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## FORUM

### Secret hideouts and the adolescent experience: Hubert on the art and politics of *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*

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The following interview examines Hubert's creative process for his graphic novel *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014). It explores his thinking about gender and the adolescent experience in the context of a range of social issues including his own Catholic upbringing. This interview culminates with a discussion about homosexuality in contemporary France, Charlie Hebdo, and larger extremism.

**Keywords:** Hubert; graphic novel; gender; intellectual freedom; Charlie Hebdo; homosexuality

#### Introduction

This interview was completed by Hubert shortly after the publication of *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014). Illustrated by Marie Caillou, the graphic novel relays the story of a teenage boy who falls in love with another boy at school but who finds his Catholic high school and their small town, stifling and inhospitable to his personal growth. Hubert studied at the School of Fine Arts in Angers, where he first set his sights on comics for a career. He is the author of a number of graphic novels and comic series in French, including one translated into English: *Miss Don't Touch Me, Vols. 1 and 2* (Hubert, 2011), a graphic novel series set in Paris in the 1930s. He lives in Paris.

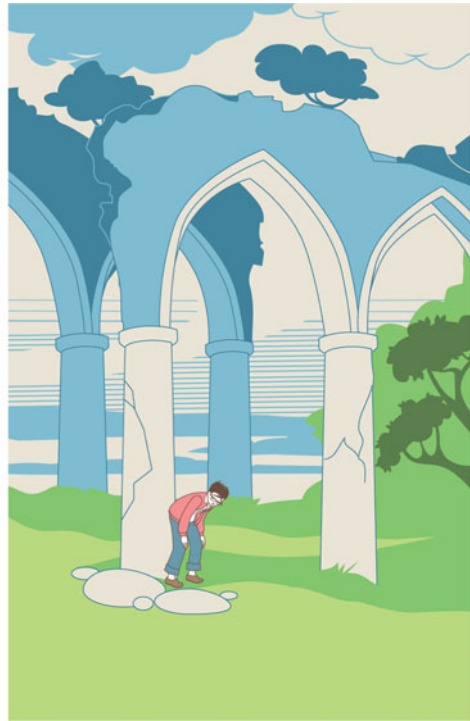
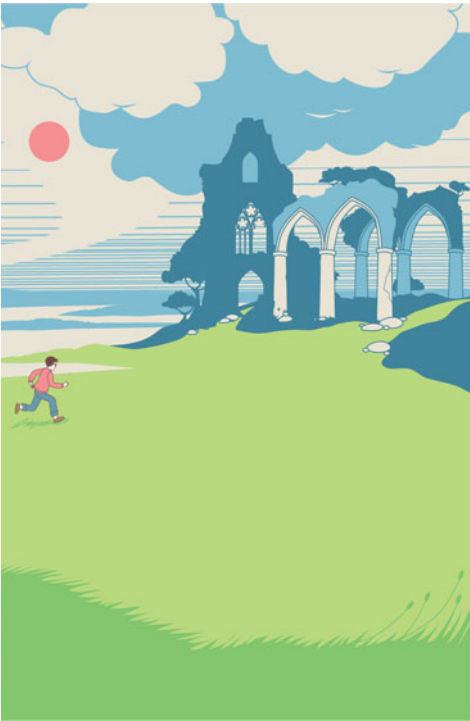
This interview contributes to scholarship on gender by bringing together some of Hubert's views about his own adolescent experiences with reconciling his sexuality and Catholic upbringing, about working and producing graphic novels in Paris, and about the need to create art that marries the concerns of gender and identity politics. It ends with a wider consideration of how some of these issues are brought to the forefront with the Charlie Hebdo tragedy.

#### Conversation

**Thank-you so much for *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets*! *Adrian* is a fantastic graphic novel that traces the young protagonist's falling in love with another boy at his school and the lack of sympathy that he gains from the repressive community in which they are living. . . . You have worked on a number of graphic books and novels. Tell us about your previous projects.**

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This first ones were *Les Yeux Verts* with Zanzim and *Le Legs de l'Alchimiste* with Tanquerelle, two fantastic stories a bit in the spirit of the dark gothic novels of the 18th and 19th centuries (like Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*).

Then I met the Kerascoët, and we published *Miss Don't Touch Me*, a whodunit in the world of high bordellos in 1930 Paris. It talks a lot about sexuality, all kind of sexualities, and I think Miss Jo is one of the first transgender characters in French comics. I didn't realize when I created it that for a lot of people it was unusual... Then we published *Beauty*, a fairy tale about appearance and narcissism: a young girl who does not like herself asks a fairy for the gift of beauty, and she receives the absolute Beauty and becomes the incarnation of desirability on earth, which is quite a complicated situation to manage.

With Zanzim, I published *La Sirene des Pompiers*, the story of a mermaid who becomes a model for an academic painter in the 19th century, and *Ma Vie Posthume*, about an old woman living in a small village who discovers that she is dead and murdered and is quite worried about how her neighbours might react.

I wrote two Sci-Fi stories: *Bestioles* with Ohm and *Le Temple du Passé* with Etienne Le Roux (this one is the loose adaptation of an old book of Stephen Wull's).

With the same artist, I published *Chien Jaune*, an uchrony on World War II.

Last year, I published *Les Gens Normaux*, a book of testimonies in comics about gender, homosexuality and transgender, with a lot of different artists, one for every interview. These true stories are accompanied by reference texts especially written by great historians and sociologists (like Michelle Perrot for example). I was very honored to have Robert Badinter write our preface.

My most recent publication is *Petit* with Bertrand Gatignol, about a young ogre – the last of his decadent family – who is so small he could be seen as a human. His father wants him dead, but he's raised in secret in the castle of the family by an aunt who is an heretic because she likes humans and doesn't eat them. He is divided between his instincts and his education. It's a lot about family determinism.

I had a previous collaboration with Marie Caillou, our first, *La Chair de L'Araignée*, about anorexia, and more precisely about the feeling of living in a mind without a body.

I like to make very different things, going where people don't expect, even if I often write about the same themes.

...

### **How do you see your religious education as having impacted your outlook and your creative work?**

I think it impacted me a lot! When I was ten, I was a very religious kid, praying every evening. I may have become a mystic in another time! It was something very deep in me. I lost faith very young, at twelve (I couldn't bear contradictions between texts and acts, between Gospels and Catholic moralism). Maybe that's why I felt so attracted to art and beauty. A transcendence for another.

I'm out of the church, but I'm deeply concerned with personal morality (which is, for me the opposite of moralism), respect of difference, and social solidarity, which are part of the Catholic humanism tradition (today a minor current in the Catholic church).

...

### ***Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* differs in its concerns and in its style from *Miss Don't Touch Me*, your earlier work. What led you to tell this story?**

In fact, this story comes from my past: a few years ago, I was in Brest, where I was in school when I was a teenager. My parents live in a small village nearby. We were crossing the bridge which is nicknamed “Suicide Bridge” in the city. I’ve seen anti-suicide barriers being installed. When I was younger, I saw this bridge every day from my school. Suddenly I remembered another teenager from my village when I was a kid. We were the same age. I didn’t know him very well. He jumped from the bridge. When I heard about his suicide at my school, which is near the bridge, I thought: ‘We should have been friends. We had so much in common’. Seeing those anti-suicide barriers installed so many years after opened this particular part of my memory, and very old feelings were coming back to me, all the dark atmosphere of this part of my life. That’s the origin, and then the rest of the story came very quickly.

It’s not an autobiographical story, but a fiction created with some autobiographical details. I remember very well the feeling of being a queer teenager in a rural Catholic world with a conservative family.

**This book is illustrated by Marie Caillou. Tell us about what happens behind the scenes. How did you decide on the book’s colour scheme and its visuals?**

In fact it was Marie’s decision: I always trust her completely with all the visual decisions and she trusts me with the writing. Between is the stage setting where we work together.

I love Marie’s work, which is quite unique. I couldn’t have told this story with another artist. In fact I don’t like reality very much, I think! I write to run away from it, that’s why most of my stories are quite fantastic or set in other time periods. Marie’s drawing appeared to me as a key to speaking about present time and very personal matters. The way Marie transforms reality in patterns and color fields created the necessary distance, and it has a great tension in its fixed aspect that corresponded well with the story I wanted to tell.

**Did the story develop before or alongside the illustrations?**

I wrote the story first and proposed it to Marie, and then we had long discussions that made the story shift on some points. I like to work in collaboration. I find it richer than working alone on a story. It’s the same difference between a soliloquy and a conversation.

**Did the illustrations change your thinking about the story?**

Not my thinking, but its perception by readers, I think: it was really harsh in my first version. I knew Marie would bring the softness and the beauty. One of my first feelings about the story and when it was just the intuition of a story, even before it became a narration with a beginning and an end, was that it had to be elegiac. So I think I brought the sadness and Marie brought the beauty!

**Let’s talk more about the story. Adrian’s aunt and his mother make an interesting contrast, the former, in particular, suggests that his mother was once more fun and understanding. What do you think led to this change?**

I don’t know everything about my characters. Sometimes they keep secrets from me.

Maybe she fell in love and it did end not very happily. Or maybe she didn’t accept her sister’s leaving her behind and felt held back by her family because she couldn’t go to study in the big city.

This character keeps his mystery, as parents always keep secrets from their children. We never know everything about people around us. We guess.

For me the voids in the story are as important as what is revealed, and I don't want to fill them all in!

**Where is Adrian's father and what do you imagine that he is like?**

In fact, in the early versions of the story, he appeared sometimes, but he never spoke anyway. He was an absent father whenever he was there. He vanished completely during the staging. I think he is more involved in his work than in his family.

**Adrian's aunt explains that she returned because she was tired of the big city, and yet she is critical of the "hole" (29) in which they are living. Does geographical location make a difference to their characters and their decisions?**

A location is a potential: there are things you can do and things you can't. It has a direct influence on you. You don't act the same way in a big city where you are quite anonymous as you do in a small village where everybody can keep an eye on you. You can meet few new people in a small and isolated place, and they will be less different when you are naturally in contact with other cultures, other behaviours in a city like Paris (but in another way, you have to protect yourself because human contact can be quite aggressive). I would be a very different person if I had stayed all these years in my village instead of living in big cities.

**Are the novel's adult figures, as Adrian suggests, channeling their repressed feelings to their children?**

Not only the novel's figures, but most people in real life! Parents often want to see their children as extensions of themselves. They have projects for them that ignore their children's desires in favour of their own goals for them: "he/she will be a lawyer, a doctor, he/she will study in this prestigious school, he/she will have a beautiful wedding" . . . They are convinced they do what is best for their children, but they don't question themselves about what is this best. They try to model their children as if they were virgin clay. It can do serious damage, sometimes, when these forced projects are not compatible with who their children are or want to be.

**Laura is quite an interesting character. Adrian's boyfriend Jeremy readily resumes a heterosexual relationship with her, though, paradoxically, he wanted sex with Adrian. What do you think leads Laura to put aside her boyfriend's sexual preferences?**

At this age, you don't analyze things like that, I think. You don't really know what you want and who you are. Everything is a bit confused. Most of the time, you try to exist in the eyes of other people of your age more than in the service of your own aspirations.

Young people (and not only young people . . .) have internalized gender prejudice: a tall, sportive and masculine guy must be heterosexual, so if he kisses a weakling guy, the weak guy must be the queer one who has seduced him (and if they have sex, the muscular one should be active, of course!). And everybody knows a feminine girl can't be lesbian!

So I think that in Laura's mind, if Jeremy comes back to her, he is "cured". Everything is back in order. Only appearance matters.

**What is the future of Laura and Jeremy that you envision with the absence of Adrian? Can they translate their friendship into a meaningful romanticized relationship or do you think that Jeremy will always be unhappy by staying in the closet? What is your opinion of Laura and the headmaster, who believe in "curing" homosexuality?**

In fact, I really don't know them outside of the story I wrote. I don't build characters with profiles and closed characteristics (I know it's a common technique often taught in writing class). I prefer to let them play, and I like it when they surprise me. I think that nobody can be known completely in real life: everybody has hidden parts, even for himself/herself. But people who want to cure homosexuality are out of touch with reality, and out of their minds. It's not a disease, and it's not a free choice whenever it's innate or acquired.

Normality doesn't exist as a fact of Nature, as conservative people try to make us believe. It's a social construction and it can change. It changes all the time! Our normality would seem very strange for people three centuries ago!

**Many characters in the story seem to have hideouts: Jeremy with his tree, and Adrian with his abbey ruins. What do you see as the appeal of such a space?**

When you are a teenager, you often have the intense feeling of being held hostage in an adult's world: you are convinced that you are able to rule your world, but adults consider you a child, making your decisions for you. So you create or choose your own space where you feel you can really be yourself. You need a place separate from the adult's world, somewhere to escape from their control.

**Tourists visit the ruins and we learn about its history. Why figure that into this story?**

In fact, Adrian has chosen this place because it's the perfect decor for his despair, like a Freidrich's painting. When I was a teenager, there was always this kind of mix between a real, deep feeling and the need to put in on stage, even if I was alone. Sadness was more delicious sitting on a rock in face of a stormy sea. But in the story, reality creeps in: the ruins are a tourist attraction and it breaks the atmosphere Adrian has chosen. He has to run away because it's an insult to his feelings.

**Adrian ends with the titular character swimming away. Why end the story in this ambiguous way?**

(Spoiler!) Because I don't know what happens next. I wanted to tell a story about teenage despair, about intolerance and temptation of suicide. Not about death. It's all about a feeling, a mood that was mine when I was this age.

And when I was this age, I didn't know what would be next: the future appeared like a wall, everything seemed impossible and complicated. I wanted to be in Adrian's place to write the story, not in my actual place.

In fact when I write, I try to create a story that has a meaning, but not a message. It has to stay open, a bit floating: I want the reader to appropriate it if he or she wants, to make his or her own journey in it.

**Are you optimistic for the character?**

It depends on the day!

**What would you have done in his place?**

I was not as strong, as courageous as he is when I was his age. I was so afraid of what people could think and do if they knew about my sexual orientation that I was hiding my desires, living undercover. I really only began to live my life when I was around twenty. So I think I wouldn't have done anything!

**How do you think embracing your sexual preferences in your twenties differs from embracing it earlier on?**

My teenagehood was a very unhappy period of my life. I couldn't imagine being with someone one day. Living with a girl would have been a lie, and dating a boy was so far away from what I was seeing every day that it seemed impossible: I had no point of reference for such a kind of living in my everyday world.

I started to feel better when I discovered love and sex. It helped me to accept myself, to become more confident. So maybe if I started earlier, this period of my life wouldn't have been so difficult. But who knows?

...

**This interview is appearing at a most serious time for writers and intellectuals worldwide with the Charlie Hebdo tragedy. Can you share your thoughts?**

We are all shocked. Killing people because they create things which are seen as offensive is just barbaric. It's quite difficult to work in these times.

This is the climax of a series of affronts to freedom of expression these past years by religious lobbies. It's something very unusual for us in France. It's a stifling atmosphere.

Even if they haven't killed anybody yet (but gay-bashing is growing and I don't think that it's a coincidence) people around "La Manif Pour Tous" (anti-gender and opponents of equality of rights for straight and gay couples) and Catholic extremists are attacking movies, plays, exhibitions, and children's books when they speak about gender and sexuality in a way that is not the same as their obscurantist one, or when they consider them offensive against their religion. Last year, during an exhibition about *Les Gens Normaux* (a book made of gay, lesbian, and transgender testimonies) in a public library, I had the honour of a small conservative protest that wanted it to be canceled to "protect children".

I can't forget that 25 years ago, a group of Catholic fanatics burned a movie theater in Paris with people in it because *The Last Temptation of Christ* was projected. But most of the people who protest against Charlie Hebdo massacre don't see the link.

Religion becomes madness when it pretends to control society and politics. A true religion should make people become more human, more open to other people. But sadly that's rarely the case.

It makes me want to write more about gender, about religion and society. We can't just give it up because of the totalitarian aspirations of fanatic minorities in their own religions. But I will do it in my own way. I've always preferred seduction to provocation, because it can attract people who don't think the same way. I try to make welcoming books.



When they are inside your house, you can try to show them what life looks like from your perspective. (For example, *Miss Don't Touch Me* won a prize from *Le Figaro*, a very conservative newspaper. Quite unexpected).

Culture becomes a battlefield for reactionary groups, and even if we are making comics, we have to stand up.

**On a more personal level, how do you see these extremists groups impacting the day-to-day interactions of the gay and lesbian community in Paris?**

When you live in Paris, most of the time, it has no impact at all, I think. But it's quite different for kids living in the suburbs (especially if it's poor ones where there are a lot of people who've immigrated to France, or rich ones with Catholic school): it's not easy to be gay, I think. But it has never been in these areas. But there is something quite new: a lot of gay people are afraid, and some are joining the xenophobic political parties who pretend they will protect gay people against Muslims.

It's scary, because these parties are close to extremists who encourage gay bashing, and they have walked against equality of rights between gay and straight couples, trying to seduce Catholic conservatives.

How can people who have experienced xenophobia become xenophobic too? How can people forget history, the battles that have allowed them to live the free life they have today?

**Thanks so much for your time, and we wish you the best with your work!**

**Notes on contributor**

Tom Ue gained his PhD from the Department of English Language and Literature at University College London, where his research examined Shakespeare's influence on the writing of George Gissing. Ue has taught at University College London. He was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of English at Yale University, and the 2011 Cameron Hollyer Memorial Lecturer, and he has held an Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship. He has contributed essays on Thomas Hardy, Gissing, Wilde, and with John James, Sherwood Anderson and James Cameron. Although Ue specializes in nineteenth-century literature, he cares deeply about, and writes on, many aspects of intellectual history. His work has appeared in a number of journals including the *Journal of Gender Studies*, *The Gissing Journal*, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, and *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship*, and he regularly contributes to *Film International* and the *TLS*. He is editor of *World Film Locations: Toronto* (Intellect Books, 2014), which coincides with the city's 180th anniversary, and *Dictionary of Literary Biography 377: Twenty-First Century British Novelists* (Gale, 2015). He is currently at work on a shorter piece on photography and phonography and their impact on the forms of late-Victorian and Edwardian writing. This is an opportunity to do some preliminary work towards a monograph on legal theory and the British novel in the nineteenth century.

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