Book review: the interpreter

Suzanne Glass
The Interpreter
Century Books, 1999, 290 pages

Dominique Green is an interpreter. She is a brilliant interpreter. She's too modest to tell us this herself, of course, but fortunately lots of other characters are on hand in the book to let us know how wonderful she is. Dominique is "the eighth wonder of the world", "a born interpreter", the "star translator" of the agency where she works (it's in Manhattan, so we can let the use of the word "translator" in this context pass), a "brilliant interpreter". "I know you're brilliant at what you do," says her boyfriend Paul. Actually, Paul is no longer Dominique's boyfriend at this point. Possessed only of some ill-defined job in finance, and conspicuously lacking in brilliance, he's clearly not a suitable companion for her, and is unceremoniously dumped in the book's only good scene. His replacement is Nicholas Manzini. Nicholas is a medical researcher. Not just any old medical researcher, of course: he is "a star performer", "a genius." He meets Dominique at a conference where she's working and he's a delegate. Naturally, her superlative interpreting skills are not lost on him. On a date in Central Park, he tells her: "Look over there. You see that runner. The one in the green shorts. See how fast and confident he is. He runs like you work...the other day...I saw a runner like that man over there and I thought of you. That's what you sound like in the booth." "Do I? Do I really?" quavers Dominique in reply, presumably wondering what kind of raving lunatic she's become involved with.

This clunking exchange takes us to the heart of the most serious problems that bedevil Suzanne Glass' novel: her inability to write decent dialogue or create believable characters. It's clearly not a good thing for a book which is, in many ways, about language, and whose heroine is (the blurb on the back tells us) "a genius with language" to be written by someone who handles English in such a way as to make Alec Falconer look like Shakespeare. American characters say things like "Don't talk rot" and "your name can so easily be blackened". Nicholas tells us that the yellow of his mother's dress was "the colour of the face of the red-necked grebe" (i.e. yellow; perhaps her lips were the colour of the legs of the yellowhammer).

But the book isn't all grebes and joggers: Dominique has a Secret. In fact, the word "secret" doesn't really cover the complexity of her situation. Luckily, being a genius, Dominique has more lexical resources at her disposal than just the rubbishly old English language, with its pitifully small vocabulary. After mulling things over, she tells us that "the ancient Hebrew word for secret, sod...far more accurately describes my load". (Oddly enough, sod, the English, not the ancient Hebrew word came into my mind frequently while I was reading the novel).
At the end of a medical conference, Dominique overhears (someone's left a mike on) two delegates talking about a possible breakthrough in AIDS research. Dominique's best friend Mischa is HIV positive. She longs to tell someone about what she's heard, but "'Confidentiality', screamed the voice of the Interpreting School director in my head 'confidentiality'. Break your vow of confidentiality, get caught, and you are out. Your vows are as solemn as the Hippocratic oath, as sacred as the nun's marriage to Jesus. What you learn in that booth must stay there or else your career is at an end.' " This is clearly a portrait of Patrick Twidle, but there is a serious point here: what is Dominique to do?

This brings us to the real theme of the book, and its author's views on the profession: interpreters, according to Glass, spend so much time in other people's heads that they have no 'voice' (used in the book to stand for independence, autonomy) of their own. This vaguely condescending idea is introduced explicitly into the book with Glass' characteristic mix of heavy-handedness and bad dialogue, as Dominique's need to speak for herself, to assert her own independence, to let friendship take priority over professional considerations, is clumsily hammered home. "Reserved and reticent Ms Green seems to be finding that voice of hers" remarks a journalist pal as Dominique begins to awaken; and, when she mentions the AIDS breakthrough to her (and Mischa's) friend Anna (thus breaking the sacred vow of confidentiality, by the way, although no one seems to notice), Anna gasps, "don't you have a voice?"

But this is all nonsense. Glass' implication, that the way interpreters think and behave while working automatically conditions the way we think and behave while not working, simply isn't true. (I've always thought that if there is a problem, it's just the opposite: that everyone I interpret ends up sounding more or less like me.) One of the best things about interpreting is that once a meeting's over, it's over- we don't take our work home with us. Clearly the AIDS business is an exceptional case, but Glass suggests that these kinds of problems permeate Dominique's whole life. As she sits on a plane, listening to an announcement by the pilot, she informs us, with that smugness that made this reader loathe her beyond description after about ten pages, "As he spoke in my head I could not help but translate his words simultaneously into French." The intellectual heart of the book, then, Dominique's need to find her own voice, is utterly phoney: she should never have lost it in the first place.

But, of course, failure as literature as it may be, The Interpreter has another claim on our attention. Suzanne Glass, the potted biography at the front of the book informs us, "became a simultaneous interpreter...and speaks several languages." Does she manage to capture what it's like to work in a booth?

Well, no, she doesn't. So vague is the book that it never even becomes clear whether Dominique is primarily a bilingual, two-way interpreter or whether she has one A language and several B or C languages, like most of us in the European Parliament. On the one hand, we never meet (or even hear about) anyone working in the same meeting as Dominique, but in another booth. On the other, although she's hired on page 71 to "translate from French, Italian and German," on page 92, in the same meeting, she's sitting next to a colleague who is working from English into French, so perhaps Glass doesn't know either.

One of the few things that did ring true for me was Dominique's personal and/or professional contempt for nearly everyone she works with. In the opening chapter, her colleague is "a spotty Liverpudlian" whom she despises for having holes in his socks, a grey handkerchief ("I felt repulsed"), and for making "mistake after mistake" when he works. In the mysterious meeting referred to above, Dominique's boothmate is the formidable Lisa Marks, "a brilliant but frightening and hugely disliked interpreter." Marks, we hear, is "truly quadrilingual", but since she comes out with things like "I'll be getting the brunt of the workload," one can't help wondering whether she
wouldn't benefit from spending some time in the UK to brush up her English. Her crime is to open the curtains in the booth while Dominique is working. "Vicious woman," thinks our heroine, who likes to work in the dark.

The colleague Dominique gets on best with is Marcus Schaller. Schaller is (surprise surprise) "a brilliant interpreter...he picks up every note and nuance...he is blind." (Being blind probably works to his advantage with Dominique because it presumably means he has no strong views on the subject of curtains.)

So how can I summarise my feelings about this pompous, badly-written, silly and irritating book? Well, it's difficult, but I think the modern English word bollocks does it best.

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**Recommended citation format:**