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Switzerland's Prix Goncourt winner passes away

Throughout his lifetime, Jacques Chessex, the writer from the Canton of Vaud, produced work which simply could not be ignored. Just as popular in Paris as in Switzerland, the hermit from Ropraz in Vaud passed away at the age of 75 while giving a presentation at the public library in Yverdon. A tribute by Alain Wey

"Jacques Chessex possessed incredible vigour and focussed his energies on his need, desire and obsession for writing and producing literature", says his friend, the poet and journalist Jean-Dominique Humbert. An emblematic figure, Jacques Chessex defined the writer as "someone who elevates literature by giving power or an essentially sacred virtue to language, style and words".* The only Swiss winner of the Prix Goncourt** (in 1973 with "L'Ogre") died at the age of 75 in the pleasant surroundings of a presentation he was giving at the public library in Yverdon. A look back at his life in the company of his poet friend.

God, sex and death

Literature spanning half a century, a hundred books and highly prestigious literary prizes (Schiller, Grand Prix de la langue française, Grand Prix Jean Giono): Jacques Chessex provoked strong feeling. In February 2009, he once again created a scandal by publishing "Un Juif pour l'exemple", which tells of the murder of a Jewish trader

in Payerne (Vaud) in 1942. You either liked or loathed Chessex, but nobody was indifferent to him. As he himself said, he must have possessed "some kind of mystical power" which drew attention to him. Bernard Pivot, the French literary critic, had this to say about him: "Most of his work possesses an uncompromising realism, a dark sensuality and an often rather ferocious lucidity. Jacques Chessex always loved reopening old wounds: he knew exactly what troubled him and exactly what would trouble his readers."*** Summing up the writer translated into over 20 different languages in just a few words, his friend Jean-Dominique Humbert said: "He was a man with the noble ambition of facing up to himself, to literature and to the chapter to be written. A writer who lasted the distance, he possessed the intuition about what he wanted to write at a very young age and retained his desire and passion for writing throughout his life. This was a man obsessed by God, sex and death. This trinity always featured in his work."

The writer who recited matins

Jacques Chessex had a sacerdotal view of writing. He would write early in the morning, getting up between 4.30 a.m. and 5.00 a.m. Jean-Dominique Humbert says: "He would start with a poem to awaken himself from his sleep, like a monk reciting matins, before going on to write prose or essays. His daily routine was precisely structured." As a poet, novelist, portraitist, essayist and writer of short stories, Jacques Chessex's work was extremely diverse. His last book "Le dernier crâne de Monsieur de Sade" will be published in January. So what were Chessex's other passions? His friend explains: "Painting, which he practised himself, and music and the blues, as he also played the piano. Naturally, he had a passion for reading. He loved taking walks, strolls and getting away from it all. He enjoyed looking around churches and cemeteries. People would sometimes stop to question him. He jokingly once told me that lots of people had asked him what he was doing. He could be quite quick-witted and would say: "I'm looking for God." The person who had stopped him was more likely to want to call the police than believe there was a metaphysician roaming around churchyards and cemeteries."

KEY DATES IN HIS LIFE

1934: Born in Payerne (Vaud)
1951-1952: Studied at Collège St-Michel in Fribourg
1952-1960: Degree in literature at the University of Lausanne
1956: His father commits suicide, a tragedy which never ceased to haunt him
1963: Schiller Prize for "La Tête ouverte"
1953 and 1964: Co-founder of the literary reviews "Pays du lac" (Pully) and "Écriture" (Lausanne) in 1964
1969-1996: French teacher at the Gymnase de la Cité grammar school in Lausanne
1973: Prix Goncourt for "L'Ogre"
1992: Mallarmé poetry prize for

"Les Aveugles du seul regard"
1999: Grand Prix de la langue française
2005: Goncourt poetry award for "Allegria"
2007: Grand Prix Jean Giono

SWISS NEUTRALITY

"What has always irritated me is that the concept of Swiss neutrality has tempered hearts and souls and tarnished courage and morality. In this country, any suggestion of being too strong, any emergence of a figure of stature is intolerable to people today. It is remarkable that in a country where mountaineering, the Alps, the peaks and magnificent glaciers are so celebrated, there is so

much concern about those who stand out." Littératur de Suisse, a documentary broadcast on TSR, 1998

ALWAYS A WRITER

"I happily got through thirty-five years in teaching and I have provided myself with the resources needed to produce my work without having to ask anyone for anything, which is something that should make my critics think. I have overcome difficulties and crossed many rivers, sometimes through fords, sometimes by wading through the mud. I have experienced much heartbreak, such as my father's suicide and the breakup of relationships, but I have

never stopped writing. Bizarrely, I have great confidence in myself today. I believe you improve with age, not go downhill." Le Matin, 2000

* Voix au chapitre, broadcast on TSR on 11 August 1975.

** The Prix Goncourt is the most prestigious prize in French literature and the winning book sells between 300,000 and 900,000 copies.

*** Téléjournal, TSR, 10 October 2009.