



**UNIVERSITÉ
DE LORRAINE**

ALL ARTS
LETTRES ET
LANGUES
NANCY

**MASTER 2 LANGUES ET SOCIÉTÉS
PARCOURS MONDES ANGLOPHONES
ORIENTATION LIVRES, TEXTES, MATERIALITES
UE903 - COMPTE-RENDU DE JOURNÉE D'ÉTUDE**

Estelle JARDON

Semestre 1
2018 - 2019

On Thursday 15 November 2018, a day-long seminar entitled "Le texte dans tous ses états : genèse, publication, traductions" ("The Text In All its Forms: Genesis, Publication, Translations") was held at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Lorraine in Nancy, France. Organised by professors Nathalie Collé, André Kaenel and Monica Latham from the research lab IDEA (Interdisciplinarité Dans les Etudes Anglophones), the seminar focused on promoting the strong linkages that exist between scientific research in book history, the different professional sectors of the book industry and authorial and translational practices. This series of lectures gathered different professionals of the book industry and shed light on almost every actor of the book spectrum, from the writer (Mark SaFranko, the 2018 American writer in residence at the University of Lorraine, who was the star of the seminar), through the publisher (SaFranko's French editor, Olivier Brun), several of SaFranko's translators (the scholar Barbara Schmidt and professional translators Annie Brun and Stéphane Normand) to the bookseller (Olivier Huguenot) and the reader (Estelle Jardon).

Olivier Brun talked about the different challenges that he faces as an independent publisher of *underground* American writers. Annie Brun and Stéphane Normand, both translators of SaFranko's short stories, exposed the main difficulties of translating the author's idiomatic American English into French. As a lecturer at Lorraine University and a professional translator, Barbara Schmidt gave a presentation on the ARIEL collaborative translation project of SaFranko's *The Suicide* into French and the different issues such a daunting task entails in terms of organisation, synchronisation and unification of the different translators' voices into one French narrative voice. Managing an independent bookshop in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, Olivier Huguenot detailed his daily work as a bookseller, focusing primarily on how non-translated English books are now increasingly requested by French readers. Lastly, as a young researcher in Anglo-American crime literature, whose corpus of study includes SaFranko's 2014 metaphysical detective novel *The Suicide*, I had the chance to conclude the seminar with an interview of the author during which we talked about his crime novels and discussed the state and possible evolution of twenty-first-century crime fiction.

Mark SaFranko's opening talk was, for me, one of the most significant moments of the seminar as the rare opportunity to hear a professional writer talking about his own works, his writing process, his successes and failures as well as the harsh reality that the vocation for writing entails. SaFranko notably described the genesis of *The Suicide* in light of several photographed pages of his personal notebook — containing all his ideas and preliminary notes — that he kindly agreed to display. Though published in the United Kingdom in 2014, SaFranko actually began writing his novel in the 1990s, a twenty-five-year gap which,

understandably, made it difficult for him to remember all the details of his own novel's inception and his past intentions. The writer's "raw material" constituted by the few pages of his "fat notebook" (as SaFranko called it) allowed him to retrace the progression of his own work in order to better explain the particulars of his writing process as shown in his typed manuscripts. This presentation thus provided the audience with an overview of the different writing stages — from the mere imagination of a story's time, place and characters to its mental elaboration, multiple re-organisations and countless textual revisions — which eventually morphed into the published book we now read, *The Suicide*.

If SaFranko's purpose was to discourage us from venturing into creative writing, he most certainly accomplished his goal with his unvarnished depiction of the writer's life. Indeed, SaFranko completely debunked the commonly-held romantic vision of the writer's carelessness and bohemian lifestyle. Being a professional writer is actually "a very solitary and boring life spent sitting alone in a room in front of the page". It is also a laborious and most often thankless work. When not suffering from the inevitable blank page syndrome, writing is a very long process for SaFranko, taking him ten to fifteen drafts before beginning to feel satisfied with his work, since

ideas are really generated, even refined, by repeated visitations of the canvas. People don't really understand that, how would they know? They think that writers generally write a first draft or get to a second draft and they figure that they're done. It couldn't be further from the truth! It's that constant re-visiting of the material that works. Every time you read what you've done, you generate new ideas and see it from a different perspective. [...] One of my favorite adages as an artist is: "no work of art is ever completed, it is abandoned". I think, that's true. You just get to a point where you can't work on it anymore, it's as good as you can do.¹

Considering that nearly eighty percent of what a writer writes will never reach a publisher's desk, such a heavy workload and personal commitment can only truly be undertaken by the most strong-willed individuals. Before being talented, a writer's best quality to succeed is perseverance. To further tarnish the picture, the writer is usually confronted with the controlling supervision that publishers and literary agents exercise on his work in order to insure that creativity is met with marketable potential. SaFranko unabashedly broached this sensitive issue that he personally considers as both the cause and consequence of his struggles for getting published in the United States. His novel *The Suicide* "ended up being rejected by seventy-six American publishers. It was almost signed by Ballantine Books, [...] one of the big commercial publishers in New York, but the editor [...] w[as]n't sure how many copies

¹ SaFranko, Mark and Estelle Jardon. "Writing Crime Fiction Today: Old Constraints, Contemporary Challenges, Future Perspective. An interview with Mark SaFranko." *Blog ARIEL* 28 Nov. 2018 <<http://residence-ariel.fr/index.php/2018/11/28/mark-safranko-on-crime-fiction-an-interview-by-estelle-jardon/>>. All subsequent quotes from Mark SaFranko correspond to this cited source.

would sell and that doomed it". The author also explained the commercial failure of several of his works in his own country as the result of the poor editorial choices made by his American publishers. For instance, the low-quality illustrations of his book covers doomed the promotion of his crime fiction and the misleading catch phrase "a love story" used as a subtitle to *Hating Olivia* — one of SaFranko's three 'Max Zajack' series of confessional novels published by Harper & Collins in 2010 — failed to attract the right audience for his novel. SaFranko implicitly highlighted the significant role played by the publisher in the commercial success or failure of the writer, since his editorial choices regarding the paratext and the clothing of the book are decisive for its sales. For, whether they admit it or not, readers always end up judging a book by its cover at the bookshop.

Although still undiscovered in the United States, SaFranko has a growing fan-base of readers in Western Europe notably in the United Kingdom, in Belgium and in France, where the life setbacks of his recurring, disillusioned literary *alter ego*, Max Zajack, were relished by the European reading public. The manager of La Dragonne (Vandoeuvre-lès-Nancy, France) and French editor of Mark SaFranko, Olivier Brun, evoked the various challenges that publishing an unknown American author in France represents today when running a small and independent publishing house. Fascinated by the publishing industry in which I dream to find a position in the future, I was looking forward to hearing Brun's description and views on his profession. Unfortunately, his presentation did not live up to my expectations as it concentrated on the modalities of his team work with his mother, Annie Brun, who graciously translated two collections of SaFranko's short stories into French (*Incident sur la 10e avenue*, 2016 ; *Léger glissement vers le blues*, 2017). The editor stressed the importance of such a convenient collaboration, one of his many "muddling through" strategies, which allows his publishing house to stay financially afloat. Although his emphasis on these financial considerations was perfectly understandable and not really surprising to me, it had the effect of a cold shower as I came to the depressing realisation that Brun's work resembles that of a bookkeeper more than that of a discoverer and promoter of literary talents. Brun has, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrated that minor independent publishing houses do not have the means to fully develop and have very little chance to be truly self-sustaining, hence the long-time hegemony of Paris-based major publishing houses like the famous Éditions Gallimard.

As my Master's dissertation is devoted to the contemporary metaphysical detective novel — or *whydunit* — I have included SaFranko's crime novel *The Suicide* (2014) in my corpus of study. Mark SaFranko's interview, which I conducted at the end of the seminar, constituted a great and rare opportunity for me, as a reader and researcher, to confront my

personal insights into this unconventional type of crime narrative with its own creator's intentions. Although SaFranko concurred with my classification of his novel as a metaphysical detective novel and with my interpretations in general, I could not help but feel frustrated with SaFranko's answers to my questions concerning crime fiction writing as I was faced with the intuitive writer, partly unconscious of his own literary effects. As SaFranko confessed himself:

so much of what I do as a writer is really instinctive. There are conscious elements but the vast amount of what I do in anything is purely instinctive or intuitive. Often, I'm stunned when people read something and start telling me about the dimension of something that I've done but that I had no clue it was there at all.

Admittedly, academics tend to over-analyse or over-interpret. However, regarding detective fiction, I cannot imagine how *The Suicide*, characterised by such a complex tangle of narratives which all dovetail with one another to reveal the missing puzzle piece of the mysterious suicide, could only be "character-driven" and "instinctive". For, in SaFranko's own words, "the instinctive part is what really gives you all the raw material and then later you must shape it". I would have liked SaFranko to tell me more about this background work, *how* he concretely "shaped" his ideas and the text to attain such a sophisticated mystery plot. What I expected from him was to explain the reasons why he decided to depart from conventional crime fiction in *Hopler's Statement* (1998) and *The Suicide* (2014) and to describe by which thematic and narrative strategies he managed to do so. I should have better formulated my questions in order to drag these precious information out of the author.

Thanks to this seminar, the Master's students of "Livres, Textes, Matérialités" moved from theory to practice as they had the chance to be concretely in touch with the realities of the main professions linked with books. Based on photographs of his own notebook and manuscripts, SaFranko's presentation allowed us to have another glimpse of what genetic criticism consists of. After five years of translation classes, I also personally found enlightening to finally meet various professionals of the discipline. Although I need to improve my interviewing skills, which failed to drag every writing tip and trick out of Mark SaFranko, this first-hand encounter was a rewarding professional and personal experience that I am deeply gratified to have been able to live.