

# THE LANGUAGE OF ASTONISHMENT: A FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR'S REFLECTIONS ON HER IDENTITY

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Towards the end of Russian-French writer Andreï Makine's hauntingly beautiful novel of childhood, memory and divided loyalties, *Le Testament français* (1995), the narrator Alyosha, who all his young life has been shuttling between the visceral reality of his Russian Siberian childhood and his French grandmother's poetic evocations of her past and her old country, has a sudden slip of the tongue which for a moment puts him in a disorienting position: that of being literally between two languages, between French and Russian, and understood in neither. But it is that very moment which transforms his life and his understanding of himself and his literary ambitions. The gap between the two languages, which as a dreamy child he simply accepted and as a rebellious teenager he reacted against, is not what he once thought it was—a frustrating barrier to understanding or a comforting bulwark against reality, depending on his mood at the time. No, it is something far stranger and much more exhilarating: a prism through which everything can be seen and felt even more clearly, sensually and intensely and not only because with two languages at your disposal you have even more opportunity to 'nail' the world, as it were. It is also because this between-two-languages phenomenon, common to all bilingual people, is actually a striking metaphor for the gap that exists between language per se and language lived—the sensual reality for *all* human beings. And it is in that gap that literature itself is born: literature which, in Makine's beautiful words, is *un étonnement permanent devant cette coulée verbale dans laquelle fondait le monde* (Makine, 244).<sup>1</sup> And it is that very 'in-between', that universal 'language of astonishment', which will turn Alyosha into a writer and by extension Makine himself, who included many autobiographical elements in the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> A never-ending astonishment in the face of the flow of words in which the world dissolved [transl. by editor].

When I first read *Le Testament français*, in the year it first appeared and in the language in which it was written—French—(the English translation, with the same title, appeared two years later, in 1997) I had already been published in Australia for five years with several novels already in print. I was already aware subconsciously of many of the things Makine writes about. But I was immediately and viscerally struck by *Le Testament français*. Makine had put his finger unerringly on the pulse of the bilingual writer; he had expressed perfectly something most of us knew and struggled with but I for one had never expressed quite so clearly, though I knew that my background and divided loyalties informed practically everything I had written, even those works which had nothing whatever to do with bilingualism in content, style or theme.

I write very differently from Makine, and in a very different field to his adult literary fiction. Though I have written three adult novels, the vast majority of my work is fiction for young people: children and adolescents. It is an area I much prefer for all kinds of reasons but principally because it is the area in which I can best express myself, in which I feel most free, whose very constraints in terms of what may or may not be permissible due to readers' ages mysteriously allows my imagination a great deal more latitude, invention, freshness and subtlety than would be the case in adult fiction. Within young people's fiction I have written in all kinds of genres, from mystery novels to fantasy novels, family sagas to ghost stories, thrillers to love stories, historical novels to graphic novels. But the element of the fantastic, in one way or another, has been an abiding feature of my work. And now, after reading *Le Testament français* and thinking deeply about what it raised, I begin to see that, since my earliest childhood, my own abiding interest in the fantastical, in fairytales, legends, mythology, as well as modern fantasy, was in itself not only a personal choice (because I was that way inclined and always had been) but was also a journey between worlds, a sojourn in strange places and the sudden irruption of a different, disturbing reality into the everyday which is at the heart of fantasy and was actually also at the heart of my own lived experience.

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I was born into a long, tumultuous family history. A history which at least on my father's side we knew very well, stretching back through the centuries from the peasant villages of western France to emigration to Quebec as some

of the first people to settle in ‘New France’, through centuries of Quebec life to the spectacular return to France in the early twentieth century as very rich and reckless dual nationals of the *haute bourgeoisie*. It was a history that was a mixture of grand tragedy, thrilling romance, *Grand Guignol* horror and high farce, and it was always more than a bit player in all of our lives. The dead jostled with the living in our understanding of the world; the mad, the bad, the sad, the brave, the good, the cruel, the powerful, the poor, all wore our features and answered to our names. Passionate love and murder, suicide, treachery and madness as well as acts of courage and of cunning were all common currency in this history of ours which crossed over often into the history of the countries my various ancestors lived in. And throughout the twentieth century (and beyond!) it has continued to unfold in instalments, action-packed, terrifying, ridiculous, disturbing and exciting by turns.

We were always in the midst of drama, some a direct result of the past, others new episodes that would in turn generate their own echoes. People to whom I’ve told even a fraction of the extraordinary stories engendered by my family have said to me that, one day, I must write them down. They’re thrilled by it all; they say, ‘No wonder you became a writer’! But what people often fail to understand is that, for a child, and especially a child who tends to be more of an observer, as many young writers *en herbe* tend to be, such tumult can be fatal to peace of mind and even to the growing of a separate identity. It can actually paralyse those faculties of observation and clarity you need in order to transform powerful emotions into good writing. In order to escape, to protect yourself, you can only retreat, and risk being labelled a selfish dreamer, an emotionless blank, a weird changeling in the warm human world...

Perhaps I was just such a changeling. Perhaps my own destiny, as a child born to carry straight on with the quarrels and loves of a self-absorbed French family, was irrevocably changed when first I was born in Indonesia on the other side of the world where my parents were working and then I was left as a baby with my paternal grandmother in France for four years—because of ill health—so did not see my parents or sisters in all that time. My grandmother, a great beauty with a turbulent past, was from a world that to me seems as mythically poetic as the past of Alyosha’s grandmother Charlotte Lemonnier seems to him. She had a fund of stories of that world, suitably glossed for a child’s ears, and one of my greatest delights was to listen to her or my aunts, her daughters, tell stories about the glamorous people in the elegant photo albums

that filled one of the family heirloom cabinets in her bedroom. The Toulouse apartment where they lived, filled with the gracious and gorgeous relics of the past, its wardrobes crammed with evening dresses and furs and hat-boxes, was like a memory capsule of the vanished family fortune and long-ago histories of its more celebrated members, a place where a child could dream and dress up and imagine fairytale destinies. But it was also a space where I was the only and very cosseted and petted child in the house, the embodiment of the future and, with my grandmother, one of the twin centres of this very feminine world.

My grandfather was still on and off a part of my grandmother's life; but their differences and a difficult history had made them drift apart so that he was away for long periods in his other world, one I never knew and still know only from very small hints. It was a world where he did not have to live up to the protocols and constraints of the gilded class into which he had been born, where his own troubled past could be forgotten, a world in which he felt more himself, though he was not the kind of man who would ever have put it like that. Elegant, impulsive and with a not-so-hidden streak of violence, he was not an analytical type and was also no worshipper of the past, indeed, quite the contrary. On his infrequent visits back to the apartment he brought a disturbing breath of masculine havoc with him and a reminder that the past had also contained much darker things than the golden memories evoked by my grandmother in her stories. I was afraid of him—and also fascinated by him. I'd been so young when I left Indonesia that I didn't remember my father at all but I knew, from looking at photographs, that he looked very like *his* father, my grandfather, though I also knew that they didn't get on.

All this vanished almost overnight when my parents came back from Indonesia and the next stage of my border-crossing, changeling existence began. Suddenly I was no longer the only child but the third of four children; suddenly I had to adapt to the rediscovery of my father and mother. We were not together long in France though because my father had been offered a new contract to work overseas again, this time in Australia. And this time I would go along with them, with my second eldest sister Beatrice and my little sister Camille while my oldest sister Dominique, who was on the cusp of high school, would take my place in my grandmother's and aunts' lives as the young centre of their existence.

I knew no English at all when we arrived in Sydney. I was five, ready to start school, and with Beatrice, who did know English, I dutifully trotted

off. I don't remember much at all about that first year in Australia. And I don't think it's because I was traumatised—from what my mother tells me, though she was worried I'd be upset, in fact I took to school very happily and babbled away in French and broken English to anyone who would listen, seemingly unconcerned with the strangeness of it all and soon had several friends. Rather, I don't remember that time because I didn't have the words in which to 'dissolve the world' and fix my memories. Memory itself is dependent on language and it is why we do not remember, as a general rule, our pre-verbal babyhood.

But I do very clearly remember that first English-language book I read by myself, as mentioned, the *Little Golden Book* and this recreated for me, in my new language, the fairy stories I'd already heard and read in my own mother tongue. For me it was like a version of the feelings Alyosha has when he realises that the stories his grandmother tells him can equally be told in French or in Russian because they are at the junction of the two, told in that 'language of astonishment'. And the fantastic is *par excellence* the discovery of astonishment, of surprise, of the strange, dislocating everyday reality in an unexpected way. Little wonder then that it was that element that spoke so deeply to me, why I took so to the whole idea of fairyland, of the otherworld, in my reading. And the discovery of the extraordinary range of fantastical children's fiction in English was one I made by myself for as my parents had come to English as adults, they were not familiar with English-language children's books. We had many books at home in French: rows of *Tintin* and *Astérix* and *Babar* and Bibliothèque Rose editions of the Comtesse de Ségur and Bibliothèque Verte editions of Paul Berna and lots of nineteenth-century adventure novels, like those of Dumas, Féval, Gautier, Hugo. I read them all, some of them many times over but the English-language books I found for myself in the public library or the school library were very special to me because I came across them by myself. I was always attracted to titles that breathed of magical possibilities. The world beyond the wardrobe, in the cracks of the floor, through a river, across the sea, in the hollow tree, through the looking-glass, beckoned me. It offered space and time. Possibility. More than that, it offered the chance of transformation so that one could re-emerge into the everyday world re-invigorated, newly ready to cope, understand and overcome.

My parents never intended to stay more than two or three years in Australia; Dad always had it in his mind to get a job back home. But that didn't

happen—the contracts kept being signed and we settled into a shuttle between Australia and France for the two or three year period of each contract, with a stay of several months back in France at the end of each. It became our way of life, this moving between countries, continents, and languages and, although Béatrice soon rejoined Dominique back in France for high school, the rest of us (including the three youngest born in Australia, Louis-Xavier, Gabrielle and Bertrand) stayed here. Speaking English at school, we were not supposed to use it at home and didn't, with our parents, but soon evolved, between siblings, a kind of private language—a *franglais*, or rather *frangarou*, a word I have coined to evoke our Australian English, an in-between *patois* that twisted and melded and that no-one else could understand. This too, I now see, fed into my apprehension of the world as a multi-dimensional thing, a reality that could be disturbed, whose known layers could be peeled back to reveal something else, something unexpected, familiar and foreign all at once. The languages coined by fantasy writers are no stranger than the weird mixtures spoken by children growing up with more than one language deeply embedded in them.

I was soon writing as well as reading stories. Head down in a book or nose up in the air, dreaming, or bottom up, scribbling interminably; for me, stories were literally indispensable, as absolutely necessary as breathing. Away with the fairies I could hold and control and understand and *know*. Otherwise I was just a child, at the mercy of forces both personal and impersonal that swept me into constant yet unpredictable turmoil. But right from the start the stories weren't just private, not just written for myself; I had an audience in mind, the audience of my siblings. We younger five, especially, were very close; our parents' fears about the cultural differences between our lives in Australia and their own difficult wartime childhoods meant that they did not allow us to do the kinds of things our Australian school friends could do as a matter of course. I've often read in the reminiscences of fellow Australian writers that they had a freedom in their childhoods that children today lack, hovered over as they are by anxious 'helicopter' parents. Well, in our case, we had more than 'hovered-over' experience; not for us bike rides down the creek or jaunts by ourselves into the city. During the week we trod familiar paths to school and back again; after school and on weekends we generally stayed within the quite extensive confines of the garden and the house. However, our parents did not attempt to program our days. We were thrown very much on our own resources especially as there was no TV allowed in the house. And entertaining yourself

often meant having to entertain the bored younger ones as well; you couldn't just bookworm all day or you'd run the risk of armed revolt, both from siblings and parents. Telling stories—or rather writing them—was a good compromise. I'd be doing what I wanted and could still escape into other worlds but also keep the family peace. More excitingly, I could actually take other travellers into those strange and magical worlds of the imagination.

Sometimes we children would sit under a big table in the living-room that we'd covered with a large, dark pink velvet curtain hanging all the way down to the floor, making the space beneath like a kind of dimly-lit tent. In this space my younger brothers and sisters sat while I played Scheherazade, spinning as many stories as I could. Though I didn't know it, I was learning not only the storyteller's vocation but also the craft of the writer, because there were times when my stories fell flat and I had to quickly change them and build up suspense and a sense of style. I couldn't just say 'And then this happened and then this...' because the audience would rapidly get bored and one brother would start pinching one sister or vice versa and the resulting brawl would make our parents come running.

Sometimes, though, it wasn't a shared experience. One of my ways of coping with boring or uncomfortable situations was to imagine myself elsewhere. I could look at a stone or a piece of wood or anything, really, focus on it till I felt as if I could crack its essence and emerge into that parallel reality I'd grown to love deeply. It was an actual physical reaction, this sensation of being in another world: a kind of dreamy dissolving of the limbs, a swimming of the head, and yet a great clarity of mind and a delight that was piercingly sweet.

This was possible anywhere but even more so when on holidays we were back at our house in the rural south-west of France, west of Toulouse. The house, that had been renamed by our father *La Nouvelle Terrebonne* after the original *Terrebonne*, the long-lost family mansion in Montreal, was a centuries-old place that with its nooks and crannies and secret places seemed to me to hide many different passages to the otherworld. In that enchanted Narnia-like space, everything was extraordinary. It was a house where my parents were happy and relaxed and from where we children could roam into the countryside, free of the anxious worrying which in Australia kept us to our immediate surroundings. It was a 'good-fairy' kind of house, the sort that is deeply loved by all who live in it but that nevertheless has many strange,

mysterious and even frightening stories associated with it. There were stories of the haunted red room, where a young man had hung himself a hundred years before; of the well, where a witch had been thrown, centuries ago; of the enormous elm tree outside my parents' bedroom window, planted by one of Louis XIV's ministers. The stairs creaked, the attic was spooky, the cellar dim and creepy; there were storage antechambers to every room. Each of these storage-rooms had its own strange cargo: a huge oak wardrobe full of old fur coats, including my great-grandmother's Canadian wolf-skin coat; pottery jars full of goose and duck *confit* in the winter; an old wicker doll's pram with my aunt's doll in it sporting a wig made of her own, blond childhood hair; and in another the baskets brought back by my parents from Indonesia, full of red and gold and green and gold costumes, filigree jewellery, and two sinuous plaits of black hair, wigs made, so my mother told us in a thrillingly bloodcurdling tone, by cutting off the hair of corpses.

In Australia I'd scribbled and told stories of fairies and knights and monsters. But, in *La Nouvelle Terrebonne* and the rural world beyond it, we discovered the actual homes of those fairies and knights and monsters. We headed out on our bikes to neighbouring villages, past deep rustling woods, fountains and castles and ancient churches; we went to school in the little village school across the road where they still had ink bottles and slates; we found eighteenth-century books on the rubbish tip and picked cherries and apricots and greengages and figs in our own parkland. Looking back on it now that the house has long been sold, there is a golden, *Le Grand Meaulnes* nostalgia about it; *La Nouvelle Terrebonne* was an enchanted space which has stayed forever not only in my own heart but in those of my entire family. We sometimes visit the village just to look at the house and my mother told me recently that of all the many houses she has lived in during her life, all over the world, *La Nouvelle Terrebonne* is the only one she ever dreams about.

Of course, for a budding writer an enchanted space like that is very important. Stories don't need to be looked for; they are thick on the ground, in the air. But if that space is only chronologically a small part of your childhood, then you must also find stories wherever you are. And that's how a writer's mind works—you see stories everywhere. Back in Sydney we might be more restricted than in the village but there were still lots of magical stories to be found, even within our small radius. Coming home from school we passed a house on the corner that was covered in vines and creepers, its garden full of



roses. A couple of elderly sisters owned it and often in the afternoons they were out in the garden wearing flowery, flowing dresses and girlish hats. One had dyed her hair lilac, the other pale blue; to me they looked just like the good fairies in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* film, and we used to call their place the 'Sleeping Beauty house'. Or there was the old lady who lived in the block of flats next to our house. Her late husband had been something important in India and her beautiful apartment was crammed with such things as a jewelled sword and a whole family of carved ivory elephants arranged in a row, from the large to the tiny. Once she took us for a ride in her ancient, magnificent Rolls Royce which scarcely ever poked its nose out of the garage. Though she was a tiny woman, she navigated the roads with great aplomb, sitting on a cushion at the wheel of the vast car that to me felt like a royal carriage in a picture book.

I was always doing that as a child—transforming the world with the 'language of astonishment'. It didn't even need to be as glamorous as a Rolls Royce or a fairytale garden to be turned into something magical. That technique I'd learned, abstracting myself into imagination, came in very handy indeed—in maths lessons, long sermons, school assemblies, on unwanted bushwalks at the Blue Mountains block my parents bought and just hanging around at home on a rainy day. My sister Camille said to me once that what she most remembers of her childhood is being bored and that amazes me because boredom is something I don't associate in the least with my childhood—many other emotions, yes, but boredom, never. I was on journeys all the time in my mind, whether in books written by other people or in my own stories and daydreams, always escaping into other worlds...

As a child, though, the fact that even in reality I lived in two worlds—a French one at home, an Australian one at school—did not strike me as unusual, intriguing, or weird. It was just what life was like. I spoke in French to my parents, *frangarou* to my siblings and my diary and English to my classmates and the exercise book I kept for my stories. I didn't wonder at it, back then. I just switched effortlessly without thinking about it, just like the child Alyosha in *Le Testament français*. Yes, there were certain things I didn't like about the times when these worlds collided, when our sandwiches were different from our classmates' or the truly cringe-making experience of the teacher picking me out of the class, saying to the rest of them, 'Sophie's native language isn't even English and she writes it better than any of you!' Yes, I might dream of having blond hair as well as magic powers (one of the characters I created as

a child, Princess Alicia, had both!) but mostly the differences didn't worry me. I was simply hardly even aware I was different. Was I French? Was I Australian? I didn't know and didn't care. At home my parents were always enjoining us never to forget we were French; at school we were always having it reinforced that this was Australia. At home my parents sometimes talked about 'Anglo-Saxons' in disparaging terms; outside the home you sometimes heard disparaging—or conversely, adoring—remarks about the French, both of which surprised and confused me. But it didn't really cause any conflict in me; as a child, it just seemed like one of those boring things that adults thought about but I didn't. My mother would sometimes say, 'Why are you always writing make-believe stuff? Why not write about what you know?' but I had no interest at all in writing about my actual experiences which to me were much too humdrum. Even if I was writing about the 'real' world it was always set in places I'd read about, never in places where I'd actually lived.

That all changed in my teens. I still loved fantasy but went from wanting to write dashing adventure tales to dreamy meditations and mystical poetry that tried to express everything I felt about the mysteries of life. But I also became intensely self-conscious about the two worlds I lived in every day and became aware that it wasn't 'usual'. I started questioning. Rebellious. And that meant challenging my parents, because this was the school culture—the cool Aussie teen culture I really wanted to belong to in those years. Like Alyosha in *Le Testament français* I really wanted to 'expiate my marginality' in the merciless 'mini-society' of adolescence. So I read mostly in English, at least where I could be seen, and my diary and my stories were always written in English though I didn't quite dare speak to my parents in anything other than French. When we went back to France on holidays, I took to calling myself 'Australian' in response to the sardonic jokes of my relatives who took all this teenage hoity-toitying much less seriously than my parents did.

And I laboured incessantly to keep my worlds strictly apart, impermeable to each other, an effort constantly frustrated by my father's mischievous antics: for instance, I remember mortifying expeditions to the beach in the early morning—avoiding the very hot sun—and Dad, wearing on his head a clean but very shabby handkerchief knotted at the corners, speaking loudly to us in front of the surfies I'd hoped to impress, and who would then, I just knew, dismiss us as a bunch of ridiculous wogs. And both of my parents always refused to bow to our pressures to hide their 'Frenchness' and reinvent

themselves as Australians, ‘New’ or otherwise. Stiff-necked in their pride and determined to teach us a lesson in identity they made us, instead, toe the line and they refused to change.

But at school it wasn’t always plain sailing either. Occasionally my wish to belong ran ‘smack bang’ up against visceral feelings such as in the mid-70’s when there was one of those periodic anti-French-nuclear-testing episodes which pepper the memories of many French-Australians. Just as in the 90’s the whole issue was personalised in a quite inappropriate way and some local French people were targeted with things such as mail bans and rude comments in the papers that appeared to make no distinction between an attack on French Government policy and on the French themselves. My parents were up in arms and, though I shared my school friends’ anti-nuclear stand, it stuck sharply in my throat that we should be targeted in this way and that even people I liked thought it OK to make sweeping generalisations about French people. But that was a rare if uncomfortable episode. Mostly it wasn’t the fact of being French that caused me any angst; it was more a case of not being ‘mainstream’. Being a ‘frog’ was rather better than being a ‘wog’—there were many more romantic clichés attached to it—but most people, except for those who knew us personally, thought we were ‘wogs’ anyway because of our olive skin and dark hair. But, though I tried so hard to be a real Aussie, I began to see after a while that there were advantages in my unusual situation. Adolescence is often the time when budding writers, bilingual or not, first learn that the storyteller has a special place, even amongst the cool groups, even amongst the scary types. And the skills they learn in the jungle of adolescent society not only help them to survive it but can also be carried right through into adult life and the honing of the writer’s craft. And so I soon realised that quite a lot of my schoolmates were actually interested in France and Frenchness. To them, it was a glamorous other world and they never tired of hearing stories about it and our periodic disappearances there. I began by recounting fairly straightforward stories of our holidays, of people we knew, of the family and then I expanded and embroidered, taking in stories I’d read and ‘remembering all kinds of things that hadn’t happened’, as my husband comments. I wrote a good deal of it down too. And, as it does for Alyosha, France became for me material for storytelling and gave me an unexpected cachet amongst my peers, especially in the last two or three years of high school when peer-group

pressure is towards individualism and not melting into the mass as it is in early adolescence.

But it also led me to write not only about France but about my life in Australia too—and not to focus only on myself. I started keeping voluminous notebooks of observations of people I knew or had briefly come across or seen from the windows of the train on my way to school. I imagined how their lives might proceed in the future. I wrote down columns of descriptions of places and objects because the sensual world I'd observed so closely in childhood, through a fantastical prism, became ever more sharply important to me as a teenager. Going on several holidays to northern NSW—my first real contact with rural Australia outside of the books I'd read—I was utterly fascinated by its village life. At sixteen I wrote an impressionistic short story called 'Sketches' about the lives of people in one small timber-milling village. To me that place was as exotic as something I'd read about in John Steinbeck's novels or Chekhov's plays but it also had an odd familiarity, not only because it was Australia but also because of its occasional, unexpected similarities with rural France and the village we'd known. Yet there wasn't a single mention of France in this story and I didn't bring in my own experience at all. This setting was rich material for the 'language of astonishment' and it's one of the things I wrote at that age which still remains with me. Indeed, 'Sketches' eventually morphed into my very first novel, *The House in the Rainforest*.

Was I French? Was I Australian? I still wasn't entirely sure, despite my efforts to fit in. But I wouldn't have answered at that point as I might have done in childhood, 'Who cares?'. I *did* care. Part of me wanted to reject France, to pretend I could only speak English. But another part refused point-blank. It was all part of the painful chrysalis process of adolescence. Every teenager asks 'Who am I?'. In my case, like that of so many others, it was complicated by the fact of those two worlds, that's all. And, as I wrote my way through mystical Celtic-flavoured poetry and Steinbeckian realism and French fancies and Russian-inspired sagas, I was also making my way through those questions without even knowing it. When I left home soon after leaving school—the strains between my two worlds had become too much—I took the big step of becoming an Australian citizen, something that my parents, who did not come as migrants but on work contracts, had never encouraged. It caused a stir in the family. I was deemed to have chosen, to have turned my back on France (though I still had my French citizenship.) I knew they'd see it that way

though consciously I'd never intended it. But unconsciously? I don't know. It was confusing, and all mixed up with the fights I'd had with my parents, or more particularly, my father, over our very different expectations about my post-school life. But leaving home actually meant moving in with my eldest sister Dominique who had come to Australia after she'd finished university. And she was much more French than I was, because she had spent her entire adolescence and early adulthood in France. Living with her I couldn't have escaped from the French side of me even if I'd tried! Not only that but I'd become very interested in languages generally—not only did I enrol in French at university, but also in a range of 'English literature' subjects which in fact weren't English at all—Middle Welsh, Old Norse sagas and Anglo-Saxon studies. All, as you will note, fodder for the 'fantasy' side of me, the side that also sent me to weekly Irish classes at the Gaelic Club in Surry Hills. They were also fodder for that 'language of astonishment'—the writing voice I was groping towards.

So I went to Uni, patchily, and to work, patchily too, and wrote and wrote, very assiduously. At school I'd never really tried to send anything out. Now I began blizzarding magazines and newspapers with ideas, outlines, finished pieces. I pestered my sister and her friends to read my work and offer advice. I borrowed umpteen books on how to get published and sent my verse to poets whom I'd read at school and admired—A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, and later, Les Murray. I will always be grateful for the generosity with which they responded to the naïve young enthusiast with her palimpsest poetry, modelled on ancient forms. A.D. Hope in particular went way beyond the call of duty, critiquing lines and giving advice, not just once, but three times. That was an important experience—my first exposure to the idea of a community of writers and of the continuity of literature, too, as older, more experienced and sophisticated writers pass on hints and encouragement to a new generation. It's something I've been mindful of myself, passing on those things, as my status has changed over the decades from 'emerging' to 'established' and I get letters—or rather, emails, these days—from naïve newbies myself.

But it took years, many more years than I'd have cared to imagine, from beginning as an impatient eighteen year old, with the occasional short piece in a student newspaper or the occasional poem in a local magazine, through to short stories being accepted for magazines, newspapers and anthologies and then the many rejections of the first two novels I wrote, to that magic moment

when I got the letter which told me that an editor actually wanted my book. Lightning struck twice for me that year for only a few months after getting that letter I received a second, from a different publisher, accepting another of my novels. Both were published the same year, in 1990.

The first was *The House in the Rainforest*, a very realistic Australian drama with not a skerrick of Frenchness in it; the other was *Fire in the Sky*, my first children's novel which combined my love of fantasy and history and which, from the start, melded France and Australia, past and present, as a modern French-Australian family is confronted through a time-slip with events in medieval south-west France. Domi and Tad in that novel have elements of myself at their respective ages—pre-pubertal, enthusiastic Domi, who doesn't think or care about questions of belonging and surly, frustrated teenage Tad, who's uneasy in his own skin. But Kate in the first novel, though her background is nothing like mine, does carry elements of my life, especially that after leaving home. By the time I wrote those books in my late 20's I still had not answered that abiding question—was I French or was I Australian? But it no longer preoccupied me as it had done in adolescence. It wasn't that I didn't care as had been the case back in childhood. It was just that I'd decided it was a lesser question than the ones that had become much more important to me. Was I really a writer? Did I really have an original voice that people would want to listen to? Or was I just kidding myself again?

Being published, especially with two such different books in the very first year, settled those questions very satisfactorily indeed! But some of the reactions to those first books also re-opened the old questions of identity. My background was mentioned in reviews and, as time went on and more of my books for young people were published, they started appearing on lists of multicultural children's literature. I was asked to speak at conferences on 'writing from another culture' and asked questions about what it was like to write in a language that wasn't your mother tongue. And I found myself both welcoming and resenting these things. Just as in those long-ago primary school classrooms I hated to be hauled out in front of everyone as some kind of specimen. I squirmed at awards ceremonies focussing on 'multiculturalism', feeling I was getting stuck in a ghetto. But equally I didn't want to pretend that it didn't matter at all, that I'd come to this country without any English. Meanwhile, going back to France periodically, as I continued to do as an adult,

meant that I could not clothe that part of my identity in either a rosy glow or a black veil but had to deal with its reality.

Slowly, I came to grips with the idea that I was simply a hybrid. The answer to the question, Was I French? Was I Australian? was: *both. And neither.* I was part of an ‘in-between’ stage, unlike my parents and my children. And I probably always would be. My parents never thought of being Australian; my children were naturally so. Though they acknowledged their heritage, it did not trouble them at all. It still did trouble me, a little. I was glad of my acceptance in Australia<sup>2</sup>—as time went on and my books grew ever more varied in scope and genre, the ‘multicultural’ tag was no longer automatically attached to them—but I longed for my books to be published in French, in France. But that did not happen for many, many years: it appeared that although French publishers were mildly interested in Australian fiction, it was only of the kind that was ‘exotic’ i.e. recognisably Aussie. An author with a French name writing in English about *frangarous* like Domi and Tad, or even a ‘true blue’ like Kate in *The House in the Rainforest*, was clearly not high on the agenda. Perhaps it was confusing. Perhaps it was deemed not exotic enough. In any case it wasn’t until 2010 that a book of mine appeared in French. And even then it was one I’d written under the pseudonym of Isabelle Merlin! But by then things had changed for me, and instead of being troubled by this as I might once have been, I found it amusing because the last trace of my self-consciousness had quite gone.

It’s one thing to feel you’ve answered a question. It’s quite another to feel comfortable with the answer. When I first read *Le Testament français* back in 1995 I had already accepted the fact of my hybridity but I still wanted somehow to pin it down, analyse it, worry at it. Makine’s novel, with its extraordinary evocation of the essence of bilingualism and how it affects a budding writer, struck deep echoes in me because it linked those questions—the bilingual identity, the writer’s identity—and answered them with great simplicity and yet great depth. At the very end of the novel, in a spine-tingling and pitch-perfect twist, Alyosha discovers something about his mother that will not only show the past in a new light but will also propel him into the real discovery and mastery of the ‘language of astonishment’ by exploring that past and making it live again. The novel ends with the words: ‘*Seuls me*

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of going to press the Editors have learnt that Sophie Masson has been elected President of the Australian Society of Authors.

*manquaient encore les mots qui pouvaient le dire*' (Makine, 309).<sup>3</sup> And as the young man, on the cusp of becoming a writer, walked out of the pages and into this reader's memory, I knew that was precisely what had happened to me as a young writer. I had gone looking for those words and *I had found them*. And ever since then that knowledge has been with me. I don't need to labour those questions of identity any more. The 'language of astonishment' has become my native tongue.

*Armida*

## Reference

Makine, Andreï, 1995, *Le Testament français*, Paris, Mercure de France.

## Sophie Masson — Selected Works

### BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

#### Historical novels

*The Hunt for Ned Kelly*, Sydney, Scholastic Press, 2010.

*The Phar Lap Mystery*, Sydney, Scholastic Press, 2010.

*My Father's War*, Sydney, Scholastic Press, 2011.

#### The Chronicles of El Jisal series

*Snow, Fire, Sword*, Sydney, Random House, 2004.

*The Curse of Zohreh*, Sydney, Random House, 2005.

*The Tyrant's Nephew*, Sydney, Random House, 2006.

*The Maharajah's Ghost*, Sydney, Random House, 2007.

#### The Thomas Trew series

*Thomas Trew and the Hidden People*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2006.

*Thomas Trew and the Klint-King's Gold*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2006.

*Thomas Trew and the Horns of Pan*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2007.

*Thomas Trew and the Selkie's Curse*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2007.

*Thomas Trew and the Flying Huntsman*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2007.

*Thomas Trew and the Island of Ghosts*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2008.

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<sup>3</sup> Only the words with which I could express it were still missing [transl. by editor].



**The Shakespearean collection**

*Cold Iron*, Sydney, Hodder, 1998.

*The Tempestuous Voyage of Hopewell Shakespeare*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2003.

*Malvolio's Revenge*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2005.

*The Madman of Venice*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2009.

*The Understudy's Revenge*, Sydney, Scholastic Press, 2011.

**The Seyrac family series**

*The Opera Club*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1993.

*The Cousin from France*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1993.

*Winter in France*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1994.

*The Secret*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1996.

*Family Business*, Sydney, Hodder, 2000.

**The fairytale selection**

*Carabas*, Sydney, Hodder, 1996.

*Clementine*, Sydney, Hodder, 1999.

*The Green Prince*, Sydney, Hodder, 2000.

*The Firebird*, Sydney, Hodder, 2001.

*In Hollow Lands*, London, Hodder Children's Books, 2004.

Forthcoming: *The Boggle Hunters*, Sydney, Scholastic Press, 2012.

**A selection of mystery novels**

*Illusion*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1997.

*The Tiger*, Sydney, Harper Collins, 1998.

*The Hand of Glory*, Sydney, Hodder, 2002.

*The Secret Army: Operation Loki*, Sydney, ABC Books, 2006.

*The Case of the Diamond Shadow*, Sydney, ABC Books, 2008.

**Short novels**

*Birds of a Feather*, Melbourne, Mammoth, 1996.

*The Troublemaker*, Sydney, Hodder, 1997.

*Green Eyes*, Sydney, Hodder, 1998.

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**Short selection of other titles for young people**

*Fire in the Sky*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1990.

*Sooner or Later*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1991.

*A Blaze of Summer*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1992.

*The Sun is Rising*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1996.

*The Gifting*, Sydney, Harper Collins, 1996.

*Red City*, Sydney, Harper Collins, 1998.

## **BOOKS FOR ADULTS**

### **As Sophie Masson**

*The House in the Rainforest*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1990.

*The Hoax*, Minerva, Sydney, Random House, 1997.

*Forest of Dreams*, Sydney, Random House, 2001.

*Walking in the Garden of the Mind* (essays and short stories), Adelaide, Altair Publishing, 2005.

### **As Isabelle Merlin**

*Three Wishes*, Sydney, Random House, 2008.

*Pop Princess*, Sydney, Random House, 2009.

*Cupid's Arrow*, Sydney, Random House, 2009.

*Bright Angel*, Sydney, Random House, 2010.

*Paul, Charlie et Rose*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2010