

Interview in English about *White*



PHOTO BY DOLORES MARAT COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR AND MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ

How and Why did you choose to write about the South Pole?

My husband is an astrophysicist, and he spent two years in the middle of the South Pole collecting, in the snow, meteorites (a career that I liked to caricature with the character Ukla). Therefore I had irresistible data to use to plan a book.

For a long time I have been working on the theme of a void, and on two questions: “What are we doing when we are doing nothing?” and “Where is the center of the world?” To be trapped for months in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by white, lost in a difficult time and place, was an experience that I wanted to explore. That would say something about the human.

My husband is very close to the character of Lutin. My husband’s experience was really fascinating, and crossed so close to my own questions, that I didn’t really choose to write *White* (all of my novels pop into my head with my knowing where they came from, and I don’t have any choice but to write them: they make me). But *White* is without a doubt the least personal book, the one that depends the most on the experience of another. It was almost necessary that I separate myself, to be able to move on to other

things.

For better or worse, it is without a doubt my most novel-like book, and the least autobiographical. All the scientific data came from my husband, the rest is fiction.

What is the reason behind writing this book, personally or universally?

To respond again to my two famous questions. To question the void. My favorite novel writers try to answer these questions, each in their own way: from Melville to Modiano!

Is the Pole the center of the world? Or, on the contrary, its farthest point? Everything is geography in my books. Psychology and history are geographies. And writing is close to a zen exercise for me, a sense of “doing nothing” where the psychological me is evacuated. To write is to be absent from myself, to echo, to be porous to the world, posed there.

Is this book what you envisioned to write about or did it change somewhat?

Yes, after many difficulties.

White was first interrupted by the birth of my son, in April of 2001. I no longer had the concentration or the time necessary, momentarily, to launch myself into this empty construction site, where I had to leave everything for the white. Therefore, I wrote *Le Bébé*.

When I began *White* again, September 11 occurred. I had already written 80 pages of *White*, a first version where Edmée was a CIA agent. After 9/11 that became completely absurd, everything in reference to the CIA was obsolete or indecent. Not only could we no longer joke about it, but also, nobody knew what a secret agent does. What did it mean; a secret agent in the South Pole?

At first, my idea was a bacteriological lab buried under the ice: a real thriller plot. I was without a doubt asking myself too many questions of morality after 9/11, after all I would have been able to write this thriller all the same, but it didn't interest me as much as before.

Therefore, I threw out the 80 pages (4 months of work), simplified it all, stated over at zero: just a love story. Very difficult to write.

I stayed “stuck” for several months after the opening scene, when Edmée gets off the plane. It is the Callas that saved me, that sent me to lyricism. Hearing them, I understood how to dare to write love scenes, all the sentiment, all this ardor, without justifying anything.

Do you think that the writing style of *White* is a similar to the style of your other books?

All of my books have a different writing style. For each subject its own form, for each book its own rhythm, its own harmony... but the profound style stays the same, the questions stay the same.

The writing style of White is staccato in the beginning, it tries to shake you, to make you seasick; the sentences are shorter than in other books, it goes quickly, there are noises, sounds, the phantoms play...

Do you identify with the character Edmée?

Like all of my characters, yes and no. She is rather nice.

Why is it so important to find out where Peter is from?

Peter and Edmee both know that the language that they speak is a random convention, like the place they were born. They know that it is not very important. The exile is their identity, but with the South Pole, they find a hyperbolic exile, they are close to being thrown off the planet.

Why are the past parts of Peter and Edmée's lives so important in the story?

They have a common secret and this secret is that children can die. They fall in love over this secret. They get rid of their phantoms maybe because they met each other.

Why are there often sections about characters by themselves, rather than conversation among characters?

Because I don't always know how to write dialogs, especially romantic dialogs. But I'm working on it... I am in the process of learning that dialog... But I like to be in the mind of my characters, it is more comfortable than opening their mouths and hearing them speak. In addition I think that white and emptiness hardly incite dialogue. The pole isolates the characters much more than any other place.

Are the futuristic ideas based on anything specific in the present?

Like all of my other books that are slightly shifted in time (*Truismes*, *Naissance des fantômes*), in the future 10 or 20 years in "science fiction" they liberate me from the probability of the times and the present space. It gives me the liberty to invent (here holographic telephones.) I can let my imagination run wild without holding back. The hologram (that I reuse in my book, *Le Pays*) is an old topic of science fiction, a very interesting presence-absence for my reoccurring themes. The body is there without being there.

Is love a very important aspect for a lot of books or is it not vital to a book?

One can do surely without it.

Dreams, imagination, solitude and the roles of women seem like very important themes in your writing...

I haven't written about dreams since *Bref Séjour chez les vivants*. It is a very particular piece. I don't remember who said "tell a dream, lose a reader." For example I found G. Perec's book about dreams, *La Boutique Obscure* (I think that is the title) is his worst book, the most tedious. Telling a personal dream, it's always obscene, a direct link to our unconscious, our secrets. More obscene than talking about sexual experiences.

I tried to invent plausible dreams for my characters. They are fictional dreams that could correspond with their thinking.

When is the time to tell about a dream? With what syntax?

It is natural for me to write about women. I am a feminist in my life, but not necessarily in my writing. I don't think I am a feminist writer. The ideas involve danger, ghetto and minorities. There are maybe feminine themes, but the writing has no sex, just like the mind.

Why did you refer to 9/11?

It is a historic event that permits us to situate the action in a future that is close to 2020.

Why did you write about Imelda Higgins so much? Were you inspired by the true character of Andrea Yates as intertextual reference?

The name Andrea Yates is not known in Europe. This story is typically American, with the beginning typically American, radical, about feminism and the pain of death.

This inspired me but if Andrea Yates was known here, I would have shifted the account compared to her story.

In my distant family, a mother killed her eight-year-old son by hitting his head on the bathroom counters. That greatly inspired and traumatized me. I think that to be the mother of someone suggests many different forms of love or forms of hatred. Nothing is uniform or social in this intimacy. Nothing that agrees with conventional discussion of the mother.

Interview by Becky Miller and Martha Holmes (December 2001)

B.M.: Which writers do you admire? Why?

B.M.: You have said, «I write the book I don't know how to write.» Can you explain this statement? Are you saying that writing is an adventure, or maybe a way to take risks?

B.M.: You have said that you want to «kick down the castle of cards so as to be able to rebuild it differently.» Do you not want your own writing to follow strict literary rules, or do you want to change the entire institution of modern literature?

M.D.: It is useless to write if one knows in advance what one is going to write, the form it is going to take. One would not be doing anything but repeating the past. One can know the themes about which one is going to write, one does not know how one is going to play on the page, how the sentences are going to catch the world. I admonish writers whose highest goal is to write «like Tchekov,» or «to resume with classic writing.» Yourcenar, for example. Ninety-five percent of the books that are published every year are useless in this way or plainly noxious: conservators, reactionaries for their form whatever theme they are approaching, they immobilize literature, give cumbersome rubbish to read instead -- sometimes more discreetly, but not always -- necessary books.

I am looking to invent new forms, to write new sentences, because it is the only way to realize the modern world, whose movement otherwise surpasses us incessantly, staying unreadable, incomprehensible.

In this sense, all exploratory, innovative writing is political: even apparently removed from the «real,» from «events,» it furnishes modern language, it builds verbal and mental tools which permit the world to think. It corrodes clichés, it cuts off the life blood of conventional thinking, of time-worn statements

All real writing plays against clichés, the «truisms,» which hold back the movement of thought, which ruin the flow of life, which upset language and man in alienation and death. This writing can take multiple forms, from the simplest to the most complex; so much that it is lived by its author, it is essentially poetic.

Pig Tales, my first published novel, was in a way a literary manifest: the adventure of an alienated woman (to the point of not realizing that she is a prostitute) who can free herself a little of clichés to find her voice. Her body, transforming itself, signifies to her that now, right away, if she wants to survive, she is going to have to start thinking. What happens to her is unprecedented, has never been codified by common places. Her unique experience escapes from social registers. So she has to invent her voice, live the adventure of a language, which as the book moves forward and the body oscillates from symptom to symptom, enriches itself, complicates itself, in vocabulary and in structure, to disengage itself from truisms.

B.M.: It seems that you talk about things which nobody wants to discuss, or see in one's self: anguish, insecurity, the unbearable, taboos... Why?

B.M.: You have said that you find books that will not be relevant in the future to be useless. Do you still have the same opinion? Do you think that a book is worth absolutely nothing if it cannot follow us into the future and always be able to touch us? Are there any exceptions to this rule?

B.M.: Why are you fascinated with ghosts? Do you have any ghost stories?

M.D.: The unsaid is that which advances literature, that which it explores as a virgin or submerged land. Ghosts are born of the unsaid. Children are particularly sensitive to them: they hear the specters shake their chains in the attic, they believe in monsters under the bed, they notice the stirring of creatures in the cupboards... What is hidden from them is always concerning death or sexuality: and these fundamental questions, passed in silence, oblige them to structure themselves using ghosts, to trust their imaginations to clarify the world. I am without a doubt a writer because people were so silent in my family, but that does not explain everything. Fantastic literature is the fear of the dark which is rediscovered by adults. With regards to conjugal, familial, and social scales, what happens silently makes itself heard in one way or another: it is a map of psychoanalysis. To write is to give a voice to ghosts. That is also the theme of my second book, *My Phantom Husband*. A woman, still there, invents her own voice, with the void left by her central focus, her husband -- another form of alienation than a conjugal life lived in style. No one will give her what she misses when he disappears, and what is much more than his problematic presence, if not her self, by her words and her autonomous thought. The sentences tell of anguish, they are long, pierced with commas, with parenthesis, in search of a missing word, of the last word of the story... Like *Pig Tales*, it is a book about the passage to adulthood, and it is also, of all of my books, my darling book, the one closest to me (without a real autobiographic aspect): the witness to a very vivid period of my life, with its structure, its theme, its telling.

I write psychological books which are against psychology. I am never satisfied with sentences like «I feel very anguished» or «She was very happy.» These sentences have been elaborated, pulled to the max, at the hinge of the 19th and 20th centuries, with Proust. Then, there is the Joyce fracture: how this happens even in the brain Uysse, among other books, nourished *Bref séjour chez les vivants*.

I want to know what anguish is, what happiness is, the sea, a baby, the interior of things, as if it were the first time that I tested these waters. I want to say to the reader: «See, smell, listen: this is a wave, this is a woman who is losing herself, this is a brain that is thinking.» To cite some simple examples, the Impressionists opened people's eyes by revealing to them that the world is made up of spots and of lights; the world is also made of forms seen at every angle: it is bringing cubism into our view. The world is also made of electrons, of microbes, of waves, of planets...etc... I participate in

the permanent movement of settlers. I want to open eyes under the eyes of readers, ears under their ears, a new skin under their skin. How good is a book that does not ask me to see the world as if it were unveiled to me for the first time?

For this work, one needs new sentences, new forms, new attitudes towards writing.

Birth of ghosts, birth of fiction. I have liberated myself from multiple constraints in writing *My Phantom Husband*. *Pig Tales* was written in a spurt, with anger, in six weeks; *My Phantom Husband* was my first real «author's book,» where writing became my work, took its place in my life, without pathology, without preventing me from living: a career, a beautiful career. At this moment I stopped teaching, I accepted being what I was, I left people...I was twenty-eight years old.

Breathing Underwater/Undercurrents is the reverse angle of *My Phantom Husband*, the point of view of the person who disappears. I needed the third person to express the absence of herself in the woman who flees, depression like a sea... I have great affection for her, the character of the «bad sea,» the same for the character of the detective. It is my «perfect» book, impeccable, each word weighed and taken in the flow, too perfect in a way: it is not shaky enough, not «pitiful» enough. I like books that are missing pieces, which make noise...which stay open, impossible to finish and therefore, in a certain sense, forever in need of further elaboration. The Charterhouse of Parma would be the sacred relic of these books.

B.M.: There are several paragraphs in English in your novels, for example in *Pig Tales* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*. Do you speak English? What do you think of the increasing globalization of the English language? According to you, what are the advantages of knowing a foreign language when one is a writer?

M.D.: I am for the globalization of the English language since Esperanto has failed. It is necessary to have one language so that people can communicate with each other, it is as simple as that. It has fallen on English to be this language, for diverse reasons. And it is not so bad that it works out this way: the English language is easy to simplify, to universalize. Evidently «classic» English has found itself thrown into disorder, like any language which is widely spoken; but English literature written in English exists, evolves, and Shakespeare is freely accessible in most of the countries in the world.

García-Márquez, I think, has said that French is a dead language. I am translated into thirty-eight languages; I can afford the luxury of thinking that it is a fair, provocative, and funny idea.

I am relearning Basque, my first language, which I forgot at the age of two. I can also babble in Latin. I can make it seem like I speak Italian. I

know rudimentary Chinese. I speak English fluently, and Spanish just as well: so I will be able to survive, and, if need be, to ask my way. These three languages are, if I am not mistaken, the three most widely spoken languages on the planet. Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, my hero, my editor, has a theory about writers: all writers, he says, have a particular relationship to their first language, in the sense that they envision it as a convention (that could have been another language, another mother) and not like a natural state (I speak French without thinking about it).

My own French is doubled with Basque: a prehistoric language, out of the Indo-European context, oral for a very long time, not resembling any other language... They even say that it was the language of Atlantis! As a child, I refused to speak Basque, preferring the French of my father, luminous and limpid language, language of reason and of oedipal love... Basque was the language used by the women of the family, a language of witches, of secrets, an opaque language, raucous, and boiling.

Today's witches are the women who write (cf. Marguerite Duras). My grandmother used to call on spirits for turning the tables, and I cast spells on the world by dipping into my cauldron of words. At times I even see a stake erected in my honor, waiting to consume me in its flames. I am perpetuating the family tradition.

B.M.: Why do you compare animals and humans? What do they represent for you?

I find animals funny. They force instantaneous metaphysics upon us: what separates us from them? What makes us human? It is perhaps the subject of my books in general. And the question is crucially important since the birth of my son in April 2001

M.H.: Do you travel often? Which countries are you attracted to and why? Is your writing inspired by your travels?

M.D.: I have traveled a lot, thanks to *Pig Tales* and I love that. I liked writing in hotel rooms. I liked not knowing any longer in what manner I should dress, to have to put my nose to the window to recall the climate. I loved traveling quickly, reducing the planet into a «head of Jivaro.» There is a great sentimental song by Joe Jackson that reminds me of a catchy musical tune every time I fly:

«Each new arrival closes places in my heart
But in Shanghaiiiiiiii
The color of the sky
After the summer rain
Is something I've never seen
And the wO-O-rld is big again»

I love the grand hotels. Room service is very close to the idea that I have of

what paradise would be like. As well, a whiskey at the bar of international hotels, as anonymously as possible, after a long day spent with editors, readers, journalists or university people. It is the opposite of the profession of writing, and sometimes, that is good... To write is first of all, to be ALONE.

I have also traveled for myself, in a different way, hitchhiking, before being published, taking some time, stopping on the way, staying. I am very much touched by Buenos-Aires and Patagonia, by Tasmania and Iceland, by the ends of the world, by these places where - one could live for a hundred years and would still be fundamentally in exile.

Now, I stay more often at home, with my husband and my son. Life is short, precarious and precious, and I feel like spending it with those that I love. We are thinking about living for some time in Australia, and possibly in the Aleutian Islands... My husband is a researcher in astrophysics, he works on the subject of meteorites and is often in the Arctic and in Antarctica. In his own way, he also is an explorer. For the anecdote, my ex-husband is a mathematician. Science enriches my imagination, supplies me with images, metaphors, and fictions in order to understand the world.

M.H.: Do you imagine yourself as a writer of novels forever, or will you be planning to write in other literary forms, for example, that of your thesis on «autofiction?» Do you prefer a life apart from the «so-called» intellectual society of Paris, or do you participate from time to time?

M.D.: My writing projects are confined to *Le bébé*, to appear in March 2002, (through P.O.L., of course). Novels, theatre, poetry, and possibly, in a while, a literary essay (in my own style). I live pretty much apart from the Parisian literary scene. I enjoy seeing two writers: Philippe Sollers and Virginie Despentes, and I happily feast with certain poets at P.O.L.: Olivier Cadiot or Dominique Fourcade. I had the luck to be close to Nathalie Sarraute at the end of her life. « Never let yourself be get beaten down,» that is the message that, in short, she left me. She was a researcher, a discoverer, full of aggression, humor and tenacity.

M.H.: Do you have any experiences or beliefs that are linked to your inspiration? Are you a «rebel?» Do you have another word to describe yourself or to describe your style of writing?

M.D.: I react occasionally, if someone asks me about it, to events. I am not a militant, but I do get upset when abortion rights or free access to contraception are menaced. My work, my weapon, my pleasure, my role, is to write: no more, no less. It would be a mistake, in a sense to isolate myself, to cease to observe the world, but my profession is not exactly to comment upon it.

I am an atheist, a feminist, and a European.

At night I believe in ghosts, during the day I am Cartesian. «Past the bridge,

the phantoms come to meet me...»(Dracula?)

M.H.: Your parents like to read (your mother was a French professor) -- were there other family influences that led you towards writing?

M.D.: I achieved through the French school system all the diplomas, in literature, that one could obtain, without ever letting go of my idea: to write, to write outside of the system, to not let myself become sterile. It was rather «schizophrenic» (although I do not like to overuse this word). I keep very good memories of my years at Normale Sup (1990-1994), of total liberty in the heart of Paris. Dense writing years. My mother was a professor of French in a junior high school, my father a technician. At my house, there was a very heterogeneous library, my parents read a lot and about everything. In the village of 300 people where I was born, my best friend, whom I met at six years old and who is still my best friend, also studied at the Normale Sup, in math. I do not know if this explains this or that, and I do not believe it is essential for the reading of my books. Regarding the «literary» system, Goncourt or otherwise, I have not received any prizes. I had very early on in my profession as a writer the worst and the best, praise and critical lynching, letters of love and of hate, slander and proposals of marriage, worship and jealousy. I am made of steel. I am 32 years old, life is ahead of me and there is a pile of books in my head.