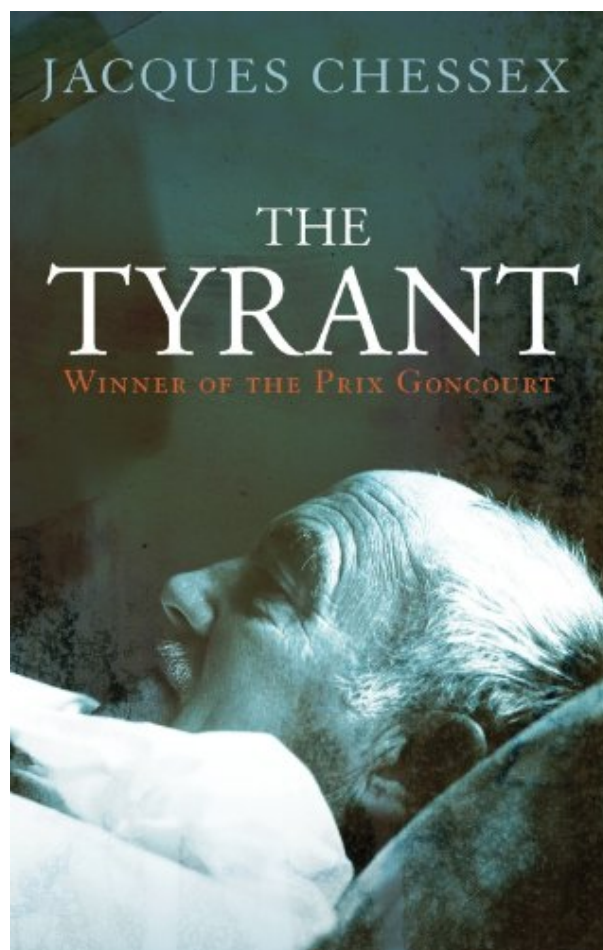
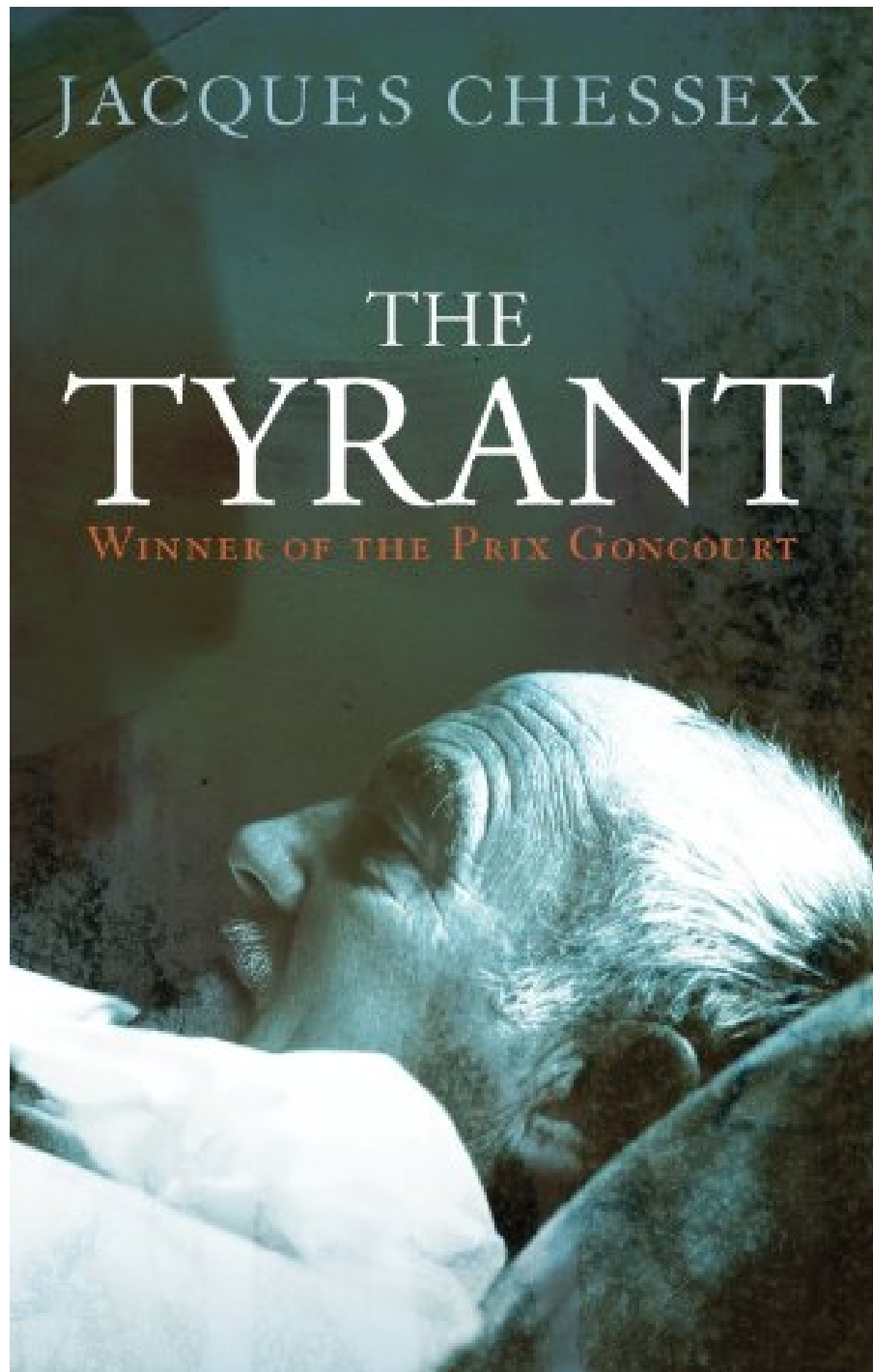


# THE TYRANT BY JACQUES CHESSEX



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## Review

'This extraordinary work is a lean, modern narrative that scrutinises the irredeemable effects of a monstrous father on an emotional child and becomes a study of the damaged adult. The book in its richness of language and intensity of feeling won Chessex the Prix Goncourt. Those qualities are powerfully apparent in Martin Sokolinsky's translation.' The Independent

'A complex, psychological study which shines a light on masculinity and the nature of men, the need for freedom and for absolution through the apportioning of blame, and the skewed perspective that time and death can offer.' Irish Examiner

'First published in France in 1973, this unbearably sad novel from Swiss author Chessex, the first non-French writer to win the Prix Goncourt, charts a man's slow but steady path toward tragedy. Chessex perfectly captures the juxtaposition of the profound and the banal in a surreal scene where a mortuary representative hawks different models of urns to hold cremated remains. Jean's burden of guilt only grows heavier with time, and the denouement will strike many as pathetically inevitable.' Publishers Weekly

## About the Author

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A haunting work, reminiscent of Albert Camus, that portrays with exquisite psychological detail the emotional crisis in the life of Jean Calmet, a young Swiss schoolteacher. As we watch the father's cremation in the opening chapter, we sense that, even though his father's body has been reduced to ashes, his spirit survives to haunt Jean. His father's prodigious vitality and virility had crushed his family and ruined his son's childhood. Even after his father's death, Jean cannot be free. The parental ogre's actions continue to suck Jean into a vortex of despair.

Jacques Chessex, a giant of Swiss literature, won the Grand Prix de la langue française and was awarded the Grand Prix Jean Giono for his entire work. Bitter Lemon Press published his novels *The Vampire of Ropraz* and *A Jew Must Die* to high acclaim. He died in 2009 at age seventy-five.

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"My God, what have I done that you take everything from me...separated from others, deprived, guilty."

By Mary Whipple

Winner of the Prix Goncourt for this novel in 1973 (newly republished), Swiss author Jacques Chessex tells the story of Jean Calmet, a thirty-eight-year-old schoolteacher, whose physician father has just died and with whom he has had a fraught relationship. The youngest of five children, Jean both loved and feared his father, with good reason, and he is glad that his father has been cremated, rather than buried. "The doctor would be reduced to ashes. He could not be allowed any chance of keeping his exasperating, scandalous vigour in the fertile earth," Jean thinks. "Make a little heap of ashes of him, ashes at the bottom of an urn. Like sand. Anonymous, mute dust."

As the family gathers to choose an urn, Jean meditates on his father's relationships with the whole family. His meek mother has lived for fifty years "bent under the tyrant, broken, destroyed." His brothers and sisters have left for lives of their own, and he himself is unmarried and lonely, though no longer living at home. His job as a teacher provides him with a "refuge from the authority of that father who is bearing down with all his weight on the rest of the world," but he has few friends, and though he mentors his students, he is emotionally much like them and still in the thrall of a domineering parent with seemingly no emotional resources of his own.

As he fixates on the loss of his father and what it means for him, death becomes his constant companion. One of his students, Isabelle, is dying of cancer but refuses to give in. By contrast, Jean is obsessing, seeing ghosts, and thinking about the fire in the crematorium as a "beautiful purifier," even as he is dwelling on moments in which his father has called him a "cringing, muddleheaded weakling." Thoughts of sex get confused with death, as he remembers seeing his father in a forbidden relationship, and he is unsuccessful in relationships of his own. At age thirty-eight, he is a completely lost soul, ready to become a victim of others, if not himself. Symbols abound as Jean visits Bern with his students, and additional symbols of a cat, a rat, and a coin add to the heavy sense of his own oppression.

The glories of nature, lyrically described, add to the depth of this intensely psychological novel. One would think natural beauty would offer some comfort to Jean, whose aesthetic sensibilities are finely honed, but any beauty Jean sees vanishes as he contemplates death as a destroyer. When, late in the novel, he sees a dead animal, he observes that "One is not safe being independent in our part of the world. Not safe staying wild and uncompromising in the city," offering yet another excuse for his own inaction (though he himself could hardly be considered "wild and uncompromising"). Ultimately, I found this novel a fascinating set piece about life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Now, forty years after this novel was written, with social networking and the internet, it is much more difficult to imagine feeling as isolated, lonely, and hopeless as Jean Calmet does, and modern readers may become impatient with a main character who blames everyone else for his own misery while taking few steps to come to grips with his problems. Mary Whipple

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

fascinating psychological study

By A Customer

The Calmet patriarchal Tyrant Paul is dead. None of his five adult children feel grief as their father was an abusive martinet. The youngest of Paul's offspring, Swiss schoolteacher Jean actually feels nothing until he sees the urn of his dad's ashes; then he thinks he is at last free.

However though the schoolteacher is nearly forty, he will soon learn he has not been liberated by Paul's death. His father's activities still haunt Jean who has never moved passed the love of his life tuning to his greater than life virile father rather than him. So instead of flying free like a released butterfly, he depressingly continues what he has done for years hide from his odious sire at the Gymnasium of Lausanne where his students cherish his teaching subjects like Latin.

The Tyrant is a fascinating psychological study of the child is the adult as even in death Paul still torments his youngest child as he did for almost four decades. Character driven, the well written storyline keeps readers wondering when will Jean hit rock bottom and will he survive the spiral downward into numbing depression. This is not an easy read as the dead tyrannical patriarch still sucks the life out of his son.

Harriet Klausner

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