

Coming Soon: New Fiction From Simone de Beauvoir

“The Inseparables,” a novel Beauvoir abandoned in 1954, tells the story of a doomed friendship based on one from her own childhood.



The French existentialist writer and feminist Simone de Beauvoir. Credit...Hulton Archive/Getty Images

By Alexandra Alter and Laura Cappelle

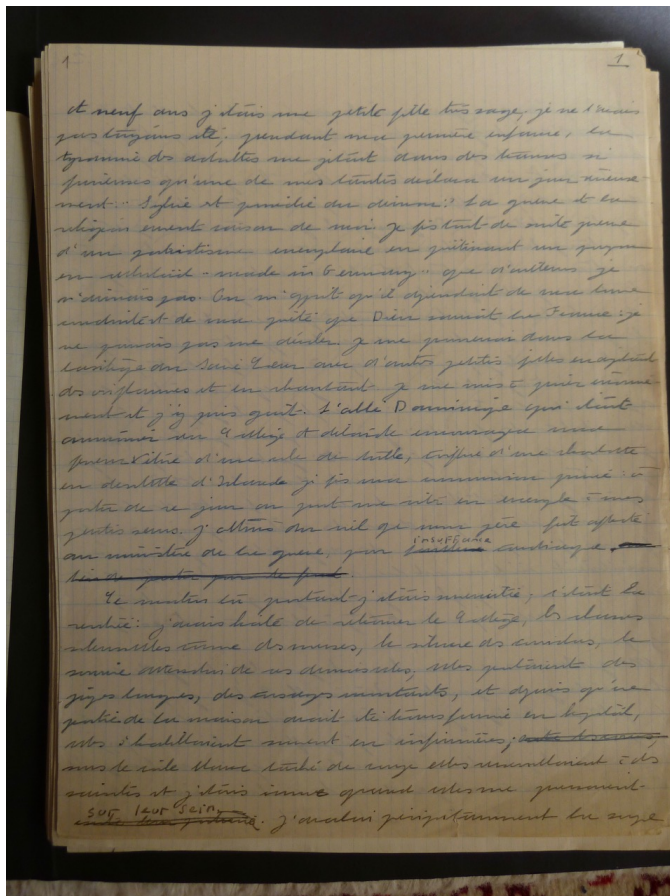
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In her 1963 memoir, “Force of Circumstance,” Simone de Beauvoir made a fleeting and tantalizing reference to a work of fiction she had abandoned. She described her attempt to write a story centered on her best friend Zaza, who died young of viral encephalitis.

Beauvoir started writing the novel in 1954, five years after publishing her groundbreaking feminist treatise “The Second Sex.” She worked on it for a few months, then showed it to Jean-Paul Sartre, her longtime romantic partner. Sartre was unimpressed. Beauvoir wrote in her memoir that she agreed with his wilting assessment: The story, she wrote, “seemed to have no inner necessity and failed to hold the reader’s interest.”

In the decades since, literary scholars have wondered what became of the manuscript. Even as other posthumous Beauvoir works came out, including volumes of her wartime journals and her love letters (to Sartre, Nelson Algren and Jacques-Laurent Bost), the fate of the novel remained a mystery.

Now the book, “The Inseparables,” is finally being published, after Beauvoir’s adopted daughter, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, decided to start releasing the works of fiction from the archive she inherited.



The first page of Simone de Beauvoir’s manuscript “The Inseparables.” Credit...Archives Simone de Beauvoir

The 176-page novel, which is being released in France this fall and in the United States next year, illuminates a formative chapter of Beauvoir’s early life, and a pivotal relationship that shaped her views on gender inequality and sexism.

It could also offer new insight into Beauvoir’s development as a writer, and reshape scholars’ and readers’ understanding of her literary legacy. While Beauvoir published several works of fiction during her lifetime, including the novels “She Came to Stay” and “The Mandarins,” which won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1954, she is best known today for her political and philosophical writing.

Scholars are eagerly anticipating the publication of “The Inseparables,” hoping it might resolve longstanding questions about the novel’s literary merits.

“Was Beauvoir right to put it aside? Why did she so readily agree with Sartre? I don’t think it’s the prose,” said Toril Moi, a professor of literature at Duke University and the author of “Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman,” who recently read the unpublished French edition of the novel. “She judged it insignificant because it was not political.”

In a phone interview from Paris, Le Bon de Beauvoir said she knew “The Inseparables” should eventually be published when she first read the manuscript in 1986, soon after Beauvoir’s death. “Other publishing priorities simply got in the way, which is why I’m just getting to her novels and short stories now,” she said. Beauvoir chose Le Bon de Beauvoir, a close confidante of hers for 26 years, as her literary executor, and legally adopted her in 1980 for the explicit purpose of ensuring the rights to her works would revert to her. Le Bon de Beauvoir plans to release more of Beauvoir’s unpublished fiction in the future, she said.



Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir and Simone de Beauvoir at the Fête des Femmes in June 1973 in Vincennes, France. Credit...Collection of Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir

Le Bon de Beauvoir is confident that “The Inseparables” is a fully formed work. “When she wrote it, in 1954, she had already honed her craft as a writer,” she said. A typed copy of the novel exists in addition to the handwritten manuscript, and Beauvoir didn’t tinker with either after 1954. “She destroyed some works that she was unhappy with,” Le Bon de Beauvoir said. “She didn’t destroy this one. About her papers, she told me, ‘You’ll do as you think is right.’”

The manuscript was kept at Le Bon de Beauvoir’s home along with a good chunk of the archives, though some of Beauvoir’s papers were donated to the National Library in Paris. Before preparing it for publication, she only ever granted access to “The Inseparables” to one scholar, the Beauvoir specialist Éliane Lecarme-Tabone.

“It was an amazing discovery,” Lecarme-Tabone wrote in an email interview. “We know that Simone de Beauvoir sometimes judges herself too harshly. It deserved to be seized on.”

Beauvoir had left the work untitled, so *Le Bon de Beauvoir* looked to the text itself for inspiration. The word “inseparable” is mentioned several times in relation to the central characters, modeled after Beauvoir and her friend Élisabeth Lacoin, known as Zaza.

Both born to bourgeois, Catholic families, they met at the age of 9, and shared dreams of independence and higher education at a time when women were discouraged from pursuing either. Zaza, the more overtly rebellious one, spurred on her friend, Beauvoir wrote in “Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter”: “It was only when I compared myself with Zaza that I bitterly deplored my banality.”

The story of Zaza that appears in “Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,” released in 1958, echoes the fictionalized version in “The Inseparables”; the two books even feature identical sentences. In both Beauvoir recounts the familial pressure that led Zaza to give up her studies, and her ill-fated relationship with the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (called Pascal in the novel).



Élisabeth Lacoin (Zaza), left, with Simone de Beauvoir at Gagnepan, September 1928. Credit... Association Élisabeth Lacoin

Her death, at the age of 21, left Beauvoir devastated. Beauvoir saw it as a cruel irony that Zaza, who had inspired her to push back against conventional expectations and restrictions placed on women, had been crushed by those same forces, and hadn't lived long enough to overcome them and establish herself as an independent woman. “We had fought together against the revolting fate that had lain ahead of us, and for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with her death,” Beauvoir wrote in “Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.”

She made multiple attempts to capture her best friend on paper. Even before “The Inseparables,” Zaza was a character in four earlier unpublished, unfinished novels,

written in the 1930s, which Le Bon de Beauvoir hopes to release as part of a future anthology.

Laurence Tâcu, the publisher of Les Éditions de l'Herne, which will release "The Inseparables" in French, said that the novel shines additional light on Zaza's character and her role in Beauvoir's feminist awakening. "She writes very powerfully about the way young women were prevented from living freely, because their purpose was to be wives and mothers," she said.

So far, rights to "The Inseparables" have been sold to publishers in 17 countries. Daniel Halpern, the publisher of Ecco, acquired North American rights from Les Éditions de l'Herne through Marleen Seegers of 2 Seas Agency, and plans to publish it in the fall of 2021.

Halpern took a gamble and acquired the book, which hasn't been translated into English yet, without reading it, relying instead on assessments from several people who had.

"You don't get a chance to do this very often," he said. "An unpublished book by Simone de Beauvoir is worth the risk."

Alexandra Alter writes about publishing and the literary world. Before joining The Times in 2014, she covered books and culture for The Wall Street Journal. Prior to that, she reported on religion, and the occasional hurricane, for The Miami Herald.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/books/coming-soon-new-fiction-from-simone-de-beauvoir.html>