

# Off the bookshelf

## Charlotte Monnier finds much to praise in a French novel about an inexperienced conference interpreter faced with intense professional rivalry



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### ***Entre deux voix* by Jenny Sigot Müller (Editions Mon Village, €15)**

When I heard that a book on interpreting had been published, more specifically a novel, it immediately caught my attention: it is not very common to find fiction on interpreting, even less so when the book is written by an interpreter. The title itself, *Entre deux voix* (Between two voices), looked quite intriguing. As an interpreter myself, I could not wait to read such a unique piece of work.

Jenny Sigot Müller's story is about a new interpreter, Sonia Clancy, who starts work in Switzerland. Unfortunately, a very hostile experienced interpreter crosses her path on her first job. They work with each other again and, as time goes by, things take a turn for the worse. Alongside the main story, the book contains anecdotes and reflections on life as an interpreter.

The depiction of an interpreter's daily life in *Entre deux voix* effectively demystifies interpreting. Though they give the impression of leading the high life, interpreters are modern-day nomads who do not have an office, do not always know the colleague they will be working with and who can have very different working hours from one day to the next. All of this makes it difficult for them, in the author's words, 'to belong to a place, to a specific corporate philosophy, to faces', though she insists that 'each trip is a gift'.

This book is also the truthful portrayal of the dreams and doubts of new interpreters, whose first job is a daunting prospect, especially when working alongside more experienced



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colleagues. In a line of work where reputation is key, the author mentions how the fear of performing below par is constantly at the back of every new starter's mind. Sigot Müller also describes how much young entrants to the interpreting market need to prove themselves, find their place and have to rely on the recommendations of colleagues to find more work. She depicts truthfully the psychological state interpreters can find themselves in, their fears, their feeling high or, on the contrary, very low.

The author outlines most of the difficulties interpreters have to cope with, such as difficult accents, fast speakers, untranslatable jokes, poor acoustics or a lack of documents that

would allow for preparation before an event. For conference interpreters specifically, she underlines the difficulty of sharing a very small and claustrophobic working space (a 'glass cage') with a colleague, if you do not get along with them. Finally, the book focuses on one crucial difficulty an interpreter might have to face: having to cope with a hostile colleague. As an inexperienced interpreter, you are not necessarily prepared for this kind of issue. However, the author also reveals the many rewards of being an interpreter, like being able to voice the thoughts of people who otherwise would not have been able to understand each other, being a person 'in the know' who delivers confidential information, helping good causes, enjoying teamwork with pleasant and open colleagues you learn from and, most importantly, helping others while doing a job you love.

### **A compelling read**

Personally, I really enjoyed reading this novel, and I could identify with the main character more than once. This is a very touching and sincere account of the life of a fledgling interpreter, which I suspect to be autobiographical since the author is an interpreter herself. Well written and to the point, the book's concise and straightforward style is well suited to the subject at hand. The only aspect I found at times unrealistic was the level of hostility from the more experienced interpreter, and the way she fights her corner. However, it is a novel after all, so a little hyperbole is allowable by the very nature of the book.

My advice? This book should be handed out to every new interpreter, especially those fresh from interpreting training. Not only is it a good novel, but it also contains the advice Sigot Müller acquired in her studies, mixed with anecdotes that give insights into the daily life of interpreters. I wish it had been published earlier, as I could have used it at the start of my career. It is also worth a read for anyone who wants to know more about a little-known and often misunderstood job. Oh, and 'that' interpreter? I have never met her and I sincerely hope she does not exist!

