

**Ceremony to award the insignia of *Officier*  
in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*  
to Mr Jonathan Coe  
French Residence, 21 June 2016**

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

***Cher Jonathan Coe,***

**What better place to celebrate your art and who you are than here, in Kensington Palace Gardens?**

**By one of those strange coincidences that readers of fiction enjoy, since the nineteen-forties the French Ambassador's Residence has been established at number eleven, Kensington Palace Gardens.**

**Whether this is to be read as a good or a bad omen, the title of your latest book – *Number Eleven* – brings us closer than ever, to such an extent that the fate of this residence seems partly written into your novel, where “all day long Rachel had to listen to [a] ceaseless reverberant boom-boom-boom. She could even feel the ground shake with every impact”.**

**In our struggle against London's building practices, your book is now our best weapon!**

**Originally from Birmingham, you have lived in London and written about life here for many years, and to French readers you've become one of its best portraitists.**

**The characters, plots and humour in your books guide us through several decades of this mad British society – which, for outsiders, can be so fascinating and so puzzling.**

**When the plan first hatched to award this distinction, we were asked (more than once) by the Foreign Office to justify your connections with France.**

**In that other world of official paperwork and lengthy correspondence, it may have been difficult to comprehend how strong and enduring such ties of fiction can be. And how important that fictional work of understanding cultural motivations and differences can be to a whole nation.**

**In short, we would have liked to reply: his stories are so good! Although this did not seem admissible.**

**From the Iron Lady in the eighties to the “insect-eating lady” character of your latest novel, your eleven books, all translated into French (or soon to be), lead us through several political and social eras.**

**They take in generational change, the race for profit, social quandaries, divergent aspirations and political disillusionment – approaching through fiction these many factors which have such a decisive influence on the present moment, when Britishness is so widely discussed.**

**This is what many of us find and enjoy in your books, from the hilarious *What a Carve Up!*, first published by Penguin in nineteen-ninety-four, to your most recent work.**

**Your witty and ironic realism provides us with something of a reader's manual for the Britain of today – not only that global world player we diplomats work with daily, but its deeper, more human traits.**

**With the help of remarkable publishers and brilliant translators, your books have become available to an international readership.**

**Some of the people who have worked with you are present tonight : Marie-Pierre Gracedieu (your current editor at Gallimard), Mary Mount (your current editor at Penguin), Joanna Prior (Managing Director of Penguin General Books, who have published you for 22 years) and Tony Peake (who has been your agent for 27 years).**

We are proud to say your books continue to be most successful in France, where “*le nouveau Jonathan Coe*” is a pleasure to look forward to.

By the end of the nineties, after winning both the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (in nineteen-ninety-six) and the Prix Medicis étranger (in nineteen-ninety-eight), you were already France’s favourite British writer.

Maybe this is partly because France is still looking for its own satirical realist, capable of producing a fictional version of its social and political life over the last thirty years? With no prizes left to win, you had no choice but to join various other exciting projects.

That’s why the list we sent to the Foreign Office contains a selection of rather strange items!

Dreams, to start with. In June last year, you were the special guest of Barbara Carlotti’s “dream laboratory”, a musical, poetic, experimental performance at the Maison de la Poésie in Paris, as part of the “Tandem Paris-London” project.

Secondly, bridges. We are happy to say that you have become a friend of our Institut français in South Kensington.

**You have not been afraid to take on challenges there, such as sharing the stage with a French author with no English – despite professing to have only O-level French.**

**But as you enthusiastically exclaimed that evening, “What I love about Maylis de Kerangal's books, is how different they are from mine!”. Many bridges were built that night, inside and outside the books discussed.**

**Last but not least, melancholy. The same year, your book *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* was adapted for the screen by French filmmaker Michel Leclerc.**

**He managed to transpose the sadly comical adventures of Monsieur Sim from a very Scottish landscape to a definitely recognizable Massif Central road map.**

**It was a real pleasure to discover this film recently at the Ciné Lumière, and to see our quintessentially French actor Jean-Pierre Bacri in the shoes of the so British Maxwell Sim. Those who knew the book were amazed at how well your mixture of irony and melancholy suits that of France.**

**An intersection between French and British dreams, a crossover between the political and social melancholies of our two nations: what better reasons could we have to be celebrating your work this month, of all months?**

**But enough of fiction, dreams and differences. Your connection to French culture is also an intellectual and political one. You have taken a stance to defend causes dear to our country.**

**Your commitment to protecting booksellers and publishers in the United Kingdom, and your involvement in the Federation of European Publishers' initiatives, have earned you considerable respect.**

**You are also not only a Francophile, but a Europhile. Your novel *Expo Fifty-Eight*, published by Penguin in twenty-thirteen, was already set in a place called Europe, revisiting the nineteen-fifty-eight Universal Exhibition.**

**In that burlesque story where romance meets *roman d'espionage*, your characters, catapulted onto the continent for the first time, are perhaps more English than ever. I believe you have started working on a script for a film project with Julie Gavras on a similar topic?**

**Most recently, you contributed to the long list of signatories of the “love letter to the British people from Europe”, initiated by a pan-European trio of which the French member was Philippe Auclair – a Frenchman you happen to play indie rock music with (yet another item on our list).**

**This letter, published by the *TLS* on the first of June, emphasizes the “bonds of admiration and affection” between European countries. It asks the United Kingdom to “please stay” in the European Union, in the name of bonds which are akin to those we are here to celebrate tonight.**

***Cher Jonathan Coe, in recognition of the wit and zest with which your prose leads us through the complexities of British society, in the name of those many bonds and dreams that are so essential to our differences and to our unity, the French Culture Minister has decided to award you one of the highest distinctions.***

***Cher Jonathan Coe, au nom du Gouvernement de la République, nous vous faisons Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.***