

A Welcome Invitation

[Adam Gallari bio ↓](#) · January 17th, 2012 · filed under [books](#), [reviews](#), [rumpus original](#)



In Francois Emmanuel's new collection *Invitation to a Voyage*, the prose is elegant and refined, the subject matter heady yet accessible, and the execution nearly flawless.

By their nature, reviews of collections often prove difficult if only because the strain of narrative is fragmented by the shifting of stories and the trajectory is less a linear journey than a series of points that, when taken together, serve to become something greater than their individual selves. Good collections are rare, as they have slowly become either proving grounds for young authors or tired compiling of the random works of older ones, and as the collection, in the American market, continues to be seen as a less viable option for publisher and writer alike, traditional collections are being replaced by novels in serial vignette form.

Still, from time to time a book arrives that eschews the common notion of the collection and its viability as a continuing art form. Francois Emmanuel's *Invitation to a Voyage* (L'invitation au voyage) is one of these. While short, Emmanuel's collection is dense, yet reads as though the reader is caught in the hazy limbo between sleep and consciousness, a place where neither the world of dreams nor the world of reality dominates but where the two melt together to strengthen the best qualities of the other.

The Belgian Emmanuel is a writer in love with language, and it is clear that the choice of poet Justin Vicari as translator was a wise one. The lyricism of Romance languages rarely crosses into Germanic ones, and this proves especially true for those like Baudelaire and Apollinaire, whom Emmanuel's prose will at times recall—the book's title is a not-so-subtle homage to Baudelaire's poem of the same name—but *Invitation* retains a freshness and crispness and cadence in English that leaves one wondering how truly marvelous the original French must be.

Invitation to a Voyage is a very continental book, and those who have, for the past two years, been following [Dalkey Archive Press's](#) Best European series would be well served to acquaint themselves with Emmanuel. *Invitation* is a book in which the destination is superfluous, where the intention is not to arrive a specific endpoint but to become sidetracked during the journey, to loop back over terrain already traversed if only to discover how distant hills might differ in appearance in dawn and dusk. Emmanuel's work falls somewhere between the circumlocutive elegance of W.G. Sebald and a Jamesean stream of consciousness that produces six stories that exist almost entirely between the lines of what is written, as though Emmanuel is giving his readership the outline of a form while slyly winking as he simultaneously offers them the tools to paint alongside his watchful eye.



Francois Emmanuel

The notion of longing, of distance and of the unspoken is paramount in these stories, and it is as though Emmanuel, a psychiatrist by trade, is using his prose to further examine the human psyche, to trace out through his fictions questions that science, in its cut and dry fashion, is ill-equipped to answer; and what he seems to crave, more than anything else, is the answer to how much, how well and how deeply can we ever know ourselves and, especially how might we construct the image of another as all we are ever truly offered are the dots of a pointillist image, a Bonnard that from one angle is a ship yet from another is no more than a scattered series of colored dots forming and reforming over and over again our minds.

In *Invitation to a Voyage* we have impressionistic writing done exceedingly well, as Emmanuel manages both to ground his reader in a palpable reality even as he continually spirals away from it. No matter how esoteric he might become, Emmanuel never loses himself in solipsistic narrative, and though he might flirt with it at times, the beauty and power of his prose supersedes what in a lesser writer would be navel gazing. And it would not be too much to say that *Invitation*, in its way, is a narrative version of Monet's series *Le Cathedrale de Rouen*, for though the subject might often appear the same, it is the subtle change brought about by the shifting angle of shadow and glow of light that enables the same façade to be rendered so eloquently and so differently over and over again without ever becoming stale or redundant.

Once again Dalkey Archive Press has managed to find a gem from abroad and undertake the effort to exhibit it here; Emmanuel's prose is elegant and refined, his subject matter heady yet accessible, his execution nearly flawless, and his *Invitation to a Voyage* is one that should be accepted quickly and readily by those who enjoy literature that seeks not to explain but to question and examine the life that exists around and within them.