

CULTURE

Un Homme in Full

A blinkered and besotted account of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign succumbs to the erotic entanglements of biography.

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SHARE AS GIFT  SAVE  sarkozy

Photo by Jean Pierre Amet/Belombra/Corbis

Looking over the headlines at a news kiosk in Paris this spring was like examining an array of autopsy reports and clinical case studies. “The Man With the Bags Under His Eyes” read *Le Point*, a right-wing weekly that might normally be presumed to bolster France’s right-wing president. Nicolas Sarkozy’s visage stared out sadly from behind the magazine’s block letters. The newspaper *Libération* didn’t even bother with a head shot; its cover simply sported a black silhouette to suggest a missing person: “French Seeking President,” it announced ominously. The page-one editorial was titled “Pathology.” “When one judges a head of state, one generally asks, ‘Is he a good president or a bad president?’” it began. “In the case of [Sarkozy,] one must ask, ‘Is he *a president?*’”



Sarkozy's career, for the past several months, has been in a dizzying downward spiral. Every fresh magazine cover in la belle France, every weekly and every tabloid, seems to offer new evidence of his destruction. Even though—as many a Frenchman will tell you—he *runs* them all. Or at least his friends do. Arnaud Lagardère, a witness at Sarkozy's second marriage, owns *Paris Match*; another pal, Serge Dassault, presides over *Le Figaro*; longtime associate Martin Bouygues heads up the television channel *TF1*; and Vincent Bolloré—the notorious billionaire who outraged the country by lending Sarkozy a yacht for two and a half days after his year of presidential campaigning—controls *Matin Plus*.

But with friends like these, you don't need enemies. “The Meltdown of Nicolas Sarkozy,” flashes yet another headline. “Should he resign?” puzzle the commentators. Many say yes. Sarkozy's approval ratings have plummeted to the 30th percentile. *Sarcophobia* has entered the French language and is here to stay. So has the acronym *TSS*—*Tout Sauf Sarkozy* (“Anything But Sarkozy”).

What happened? How did this man—elected with an imposing margin over his attractive Socialist rival, Ségolène Royal, less than a year ago—sink so low so fast? He hasn't drawn corruption charges, as did his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. He hasn't started wars. He hasn't made even a dent in the economy. In fact, he hasn't had time to do much of anything yet. His problem is one of style, not substance.

As the newly translated book about him by the famous French playwright Yasmina Reza suggests, Sarkozy is a man at war with French niceties. He's a plainspoken tough who dispenses insults more easily than he absorbs them, wishes to save France from apathy and irrelevance, suffers from an acute case of restless legs syndrome, and, in the end, possesses a heart of gold.

Reza followed Sarkozy for almost a year of presidential campaigning in 2006–2007, and she continually reprimands him for, of all things, his obsession with love. In a 30-page speech to the youth of France, he says “amour” *53 times*, Reza laments. What's with this guy? Reza is an intellectual, a skeptic. Her literary works (among them the international theater triumph *Art*) teem with ironic asides and tragic heroes. Indeed, Sarkozy is the first nontragic hero to merit Reza's attention in some time, she confessed to a reporter after the publication of *Dawn, Dusk or Night: A Year With Nicolas Sarkozy*. She tries, in many ways, to turn him into a tragic hero. When he tells her, “Love is the only thing that matters” and “I can only love a landscape if I'm in it with someone I love,” she mocks his naïveté. “A formula so vain,” she sighs.

She hints broadly at his disappointment e life. There is something to this disappointment. While Reza was writing , Sarkozy was campaigning alone—his

second wife, Cécilia, with whom he had officially reconciled after she'd left him to cohabit with a New York millionaire for several months, was conspicuously absent from his side and never found the time to vote for him in the final election. He was incessantly checking his cell phone for news from her. In fact, one of the book's most poignant moments comes when Reza describes Sarkozy, alone in a train compartment, opening and shutting his mobile phone: "I see him turning on his cell phone, turning it off, never going any further than the home page ... [his youngest son's] face appearing and disappearing dozens of times." He never makes a call; he only waits for one.

Reza accurately captures the vulnerability of this man, so infamous for arrogance, for bravado. Early on in her meetings with him, she notices that he has a slight limp. She notices that he is hardly taller than the 10-year-old son of a firefighter being honored on the anniversary of September 11. The president strikes her as a little boy. "When I tell his entourage that he looks like a child, I get stunned stares," she notes.

Sarkozy is indeed an arresting mix of strength and weakness. At times he seems very much the hero, the strongman, the larger-than-life action figure. He raised eyebrows throughout France in 1993 when, as mayor of the posh Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, he burst into a school held by a gunman and emerged carrying a young hostage in his arms. No other politician in recent history has risked his skin the way Sarkozy does. At other times, it is his frailty that attracts attention: his hair-trigger temper, his vulnerability to Cécilia, his physical tics.

I, too, noticed his limp when I arranged to join him—Reza-style—on a day trip to an apprentice-training outfit in the east of France where he hoped to promote a new Gallic work ethic. Arriving with a cavalry of handlers, he resembled a child star on a sitcom. For all his conscious swagger and broad, thrown-back shoulders, he wore soles several centimeters high. His voice, when he answered journalists' questions, was almost preternaturally soft.

This was a man who only two weeks earlier had raised a furor in France for calling a farmworker a "poor slob" when he yelled "Keep your dirty hands off me!" as Sarkozy greeted supporters at an agricultural event. How unpresidential, raged the critics. Never mind that Sarkozy hadn't skipped a beat or broken his smile. Jacques Chirac, it was pointed out, had been similarly accosted once: "Asshole," a man yelled at him. Chirac stretched out his hand in greeting: "And *my* name," he said graciously, "is Chirac." That, many decided after years of reviling Chirac, was class. Sarkozy was a boor.

I had expected someone more aggressive. Standing half a meter from Sarkozy, I had to strain to hear him. The words he spoke were forceful: France, he declared, had come to punish its citizens for working. The minds expended their talent figuring out how to do as little as possible. The to stop providing so many handouts

and start creating more jobs. Yet even as I listened to Sarkozy speak, he reminded me of a mime—not only because of his quiet manner, but because of his expressive face. Sarkozy's mouth is huge, his eyebrows thick and dark, as though splashed on with an oversize brush. His smile and frown are theatrical. The thick-soled shoes make his feet look big. There is something clownish, something Marcel Marceau-like, something cartoonish but, at the same time, imposing about the man.

To be loved, a man must have in his face something to pity and something to admire, says Stendhal. It is probably hard to spend a whole year writing about a public figure—a figure whose schedule becomes your schedule, whose movements become your movements, whose successes become your successes—without falling a little bit in love with him, and Reza hints (both in her book and elsewhere) that this is exactly what happened to her.

In many ways, her narrative reads like a long-running tale of foreplay. Reza is pulsingly alive to Sarkozy's moods, his foibles, his ambiguities. Few observers of Sarkozy have been more finely attuned to his outbreaks of megalomania and anger, to his one-on-one combat with the angel of time. Reza perceives his restlessness with the attention of a woman enamored; she notices his nervous movements, his impatience with people's questions and reports, his fear of letting life slip through his fingers. "They brutally tell you it's too early [to act]," Sarkozy tells her at one juncture. But "then, no less brutally, they tell you it's too late. The advice always adds up to: not right now." Rather than miss the right moment, Sarkozy barely shuts an eye. He plunges into every fray. He is in perpetual motion. As a result, he sometimes resembles "a fox terrier running everywhere, barking." Other times, he evokes Macbeth—edgy, driven, tortured, noble.

But Reza's tale also acquires an airless quality, a narrative claustrophobia. One senses that she is waiting, rapt, for Sarkozy to make a move on her. Their circular conversations about love; their stagey disagreements; their implicit superiority over surrounding journalists and administrators and colleagues. Reza's frustration—that her subject never, in fact, makes his move—becomes the frustration of the book. Tirelessly, she drops hints that she is engaged in a sexual waltz with the man who will be president: she, the great writer, he the great politician—two *Übermenschen* in a state of attraction.

Warned by her artsy friends not to meddle with political men because "they are stronger than us," she responds archly, flirtatiously: "I don't believe [Sarkozy] is stronger than I." A photo taken of Reza and Sarkozy shows her, arms akimbo, bosom thrust toward his chin, staring him feline in the face. He smiles at her like a gentleman chagrined, flattered, compr

In a particularly maddening scene toward the end of the book, Sarkozy has just won the presidential election and Reza has announced with mysterious abruptness that she will cease to follow him. He summons her to his new office in the Élysée. “I could say, Why did you want to see me, but I don’t say it. He could say, Why do you want to stop [accompanying me], but he doesn’t say it. What for? We know the answers,” she says coyly, “and any kind of explanation would be demeaning.” The new leader and the longtime celebrity contemplate each other in charged silence. They contrive small talk. It is tense. But it is also—and this is the problem with much of the book—essentially dull.

Just as the reader is about to scream with exasperation, comes the coup de théâtre. Sarkozy stands up. He moves across the room. We can feel Reza’s heart stop. And then he picks up ... a table. He picks up a small table by the window and carries it to the other side of the room. He sets it down next to the wall. And that’s it. He sits back down again.

“That’s crazy what you just did,” Reza says, after a beat. “You think so?” asks the president.

It’s as close to a declaration of love as Reza gets in this book. And since such a declaration is so clearly the main point of the whole exercise, its absence makes for a memoir that is irksome, desk-pounding, futile-feeling.

It also makes for a memoir that is unfair. For Reza ends up slightly bitter about her resistant subject. “Did he attempt to seduce you?” a brazen French reporter asked her after the book’s publication in Paris. “No,” she said. And then: “Come to think of it, it is almost insulting to spend a year with a man without his even trying to seduce you.” Ironic? We are probably supposed to think so. But in irony lies truth—especially for a writer like Yasmina Reza. “Were you attracted to him?” pursued the reporter. After complimenting her interlocutor on the “audacity” of the question (thus admitting that he was on the right track), Reza told a lie as bold as it was pompous:

“I would like to respond to that question impersonally,” she said. Sarkozy “is one of those men who ... are very desirous ... [but who] were one day forced to stop diversifying [this desire].” It is “a form of desiccation,” she explained: “Beings who once possessed the capacity to move life in many different directions become one-tracked.” In other words, where Sarkozy once would have allowed his life force to spill into the seduction of Yasmina Reza, he has now truncated it so violently that it suffices only, alas, to “seduce France.”

Really? Is this the man she needed for nearly 200 pages about his fullblooded faith in love; the man who, it should be mentioned, himself wrote a memoir, in 2006, *Testimony*, whose most-cited passages are full of effusions of passion for Cécilia? This man is now incapable of “diversifying” his [redacted] Reza’s offended soul, he has become

a political machine, a windup toy that buzzes off into political Neverland without so much as pausing over the flowers on the way.

If Reza is a flower, Sarkozy may in fact have resisted alighting upon her petals. But to blame this on his defects of character rather than on, for example, his loyalty (however unreciprocated) to his wife—or indeed on his indifference to Reza—seems to signal a fundamental dishonesty and vindictiveness on Reza's part.

"Anyway, you'll reinvent him," said a friend of Reza's upon hearing that she would be writing about Sarkozy. And so she has. She has captured certain aspects of him in glinting detail; others she has altered, darkened, and altogether misunderstood.

Whatever else this hurried, harried president is, he is large; he contains multitudes. He can divorce a woman he begged endlessly to take him back and then marry someone else three months later with apparent—and convincing—devotion. He can tell a man at an agricultural salon to "get lost, poor slob" and on the next occasion be as gentle as a dove. He can want badly to reform France—to shake up its citizenry and sound a clarion call to work—and believe that *love* (not industry) makes the world go round. He can remind the French of the Americans and the Americans of the French: he can jog like Rocky and flirt like Alfred de Musset. (Recall: he first met Cécilia when—as mayor of Neuilly—he presided over her marriage to another man.)

The last thing this man is is narrow or "desiccated." Or predictable. Despite his current trials, his detractors are holding their breath. I talked in March with a spokesman for Paris's left-wing mayor, Bertrand Delanoë—himself a presidential hopeful for 2012. It was the middle of the "meltdown" phase of media coverage of Sarkozy. "Don't bury him yet," my friend said. "He is like Lazarus. If people are disappointed in him, it is first and foremost because he raised such high expectations."

Sarkozy struck people as a man of his word. Whereas other candidates for public office make their promises with a certain perfunctoriness, Sarkozy looked his electors in the eye: "Everything I have spoken, I will perform," he said fiercely. "I will scrupulously adhere to my promises and to my word."

In many ways, he has done just that. Even leftist media watchdogs dedicated to charting his downfall admit it. Rue89, a Web site that vowed to monitor the new president for the five years of his term and demonstrate how easily he forgot his oaths, has, it seems, thrown in the towel. Its "Sarkoscope" registers that after a few months in office, Sarkozy has successfully instituted (or is in the midst of instituting) eight of the 10 specific policy reforms he had  on the campaign trail.

From simplification of the European Union's clunky internal procedures and mandatory penalties for repeat criminal offenders to overhauls of the country's 35-hour work week (henceforth, French employees can work overtime without being punished for it), Sarkozy has delivered what he promised. The operators of the Sarkoscope can resume their day jobs.

Still. The president didn't just make a beeline for target statistics. He also, and more importantly, "diversified his desire." He dove ardently into education reform (dispatching a 30-odd-page tract to surprised school authorities), into the urgency of religious respect, into the rights of crime victims, into debates about the Shoah. He made rousing speeches about France's need for "rupture" with its past. As he told audiences toward the end of last year:

I still remember some of my friends trembling ... because I used the word *rupture*. 'It's a mistake,' they said to me. *Change* would be better. In other words, the smell of rupture without the rupture. But I do not fear the word rupture—rupture with habits of thought, with ideas, with behaviors of the past that have prevented us from advancing, from grasping the future between our two arms ... I want rupture with intellectual conformity ... I want rupture with halfheartedness, I want rupture with conservatism, I want rupture with immobility. This rupture I believe necessary. This rupture I have betrothed myself to. This rupture the French people have approved. This rupture I will perform.

Even as he hailed political rupture, Sarkozy confronted personal rupture: he ended one marriage and celebrated another. It took him no more than three months.

He still has four years to change the country he adores, the country his Hungarian father folded fast into his heart. So the poor slob at the farming event oughtn't write him off just yet. Nor should the European media, the next American president, or the previous French one. Neither, finally, should the acclaimed playwright who followed him. Yasmina Reza may not think Nicolas Sarkozy is stronger than she is. But guess what, Ms. Reza: he is.

DAWN, DUSK, OR NIGHT: A year with Nicolas Sarkozy

By Yasmina Reza

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