One Hundred Twenty-One Days

A Review by John McCleary

The Oulipo stands for *Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle*, or workshop on potential literature. It was founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais (1901–1984), a polymath and well-known expositor of mathematics, and Raymond Queneau (1903–1976), a writer with an interest in mathematics. The main concerns of the group have been, in the words of mathematician and Oulipo member Jacques Roubaud, “the research, the discovery, and the invention of constraints for the composition of literary texts.” Among other participants in the Oulipo have been the mathematician Claude Berge, computer scientist Paul Braffort, the painter Marcel Duchamp, and writers George Perec, Harry Mathews, and Italo Calvino. The best-known works of the Oulipo are Queneau’s *Exercices de Style* and *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (*One Hundred Thousand Million Poems*) and Perec’s *La Disparition* (*The Disappearance*), a novel written without the letter *e*.

As an example of how mathematics and literature come together, consider the sestina, a poem of six stanzas followed by a three-line summary. The rhyming words of each stanza are the same, but in different orders. Furthermore, the last rhyme of a stanza becomes the first of the next. The order of the rhymes of the second stanza determines a permutation of order six of the initial scheme and the subsequent rhyme schemes. The sestina was introduced in the twelfth century in France by troubadours. (The Oulipo would consider this a case of *anticipatory plagiarism* by the earlier writers [2].) Two features of troubadour poetry are found in Audin’s novel: each chapter begins with the last words of the previous chapter, and the last chapter ends with the first paragraph of the first, making a cycle. Another feature of troubadour poetry may be described as a sort of mask. The poem has a surface meaning, but it is really about something else, known to the cognoscenti in the audience. Audin’s novel thinly
The presence of the Germans in Strasbourg in 1939 caused August who has written a formidable thesis in class field theory. berberg, a fellow student in Strasbourg who is Jewish and Audin. The interview (Chapter IV) focuses on André Sil-Meyer, a one-time student of mathematics in Strasbourg, berg publishes a paper as André Danglars. Thewartime ban of Jewish authors. In the novel André Silber-sixteen months later he received a message from Oulipo’s presi-M. was the liaison to Kürz in Paris and later visited him in N., a German city with a famous university. The historian visits N. in current times and finds a photo from M.’s visit to Kürz. Chapter VI, “The Form of a City,” is a fascinating account of impressions made by the photo and a map.

The heart of the book is Chapter VII, which concerns Mireille, the niece of Gorenstein and beloved of Silberberg. One Hundred Twenty-One Days is the time from her acquaintance with André to her getting the news of his death. The time is liberation, but the dehumanizing effects of the war are depicted as Mireille seeks word of André. Though short, the chapter had a powerful effect on this reader. The rest of the book delves deeper into the practice of the historian and consists of two notebooks, another collection of clippings, including the announcements of the deaths of Gorenstein and M., a list of numbers, and finally a return to “The Form of a City,” this time Paris. The historian begins at the Cimetière Montmartre after the funeral of Pierre Meyer and continues through the streets of Paris. The stories we have read fill her thoughts, together with all the connections to history in the names of streets and places. Returning home with all these thoughts, she begins to write this novel.

The foundation of Audin’s bold experiment in literature and history is the many contributions she has made to the history of twentieth-century French mathematics: Fatou, Julia, Montel, le grand prix des sciences mathématiques de 1918, et après… (2009), Remembering Sofya Kovalevskaya (2011), and Une histoire de Jacques Feldbau (2009). The thin veil between the novel and history is lifted in light of her work. For example, the topologist Jacques Feldbau (1914–45) published his papers during the war under the pseudonym Jacques Laboureur, and other Jewish mathematicians did the same to be able to publish under the wartime ban of Jewish authors. In the novel André Silberberg publishes a paper as André Danglars.

It was the history that connected Audin to the Oulipo: As she explained in an interview with Publisher’s Weekly, she shared her unusual book on Kovalevskaya with Jacques Roubaud, who spoke of her work at a gathering of the group. She was invited to the next gathering and six months later she received a message from Oulipo’s president inviting her to return. Eventually she was co-opted, as they call it; that is, she was made a member of the Oulipo.

There are two extra bits that follow the novel. The first is a “Supernumerary Chapter” that reveals literary sources and places that are cited or that shaped her choices in the writing. The second is a translator’s note from Christiana Hills, who relates the problems of finding the right voices.
Book Review

among so many forms of discourse. Translation of works written under constraints is a heroic task. Hills’s translation is entirely worthy of the novel.

I have said too much about the novel and not enough about the initial question of the effects of war on the community of mathematicians. The book says a great deal about this and about the problems of history. The reader can accompany a historian in her search for the right story and discover the limitations under which historians labor. For its invention, for its emotion and depth, you should read this book.

References
[1] D. Aubin and C. Goldstein, “Placing World War I in the History of Mathematics,” HAL, hal.upmc.fr/hal-00830121v1

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER
John McCleary is the author of a few books, including the forthcoming Exercises in (Mathematical) Style to be published by the MAA.

EDITOR’S NOTE. See Allyn Jackson’s interview with author Michèle Audin in this issue of the Notices on page 761.