the PARIS REVIEW

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 15

FRANÇOISE SAGAN

Françoise Sagan now lives in a small and modern ground-floor apartment of her own on the Rue de Grenelle, where she is busily writing a film script and some song lyrics as well as a new novel. But when she was interviewed early last spring just before the publication of *Un Certain sourire,* she lived across the city in her parents' apartment on the Boulevard Malesherbes in a neighborhood that is a stronghold of the well-to-do French bourgeoisie. She met the interviewer in the comfortably furnished living room, seated them in large chairs drawn up to a marble fireplace, and offered them scotch from a pint bottle which was unquestionably, somehow, her own contribution to the larder. Her manner is shy, but casual and friendly, and her gamine face crinkles easily into an attractive, rather secret smile. She wore a simple black sweater and gray skirt; if she is a vain girl the only indication of it was her high-heeled shoes, which were of elegantly worked light gray leather. She speaks in a high-pitched but quiet voice and she clearly does not enjoy being interviewed or asked to articulate in a formal way what are, to her, natural assumptions about her writing. She is sincere and helpful, but questions that are pompous or elaborate, or about personal life, or that might be interpreted as challenging her

work, are liable to elicit only a simple "*oui*" or "*non,*" or "*je ne sais pas—je ne sais pas du tout*"—and then an amused, disconcerting smile.

—Blair Fuller & Robert B. Silvers, 1956

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to start *Bonjour tristesse* when you were eighteen? Did you expect it would be published?

FRANÇOISE SAGAN

I simply started it. I had a strong desire to write and some free time. I said to myself, This is the sort of enterprise very, very few girls of my age devote themselves to; I'll never be able to finish it. I wasn't thinking about "literature" and literary problems, but about myself and whether I had the necessary willpower.

INTERVIEWER

Did you let it drop and then take it up again?

SAGAN

No, I wanted passionately to finish it—I've never wanted anything so much. While I was writing I thought there might be a chance of its being published. Finally, when it was done, I thought it was hopeless. I was surprised by the book and by myself.

INTERVIEWER

Had you wanted to write for a long time before?

SAGAN

Yes. I had read a lot of stories. It seemed to me impossible not to want to write one. Instead of leaving for Chile with a band of

gangsters, one stays in Paris and writes a novel. That seems to me the great adventure.

INTERVIEWER

How quickly did it go? Had you thought out the story in advance?

SAGAN

For *Bonjour tristesse* all I started with was the idea of a character, the girl, but nothing really came of it until my pen was in hand. I have to start to write to have ideas. I wrote *Bonjour tristesse* in two or three months, working two or three hours a day. *Un Certain sourire* was different. I made a number of little notes and then thought about the book for two years. When I started in writing, again two hours a day, it went very fast. When you make a decision to write according to a set schedule and really stick to it, you find yourself writing very fast. At least I do.

INTERVIEWER

Do you spend much time revising the style?

SAGAN

Very little.

INTERVIEWER

Then the work on the two novels didn't take more than five or six months in all?

SAGAN

Yes, it's a good way to make a living.

INTERVIEWER

You say the important thing at the start is a character?

SAGAN

A character, or a few characters, and perhaps an idea for a few of the scenes up to the middle of the book, but it all changes in the writing. For me writing is a question of finding a certain rhythm. I compare it to the rhythms of jazz. Much of the time life is a sort of rhythmic progression of three characters. If one tells oneself that life is like that, one feels it less arbitrary.

INTERVIEWER

Do you draw on the people you know for your characters?

SAGAN

I've tried very hard and I've never found any resemblance between the people I know and the people in my novels. I don't search for exactitude in portraying people. I try to give to imaginary people a kind of veracity. It would bore me to death to put into my novels the people I know. It seems to me that there are two kinds of trickery: the "fronts" people assume before one another's eyes, and the "front" a writer puts on the face of reality.

INTERVIEWER

Then you think it is a form of cheating to take directly from reality?

SAGAN

Certainly. Art must take reality by surprise. It takes those moments which are for us merely a moment, plus a moment, plus another moment, and arbitrarily transforms them into a special series of moments held together by a major emotion. Art should not, it seems to me, pose the "real" as a preoccupation. Nothing is more unreal than certain so-called "realist" novels—they're nightmares. It is possible to achieve in a novel a certain sensory truth—the true feeling of a character—that is all.

Of course the illusion of art is to make one believe that great literature is very close to life, but exactly the opposite is true. Life is amorphous, literature is formal.

INTERVIEWER

There are certain activities in life with highly developed forms, for instance, horse racing. Are the jockeys less real because of that?

SAGAN

People possessed by strong passions for their activities, as jockeys may seem to be, don't give me the impression of being very real. They often seem like characters in novels, but *without* novels, like *The Flying Dutchman*.

INTERVIEWER

Do your characters stay in your mind after the book is finished? What kind of judgments do you make about them?

SAGAN

When the book is finished I immediately lose interest in the characters. And I *never* make moral judgments. All I would say is that a person was droll, or gay, or, above all, a bore. Making judgments for or against my characters bores me enormously; it doesn't interest me at all. The only morality for a novelist is the morality of his *esthétique*. I write the books, they come to an end, and that's all that concerns me.

INTERVIEWER

When you finished *Bonjour tristesse* did it undergo much revising by an editor?

SAGAN

A number of general suggestions were made about the first book. For example, there were several versions of the ending and in one of them Anne didn't die. Finally it was decided that the book would be stronger in the version in which she did.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn anything from the published criticism of the book?

SAGAN

When the articles were agreeable I read them through. I never learned anything at all from them but I was astonished by their imagination and fecundity. They saw intentions I never had.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel now about *Bonjour tristesse*?

SAGAN

I like *Un Certain sourire* better, because it was more difficult. But I find *Bonjour tristesse* amusing because it recalls a certain stage of my life. And I wouldn't change a word. What's done is done.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you say *Un Certain sourire* is a more difficult book?

SAGAN

I didn't hold the same trump cards in writing the second book: no seaside summer-vacation atmosphere, no intrigue naively mounting to a climax, none of the gay cynicism of Cécile. And then it was difficult simply because it was the second book.

INTERVIEWER

Did you find it difficult to switch from the first person of *Bonjour tristesse* to the third-person narrative of *Un Certain sourire*?

SAGAN

Yes, it is harder, more limiting and disciplining. But I wouldn't make as much of that difficulty as some writers apparently do.

INTERVIEWER

What French writers do you admire and feel are important to you?

SAGAN

Oh, I don't know. Certainly Stendhal and Proust. I love their mastery of the narrative, and in some ways I find myself in definite need of them. For example, after Proust there are certain things that simply cannot be done again. He marks off for you the boundaries of your talent. He shows you the possibilities that lie in the treatment of character.

INTERVIEWER

What strikes you particularly about Proust's characters?

SAGAN

Perhaps the things that one does not know about them as much as the things one knows. For me, that is literature in the very best sense: after all the long and slow analyses one is far from knowing all the thoughts and facts and sides of Swann, for example —and that is as it should be. One has no desire at all to ask "Who was Swann?" To know who Proust was is quite enough. I don't know if that's clear: I mean to say that Swann belongs completely to Proust and it is impossible to imagine a Balzacian Swann, while one might well imagine a Proustian Marsay.

INTERVIEWER

Is it possible that novels get written because the novelist imagines himself in the role of a novelist writing a novel?

SAGAN

No, one assumes the role of hero and then seeks out "the novelist" who can write his story.

INTERVIEWER

And one always finds the same novelist?

SAGAN

Essentially, yes. Very broadly, I think one writes and rewrites the same book. I lead a character from book to book, I continue along with the same ideas. Only the angle of vision, the method, the lighting, change. Speaking very, very roughly, it seems to me there are two kinds of novels—there is that much choice. There are those which simply tell a story and sacrifice a great deal to the telling—like the books of Benjamin Constant, which *Bonjour tristesse* and *Un Certain sourire* resemble in construction. And then there are those books which attempt to discuss and probe the characters and events in the book—*un roman où l'on discute*. The pitfalls of both are obvious: in the simple narrative it often seems that the important questions are passed over. In the longer classical novel the digressions can impair the effectiveness.

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to write "*un roman où l'on discute*"?

SAGAN

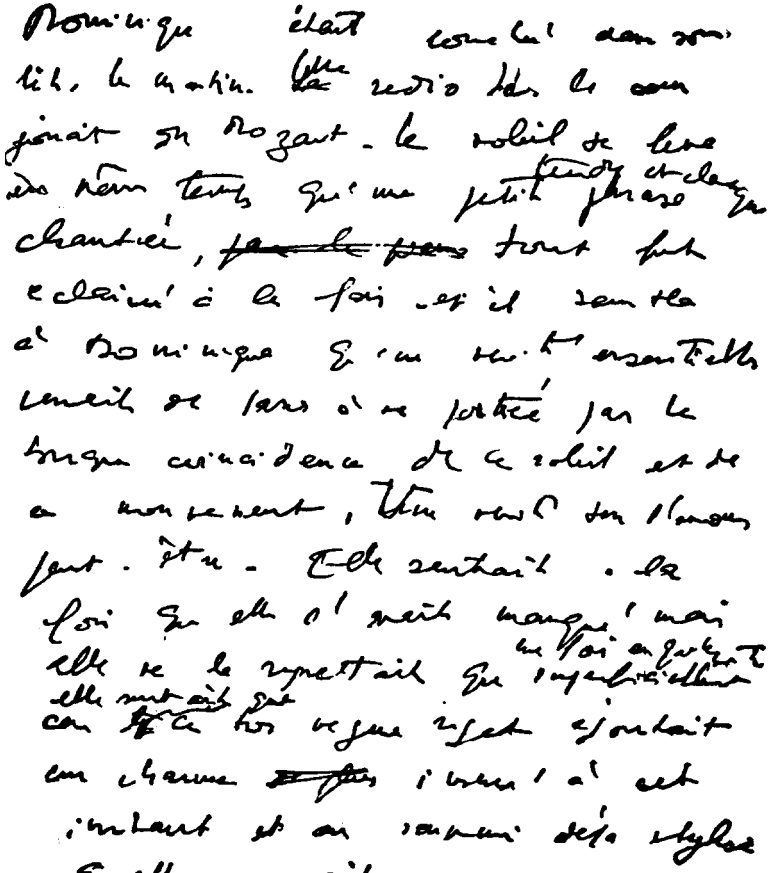
Yes, I would like to write—in fact I'm now planning—a novel with a larger cast of characters—there will be three heroines—and with characters more diffuse and elastic than Dominique and Cécile and the others in the first two books. The novel I would like to write is one in which the hero would be freed from the demands of the plot, freed from the novel itself and from the author.

INTERVIEWER

To what extent do you recognize your limits and maintain a check on your ambitions?

SAGAN

Well, that is a pretty disagreeable question, isn't it? I recognize



One of the final manuscript pages from Françoise Sagan's *Un Certain sourire (A Certain Smile)*

limitations in the sense that I've read Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare. That's the best answer, I think. Aside from that I don't think of limiting myself.

INTERVIEWER

You've very quickly made a lot of money. Has it changed your life? Do you make a distinction between writing novels for money and writing seriously, as some American and French writers do?

SAGAN

Of course the success of the books has changed my life somewhat because I have a lot of money to spend if I wish, but as far as my position in life is concerned, it hasn't changed much. Now I have a car but I've always eaten steaks. You know, to have a lot of money in one's pocket is nice, but that's all. The prospect of making more or less money would never affect the way I write —I write the books, and if money appears afterward, *tant mieux*.

Mlle. Sagan interrupted the interviewers to say that she had to leave to work on a radio program. She apologized and got up to go. It was difficult to believe, once she had stopped talking, that the slight, engaging girl had, with a single book, reached more readers than most novelists do in a lifetime. Rather, one would have thought her a schoolgirl rushing off to the Sorbonne as she called down the apartment hall to her mother, "Au revoir, maman. Je sors travailler mais je rentre de bonne heure."

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