

Introduction

The residents of a Normandy village are experiencing an eerie night, and we readers are sharing it. *Combien de lunes* tells the story of an apocalypse where the Moon hangs dangerously near to Earth.

Laura El Makki prefaces the novel with a quote from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: 'Everybody seems to be doing things for this moment only; and never again.' She goes on to explain that this novel is 'pure fiction, while being very personal'. It recounts a night that reveals more than it conceals, and where all is possible – it's a night laden with imagination.

I think the writing in this novel is spellbinding, like the opener to *The Waves*. It's evocative and immersive, an auditory and visual experience. We feel the gravitational pull of the oversized Moon as a desperate bird struggles to gain height. We see the surface of a stream move in 'large graceful arcs' and hear a night's faint melody: a hooting owl, rustling leaves, 'the darting current with its old familiar noise'. We see suspended dust sparkling in the empty air and hear an echo that dies in seconds.

As the village's societal fabric comes unravelled, each protagonist undergoes a new stage of personal development. Certainties begin to crumble as to the status of each character, according to both their self-perception and our perception of them.

I isolate three topics, here: Characterisation, Community, and what I think *Combien de lunes* is about.

Characterisation

Through the use of simile, metaphor, and the evocation of universal experiences, Laura El Makki lets us into her protagonists' inner lives. We wonder at clouds that are like stories, relive the innocent curiosity of pointing at faraway things, and emphasise with the universal experience of missing someone who is no longer there.

Like any reader, a translator can (and must) look out for clues to character in the author's writing. Four of the novel's protagonists are painted especially vividly to me, as a reader who's looking to translate them: Ethel, Josselin, Gautier and Mado. The novel is arranged in chapters with a single-character focus, each dedicated to one of the first three of these four plus Mado's older sister, Anna.

My own reading of a character is going to be different to the next reader's, but if I can form an impression, it's a testament to the author's skilful character creation.

Ethel I imagine to be an articulate, independent person who, in her determination to be self-sufficient, possibly misses out on the things interpersonal relationships could bring her. Her humour is ironic and expresses frustration, I think, and so in my translation I have made her voice – stream of consciousness – alliterative (or consonant) and expressive of the personality I feel she has:

with a squeeze before absconding

doggedly determined and suddenly swears

over the cloth that was fucked now

Knackered, that as well.

Josselin, Ethel's partner, is stoic and taciturn. There's an undercurrent of violence to his personality. He does have the ability to empathise, though: 'Josselin... would wonder... what was keeping [his mother] here, what her life might have looked like somewhere else, far from the cluttered kitchen and mimosa wallpaper. She had learned to keep quiet.' As a teenager, he started a fire while sneaking a smoke on the toilet at home. His resulting facial burns caused him to become withdrawn and self-loathing:

he's as loathsome as the moon is pure.

Josselin was handsome when he was young. His mother was determined to see him 'go to university in America'. Does he perceive his disfigurement as having ruined his chances in the wider world? Or did his mother's overfondness and his father's roughness ('[He'd] be better off learning to use his fists, is he a fucking boy or what') shape his gruffness and diffidence as an adult?

you can make out [the bend of the road] beneath the heather. It sinks in valiantly and, thus submitting, consents to disappear, snatched by who knows what depth.

Gautier is a seven-year-old boy. His stream of consciousness is clearly a child's:

It's cold, the days have got shorter, and there's nothing left in the trees.

Gautier likes fact-gathering, and has a child's inquisitiveness about the world and the grown-ups around him.

Rekindle's a word he learned at school last week. You can say it about a flame or a memory.

it's a rampart if you ask him.

There's a mortifying moment when Gautier suggests to the adults that the 'pikeys' (*little, clever, a bit hairy*) might be behind the night's power cut: he thinks to himself:

Maybe, while tumbling about, they've broken the electric cables?

Finally, **Mado** (Madeleine), who is a couple of years older than Gautier, is also bright, a chatterbox with opinions. She has concluded that humanity is

a speck of a dust speck among all the other dust specks in the hugeness of the universe

Her interests are horses and – implicitly – geography and history and castles. She badgers her older sister Anna to reveal what she has been up to tonight, but she also has a secret to confide: she has been on internet forums and now believes her birth was the cause of her mother's present depression.

Community

The initial chapters in the novel are concerned with the building of individual characters, but from Chapter 6 on, the focus is on the building of a bonfire 'on the square they call main' (Ethel muses) while the villagers convene. Themes of community and societal cohesion come to the fore now, via the points of view of Ethel and Josselin.

Ethel performs her observations of the events with her characteristic wit:

The kindling has caught fire, the flames are unfurling; Josselin walks around to make them grow and all arrive from the road, all converge on this glimmer which, bit by bit, becomes a fire; *sticking to one another, they'll be glued together soon.* (italics mine)

Further evocative writing now follows, through Ethel's POV:

Ethel watches the silhouettes emerge from between the flames, faces reddened, hands extended to get warm; the kisses exchanged, the ashes aloft, and Josselin amid the specks: Josselin, who stares at the blaze, lulled, like the others, by this incredible stillness.

Ethel's only real focus as she watches this scene is her partner, Josselin. Josselin retreated into himself long ago. He regards his neighbour, Aldaric, as his only friend. Though seeing himself at its margins, Josselin knows this community well, and his contemplation of his fellow locals reveals empathy, but also a measure of the exasperation felt by an objective observer from outside:

The rule's a simple one, though. Everyone gets a chance to speak and you have to listen to what each has to say. But that's beyond them all. Everyone ignores the rule. Voices clamour, there's hand-raising, there's swearing, all those voices merging into one enormous one, it's spectacular.

[...] He looks closely at the crimson silhouettes, the people taking measure or settling their accounts. The faces look a bit mad. ...

What *Combien de lunes* is about

Societal cohesion functions best when the conditions are favourable. In this one night, the conditions have become unfavourable. The moon is affecting Earth's gravity. There is no sign of morning. Characters evolve as the protagonists grapple with the situation.

Hitherto, becoming part of a rural community has sat awkwardly with Ethel. Her unease and longing to develop as a person are voiced through her interaction with Adalric's wife, Suzanne. Ethel wants to be like other people, and Suzanne, to her, lives the perfect life. She watches Suzanne move among the worried crowd gathering at the bonfire, shaking hands and reassuring everyone.

Ethel looks on as Suzanne spreads her light, since this is what's going on here – Suzanne spreading her light effortlessly, without even being conscious of this power, nor of all her other parts.

As for Ethel's partner, Josselin, he seizes his moment as this disaster unfolds. Frustrated by what he sees as inaction and pointless debating among his fellow villagers, he overcomes his reticence and rouses them to point the finger at a common scapegoat, a woman whose arrival in the village apparently triggered all kinds of local disasters.

'Just bloody wake up! The hell, you all blind? Don't you see what's happening? [...]'
Josselin hears his blood pulsing in his palm, then near his jugular, and then his chest

is where it's all at. 'Look around you, look closely! Who isn't here?' He puts emphasis on the 'who', and they all get it. [...] Her absence marks her out; it's her undoing.

Later in the novel, Josselin and Adalric set off to find the supposed witch, and on the way, Josselin accidentally fatally shoots his friend.

At the moment the gun is fired, Gautier is at Mado's house. Gautier is trying to make out details of Mado's posters in the dark and marvelling at the large supply of brushes and pencils Mado is stuffing into her rucksack. She is so preoccupied that she seems not to have heard the noise, and her lack of interest or curiosity contrasts with Gautier's need to know whether it was a gunshot. Equipped with Mado's pricey binoculars and compass and some pancakes Gautier has put up his jumper, the children leave with Mado's bewildered mother and two suitcases.

Mado is the younger child in a well-off family and attends boarding school during the week. Gautier is the only child of a widowed parent. Mado has lots of material possessions but, since she is usually away from home, she is not close to her mother and so feels able to take command of the situation as the responsible adult, as it were. Gautier, despite what everyone seems to expect, does not especially grieve for his mother. The way Gautier sees it, life goes on; he and his father enjoy lots of activities together and he is well looked after.

Combien de lunes is also about these children, with their contrasting personalities: how they are presently being shaped by their parents and the adults they know, and the prospect that they will be tomorrow's adults, forming tomorrow's society. After tonight – assuming that anyone survives – will that society be a new one?

In the penultimate chapter, on the road, Gautier watches the villagers leave, their lives reduced to 'a plastic bag, one or two suitcases'. He looks up at the moon, aware that his father will be seeing it too. His thoughts are interrupted by a snap like wings beating, so at first, he thinks the birds are returning. There's another long sentence in Gautier's 'voice' as he contends with the wind to catch the object – which is not a bird, but a bit of paper. The writing on it is tiny and hard to read. The only words he discerns are: *the little branches; to live; the forest; within us*. He also deciphers, but doesn't know, the word *ramifications*: a clue which refers us to the very first poetic passage at the start of the novel. Gautier reads scraps of it here. There are five such passages – what is their meaning?

Each passage is adjacent to a chapter about Anna. Anna is nearly an adult – the novel opens on that theme – and her chapters contain some detailed memories. The novel is 'very personal' – so could Anna be (a version of) the author? Maybe, but there's more. In the third passage, the subject is apparently watching Josselin and Adalric make their way through thick vegetation towards the 'witch's' house. The watcher isn't Anna, since she is still back at home at this point.

So it's likely that the 'witch' is speaking in these passages: but there's another possibility. If Anna is a version specifically of the author of *Combien de lunes*, then – taking the passages' position (next to 'Anna') as a clue – the 'witch' could be the Author, understood generally. The fourth passage contains a hint: *if I wasn't here what would they do*

the forest within us of the first passage is a metaphor for things people leave unsaid. We read an appeal to take *questions regrets* by the root before *the little branches* – the *ramifications* – grow beneath the skin during *silence sleep*. We choose to ignore them, because our primary need is *to live*.