

## Book Reviews

**Marie Darrieussecq**, *Crossed Lines (La mer à l'envers)*, translated by Penny Hueston, Melbourne, Text Publishing, September 2020, 304 pp., rrp AU\$ 32.99, ISBN 978-1-91123-134-9.

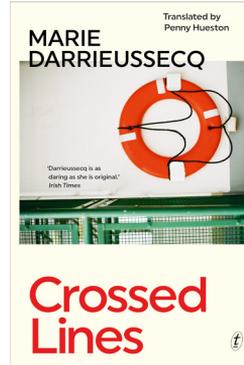
Rose Goyenette has accepted a gift from her mother, to take her two children on a cruise, escaping her difficult patients and her husband who drinks too much. This is where we meet Rose, aboard a luxury cruise ship, the floating capitalist hotel where she disdains her fellow passengers while embracing its universe, enjoying its champagne, sending her daughter to the kids' club and musing on its surreal nature. One night, while the children are asleep, the ship comes across a boat in distress. The boat is full of migrants. Rose tries to help, distributing coffee, blankets and clothes, which is where she meets Younès, a young migrant from Niger, who reminds her of her son. Their hands touch and she feels a familiar 'ping' of connection. In an unguarded moment, she takes her son's iPhone and gives it to Younès, who, along with all the other migrants, is taken away by the coast guards' vessel early the next morning. But their unexplained connection—and the iPhone—ensure their ongoing involvement.

We have met Rose and her friend Solange in earlier novels, *Men (Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes)*, 2013) and *All the Way (Clèves)*, 2011). As well as these familiar characters, there's a lot of Marie herself too, despite Darrieussecq's claim that her only autobiographical novel is *Le bébé (The Baby)*, 2002). Marie is a psychoanalyst, Rose is a psychologist, both come from the Basque country and have second homes there, both have striking, plausibly Basque surnames and both contend with their middle-class privileges—Darrieussecq fled Paris for her Basque home during the Covid-19 lockdown and wrote a diary from there. As for the alcoholic but well-meaning husband, auto-immune-suffering daughter and aspiring-writer son, these seem to have been created just for Rose.

*Crossed Lines* is set against a backdrop of the migrant crisis, people dying in treacherous sea and ocean crossings, the Calais jungle and the general dis-ease of the stark inequalities between the global north and south. It is a difficult backdrop, and the well-meaning Rose isn't given an easy ride.

## Crossed Lines (La mer à l'envers)

She wants to do good, but she has limits. She has her own family, safety, money and career to take care of. Back in Paris, Younès calls, but she doesn't pick up, scared of what truly helping might mean.



Marie Darrieussecq, photo by Hélène Bamberger

Eventually Rose answers his call and drives from Clèves in the south of France, where she has moved from Paris, to Calais, where he is injured, having fallen from a lorry trying to make the crossing. She takes him to convalesce in the south, integrating him into her family and village. Rose is no heroine, however. She is an interesting character, but certainly not likeable. She wants to help this poor migrant, but she also finds herself getting annoyed when she finds out that his mother has a smart phone and can send videos too and that their family has a caretaker back in Niger. How typecast do we want our migrants? She has the ugly realisation that part of her wishes he were more impoverished.

Her new age healing powers increase throughout the novel as she practises some kind of reiki on Younès, but she never reaches any kind of reckoning with what she's really participating in. Her son grows irritable with her glossing over of the ills of the world, as if her act of salvation will absolve all. Yet again, she is upset when Younès starts to settle in and establishes his own room and privacy, offended that she has to knock on his door, as if having lifted him from Calais should allow her complete ownership of his being. When her rich-and-famous best friend Solange (whom she seems secretly to detest) offers financial help, her first thought is how Solange seems always to take for herself what little Rose has. She *has* Younès. She *has* his story.

Darrieussecq does not trespass into Younès' past too far. Perhaps by humility or the impossibility of knowing what a plausible migration story would entail, she sketches his past and his journey briefly, which is fine yet this leaves his character quite thin and his superstitious insistence on Rose's healing abilities comes off with a hint of exoticism.

The narrative has a staccato rhythm, flowing fast in parts and tarrying in others. One section starts 'Now we're in the future...', another 'Ten years later...', which might appear a little lazy. However, the voice that Penny Hueston has created for Darrieussecq is gaining consistency now that she has translated a number of this author's novels into English. I think Darrieussecq benefits from a single translator, especially since her narrators and protagonists often return. While Rose becomes quite antipodean in her vernacular, this perhaps makes her more approachable and knowable for her Australian readers.

The French title, *La mer à l'envers* plays on the homonym of *mer*—sea and *mère*—mother, and *envers*—upside down and *en vers*—in verse. There's also the internal rhyme of *mer* and *envers*, which makes the French title read as if it were a saying or a truism. The English title, while inevitably losing all of this and decentring both the mother and the sea, makes up for it in other ways. We are asked to think more about the notion of frontiers, boundaries and limits between countries, languages, bodies, jurisdictions. Darrieussecq—and Hueston also—urge us to contemplate crossing not just migratory lines, but ethical, moral and personal borders and to think about how lives overlap and intersect, sometimes blindly and silently, but other times, with life-changing consequences.

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**Andréas Pfersmann and Titaua Porcher (guest editors), *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, vol. 37, nos 1 & 2, ' Littérature et politique en Océanie', Palmerston North, N.Z. (Department of Modern Languages, Massey University), 2019, ISSN 0110-7380.**

This 2019 double-issue of the *New Zealand Journal of French Studies* performs a unifying task in French-speaking Océanie for the purposes

of comparison and in the process contributes to Franco-British studies in this region. The topic of literature and politics in Océanie is vast, and it is a tribute to the authors that there is a good cohesion and logic to the volume, beginning with a *Présentation* by Andréas Pfersmann and Titaua Porcher which brings together the French cultures of the South Pacific—New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii and French Polynesia—as well as other English-speaking and local linguistic and postcolonial influences. The authors tease apart the different, often revolutionary, influences, asking questions around the role of the political in artistic life. Through theatre, poem, song and novel, proximity in itself becomes a political influence for the artist, because environment involves not only geography but people, property and agency. In this way the culture of the many islands is woven into a complex story of hope, that extends beyond the physical landscapes to include the emotional history of individuals and families as portrayed in literature, and represented (or not as the case may be) by the politics.

There are nine articles in this double issue of the *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*. The editors' goal is to present a 'perspective comparatiste' (a comparative perspective) and Peter Brown sets the scene looking at theatre in the Antipodes. He suggests that theatre has moved in two centuries from being an idle art of the aristocracy, to becoming the centre of popular artistic engagement in Australia.

Starting with Rousseau's *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, the author seriously risks underplaying the role of dramatists prior to the twentieth century. Much of the French revolutionary literature, such as the plays of Marie-Joseph Chénier or the novels of Year X (1802), represent the same kind of socio-politically-motivated literature found today and what is striking are the similarities between the artistic productions of that period and the authors presented here. Being non-conformist in an 'engagé' if not revolutionary way is at the heart of (French) literature and Peter Brown further shows that Australian theatre is at risk of being in a 'conceptual muddle' over questions that spark active public discourse. He shows that a form of passive censorship, arguably as restrictive as the legal variant of the Ancien Regime, operates, 'favouring commercial success over social responsibility'. The historical politics of this argument are set out by Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, in *The History Wars* (Melbourne University Press, 2003).

The depth of the discussion and the links between old world and new, northern and southern hemisphere are further explored through ku‘ualoha ho‘omanawanui’s article on women’s poetry in Hawaii and Jean Anderson’s masterful chapter on the *roman d’apprentissage* or *Bildungsroman*. Themes of domestic violence and alcoholism show how blurred the frontiers really are between the socio-political and literary themes in ‘stories of maladaptation to modern ways of life’. This is followed by Mounira Chatti on the ‘roman kanak’, bringing out the need to explore the ‘conception kanak des choses’ in Déwé Gorodé. Odile Gannier takes over with the literature of Flora Devatine and the sense of othering that is expressed by authors like Albert Memmi trying to assert themselves in a pluralistic linguistic reality still dominated by the *langue française*. Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega and Sémir Al Wardi pose searching questions that dovetail seamlessly with the preceding chapters, and Titaua Porcher continues this section with an article entitled “‘L’autre histoire’ dans la fiction du Pacifique”, giving way to Andréas Pfersmann with a case study of anti-capitalism in the novel *Quand le cannibale ricane* by Paul Tavo. All provide fascinating insights into a world that is nuanced, hard to grasp from the outside, perhaps especially from the vantage point of the dominant culture.

In many ways the volume is an exploration of the extent to which the politics of the period has found its way into the artistic outputs not only as an expression of political revolt but as a validation of the (political) imaginary. This, on the one hand, links these literatures back to Western tradition and history, but it also allows the intellectual integrity of the individual author to shine through without need for comparison. Yet still, the question of comparison raises its head. If the *artiste* is sufficient *en soi* why compare the literary productions across geographic spaces if it is not to find a political *raison d’être* for their work?

The section ‘Parole des écrivains’ offers interviews and extracts from authors like Déwé Gorodé, who explores her ideas about culture and diversity—‘on devient parents avec ceux qui sont arrivés, avec les migrants, quelle que soit la raison qui les a amenés ici’ (‘we become parents to new arrivals, to migrants, whatever the reason they have come here’). ‘Parole des écrivains’ is an invaluable resource and should provide openings for future research into complex arguments regarding custom, migration and feminism in the contemporary world. This volume reminds us that we need

to keep asking whose politics is being relayed, and, how does the literature of the Pacific challenge the 'naïve realism' of the Western-educated reader?

If this issue is the final hard copy of the *New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, it is a celebration of everything that is best about studying a language for the sake of appreciating the cultural depth it brings—not only to those who speak the same language, but for those who hear, and have contact with, its sound. This volume illustrates that we are still struggling with very big issues in regard to barriers—personal, collective, linguistic and emotional—in the landscape of humanity and of French Studies to which this journal has made, and will continue to make, a vital contribution.

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**Edward Duyker, *Dumont d'Urville : L'homme et la mer (Dumont d'Urville: Explorer and Polymath)***, translated by Maryse Duyker and Anne Kehrig, Paris, Éditions du CTHS, May 2021, 600 pp., rrp 32,00 €, ISBN 978-2-73550-933-1.

In regard to the maritime exploration of Oceania, it is typically the voyages of the eighteenth century that come to mind and then, notably, the British voyages of James Cook. A wealth of literature tells the stories of these endeavours. Yet during the mid-nineteenth century French expeditions followed one upon the other in these waters. They refined and extended the charts produced by their Enlightenment predecessors, advanced European knowledge in science, and kindled French colonisation in the region. Rivalling the efforts of Cook, Dumont d'Urville (1790–1842) participated in three and led two of these expeditions, the third of which included Antarctica.

Edward Duyker's biography of Dumont d'Urville (2014) brought fresh attention to d'Urville in a detailed narrative. Revised and translated into French as *Dumont d'Urville : L'Homme et la Mer*, by Edward Duyker, Maryse Duyker and Ann Khreig, this work is now available to francophone readers. The French edition remains true to the original publication and, despite its multiple contributors, maintains a consistent voice.

This is an extensive biography, covering the life of d'Urville from his childhood in post-revolutionary France, through his marriage and his naval career, to his tragic death in the Versailles rail accident of May 1842. It advances on previous biographies by fleshing out details about d'Urville's family, life, and career with the use of original journals held by the municipality of Condé-sur-Noireau, letters seized from d'Urville's Paris apartment and held at the Archives nationales, and documents passed on through d'Urville's relations and now spread between the Service historique de la défense, Château de Vincennes, the Bibliothèque de Toulon, and the national archives in Vincennes. It is an extensively researched work.

D'Urville's life spanned a most tumultuous period in French history, encompassing the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Era, the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy. Correspondingly, Duyker shows that French politics considerably influenced and interested d'Urville. The explorer grew up in Normandy in a family of noble heritage, under 'austere' conditions (28). While he did not seem to have lost any loved ones to the guillotine, d'Urville's mother was for some time imprisoned for counter-revolutionary behaviour and association. D'Urville himself, by the time he had reached adulthood, presented himself as possessing a republican spirit, despite some 'enfantins préjugés', and apparently did not support Emperor Napoleon. He later bore witness in his journal to the events of the July Revolution, which brought about the overthrow of the Bourbon King Charles X and the ascent of Louis Philippe, Duc of Orléans. During the uprising he had joined the National Guard. Famously, it was d'Urville who was given responsibility for transporting Charles X into exile in England. Duyker avoids referring to d'Urville as a participant in the revolution but argues that he certainly was not a mere witness. D'Urville was, Duyker finds, a 'man of liberal political persuasion'.

The biography emphasises that, throughout these political upheavals, maritime exploration and scientific research remained important to France and became passions for Dumont d'Urville. A Mediterranean voyage aboard the *Chevette* provided d'Urville's first opportunity to play the part of expedition naturalist. In addition to botanical collecting, at the island of Milos d'Urville helped to acquire for France the ancient Greek statue of Aphrodite now known as the *Vénus de Milo* and housed in the Musée du Louvre. A previous claim that d'Urville misrepresented the circumstance

of the statue's discovery in an effort at self-aggrandisement is argued by Duyker to be an exaggeration. However, d'Urville did evidently work hard in general to gain promotion and further opportunities in scientific voyaging.

The largest portion of the biography is devoted to description of the organisation, on-board politics, and work of d'Urville's three Oceanic voyages. Duyker explains that the first expedition resulted from collaboration between d'Urville and his friend Louis-Isidore Duperrey. Aboard the *Coquille* (1822–1825) and in the position of first-lieutenant, under Duperrey's command, d'Urville visited the Society Islands, New Ireland, the Papuan and Moluccan Islands, New South Wales, New Zealand, the Carolines, West Papua and Java. During the homeward journey he wrote a novel based in New Zealand and New South Wales. According to Duyker, this was the 'beginning of his romance with Polynesia' (144). Upon his return to France, d'Urville wasted no time in putting his case forward for another Oceanic expedition, this time under his own command. He proposed to improve on the work of the *Coquille* mission and by December 1825, Duyker writes, 'the stage was set for d'Urville to show what he could do with almost identical resources as had been allocated to his rival three years before'. The *Coquille* was renamed the *Astrolabe* and visited south-western and south-eastern Australia, New Zealand, Tonga, Ambon, Tasmania, Guam, Batavia, Manado, Tikopia and Vanikoro (Solomon Islands). It was at Vanikoro that the expedition finally resolved the mystery of the La Pérouse expedition's fate. La Pérouse had last been seen leaving Botany Bay in 1788. D'Urville set sail for home from Vanikoro in order to report his discovery as soon as possible, 'determined to claim his share of the glory' (264).

King Louis-Philippe desired d'Urville to add an attempt at the South Pole to his plan and accordingly provided him two vessels for the voyage, the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélée*. This was a more ambitious voyage than France had undertaken for some time, with visits to Antarctica, Mangareva (Gambier Islands), the Marquesas, Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, the Solomon Islands, the Caroline Islands, Guam, the Moluccan Islands, northern Australia, West Papua, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Tasmania, New Zealand and the Torres Strait Islands. It was also notable for the fact that it carried a civilian scientist, phrenologist Pierre-Marie-Alexandre Dumoutier. Duyker explains that d'Urville had a keen interest in phrenology. In the end, Duyker demonstrates that this last voyage was characterised by significant results—

notably in the discovery of Terre Adélie in Antarctica and the anthropological collection—as well as exhaustion and colonial politics. Had he lived longer, Duyker asserts, d'Urville would have retired to Toulon after completing his work from this expedition.

This account seems intended more to provide a biography that is as detailed as possible than to advance an interpretation of d'Urville and his accomplishments. Duyker sketches d'Urville's life in panoramic style, inviting his readers onto the ships and beaches, inside the apartments, and into the conversations d'Urville experienced. The research results of d'Urville's voyages are described as they occurred, with particular attention to botany, ethnography, and languages—areas of especial interest to the explorer—not in tallies, overall privileging narrative above analysis. Along the way, despite the stated objective 'd'éclairer certains aspects de la vie et de la carrière de l'explorateur' (9), a certain portrayal of d'Urville himself naturally comes through. Duyker describes the explorer as ambitious, generous, gentle, democratic, a humanist who believed in 'l'unité fondamentale de l'espèce humaine' (10), despite the occasional 'empreint de racisme' evaluations, and a voracious reader; in fact, the biography devotes an appendix of fifteen pages to a description of d'Urville's library. This French edition of the biography may have benefited from further attention to similar French studies of d'Urville; however, Duyker's extensive primary research gives interesting insights into the personal and public life of this explorer.

*Dumont d'Urville : l'homme et la mer* brings Australian scholarship to the francophone historiography of a significant French figure and the worlds he traversed. It should serve as a useful source of biographical information not only on d'Urville himself but on the many people he encountered in his personal and professional life—everyday French men and women, members of the navy, colonists, explorers, and Oceanic Islanders—as well as on the travails and accomplishments of French scientific expeditions in the nineteenth century, and the history of France and Oceania during this period.

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**Katherine Johnson, *Paris Savages***, Ventura Press, Edgecliff, NSW, 2019, 361 pp., rrp AU\$ 32.99, ISBN 978-1-92538-470-3.

The phenomenon of ‘human zoos’, ethnographic displays or, in German, *Völkerschauen*, that became popular across Europe and America from the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century into the 1930s, has become the object of academic and broader interest since the turn of the century. The study by Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (2004), is a notable example. It is estimated that during this period, the shows, that often included exotic animals, attracted over a billion spectators to view some 35,000 ‘performers’.

In *Paris Savages*, Katherine Johnson takes as the basis for her largely fictionalised account, one such touring group, the three Badtjala/Butchulla people, Bonangera (Bonny), Jurano and Dorondera, who were taken from Fraser Island (off the coast of Queensland) in 1882 to tour Europe. From what little is known of the experiences and fate of this group, Johnson has constructed a rich and moving narrative that explores the diverse motivations of those involved in the tour: the deceptions practised by the tour organiser, the German engineer resident on Fraser Island, Louis Müller; his daughter Hilda’s gradual disillusionment with her father; the strength and determination of Bonny, whose motive for undertaking the tour is to see the Queen, in order to petition her on behalf of his people. The Fraser Island group was brought to Europe by Carl Hagenbeck, whose reputation is represented as somewhat more nuanced than that of his contemporaries P. T. Barnum and Robert A. Cunningham, who also figure in the narrative.

Although little information survives about the tour, Johnson has expertly woven what evidence does exist into the thread of her narrative. Her account is all the more credible in that her PhD was on this topic. The narrative closely follows Hilda’s perspective on the journey, people and places she experiences and her sympathetic imagining of the reactions of her companions. These are sometimes conveyed directly through her diary entries, sometimes through an all-seeing ‘ghost story-teller’—her dead mother—who flits across space and time, and sometimes through conventional third person narration that adopts Hilda’s point of view.

Much of the tour takes place in German cities—Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin—where the group, in addition to their performances, is subjected

on several occasions to ‘scientific examination’. The detailed description of the extensive, intrusive and humiliating measurements they undergo, exposes the racial ideas that underpinned the scientists’ study of the ‘fine specimens’ before them. A striking episode is recounted in Lyon where a full body plaster cast is taken of Bonny (which still survives today); Johnson vividly evokes the suffering that must have accompanied this process but also Bonny’s courage and determination to survive the ordeal and fulfil his mission. She accords agency to the touring party, particularly to Bonny, who quickly learns how to make extra money by selling artefacts to the public and to exploit opportunities to renegotiate their wages and conditions.

A few caveats. The choice of the title, *Paris Savages*, is somewhat puzzling. The episode in Paris occupies only fifteen of the 350 pages of narrative and is not the most noteworthy. The title no doubt seeks to capitalise on the oxymoronic resonance it evokes. It also suggests that the savages were not those on view but those who were viewing.

Johnson imagines the fate of the group at the end of the tour, although evidence exists only for the apparent decision by Bonny to leave Müller’s stewardship in order to tour with a quite different ethnic group. She allows us to suppose that Bonny will find a way home with the aid of a sympathetic Dutchman. Jurano has died during the tour from tuberculosis, this illness as well as smallpox often proving fatal to the members of the touring parties. Dorandera finds love and marriage with a European; the happy ending, and the sexual tension between Hilda and Bonny, while foreshadowing more positive inter-racial relations, sit rather oddly with the thrust of the narrative.

Overall, however, Johnson brings to life with enthusiasm and conviction the real and imagined characters who took part in this disturbing enterprise in human exploitation.

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