



Un secret

Philippe Grimbert

Professor Claire Gorrara – Cardiff University

Lecture Structure

- Philippe Grimbert: life history and motivations for writing
- Un secret: structure and memory; representing the Occupation
- Jewish identity in the novel: 'secrets and lies'
- Contemporary memories of the Second World War in France

A. Philippe Grimbert

- Born in 1948: life story reflected in the novel
- Psychoanalyst: works with autistic children
- *Un secret*: published in 2004: Prix Goncourt des lycéens



A. Philippe Grimbert

- o Motivations for writing
- 1. Curative function: form of therapy
- 2. Testimonial function
- 3. Commemorative function: a literary burial for those family members lost during or after Second World War

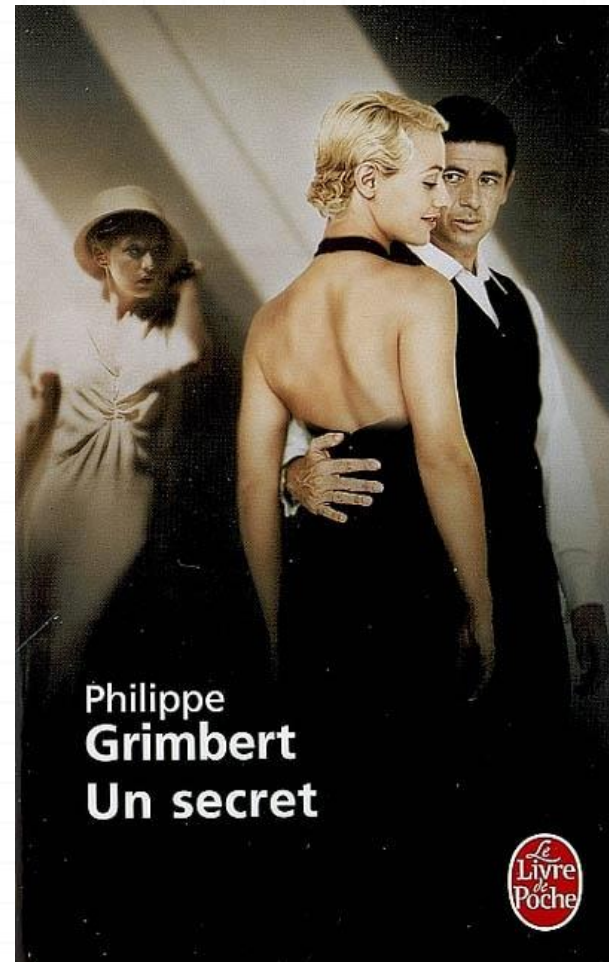


Handout task 1

In pairs, think of two reasons to explain why Jewish memories of the war years have come to such prominence in France over 70 years later?

B. Un secret: structure and memory

- Double time frames: moves backwards and forwards in time
- Double narration: child and adult narrative voices
- Double vision of the war years and their impact on the present



B. Un secret: structure and memory

- Representations of the war years

Exclusion and repression

Double vision:

- (Part 2) romanticised love story
- (Part 4) sinister and complex period of loss and betrayal



B. Un secret: structure and memory

- o A history of Jewish persecution
- 1. Rounding up of 'foreign' Jews
- 2. Stamping of 'Juif' on identity papers
- 3. Decree to wear the yellow star of David
- 4. CULPABILITY OF THE FRENCH STATE

Period of traumatic loss



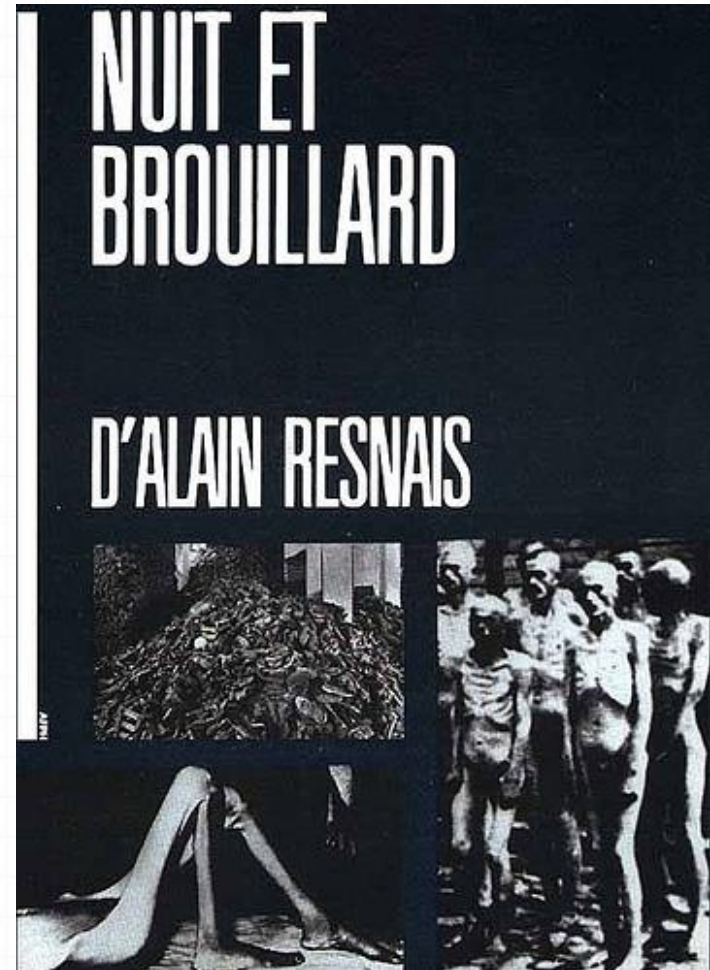
C. Jewish identity: 'secrets and lies'

- o Generational differences
- o **Father:** repression and rejection: changing the family name (patronym)
- o **Father:** shame and guilt: desire and illicit love



C. Jewish identity: 'secrets and lies'

- o Impact upon the child narrator
- 1. **Physical manifestation:** his body carries the marks of his parents' guilt: 'vaincu'
- 2. **Invention of a phantom brother:** Sim, the toy dog, stand in for him
- 3. **Presence of the past** in surrounding culture, above all film



C. Jewish identity: 'secrets and lies'

- o **Responses to the lost brother:** shame and pity; anger and jealousy but above all SORROW
- o **Last secret:** Hannah's 'acte suicidaire' (p. 137); her reasons: jealousy; loss of her parents; lack of knowledge of the consequences
- o Child narrator moves from VICTIM – CATALYST and finally CUSTODIAN of memory

D. Contemporary memories of the war years in *Un secret*

- Shift in relationship with the father: disappointment to mutual respect
- Son discovers fate of Hannah and Simon
- Trigger point: death of Echo; son allows father to confront his past and the chance of recovery



D. Contemporary memories of the war years in *Un secret*

- o Recuperation of memories for the 'générations d'après': a memory full of holes?
- o Custodian of memory: politics and responsibilities: figure of Pierre Laval



D. Contemporary memories of the war years in *Un secret*

- o The symbolism of the dog cemetery in *Un secret*:
 1. Connection to the Jewish children: commemoration and forgetting
 2. Trigger for the writing of the book: to provide a 'resting place' for Simon

Handout task 2

In pairs, identify what you think this novel tells us about memories of the Second World War in 21st Century France? Do you think it has relevance for you as a reader?