Interpreter voices: Lori Saint-Martin and Susan Ouriou

Lori Saint-Martin and Susan Ouriou, AIIC members in Canada, share a distinction: each has received a Governor General’s Award for literary translation.

Every year, the Governor General of Canada, who represents the British Queen as Head of State, presents the country’s oldest and most prestigious awards for English and French-language Canadian literature to Canadian authors, illustrators and translators.

Susan Ouriou won the 2009 award for the young adult novel Pieces of Me, a translation of La liberté? Connais pas... by Canadian author Charlotte Gingras.

Lori Saint-Martin and her translator husband Paul Gagné won the 2007 prize for Dernières notes their translation of Tamas Dobozy’s Last Notes. This was the couple’s second award; they had already received it in 2000 for Un parfum de cèdre, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s first bestseller Fall on your Knees.

The two laureates kindly agreed to answer some questions for Communicate!

How long have you been translating?

Lori: Since 1993. I had read three pages of Ana Historic, a novel by Daphne Marlatt, at a book fair when it hit me: we have to translate this book! The author had begun working with someone else, but when that fell through, Paul and I were given the job. It is one of the most difficult books we've translated and I marvel at the nerve I had at the time, with no experience, wanting to take it on through sheer love.

Susan: I started work on my first literary translation in 1989 and have translated over 20 books. I have also just edited a book on literary translation, an anthology of writing by literary translators from different parts of the world entitled Beyond Words - Translating the World. (I also would love to see an anthology of conference interpreters writing about interpreting some day!)

Do you also write?

Lori: I write short fiction and have published two short story collections in French. Recently, I have been recreating some of them in English. It's very painful -- because sometimes I have bent French in ways in which English won't go -- but also very exciting because I have total freedom. I find myself adding or cutting passages, inventing new images and generally playing freely with the text in ways no honourable translator would. An English version of four short pieces of poetic prose will appear in Best Canadian Poetry in English 2010.
Susan: I do write my own fiction as well - numerous short stories, the novel Damselfish published in 2001, a second novel that is with an agent right now and a third novel in the works. I began writing at about the same time I started translating fiction.

How do you reconcile translating with interpreting and writing, and for Lori, with teaching?

Lori: Translations, unlike my own writing projects, have deadlines, and things with tight deadlines always seem to get done!

Susan: I find that simultaneous interpreting in Western Canada, where there are fewer conferences than in Eastern Canada, lends itself extremely well to the pursuit of another activity such as writing or translation. I have always loved the challenge, diversity and stimulation of conference interpreting, but I also love the actual book that comes from a translation or writing project.

How do you choose the book that you are going to translate?

Lori: Initially, we pitched works to publishers, who often looked down their noses at us. After we won the first Governor General's Award in 2000, publishers began taking us more seriously. Today, it's a mixture - I read and select books for Éditions du Boréal, but we also accept projects publishers bring to us. Working with a number of publishers is interesting because of the variety of books - sometimes fiction, sometimes non-fiction - and because each has its own way of doing things.

Susan: The first book I translated - Planicio (The Thirteenth Summer) by Spaniard José Luis Olaizola - was a labour of love. I translated the novel without a publishing contract or any guarantee that it would find a home. My hope was that once publishers read the story they would be interested. The gamble paid off. I still pitch books to publishers on certain occasions, but now publishers contact me with their translation projects as well. Since interpreting is also an important part of my life, I am careful not to take on too many translation projects, limiting myself for the most part to books I love.

How long does it take you to translate a book? How do you go about it?

Lori: We always work the same way, as a team. Paul usually does the first draft, after which I read it twice, once comparing it to the original to check for mistakes or omissions, then a second time for general flow, beauty and economy. After we’ve made these corrections, each one reads the manuscript again. No matter who begins reading it, we both find different ways of improving it. It's a long and patient process and you just have to take the time.

Susan: I have been fortunate in that most of my literary translation contracts are signed up to a year before the manuscript is due. The draft translation itself does not take me very long, but I find it invaluable to be able to put the project aside for weeks at a time and then go back to it with fresh eyes.

Is it not difficult to adapt your translating style to the author's – or is it as if you were rewriting the book?

Lori: The translator's ethic and aesthetic are bound up together. You have to find the voice, the music of the author, and render it as best you can. There is artistry involved, but also a kind of abnegation. Writers with big egos make bad translators because translation is not about you; it's about the book. The voice has to be true.

Susan: I do have a tendency to choose books that resonate with me both in terms of their content and style. I am very aware of my responsibility to the author, but also of my responsibility to provide readers with the same notional and emotional experience.