



Régine Detambel

ADRESSE ÉLECTRONIQUE

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BIOGRAPHY

Between 1990 and her most recent novels (*La Splendeur*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2014 ; *Opéra sérieux*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2012 ; *Son corps extrême*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2011 ; *50 histoires fraîches*, Gallimard, Paris, 2010), Régine Detambel has published over 30 books (novels, essays, poetry, children's literature) and won several literary prizes.

Her Extreme Body (Actes Sud, 2011) : Shaken to her very core by a car crash that may have been suicidal, Alice lies on a hospital bed, set adrift from the world and her own life but a very long way from wonderland. For a period of two years she experiences the merciless process of scarring, muscle building, physiotherapy and reconstruction, struggling night after night to regain possession of the language she has lost. It is a fellow patient who gives her the will to get back on her feet, under his watchful gaze that she will learn to walk again, and thanks to their conversations that she will be able to excavate the original catas-

trophe in order to cast it out once and for all. This prelude to a rebirth inside a different body – a rethought, re-negotiated body – is a journey through the organic building site and closed world of hospitals. It is also a powerful initiation into the seductive power exerted by death and illness at certain stages of life, when a quite new relationship emerges with the truth, even a form of spirituality.

Biography

Régine Detambel, who was born in 1963 and trained as a physiotherapist, now lives near Montpellier and, since 1990, is the author of a highly regarded body of work, mostly published by Julliard, Le Seuil and Gallimard. She is a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres and has also won the Prix Anna de Noailles from the Académie française. Actes Sud previously published her *Syndrome de Diogène* (essay, 2008).

Régine Detambel had her own daily radio program (« La Comédie des mots », France Culture, 1999) and has written radio plays.

She also a writer with a mission : teaching others to read and write literature has been an essential part of her work for the last ten years ; she leads her own creative writing workshops for children, adults, teachers ; she believes that training children to be readers is an essential part of living, of becoming « singular », of discovering beauty and plea-

sure, of transmitting and perpetuating literature.

About literature she says : « Literature is not just in books, not just in literary books. It is everywhere. I have been trained and I worked many years as a physical therapist, I exercise a lot, I wrote a poetic book about bones ! I have written over forty books and the only times I have set foot in college for literature classes was as a writer. I learned almost everything I know from my patients and in hospitals. Everything is literature if you know how to look, dream, use the words and images you've created to live and communicate with others. »

PRESS

• John Brown, Washington D.C., *World Literature In Review / French Fiction*, Friday, January 1999

About *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* (Gallimard, 1998) Ever since Françoise Sagan, only nineteen, published *Bonjour, Tristesse* (1954), which rapidly became an international best seller, increasing numbers of talented, innovative young ladies have been attracted to a literary career. Among the recent recruits - Marie Darrieussecq (*Truismes*), Lorette Nobécourt (*La Demangeaison*) and Nina Bouraoui (*La Voyeuse interdite*), and others who have been creating a modest feminist wave in end-of-the-century French writing - Régine Detambel stands out as "the leader of the pack". Just thirty, she has already published some ni-

neteen volumes. Critics have pointed out that members of "the pack" reject the idea of "the novel" and do not pretend to "tell a story" but rather draw up "a list of their sensations," to keep a balance, sophisticated and somewhat perverse, between "le mouillé et le sec, l'exercice video et la chronophotographie." They all cultivate "the ecstasy of the senses." The heroine of Detambel's 1995 novel *Le Ventilateur* (see VLT 70:4, p. 906) - she is never given a name, remaining anonymously "She" - finds her greatest erotic pleasure in savoring "His" body fluids and in rapturously cleaning his navel !

Like Detambel's prior volumes, *Elle ferait battre les montagnes* has no narrative line. It consists of fifty brief passages, some less than a page in length. In the house of her grandfather, Martin, a little blonde girl (we never learn her name), "un petit ange," is passing the summer with her godmother, Tatie, the sister of Martin, and with her young cousin David, his grandson. From the opening pages, her magnificent "golden locks", magical in their power of attraction, dominate this "fable." As in *Le Ventilateur*, things are more important than persons. (This preoccupation with objects reflects the influence of Francis Ponge, of Georges Perec, and of Robbe-Grillet, who "disdains the picturesque and the fictional in order to dwell on objects which form and deform his characters." And indeed, Hair would be a suitable title for this curious performance. (Detambel's fixation on hair occurs in earlier works, notably in *Le Ventilateur*, where "She" revels in caressing "His" body hair from head to toe with her tongue.) The "petit ange" and her cou-

sin play together in the wood in front of the house and wade in the stream that flows through it. The radiance of the girl's hair makes the water glow and causes little fish, attracted by "le halo de sa chevelure," to rise to the surface and circle around her. The wood, however, is not tranquil. Crowds of hunters are shooting birds, and one day a stray bullet hits the girl in the head but, burrowing into the thick mass of her hair, does not wound her. It remains there unperceived, until one day David, fondly caressing her head, discovers it. Determined that it must be removed, he takes her to the village barber. As great locks of her hair are cut and fall to the floor, David picks up a few, puts them in his pocket, and later throws them in the stream, "comme des cendres de mort."

Tatie is furious that her goddaughter's hair has been cut, thus depriving her of her magical charm. The "petit ange" no longer exists. Without her golden crown, she is no longer the child the family has adored. The mythical little princess is dead. And death, in reality, soon arrives. One evening she is sitting outside while hunters are firing away in the wood. A bullet, unimpeded by thick, protective hair, hits her behind the ear and she falls dead. The fable ends as Tatie summons up memories of the baptism of the baby, whose "petite tête opulente" completely covered her mother's breast. Concluding this technically disciplined minimalist text, the reader may well long for a slight show of emotion. He can admire the work of Detambel as "an expert engraver on metal" while feeling a nostalgia, anachronistic if you wish, for the sensibility of a Colette.

© John L. Brown, Washington, D. C., *World Literature Today*, Sunday, June 22 1997.

About *La Verrière* (Gallimard, 1996)

Since 1990, the thirty-year-old Regine Detambel, the wunderkind of her literary generation, has published some fourteen novels, of which *La Verrière* is the most recent. A fifteen-year-old lyceenne (we never learn her name), working on her bachot, hates her mother, who imposes a strict, cruel discipline on her, locking her in her room at night, not permitting her to go out in the evening, and forbidding her to smoke. Depressed and vengeful, the girl swallows all the pills in her mother's medicine cabinet in an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. The family lives in a run-down apartment house in a town in the Midi. The window of the girl's room looks down onto the basement garage, occupied by Mina, a poor Arab immigrant who works twelve hours a day in a factory to earn a little money to send to her family back home. Through the window, the girl makes contact with Mina, who realizes how unhappy she is and treats her with an affection she has never known. Soon she is sneaking out of the apartment to join Mina. One evening, the mother, looking out the window, observes her daughter making love with Mina. She rushes down and confronts the two with savage fury. Soon after this violent scene, Mina flees to her Moroccan village, aware that her relationship with the girl could lead to disaster.

One night not long thereafter, the mother, exasperated with her daughter, pushes her out of the apartment into the hallway and locks the door. The girl sits down on the stairs in the hall, wondering what to do. She is determined not to beg to be let back into the apartment. Rather, she decides she will run away and join Mina in her village, and so she slips out into the night. Walking along the canal that leads to Sete, where she can take a boat for Morocco, the young girl happens to meet three young runaways - Katia, Manuel, and Denis - camping out on a deserted barge. They recognize her as one of their own and offer to take her in. Within a few days, she and Denis have slept together, and she does not seem to worry that within a few months she may join the international legion of "teen-age mothers." Denis takes her to an army-surplus store and buys her boots and a military jacket. (She had left home barefoot, clad only in her dressing gown.) While trying on the boots, she asks Denis if he has ever "blown up a house." "Do you want to bomb your parents?" he queries. No, all she wants is to destroy "the evil house" she hates. Denis consents to help her. She assures him that the house is empty and that the explosion will kill no one. The following day, Denis sets off his home-made bomb, the house is blown to bits, and the adolescent terrorists escape on stolen motorcycles. Denounced by the girl's mother, they are quickly arrested and sent to prison. However, the daughter, only fifteen, is simply put under the guardianship of Clarisse, a school-teacher friend of her mother's, with whom she is far happier than she had ever been with her parents, who brand

her as "delinquent and lesbian." Clarisse arranges for her to visit Rome, an experience which "cures her," which makes her "une fille nouvelle, qui serait désormais douce et spontanée." Speriamo ! Back home, she makes arrangements to return to Rome to "live a new life". The reader may well remain somewhat skeptical of the possibility of such a transformation.

La Verriere's style and structure reveal (deliberately and brilliantly) the disorder and the confusion of the personality of the narrator herself. Detambel's work goes beyond "fiction." It can be viewed as a significant social document detailing the problems of the numerous contemporary young people who have rejected every form of authority, whether of the state, the Church, the school system, or the family, and find themselves adrift, drugged, and desperate, seeking solutions in self-destruction and gratuitous violence.

© John L. Brown, Washington, D.C., *World Literature Today*, Sunday, September 22 1996.

About *Le Ventilateur* (Gallimard, 1995)

This account or, more accurately, this set of notes about a marriage going on the rocks begins when an electric fan falls on "Her," landing her on the floor and wounding her. She remains lying there, and when "He" comes in from work, he does not believe that there is "anything wrong with her." She is just trying to impress him. We never learn the names

of "Him" and "Her" in this exercise in objectivism. The only character mentioned by name is an old spinster, Mlle Fauges, who lives up on the fifth floor with her cat. Critics note the influence of Francis Ponge (*Le Parti pris des choses* and *Le Savon*) on Regine Detambel, who devotes a section of *Le Ventilateur* to "her" minutely described collection of bars of soap. One also easily perceives echoes of Robbe-Grillet, who "disdains the picturesque and the fictional" in order to dwell on objects which form and deform his characters, and of Georges Perec's novelette *Les Choses*.

Detambel has been hailed as something of a wunderkind. Scarcely thirty years old, she has produced some twelve volumes since 1990, when Julliard brought out three of her works. In 1994 she received le Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française for *Le jardin clos*. *Le Ventilateur* is organized in sixty-nine brief sections - one could hardly call them chapters - each composed of several short paragraphs. The same technique is employed in Detambel's *Graveurs d'enfance* (1993), which describes in thirty fragments the contents of a child's schoolbag. *Le Ventilateur* is introduced by a quotation from Colette: "Je détaillais la montagne avec un goût étriqué, menu, parfois subtil de myope et de femme." Lying helpless on the floor, "She" reflects bitterly that she has always taken such good care of "Him," while "He" neglects her and loves only his guitar. She cleans his eyes; she wipes off the blood when he cuts himself shaving. She examines his tongue, which was "like an eel when it glided in and out of her mouth." She digs the wax out of his ears and loves to taste it; it was like "une liqueur âcre et mordante."

She is obsessed with his body hair - that on his belly which she kissed, that on his chest and in his armpits which she loved to "chew on." When "He" returns from work and finds her still on the floor, he shows little pity. He simply picks her up and decides to take her to the hospital. On the way she continues to dwell on his body and its secretions, his saliva, his sweat, his sperm. She loved to nibble on his muscles - those of his arms, his chest, his stomach, his thighs.

At the hospital it is found that her right hand was badly wounded and that, disabled, she will have to wear a bandolier. Back home, he warns her that he does not want her "spying on him" all the time, even when he is taking a shower. He does not want to eat with her : "You just keep looking at my fork". He takes his toilet articles with him to the office and bathes and shaves there. He sleeps on the sofa, since he does not want to go to bed with her. He builds a wall between them and seeks to deprive her of every pleasure, even of smelling his body odors or cleaning his navel, which she always loved to do. Finally, he leaves for good, determined that he will not be "possessed by her", that he will not be devoured by "the hyena." She consoles herself by arranging her collection of soap and of the cuds of gum which he had chewed.

"Romantic" love seems an outmoded illusion when confronted with this relentless, dehumanized obsession with the body. Regine Detambel's disquieting performance records in impersonal detail the predominance of the purely

physical in a society in which "to make love" has been replaced by "to have sex".

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