

## **Translations of French Reviews of *Le Chant de la Pluie* (Rainsongs) by Sue Hubbard**

Translated by Antoine Bargel

### **Le Chant de la Pluie: An Irish Renaissance Philippe Chevilly, *Les Echos*, 31 March 2020**

<https://m.lesechos.fr>

Having travelled to stay for a while in Ireland, beside the sea, in a cottage that belonged to her husband, who has died suddenly, a woman tries to mend the threads of her life. From this quite simple story, English poet Sue Hubbard draws a fine novel of grief and a subtle analysis of the Irish soul faced with the ravages of modern times.

The 'Rainsongs' are truly to be heard here, amidst the moaning of the wind and the sea, for Sue Hubbard's novel is set on Ireland's wildest coast, directly facing the formidable Skellig Islands. And the novelist, a well-known English poet, knows better than anyone how to make her words vibrate as she evokes unbridled nature. But the reader should not expect some long, ethereal lyric poem. This story of an English teacher who takes refuge for a while, after his sudden death, in the cottage owned by her Irish husband is never less than a realistic tale of our times. The writer is at pains to evoke the concrete details of a grief and rebirth, and to depict an array of profound and melancholy characters embedded in the everyday life of a faltering world.

#### *Learning to live again*

The Christmas and New Year holidays are not yet over and 2007 about to begin when Martha, a drama teacher, arrives at the icy-cold cottage and discovers a community suspended in time. The village of her late husband Brendan's birth is subject to all the pressures of tourism and property speculation. Ireland's green has turned the colour of money, its frenetic transformation personified by the unappealing Eugene, a childhood friend of Brendan's, whose slippery financial manoeuvrings would like to see the whole region concreted over. While reviewing the jagged story of her life with a husband who was not always faithful and a child, a little boy, cut down at a tender age, this broken woman is slowly won over by the energy of her farming neighbours. By the dignity and courage of bachelor Paddy, and the charm of young Colm, a rural poet who sings in pubs around the region.

Martha has much to deal with if she is to come to terms with the failures of a past more empty than joyful, learn to live and love again... and to be useful. The predatory Eugene turns up to harass her, as he is harassing Paddy, pressuring them not to stand in the way of his plans to build a swish seaside spa. Will she resist him? Through this sensitive, contemporary tale that moves forward in waves, drawing on a succession of leitmotifs, Sue Hubbard paints a fine portrait of a resilient woman. Through the character of Colm she also explores, with tenderness and acuity, the soul of an Ireland bending but not quite breaking under the assaults of unbridled neoliberalism – not unlike the Skellig Islands themselves, which, fortified by their own steep pride, have triumphed for thousands of years over ocean, wind and rain.

**Le Chant de la Pluie: Sue Hubbard's poetic and sensitive Ireland**  
**Baz'art webzine, 23 April 2020**

[www.baz-art.org](http://www.baz-art.org)

Now for a bit of foreign literature with *Le Chant de la Pluie*, the first novel by the British poet Sue Hubbard to be translated into French.

'Well, it's a long time since I've been here. It was the summer then and the place has rather complicated memories for me. But it's incredibly beautiful. I love being right on the edge of the ocean.'

After the sudden death of her husband, an art critic, Martha returns to their cottage in Ireland, facing the windswept Skellig Islands, to put his affairs in order.

*Le Chant de la Pluie* transports us to County Kerry in Ireland. I was quickly hooked, I think, by these new horizons and by reading a book that speaks truly and poetically of landscapes, nature and the sea.

In *Le Chant de la Pluie*, the subject of grief is dealt with subtly and sensitively (but never in a sentimental way).

I particularly like the poetic language of Sue Hubbard, an eminent British poet, sprinkled with a few words of Irish, as well as Antoine's Bargel's fine translation.

'Mummy where do the stars go in the daytime? Nowhere, darling, it's just that you can't see them when it's light.'

**Pierre Ahne, literary blog, 4 April 2020**

<http://pierreahne.eklablog.fr>

Kerry, in Ireland, is a really lovely place. And anywhere in Ireland, the whole country, is full of charm. I've been known to speculate on previous occasions about why we're so fascinated by this green land of harps: is it the country's location at the farthest edge of the Western world? its tragic history? the splendour of its landscapes? its many great writers (who have rather often been in a hurry to leave their native land)? something of all these?

Martha, too, asks this question: what is it that 'draws her to this small country'? For, like Sue Hubbard, she is English herself but clearly under the spell. Unlike the author, though, she is not a poet, but merely a teacher, and her husband Brendan, a gallerist, art dealer and specialist in contemporary art, has just died. He was the Irish half of their couple. An Irishman settled in London, but still he used to go and stay sometimes in the Kerry of his childhood. Now it is time to clear out the old cottage to which, for years, Martha has not wanted to return. As she feared, her return to this place will reawaken her memories of another grief, another death – that of their son Bruno, who died in an accident when still a child.

**People's lives**

Around this grief-stricken woman various characters make their appearance. Eugene, set on profiting fully from the Celtic miracle (we are in 2007), dreams of building a luxury hotel complex on these wind-blasted cliffs – he is not completely hateful, but not a very sympathetic character either. Paddy O'Connell, as his name suggests, is attached to his land and traditional way of life, and a

frankly sympathetic figure. Colm, now back on the land after some years studying in Dublin and a poet and singer in local pubs, is not only sympathetic but seductive.

Martha knows herself to be 'a prisoner of her past, but not daring to move towards an unknown future. She has reached that fateful point between being and nothingness'. And this faltering moment lengthens, extending almost to the end of a book in which we witness only almost imperceptible development, until the final pages, where small but crucial events lead to a denouement. Up to this point, the story maintains – and here lies its originality – a stillness as rocklike as the landscapes it evokes. This is a novel that swings between ethnography and poetry

The ethnography is where it works less well. There are many descriptions of rural life in earlier times, discourses on the lives of people 'who battled against scrub and peat-bogs to build those now-abandoned homesteads'. Then came modernity, with its buildings [that] disfigure the wildness of old'. 'Not long ago' the inhabitants of Kerry 'were peasants who took their milk to market on a cart, believed in fairies and in original sin, in the Immaculate Conception and in weeping statues'. A sad picture.

'In the charcoal-grey night'

It would be unjust, though, to accuse Sue Hubbard of a bland attachment to the past. Despite appearances, she distrusts the myths of the good old days as much as those of a bright new age. She has the young Colm recall that 'Ireland has always had its dysfunctional families, its sad and loveless lives, its sickness, old age, oppressive religion and its rain.

However, the real heart of the book lies not in these socio-historical considerations but, as its title (*Rainsongs in English*) indicates, in what makes it closer to poetry than novel. One short chapter offers us a curious *mise en abyme*. Martha suggests to Colm that she read his writings, and in a letter gives him her opinion – the grieving teacher speaks to the budding poet. And when she quotes him, it is the author's own work that is quoted – as a final acknowledgement confirms. In the words of Martha, Sue Hubbard addresses herself in the guise of Colm, expressing her own conception of the art of poetry: 'when you're describing the dark moors, the cliffs and peat-bogs, it's as if you're not [...] using symbolism, but [...] revealing the essence of things. And this essence [...] is the intrinsic individuality and innate solitude of every animate and inanimate thing'.

This 'innate solitude' is the real heart of a book that we may forgive for being perhaps a little too long and sometimes wordy. The godless spirituality affirmed here resonates with the frequently evoked mysticism that, in the high Middle Ages, led the monks to isolate themselves on the harsh Skellig Islands off the coast of Kerry. It impregnates the evocation of stony, watery landscapes, usually washed by rain, where 'death is close at hand', present in the 'ruined cottages beside which 'a solitary crow pecks at the carcass of a lamb'. Reading all this, we have the impression that, in Colm's words, 'life is only this moment / at midnight: a guttering candle flame / and a terrible wind / howling across a strait of wide water / like something lost in the anthracite dark'.

**Babelio (social network), March/April 2020**

<https://www.babelio.com>

Summary:

Dusk is already falling as they scramble over a dry-stone wall and make their way towards a small bay. 'Close your eyes, Martha, and don't open them until I tell you.' As they come to the edge of an inlet, he says: 'Now'. Before them, the sky is alight with blood-red and gold. Little by little, darkness descends, from purple to black, until the great ball of fire falls into the sea. We are on the west coast of Ireland, amidst a nature simultaneously wild, harsh and magnificent, where Martha, who lives and teaches in London, has come to reflect upon her life. Her Irish husband, who has died

suddenly, owned a cottage here, in the village of his birth, facing the disquieting Skellig Islands. He often came here – alone? – while she rarely visited. Here there is rain, seaspray, peat fires, incredible sunsets, smoky pubs where everyone sings the old songs. And encounters, often unexpected...

### **Alexb27, 21 March 2020 – 4 stars**

This is a story of grief – grief for a child, for a husband, for a whole life. Martha returns after her husband's death to the house he owned near the Irish Skellig Islands, where he came to write his books about art. Now is the time for her to reflect on her life and find a new direction. A very lovely novel, whose beautifully written story really resonates with the opening lines of Verlaine's poem of the same [French] title:

It rains in my heart  
As it rains on the town;  
What languor so dark  
That it enters my heart?

### **Chocoladdict, 23 April**

Does reading during this period of confinement make a difference? Do we read more if we have more time? Are our minds more open in these very particular conditions, where all is flux, uncertainty? Each of us has a different experience of this long banishment to our homes, depending on our professional or personal situation, our location, our finances. For my part, I've noticed a greater need to resort to manual activities (baking, drawing) than to reading. But then a few days ago I opened this novel, *Le Chant de la Pluie*, and I was transported.

I don't really feel like writing my usual simple account. I feel inclined, rather, to draw up a list of the things I particularly like about this novel.

Reasons for reading *Le Chant de la Pluie*:

- The title, as explained in a passage in the book.
- The wild and hostile landscapes in which Martha revisits her husband's death, in a cottage near Bolus Head, facing the Skellig Islands.
- The story, and the mystery, of the beehive-shaped stone huts on Skellig Michael.
- The desires stirred in me by the novel: to go and visit the fishing village of Portmagee, the abbey of Ballinskellig, St Ives in Cornwall; to know the smell of peat-smoke so often evoked here, to eat scones (that one I can do), to reread Benoîte Groult's Irish journal.
- The picture of an Ireland far from the postcard or folkloric cliché, an Ireland stretched between its history and the economic and touristic development in danger of disfiguring its countryside and exploding its house prices.
- The characters by whom Martha is surrounded, each of whom evokes some facet of Ireland.

**Cerber08, 27 April – 4 stars**

This book was recommended to me by my bookshop and it was a good choice. We're off to Ireland, the end of the world, to the Skellig Islands, with the return there of Martha who has lost her husband. She returns to tidy up, to sort possessions, to remember. It is moving and well written. For once we see Ireland not just through its landscapes, but the stories of its people are also told. We feel their solitude or isolation and all that goes along with this. A really good book

**Yolu, 5 April – 4 stars**

A sweetly, lightly poetic work that speaks to us of the grief but above all the rebirth of a woman who, thanks to some happy encounters and to the gifts of a wild and lovely Irish nature, finds new hope in life.