



The Disappearance of Émile Zola: Love, Literature and the Dreyfus Case

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It is the evening of 18 July 1898 and the world-renowned novelist Émile Zola is on the run. His crime? Taking on the highest powers in the land with his open letter 'J'accuse' and losing. Forced to leave Paris, with nothing but the clothes he is standing in and a nightshirt wrapped in newspaper, Zola flees to England with no idea when he will return.

This is the little-known story of his time in exile. Rosen has traced Zola's footsteps from the Gare du Nord to London, examining the significance of this year. *The Disappearance of Zola* offers an intriguing insight into the mind, the loves, the politics and the work of the great writer.

The Disappearance of Émile Zola: Love, Literature and the Dreyfus Case Details

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From Reader Review The Disappearance of Émile Zola: Love, Literature and the Dreyfus Case for online ebook

Paul says

At the turn of the 19th century the famous writer, Émile Zola is fleeing from his home country of France. Carrying a nightshirt, he takes the train from the Gare du Nord, crosses the channel and heads to London. He had committed no crime, just had the audacity to take on the French government over the handling and verdict of treason handed out to a Jewish artillery officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Like many others, Zola believed he was innocent and the real culprit for handing over secrets to the Germans was another officer, Major Esterhazy. Zola's open letter, 'J'accuse', published in *L'Aurore*, accused the French Army and establishment of antisemitism and injustice. The intention of this provocation was to be sued for libel so that documents in the Dreyfus case could be revealed and the innocent man freed.

It didn't quite work out like that, hence why he was on his way to London.

Rosen has in this book revealed a fascinating little piece of history of a world-renowned writer who believed in justice and the truth. He details his movements into London and out into Weybridge, keeping a low profile, unlike his previous high profile visit where he was lauded and celebrated. We learn about the two women in his life, his wife Alexandrine and the mother of his children, Jeanne; it was a complex ménage-a-trois; He was not overly enamored with the weather in England, and loathed the food, but used some of the time here to embark on the *Les Quatre Évangiles* novels.

I have read a couple of Rosen's books before, including as most parents would know well, *Going on a Bear Hunt*. I have never read any of Zola's novels as yet and knew almost nothing about him, but Rosen's skill as a writer means that he has added in those little details to the narrative to show Zola's flaws and qualities without it becoming too bogged down. Definitely, a must read for any Zola fan, I found it an interesting account of a small slice of history.

Marie Bouteille says

Zola was the first writer I fell in love with. I had no idea his work was considered pornographic in the UK and that his translator had been sent to prison because of this. I also didn't know that he spent a year in London, fleeing after the verdict of his trial following his article "J'Accuse" because his life in anti-semitic France was in danger... 5 years earlier, he had been invited to speak about his work in London and he had been pleased with life there (and it's exciting to know that he met Henry James and Oscar Wilde, two of my favourite writers...). In exile, everything seems grim. He feels lonely. He has to keep to his hotel or the little house he rents. He can't speak English so even basic errands are a burden to him. His family and friends back in France are constantly threatened. The four Gospels are the only work that I've never read and now I know in what circumstances he wrote the first one, *Truth*, I'm curious. It's funny that England made such an impression on him that he wrote the short story *Angeline* or the haunted house, which reads like a tale by Poe at first and doesn't look like anything he's written before but then turns back to the search for truth so important for him.

Dale says

Zola and the Dreyfus Affair

My thanks to my contacts at Pegasus Books, Iris Blasi, Katie McGuire, and Maia Larson, for my advance reading copy of this book. You ladies rock!

In 1894 French Intelligence was made aware of an unnamed French Officer who was sending state secrets to German Intelligence. The investigation into the case was prejudiced from the start. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused, court-martialed, convicted, and sent to Devil's Island in French Guiana on flimsy evidence. The deciding factor in the alleged treason charges brought against Dreyfus seemed to be that he was Jewish.

Emile Zola, a French novelist, playwright, and journalist then published an 1898 article in the Paris daily L'Aurore titled J'Accuse in defense of Dreyfus. The article pointed out what Zola perceived to be corruption and anti-Semitism on the part of the government and military. His championing of Dreyfus was not easy for him and would cost him dearly.

In this book author Michael Rosen does an excellent job of bringing out the drama of this advent. He describes Zola's flight to London and the pressure that Zola's actions brought upon him. At times discouragement and even a stark loss of hope plagued Zola. The author paints a picture of Zola that allows the reader to sympathize with both Zola and Dreyfus. Zola continued to write and publish during his exile. They are very demonstrative of his continued protest against corruption in politics and the military.

This book makes it clear that Zola's bravery in drawing attention to the plight of a loyal Captain Dreyfus sowed the seeds of Dreyfus' release. In the end, the actions of Zola and other writers caused the complete exoneration and reinstatement of Dreyfus into the Military with a rank increase to Major.

The book is well written, painstakingly researched and very informative but I cannot help but feel that it is perhaps better suited to use as research material. Was I charged with writing a paper of any sort about the Dreyfus Affair, this book would become invaluable. When it comes to being a book to read and enjoy, not so much.

I will give the book three stars, basing the score more on the book's merit and less on my own enjoyment of the volume...

Quoth the Raven...

Geenyas says

Highly informative, but not highly entertaining.

Laura Spira says

This is an odd little book and I was left wondering why Michael Rosen chose to write it. It tells the story of

Zola's brief exile in England to avoid imprisonment for his part in the Dreyfus affair. It seems to be meticulously researched, based on Zola's prolific correspondence, but, while the characters surrounding him - his wife, his mistress and their children, and his loyal publisher - are depicted with some depth, I was left with very little sense of Zola himself.

The challenge of leaving one's home in haste for a destination where one does not speak the language and has to remain in hiding does not seem to impede Zola from continuing to write. His letters suggest petulance rather than any real sense of danger. But writing about a writer writing is not really very interesting. Much of his correspondence seems to relate to managing his relationships with his wife and mistress: his wife seems to have shown great forbearance in this and having been left in France to deal with all his business in his absence cannot fail to win the respect of the reader.

The contrast between Zola's earlier visit to England when he was lionised by the literary establishment and his less happy return was well portrayed, as was his claustrophobic existence in various South London hotels. But Rosen's fondness for exclamation marks became a bit irritating to this reader and some of his speculation about Zola's thoughts and emotions seemed a little wayward.

Although there is very little detail included about the Dreyfus affair, the inclusion of the translated text of "J'Accuse" as an appendix is useful and the reader could be prompted to read more about the background.

Ian Brydon says

Emile Zola's connection with the Dreyfus Affair is well known. His open letter, titled 'J'Accuse' and published in *L'Aurore* (edited by Georges Clemenceau, who subsequently became French Prime Minister), brought international attention to the scandal and was a major contribution to the campaign that would, eventually (and woefully belatedly) see Captain Dreyfus pardoned for his wrongful conviction of treason.

Less, though, is known about Zola's disappearance in July 1898. Zola had suffered for his intervention in the Dreyfus Affair, and in addition to heated public invective he was prosecuted for libel arising from his claims that the court martial proceedings against Dreyfus had been fixed from the onset. On 18 July, in advance of the declaration of the verdict in that libel case, Zola left Paris, eventually turning up in London. The verdict found Zola guilty, and he was fined 3,000 francs and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. The libel case has already proved a cause célèbre, with extensive press coverage and a crowd had gathered to bay for Zola's head as he left the court on the previous day. His disappearance became, therefore, a major media event, prompting press exuberance across Europe.

Michael Rosen has explored how Zola spent his time in England following his escape from France, and has woven an enlightening account of the novelist's life and works during that period. Zola's personal life was involved, to say the least. He had been married for many years to the long-suffering Alexandrine but had also maintained a lengthy liaison with his mistress, Jeanne, (whom he addressed in his many letters as 'Chère femme'), with whom he had two children. Nothing too surprising there, perhaps when one applies British stereotypes of French writers. What was less predictable, however, was that Zola's wife would not only countenance Jeanne travelling with the children to be with Zola in England while she remained in Paris, but would actually make all the necessary arrangements herself.

Rosen offers a clear and engaging portrayal of Zola's life in England, where he struggled to adapt to the life of an exile in what he clearly considered to be a most uncivilised country. Although he developed a liking for

local Sunday roast lunches, for the most part he was appalled by the culinary fare on offer, finding even such staples as bread to be barely palatable. His sociological observations were far from sympathetic, too, coming to view the English as a nation of relentless litter louts. This did not prevent him from putting his time in England to good use, and he completed his novel *Fécondité* and planned its companion volumes.

Rosen is himself well known for his espousal of liberalism and has campaigned vociferously for the spread of literacy, and particularly for prisoners' wider access to books, so it is clear that he and Zola are kindred spirits. His book is a sound tribute: informative, enlightening and engaging.

Peter Pinkney says

A well written, and well researched, account of the great author's time in England after his brave stance over the Dreyfus case

Gill says

'The Disappearance of Émile Zola' by Michael Rosen

3.5 stars/ 7 out of 10

I was interested in reading this book because recently I have completed reading the 20 volumes in the Rougon Macquart series by Émile Zola, and hence was looking forward to extending my background knowledge of Zola's life.

I found this book to be interesting. It added a lot to my knowledge of this period in the life of Émile Zola.

The parts I especially enjoyed and found interesting related to Zola and photography, to Zola and his previous visit to London a few years earlier, and to the issues leading to the trial and imprisonment of Henry Vizetelly. It was also interesting to read about the various links to the author's family. The only negative for me was that I felt that there was too much detail relating to Zola's correspondence with Jeanne.

I think that the book will be best appreciated and enjoyed by those who are already interested in Émile Zola and/or the Dreyfus Affair. I am a bit doubtful as to whether it will be of great interest to a wider audience.

Thank you to Faber and Faber Ltd and to NetGalley for an ARC.

Jovan Autonomaševi? says

A lovely little book, meticulously researched. It tells the story of French author Zola's exile in the UK. I knew vaguely about the Dreyfus affair, and was aware Zola had something to do with it, but now I've this book I have a much better understanding of both. And more than that, I have an understanding of the rabid anti-semitism that existed at that time, and which continued afterwards, to culminate in the deportation of tens (or hundreds?) of thousands of Jews from France to Auschwitz during WWII. In most cases, they were

deported not by the German army, but by the French police.

Dreyfus, an army officer, was wrongly accused and convicted of treason in the late 1890s, on no evidence. In fact, he was innocent, but another officer was guilty. Yet through a combination of incompetence, unwillingness to admit their mistakes, and racism, the army top brass closed ranks and refused to revise the original judgment, even when the real culprit came to light. Zola, a successful writer at the time, risked his reputation and his liberty (and possible lynching) by publicly condemning the injustice, corruption, and incompetence at the heart of the French establishment. He was sued for libel, and on the advice of his friends, took refuge in the UK while the various legal proceedings played out. He was finally vindicated (although Dreyfus himself was not; he was pardoned, but not acquitted, and the real culprit and those who had wrongly convicted him were also pardoned).

The book concentrates on Zola's life in the UK at this difficult time for him. Beyond the narrative of where and when he was, it concentrates on his family life, and how he and his unusual family (wife and concubine, and kids) coped with the stress of living undercover, of the impending threat of imprisonment and ruin, and of living as an exile in a foreign country (he didn't speak English). What is remarkable is how they all tried to carry on as usual, as much as they could in the circumstances, and Zola even used the time to complete one of his books. A reminder that people who are ready to make a public stand against what they see as wrong are nevertheless still people, with all the everyday concerns that affect all of us. That even heroes have to cope with day to day life.

In these days when anti-semitism is a political issue in the UK, it is timely to reflect on how it has developed and been perceived in other circumstances. And to reflect on how we as individuals respond to it today. Dreyfus's granddaughter was sent to Auschwitz. The author's uncles were also sent, on the same transport. That partly explains his fascination with Zola, and his decision to write this very human book at this time.

Monica says

This very engaging history sheds light on the last months of Zola's life – his exile in Britain after he was found guilty of libel for publishing *J'accuse*, his accusations against the miscarriage of justice in the Dreyfus affair, alleging forged evidence and a conspiracy at the highest level of the army and the government by anti-Semitic and royalist forces.

Zola was at the height of his fame when he made this statement – a best-selling author, celebrated across Europe. It was an idealistic gesture which cost him and his family personally and financially, and may in fact have cost him his life, if the confession of an anti-Dreyfusard who claimed to have blocked the Zola chimney to suffocate him is true.

He was a larger than life character in many ways – the state of friendly détente between his two families, mistress Jeanne and their two children and his childless wife Alexandrine being one. He was loved and hated as an author – his unsparing and graphic descriptions of physical reality causing him grief from the Purity Police at home and abroad. He was a doting if demanding father, and attentive to both his spouses, wretched in exile, writing of how he hated the weather and the food and how he missed his family and friends. It is a wonderfully human portrait of a man who made a singular and brave contribution to the cause of equality and social justice.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

Richard Derus says

Real Rating: 3.5* of five

A very interesting digest of the paperwork, published sources, and private thoughts recorded between 13 January 1898 and Christmas 1900. The Dreyfus Affair's incredibly long shadow hasn't passed yet, the anti-"foreigner" attitude of many of the French has shifted to the Muslims. The rhetoric hasn't changed much.

Zola's response to the horror of his country's leaders, the men charged with guiding the Ship of State into safe harbor, listened to the lowest, the least, and the worst people in France, gave them something they wanted...an Other to abominate and excoriate...then put that designated scapegoat onto a ship to die in their most horrifyingly ghastly prison colony, was to scream his fury and rejection. The baseness, the injustice, the inhumanity of it, ate at Zola like acid. He was the author of a multi-volume body of work called *Les Rougon-Macquart*, a daringly honest and searingly realistic 20-volume cycle of tales about a clan of nothing-special French folk that earned Zola an international reputation for both talent and prurience. Reading them today, both seem reasonably accurate assessments.

So what, the guy's dead 116 years, the Dreyfus Affair happened 120 years ago.

Look around you. I would that we had a Zola to, in clear and direct prose, accuse the malefactors of our world of their crimes and, what's more, make the accusations stick. Will that be a lawyer named Mueller? Maybe...I hope so.

Rosen also includes translations of "Angelique," a "ghost story" that Zola wrote in London, as well as the stirring-if-stilted *J'accuse!* as it appeared in *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898. If none of these events are familiar to you, go read this book immediately.

I'm stingy star-wise because Rosen's task includes the thankless one of framing his subject to people unfamiliar with the *dramatis personae* as well as the *casus belli* that got the whole thing going. As a result, he resorts to much inevitable spoon-feeding and that, I fear, caused my eyes to glaze over. It's necessary, it's even reasonably well-done, but it's bloody tedious and kept me from ever forgetting how Worthy the people were and how Relevant the warnings herein are. When my finger finds the shift key without being told to go there by my brain, we have a problem between us Author Man.

Paradoxically, that makes me want all y'all to read this book all the more! The beauty of history is that we are able to view causes and effects in their entirety; a thing obviously impossible in the present. The tragedy of history is that those who don't read it don't learn from it; a thing that could prevent the present from repeating the past verbatim. I will say this: When you read this book, you will not feel like you're being told to keep chewing that wad of kale until it goes down your throat. More along the lines of, "here's some lovely dark bread to sustain you, love, and a big pat of real butter for yummies."

Jonathan says

The Disappearance of Émile Zola covers Zola's period of exile in England during the Dreyfus Affair. I had previously read Ernest Vizetelly's *With Zola in England: A Story of Exile* which is a great first-hand account of events by Zola's English publisher and was published in 1899 while the Dreyfus Affair was still raging. Michael Rosen is able to add to that account by referring to Zola's correspondence and more recent works on Zola.

On the evening of Monday, 18 July 1898, Émile Zola disappeared.

Zola had been convicted for criminal libel following the publication in January 1898 of his explosive article

J'accuse. In this article Zola claimed that Dreyfus had been falsely convicted of espionage by the army, that evidence had been fabricated and kept secret from the defence, that the guilty person, Major Esterhazy, was protected by the army and that Dreyfus was convicted because of anti-Semitism in the army. All of this was true but that did not stop Zola from being prosecuted. Zola had hoped that his trial would result in a re-trial of Dreyfus but this failed as the military and judiciary closed ranks. Zola faced a year in prison but was persuaded by his lawyer to flee to England instead.

As we read this book we discover that Zola had a hard time in England. His home affairs were complicated as he shared his life with his wife of nearly thirty years, Alexandrine, and his mistress, Jeanne, with whom he had two children, Denise and Jacques. Zola could speak very little English and now, although a famous author, he found himself alone and in a foreign land having to hide away in damp, cramped houses and having to cope with English weather and food. He wasn't totally alone of course as Vizetelly and others were there to help him find a place to stay and to direct his correspondence back home. Zola managed to stay hidden away despite attempts by the press to track him down. Amusingly Zola was spotted almost straight away by some French actresses on tour in London but luckily this didn't get leaked to the press and he managed to remain hidden away for the whole period.

Zola wasn't to return to France until 5th June 1899, over a year since he decided to leave France. During this year he was compelled to move house several times but he managed to continue his work on the first of his novels from the *Four Gospels* series, *Fruitfulness* (*Fécondité*), which was published whilst he was still in England. Zola's *Four Gospels* were to concentrate on influencing French society rather than just documenting it. Strangely, Zola seems to be more positive than ever before. Here he is recorded by a reporter as saying:

Ah! how this crisis has done me good! How it's made me forget the self-glorifying vanity to which I—like many others—become attached! And how it's opened up my life, along with problems and profundities that I didn't ever suspect! I want to devote all my efforts to the liberation of man. I wish that we could all put ourselves up for the test that our group of humanity might come out of this being braver and more fraternal...

Once he'd moved out of London both Alexandrine and Jeanne were able to visit Zola during this period, albeit at separate times. As he became more settled he was able to enjoy his new passions of cycling and photography and included in this book are several of Zola's photographs of England and of his visiting family. Rosen's book also includes many extracts from Zola's correspondence with Alexandrine, Jeanne and his children. These letters help us to understand his unorthodox homelife and how he tried to please everyone. Alexandrine must have found the situation very difficult but she and Zola were still in love and she continued to administer his affairs in Paris. Zola's letters to Alexandrine and Jeanne show that he cared for them both.

This is a very interesting book for the Zola enthusiast and even if you've read Vizetelly's book you will find it fascinating to read. It also includes the short story that Zola wrote whilst in England called *Angeline* or *The Haunted House* which is a sort of 'non-ghost story' and the text of *J'accuse* is reproduced in full. I suppose the only criticism is that the Dreyfus Affair is only explained very briefly so it would be best to read up beforehand on the scandal that instigated the events laid out in this book.

Zeba says

This was a great book, a fantastic biography and such a pleasure to read. The research blew my mind, all the newspaper stories, ads, letters. It was also a quick read, an interesting life story and an insightful look into relationships. I appreciated the care with which the author revealed aspects of Zola's life.

Mandy says

Meticulously researched and demonstrating an obvious, and deserved, admiration for his subject, Michael Rosen's account of Emile Zola's stay in London whether he had fled from his native France to avoid the fallout from his defence of Dreyfus opens up a little known episode of the writer's life. It's a really interesting book, for sure, but I found it perhaps a little too detailed at times, which slowed the narrative down on occasion. Rosen quotes extensively from Zola's letters to his children, for example, encouraging them to do better at school and so on, and although this aspect of the private Zola holds a certain fascination it all became a bit repetitive at times. Rosen largely succeeds in making his subject come alive but overall there could have been a bit of editing to make the tale rattle along at a more compelling pace.

Eileen Hall says

Michael Rosen always writes interesting and informative books on many subjects and I always make a point to listen to his radio programmes when broadcast.

Emil Zola's escape from France is a subject that I don't know much about, but I imagine it shows a side to him which will be surprising to many.

A great read and highly recommended.

I was given a digital copy of this book by the publisher Faber and Faber via Netgalley in return for an honest unbiased review.
