



THE SCHOOLS' LAUREATE 2026 BOOK GUIDE

THE LEOPARD-SKIN HAT

By Anne Serre

Translated by Mark Hutchinson

This book is an episodic account of the life of a woman called Fanny. Fanny died at the age of forty-three. Her friend, named only as the Narrator, tells of the times they spent together. They knew each other as children, when Fanny was wild and pretty and liked to call herself Felix. Their paths crossed again in adulthood when, increasingly, Fanny struggled with the expectations of the conventional middle-class life into which she had been born. This is a short but enigmatic book. It was first published in French in 2008 and in English translation in 2023.



Penguin

Shortlisted,
The International
Booker Prize 2025

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Hawthornden
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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Mark Hutchinson lives in Paris. He has translated numerous books from French, including three other works by Anne Serre, with whom he is friends: *The Governesses* (2018), *The Fool & Other Moral Tales* (2020) and *The Beginners* (2021).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Serre is a French writer living in Paris. She studied modern literature at the Sorbonne and completed a Master's thesis on the fairy tales of Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy. She has written eighteen works of fiction. Her novel, *Grande tiqueté* (2020) is written in an invented language. Other titles include *Le cheval blanc d'Uffington* (2002) and *Le narrateur* (2004).

Anne Serre shares biographical similarities with the Narrator in this story. She too worked as a teacher and in publishing and her mother died young. In 2007 her sister died by suicide at the age of forty-three. However, this is avowedly not a work of autofiction or autobiography. Anne Serre has said that a novelist has to blend imagination with experience:

'When the two currents merge (which is what being a novelist is all about), it reveals something, it tells you something about existence that is far more richly variegated, far more penetrating and arresting and impossible to pin down, than the story of a life.' Interview with Tobias Ryan in *minor literature[s]*.

RESOURCES

[The Booker Library reading guide](#)
[The Booker Library interview with Anne Serre and Mark Hutchinson](#)
[Sidecar \(the New Left Review blog\)](#)
[The Conversation](#)
[The White Review](#)
[minorliterature\[s\]](#)
[The Brooklyn Rail](#)

'The book is both a celebration of life and an elegy – holding the fragility of life and death in its hands with the utmost care.'

2025 International Booker Prize Judges

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The world of the book

- Who is the Narrator?
- What is the significance of the leopard-skin hat?
 - When do you first notice that there is something of the wild cat in Fanny?
 - Can you spot references through the book to the cat-like in Fanny?
- How do children react to Fanny?
 - What do they sense in her?
- Is Fanny aware of her own power?
 - Does she find a way to channel it?
 - Do Fanny's father, her father's neighbours and the Narrator recognise her power?
- When Fanny starts to turn up for appointments punctually and dressed appropriately:
 - Does the Narrator miss something in her?
 - Has she slain 'the beast' (something she resolves to do as she travels from her father's house back to Paris in chapter IV)?
- Why does Fanny laugh at the Narrator (chapters XIII and XIV)?
 - What are the Narrator's chief reference points?
 - Are they meaningful to Fanny?
- In what ways does Fanny live on even though she is 'no longer visible' (as the Narrator observes at the beginning of chapter XIII)?

FURTHER READING:

Lady into Fox by David Garnett. It is available [here](#)
The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby
The year of magical thinking by Joan Didion
Not Waving but Drowning by Stevie Smith

Style – or, How is this book written?

- Who is narrating this story?
 - Whose viewpoint is the narrative bound by?
 - Do we break free from this viewpoint?
 - Things get complicated. Look at Chapter XIII, for example.
- Whose voice says:
 - That what Fanny is waiting for is 'manifestly impossible' (second paragraph of chapter I);
 - That 'with emotions like these you obviously can't get very far' (last paragraph of chapter VIII)?
- When does Fanny's voice first emerge?
 - Why could it not be heard previously?

Wider themes

- Anne Serre said of her sister, 'I wanted to create a memorial to her, one that was as beautiful as possible.' (Booker Prize interview.)
 - Has Anne Serre, through narrative, gestured towards something that cannot be expressed directly in words?
- What does this book say about mental illness?
 - Is the author tentative about labelling it?
 - Does it defy definition?

'Fictional forms can
reveal truths in
glances'

Meghan Racklin,
The Brooklyn Rail

- Compare these two observations:
 - 'Perhaps he'll just have to keep his friend inside him, like that unwavering A note that enables you to get your bearings?' (final sentence of first paragraph of chapter IX)
 - 'So ... your great friend ... starts doing or saying ... things that are slightly off base.' (This quotation is from the beginning of the third paragraph from the end of chapter XII).
- Is a 'shattering indifference' (final paragraph of chapter X) necessary to survival?
- What does this book say about the work of writing?
 - Is Fanny trapped by the Narrator?
 - Does Fanny hold the Narrator to account?
 - Does she:
 - Invite narration?
 - Resist narration?

Reading the world

- Would you like to spend time, as Fanny does:
 - in the cafés around the Place de la Sorbonne and the Panthéon in Paris?
 - in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève?
- How is the village where Fanny's father lives described:
 - the place?
 - the people?
 - To gain an idea of its location, you could look up the towns Fanny passes on her train journey back to Paris from the village (chapter IV).

One more thing

- In Chapter XII the Narrator imagines placing Fanny on a sculptor's stand.
 - Have a look at these sculptures by Auguste Rodin, who lived and worked in and near Paris:
 - Adam and Eve
 - The Tempest
 - The Fallen Caryatid Carrying Her Stone
 - And perhaps have a look at this exhibition website.
 - Is there a sense in which Fanny is breaking out of the prison of narrative rather as these sculptures are breaking out of the rock?