

A GUIDE FOR READERS

THE FUTURE

CATHERINE LEROUX

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY SUSAN OURIOU



*In an alternate history of Detroit,
the French never ceded their settlements
and children protect their own
kingdom in the trees.*



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Detroit photographs courtesy of Catherine Leroux.



QUESTIONS FOR READING GROUPS

HISTORY

1. History is often described as a story we tell ourselves about the past. How does Leroux's alternate history of Fort Détroit compare with other histories of the region?
2. What opportunities—and challenges—do you imagine are presented by writing a fictional version of a real place?
3. The children of the Rouge depend on each other for survival. How does their society compare with other depictions—in fiction, or in the real world—of groups of young people?

ENVIRONMENT

4. Climate fiction is an increasingly popular genre for novelists. Why do you think this is? What role do you think art can play in addressing environmental issues?
5. The children of the Rouge are distrustful of adults, but must learn to accept their help. How is intergenerational trust damaged—and repaired—in the novel? What role does it play in a time of climate crisis?
6. There are many elements of magical realism in *The Future*: houses burn down and reconstitute themselves, animals communicate with children, and myths come to life. How might the magic in the book shed light on our relationship with nature?

MOTHERHOOD

7. Motherhood is a common motif. A grandmother tries to solve her daughter's murder and find her missing granddaughters, and she's aided in her journey by a pregnant pit bull. What other kinds of mothering do you observe?
8. Gloria learns to rely on the help of her neighbours in her search for her granddaughters—her village. What does her journey, as a grandmother and as a character, teach her about how we care for one another and build community?
9. When Gloria finds her granddaughters they are faced with a difficult choice: to remain in the children's kingdom in the trees or to go home with their grandmother. What did you make of their choice?

LANGUAGE

10. Catherine Leroux is a translator and translation editor in addition to being a novelist. In Fort Détroit, language leaves its trace on culture, given the French history of the area, but language also evolves, and the children's language is as innovative as they are. How does language contribute to your understanding of the characters and communities in the novel?
11. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
12. What question would you ask the translator?

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR CATHERINE LEROUX

MADELEINE MAILLET: *Tell me a bit about yourself.*

CATHERINE LEROUX: I live in Montreal, close to a river. I'm a single mom of two kids. I work as an editor for Editions Alto, I do a bit of writing for TV, and I translate and write novels. I basically live in the realm of writing, other people's books and my own.

MM: *This novel depicts a dystopian future that is the product of an alternate history, in which the city of Detroit was never ceded by the French. In The Future, Fort Détroit is a French Canadian archipelago in an ocean of anglophones. What inspired this choice?*

CL: Initially it was a very practical writerly choice. I had written novels in the past that took place in environments that weren't francophone. In those books, it didn't feel right to give the characters dialogue that was close to the way I speak, language that was colourful or locally inflected. Though the reader was reading dialogue in French, the conversation, by virtue of the setting, would have been happening in Spanish or in English. For those novels, I felt I had to use a more neutral or international French, very distinct from the way I talk. To use slang would have felt like a conceptual transposition—an odd leap for the reader to make. After writing these books, I did not want to write another novel in which I had to restrain myself in dialogue. I knew that I wanted to set this story in Detroit. I

wondered how I could make it French? The answer almost imposed itself on me. The region was originally colonized by the French, by Cadillac, who was a fascinating character, a con man who invented a title of nobility for himself, so there was already an element of invention to the history of the area. This inspired me to write the novel as an alternate history of the city of Detroit in which the French never ceded their settlements. This allowed me to invent historical elements that served my purpose. Different characters in the novel are history buffs, they disagree and contradict one another, and this allowed me to create a history of the city that wasn't universal and flat. Because that's not how history works. It was important for me to show that history is dynamic and open to different interpretations, even if in this case it's a fictitious history.



MM: *A post-industrial Fort Détroit is depicted very lyrically and becomes the source of magic in the novel. What drew you to the rusted out landscape of this region and the spaces in between abandonment and reclamation?*

CL: It started in Montreal. I got the idea for the novel during the summertime when I had a new baby. I was walking around the neighbourhood because the only time the baby slept was in the stroller. It was a beautiful summer. I started paying attention to urban nature and wildlife, the flowers and grasses that grow in abandoned lots and by the railroad tracks. These areas that nobody is watching and no one is trying to manicure. I sort of became obsessed with these landscapes. That same summer, in the local park, they were showing the Florent Tillon film, *Détroit, ville sauvage*.



It was like a revelation. I realized that there's a place in the world where the urban nature that I'd been observing exists on a larger scale; where there were urban prairies and predators. The reclamation of the landscape by nature felt almost symbolic. I think that I was drawn to Detroit because very few people now doubt that we are headed towards an ecological catastrophe. It seemed to me that Detroit was like a crystal ball, a way to see what nature's reclamation of urban landscape might look like, and to also consider how we might help each other through a crisis and survive, much like the crisis of Detroit's depopulation after the housing market crash. I had read Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*, which debunks the idea that people turn against one another in times of upheaval, showing instead that history tells us people collaborate. That's what I had in mind when I created my little Fort Détroit community.

MM: *Gloria, the novel's central character, arrives in Detroit having suffered heartbreaking losses, the murder of her daughter and disappearance of her granddaughters. She desperately wants to find them, but to do so she needs to learn how to navigate a broken city that resists navigation, both literally—there are no buses and roads are no longer maintained—and metaphorically, of course. She is only able to begin to look for answers when she starts to rely on others. In a way the ethos of this novel is very different from other dystopian novels, most notably Cormac McCarthy's The Road, in which characters make their way alone. Can you talk about the importance of collaboration and care to your vision for this novel?*





CL: My initial vision of Gloria was that of a very passive person. When heartbreaking loss happens sometimes we are paralyzed. I think Gloria is a pretty passive person to start with, so the things that put her in motion are other people, her neighbours, and eventually she is able to begin to move towards her goal of finding her granddaughters on her own. I hadn't thought about responding to McCarthy and other dystopian authors but you're absolutely right, the trope is that when everything goes to hell, you can only count on yourself and other people are dangerous, you can't trust them, because they're going to try to kill you, or rob you, or rape you. I cannot read another dystopian novel where people rape each other. I'm done with that. I



want to imagine a world where women and children are more than prey. And beyond that, I'm not sure this dystopian idea is realistic. In an ecological crisis, I don't think we would survive very long alone. If there is nothing to eat and people are starving, the only way to grow food is in collaboration with others. No one farms alone.

MM: The children of Fort Détroit have established their own society in Parc Rouge, a formerly landscaped pleasure ground that has been abandoned to nature. They have their own laws and speak their own dialect. While their community is depicted unsentimentally, kids die from exposure and misadventure, they also act with tremendous



courage and tenderness. What inspired this kingdom in the trees and how does it differ from other dystopias like William Golding's Lord of the Flies?

CL: The children are mistrustful, but only of the adults, they trust one another and depend on one another and this support gives them strength in numbers. I was intentionally responding to *Lord of the Flies* because I don't think that novel realistically portrays what would happen if children were left to their own devices. Of course, I think there would be unfortunate accidents, their judgment is not fully formed, and they're going to make bad decisions and be ignorant of how to respond to certain situations. What *Lord of the Flies* seems to assume is that children are inherently evil and we have managed to civilize ourselves as a human race through education. I think that's wrong. Children aren't little angels or devils, they're people who are capable of the best and the worst. Even under the difficult circumstances these abandoned and orphaned children are living though, what saves them is their imagination, the fact that they live in play, they live in dreams. The world I wanted to evoke was closer to *Peter Pan*. That was an inspiration to me as I was writing *The Future*. After I'd finished the novel, someone sent me an article about a real life *Lord of the Flies* case, where some boys had been shipwrecked on a deserted island for a year. In that time they had not killed or hurt each other; on the contrary, they had helped each other out, protected each other, and when one boy broke his leg the other made him a splint so that the fracture could heal.

MM: *The wildling children of Parc Rouge are more decisive about how to live in this environment that civilization seems to have abandoned than the grown characters in the novel. Can you tell me a bit about this bold decision?*

CL: I was thinking a lot about intergenerational equity. These kids represent a lot of the best qualities of the next generation. They don't have time for excuses or half measures. By nature, children are radicals. The next generation is not going to be satisfied by signing petitions. They're going to take matters into their own hands. It's deeply unfair that we're leaving it to our children to be radical and to find solutions. We should have been radical. There's a kind of righteous anger with the children of Parc Rouge. Nobody took care of them. They were left with a mess. They should be angry that they have to find solutions to these problems that the grown-ups didn't try to address.

MM: *In many ways this is a novel about mothering, a grandmother seeks her lost granddaughters and reckons with the past, while at the same time in this dystopian landscape legacies of environmental devastation, racism and poverty have robbed people of too many of their loved ones and bonds of care need to be improvised between neighbours and friends to ensure survival. Was motherhood on your mind when you were conceiving of the novel?*

CL: One hundred percent. The book is dedicated to my kids. When I started writing the novel, I had been thinking about the fact that I brought two children into this world without giving much thought to what their future is going

to look like. Now I'm forced to look at the world differently. It's like my life was suddenly extended by forty years, because my kids are going to outlive me and their life span matters as much as mine. My responsibilities as a parent and my questions about the future were a huge part of the creative process. That's why, in spite of some sad moments the book is ultimately a hopeful one. That's the only way you can see the world as a parent. You have to believe that solutions can be found. It's a huge failure of our civilization that our understanding of time doesn't include those who will descend from us. Time was an important thematic concern for me in writing this book. We only see it as linear and short. I wanted to question that, and also explore other notions of time. Like the cyclical time of agricultural seasons as well as the cyclical nature of family, the way having children allows you to revisit your own past, to repeat the good things, change the bad ones. I also wanted to explore the idea of time as a spiral. This is the shape we should have in mind when we think about time, which is that it is both circular and always forward moving.

MM: *What are you reading right now?*

CL: I'm reading a manuscript by a first time author, Simon Dansereau-Laberge. His book is also an alternate history novel. He came to me as an editor because he had read *L'avenir*, and he was like, oh, here's another writer who deals with speculative histories. His book imagines what America would look like if Al Gore had won the presidential election and had created a "Green New Deal." ¶





AN INTERVIEW WITH TRANSLATOR SUSAN OURIOU

MADELEINE MAILLET: *Tell me a bit about yourself, and how you first got into translating.*

SUSAN OURIOU: Originally from Calgary, I have always loved languages and so, after high school, I left for France to work as a jeune fille au pair and study French at the Sorbonne. After that year, I returned to Canada, to Montreal, for a diploma in languages and literature from a Franco-phone CEGEP and then back to France, to Grenoble, for a Bachelor's in Applied Foreign Languages (French, English, Spanish). Once I'd returned to Calgary, I got in touch with the Canadian publisher Red Deer Press to see if they'd be interested in buying the translation rights to a Spanish novel I hoped to translate. They were and *The Thirteenth Summer*, my translation of *Planicio* by Spaniard José Luis Olaizola, was published a year later. Ever since, I have continued to write and to translate fiction (and some poetry and non-fiction) from both French and Spanish to English.

MM: *What attracted you to this project? Were you aware of Catherine Leroux' work before reading The Future?*

SO: Before translating *L'Avenir* I didn't know Catherine Leroux's work, but I had seen a wonderful review she had done of an earlier translation of mine, *The Body of the Beasts* (*Le Corps des bêtes* by Audrée Wilhelmy). It was a thrill to discover that, once Catherine learned that her longtime translator Lazer Lederhendler would not be

available, she specifically asked Biblioasis whether I could be the translator for *L'Avenir*. I read her novel and fell in love with it immediately.

MM: *The Future, set in Fort Detroit, is an alternate history that depicts what the Motor City might have become if it was never ceded by French settlers that is both dystopian in its setting, it takes place in the future, and anachronistic in the way some of the character's speak, the language bears traces of the city's settler past. Was it a challenge to capture and translate the way different histories and cultures register in the Fort Detroit characters language and sensibility?*

SO: I was struck by how, in reimagining history through a francophone Detroit—Fort Détroit—and acknowledging its Indigenous past and present, Catherine erased boundaries and opened new horizons for us all. In my case, that meant, of course, that French needed to remain present in my translation as a reminder to English readers that Fort Détroit was not the Detroit they know.

MM: *The children of the Rouge, who as in Lord of the Flies have a kind of independent society in the woods, speak in a grammatically free-wheeling way that is adapted to their decaying environment that is being reclaimed by the wilderness. What was your strategy in translating this distinct way of speaking the children have in the original French?*

SO: The children's sections were a particular challenge to translate since each child has their own take on a language



ABOVE and FACING: Catherine and Susan at Calgary Wordfest.

they have never fully learned, living cut off from the adult world as they do. I played around with various possibilities and, once I was ready to consult Catherine, one of my questions was what had guided her in her choices for the children's way of speaking. She replied that much of their language came from her memories of the way her own children spoke when they were little and still learning French. Based on her response, I revisited my translation and travelled back in time to the days when my girls were finding their own way through language.

MM: Could you speak more broadly about translation in Canada? You've been doing this for a while, and have surely watched the literary landscape change over time.



PHOTOS: David Kotsibie/Wordfest.

Any thoughts on the reception of translated literature by Canadian media and readers?

SO: What I have particularly appreciated over the years I've spent translating and reading is how publishers' and readers' horizons have expanded, opening them to publishing and reading both books in translation and books told from the many points of view that exist in our culture. Today's diversity of voices enriches us all.

MM: How was working with the author, Catherine Leroux, who is herself an English to French translator. Was the translating process collaborative?

SO: It was a genuine pleasure working with Catherine. As with all the authors I translate, I tend to avoid much contact about the book until I have what I feel is an almost-finished translation since many questions I have at the outset are often answered by the text itself and by my growing understanding of its sub-text. But, inevitably, a few questions remain at the end and, in the case of *The Future*, I greatly appreciated Catherine's careful consideration of the questions I raised, her detailed answers explaining her thought processes and, above all, the trust she placed in me to find the best translation possible based on her answers.

MM: *Lastly, what are you reading now?*

SO: As for my current reading, I am taking one last look at my next two translations before they go to print: the searing *Poetry Marching for Sindy* (Poésie en marche pour Sindy) addressed to one of the missing Indigenous women by Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau; and Fanny Britt's award-winning novel *Sugaring Off* (Faire les sucres).



DETROIT

I do buy books regularly but also, as the daughter of a librarian, am a weekly visitor to my local library—thank you Southwood Branch! I am blown away by the writing talent in our country. Some recent favorites (but there are so many others I could mention as well!): Cheri Dimaline's *Funeral Songs for Dying Girls*; Celeste Ng's *Our Missing Hearts*; Barbara Joan Scott's *The Taste of Hunger*; Deborah Willis's *Girlfriend on Mars*, Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars*; Tomson Highway's *Laughing with the Trickster*; and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. Outside Canada, I'd like to briefly mention US writer Anthony Doerr's *Cloud Cuckoo Land* and French author Anne Berest's heartbreaking novel *La Carte postale* (available in English as *The Postcard*, translated by Tina Kover). Last but not least, the anthology *Many Mothers, Seven Skies—Scenes for Tomorrow* and the collective of women who brought their one-act plays to the stage: Joan Crate, Cheryl Foggo, Linda Gaboriau, Tchitala Nyota Kamba, Sherry Letendre and Karen W. Olson (full disclosure, I too am a member of the collective, all of us bent on making a difference in the world for our children and for those to come). ¶



JEWEL

Praise for

THE FUTURE

“At the heart of Catherine Leroux’s extraordinary novel are the rising and vanishing lifeworlds nurtured by the Rouge River. The children of the Rouge are hunters and prey, remorseless, capable, indelible—‘wildings’ who are simultaneously custodians and seeds of the future. This ferocious, provocative dystopia is a dance of knives, and a deeply moving exploration of our decaying, adapting, ever-changing world.”

MADELEINE THIEN, AUTHOR
OF *DO NOT SAY WE HAVE NOTHING*

“What makes *The Future* hopeful is its imagining of new, organic, co-operative (but not egalitarian) communities... savage but caring networks: small, local, and while living close to the edge still managing to get by. It may not be progress, but it is adapting to a vision of the future that hits pretty close to home.”

ALEX GOOD, *TORONTO STAR*

“Leroux brings believability, poetry, and hopefulness to the dystopian narrative of Fort Détroit by steering clear of the many pitfalls of end-times novels... This permits the novel to imagine infinite small beginnings within the ending, and to show how destruction is balanced by the ever-present promise of creation.”

BRONWYN AVERETT, *MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS*



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