

ROSEBUD PRODUCTIONS
presents



WRITING LIFE

Annie Ernaux through the eyes of high school students

A documentary about **Annie Ernaux**'s body of work,
written and directed by **Claire Simon**

France, 2025, 1h30



SYNOPSIS

A major figure of contemporary feminism, and the first French woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, Annie Ernaux embodies in the eyes of many a source of individual and collective emancipation, at the junction of the intimate and the universal. Through the words of students and teachers, filmmaker Claire Simon delivers an original depiction of Annie Ernaux. How is the author's work taught in schools? How is it received, studied, and comprehended? How does today's youth, whether in France or elsewhere, make her writings their own? Claire Simon placed her camera in French high school classrooms, capturing the vivid impact of Annie Ernaux's words: their power to awaken, their ability to rattle convictions and feed blossoming minds, finding in them a reflection of their own adolescent lives. Claire Simon's gaze on transmission shows how Annie Ernaux's work, which now belongs to the world's literary history, continues to inspire young people on a quest for freedom and meaning.

ABOUT THE FILM

Over the past fifty years, the two women have built their body of work practically side by side, following parallel paths. On the one hand there's Claire Simon, a renowned director who has authored both fiction films and documentaries. She tells the story of the other's work: Annie Ernaux, Nobel Prize in literature, for whom 2024 marked half a century of writing.

"I will write to avenge my people (...)

I proudly and naively believed that writing books, becoming a writer, as the last in a line of landless laborers, factory workers and shopkeepers, people despised for their manners, their accent, their lack of education, would be enough to redress the social injustice linked to social class at birth.

That an individual victory could erase centuries of domination and poverty, an illusion that school had already fostered in me by dint of my academic success."

Annie Ernaux

"To film is to believe in the revelation of cinema, the simplest and most radical revelation: that the present is transformed into presence, that an action becomes a story, that a human becomes a hero, that a location becomes a place."

Claire Simon

THE HEROINE OF A NEW GENERATION

For the new, foremostly feminine and feminist generations, Annie Ernaux has become a source of admiration, a figure of inspiration and commitment. Virginie Despentes, Maria Pourchet and Delphine de Vigan proclaim how deeply she has influenced them. Filmmakers Céline Sciamma, Danielle Arbid and Audrey Diwan often reference her or adapt her work. Upon the announcement of her name for the 2022 Nobel Prize, thousands of joyful messages by anonymous contributors flooded social media.

Annie Ernaux has become the embodiment of women's freedom to have control over their bodies, and numerous feminists rallied around her in January 2024 to support the vote aiming to enshrine abortion as a constitutional right in France. While she is obviously not the only personality contributing to the current revival of feminist commitment, her readers credit her with a decisive role in their quest for individual and collective emancipation. Intertwining intimate and universal planes, her books address the shame of belonging to a poor and uneducated social class, as well as social climbing (*A Man's Place*, *Shame*), the condition of married women (*A Frozen Woman*), women's sexuality (*Simple Passion*, *Getting Lost*), clandestine abortion (*Happening*), Alzheimer's disease (*I Remain in Darkness*), her mother's death (*A Woman's Story*), or also breast cancer (*The Use of Photography*).

The sum of her work makes up an auto-socio-biography of women culminating with *The Years*, a sort of collective autobiography, a saga of ordinary lives and ruling classes going against traditional codes of novel writing. Annie Ernaux's entire body of work rests on her determination to restore women's legitimacy, patiently describing the slow construction of her identity beyond the countless failures and the modest victories won from hard-fought struggles. With her style (which she herself qualifies as "flat writing"), Annie Ernaux has sought through the sheer strength of simplicity to depict women's alienated lives, and how in order to discover her own sense of self, she had to let others pass through her ("I am penetrated by people and their existence like a whore").

“[...] to what end? Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others. Who could say that love, pain and mourning, shame, are not universal? Victor Hugo wrote: ‘Not one of us has the honor of living a life that is only his own.’ But as all things are lived inexorably in the individual mode – ‘it is to me this is happening’ – they can only be read in the same way if the ‘I’ of the book becomes transparent, in a sense, and the ‘I’ of the reader comes to occupy it. If this ‘I’, to put it another way, becomes transpersonal, and singularity achieves universality.”

Annie Ernaux

A UNIVERSALLY READ AND STUDIED BODY OF WORK

Beyond French borders, Annie Ernaux is an internationally celebrated author whose work has been translated into 42 languages. Better yet, the former teacher is now widely taught. Her books are studied in French high schools and universities, but also in other countries in Europe, Asia and Africa as well as in English language intellectual circles (*The Years* was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize in 2019). It is this unanimous appeal that Claire Simon wishes to explore while proposing an unusual approach for a portrait from which the subject herself is in fact physically absent: How is Annie Ernaux's work taught in middle schools, high schools and universities in France and abroad – especially since she received the Nobel Prize in literature in 2022? How is she studied and comprehended? How does today's youth, whether in France or elsewhere, make her writings their own?

A FILMMAKER IN THE FIELD

Claire Simon's original, fieldwork-like approach allows the director to show how today's teachers present and convey the author's words, and how young people perceive and respond to them. This approach aims to capture the impact of Annie Ernaux's thinking, the emotion and reflection it arouses, and the awareness it induces.

Regardless of the encountered persons' age and their culture of origin, do Annie Ernaux's words have the same meaning and impact? Are they likely to shift boundaries?

Claire Simon's work is often keen to listen to young individuals and show them through the lens of their school education: in *Young Solitude* (2017), she depicted high school girls and boys from the Lycée Romain Rolland in Ivry-sur-Seine at an age when they first experience passion and solitude, between families falling apart and the uncertainty of the future. The film marked the return of Claire Simon's camera in a school setting, twenty-five years after *Récréations* [Playtime] (1992), an admirable documentary placing the viewer at the heart of a nursery school yard to discover 3 to 6-year-old girls and boys grappling for the first time with the power of emotions and the constraints of subjection to other human beings. With *The Competition* (2015), Claire Simon put the spotlight on the selection mechanisms of a prestigious higher learning institution and what they revealed about reproducing an elite, or allowing social climbing for a lucky few. More recently, her latest opus, *Elementary* (Official selection in Cannes in 2024, theatrical release in January 2025), shared the perspective of an elementary school in an underprivileged neighborhood where the children learn, progress, experience, think, question and discover what it is like to live in the company of others, and where every single day teachers fight armed only with their energy against the societal challenges stirring France: gender inequalities, inequality of opportunity, integration difficulties, the discriminations by people who live in underprivileged environments, regardless of their origins. These are all subjects, convictions and conflicts the director shares with Annie Ernaux.

CLAIRE SIMON & ANNIE ERNAUX, TWO PARALLEL TRAJECTORIES

1974. While Portugal carried out its carnation Revolution, and Greece put an end to the colonels' dictatorship, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago was published. On French television, presidential candidates Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand argued over the latter not having "the monopoly of the heart." In July, being of age in France was changed from 21 to 18. Soon, at the very end of the year, the newly appointed female minister in charge of health was about to give a speech that would forever mark the course of women's history and French society: Simone Veil introducing a law to make abortion legal.

A few months earlier, in April, an unknown writer's first book was published. In this inner monologue, "a formative, or rather deformative novel," as described by the daily newspaper *Le Monde* upon its publication, a young female student recalled the year of 1964, her childhood in Normandy, her parents who ran a café, the social background she came from, and the milieu she was now confronted with as a university student. The reason why all these thoughts were going through the main character Denise Lesur's mind was that she was waiting to have an abortion – illegally, by force of circumstances, as the story takes place ten years before the Veil Act. The book's title was *Cleaned Out*, by Annie Ernaux.

1974, still. Claire Simon, a high school student chose Ethnology, Arabic, and Berber, found an internship to become a film editor thanks to the Film Archive of Algiers. She discovered a passion, and perhaps a vocation.

Meanwhile, in parallel, they both unfurled similar ideological lines in their respective work, as well as a shared gaze on the world surrounding them.

WOMEN, and WOMEN'S BODIES

Annie Ernaux's talent is her ability to transcribe, some would say nearly sociologically, life events that could well be ours, and this essentially for two categories of people that could in fact be intermingled: children having left the lower social classes they came from (climbing the social ladder), and women.

Femininity, in the widest sense, is at the heart of her work. Maternity or the absence thereof, and the control over one's body, whether from outside parties or women themselves. It is a subject matter that Claire Simon has also long explored through her films, specifically in two of her most famous feature films: *God's Offices* in 2008, and *Our Body* in 2023 – perhaps because having control over one's body is having control over one's destiny, in 1974 just as much as today; and because exploring the body also means exploring the feminine mystery.

TEACHING

Both women are also viscerally attached to and passionate about transmission. Annie Ernaux taught French language and literature for thirty years. Claire Simon has spent time in many schools and high schools, standing side by side with pupils and students, from the preschoolers of *Récréations* [Playtime] (1992) to the teenagers of *Young Solitude* (2018).

They both see schools, in the broadest sense of the term, as communities playing a foundational role, that of transmitting knowledge. Schools are also the place (from the earliest classes to the prestigious universities) of men and women in the making, where for younger generations “the future is played out,” and as Claire Simon says: “The question is: do others believe in my story? In the end, I only exist if others believe in my story. Children are always trying to see if stories work for one or another, if they can lead somewhere.”

THE QUEST FOR REALITY

The two authors also share the personal narrative and the reality of their contemporaries: “What touches me so deeply with Claire Simon is her way of working with people’s tangible, daily reality, extracting the essence of this reality to convey its inextricable complexity, the unspeakable.” (Referring to *God’s Offices*). And the reality they both want to recount and achieve is not, by far, that which art had up until then been showing us. Annie Ernaux: “That’s what people didn’t understand when they talked about *Madame Bovary* in connection with *Simple Passion*. Flaubert writes about *Bovary*, whereas here it’s *Bovary* herself who’s writing! And that’s got nothing to do with it.” Claire Simon: “It’s a great jubilation and the great desire of art to say to oneself: what is the painting that *Mona Lisa* would paint? What is the point of view? In the search for truth, we dream of hearing *Emma Bovary*’s thoughts, of being as close as possible, in jubilation...”

(Crossed portraits, GREC, 2002)

AND TODAY

1974 was fifty years ago. Today, France has enshrined the freedom to terminate a pregnancy in its constitution. It is also perhaps at the beginning of its own MeToo movement.

Annie Ernaux has received the Nobel Prize for literature, and Claire Simon has built her career as an independent filmmaker with her fingers on the pulse of reality. They have met, followed, and appreciated each other without ever working together. In 2024, what can the filmmaker tell us about the writer? What can these women, in a shared project, tell us about one another? And what can they tell us about ourselves?





CLAIRESIMON

Claire Simon widely contributed to the recognition and promotion of documentary cinema in France through the many films that have left their mark on the French cinematographic landscape. Claire Simon's films are a reflection of the question she has ceaselessly been asking herself: What is a story? What is a story nowadays? She makes a hero out of anyone she's filming, whether they are children, a young couple, young teenagers, repair shop technicians, or family planning counselors.

Born in London, Claire Simon grew up in France and began her studies in ethnology. Self-taught, she learned to edit, then directed her first short films in the 1980s, before joining the Ateliers Varan, where she became familiar with the realist style of direct cinema, exploring its range of possibilities. After several short films (*The Police*, *Domestic Disputes*) and documentaries (*Recess*, *At All Costs*), she made her first fiction feature film, *A Foreign Body*, in 1997. Throughout her career, the filmmaker has enjoyed mixing fiction and reality, as illustrated by *Human Geography* (2012, documentary) and *Gare du Nord* (2013, fiction). Whether documentary or fiction, all her work boils down to one question: What is a story? A life?

At the same time, she has taught at the university of Paris 8 and Paris 7 as well as Ateliers Varan while also being the head of the directing department at La Fémis.

Moi non, ou l'argent de Patricia [Me No, or Money], 1981
Mon cher Simon [My Dear Simon], 1982
Une journée de vacances [A Day Off], 1983
La Police [The Police], 1988
Les Patients [The Patients], 1989
Scènes de ménage [Domestic Dispute], 1991
Récréations [Playtime], 1992
At All Costs, 1995
A Foreign Body, 1997
Ça, c'est vraiment toi [That's Just Like You], 1999
800 km de différence – Romance [An 800-km Difference], 2000
Mimi, 2002
On Fire, 2006
God's Offices, 2008
Gare du Nord / Human Geography, 2013
The Woods Dreams Are Made Of, 2016
The Competition, 2016
Young Solitude, 2018
Le Village, 2019
I Want to Talk About Duras, 2021
Our Body, 2023
Elementary, 2024
Writing Life, 2025



ANNIE ERNAUX

Cleaned Out, the first book written by an agrégation holder and literature professor, was published 50 years ago. Since then, standing at the conjunction of literature, history, and sociology, Annie Ernaux has been weaving her vast body of work – essential work. She tells us about society, delving into its most minute details. Her parents' grocery store-café, her mother, her deceased sister Ginette, her life in Cergy, her love stories and disillusionment – and above all her experiences as a woman, everything she experiences because she is a woman. Childhood, upbringing, abortion, love, marriage, motherhood, passion... When Annie Ernaux uses "I", it is not with the intention of just talking about herself in particular. What she recounts, one book after the other, is the story of women in France in the half century that has just come to an end. She has thus drawn from her own life personal material to blend the intimate with broader, political matters.

Such are her many ways of Writing Life, to mirror the title of the anthology of autobiographical documents published by Gallimard in 2011.

For years, and certainly even more so since she received the Nobel Prize in literature in 2022, her body of work has been studied across the world. Her books have been adapted (into twenty or so theater plays and three feature films), and yet everyone is still seeking to unravel the mystery of this great figure of literature and feminism.

Cleaned Out, 1974
Do What They Say or Else, 1977
A Frozen Woman, 1981
A Man's Place, 1983 (Renaudot Prize 1984)
A Woman's Story, 1988
Simple Passion, 1992
Exteriors, 1993
I Remain in Darkness, 1997
Shame, 1997
Happening, 2000
Things Seen, 2000
Getting Lost, 2001
The Possession, 2002
The Use of Photography, 2005
The Years, 2008
L'Autre Fille [The Other Girl], 2011
L'Atelier noir [The Dark Studio], 2011
Écrire la vie [Writing Life], 2011
Retour à Yvetot [Return to Yvetot], 2013
Look at The Lights, My Love, 2014
A Girl's Story, 2016
The Young Man, 2022

Crew

Director & Screenplay

Editing

Cinematography

Sound

Sound Editing & Mix

Claire SIMON

Luc FORVEILLE

Claire SIMON

Pierre BOMPY

Jules JASKO

Nathalie VIDAL

Clément CLAUDE

Production

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