

It has been a month since we were walking through Cișmigiu, and only now I am able to start my interview with you. At that time, you were surrounded by so many people interested in your writings that I thought to best delay our official conversation for a quieter time. I also wanted to read you before initiating our discussion. My questions are not just about one book or another, rather look at your personality as a writer, as a portrait of the creator you are. That being said, here is my first question:

Odilia Roșianu: *What does solitude mean for you? Especially because “The other one/l’autre is always the other one/l’autre, we are always alone.” What is useful and good in solitude? Or is it the opposite, is that something to avoid?*

Catherine Cusset: I grew up in a family with three siblings, between an older sister I didn't get along with and two younger brothers who played noisily. I constantly had to protect my space. During family dinners I only wanted to be excused and go to my bedroom (which I shared with my sister.) Reading was my refuge, the place where I could be alone and myself completely. The fiction world felt more real than boring, noisy reality. To read, to write, you need to be alone. Solitude is the source of writing.

I cherish my solitude but I dread its twin sister, loneliness. Being alone one evening, desperately trying to reach out to friends, feeling dependent, abandoned, and rejected, has always been my terror. Maybe this is why I constructed a double (or even triple) life: in New York, Paris, and Brittany. This way I have several circles of friends on several continents and I always feel that there is an escape.

Thomas, the main character in my novel, is a very social person and surrounds himself with friends and women who adore him and find him very funny, yet he dies alone in his small apartment, away from anyone he loved. What allowed me to write that novel was my intuition of his deep loneliness.

O.R.: *During our long chat in Bucharest, you mentioned that you have always chosen life, in spite of all that happened to you. And you wrote. Is writing a drug, a way to free you, a fight against something that could be unbalancing?*

C.C.: Writing is definitely therapeutic and addictive. What else is there to do after losing someone you love?

Writing is not just a drug and a relief, though. Writing is work. You're working with words, trying to give a form to the shapeless — a form that can be communicated to other people — replacing events that you can't control with a form that you can try to control. Writing is an attempt at mastery. Writing is an alchemy which transforms an individual experience into something universal. Writing is very hard, because you're constantly fighting against your own limits (in my case, self-indulgence, moralizing, and writing clichés). This is what I love most about writing: the very-hard-work aspect of it, the knowledge that you can always make it better, the endless effort.

My novel is based on a true story, on the life and death of a very close friend of mine, and I wrote it out of love, to give him back his life and to do him justice. I wrote it because I owed it to him. After the novel was published in France, I received many letters from readers who all told me the same thing: "I know a Thomas." Some people were even convinced that I was telling their friend's story. As a writer, nothing could give me more satisfaction.

O.R.: *What was the trigger that determined you to give up everything else and dedicate yourself entirely to writing, in a world where only a few can make a living out of it? How much did the US atmosphere play into your decision?*

C.C.: I didn't give up "everything else." Just my career as a university professor! It was not my ambition. I always wanted to be a writer. But I came from a family where women had always worked and supported themselves: my grandmother, born in 1908, worked as a lawyer all her life, and my mother was (and still is, at 84!) a judge. My mother had the utmost respect for writers but she was a pragmatic woman who convinced me that I should first earn the degrees I needed to become a professor, in order to earn my life.

I quit the academia two years after I published my fifth novel, *The Trouble with Jane* (also translated in Romanian). That novel received an important literary award in France and was my first commercial success. I was finally making money with my writing. I had a 2-year old daughter and found it difficult to be at the same time a professor, a novelist, and a mother, as each was a full-time job. Teaching was really the only one I could drop. The other two were not an option.

I don't think the US atmosphere played in my decision, or I would have started writing American novels — that is, plot-driven fiction. But I didn't want to write for money. I was never able of it. I need to feel free to write whatever I want, literary and personal novels which won't sell as well as plot-driven, formulaic ones.

O.R.: *Brittany is also called Finistere, which can be translated as “The end of the Earth”. It is the place you find a retreat most of the year. What does Brittany mean for the writer in you? What does it offer you? How much would you wish to live there, permanently?*

C.C.: I was born in Paris. My father is from Brittany, from Brest, and is Catholic like most people in Brittany. My mother is Parisian, atheist, and Jewish: I am both Jewish and Catholic, Britton and Parisian. I am much closer to my mother, with whom I have a strong bond, but my father transmitted Brittany, the love for Brittany, to me. I have spent every summer since I was born on the Crozon Peninsula, at the western tip of Brittany. The weather is not warm, it's windy, it rains often, the ocean is freezing cold, the landscapes are wild and beautiful. I love it. The beauty of nature protects us against the evil world we live in. This is the one place where I have always felt happy, an energizing place which gives me strength, a place where I can be alone without ever feeling lonely. I'm not sure I could live there permanently as it is very isolated, but I definitely need to spend a few months there every year to recharge my batteries.

O.R.: *Freedom, with all its nuances, seems to me defining for your personality. Not only because you were born in a free country and free family – certainly there are people who cannot or aren't somehow allowed to be free, even over there –, but simply because this transpires through your writings, your persona, your moves and your smile. Were there any compromises though? In life or creation? Have they impacted your way?*

C.C.: Yes, I am very lucky. Being able to live between several countries and to do what I like — writing — is a gift. As a writer, living in a foreign country gives me a greater freedom. It creates a distance that makes it possible me to look at myself as if I had eyes in my back, and it allows me to be totally honest and to expose even shameful aspects of me, since my neighbors won't read my books. For instance, I wrote a book called *Confessions of a Cheapskate*, in the first person, clearly autobiographical. I don't know if I would have dared published or even written such a book, which makes readers laugh at my expense, if I lived in France.

I am not entirely free, though. I've had to make compromises. I wrote a book that my husband asked me not to publish because its subject (he didn't even read it) was painful to him. Even though I thought that it was a good book, I left it in a drawer. I don't want to lose my husband. Therefore, I don't wish to hurt him.

So I feel free to write whatever I want, and I would never censor myself in my writing. But I am ready to give up publication, because my personal life matters more to me than fifteen minutes of literary glory.

O.R.: *You often said that your subjects, your stories, come from real life, even in your fiction novels: the truth is crucial in your work. The two books I read, “Un viitor strălucit” and “Celălalt pe care-l adoram” are known to be centered on people very close to you, truthful in almost everything. How difficult (or easy) is it to write about people close to you?*

C.C.: I find it easier to write about people I know than to invent fiction characters because reality has a complexity that is very difficult to invent and, as a reader, I often feel that “real people” are more interesting than simplified versions of them. Only great novelists are able to create fiction characters as interesting and complex as real persons.

The first real person I wrote about was my mother. I wrote a whole “novel” about her. It was a shock to her, she had the feeling I had dispossessed her of her life, but in the end she loved the novel (entitled *Family Hatred!* Yet it’s a book of love). But my mother is not fragile and I inherited from her the desire for self-knowledge without any compromise. The problem starts when you write about someone vulnerable — like my mother-in-law in *Un Viitor Strălucit (A Perfect Future)*. Then it becomes really tricky, because writing could reveal something that this person doesn’t want to, or cannot, see.

In *Celălalt pe care-l adoram (The Other One We Adored)*, the problem is different since I wrote about someone who was dead already. But my novel made people close to him angry. I was aware of the risk. When someone commits suicide, there is a lot of guilt. People close to my friend resented me for writing about his death. They had the feeling I was pointing the finger at them, accusing them not to have saved him. Indeed, I called the second part of my novel “To the friend whose life we didn’t save.” I included myself in this “we”, and I didn’t accuse anyone, I just observed that we couldn’t save him. If I pointed my finger at something, it was at our ignorance. My friend had an illness, a so-called “mental” illness (even though its origin is chemical and not mental), but I don’t think that we were aware of its seriousness until it was too late.

O.R.: “I have never ever put an ironed t-shirt on!” says Marie at some point in “A Perfect Future / Un viitor fericit” (character who subtly hides Catherine Cusset), a line which made me smile, of course, especially because it is not the only statement placing Helen’s daughter-in-law in an unfavorable light. Similarly, in “Celălalt pe care-I adoram”, Thomas’s young love, then friend, doesn’t enjoy a favorable sketch either. How much of Catherine Cusset – the woman – is part of the characters in the novels based on her persona? How do you see yourself looking from the outside, are you able to be impartial?

C.C.: Well, I am not sure that having never ironed a shirt in my life puts me in an unfavorable light! Everything is relative. I don't feel ashamed about wearing slightly wrinkled shirts. And I usually buy clothes in fabrics that don't wrinkle or do wrinkle but in a noble way, like linen.

It is true, though, that my fiction alias (Marie in most of my novels, Catherine in *Celălalt pe care-I adoram*) is rarely put in a favorable light. As I try to be as honest as possible, I have a tendency to accuse myself of many flaws. In my most personal novels, I never target anyone but myself. I have recently (since I published *A Catholic Education* in 2014) wondered whether I was doing this out of a Catholic desire to confess. I am not sure. I can only say that my main interest lies in lifting a tiny bit the blindfold which always blinds us about ourselves.

Sometimes (rarely, fortunately) the literary critics have quoted my own self-criticism to criticize me as a writer. What a coward thing to do! From now on, I may only write the most positive things about myself. This is an example of how critics can influence you.

O.R.: *Little by little we made it to your most recent book “Celălalt pe care-l adoram” (Humanitas Publisher, 2017) which brought you back to Romania. The interviews you granted during your few days in Bucharest tried to look at the novel from all viewpoints, bringing up more than once the fact you use the second person, ‘you’, telling the story. Reading some of their questions, I thought to myself that some of the interviewers were never faced with solitude. They simply didn’t seem to understand what talking to yourself means, questioning, analyzing – they assumed that the narrator is the one speaking with Thomas, rather than Thomas asking himself, struggling, relishing, despairing or overjoying... on his own.*

How difficult was it for you to write “Celălalt pe care-l adoram”? I am not thinking of the research and the actual effort of putting pen to paper; rather the feelings this return to the past brought in you and in the ones close to you, friends and acquaintances of the character? And how much have you actually talked to yourself (only) while writing it?

C.C.: I had a very hard time writing some parts of this novel but I loved writing it as a whole. I loved slipping into my friend’s skin for two years, thinking about him constantly, listening to the music he loved, wondering what he would think in such or such situation, reading Proust again because he knew Proust by heart, remembering sentences he had said, moments we had lived together, imagining others... He was on my mind constantly. I had a little notepad and constantly took notes in the “you” form but, as you say, it was my character, Thomas, talking to himself. I was hearing his voice, I had the feeling that he was alive. I loved so much writing that book that I didn’t want to finish it and leave it. Fortunately there was almost a year of promotion after its publication. The three years of writing and promoting that book have been very happy years, and I had to wean myself of this project by writing another book — *Life of David Hockney*, coming out in January. *Life of David Hockney* is similar to *Celălalt pe care-l adoram* in many ways, except that it is a happy story of success which doesn't end with a suicide.

O.R.: *What does family mean for the writer Catherine Cusset? Are the two facets – woman dedicated to writing, and wife and mother –, compatible with each other? How do you manage to isolate yourself to finish your books?*

C.C.: Totally compatible.

Isolating myself is not an issue. My husband is at work all day and I have only one child, who was at school and now is in college. I have the apartment for myself all day long. I love the separation between the solitary days (filled with writing, reading, swimming, etc) and the evenings when I have dinner with my husband and/or with friends and when we watch a film or a TV series. I also like cooking.

O.R.: *A Frenchwoman in New York City. You have always been and remained a French writer. Still, what is the American part in your writings? Have you ever sensed that France perceives you as an American writer?*

C.C.: I am definitely influenced by the American way of writing (pragmatic, direct, efficient, visual), but I remain French in my sensibility. I am not sure how I am perceived in France. Living in New York doesn't play in my favor as the French have an ambivalent relationship to the United States.

O.R.: *Literatura de azi, in which our dialogue will be published, is the first in Romania among on-line culturally-focused periodicals. I am asking you now to share your thoughts with our readers, especially given that soon, they may read within its pages my reader's opinion about your novel "Celălalt pe care-l adoram".*

C.C.: I feel extremely honored that my novel was translated into Romanian and was chosen by the Romanian students as the Liste Goncourt/Choix Roumain. But more than this: I feel Romanian. Not only because I have a Romanian husband and I wrote a novel about my Romanian mother-in-law. There is something about Romanian humor — something self-depreciative, derisory, sarcastic — I feel very close to (this is probably why I married a Romanian!). And literature seems to be still alive in Romania! Fantastic.

O.R.: *Thank you very much for having this conversation.*

