

# Bridging cultures through storytelling



Nicola Savage recounts the challenges and rewards of her first foray into literary translation through her work on a collection of French short stories.



**I first heard about this project when I attended the Melbourne launch of *Jetlag Stories (Australie)* in June this year. I was thrilled to meet three of the authors, and the publisher of Emue Books, a Melbourne-based publishing house that brings lively and humorous contemporary fiction from Francophone European writers to English-speaking readers all over the world.**

*Jetlag Stories* is the fruit of a competition for short story authors who submitted their narratives on an Australian theme, written in French. The book includes the four winners of the Best Francophone Short Story award in 2012.

Following the book launch and discussions with guests who didn't speak French, as well as the publisher, I was asked to be involved in the translation of some of the stories into English. This was a new and exciting challenge for me as someone new to literary translation. Most of my work to date has been in corporate, legal, government and education fields.

As I read the stories, the combination of familiar Australian cultural norms and references to places I know well, written in French, made me realise afresh how much our world view is shaped by language and culture.

Translation theory came flooding back to me. I found myself thinking about Schleiermacher's foreignisation and domestication, and whether I should attempt to move the reader towards the author or the author towards the reader in my translation. How was I to reconcile the need to respect the author's original style

with the different intertextual, cultural and geographic references, and how did I deal with those that were almost transcendent, like Starbucks coffee? There truly is a multitude of challenges to be overcome in literary translation.

There are also rewarding moments to be experienced throughout the process. Collaboration with editors is gratifying; there is often a lively exchange of ideas and suggestions to try and reach a translation that somehow conveys the original meaning or rhetorical device, with minimum translation loss – whether it is the hustle and bustle of Pitt Street Mall in Sydney, the junkie-filled streets of Fitzroy in Melbourne, a bourgeois suburb of Paris or a parallel drawn with a Tintin cartoon character. It was in attempting to transport the reader on a voyage into the perspective of the author that I realised that I was acting as a cultural bridge between France and Australia.

## **A hint of bitterness still seeps in**

This collection of stories also reveals the longstanding love the French have for Australia: the attraction to the sense of the unknown and enigmatic; the amazement because nothing goes in the same direction – neither in Australian mannerisms (much more polite), nor in Australian streets (much prettier). But though the sun always seems to shine, a hint of bitterness still seeps in and spreads from one story to another to unite these uprooted few. The journey is long, families are absent, pain exists even in paradise. You can be expelled, you are reminded that “everywhere else is here” – that the most beautiful dreams come to an end too.

Two of the stories I translated were “And if there was no Australia” (“Et si l’Australie n’existait pas”), about a couple who meet in Paris, fly to Sydney then split up. It is a melancholic and humorous love story between two places with the discovery of Australia as a backdrop; and “Melbourne Comedy”, a story about Jules who lives in the wildest part of Melbourne: all he sees around him are drugs, graffiti, alcohol and loud music, yet in his mind things are different – he has remained a child at heart. Making a new start in Australia, one hot and sleepless night, he lets his imagination run wild ...

I hope that I have been able to contribute in some small way to enriching contemporary literary culture in Australia and to improving cross-cultural understanding between our two countries. I look forward to further literary translation projects in the future.

Emue Publishing favours short and structured narratives, and is keen to publish lively, humorous and poetic texts that cast a critical eye on today's society. Emue has a dual meaning: it means “moved” in French, and it also stands for Ethical & Multicultural Editions. Visit them at [www.emuebooks.com](http://www.emuebooks.com)

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