

Translator Julie Rose wins the '2018 Australian Academy of the Humanities *Medal for Excellence in Translation*'¹

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Internationally renowned translator Julie Rose was recently awarded the '2018 Australian Academy of the Humanities *Medal for Excellence in Translation*' for her translation of *Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds* by Philippe Paquet, published by La Trobe University Press and Black Inc. (Melbourne).



¹ The Australian Academy of the Humanities was established by Royal Charter in 1969 to advance scholarship and public interest in the humanities in Australia. It operates as an independent not-for-profit organisation partly funded by the Australian government.

The Australian Academy of the Humanities *Medal for Excellence in Translation* is a major national award that recognises outstanding achievement in translation and the vital role of translators and translation in Australian culture and scholarly discourse. It is awarded biennially for a book-length translation into English of a work of any genre (including scholarship), from any language and period.

Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds is a translation of Philippe Paquet's biography of the late Belgium-born writer, essayist, literary critic and sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (pen-name Simon Leys) who was born in Belgium and settled in Australia in 1970. He taught Chinese literature at the Australian National University and was Professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney from 1987 to 1993. He died in 2014. Writing in three languages—French, Chinese and English—Simon Leys played an important political role in revealing the true nature of the Cultural Revolution. His writing on China and on varied literary and cultural topics appeared regularly in the *New York Review of Books*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, *Quadrant* and *The Monthly*, and his books include *The Hall of Uselessness*, *The Death of Napoleon*, *Other People's Thoughts*, *The Wreck of the Batavia* and *Prosper*. In 1996 he delivered the ABC's Boyer Lectures. His many awards include the Prix Renaudot, the Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca, the Prix Guizot and the Christina Stead Prize for fiction. He was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

In 2016, the biography by Philippe Paquet, *Simon Leys : Navigateur entre les mondes*, was published by Gallimard to wide acclaim and won several prizes, including an award from the Académie Française. The book draws on extensive correspondence with Ryckmans, as well as his unpublished writings. Philippe Paquet is a Belgian journalist and sinologist. He was president of the Society of Editors of *La Libre Belgique* from 1997 to 2007. He is a lecturer at the Free University of Brussels and at the Higher Institute of Translators and Interpreters. His previous biography, *Madame Chiang Kai-shek: A Century of Chinese History*, won several literary prizes.

The foreword to *Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds* was written by Julian Barnes who writes, among other things, of coming to know Simon Leys through reading *The Death of Napoleon (La mort de Napoléon)*, Leys's only novel, translated into English by the author himself with Australian translator, Patricia Clancy, and published in 2015. (This translation won prizes in both the UK and Australia.)

The judges of the 2018 Academy of the Humanities translation award, Professor Brian Nelson FAHA (Chair), Professor Bonnie McDougall FAHA and Mr Peter Boyle, were deeply impressed by the ‘dexterity, clarity, crispness, wit, syntactic versatility, rhythmic subtlety and verbal range of Rose’s translation’. Chair Brian Nelson remarked that ‘Julie Rose’s translation of Philippe Paquet’s acclaimed biography, *Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds*, is a massive achievement—literally (664 pages), but also, and chiefly, because of the exceptional skill of the translation... Rose’s task was not simply to translate the urbane, elegant prose of Paquet, but also the subtle, witty voice of Simon Leys/Pierre Ryckmans and the various styles he employed in diverse writings at different stages of his life, as well as the voices of the numerous French authors quoted in the text (Victor Hugo, Raymond Queneau, Roland Barthes, etc.). To sustain such a high level of attentiveness and skill over so many pages is remarkable’.

Julie Rose has translated over forty books and plays from French to English, in a career that has included teaching French language and literature and interpreting in Paris for top-level foreign delegations. She has worked in the print media as a writer and critic and in theatre and film as a dramaturg and script editor and brings an innate understanding of drama to her work as a translator of some of France’s most highly-prized writers, both classical and contemporary: Racine, Molière, Victor Hugo (with the world’s first fully original unexpurgated English translation of *Les Misérables*), Alexandre Dumas père, André Schwarz-Bart, André Gorz (of *Letter to D: A Love Story* fame), cultural critic Paul Virilio, Jacques Rancière, Chantal Thomas, Hubert Damisch, Bruno Latour and many more. Critics have commented on the ‘musicality’ of her work, its ‘precision’ and ‘force’.

A recent achievement for Rose was her 2008 translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (Random House, New York and Vintage London); hers was the first unabridged translation of the book. She has said that translating Hugo was ‘a major highlight’ of her translation career. It took her three years and three drafts to bring the translation to completion. In her own words: ‘I always do three drafts of anything, but usually race through the first to seize the tempo, the rhythm, the unique music of the piece. Of course, that wasn’t possible here. But the slower pace gave me time to really wrestle Hugo to the ground—every word and every comma—and then pick him up again and dance’.

In a 2009 interview with Ron Hogan (Beatrice.com), Rose spoke of the variety of the works she has translated—Hugo, Gorz, Rey, Ciment, Virilio, Rancière—‘writerly biodiversity in action’. ‘Such a list presents vast differences in style, emotional register and temperament, context and resonance and intellectual tone—all those qualities that go to make the thing we call “voice”. Some people talk about texture, flavour, music, taste, colour. These are all sensory metaphors for the same thing. I prefer to call it “voice” to suggest the theatricality not only of the embodiment of personality in writing in the first place, but the whole performance of re-embodiment that the process of translation entails. Translation is rewriting—as someone you imagine the writer to be. A writer’s “voice” in this sense is as unique as the thing produced by their vocal chords, no matter how codified shared language and the rules of writing might be. It is “voice” that a translator worth her salt is always trying to mimic. Translation as an art is an art of listening that means getting into “character” and staying there, convincingly, from start to finish. In so doing, of course, you produce your very own distinct voice, with its very own timbres and energies. Which is one reason why re-translating is a potentially endless field. The original text stands immutable, but its potential translations are potentially infinite.’

Rose had never read *Les Misérables* before translating it and says that this helped her keep going, especially with the first draft, as the need to know what happens was a great motivator. ‘I raced toward the finishing line on that first draft (and sobbed mightily when I got there), revelling in what turns out to be a gripping page-turner of a thriller embedded in a much larger work about everything, written with equally compelling exuberance and gusto—and sheer delight in language.’

‘Keeping pace with the great Victor also meant walking for miles every day with my dog Poppy, rain, hail or shine, much like Hugo himself. It also took three other major translations—all Virilios—as I found I couldn’t go on without a few breaks from the blazing intensity of Hugo’s prose.’

‘That prose, which Rimbaud once described as “pure poetry”, was a shock. Far from faded, stale, overblown—the things I’d feared—it felt amazingly fresh, sharp, even modern in its often staccato thrust. The muscularity of Hugo’s rhythms, the endless tonal and discursive shifts, all handled with virtuoso ease, the prescience and brilliance and even, at times, sheer bizarreness—and occasional corniness, such is Hugo’s greatness—were a downright tonic.’

When asked to talk about her recent experience translating *Simon Leys: Navigator Between Worlds*, Julie Rose replied: ‘For me, translation is an intuitive art. Philippe Paquet’s bio. of Simon Leys is a case in point. It was an absolute joy to do, with so many different voices to “catch”, as Leys might have said. The most challenging was the voice, the many voices, of Leys himself, from the gifted schoolboy with a taste for Conrad and art, to the indignant young man appalled by the colonial situation he finds in the Congo, through all the stages of his wonderful polyglot life, including private emails and letters, and many works never before translated into English. It’s worth remembering that Leys was himself a very fine translator. He later reckoned 50% of his creative output consisted of translations; his very first published book was a translation—into French—of a Chinese classic (he managed to do it sailing home to Europe from Asia on a cargo boat: it was all adventure to Leys, sailing, translating...); translation was so important to him, he actually translated Confucius’s *Analects* twice, the first time into French, the second into English, ten years later.’

‘If ever anyone had an ear for the sound of words, it was Leys. For my money, it all starts and ends with rhythm: the signature music of every piece of writing. The shape and cadences of sentences, the tonal colour and variation, the breathing, the pace and particular energy—all these things have to be “heard” and reproduced if you’re going to sound as close to the original as you can. This will rarely mean reproducing syntax exactly—even languages as close as French and English have such different syntactical habits. So you bring all those hard-to-define qualities to the job, intuition, intelligence, a feel for music (crucial, I think), a gift for mimicry... All serious translators call on these things, always.’

As well as winning the 2018 Australian Academy of the Humanities Gold Medal, Julie Rose has received the PEN medallion for translation, the New South Wales Premier’s Translation Prize and was shortlisted for the 2008 French-American Foundation Florence Gould Translation Prize for *Les Misérables*. In 2016 the French Government named her *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

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