

SEVEN HOUSES IN FRANCE

Bernardo
Atxaga

**'A BRILLIANTLY INVENTIVE WRITER...
at once terribly moving and wildly funny.'**

A.S. BYATT

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Bernardo Atxaga
Title Page

Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII
Chapter XIX
Chapter XX
Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII
Chapter XXIII
Chapter XXIV

Chapter XXV

Copyright

About the Book

The year is 1903, and the garrison of Yangambi on the banks of the River Congo is under the command of Captain Lalande Biran. The captain is also a poet whose ambition is to amass a fortune and return to the literary cafés of Paris. His glamorous wife Christine has a further ambition: to own seven houses in France, a house for every year he has been abroad.

At Lalande Biran's side are the ex-legionnaire van Thiegel, a brutal womaniser, and the servile, treacherous Donatien, who dreams of running a brothel. The officers spend their days guarding enslaved rubber-tappers and kidnapping young girls, and at their hands the jungle is transformed into a wild circus of human ambition and absurdity. But everything changes with the arrival of a new officer and brilliant marksman: the enigmatic Chrysostome Liège.

An outstanding new novel from the critically acclaimed and prizewinning author Bernardo Atxaga, *Seven Houses in France* is a blackly comic tale which reveals the darkest sides of human desire.

About the Author

Bernardo Atxaga was born in Gipuzkoa in Spain in 1951 and lives in the Basque Country, writing in Basque and Spanish. He is a prizewinning novelist and poet, whose books, including *Obabakoak* and *The Accordionist's Son*, have won critical acclaim in Spain and abroad. His works have been translated into twenty-five languages.

Also by Bernardo Atxaga

OBABAKOAK
THE LONE MAN
THE LONE WOMAN
TWO BROTHERS
THE ACCORDIONIST'S SON

Bernardo Atxaga

SEVEN HOUSES IN FRANCE

*Translated from the Spanish by
Margaret Jull Costa*



HARVILL SECKER
LONDON

I

CHRYSOSTOME LIÈGE SIGNED a contract to serve in King Léopold's Force Publique at the beginning of 1903 and reached his posting in the Congo in August of the same year, having travelled by packet-boat from Antwerp to Matadi, by train as far as Léopoldville, and then, finally, on a small steamship, the *Princesse Clémentine*, to the garrison of Yangambi. It was not exactly the last outpost of civilisation because, as they said in the Force Publique, that honour belonged to Kisangani, some one hundred and twenty miles further upstream, but it was certainly a very long way from anywhere anyone had heard of.

The *Princesse Clémentine* docked at a wooden platform on the beach that served as a jetty. Chrysostome was met by a soldier, who advanced very slowly towards him. He was a young man and, at about six foot five, almost a head taller than him.

'Chrysostome Liège?' he asked.

The new arrival replied tersely: 'Yes.'

'I'm Donatien, Captain Lalande Biran's orderly,' said the officer. Then he pointed to the half-empty canvas bag Chrysostome was carrying and asked in a more relaxed tone: 'Is that all your luggage?'

Chrysostome replied equally tersely, this time in the negative.

Together they walked back towards the village, and Donatien gave him a brief rundown on the garrison. In

Yangambi there was a total of seventeen white officers, twenty black non-commissioned officers, and one hundred and fifty *askaris* - volunteer black soldiers - all of whom were under the command of Captain Lalande Biran, a highly cultivated man, well known in Belgium as a poet, an excellent soldier, and the most gifted of all the officers who had passed through Yangambi.

'The Captain likes things done properly,' said Donatien. 'That's why he's prepared a reception committee for you on the firing range. Don't worry, Chrysostome, you'll soon feel at home in Yangambi, and the days will fly by.'

Donatien spoke very quickly, in bursts, running his words together. He said '*tutrouveratrebienci*' when he should have said '*tu te trouveras très bien ici*'. Sometimes, his Adam's apple moved up and down as if his salivary glands were working overtime and producing too much saliva for him to swallow.

'It's a shame they didn't build the village a bit closer to the river, though!' he said when they had gone some two hundred yards. 'Not the Captain's idea, of course. That was decided by the first officers who came to the region. The Captain has only been here for five years, same as me. I've been his orderly from the start. He really values me. He wouldn't want anyone else.'

They walked up the slope, stepping on the planks laid across the path to keep them from muddying their boots. When they reached the top of the hill, Donatien paused to get his breath back, and Chrysostome, like an explorer trying to orient himself, shaded his eyes with one hand and gazed around him. Ahead lay the first huts and a few European-style houses, all of which were surrounded by a palisade; lush palm trees grew on either side, and beyond was the imposing sight of the River Congo and a seemingly endless expanse of jungle.

The Congo was a powerful river. It cut straight through the jungle, although the vegetation, as if it continued to

grow beneath the water, sprouted up again in the middle of the river in the form of small islands thick with trees and undergrowth. The *Princesse Clémentine*, the steamship that had brought Chrysostome, was still moored at the jetty. Two men were unloading the luggage and another two were carrying it to a building situated on the beach itself.

‘That’s the Club Royal, the officers’ mess,’ said Donatien. ‘It is, in my opinion, the best place in Yangambi. I’m in charge of the storeroom there. My biggest worry are the mice. It’s the same in every storeroom in the Congo, but they don’t get their way in Yangambi. I finish them off before they can so much as take one bite of the sugar or the biscuits.’

Chrysostome appeared to have heard none of this and was still gazing down on the jungle. Several columns of smoke rose up here and there among the trees. The inhabitants of the villages or *mugini* were doubtless preparing their meal.

‘How many savages live there?’ he asked.

‘Oh, thousands and thousands of them, all belonging to different tribes. But they don’t often attack. Not, at least, at the moment,’ answered Donatien.

‘Do all those trees produce rubber?’ asked Chrysostome.

‘Not all of them, but many do. Around the Lomami, though, it’s more mahogany than rubber.’

He pointed to the right. About half a mile away, you could see the line of another river – the Lomami. Its waters joined those of the Congo, slowing the latter’s flow and creating the pool that served as a harbour opposite the beach.

‘The rebels control the whole of this part of the Lomami. But, like I say, lately, they’ve been pretty quiet. Of course, as soon as they show any signs of activity, Lieutenant Van Thiegel is quick to put them down. He’s not as intelligent as Captain Lalande Biran, but he’s completely fearless.’

They say that even the lions shit themselves when they see him.'

Donatien set off again, laughing loudly to show that his words had been intended as a joke. His remark drew no response from Chrysostome, however, and so as they went through the palisade to the square - the Place du Grand Palmier - Donatien decided to say nothing more and to refrain from explaining which of the buildings were the residences of Lalande Biran and Van Thiegel and which was Yangambi's Government House; nor did he indicate the area or hut where Chrysostome would be living from then on. It was tedious trying to strike up a conversation with a tongue-tied novice.

Leaving the palisade behind them, they walked another five hundred or so yards to the firing range. When they arrived, they found the whole garrison waiting for them: the white officers in the front row, smiling, hands behind their backs; the black non-commissioned officers in the second row, also smiling, but with hands folded over their chests; and a little way behind them, divided into five companies, stood the *askaris*, the soldiers recruited from Zanzibar and from among the cannibals in northern Congo; they were standing to attention, left arms rigidly by their sides and right arms holding rifles. Opposite them, next to a dais, at the top of a flagstaff, fluttered the blue flag of the Force Publique with its single yellow star.

One of the white officers in the front row stepped forward.

'That's Captain Lalande Biran,' whispered Donatien.

He was a very handsome man, with blue eyes flecked with gold. He saluted Chrysostome, then ordered him to step onto the dais so that everyone could see him.

It was a ceremony in which military humour prevailed. Captain Lalande Biran began by presenting Chrysostome with the blue uniform and red fez of the *askaris* instead of an officer's pale brown uniform and white hat, a joke which

caused everyone present on the firing range to titter, particularly his soon-to-be comrades. Frowning and resisting the desire of the Captain, the other officers and the NCOs to have their bit of fun, Chrysostome solemnly stuffed the trousers and shirt into his canvas bag and donned the red fez.

Large storm clouds were gathering. From one small clear patch of sky the sun was beating down.

'And here is your rifle!' said the Captain, handing him an eighteenth-century, barrel-loading musket, a hulking great thing, weighing at least twenty pounds. More tittering. 'It's loaded. The target's over there. Let's see what you can do.'

At the far end of the firing range, high up in a tree, a monkey appeared to be watching the ceremony with great interest. It was straight ahead, about a hundred yards away. That was the target.

The shot startled all the birds round about. The monkey fell to the ground like a stone.

'Well, if you can hit the target with that great thing, I can't wait to see what you'll do with a really good rifle!' exclaimed the Captain, his eyes still fixed on the place where the monkey had been.

Above the trees, the birds frightened by the shot were still wheeling around looking for somewhere else to perch. Any clear patches of sky were growing ever fewer, and clouds were covering the sun. A heavy rain shower was imminent. It was best not to prolong matters.

'The new soldier deserves a prize, Cocó,' said the Captain, addressing the man at the far end of the line of white officers.

Cocó was a robust, broad-shouldered fellow. He took a few long strides and planted himself in front of Chrysostome.

'I'm Lieutenant Richard Van Thiegel, but everyone calls me Cocó,' he said, handing him a rifle. Compared with the musket, it seemed positively delicate. 'For you,

légionnaire,' he added. He had belonged to the French Foreign Legion before enlisting in the Force Publique, and, to use a common metaphor, his heart was still there. As far as he was concerned, all his comrades were legionnaires.

Chrysostome continued to frown, as if he found the jokes and the ceremony disagreeable. This wasn't because he was annoyed, however, but because he was studying every detail of the weapon he had been given. It was a real marvel. A twelve-shot, breech-loading Albini-Braendlin. When he held it in the firing position, the butt fitted snugly into his shoulder.

'There are twelve cartridges inside. You can check, if you like,' said Van Thiegel.

Chrysostome removed the chamber and counted the cartridges one by one.

'There are only eleven,' he said, replacing the chamber. The sounds the rifle made were equally marvellous. Clean and precise.

Lalande Biran was watching him intently. This new arrival was clearly no ordinary soldier. He had never known any other 'novice' at a welcome ceremony to check the number of cartridges. Even veterans, who had served in other armies, would never dare to doubt a superior officer's word.

'When are you going to give us a smile?' asked Van Thiegel reproachfully, handing him the missing cartridge. Chrysostome's expression remained unchanged as he weighed the cartridge in his hand as though trying to determine its calibre.

Lalande Biran noticed a strip of blue ribbon round the soldier's neck.

'What's that?' he asked.

'A medal of Our Lady, sir,' replied Chrysostome, raising his eyes for a moment to glance at the Captain, before turning his attention back to the rifle and the cartridges.

'Are you from a village in the provinces?' asked the Captain. He didn't run his words together like Donatien, but pronounced them precisely, modulating his voice: '*Vous venez d'une ville de province?*'

'I was born in the village of Britancourt, sir,' replied Chrysostome. He had a country accent.

'We would be much better Catholics if we had been born in Britancourt, Cocó,' Lalande Biran said to Van Thiegel. He was from Brussels and the Lieutenant from Antwerp.

Chrysostome pulled back the bolt and removed the chamber. He inserted the twelfth cartridge, closed the chamber, put the rifle to his shoulder, and pointed at a monkey about two hundred yards away, then at the leaf of a tree further off, then he lowered the rifle and asked: 'How far can the bullet travel?'

'About three thousand yards or more,' said Van Thiegel.

On the horizon, the sky had turned black and was falling like a curtain over the jungle; closer to, the rounded clouds resembled the scattered beads of a necklace. Over Yangambi, the sky was still blue, but it was only a matter of time. Another quarter of an hour and it would start to rain.

'Come on, Cocó, let's go and have a drink. I don't want to get wet,' said Lalande Biran.

The Lieutenant gestured to the chief of the black NCOs, who, in turn, gestured to an *askari*. The blue flag of the Force Publique with its single yellow star was immediately lowered. The welcome ceremony was over.

Beyond the firing range lay an untidy collection of huts, cabins, chicken runs, vegetable patches and grain stores; and suddenly, noisy groups of *askaris* and black NCOs set off in that direction, laughing and joking, as if the lowering of the flag had lifted their hearts, prompting them to go and join their wives and children. In many of the huts, fires had been lit and meat and fish were being cooked. The smoke from those fires and, above all, from the bonfires lit

to keep off the insects bothering the cattle, drifted over the whole area and added to the festive atmosphere.

In the European zone, however, such good cheer was notable by its absence. The white officers who had walked over to the Place du Grand Palmier - seventeen of them, not counting the new arrival, Chrysostome - looked as serious and tongue-tied as him, and as though they had nothing better to do than wait for the rain to start.

Opposite Government House, African servants were moving about among the different groups, serving glasses of Veuve Clicquot champagne. The officers accepted them carelessly and, just as carelessly, raised them to their lips, not even bothering to say 'Good health'. It was clear that the military humour Lalande Biran had attempted to inject into the welcome ceremony had cheered no one. This was due entirely to Chrysostome's refusal to collaborate.

Richardson was the third highest-ranking officer and, at over sixty, the oldest member of the Yangambi garrison. Seated in a rocking chair at the door of Government House, he reminded Lalande Biran and Van Thiegel of the various welcome ceremonies he had attended throughout his long career. There had been many amusing incidents; for example, it still made him laugh to think of young Lopes' antics with the musket before he eventually fired it. But no two people were alike, and some had no sense of humour at all.

'Today's ceremony was the most boring ever. This Chrysostome fellow is as miserable as a mandrill,' he declared.

The man in question was approaching, holding his rifle in one hand and his canvas bag in the other. Everyone fell silent. Lieutenant Van Thiegel strode over to him.

'Biran,' he reported, after a brief exchange with Chrysostome, 'our new colleague wishes to retire to his hut to rest. I don't know whether I should allow him to do so or

not. Traditionally, he should come down to the club and buy a round of drinks for all the officers.'

'Tell me, Chrysostome, are you in the habit of drinking?' asked the Captain.

Chrysostome replied in the negative.

'And what about gambling, do you like that?'

Chrysostome again said 'No'.

Lalande Biran turned to his two colleagues:

'I thought as much, gentlemen. Our new comrade is something of a *rara avis*.'

Van Thiegel grabbed Chrysostome's arm.

'Did you understand what the Captain said? He means that you're a rare bird and that we're going to have to do all your drinking for you.'

Richardson laughed loudly, but no one else joined in. Lalande Biran pointed to Chrysostome's rifle.

'Even if it gets wet, it will still fire, you know. It's not like a musket.'

'Yes, Captain.'

As the name of the square would suggest, an enormous palm tree stood in the centre of the Place du Grand Palmier, and scattered around it were a few white benches that would not have looked out of place in a Paris park. Donatien, Lopes and a few other young officers were standing chatting near one of them.

'Ask Donatien to show you to your hut,' said Lalande Biran, looking at Chrysostome with his gold-flecked blue eyes - *d'or et d'azur*. 'If you want to stay there, do so, but tomorrow morning I want to see you in the jungle. We have work to do in the rubber plantation. Is that clear, Chrysostome? Reveille is at seven.'

This time Chrysostome replied vehemently: 'Yes, Captain!'

Lalande Biran remained silent until Chrysostome and Donatien had left the square. Then he took a glass of Veuve

Clicquot from a tray proffered by a servant and set out his views on the new arrival to Van Thiegel and Richardson.

'He'll be a good soldier, possibly an excellent one. You saw what he did with the musket. He shot a monkey from a hundred yards off. He'll make a good guard for the rubber-tappers.'

It started to rain, and the three men went into Government House to finish their drinks in the vestibule.

'Well, if he does turn out to be a good soldier, that will be wonderful. We'll all be very pleased indeed,' said Richardson.

He did not mean what he said. His long years in the Congo had taught him to value cheerful companions, friends who enjoyed drinking and gambling. He didn't care if they made mediocre soldiers.

From the window, Richardson could see the rain, the heavy sky, the blackened trunks of mahogany and teak, the water pouring from the leaves of the palm trees, and the mud forming in the square. His heart told him he was right. Better a happy soldier than a disciplined one.

The officers in the Place du Grand Palmier ran for shelter. A few headed towards the beach and the Club Royal, the cosiest place to be in the rainy season.

Van Thiegel put his empty glass down on a table and walked towards the door, intending to join the other officers at the club.

'He may be a good soldier,' he said, 'but time will tell. As you know, Biran, it's one thing to shoot a monkey and quite another to track down one of those rebels hiding in the jungle. You need more than good marksmanship for that.'

Lalande Biran's gold-flecked eyes smiled. 'He'll be a good soldier, Cocó, I'm sure of it. Do you want to bet on it?'

'Ten francs, Captain. As you know, that's the maximum permitted in Yangambi.'

Van Thiegel had been campaigning for some time for the gambling rules at the garrison to be relaxed to allow them

to place bets larger than ten francs. He was convinced that the atmosphere in the Club Royal would be much improved if the limit was raised to one hundred francs, a move that would please both losers and winners. Like drink, gambling - real gambling - helped you forget.

'I've no idea whether he'll be a good soldier or a bad one, but he'll certainly be a miserable one. As miserable as a mandrill. I'll bet you ten francs on that!'

And the three men all laughed with military good humour.

II

THE TASK ASSIGNED to Chrysostome of guarding the workers was not an easy one, because the rubbertappers, all native to the area, wandered about in the jungle at will and often made use of their superior knowledge of the terrain to escape. Nevertheless, to use the words of Captain Lalande Biran, the new arrival immediately proved himself to be another Chiron - the centaur who loved hunting - or perhaps an improved version of Chiron, given that Chrysostome was armed not with a bow and arrow, but with an Albin-Braendlin rifle. Very few workers tried to escape on his watch, and those who did never got very far. With his agility, youth and slight physique, Chrysostome could make his way through even the densest jungle and his aim never faltered. Lalande Biran had more than enough reason to be pleased that such a remarkable officer should have been posted to Yangambi.

‘What he did with the musket on that first day was no fluke,’ he told the other officers during an after-dinner conversation. ‘He’s an excellent shot, a real champion. I doubt there’s a better shot in the whole Upper Congo, or indeed in the whole country. He has, I have to say, exceeded all my hopes.’

There were other notable marksmen in Yangambi, among them young Lopes and Lieutenant Van Thiegel, but Chrysostome achieved with one bullet what they could only have achieved with three or more.

Chrysostome's reputation soon reached the *mugini* in the region, as if a hundred drums had spread the news of his marksmanship throughout the dark jungle and along the damp shores of the river Congo and the river Lomami, and from then on, the workers under his supervision lost all desire to escape and devoted themselves to the collection of rubber with a determination and a will that made them run from tree to tree and from liana to liana even when they had already fulfilled the minimum quota set for each group by King Léopold. Two months passed, and Captain Lalande Biran - reminded once more of Chiron the centaur huntsman and of how he had taught the other demigods and heroes to hunt - appointed Chrysostome shooting instructor, encouraging the *askaris* and the black NCOs to go to Chrysostome in order to learn how to get the best out of their rifles.

One Sunday morning, Biran repeated this advice in a speech intended for the white officers:

'A soldier, my friends, must not only be brave in the face of the enemy, he must be equally brave when facing up to himself. After all, it's not so very hard to shout "Attack!" when confronted by the enemy, it's far harder to struggle with one's own pride. Even Napoleon, having triumphed at the battle of Borodino, which cost the lives of 50,000 Russian and 30,000 French soldiers, was capable of recognising his mistake, saying: "I cannot be that good a general, for if I were, the sacrifice of a mere 20,000 heroes should have been enough to gain victory." It was this humility that made Napoleon great, as well, of course, as his many victories at Borodino, Marengo and elsewhere. Today, I want to encourage you to act in the same spirit. I know it wounds your pride to ask a mere novice for advice on how to handle the Albini-Braendlin, but fight against that feeling!'

On each of the following days, before sunset and once the work in the rubber plantation and the marches through

the jungle were over, the firing range at Yangambi was the scene of some unusual activity. The *askaris* in their red fezes, the black NCOs, and the white officers all gathered round Chrysostome, who advised each of his pupils, one by one, on the correct position of arm, neck and foot. Lalande Biran, Van Thiegel and Richardson, the chiefs of Yangambi, watched the classes from a platform in the firing range. Presiding over the scene was the blue flag of the Force Publique with its single yellow star.

These were days of rare intensity and harmony, worthy, almost, of the age of Napoleon, but, after a week, the number of pupils had dwindled by half, then there were only fifty, then twenty. After a month, there was no one left. The shooting classes had come to an end.

'It's not your fault,' said Donatien, looking over Chrysostome's head at the empty firing range. 'The Captain wants us all to be like Napoleon, but that's not easy. If we had a woman like Josephine waiting for us in bed, we might manage it, but we, alas, live in Yangambi.'

This was Donatien's third or fourth attempt to get a smile out of Chrysostome - in vain. He received only this laconic reply:

'It doesn't matter. Some are born good marksmen and some aren't. Like everything else, it's in God's hands.'

Carrying his rifle, Chrysostome set off briskly towards the Place du Grand Palmier. Donatien caught up with him and, deciding to change the subject, began instead to talk about Christmas. He couldn't wait, he said. Captain Lalande Biran spared no effort in ensuring that his men were happy at such a special time of year. He laid on veritable banquets at which one could eat one's fill of goat's meat and the finest fish from the river, and in the card games at the Club, you could even lay bets of up to one hundred francs, rather than the usual ten. The best thing, though, was that, from then on, it rained much less and there was almost no mud. That's why he liked

Christmas and New Year. Plus it was the only time he ever received a letter.

They entered the palisade and the Place du Grand Palmier. Donatien pointed to Government House: 'The Captain receives letters from Paris or Brussels almost every week. I don't. I only get them at Christmas. Although Richardson has it worse. No one ever writes to Richardson, not even at Christmas.'

There was a set of pigeon-holes for the officers' correspondence at the entrance to the Club Royal, and on some weeks, Donatien had seen a letter for Chrysostome there, always from Britancourt and always, to judge by the writing, from the same person. The problem was that the person only put the name of the village in the return address and so there was no way of knowing who had sent it, his mother, his girlfriend, a friend. Donatien wanted to know.

Chrysostome failed to take the bait, saying: 'Christmas Day is a great day. A celebration of the birth of Jesus, who was conceived by Our Lady, the Virgin Mary and born in Bethlehem.'

He showed Donatien the medal on its blue ribbon, but said nothing about the family or friends he had left behind in Britancourt.

It was evening, and the palm trees lining the road that led down to the river were like drawings made in India ink; the sky was a sheet of greenish glass, the river Congo was the pressed skin of a snake, and the Lomami, a silver rope. On the beach by the river, a group of officers were enjoying a last cigarette before supper and the smoke from the club chimneys carried on it the smell of grilled fish.

III

IN YANGAMBI, IT was said that the cartridges for the Albini-Braendlin rifle were the most prized jewels in Africa, and that on the boats going up and down the river Congo, you were more likely to come across a diamond than a cartridge. It was also said, with less exaggeration, that King Léopold himself kept a count of the cartridges and required his representatives in Léopoldville to justify the use of each and every one, stating when, where and how it had been used. And so, after the Christmas meal, when Captain Lalande Biran named Chrysostome 'Soldier of the Year' and presented him with the prize of a box of one hundred cartridges, the seventeen white officers and ten African servants waiting on them could not suppress a sigh - of envy in some cases and astonishment in others.

'Gentlemen, I give you the Hero of the Year!' exclaimed Lalande Biran, inviting Chrysostome to take the floor.

'I started out with twelve cartridges,' said Chrysostome. 'And before coming here tonight, I had only four left. Now I have one hundred and four.'

Not a muscle in his face moved, and instead of looking at his comrades or at the beautiful, beaming serving-woman standing next to him, he was gazing into the distance, at the river and the jungle.

Van Thiegel whispered to Lalande Biran: 'I don't know why you bother trying to please him, the man wants nothing whatever to do with us.'