

David Diop

« *I try to not analyze my writing while I'm writing* »




A university lecturer and researcher in 19th century literature at the UPPA, author of the remarkable novel *Frère d'âme*, published by the Editions du Seuil and finalist of the Goncourt, Médicis, Renaudot and Femina awards, David Diop tells us about the gateways between research and literature.

Is writing a novel the inevitable fate of all lecturers-researchers in literature?

I imagine there are as many points of view on writing poetry or novels as there are lecturers-researchers in literature. There is no need to be a writer to teach literature, just as there is no need to have invented a theorem to teach math. Literati or mathematicians – or vice versa as there's nothing to stop a mathematician from being a poet – can write a poem or a theorem without necessarily publishing it. But due to their academic background, researchers-lecturers are expected to have a theoretical relationship with literary texts, and this can be somewhat inhibiting when they are considering writing and publishing a work of fiction. As far as I'm concerned, I try not to analyze my writing while I'm writing, but to let it flow freely without thinking about what I should be doing.

What are the gateways between teaching and writing?

I'm thinking in particular of the Heptaméron de la Nouvelle award that you created... In 2011, several colleagues and I created the Heptaméron de la Nouvelle award to awaken the interest of future high school graduates to our department of classic and modern literature at the UPPA. For young minds, the activity of writing fiction, out of enjoyment, can be a point of entry into literary studies. The analysis of great literary texts feels less abstract when you've tried putting together a fictional text yourself. For a few years now, our department has been proposing writing workshops that help our first-year students hone their skills in writing essays, a key exercise in literary studies. The notion of quality of style – somewhat vague



it has to be granted – is omnipresent in the appraisal of all university work, right up to PhD level. In literature as in other humanities, the art of saying things well makes arguments all the stronger.

How does your research work in literature help fuel your writing?

I'm currently studying the European representations of Africa and Africans in the 17th and 18th centuries; I'm particularly sensitive to how the Europeans, through their travel narratives – halfway between scientific writing and fiction – built images of Africa and its inhabitants. While doing research on the Senegalese skirmishers of WW1, I realized that these images had been “exploited” both by French and German propaganda. In *Frère d'âme*, I wanted to refute this propaganda on West-African soldiers that portrayed them either as bloodthirsty savages or as grown-up children that needed to be civilized.