

MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ IN MELBOURNE

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Writing about Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Breathing Underwater*, Francis Gilbert said in *The Times* that 'there are very few writers who may have changed my perception of the world, but Darrieussecq is one of them.' Any act of translation is transformative by definition, but to translate the writing of a novelist who deals with the language that is forged out of the experience of tragedy, is both a liberating and terrifying experience. It was my pleasure to do so, and also to join Marie on a number of panels at her recent visit to Australia during the 2009 Melbourne Writers Festival. Marie was accompanied by Paul Otchavosky-Laurens (POL), who has edited and published all of Marie's major works since the release of her debut novel, *Truismes (Pig Tales)*, in 1996, which became the most popular first novel in France since the 1950s.

Participating in a number of events at the festival, as well as a 'rencontre' at the Melbourne Alliance Française, Marie read and gave insights into her work, particularly the difficult task of writing about a mother grieving the death of her child. *Tom est mort*—the English translation, *Tom is Dead*, published by Melbourne-based Text Publishing—is her most recent novel, and was nominated for both the *Prix Goncourt* and the *Prix Femina*. Set in Australia, the narrator is a French woman exploring two alien worlds—a foreign country, and the universe in which her child no longer exists—these worlds forever united by this event: 'Tom's death made Australians of us.' Darrieussecq's interest in the notion of exile is well documented. Places at the end of the world long held a fascination for her: so when it came to writing about such a confronting subject, for Darrieussecq the only solution was to set it as far away as possible from the city of Paris where she lives with her family. As she explained during one of the panel discussions, she tends to describe the world slightly off to the side, thus the Sydney, the Tasmania, that she writes is her own vision of these places, with a particular resonance for readers familiar with both cultures.

For me as the translator of *Tom is Dead*, a particular highlight of Marie's visit was to hear her read her work aloud, both in French and English. I had had the opportunity to meet her in Paris, to hear the intonation of her voice, which is vital when translating the work of a writer to whom rhythm is so central. To hear her read sections of the completed translation, the confluence of two

languages, of two writers, reminded me of the wonderfully collaborative aspect of literary translation.

Darrieussecq has an ever increasing following in Australia, where her work is written about and studied, and now translated, and many of those who attended the sessions exhibited a familiarity with and love of her work. She later conveyed to me how pleased she was at the depth of the questions and the interest in her writing that came out during the panel discussions as well as in discussions with members of the public afterwards. A novel such as *Tom is Dead* evokes strong emotional responses. During her presentation at the Alliance Française, it was not without a hint of emotion that she spoke of the types of correspondence she receives from readers who have lost a child. It was with similar humility and humanity that Marie interacted with all her audiences during her visit to Melbourne, and always with a touch of wit, and I know I am not alone in hoping that she will soon return to our shores.

Melbourne

Note

- 1 Lia Hills is an Australian poet and author. She translated Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Tom est mort*.