



Interview with Louis Presset, Institut Francais

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KENNEALLY: Among politicians, soft power is the name given for the gentle practice of using culture and other indirect means to gain favor and influence. In the United States, for example, Hollywood is a soft power superpower. Fashion, music, and cuisine play similar roles for many other countries.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. On the intellectual grading curve, Iron Man and Wonder Woman hardly hold a candle to the giants in the pantheon of French authors, from Albert Camus, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, to Jean-Paul Sartre, who declined to accept the same award in 1964, and Simone de Beauvoir, who received the Prix Goncourt in 1954, to Yasmina Reza, who was Prix Renaudot laureate in 2016, French authors are known equally for their revolutionary insights and romantic expression. No wonder, then, that this fall, France is repeating as guest of honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest publishing industry exposition. France last enjoyed the spotlight role in 1989, a year of political and social upheaval that this year, 2017, seems destined to emulate.

Louis Presset is deputy executive director for Francfort en français at l'Institut Francais, the French national government's top-level soft power actor. In a Paris office that lies in the Eiffel Tower's shadow, he joins me now. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Louis. Bienvenue.

PRESSET: Hello. Hello, Christopher Kenneally. Bienvenue to you in my office. I'm very happy to meet you today.

KENNEALLY: Enchanté aussi. Let's begin with the notion of why France is being honored this year at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the world's largest book fair. Why France again, and why now?

PRESSET: Thank you very much. Why France again? Maybe the very tight and strong relationship between our two countries is one of the answers for this. We have been invited and probably we will be again. But when – that's for the question.



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Thirty years ago is quite a long time for such strong neighbors, and we are very happy to have this invitation that our former prime minister accepted a few years ago. I think that's a great time for this now, because of course, as you mentioned it, in 1989, it was strong social and political activity at this time in Europe, and I think we can say that again today, there is a very strong political situation. This invitation between those two big neighbors in the center of this European project probably is a very strong and important moment to have this new invitation.

KENNEALLY: That's very interesting, because this is really a cultural event, but the decision to have France as the guest of honor – at least 2017, as you say, is propitious. So how does the program represent an opportunity for French and German officials, as well as publishers and authors, to make any kind of special statements about the state of Europe or the European Union itself?

PRESSET: You're right. It's totally political. It's not exclusively political, but it's also political. We were talking about this political situation in Europe – in the world, actually – of course, Brexit, the different political movements in Europe, and now this election of Emmanuel Macron, who is strongly inside this European movement, is something important about it.

In terms of our own program, I think we also follow this line. First of all, as you may know, we have this project which is not to invite only France in this project, but really the French language, which is also in a political aspect, where we're to present ourselves as an open country, open to the other, welcoming and giving this hospitality as a first and priority element of this invitation. This hospitality, this attention to the other, of course has to be also followed in this project between France and Germany. We have to be careful to one another. We used to work very closely together at any moment of the cultural development, of the political development, and we have to get maybe even closer now again on a new sequence.

Now, our project, our program, we think that represents pretty well this idea. We organize many roundtables where we invite French authors, French intellectuals, German philosophers, people from all over the world talking together about the world, the ideas. I think this is one very important point of our organization. Maybe something I can add for this – we are also working on some very strongly political movements – for example, having this project to gather most of the ministry of culture of all Europe and to ask them to have and to (inaudible) for a collective statement about culture in Europe and about protecting rights for authors and for creators. So really this project of Frankfurt, this operation of this invitation in Frankfurt, has to be also something that leads us to a political statement in Europe, inside Europe – culture for Europe.



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KENNEALLY: So in a sense, while France is the guest of honor, it sounds as if you're really making Europe the guest of honor along with yourselves.

PRESSET: In a way, that's right. We are really thinking that this close relationship with Germany has to be strengthened again, but in a perspective where it has to be the first step of this new – this refreshing way to gather all European people and lands and countries around the same project for culture. So really, we are trying to be humble. We are not thinking that France has to have a leading part in this. We really want to make a statement, to make an invitation to all of our colleagues in Europe and say, OK, let's work again on this. Culture maybe is one of the main aspects of this European project. We have to build it together. Let's try to start right now.

KENNEALLY: As you say, the French language is being honored as much as France and French publishing. Of course, French is spoken around the world – in Europe, in Belgium and Switzerland and other countries, but also in Africa and even in North America in Quebec. So can you tell us about the involvement of Francophone authors and publishers?

PRESSET: Sure. Thank you very much. Yes, it's a very strong and important issue for us. As you can see in the title of our own operation, Francfort en français – Frankfurt in French – we really meant to put the French language the central guest of this project. First of all, again, to have this idea of hospitality, of opening, of not a country behind the boundaries, etc. Then, also, while the French language – this extremely wide and open language, very living language, and diverse – this French language doesn't belong to the French people anymore. It's not the language of the French people. It's really the language shared by many people living by themselves. This French language has to be known and discovered in every aspect of its variety in all the authors and the different creators that are using this language.

So we have planned, of course, to invite authors which are not from the country of France, but really are all over the world – of course, from our territory around the world. Of course, from some countries that are still some French-speaking countries. But much more wider from the Francophonic area and even wider. We are very happy to have among the authors we want to invite some people that chose to speak French and to create in French and to write in French. There was no mother language in this aspect. So it's really a way to invite everybody who wants to be invited and who thinks that he's also someone working with the French language. This is one part.



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Maybe to give you another example, we are also planning to have as one of the projects during the fair – to have a strong program from the Francophonic publishers all over the world and to help some of them from the southern countries, where maybe the industry is a little less strong, to invite them with us to be inside Frankfurt, to welcome them, to give them a program to professionalize them, meaning that, OK, let's give you some clue in a big fair like that how you can organize your own catalog. Not how you can choose your authors – you are the best to do that, and you know how to do it, no doubt. But how we can help you to give you some ideas what to do in this fair, how to have some efficient meetings, etc. And we want to finish these invitations – we will have something like 30 publishers from the southern world, Francophonic publishers to come. And we will have a roundtable with French publishers, Francophonic publishers, to see how they can access more easily to the market in Europe and all over the world.

KENNEALLY: We were saying earlier about the similarities between 1989 and 2017, but there's one great difference. That is, of course, the World Wide Web and the digitization of publishing in all media. One of the things that that allows for is, of course, more easy distribution of works. In 1989, you would have had to ship books – literally ship them from the Congo to Paris or from Haiti to Paris or from Quebec to Paris. Today, all you have to do is look online for that. This really brings everybody much closer together, it seems to me, than they would have been in 1989.

PRESSET: You're right. Everything is more simple now. The thing is it's more simple in terms in material and the technology. It's not so simple in terms of professionalism and of networking, etc. So really those big moments, like a fair – the Frankfurt fair is extremely important. That's why, for example, we are really trying to help those publishers who may be a little bit isolated in some countries, a little bit far to come here and to have access to those networking and those physical meetings where, well, rights are sold and the thoughts, the ideas are exchanged. This is still a good point.

Where you are very right also is about the technology. This is one big part of our project. We really want to work on this new way to diffuse ideas, to publish books, to express ideas through the new media. We have on the pavilion a long, wide exposition of new projects, startup projects, working on those trans-media creations. I think it's very important, because that's something which is leading us for the few years later.

KENNEALLY: As we look at it, then, digitization is important. But as you point out, the physical meetings, the events themselves that happen at Frankfurt, are very important as well. So I wonder if you can tell us about what's going on. Because



Francfort en français will focus, of course, on the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, but it's been a yearlong effort that you've been undertaking.

PRESSET: Yes. Maybe that's one of the big and main difference between this invitation this year and the one in 1989. This year, we have worked on a big cultural season all over Germany, starting in January, and leading to this Francfort en français project during the fair, which means that we have more than 50 project events being organized all over Germany starting in January. We have some roundtables. We have some lectures from French authors in the different festivals and book shops in Germany. Some projects during some other book fair – for example, we had a huge project about (inaudible), in English –

KENNEALLY: Detective fiction?

PRESSET: Exactly. Thank you very much. On the book fair of Leipzig. So we had a huge meeting there with many authors, working with a French festival, Quais du Polar from Lyon. We were organizing a quest in the city, reproducing a detective process to look for some clues all around the city and working on this idea, meeting authors. So it was really a big event, fun, and of course extremely professional, because we had some nice and strong authors invited.

So during all the year, we had these big projects, not only about literature, by the way. It was really a multidisciplinary project. For example, we have some big exhibitions running during the year. One of them I could tell you about is the Film Fabrique, the Fabric of Movies, by Michel Gondry, that will be installed in Frankfurt in the German Museum of Film of Frankfurt in September. The idea is to give the possibility to a young family to come and to make their own movie in the setting organized by Michel Gondry. In two hours, they come, they are helped to write their own script and to film, to take the image, to play, and they get out of the exhibition with their own DVD – their movie. I think that's something – the living creation. I think that's a nice project.

KENNEALLY: It's all very interesting, and we look forward to it in the Frankfurt Book Fair 2017. We've been speaking with Louis Passet, who is deputy executive director at l'Institut Francais for Francfort en français. So (inaudible) a Francfort.

PRESSET: Merci beaucoup. Thank you very much, Christopher Kenneally, and see you next time very soon in Frankfurt.

KENNEALLY: Merci aussi.



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