

BOOK REVIEW

INTERPRETER PROTAGONIST: FACT OR FICTION?

Reviewed by Nancy Schweda Nicholson

Glass, Suzanne. 2001. *The Interpreter*. South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press. 302pp.

“As an interpreter, I choose words as a sculptor chooses clay.”

Dominique, this novel’s protagonist, is an interpreter whose story unfolds not only through her own eyes but through those of Nicholas, an Italian leukemia researcher on temporary assignment in New York, and Anna, an old friend from interpreting school. The setting is the world of pharmaceuticals and medical conference interpreting.

The author crams much professional detail into the first few pages, offering the reader an authentic depiction of the job: topic preparation, confidentiality, stress (“I vowed to get out of the habit of digging my nails into my palms till they bled while I translated”), the 30-minute stints, the importance of not leaving the booth for an extended period, how to rescue a colleague in trouble, or working with unbearable booth mates. Other familiar challenges touched on are the difficulty of idiomatic expressions; nightmares about losing one’s voice before an important meeting; going to lunch with conference delegates but having little chance to eat when seated between two delegates who speak different languages; doing *chuchotage* at a small meeting; dealing with a “interpreter-unfriendly” booth position, facing the audience without a view of the speakers; the role of anticipation and prediction; the difficulty of the heavily accented philosophical output of a non-native speaker –“translating his words was the mental equivalent of doing sit-ups with the flu.” Even without her notepad to jog her memory, Dominique remembers critically important information, a nod to excellent memory skills. She also shares the student motto she learned at interpreting school: “...with the hide of a rhino you might get out of here alive.” Practicing interpreters will find themselves nodding in agreement at these passages.

In describing life in the booth, the author indirectly educates the uninitiated about the difficulty of the interpretation task and the “cerebral dexterity” involved. At one point Nicholas remarks that he used to think of interpreters “...as no more than translating machines”, and that he still feels “...guilty at [his] one-time lack of appreciation of the interpreters.” In this way, Glass uses a principal character other than the interpreter to clue the audience in. Nicholas pays Dominique many compliments on her interpreting skills: he says that watching her work is “...like watching the eighth wonder of the world.” (Well, Nicholas is in love with her -- so chalk it up to romance!)

Dominique characterizes consecutive interpretation as “undoubtedly the most terrifying,” describing it as sitting near the speaker “notating his every word in symbols.” She gives the example of sketching a picture of an umbrella and suggesting possible meanings, depending on the context. (Not to be a nitpicker, but as a trainer in consecutive note-taking, this reviewer was surprised by the suggestion that *all* words are transformed into symbols in the interpreter’s notes. Most agree that note-taking is highly personal and even Rozan’s framework does not consist solely of symbols. Thus the

statement is somewhat misleading for the non-interpreter, with an air of hocus-pocus about it, perhaps intentionally so.)

The text is peppered with childhood reminiscences of the tenuous and often vitriolic relationship between Dominique's parents as well as her mother's flashbacks of Nazi wartime experiences. As a child on the run from the Nazis, Dominique's mother often had to pack and repack her bags, and so leisure travel, a source of adventure and excitement for Dominique, calls up terrifying memories. Numerous references to words delve into definitions and possible interpretations, a testament to the author's true fascination with language. French, German, Italian and Hebrew appear in the text, along with descriptions of Zurich (and other Swiss cities), New York and Florence.

The research scientist's isolation in the lab is compared to the interpreter's solitude in the booth. Glass also parallels a lack of appreciation for interpreters to the minimal feedback received by researchers like Nicholas.

Descriptions often dwell on the presence of light or the lack of it. Dominique prefers the booth to be dark, needs a pitch dark room in order to sleep, and images of dimly lit restaurants and museums reappear throughout the book.

Ideas of individuality, personal freedom and suppression of ego also predominate. Dominique states: "We cannot create. Only recreate. And eventually if we allow ourselves to be trapped in the world of secondhand words our imaginations shrivel and die." When Dominique confides to Anna having overheard talk about illegal activity because a delegate's microphone was inadvertently left on at conference end, Dominique is concerned about breaching confidentiality—the ethical canon pounded into them in school— but Anna replies angrily: "Don't you have a voice?" underlining the difference between speaking one's *own* words rather than expressing others' thoughts. At one point, Dominique pays Nicholas a compliment by saying "You know how to make people talk" as if to say that talking done as an interpreter doesn't really count; rather, her *own* words do, and Nicholas is able to draw her out. It's probably no coincidence that the cover photo places the title word *Interpreter* over a woman's lips.

In an interesting analogy, Glass compares the interpreter to a surfer:

"...when you were interpreting and you had got it just right. You wanted to stay up there, triumphant on the bright blue surfboard, riding the crest of the wave behind the speaker's words, but sometimes the spray was too strong, some outside noise distracted you, or your headphones dug into your ear and you began to wobble. You missed a word, a sentence, an idea and right there in the booth you lost your footing and you toppled" (186).

The *dénouement* is not utterly predictable, but not a complete surprise, either. The quality of the writing is average. *The Interpreter* is definitely not a page-turner with plot twists like a Turow or Grisham novel. Although the author does wobble now and then, most interpreters will probably enjoy the book since it's an opportunity to see their work described in a popular genre rather than in a dry research article.

"Foxes. We interpreters are foxes and the speaker's words are our prey. We sneak up behind them, snatch them, flip them upside down and play with them as we choose."

The Interpreter will soon be made into a major motion picture starring Nicole Kidman. Coming soon to a theater near you: interpreters as pop culture icons!

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