



WISSENSCHMAUS
MATHIAS ÉNARD

Mathias Énard is a French writer born in 1972 in Niort in the western part of France, near the Atlantic coast. He studied Arabic and Persian at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris before residing for ten years in the Middle East, in Egypt, Iran, and Syria. He then settled in Beirut for some time before moving to Barcelona in 2010, where he currently resides. His first novel, *La perfection du tir* (The perfect shoot) appeared in 2003 and received the Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie. Mathias Énard kept on publishing novels, among them *Zone* in 2008 (*Zone*, 2010); *Parleur de batailles, de rois et d'éléphants* in 2010 (*Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants*, 2018), and *Boussole* in 2015 (*Compass*, 2017), which latter won the Goncourt Prize in 2015 and the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding in 2017. In 2023 appeared *Déserters* (*The Deserters*, 2025), his last work to date. His books have been translated into more than 20 languages around the world, including Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic. His project as a Wiko Fellow was to write a new novel about the fate of the Arab intellectuals (mostly novelists and poets) in the 20th century, especially between 1950 and 2000, in Beirut and the East of the Arab World and to explore the changes in cultural and political patterns, as well as to put into fiction some great characters of Arabic literature history, like Badr Shakir Sayyab, Mahmood Darwish, and Adonis.

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I hardly noticed the year slip by. Or rather, I swallowed it whole—greedily, without restraint, like a feast, too rich to refuse. Ten months at the Wissenschaftskolleg, and here I am, full, happy—and, it must be said, considerably heavier than when I arrived.

It all began with lightness. The lightness of thought, first: that heady feeling of being able to breathe again, to think without having to produce, to meet exciting new people. The Kolleg offered me what every writer dreams of: time, and companions. A community of knowledge. But it was more than that: a community of curiosity, of listening, of appetite. Every lunch became a colloquium, every Colloquium, a meal. We spoke of memory, of revolution, of the end of the world and the beginning of everything. Of the difficult blind lives of arthropods. And as we spoke, we ate.

A place where your only obligation (*Pflicht*, as they say in German) is to eat lunch every day (except on Thursday when you are supposed to have dinner instead) is meant to have great food. And it did.

Dunia and her kitchen team were our benevolent deities. Everything conspired to ensure we lacked nothing. That, perhaps, was when my real research began: to study the effects of pumpkin ravioli on intellectual focus, or of strawberry pie with custard on creative impulse. I took notes, though the data remain inconclusive: the more I tasted, the more I wanted to pursue the study.

Soon I discovered that common abundance had its private and regional variations. The Scots celebrated January and Burns Night with lots of sheep guts, sheep lungs, sheep liver, and good whisky. The Poles initiated me to the joys of their homeland: herrings thick with sour cream or dip, or smoke-flavored with onions; dumplings dense with potato and mystery; pierogi that seemed to have proved (the biologists were so upset by this!) spontaneous generation AND perpetual motion, as they multiplied endlessly on the plate. Every day we travelled to different Orients; there was the Polish Orient, the Lebanese Orient, the Tunisian Orient, the Palestinian Orient, the Israeli Orient, the Brandenburgish Orient. Every morning, I woke up thinking, “What are we going to cook tonight? What are we going to eat at lunch?” We unrolled the subtleties of German cuisine, a revelation of quiet discipline and endless cabbage: roulade with red cabbage, roulade with sauerkraut, roulade with raw green cabbage, roulade with a subtle cabbage, roulade with a dream of cabbage, roulade with absent cabbage—each a philosophical variation, a meditation on patience and digestion. I began to suspect that cuisine was Germany’s secret method of contemplation.

As I chewed and thought in equal measure, my body began to change—a library putting on weight. I found myself weighing my sentences as I did my portions, searching in each idea for a new flavor. Even discussions of German constitutional law, dino bones, and Messiaen’s music mingled with the scent of curry and Uruguayan “criollo” sausage. The talk was nourishing, and so was the buffet.

Little by little, gluttony crept into every part of my life: I began ordering far more books from the library than I could ever read, piling them up in my office like empty bottles under the bed. It took me a long time to discover the glass-recycling container—it was, conveniently, quite far away. Thus, getting rid of the evidence of my excesses became my daily walk, a wholesome combination of exercise and domestic hygiene.

Then one February morning, I looked out my window. On the lake, two swans glided through the mist—impossibly white, almost insolent. And suddenly I thought: *What if we cooked them?* The idea made me laugh, at first. Then it returned, obstinate, nearly serious. Perhaps we were all infected by the fever of the banquet: after months of feeding on everything—words, friendships, discoveries—we dreamed of one final feast.

I tried to convince the English Fellows to pay tribute to their Queens & Kings, as the English Crown claims property over all swans of the realm, and fish for them—or hunt them. They refused, arguing that, despite appearances, teaching at Oxford or King's College gave them no authority over German waters.

Every morning, I watched those birds. They became the silent guardians of my excesses, the symbols of my bottomless appetite. I imagined a closing dinner: an immense table where each Fellow would bring a dish, an idea, a poem, a memory. And I—I would bring those two roasted swans, golden and perfect, served up to knowledge itself. Filled with memory and desire. Their skin as crispy as Saint Martin's goose in a Grunewald inn.

At the end of the year, I hadn't written all I planned to. But I had learned what it means to be nourished—intellectually, humanly, literally. I had gained weight, yes, but the scholar's belly, great love handles for Athena to hold me with. Each conversation had thickened me with new knowledge; each friendship had added another layer to my thinking self. The swans still remain to be eaten... The *Grillen* could go further. Something had to be left undone... For another visit, maybe. The last banquet before the world ends.

And now I leave the Kolleg driving west, the road unspooling before me like a menu without end. Every sign, every billboard seems to echo that vanished abundance—*McDonald's*, *Thuringer sausages*, *Schwarzwald inns*, *golden beers*—all shimmering in the afternoon light like sad, vulgar traces of a long-gone meal. The year lingers, invisible but indelible, somewhere in the flesh. I don't yet know what book will come from this Berlin stay, but I know what it will taste of: eternal herrings, everlasting kibbehs, infinite friendship, and the lake at dawn.