



From *L'Événement* to *L-Auveniment*

Author: **David Mizzi**

Translation is a tricky business. But what does it take to translate the winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature? **THINK** sits with **Dr Claudine Borg**, head of the Department of Translation, Terminology and Interpreting Studies at UM, to find out.

Événement is an autobiographical novel where the author, Annie Ernaux, works through the trauma of her clandestine abortion 60 years ago. Despite happening over half a century ago, the classism and shame that Ernaux suffered and the way society views women have hardly changed. These attitudes are certainly not limited to modern Malta, but the reality she faced in 1963 and 1964 is, in some ways, still the reality here and now. While the topic of abortion makes this book particularly pertinent for a Maltese audience, 'it was the Nobel Prize for Literature that triggered the translation,' explains Dr Claudine Borg. 'I always try to translate from contemporary French literature, and when she won the Nobel Prize, I said to myself, it's time.'

The story itself is less than a hundred pages long, but it's a heavy and intense reading experience. The book is praised for its unflinching clinical writing and its political commentary on women's rights. Crafting a translation that does justice to *L'Événement* is an ambitious undertaking. Fortunately, Borg is already quite familiar with Ernaux's work.

FROM FRENCH TO MALTESE

Ernaux has been a presence in Borg's life for the past 20 to 25 years. In fact, Borg's master's dissertation in 2006 featured a translated extract from Ernaux's *Passion simple* (*Simple Passion*). Ernaux's writing is often described as *écriture plate*, or flat writing. 'It's clinical and minimalist in style, yet it's also very personal and very

raw. There's no beating around the bush. It has no filters, and it's punchy. We don't really have something similar in Maltese,' Borg explains. 'I firmly believe that translating literature also enriches the literature it is translated into.'

You might be tempted to think that such a clinical and minimalist style should be easier to translate; however, Maltese is a heavily idiomatic language, which presents unique challenges. For example, in Maltese, to say 'brace yourself', we might say '*ħoll xagħrek u ġib iż-żejt*' (unravel your hair and bring the oil). But Ernaux avoids such colour. In her writing, a person simply knows. They do. They fear. They wait. 'I went through multiple drafts trying to filter out any idiomatic expressions that might have slipped in to remain true to the original,' explains Borg.

However, there are moments of beautiful and satisfying synchronicity between the original French and Borg's translation. For example, at one point, Ernaux explains how she 'never resorted to descriptive terms or expressions such as "I'm expecting", "pregnant" or "pregnancy"'. In French, the word for pregnancy is '*grossesse*', which Ernaux points out, neighbours '*grotesque*' (grotesque). The original would be, '*Pour penser ma situation, je n'employais aucun des termes qui la désignent, ni "j'attends un enfant", ni "enceinte", encore moins "grossesse", voisin de "grotesque"*'.

While the English translation is forced to omit this poetic association, Borg manages to elicit it in Maltese, pointing out the rhyme between '*tqala*' (pregnancy) and '*tqalla*' (nauseating). ➤



Dr Claudine Borg

'Biex naħseb dwar il-qagħda tiegħi ma kont nuża ebda terminu li jiddeskriviha: la "qed nistenna tarbija", la "tqila", u wisq anqas "tqala" li tirrima ma' "tqalla".'

'There are always challenges; challenges exist when translating any language. But I think Maltese can translate anything. It's about the creativity of the translator. When there are challenges, we have the expertise to come up with creative solutions appropriate for the context,' says Borg. One of the main terminological challenges for Borg was that Maltese doesn't really have a word for backstreet abortionist – a slight challenge given the topic of the book.

In French, the term '*faiseuse d'anges*' is used, which translates to 'angel maker.' The term itself has tragic undertones; however, when Ernaux uses it, she makes it clear that it has positive connotations. 'She precedes it with "*une femme au joli nom*" (a woman with a pretty name), and I wanted to maintain the positive connotation,' says Borg. Various experts suggested alternatives, such as '*persuna li tagħmel abort*' (person who performs abortions), while Borg's editor suggested '*qabla tal-erwieh*' (midwife of the souls). However, the former was too clunky while the latter would not be entirely accurate; furthermore, neither maintained the positive connotation used by Ernaux.

'I vaguely remember as a child that my grandmother used to refer to this figure in the community using "*majistra*" (midwife) with a certain tone,' explains Borg when discussing the issue. 'This helped me in my research and led me to use the term "*ħelliesa*" when referring to a backstreet abortionist. While *ħelliesa* typically refers to a liberator or saviour, it was also used to refer to a person who assists a woman during childbirth. Furthermore, it ties into how we use "*ħlas*" (delivery/childbirth) in Maltese. I felt this would help preserve the original implication that Ernaux intended,' explains Borg.


CREATING A TRANSLATION

Translation is not just a linguistic reproduction but an act of creation and interpretation. Ernaux's book is a harrowing account of her trauma. The subject matter and Ernaux's frank approach make it a tough book to read. Borg's translation unwaveringly preserves that impact. There are powerful moments that left me feeling disturbed and queasy, yet there are also moments when I felt indignant at the injustices Ernaux endured. It is these raw, brutal, and honest experiences that reframe discussions about abortion from the theoretical to the practical. Impotent debates make way for the cold, harsh reality



that victims face, which *L'Événement* brings unashamedly to the fore. It drags you into a body: into fear and into shame. Ultimately, Borg's Maltese translation provides a rich nuance that is simply lost in the English version.

Translation adds something to the linguistic corpus of the target language. 'Translation is not a solo adventure,' adds Borg. 'I always discuss the text with someone already familiar with the source text. There are also readings and discussions with the editor as well as the proofreader. The entire process of translation itself is fascinating to me,' she smiles. In fact, Borg's translation of *L'Événement* serves as the basis for one of her research projects. 'I'm researching my own practice of translating through an autoethnographic approach. I've documented my entire process empirically and kept detailed notes. I'm trying to link my practice to my research, so I see the translation more as a research project with a creative outcome,' Borg points out.

Despite Malta's attitude towards abortion, there was, surprisingly, no pushback. While the book itself won funding from the Malta Book Fund, the publisher had accepted even before receiving the funds. 'I had very healthy conversations with the editor. I like working with them as they respect the translator's role. They empower translators,' Borg says. 

L'Avveniment is funded by the National Book Council's Book Fund 2023.



Copies of the book are available at the few remaining local bookshops. Alternatively, order a copy online at Faraxa Publishing.



Are you interested in translating literature? Check out the literary stream within the Master in Translation and Terminology Studies at UM.