# Annethology review: Reader for Hire by Raymond Jean

When Marie-Constance goes to put an advert in a local newspaper offering her services as a reader to people in their own homes, the clerk tries to dissuade her. Readers will guess what’s in his mind when he points out the potential for misinterpretation, but Marie-Constance is adamant. Her ex-tutor, Roland Sora, is also concerned for her personal safety, suggesting she stick to “the minor naturalists. They’re precise, they have stories, events, facts …” (p12). When the first response to her advert arrives, Marie-Constance hesitates. But she enjoys reading Maupassant’s ‘The Hand’ to wheelchair-bound fourteen-year-old Eric, until he becomes so engrossed in the supernatural story he’s hospitalised with an epileptic fit.

Despite this shaky start, her business flourishes. But in the age of audiobooks (although before the arrival of the internet), what do people really want when they invite her into their homes to read? What is Marie-Constance looking for herself when she sets herself up as a professional reader, and how far will she go for the sake of her craft?

Marie-Constance is thirty-four years old, but she comes across as a flighty adolescent. She’s married without children, but never seems to have had a proper job, or even much ambition. Having dropped out of her studies fifteen years previously, she turns up at the office of her former professor, confident he’ll make the time to see her, gently flirting with him like a favourite uncle. It’s actually her friend, Françoise’s, idea that she set herself up as a private reader. The women used to act together so Françoise, now with “her feet pretty firmly on the ground” (p9) as a lawyer’s secretary, knows Marie-Constance has “a wonderful voice, it’s silly not to do something with it” (p9).

Our reader’s deviations from her agreed task are played for laughs in the main. When her relationship with a lonely managing director becomes sexual, she insists (p139-140):

Each time he wants me to perform a particular favour, reading has to have its moment beforehand. For example, he sometimes indulges an aberrant desire to kiss my buttocks with cannibalistic frenzy. I insist that first he uses them as a lectern for a book from which he must read out loud for at least a few minutes.

Not all her journeys beyond the text are sexual, however. With a Marx-obsessed Hungarian Countess, a General’s widow who rarely leaves her bed, she’s party to leading a political demonstration into a bourgeois part of town, and becoming the figurehead of the May Day Parade. Because of this, she’s summoned to give an account of herself to the police superintendent, on a slippery slope towards being charged with committing a breach of the peace. And not for the first time; she’s already been in trouble for colluding with an eight-year-old girl’s temporary escape from the confines of her mother’s home.

It was Marie-Constance’s cavalier attitude to her responsibilities towards children that prevented me from fully relaxing into the bizarre story. Little Clorinde takes stories literally, so when they get to the point in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice finds the golden key, the girl persuades the woman into an adventure outside the home. When, on a hot day in Eric’s bedroom, she lifts her skirt to get some air at her legs, she has little thought for the fragility of the teenager’s burgeoning sexuality. Reading, it seems, arouses all manner of passions, which Marie-Constance seems happy to facilitate. But will she draw the line at the Marquis de Sade?

Amid repeated references to the madness of her enterprise, it’s worth remembering that there are parts of the world in which freedom of expression is no joke. Reading aloud can be considered an act of subversion, giving voice to ideas that the powerful would prefer to silence. Yet as Marie-Constance’s job develops – part nursemaid, part sex-worker, part therapist, part agent provocateur – she seems herself to have less idea of what she’s about (p162):

I’ve never found the truth so elusive as it has been since I started this job; it trickles between my fingers, like water I just can’t hold in my hands.

So what’s the attraction for Marie-Constance in this strange career? I think, like any of us, she wants someone to listen. Her professor (performing a function somewhat like the supervisor so often missing from therapy-lit), despite his apparent indulgence, might be engrossed in some marking while he only half listens to her account of her latest escapade. As to her husband, he’s more interested in a TV programme about volcanoes when she consults him about whether she should accede to the managing director’s desire for sex (p96). Starved of the attention to reflect herself back to herself, she feels and comes across as empty, not knowing who she is (p144).

*Reader for Hire* is a short novel of ideas first published as *La Lectrice* (and also made into a successful film) in French in 1986. This new (and possibly the first) English translation by Adriana Hunter is published this month by Peirene Press who furnished me with an advance copy. It was a little outside my usual preference for character-driven stories, but certainly an interesting and thought-provoking read.

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