

Book Review: The End of Eddy by Édouard Louis

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*With **The End of Eddy**, Édouard Louis gives an autobiographical account of his experience of homophobia and economic inequality growing up in Hallencourt, a village in the north of France where many live below the poverty line. While the book has been widely received for offering insight into current divisions within French society as well as the recent electoral success of Marine Le Pen, Peter Carroll also welcomes it as an elegantly written contribution to contemporary LGBT literature.*

The End of Eddy was also included as part of a reading list by LSE Spectrum to mark #IDAHOBIT2017. Find out what other books were recommended [here](#).

The End of Eddy. Édouard Louis (trans. by Michael Lucey). Penguin. 2017.

Find this book: 

Much ink has been spilled over the 'divided France' exposed during the country's long presidential election campaign in the first half of 2017, which ended in a run-off between Emmanuel Macron and his newly founded centrist party, En Marche!, and the far-right Front Nationale, led by Marine Le Pen. In the final round of the election, Le Pen came second but won 36 per cent of the popular vote, with an estimated 11 million French voters backing the party's strict migration controls, promotion of 'traditional' French values and protectionist economic policies.

Much in the same way that the [Brexit map sharply illustrates the political rural-urban divide between 'Leave' and 'Remain' votes](#) in the UK, the 2017 [voter map of France reflects almost identical voting patterns](#), with Front Nationale thriving in France's rural areas and En Marche! dominating the prosperous cities and their suburbs.

In the UK, this phenomenon has been described by political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin as the revenge of the 'left behinds': a social group that lacks the education and skills to survive in the modern, de-industrialised economy and is at odds with the socially liberal urbanite middle classes who dominate public life. In France, they have been called '[les couches moyennes](#)', a section of society whose social status has been relentlessly undermined by the vast economic and social changes that have occurred since the early 1990s.

The threat of a Le Pen presidency probably motivated many of the urban classes to seek to understand her appeal, evidenced in the popularity of books such as *The End of Eddy*. Since its initial publication in 2014, the memoir has sold 300,000 copies in France with its author, 24-year-old Édouard Louis, being called a literary sensation. Newly translated into English by Michael Lucey, it is the story of life lived at the fringes of the economy in a post-industrial wasteland, a world where jobs are scarce and poorly paid and communities blighted by social decay.

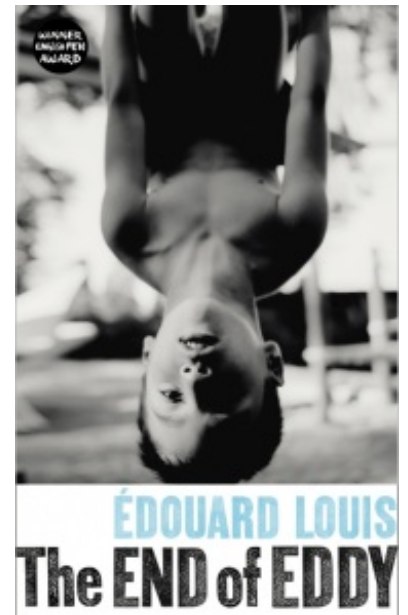




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Louis's father is a long-term unemployed, obese alcoholic who drinks wine and pastis by the box and lives off his disability benefits. Louis's mother is an exhausted care worker who had her first two children in an earlier marriage followed by Louis and his brother; together they live in the village of Hallencourt, 35 kilometres away from Amiens in a dilapidated house with a sporadic supply of electricity and water.

Hallencourt's residents are fatally pessimistic about their prospects, alcoholism is rampant and dental hygiene is nonexistent (an observation that is a reminder of former French President François Hollande's derogatory nickname for France's poor, '[les sans-dents](#)'). They often express feelings of abandonment by the hated governing classes, who they feel are callously indifferent about their fellow citizens' plight.

Many of the village's residents see economic hardship as the consequence of their own mistakes or blame ethnic minorities for destroying France; Louis takes the view that structural economic inequalities are to blame, and that the lives of France's poor are, in fact, 'the perfect realisation of the normal course of things'. Louis's analysis, [corroborated by his recent journalism](#), is that underinvestment in rural communities, a lack of dignified and reasonably paid jobs and the shameless indulging of racist prejudices, such as by the Front Nationale, have proved to be a toxic cocktail for the disadvantaged, who now flock to populist parties.

Growing up gay, Louis is the ultimate outsider in the fiercely homophobic and conservative atmosphere of his hometown. Much of the book is dedicated to his struggle to come to terms with his own sexuality: Louis describes his endless anxiety around being abandoned by his parents as his perceived feminine mannerisms and esoteric tastes become a source of terror and embarrassment.

The 'tough guy' culture that rejects Louis is similar to Barry Jenkins's depiction of a Miami housing project in his Oscar-winning epic [Moonlight](#), where an oppressive straitjacket of masculine conformity leads only to violence and misery for those living under its shadow. What unifies these seemingly opposite communities, with their contrasting histories and circumstances, is that within their social hierarchies homosexuality is always unacceptable. Louis's childhood is relentlessly bleak: brutal daily bullying as he hides in the stairwells and the corners of his school, feelings of self-hatred as he fails in his regular attempts to 'change who he was' and become straight and disturbing sexual affairs he has as a ten-year-old with his fifteen-year-old male cousin and his friends.

Eddy realises that the only chance of happiness is to escape. A teacher spots his talent for performance and encourages him to successfully audition for an arts college in Amiens, where he finally feels free to express his

identity and leave behind the life of misery that would have befallen him if he had remained.

The End of Eddy offers numerous insights into the plight of France's angry and disenfranchised, and many readers will be shocked at the levels of social decay and deprivation in a country that is famed for the 'protection sociale', a system designed to offer financial protection in the case of illness, maternity, old age and unemployment. Although the memoir tackles these somber themes with empathy, the translated writing style is often overwrought: chapter titles such as 'Portrait of My Mother in the Morning' strain for a kind of portentous gravitas that feels unnecessary and old-fashioned.

In terms of the book's position in current political debates, as Louis uses most of the pages to convey his struggle to come to terms with his sexuality, its primary reputation as offering vital insights into the popularity of Le Pen, rather than as an elegantly written example of gay literature, is difficult to comprehend. Much like 2016's [disappointing Hillbilly Elegy](#), which aimed to explain the political leanings of the US white working class and was held up by some as important insight into the election of Donald Trump, *The End of Eddy*'s remarkable success is perhaps best understood as a symptom of the divided societies that have created the turbulent politics of our era.

Peter Carrol is a Media Relations Officer at LSE and MSc graduate in Politics and Communication. [Read more by Peter Carrol](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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