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AUBERVILLIERS
FINE-SAINTE DE
PARIS

Winner of an
English PEN Award



Discretion

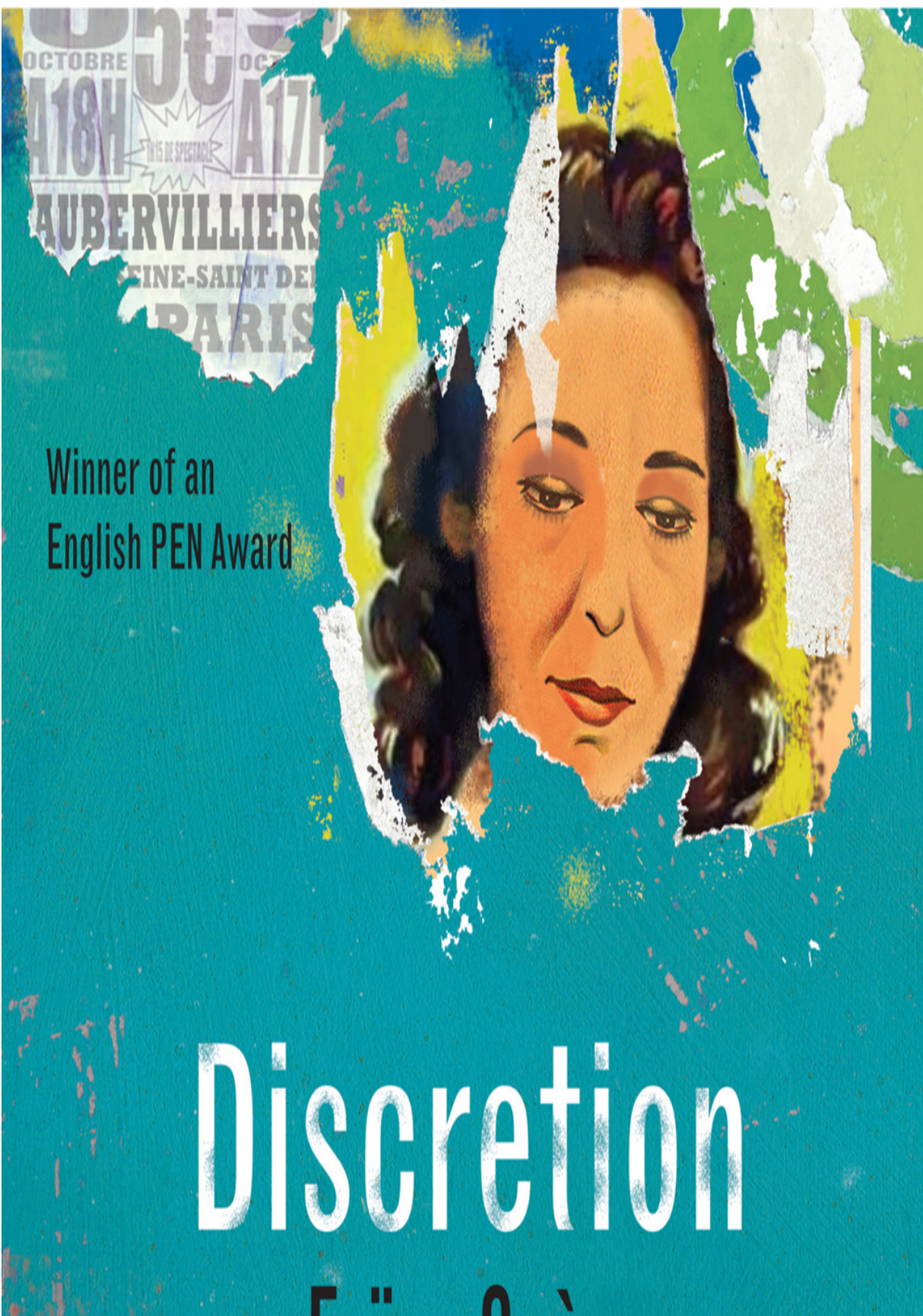
Faïza Guène

'Wonderful.
A vivid, soulful novel.'
Bidisha



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Translated from French by Sarah Ardizzone

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To my mother
To all our mothers

It demands great spiritual resilience not to hate the hater whose foot is on your neck, and an even greater miracle of perception and charity not to teach your child to hate.

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

COMMUNE OF AUBERVILLIERS
DEPARTMENT OF SEINE-SAINT-DENIS (93300)
FRANCE, 2018

Yamina is coming up for seventy. She will reach this age in November of next year. On either the tenth or the nineteenth of the month. Yamina was born *one day or the other*.

According to her Algerian documents, it was the nineteenth, but her French residence permit, issued in Seine-Saint-Denis, states: 'Born 10 November 1949 at Msirda Fouaga, Algeria'.

Who to trust?

At least she has been spared a *presumed* birthdate, the notorious 1 January, assigned, by default, to colonised subjects.

Passengers are quick to offer Yamina their seat on the 173 bus, which she catches every Saturday morning from Fort d'Aubervilliers métro station, opposite the post office.

She is off to the Mairie d'Aubervilliers market to make all sorts of pointless purchases. Plastic tat and 'revolutionary' kitchen gadgets mainly, peddled by hawkers in headsets up on their platforms. Yamina could watch these shows for hours, enthralled. She sometimes claps in wonder at the end of a demo, even if the result is far from convincing – her trusting nature means she has no sense of being hoodwinked. Such an idea would never occur to her.

She wants to believe in the miracle demonstrated with fervour by the trader with the gift of the gab. It comes easily: no arm twisting is needed. She's ready to take this cheery Von Dutch-cap-wearing traveller at his word, despite the speed of his patter as he extols the magic of the all-purpose peeler.

The self-appointed preacher of Aubervilliers market always uses the same opening gambit on the shoppers gathered before his stand: 'M'sieurs, dames, bonjour! My name is Moses, and I'm God's right-hand comrade-in-arms!' Broad-chested and short-legged, the street vendor stands rooted to the spot. His fingers never brush the hands of the women he showers with small change, his hairy forearm flaunting a home-made tattoo: *Pour toi, Suzie*.

Yamina sets off again, convinced she's scooped a gadget *and* bagged the deal of the century.

The Mairie d'Aubervilliers market is an important ritual for Yamina. She heads there on her own, enjoying chance encounters with some of her girlfriends, avoiding others. Especially *the journalists*, which is her nickname for those who ask too many questions: 'What about your daughters? Still no marriage prospects?' Polite to a fault, Yamina defers to destiny: 'God will decide.'

Yamina hurries to catch the 173 in the opposite direction, the family ritual of Saturday lunch on her mind. The flourish with which she flashes her freedom pass – the driver giving her Navigo Forfait Amethyste card a cursory glance through tinted lenses – owes a debt to the detectives in her favourite TV series.

When people offer to give up their seat for her, she refuses at first: 'Non merci, it's kind of you, but I'm fine,' indicating she's capable of standing upright in the middle of the bus, wedged between two pushchairs. As if her

balance won't be in jeopardy, as if the bend in rue Danielle Casanova won't swing her about. Not that she takes umbrage at being offered a seat on the basis of her age, not at all, she appreciates politeness. She just doesn't want to cause any bother. You have to make a point of insisting before she'll say yes. It's the same with the youths smoking cheap hash at the foot of her building, when they offer to carry her shopping upstairs: 'I'll be fine, my children, I can cope.'

They understand not to take no for an answer, they're used to her, and still they have to wrestle the bags out of her hands. She gives in with a smile but thanks them all the way to the threshold. She is touched by their help, remarking before she closes the door: 'You're good boys!'

The prospect of growing old does not frighten Yamina. She made her peace with it years ago, and appears unaffected by the tribulations of old age.

Yamina never complains.

It is as if that option was excised at birth.

And yet she is not without health problems, and must remember to take her pills twice a day to control her diabetes and blood pressure. Every couple of months, she visits the Lamarque laboratory on rue Hélène Cochenec to run her blood tests. She takes the results to the doctor who's been her GP since 2003. The surgery is located in an old-fashioned house, at the end of a cul-de-sac. There are no appointments, you drop in and wait, sometimes for hours. Magazines with titles such as *Challenges* or *Management* are strewn on the dusty coffee table, along with an old copy of *L'Express*. On the cover, a scrawled-over portrait of former prime minister Manuel Valls, his eyes aggressively scratched out and a moustache added in biro.

Management and Challenges? Who wants to read business magazines in this neighbourhood? Nobody here identifies as the target audience. More's the pity, given one headline: 'Making it in France: you can do it and here's how!'

Best case scenario: someone stands up, scans the coffee table and sits back down again, disappointed.

In the consulting room, the doctor does the minimum, offering little beyond a routine examination.

What's striking is that when he speaks to Yamina he addresses her informally as *tu*, not because they're in any way close, or because he's an especially friendly doctor. No, he adopts this casual tone after calling her Madame Yamina. For example: 'Now, now, Madame Yamina, have we been taking our little pills?' Or: 'The diabetes isn't looking tiptop today, Madame Yamina. Have we been putting too much sugar in our mint tea?'

Absurd as it may seem, Yamina is fond of him. Force of habit, probably. She's been coming here for fifteen years. She keeps the faith. The idea of deserting her GP has never crossed her mind. Her eagerness to ask after the doctor's own health borders on the comical.

She is, in all likelihood, the only one of his patients to enquire how he is doing, or to press for news of his family, and she does so with unsettling sincerity.

She detects nothing patronising in his tone. Not even when, under the guise of humour, he requests that she bare her ears, which are covered by her headscarf, so he can inspect them with his otoscope: 'Come on, let's take off our little burka, shall we, to show our little ears?'

Yamina sees no harm in this. It almost makes her smile.

Nor does Yamina see what these clumsy gestures betray. She doesn't register that the doctor is brusque and cursory. Sometimes, he knocks her when he lifts her arm to take her blood pressure, but she would never dare point this out. As if being hurt were acceptable. As if nothing really matters, where she is concerned.

Viewed from one angle, Yamina has been preserved. She hasn't grasped the geometry in which the world has placed her. Her innocence protects her from the violence behind the doctor's attitude. She doesn't notice the vertical relationship playing out in the surgery of someone she holds in high esteem, on account of his title, his years of study and his knowledge. She doesn't see the invisible ladder on which he perches every time he speaks to her.

Which begs the question of whether this is deliberate on Yamina's part, for she seems unfeasibly deaf to the call of anger. Perhaps she has chosen not to be destroyed by the scorn of others? Perhaps Yamina realised, long ago, that if she reacted to each and every provocation there would be no end to the matter?

Yamina's father was a resistance fighter. Over there, in Algeria. What if, today, for this woman approaching seventy, refusing to give in to resentment were, in itself, a form of resistance?

Except that anger, even when buried, doesn't disappear. Anger is passed on, without anyone realising it.

Her children have no time for such treatment. They can't bear their mother being spoken to as if she were totally gaga and naturally inferior.

They know who she is, and what she's lived through, and they demand that the whole world know this too.

Take the scene Hannah made the other day at the prefecture.

The official began by talking loudly and slowly from behind the glass partition, over-articulating her words for Yamina's benefit, as if scolding a child. Something about a missing document. Prompting Hannah, the most sensitive of Yamina's offspring, to retort: 'She's not an idiot. You don't need to talk to her like that.'

And so, protected by her screen, by the notice reminding the public that action will be taken against any threatening or abusive behaviour, protected by her status as a local government worker, protected by the fact that nobody wants to come back the following day to rejoin this wretched queue, the official doesn't deign to look Hannah in the eye.

'Hel-lo,' she sighs in exasperation, 'let's keep a lid on it, shall we? You people are always the same!'

This is all it takes to light the spark in Hannah. To make her feel the sulphur fizzing through her body. Weirdly, she can recall the relevant chemistry lesson: *An element with the symbol S. It belongs to the chalcogens and is insoluble.*

Hannah wants to cry. Each time someone patronises her mother, it is as if Yamina shrinks before her eyes, like a garment washed at high temperature.

Hannah senses the bile rising, at imminent risk of spilling over. There is so much anger inside her throat that it leaves a bitter taste of ancient anger, increasingly hard to contain. But crying means showing weakness, and that's out of the question. She is done with weakness.

'Who d'you think you're talking to?'

Hannah bangs on the screen while Yamina tries in desperation to restrain her.

'Binti, my daughter, it doesn't matter. Calm down.'

The woman behind the counter huffs and puffs again, producing a gob of saliva which sticks to the screen. She, for one, can't see what the problem is. *It's always the same with these people. They're never happy!* Hasn't she, a public servant, gone above and beyond her job description – to be understood, to be generous? *What have I done wrong this time? Good grief, there's no knowing what they want!*

It's almost lunchtime and the official is hungry. Fabienne's stomach is making embarrassing gurgling noises. She's been out of sorts ever since she started on this high-protein diet, despite her high hopes a few weeks earlier when she bought Dr Jean-Michel Cohen's book, *Lose Weight Healthily*, from the Leclerc hypermarket by Normandie Niemen tramway.

She's trying to patch things up with Bruno, drop some weight, make herself more attractive for him, the way she was before. But Fabienne hardly thrives on deprivation, it makes her feel permanently tense.

For a while now, on top of counting the calories, she has been battling doubt. *What if there's another woman?* You think it only happens to other people. 'Stop getting ideas into your head, Fabienne,' he says, never looking up from his mobile phone. At first, she tried banishing these negative thoughts. But they've rapidly become a fixture: *Why's he started squirting the aftershave bottle fifty-three times when he always used to say perfume was for poofters?*

The thing about men is they lose interest, as she has frequently heard her mother remark, so she *has* been warned. They'll soon have been married for twenty-seven years. Long gone are the days of feeling a special glow

every time his gaze rested on her. Back then, she believed in everlasting love and all that guff about true emotions.

Turns out Bruno is no different, just your average male. The spit of Mr Average.

Every couple they know is breaking into a thousand pieces. Half her girlfriends are divorced. So why should Fabienne be spared? She feels as if she's competing in On the Posts – one of those endgame challenges in *Survivor* – clinging on for dear life to avoid falling into the water. The prospect of being single again at fifty haunts her. To make matters worse, if it comes to it, she doesn't have a single flattering photo to post on a dating website.

Now, more than ever, Fabienne feels overlooked and fragile.

She had been so proud of becoming a local government worker. What a joke! She's paid for her years at the 'Pref' twice, maybe three times over. Just the sight of these dreary walls, the revolting building where she drags herself every morning, makes her feel sick. *Scratch Prefecture, this is a tomb. What suicide-inducing architect drew up these monstrous plans?* Fabienne has lost count of how many Combo Meal Deals she's gobbled at the McDonalds in Bobigny 2 shopping centre. Or her reluctant returns after lunchbreaks spent stirring a disgusting café crème at Segafredo, the café on the first floor of the shopping centre where scrawny illshaven men, nearly all of them North African, huddle.

The TV presenter Nagui, with his Egyptian-Italian good looks, is the only Arab to win her approval. *He's not without charm* is her take on him, *twinkly eyes, not bad*. But those guys at Segafredo, they are the sort to make their wives do things. Fabienne pictures those women being made to do it, even on nights when they don't want

to. *Of course, they're knackered most of the time anyway, because of their kids.*

Fabienne would put money on the men in the mall being wife-forcers, yes, that's it, *an army of forcers*. It makes her feel ill at ease. She doesn't dare glance at them, still less put her white arms on the café counter. *We'll soon have to pay for our coffee in dinars around here.*

She heads back to her desk with a dose of the blues, the kind that clings to the skin. *It's not for nothing Bobigny town centre is a terminus. Everything stops here. You want to be done with it all.*

Fabienne has had it up to here with this parade of races and dialects, of smashed-up faces and domestic stories that she'd rather not hear about. She is ill-equipped to deal with the paradoxes of these people: the gazes that smoulder while their hands beg, submissive shoulders belying clenched fists. Too much to understand, too many knots to unravel, plus that's not her job. They're behind a blurry screen, so why can't clients be blurry too? Fabienne is meant to ensure that procedures are followed. Not to take it on the jaw without flinching. *Fuck's sake!*

She jabs her finger at Hannah: 'Hey, you! Calm down, okay!'

The plump pink finger has inadvertently pressed an imaginary button, the red nuclear option.

'Nah, I won't calm down! Don't tell me to calm down! You'll speak to her with respect, you get me?'

Hannah is nitroglycerine, to be handled with care. Yamina understands this. She knows her daughter inside out. But Fabienne, with no prior knowledge, only makes matters worse.

'I'd like to remind you that you are speaking to a representative of the State!'

This is all it takes to ignite Hannah. She is ablaze now. Flaring up to defend her mother's honour.

'You think I give a damn you're an agent of the State? You think you're impressing anyone here? Like, who gives a shit!'

Once again, she bangs on the screen with the full length of her forearm.

'Fuck you, you fat bitch!'

The blind on the screen snaps shut. Fabienne goes off to lunch, wondering whether to call in sick, leaving Hannah in flames.

Security guards escort the pair off the premises. The mother hand-on-cheek from the shame of it, the daughter on the verge of exploding in the middle of Bobigny prefecture.

One of the guards, with his hi-vis orange armband, makes a show of sympathy. He addresses Yamina as Tata, Auntie, while steering her towards the exit. He's from the home country: you can tell by his accent. The respect he shows is comforting. But useless. He has no power.

His respect won't stop the day after from happening. Hannah will have to pay to park a second time before she and her mother cross the concourse and queue for hours. It might be just their luck to end up at Window C, meaning Fabienne's.

It isn't until she is sitting in her old blue Renault Clio, diesel, 2006, which she trawled for among the free classifieds and second-hand bargains on Leboncoin.fr, that Hannah notices her knees trembling. She reminds her