Interview de Susan Ouriou

"My first forays into literary translation and creative writing took place at about the same time."

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Les mauvaises langues disent qu’un traducteur, c’est un écrivain frustré. Vous êtes la preuve du contraire. Qu’est-ce qui est venu en premier pour vous, l’écriture ou la traduction ?

My first forays into literary translation and creative writing took place at about the same time. The translation I was working on of José Luis Olaizola’s Planicio (which eventually became The Thirteenth Summer, published by Red Deer Press in 1993) actually didn’t gel until I realized that I had to be the English “co-author” of the Spanish novel for the translation to work. Similarly, as I began writing my first short stories, I soon saw that the toughest part of writing would be to “translate” my half-formulated ideas into fiction that could lead a life of its own. I see my activities as translator, writer, and interpreter as being complementary. I once read a quote (in its English version) from Ortega y Gasset that sums up my belief: “...we give repercussion to others as others do to us... one must be both an active participant and a spectator in life, attentive to other voices as well as to one’s own variety of echoes.”

L’interprétation est un métier exigeant (stress, préparation, déplacements, etc.). Comment parvenez-vous à concilier l’interprétation avec une activité qui demande plus de calme, de recul, comme l’écriture et la traduction littéraire ?

I have to admit that some of my best thinking and writing is done while traveling to and from conferences or in the evening or occasional half day off during those same conferences. As well, in Western Canada where interpretation is not a full-time profession, I often have days off in between conferences to work on any translation or writing projects, for which I feel very fortunate.

Vous avez traduit plusieurs ouvrages d’auteurs canadiens français ou québécois. De qui s’agit-il ?

The Quebec authors I've translated are Guillaume Vigneault, Michèle Marineau, Mario Girard, Carole Fréchette, and Gilles Tibo. I have yet to translate any French authors.

Vous avez parlé d'un roman écrit en espagnol. Abordez-vous différemment le discours dans ces deux langues ?

In AIIC lingo, English is my A language, French my B language and Spanish my C language and, accordingly, I find it easier to translate from French into English than from Spanish into English. In both French and Spanish, however, I usually feel the need at some point or another to consult a native speaker to discuss shades of meaning. A lot of my time is spent re-working my English text.

Êtes vous davantage sensible au discours énoncé dans une langue par rapport à l’autre, l’une
Both French and Spanish "speak" to me; it would be impossible for me to say that one language does so more than the other. In fact, I would love to know more languages in order to gain insight into how they package up the world. I have taken an introductory course in both Cree and Blackfoot and hope to be able to take more courses to continue learning about the two cultures that gave birth to such fascinating languages.

Only one of my short stories was aired on CBC as part of their Alberta Anthology program. I have had other stories published in various literary and mainstream magazines—Grain, this magazine, SansCrit, TransLit, Write Angles, Prairie Journal Prose, and Moving Out. Although I prefer writing novels, the short story has been a fertile training ground for me.

*Damselfish* est un roman émouvant, doublé peut-être d’une réflexion sur la famille moderne, éclatée, à la dérive. D’où vous est venue l’inspiration ?

Although it wasn’t my stated intention when I began writing *Damselfish*, the novel did turn out to be an exploration of the many forms loss takes in our lives. I’m sure part of the reason for my exploration of loss is the death of my younger brother when he was 20 in a hiking accident, and of my youngest daughter at the age of 16 from leukemia. As you mention, I think *Damselfish* is also a reflection of the society in which we live where many families have been cut adrift.

You are right about Hope and the role she has carved out for herself. I don’t know that I could say what I think young people in her situation should or shouldn’t do, but I have noted that we often learn from others’ mistakes instead of repeating them. I have never subscribed to the belief that our past dictates our future.

Hope est une artiste plastique qui est incapable de trouver le moyen de s’exprimer. Y a-t-il là une analogie avec la recherche par l’écrivain de sa propre « voix » ?

Hope definitely does have a conflicted relationship with her art. And yes, that is the case of many of the writers I know. Hope’s struggle with her art could well be my way of working through some of my own issues with writing.

The allusion to *Malinche* comes from the fact that *Malinche* was my introduction to Mexico. I did write another novel before *Damselfish*, a novel that has become my bottom-drawer entry in the category of books that will never be read. Its title was *Malinche* and the novel was my attempt at writing historical fiction. I mistakenly thought I’d be able to ease into writing by choosing a character I understood on one level (as an interpreter) and wanted to understand on another (how she could have been a party to the destruction of her people). It seemed easier to write about a character who had actually lived and about whom certain facts were known, however, in reality the facts just kept getting in my way. Writing *Malinche* was nevertheless an invaluable introduction for me to the
Mexico of the past and the present. When I finally did travel to Mexico, I fell in love with the country and people I had read so much about.

Vous avez réussi à faire subir une transformation au personnage principal à l’issue du roman, une transformation radicale même…

To my way of thinking, the fact that Hope undergoes a major transformation is simply the way of the world. We are all confronted with events, both good and bad, and those events change us, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. A character who stayed the same would never come alive for either the writer or the reader.

Pouvez-vous nous parler de la recherche de votre propre voix ? Quels auteurs canadiens (ou étrangers) admirez-vous plus particulièrement ?

I think I’m still looking for my voice or perhaps, more precisely, still puzzling over questions as yet unanswered, which is why I’ll probably be writing until the day I die. When I first started writing, I had trouble “limiting” my characters’ voices and I think that was partly due to my work as an interpreter where we have to understand and reproduce language in all its registers, ranging from the uneducated to the overeducated, from the parochial to the universal, from the passionate yet clumsy to the eloquent yet vacuous. However, I also know that it is possible to consciously exploit a weakness in order to create something bold and new. Maybe one day I will write a novel in which I can cover the multiple registers and still have a believable story and characters.

As for authors I admire, there are so many it’s hard to know where to begin. Perhaps the most important authors for me as a writer are the ones who served as my introduction to contemporary English-Canadian literature: Margaret Laurence, Matt Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields, Michael Ondaatje, Bonnie Burnard, and Sharon Butala to name but a few.

Vos récits ont-ils été traduits ? Le cas échéant, comment avez-vous réagi à la traduction, en tant que traductrice ?

One of my short stories, “The Family of Man” (SansCrit, 1989), was translated into Spanish for the literary translation anthology TransLit (1996) as “La Familia Humana” by Cecilia Sessarego, an Argentinian translator living in Calgary. My short story/prose poem “A Capital Act” (Grain, 2001) was translated into French as “Un acte capital” by Laurent Chabin, a French writer and translator living in Calgary, however, it has not yet been published. Where fiction is concerned, I will probably never write in anything but English since it is so much easier to play with language and convey emotion in my mother tongue.

Avez-vous un autre roman en chantier ?

I am working on another novel set in present-day Calgary. I remember telling my daughter two or three years ago that I’d decided to set my next novel in Calgary because I wanted to force myself to live in the present and open my eyes to my surroundings. My daughter said, “Alors, Maman, tu parles de vivre dans le présent, mais de le faire dans le futur!” She knows me too well. If this next novel is anything like Damselfish, I have no idea where it will take me until I get there. That is perhaps one of the most frightening and exhilarating things about writing, the fact that it is both a plumbing of the depths and a voyage of discovery.

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