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The Goncourt Prize's AI Verdict Reveals How Institutions Weaponize Algorithms Against Authors

Our Friends · Wednesday, September 30th, 2026

The Académie Goncourt removed Thélyson Orélien's novel from contention for France's most prestigious literary prize on the basis of AI-detection analyses it described only as the work of "trustworthy researchers" — without disclosing the mechanisms behind that conclusion. For Paulius Pazdrazdys, a programmer and AI researcher who studies how people extend trust to systems they cannot inspect, that opacity is itself the story.

The academy's statement, as reported by [TNW](#), cited "the convergent result of several analyses by trustworthy researchers and journalists" to conclude the novel is "in all likelihood very largely the product of an artificial intelligence." Meanwhile, other detection tools examined by French media reached the opposite conclusion. Pazdrazdys sees the same pattern surface in a different domain: bettors evaluating [fast withdrawal sports betting sites](#) judge payout speed and back-end reliability by outcomes they can observe after the fact, not by any mechanism they can actually inspect. The Goncourt's committee, he notes, did the same thing in reverse — trusting an algorithm's verdict without being able to explain what produced it.

France's Top Literary Prize Formally Drops Orélien's Novel

The Académie Goncourt announced Friday that C'était ça ou mourir, Orélien's novel published by Grasset in France in August, would be dropped from its first selection for the Goncourt prize. The academy cited both plagiarism and its reading of the AI-detection analyses as grounds for the decision.

In its formal statement, the academy said its mission is "to promote and crown literature written by women and men," adding that it offers no endorsement or blessing "in any way to the creation of texts generated with the help of AI." The second Goncourt selection is due on 6 October, with the overall prize winner announced on 4 November. Academy president Philippe Claudel had initially urged caution over the AI claims on Wednesday, before plagiarism reports appeared to shift the institution's position and prompt the formal drop.

An Anonymous Account and a Detection Tool Set the Process in Motion

The accusation did not originate inside any literary institution. On 21 September 2026 — the same day Orélien's novel won the Prix du roman Fnac — an anonymous account on X called "Balance

ton Claude,” a reference to Anthropic’s AI model Claude, posted the allegation publicly. The account claimed it had run the novel through Pangram, an AI detection tool, and that the results showed the book was written “almost entirely” by AI.

That single social media post set the chain in motion. Le Figaro subsequently identified the person behind the account as Samuel Fitoussi, one of its own columnists and an essayist. Fitoussi later said he ran the account with other people, not alone.

Detection Tool Results Conflicted, and Separate Plagiarism Claims Emerged

The AI-authorship verdict rested on contested ground from the start. Some experts question the reliability of AI detection tools in general, and French media found that other detectors rated *C’était ça ou mourir* as very probably human-written. The academy’s statement acknowledged the basis as probabilistic — “in all likelihood” — rather than certain.

Separate from the AI claims, plagiarism allegations emerged through two French-language outlets. Libération reported that a prize-winning short story Orélien wrote in 2012 copied a preface by Louis Pauwels. La Presse reported that a 2013 opinion piece by Orélien copied material from The Philippine Star. These allegations were reported independently of the AI accusation and addressed different texts entirely.

Orélien Calls the AI Allegation Racially Motivated

Orélien, 38, has denied the AI-authorship claim and offered a pointed account of what he believes drove it. Speaking to Libération, he said the novel’s distinctive qualities reflect Haitian and Caribbean language traditions, not machine generation.

“The imagery, repetition and rhythm are a living language, they are mine.”

He told Libération the allegation was racially motivated, a framing his publisher has not directly contradicted. Grasset published the novel in France in August, and its commercial trajectory before the controversy was substantial: *C’était ça ou mourir* had sold approximately 35,000 copies, and publishers in more than 20 countries had acquired translation rights. Whatever the Goncourt ultimately decides, the novel’s reach — and the stakes attached to it — had already extended well beyond the French prize circuit.

Photo: Jitte Davidson via Pexels

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