

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

ANNIE ERNAUX ON CHILDISH CRUELTY

The author discusses her story “Stories.”

By Deborah Treisman

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n **“Stories,”** the narrator, a ten-year-old girl, is tasked with taking a five-

I year-old girl to school. Was that common practice in Normandy in your childhood? Did you do the same thing?

It was very common for an older child to accompany a younger one to the school they both attended. Mothers didn't always have time to do it. That was the case with my mother, who enlisted a "big girl" of twelve or thirteen, Monique, to take me. Later, I myself took two little girls of four or five with me. I don't remember exactly how old I was, but certainly not older than ten.

One day, the protagonist starts telling scary stories to the little girl, Marie-Paule. Does she do this because she's annoyed by Marie-Paule's passivity? Or simply to entertain herself, because she's bored? Or for another reason?

This story is largely autobiographical. There is boredom, and annoyance with this passive, oblivious little girl. But, above all, there is what you'd call a childish cruelty, a form of cruelty with no superego, which takes pleasure in acting on a being it perceives as more vulnerable, impressionable—in short, someone it is possible or easy to "torment." I don't remember exactly what stories I told that little girl.

The protagonist in the story tells Marie-Paule the tale of another young girl, who is locked up in a café that has been shut down, and is dying of hunger. Where does that image come from? Is it the worst thing she can imagine, or is it a situation in which she chooses to imagine herself?

When I was writing this story, I could see exactly the route we used to take on the way home from school. We passed by a very modest café. A few years later, it was shut down for the prostitution of minors, and the owner, a woman—and a neighbor, who lived on my street—served several months in prison. I never forgot that café, which was demolished (I don't remember when), or those events. That is doubtless why, when I was writing, I came up with the story of a young girl locked in that room—in memory of the girls who met men there—and, in my version, hunger replaces the sexual acts, I

suppose.

Why does the protagonist continue to tell Marie-Paule these stories? Is she acting out of cruelty or curiosity about what will happen?

It's a cycle of cruelty and of the pleasure it brings: Marie-Paule cries, thereby becoming more and more unbearable, which makes the protagonist want to make her cry even more. . . .

Is Marie-Paule's reaction—to throw herself, sobbing, to the ground—authentic, or more of a performance or a ritual?

She really throws herself to the ground—out of fear, I'm sure.

In the end, when Marie-Paule is taken out of school, the protagonist is devastated. What is it that she has lost?

An only child, she has lost the experience of having a little sister who is entirely at her mercy. From then on, she will walk home from school solo, alone with her imagination.

The story ends with this sentence: "I have related this episode from the year I was ten in order to try to understand why I wanted to write, but in the end it's just another story." When you were taking younger girls to school, was that your first experience of making up stories? When you write, are you trying to provoke reactions as impassioned as Marie-Paule's?

It seemed to me that the origins of writing could be found in episodes from childhood. It also seemed that recounting this episode, which caused me lasting shame and guilt, might provide a key. That last sentence shows that this attempt failed. In truth, I spent my entire childhood making up stories—of which I was the heroine—inspired by the ones I read in books. But those weren't frightening. I transported myself to distant lands, into aristocratic circles, or into the past, to the time of horse-drawn carriages, or

even to the first humans. I imagined that I was Scarlett O'Hara or Jane Eyre, wandering in the desert, on the streets of Calcutta, living in a cabin in Alaska. . . . When I actually started writing, it wasn't to invent stories, or to project myself into fiction—which I'd always wanted to do. On the contrary, it was to interrogate reality. I wasn't trying to move or horrify readers, only to uncover a hidden truth. In this story, I shed light on a form of cruelty in which I was involved.

You first published “Stories” in 1984. Why were you thinking about this particular period of your life at that point?

It was a time of extreme upheaval in my life. Separated from my husband, I lived alone with my two sons. There was a man in my life (see my story “Hotel Casanova”), and my mother, who had Alzheimer's, was in the hospital. I was thinking deeply about my relationship with my mother. Now I believe I can say, truly, that I was taking revenge on Marie-Paule for the violence of my mother, who would slap me for the most minor infraction, demanding a perfection and a wisdom that I would never attain. ♦

(Ernaux's responses were translated, from the French, by Deborah Treisman.)