

## **Working with *today's* culture: living authors and major institutions in France**

*Prof. Shirley Jordan, Professor of French Studies*

When we are not sharing ideas with students in seminars and lectures, many lecturers are out and about contributing to conferences, engaging with writers or other practitioners, and working with cultural institutions. We can take sabbatical leave (away from teaching) for these research projects. Here are some of the things that Shirley Jordan has been up to during her recent sabbatical leave—she looks forward to bringing these insights back to the classroom!

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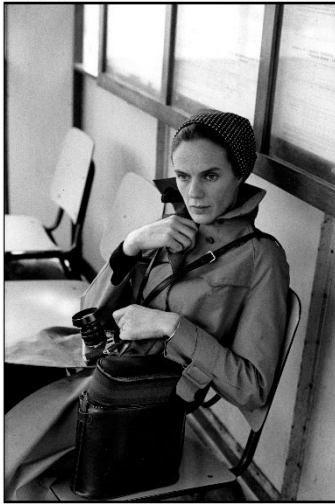
### Interview with French writer and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Annie Ernaux



L-R: Siobhán McIlvanney, Annie Ernaux, Shirley Jordan  
photo: Shirley Jordan

Students in the French section have been fascinated by the writings of Annie Ernaux, taught in a final year module on life writing. Ernaux's books explore her intimate experiences throughout her life from her working-class childhood in Normandy to her rise to fame and her success as the first woman in France to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 2022). She writes as a feminist, exploring difficult subjects such as sexuality and consent, illegal abortion (you might have seen the film *Happening* (2021), an adaptation of Ernaux's 2020 publication *L'Événement* directed by Audrey Diwan), passion and desire, illness, and class prejudice. Ernaux began publishing in the 1970s and now, aged 84, is still writing exciting texts which appeal to readers of all generations. In November 2023, Shirley Jordan and a colleague from King's College London, Siobhán McIlvanney, travelled to Ernaux's home in Cergy-Pontoise, just outside Paris, for a conversation about her work. The results will be published in the journal *French Studies* this year and will also feed into future teaching.

## Work on French Photography with the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris



Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Martine Franck*, 1972  
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Henri Cartier-Bresson

Shirley Jordan's project on French photographer Martine Franck, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, explores how Franck used documentary photography to draw attention to the plight of impoverished older people in France from the 1970s onwards. It also looks at the wide range of photographs Franck made, both in France and on her travels in China, India and elsewhere, that focus on the daily lives of older people. Shirley has been working in the archives of the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, where Franck's work is held, and has contributed to the understanding of her photographs by writing an essay for a Martine Franck retrospective exhibition catalogue (the exhibition will take place in Italy in May 2024) and making a video for the Fondation about one of

Franck's most iconic images of old age. You can see this video on the following link: <https://www.henricartierbresson.org/actualites/image-images-2-shirley-jordan/>

## **French for Business: a great preparation for the world of work**

*Luke Trinnaman (Modern Languages and Business Studies, Year Abroad—third year)*

*Luke is currently on his Year Abroad during a degree in Modern Languages and Business Studies, where he's studying French and Spanish. Here, he reflects on one of his favourite modules from his second year.*

The French for Business module was undoubtedly my favourite stage 2 module. There were a number of things I liked about it that made it both an enjoyable module, and a highly beneficial one. During this short article, I'll outline what I liked about the module in particular, and how it helped and prepared me for aspects of my year abroad.

French for Business gives insights into an economy and corporate environment that many of us are unfamiliar with. It does so by addressing and applying a range



L-R: Luke Trinnaman,  
Barbora Šachlová (both Newcastle)  
and Ally Claessens (Cambridge)  
on their Year Abroad  
hiking in Le Grand-Bornand, in the French Alps

of topics (my favourites being communication and globalisation) to the major players in the world of French business (L'Oréal, LVMH, Renault, Air France...), allowing for comparison between not only other French corporations, but also international ones. The coursework assignment gives you the opportunity to specialise on a particular subject covered in lectures and seminars, and to critically analyse a French business' approach to it. I found this to be an excellent opportunity to apply and also build on the knowledge taught in class. The lectures are conducted primarily in French, which facilitated improvements to my listening and comprehension skills, and also expanded my business-related vocabulary in French.

As a Modern Languages and Business Studies student, I found that French for Business was the perfect combination between both areas of my degree. It provided me with new perspectives about the world of French business on both a macro and a micro scale, giving me a good idea of what to expect before my year abroad work placement in Annecy. The coursework examination is a great opportunity to practice group presentational skills as well as speaking the French language in a professional context, both valuable employability skills.

All in all, I would say that this module is a must for anyone with an interest in international business. Whether you are interested in the day-to-day operations of French businesses, how they have expanded and remained competitive on a global scale, or simply want to get an idea of what working in France would be like, I strongly recommend taking French for Business.

## **To Newcastle via Paris, Nantes, Marseille and Syria**

*Dr Elizabeth Marcus (Lecturer in French and Francophone Studies)*



I'm a lecturer in the School of Modern Languages, but I'm currently also conducting a research project on what people in the Arab world think of the former French Empire. Some of the Arab world was actually under French colonial administration at the time, so it's an important area to research.

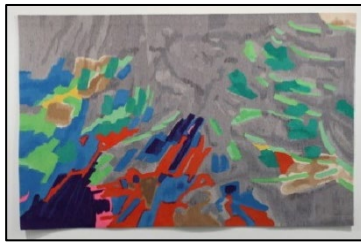
It was a while before I got to this research focus, though. To become a University lecturer in most of the world, you have to first do an advanced research qualification called a doctorate, or PhD. In the UK, that typically takes four years at the most, and you are working on your 'specialist subject' all of that time. I completed my PhD in America, though, where you don't even have to decide what research you want to do before the 2nd or 3rd year of your study (an American PhD takes a very long time...). Before I settled on this focus, I could never have

anticipated that my research would take me not only to Paris, Nantes, and Marseille but also to Syria (for Arabic language classes), and Lebanon. Studying the ongoing reckoning of the French Empire in the Arab world has been a personal and intellectual adventure. When I was in Paris, I interviewed the Lebanese-American poet Etel Adnan, who was a leading voice of contemporary Arab-American culture. She regretted that, as a result of the French-schooling system in Lebanon, she only spoke French, and not Arabic. In our interview she told me, "My problem with French started in



Etel Adnan (1925-2021)

Image: by nanwieser  
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Etel Adnan, *Mount Tamalpais*

Image: by M.Ahmadani (cropped)  
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the 1960s when I was in America during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) during which time Algerians were fighting against the French colonisers... I was on the side of the Algerians, so I felt I needed to reject the French language... I am not a happy francophone." For this reason, she told me, she took up painting for a time. In painting, she found "a language without a language problem".

I have so enjoyed bringing some of this research to a broader audience. When Etel Adnan died in 2021, I was invited to speak of her life and work on BBC Radio 4. I really look forward to more language and research adventures over the coming years!

## « Lecture contre le grain » : découvrir les mystères de la Révolution haïtienne

*Georgia Davison (étudiante de dernière année en langues vivantes)*

*Georgia Davison is a final-year student in Modern Languages. Her main languages are French and Spanish, and she's also studied Catalan in her degree, and Russian in the extra-curricular University-Wide Language Programme. She also spent a summer representing the University as an intern in the city administration of Nancy, France. Here, Georgia tells us about a key technique for historical research, and some discoveries it has led to during her undergraduate dissertation research on the Haitian Revolution.*



Georgia Davison au cœur du paysage près de Nancy

Désormais la colonie la plus rentable de la France, l'Haïti est devenu le premier état indépendant dirigé par d'anciens esclaves en 1804, après 13 ans de révolte. Il reste néanmoins beaucoup à découvrir sur cette révolution. Un enjeu clé est un déséquilibre parmi les sources

principales : la majorité des esclaves étant analphabètes, il existe peu de sources relatives à leurs expériences, en comparaison aux écritures de l'armée française qui essayait de mettre fin à la révolte. Les vies de milliers des esclaves ont été réduites à des mentions minuscules dans les archives, ou, encore pire, ont été complètement effacées. La question est donc : comment pouvons-nous utiliser les principales sources disponibles pour récupérer ces histoires ?

Je vous présente le concept de la « lecture contre le grain ». C'est la pratique d'analyser des sources dans un but contraire à celui des auteurs d'origine, d'étudier ce qui est inféré, et ce qui n'est pas dit. En étudiant les histoires des personnes marginalisées, les silences archivistiques sont tout aussi importants comme ce qui est écrit.

Étudions un exemple : le 8 février 1803, un article bref apparaît dans le journal français *Le Moniteur Universel*. Il s'agit d'un rapport du tribunal et de l'exécution de Charles et Sanitte Belair, condamnés pour avoir incité une rébellion échouée en Saint Domingue, le nom colonial de l'Haïti. Son but est de convaincre les Français que l'armée française est capable de vaincre les troubles en Saint Domingue, mais si nous lisons contre le grain, nous pouvons apprendre beaucoup de choses sur les pratiques de l'armée haïtienne, l'influence des traditions africaines sur ses structures sociales, et la position des femmes noires dans la hiérarchie de l'empire français. Quand nous lisons cet article en combinaison avec d'autres rapports des tribunaux, il est clair que les femmes luttaient dans l'armée haïtienne comme des soldats gradés. De plus, si nous investiguons davantage, nous pouvons traquer cette tradition jusqu'aux pratiques militaires en Afrique. Dans l'article en soi, il est évident que les auteurs considéraient que les femmes étaient la propriété de leurs maris, et ce, particulièrement dans le cas des femmes colonisées. Nous pouvons donc tirer de ce document des conclusions sur les attitudes distinctes envers les femmes en Afrique, en Europe, et dans les colonies antillaises. Ces analyses représentent une situation beaucoup plus complexe qu'un simple succès de l'armée française, et elles sont cruciales pour approfondir nos connaissances des vies silencées et des histoires marginalisées.

## **A day in the life of a Research Fellow in French cultural history**

*Dr Hannah Scott, Research Fellow in French Cultural History*

Dr Hannah Scott is a Research Fellow in French cultural history in the School of Modern Languages. Her current project explores the role of music as a tool for communicating and responding to experiences of disease, public health, and medicine in nineteenth-century Paris, and she has wider interests in popular music, dance, variety theatre, & street spectacle.



Hannah Scott giving a talk from her piano

**9am** Sit down at the piano, put an 1870s anti-vax music-hall song on the stand, and attempt to work out why they thought yodelling would dissuade people from getting the smallpox jab. Attempt to learn to yodel – in French – in case this helps.

**9.30am-midday** Read voraciously, about myriad aspects of life and society; about comedy, about psychology, about urban planning, about public health, about gender, about racism, about inequality, about hope. One of the joys of being

in modern languages is that it doesn't stop at learning the language; it means having the wonderful opportunity, day after day, to use words as a gateway to the people who speak them, to the inner workings of human society, and to the crux of who we are.

Today, I've been reading newspapers from the 1880s about whether working-class Parisians had undergone the same evolutionary processes as the upper-middle classes, or whether their frontal lobes were more like those of monkey. Truly, scientific advances are only as good as the people who surround them...

**Lunchtime** Turn on a French pop music mix on Spotify or – guilty pleasure – a French TV talent show (preferably *Danse avec les stars*). I'm researching French performance culture, so this definitely counts as work.

**12.30-2pm** Work with colleagues on the outline for a possible new undergrad module. Debate which of the many exciting topics we have space to include. Can we fit in a seminar on the cancan? On plague? On photography from the French Empire? Shall we offer creative writing as an assessment option?

**2-4pm** Start work on translating a musical from the 1850s. I'm working with a researcher in theatre history to revive a show that hasn't been performed in over 150 years, to be performed with participants and audiences from all around Newcastle. We're grappling with issues of historical accuracy, how to deal with the out-dated prejudices which come through the original script – especially about religion and body image – and how on earth to translate the puns so they are still funny despite being in a different language, place, and century.

**4-5pm** Attend a seminar to hear about the fascinating discoveries that my colleagues, including postgraduate researchers, have been making in their research projects – I've recently heard amazing talks on everything from German travelling theatres and recycling culture in China, to protest novels in French Guiana and the impact of recent politics on the European music industry.

#### Get in touch!

If you have any questions, please get in touch with our Admissions Selector at:

[Sandra.Salin@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:Sandra.Salin@newcastle.ac.uk)

Tel: 0191 208 8417

You can also visit us at [www.ncl.ac.uk/sml/](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sml/) - we look forward to seeing you on campus soon!

## ***La vita è bella* at Newcastle!**

*Jenniveve Grason (Modern Languages, final year)*

*Did you know that at Newcastle, as well as studying your main languages, you can also pick up other languages and have them count for credit in your degree? If you're doing French or Spanish, you can do Italian or Catalan; if you're doing German, you can do Dutch; and if you're doing Chinese or Japanese, you can do Korean.*

**Jenniveve Grason** is doing Intermediate Italian as part of her BA Modern Languages final year, where her main languages are French and Spanish. Here, she reflects on something she's enjoyed doing as part of that module, and an additional way of communicating as well...

*La vita è bella* ('Life is beautiful') is a heart-warming but also heart-breaking film about a father who tries to shield his son from the atrocities of a Nazi concentration camp through his imagination. Jewish bookshop owner Guido Orefice and his wife Dora, along with their son Giosuè and uncle Eliseo, are sent to the internment camp. Although separated from his family, Guido often makes grand gestures such as using the camp's loudspeaker to send messages so his wife would hear that he and Giosuè are safe. However, in the camp Guido wants to hide the true terror of what is going on from his son, so devises a game where Giosuè must perform tasks with his father to collect points, and the first team to reach 1000 points would win a tank. As the allied forces are approaching, Guido tells Giosuè to stay in a box until everybody has left, which is the final task before receiving the tank. Guido rushes to try and find Dora but is caught and ordered to be executed. He passes Giosuè one last time, always remaining in character in the point-scoring game, and is then taken down an alleyway and shot and killed. Giosuè and Dora are reunited, still unaware of Guido's death.

We studied this film as part of our topic on the history of Italian fascism. Whilst it is horrible to learn and hear about, it is also incredibly important to study serious topics so we can honour the memory of the victims of such atrocities. The film showed us the extent that a parent will go to for their child, to protect them at all costs. All of the topics we study here at Newcastle University are relevant and they're all made interesting to learn about. As well as all of these topics, we learn grammar in depth to allow us to communicate freely!

*Se da un lato abbiamo imparato argomenti importanti come questi, dall'altro abbiamo avuto modo di studiare argomenti divertenti come i gesti delle mani in italiano! Tutti sanno che gli italiani sono espressivi con i gesti delle mani, ma chi sapeva che esistevano così tanti gesti diversi con significati diversi! È divertente poterli praticare con gli amici e ancora di più praticare la comunicazione non verbale. Questi gesti sono molto utili se vi trovate in Italia e dimenticate la parola per qualcosa! Infatti, secondo il Centro linguistico italiano, ci sono circa 250 gesti diversi usati dagli italiani ogni giorno!*



Jenniveve on the Spanish Steps in Rome