

# No room to improvise

**HENRIETTE KORTHALS ALTES**

**LA MER À L'ENVERS**  
**MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ**  
256pp. P.O.L. €18.50.

**M**ARIE DARRIEUSSECQ'S WORK has long been peopled with outcasts, misfits, phantoms, or those with an uncertain status living on the margins of society. Her international bestselling debut *Pig Tales* (1997) traced the destiny of a beautician who metamorphoses into a pig and is tragically tracked down for embracing her animal nature. Her most recent futuristic tale, *Our Life in the Forest* (2017), concerned a woman fleeing the city to live in the woods. Her latest book, *La Mer à l'envers*, takes a more topical turn: the migrant crisis.

The novel tells of the encounter between Younès, a teenage migrant who has fled Niger, and Rose, who previously appeared in *Clèves* (2011) and *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013). Rose is a psychologist with New Age healing powers who is going through a midlife crisis: should she leave her likeable but alcoholic husband to move back to the Basque country, or stay in over-populated

Paris? She embarks on a Mediterranean cruise with her two children for some time off. During the night of Christmas Eve she witnesses a shipwreck, with migrants being hoisted up onto the deck only to be sent off in police boats before the other passengers can wake up. “No pasa nada, niente, nothing ... Tutto bene”, smiles one of the ship's officers as he moves the passengers along. Rose, however, catches Younès's eye and instantly feels a maternal instinct to help. She gives him her son's iPhone, a gesture that will form their bond.

As she describes the drama, Darrieussecq deploys her unusual sense of geography of the Mediterranean: “On a l'impression que l'Afrique pousse de tout son crâne contre l'Europe”. It is a sea that binds and divides the North and South, Europe and Africa, the rich and poor. The cruise liner itself, a paragon of capitalism, is treated with quasi-Flaubertian irony: the smell of sausage and Shalimar, Jacques Guerlain's classic scent, blend

together in kitsch Egyptian decor; out on deck, the surviving migrants smell of fish. The bystanders, meanwhile, comment as they film and take selfies: “ils ont le choix, regardez, ils sont tous noirs, c'est pas la guerre, c'est pas la Syrie”.

Darrieussecq eschews the temptation to make the migrant a modern-day Ulysses, associating him instead with Jonas, for which Younès is the translation from Arabic. Today's migrants have not won any war; nor do they take to the sea by choice. When interviewed about the novel, Darrieussecq has been quick to invoke Jacques Derrida, who said that unconditional hospitality is about improvisation, and that a society of mass surveillance, over-regulated and controlled, does not allow for that. Rose improvises, even if her hospitality is not unconditional: she takes in Younès when she decamps to the Basque country after leaving her small Parisian apartment. Once there, she records the narrative of Younès's journey - the physical and psychological abuse, the economic exploitation - to assist with his asylum application.

*La Mer à l'envers* is mostly written from Rose's perspective. It asks, in compelling fashion, how to write ethically about the migrant crisis and bear witness to lives whose destitution we can't possibly know. Rose is no politically correct heroine: she wonders whether her act of benevolence is self-serving, clearing her conscience, or just fulfilling a female - and perhaps colonial - fantasy of the older white woman helping out a young black man. Deploying pleasure-yielding gentle irony, she confronts her reader with two complex and haunting questions: how can we help and in what ways can one still be an *écrivain engagé*? ■

*Henriette Korthals Altes  
is a Research Fellow at  
the Maison Française  
d'Oxford*