

# ***Prehistoric Times***

By **Eric Chevillard**

Translated by **Alyson Waters** from the French

## **Discussion Points/Questions:**

1. *Prehistoric Times* begins with the narrator's description of Boborikine's old uniform, which the narrator is now forced to wear. These garments all at once seem to reveal the physical appearance of Boborikine, to be an object from the past that emerges as a hindrance for someone in the present, and to define and constrain the narrator within his new role as a museum tour guide. In this way, the hand-me-down uniform raises themes of archaeological traces, of the continued life of historical artifacts, and of the manner in which we interact with these objects – or in which they act upon us. What other elements of the past does the narrator go on to discover in the cave or in his new house? What role do these vestiges of history – to take one example, the Paleolithic paintings – continue to play in the present; what effect do they have upon the narrator? Finally, what do the narrator's digressions tell us about the relationship between history, the present and even the future – for example, his musings on pp. 59-60, 82, 84 and 98?

2. Within the first two pages of the novel the narrator's description of his uniform seems to undergo a reversal. Whereas on the first page the narrator complains about the uniform's lack of suitability, on the second page he comes to the conclusion that it is actually he himself who is not suitable for the uniform: "a uniform needs nobody except to make it stand... it should be up to me, rather, to adapt myself, to gain weight and climb down from my haughty height in order to pour myself into Boborikine's uniform" (p. 10). What other such flipping of normal relationships can we see in *Prehistoric Times*? For example, one might look at the two forms of historical teleology presented on page 101. Can we also consider as such a reversal the narrator's use of envisioned scenarios and metaphor, in which often the imagined and the comparison become more real than the actual setting and the object at hand? Or similarly, could the entire novel be considered as such a reversal, where the plot exists for the digressions rather than the digressions simply adding to or illuminating the plot?

3. On page 66 the narrator gives a theory of why prehistoric men decided to start painting: "through his painting he in effect took over the world." How does this idea of art as a form of domination, similar to the narrator's theory of maps and scales on pp. 79-80, relate to the narrator's role as a writer creating his own work of art? Elsewhere the narrator seems to imply that writing might be a form of "inactivity" (p. 51) compared to the real activity of work, and often it appears as if the narrator, perhaps a modern Scheherazade, is using writing as a delay tactic for his professional duties. Could these two visions of art be reconciled; what exactly is the motive behind the narrator's drive to write? Beyond this, is there a relation between

the text that the narrator presents us and the narrator's professional task? For example, could one consider the narrator to be giving a "tour" to the reader, and if so, what type of tour would this be? One might also consider why it is not until page 46 that the narrator chooses to describe fully his new job.

4. What is the role of the reader in relation to *Prehistoric Times*? The narrator at points appears to overstep purposefully the boundaries of the fictional universe. For example, on page 92 he references the upcoming turning of the page, an event that does not take place within the story but within the reader's own life. Yet at other points, such as on page 105, the narrator invites "you" to look at objects that are only found in the world of the text. What is the effect of this blurring of fictional boundaries? Furthermore, what is the relationship between the time the narrator experiences and the time it would take a reader to read his descriptions? Sometimes these two temporalities seem equivalent, such as on page 104, where as at other points they seem to diverge, such as on page 50.

5. At the end of the novel the narrator locks himself inside his house in order to paint the ceiling and walls. What exactly does the narrator hope to achieve with these paintings? Why does he choose to paint his house instead of the walls of the cave, as the prehistoric men had formerly done? What might we conclude given the fact that the closing of the house's doors mirrors the inevitable closing of the book? The narrator claims that "the advent of writing is considered to be what marks the end of prehistoric times; in brief, prehistory comes to an end when the story begins." In this case, does the desired eternity of the narrator's prehistoric paintings require the end of writing? Or, alternatively, could the text itself be a "cave painting" that will last beyond its creator?

### **Suggestions for Further Reading & Exploration**

#### **Online:**

Jordan Anderson reviews *Prehistoric Times* in [The Quarterly Conversation](#).

Alan Reed writes about *Prehistoric Times* on [Lemon Hound](#).

Watch Alyson Waters [receive the French American Foundation translation prize](#) for her translation of *Prehistoric Times*.

Visit the [UNESCO World Heritage site](#) for the Altamira Paleolithic cave art where you can watch a [video](#) about the paintings.

#### **In Print:**

Chevillard, Eric. *Palafox*. Translated by Wyatt Mason (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2004).

---. *The Crab Nebula*. Translated by Jordan Stump and Eleanor Hardin. (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1997).

---. *Demolishing Nisard*. Translated by Jordan Stump (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011).

---. *On the Ceiling*. Translated by Jordan Stump (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2000).

Curtis, Gregory. *The Cave Painters: Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists* (Flushing: Anchor Group, 2007). Gregory Curtis discusses the discovery of Paleolithic cave art in France and Spain and the theories of its origin and creation.