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“The Vivid Feeling of Creating”: An Interview with France Daigle

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY ANDREA CABAJSKY

FRANCE DAIGLE IS A FRANCOPHONE Acadian novelist, playwright, and journalist born in Moncton, New Brunswick, on 18 November 1953. Daigle obtained her BA from the Université de Moncton in 1976. She is the author of ten avant-garde novels, such as *La vraie vie* (1993; tr. *Real Life*), *1953: Chronique d'une naissance annoncée* (1995; tr. *1953: Chronicle of a Birth Foretold*), and *Pas pire* (1998; tr. *Just Fine*). Her most recent novel, *Pour sûr* (2011), is distinguished by its bold treatment of Chiac, the spoken French dialect of Southeastern New Brunswick. Taken as a whole, Daigle's novelistic corpus displays a preoccupation with such themes as urbanity, cosmopolitanism, identity, and the minutiae of everyday life. Daigle is the recipient of numerous literary prizes, including the Prix Pascal-Poirier (1991), the Prix Éloïze (1998, 2002), the Prix France-Acadie (1998), the Prix Antonine-Maillet-Acadie Vie (1999, 2012), and the Governor General's Literary Award (2012). I spoke to France Daigle at the Université de Moncton in May 2013. Originally conducted in French, the interview appears here in two versions: the original French and in English translation.¹



AC Congratulations on winning the prestigious Governor General's Literary Award for *Pour sûr*. As with your preceding novels, *Pour sûr* is as much about form as it is about content. At the same time, *Pour sûr* differentiates itself from its predecessors in its very dimensions. At over 700 pages, it is inspired by the number twelve. Its narrative, in turn, is structured around the exponentiation 12^3 and comprises 1728 passages, or the number twelve multiplied by itself three times. Where did the idea for *Pour sûr* come from?

FD When I first read that the number twelve was the symbol of plenitude, I was amused. I had already pretty much done twelve times

twelve, so I thought to myself, “twelve times twelve times twelve would be more of a challenge.” In fact, that’s what I wanted, to give myself an important challenge. I had read two books prior to undertaking this project: the first was *The Open Work* by Umberto Eco. It’s somewhat of an essay on communication, but I found that it applied well to the literary genres that interest me. And the other was by Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, which argues that if novelists want to continue to be reasonably important (he uses the word “pertinent” which I find . . . pertinent), they should not shy away from giving themselves projects that are a bit massive. But they also have to make the form of the novel itself more creative, even daring. They have to push it beyond its limits, so to speak. I was inspired by these two writers’ comments on the novel, while thinking that I myself was due for a massive project, if I may put it that way.

AC It seems as though you established a number of important challenges for yourself.

FD Yes. As with all my other books, I gave myself a sort of challenge related to the book’s structure. But in terms of challenges, this was a big one. I wondered if it was even possible, you know. A year into the book, with this idea in mind, this structure in mind, I saw that it was possible, although I hadn’t calculated how much time it would take. At a certain point, the thing has to start coming together, but in this case it wasn’t always easy to figure out what to write. I felt like writing a book that would stand out from the rest, as it were.

AC Is it fair to say you were on an intellectual journey with this book?

FD I have nothing against the books I’ve written, but it’s as though I felt they were somewhat piecemeal. It’s as though I wanted to put into this book a bit of everything I had learned when writing my other books. It’s a bit like the “sundae on the cherry.” It’s as though, with my other books, I was dabbling, exploring, but now I had all the tricks I needed to write *the* book.

AC As you mention, along with the number twelve, Eco and Calvino rest at the roots of *Pour sûr*. Your earlier novel *1953* was inspired by Roland Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero*, while *Pas pire* was inspired by

astrological houses and the shape and behaviour of deltas. How do you go about choosing the epistemological parameters of your novels? Are you inspired by what you are reading at the time?

FD Yes. Some time ago, I was writer in residence at the Université de Moncton. The goal of my residency was to explore the extent to which the novel and digital technology could work hand-in-hand with one another. It was just an exploration; nothing came of it right away. But at the time, I was reading Eco's essay on communication. And, in the end, the residency gave rise to *Pour sûr*, which, taken to its extreme, would be a digital book. I believe it could be digitized in the following manner: each fragment would have two possible sequels. You would choose one, and that would take you to another and another. Everyone could read it in a different way. If I had to do it over again, I might do it differently. There might be more than one possible version. For this reason, I told myself that, as an electronic book, readers could read it differently, based on their tastes. In the end, I told myself that there had to be a paper version, and that this one would be it, for now.

AC In *Pour sûr*, as elsewhere in your novels, you celebrate the participatory nature of reading. Was your goal to make readers feel more implicated in the reading process?

FD While writing this book, I said to myself that the reader should be able to read and experience the same sort of surprise or pleasure that I experienced while writing it. I wanted the reader to share in some of the novelty, or just the vivid feeling I got from creating, being immersed in something I didn't necessarily expect.

AC Have you read James Joyce's *Ulysses*?

FD No.

AC I ask the question because the points of comparison between *Pour sûr* and *Ulysses* are arguably remarkable. Specifically, both novels share certain Homeric qualities that make me wonder whether you were aiming to write a modern epic.

FD In fact, one of the works I had in mind was the Bible — but there, it was strictly for the numbers. The inspiration was largely graphic: numbering to identify this book or that section. Apart from that, I did not necessarily want to imitate the content of the Bible. The other

book I had in mind was by Georges Perec, a writer who always gave himself magisterial challenges. Perec is a prominent member of the movement known as “Oulipo,” which stands for “Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle.” For example, Perec wrote an entire novel, without using the letter “e,” called *A Void*. He also wrote *Life A User’s Manual*, where he describes the lives of all the inhabitants of an apartment block. His books are like puzzles. So, apart from the Bible, I had Perec in mind.

AC In an interview with Monika Boehringer in 2004, you describe your books *Sans jamais parler du vent*, *Film d’amour et de dépendance*, and *Histoire de la maison qui brûle* as forming a trilogy because, as you say, “they are clearly about a kind of exploration of form” (87). By contrast, in this same interview, you observe that, beginning with subsequent books like *La vraie vie*, you “tried to go further,” that is, “to write a novel, proper” (87). What does the “novel, proper” mean to you?

FD For me, the novel has a sort of sequence, a sort of chronological order, even if it’s askew. Normally, you wouldn’t just open a novel to any page and start reading. As for the dialogue, there usually is some, but I face another challenge with respect to dialogue which we can talk about later. I don’t think I’ve ever written a novel that builds toward a climax followed by a dénouement.

AC Those who have read your novels in chronological order can see that you’ve been on a transformative journey with respect to your treatment of Chiac, the spoken French of Southeastern New Brunswick that combines French with English and has its own syntax and grammar. Although Chiac plays a relatively modest role in your earlier books, it takes centre stage in *Pour sûr*, which effectively valorizes Chiac as a language worthy of literary treatment. How have your own thoughts on Chiac changed over the years to make a novel like *Pour sûr* possible?

FD Radically. They’ve changed radically. In fact, I’m faced with a dilemma I haven’t necessarily resolved. I was raised, like many others, to think that proper French was “true” French. As for Chiac, it was an accident, or a product of negligence or laziness or failure. But it was not to be promoted. It was a sub-product of French in this particular context, in this region. So, it was something negative. I wasn’t working towards writing in Chiac — not at all — while all around me there were Acadians, less inhibited than I was, using English words or writing

in a more spoken style. But I didn't feel I wanted to do that, either. In the end, it took me one, two, three — I don't know how many books; I wrote six or seven without dialogue. I couldn't write dialogue, and I knew it was because I couldn't decide which language to write it in. For me, it didn't make any sense to write dialogue in standard French, except where it might be applicable. But to make people from here speak in proper, standard French was senseless. A while back, I was invited to write plays. I did so and was able to coast along, because, for me, theatre isn't serious. With theatre, you're entertained for a night. So I permitted myself to throw in some Chiac — not necessarily a lot of Chiac — but, little by little, I was able to relax a bit when it came to Chiac. Even the books I wrote prior to *Pour sûr* have some Chiac in them, but nevertheless it's pretty benign.

AC Beginning with *Pas pire* and *Petites difficultés d'existence*?

FD Yes, although there's not a lot of Chiac in them. There's a bit more in the last one, *Petites difficultés d'existence*. In short, all of that emerged in *Pour sûr* because I finally realized that Chiac is not just a language, it's a mindset. But language and mindset go hand-in-hand. I couldn't separate the two.

AC In order for a novel like *Pour sûr* to be possible, Chiac has to function as a concept and not simply as a form of communication.

FD Yes! Yes, that's the brunt of it. Here, we've got intelligent people, normally intelligent people who — like everywhere else in the world where people go about juggling two languages and not making much of it — show that it works. And yet they can't shake the idea that, in the end, they have dug themselves into a hole with respect to language, because they don't have just one language, they have more than one.

AC Were you looking to resolve this dilemma in *Pour sûr*?

FD Well, I was hoping to resolve it for myself, but I didn't. It's funny, because last week, I was in my car listening to music. I had taken out an old CD onto which I had recorded some French songs I liked. I listened to it and said to myself, "Ah, there are so many beautiful songs," you know, the French ones. And so I said to myself, "I will never speak a word of Chiac again in my life." It's as though, all of a sudden, I fell totally in love with the French language. Twenty-four hours later, I was

with a group of Francophones. We were talking and Chiac just came out naturally, you know? No more than was necessary. But it was a part of who I was in that context and how I could express myself and how, it would seem, I should have expressed myself. It's not as though I didn't know the right words in French. It's that, sometimes, who you are has to appeal to those words, the English words. It's very strange.

AC Your characters seem also to be caught up in their own evolving responses to Chiac. I have in mind a passage in *Petites difficultés d'existence* where Carmen admits to Terry that her attitude towards Chiac has changed ever since the birth of their baby boy, Étienne. And in *Pour sûr*, Carmen continues to be preoccupied by the matter of Chiac versus "proper" French. Do your characters function in some ways as your mouthpieces or are their responses to Chiac uniquely their own?

FD I once heard someone say that "it's not nice when children speak Chiac." So, I thought about it and said to myself, "it's true." And that made me think of the time when I was on a plane. Ahead of me there were a man and a girl, a little girl, I don't know, four or five years old. We were on the plane, on our way to Europe, and it was getting dark pretty fast. Then the little girl, who was sitting in the window seat, said to her father, "Ah, it's dark out!" She said, "it's day and night!" Okay, those may be simple words, but the point is she could say them correctly. It's almost as though it were a kind of gift to be able to say correctly "it's day and night." And truly, when that woman said that "it's not nice when children speak Chiac," it made me think of those simple words, this simple incident that says to me, "Yes, all the same, it *is* good when children know how to say things using the words they should." Now, then, how to manoeuvre in this linguistic basin of Southeastern New Brunswick? French should be somewhat complete and functional and beautiful, but that doesn't mean we have to eliminate English words from our culture, which is also American and Canadian and Anglophone. So, it's a bit deluded to think that we can live here without being touched by . . . yes . . . this English language.

AC I think of what Michel Tremblay has done for Joual, the working-class French dialect of Montreal. Do you think that Acadians in Southeastern New Brunswick find themselves in a similar situation to Montrealers in this respect?

FD Now, then, I never thought of it like that and I don't necessarily see the connection. That's not to say there isn't one.

AC It goes without saying that your work has been extremely well received in French Canada. But it is also worth highlighting that your reception is far-reaching, from Atlantic Canada to North America, and beyond. Do different readers have different expectations of your work depending on where they come from?

FD Not really, not really. I think that people living outside of Quebec . . . how should I say this? Readers outside of Quebec are quite happy that a book like *Pour sûr* has had success because it kind of represents all of Francophone culture that is not from Quebec, but which strives nevertheless to exist.

AC Has your reception in English-speaking New Brunswick, and particularly in Moncton, been similar to your reception in Acadie?

FD You have to be bilingual to grasp what is going on in my books. With the Anglophones, it remains "two solitudes." I'm not talking about the stratum that is educated or interested in literature; you know, there is a small percentage there. But, broadly speaking, I find that the French read French authors, the Quebeckers read Quebeckers, the English Canadians read English Canadians. I mean to say that we are not all Kunderas who can be read by everyone.

AC Half a dozen of your novels have been translated into English, most of them by Robert Majzels.

FD Yes, except for the first one, which was translated by Sally Ross of Halifax.

AC That's right. Sally Ross translated *La vraie vie*, which was published as *Real Life*. Majzels himself won the Governor General's Literary Award for his translation of *Pas pire*, entitled *Just Fine*. His translation of *Pour sûr*, which appeared in June 2013 as *For Sure*, was a finalist for the GG. Majzels has changed his approach to translating Chiac into English from one book to the next. As with your own novels, Chiac has come to occupy an increasingly integral place in Majzel's translations. Have the two of you discussed his evolution as your translator?

FD Yes, yes! For example, there wasn't much Chiac in *Pas pire*. But in *Petites difficultés d'existence*, there he was able to integrate some

French into the English sentences, adding the same number of words as appeared in the original. If there were twelve English words in the original, then he would place twelve French words in the translation, you see. Perhaps not in the same places and not using the same words. But as there was not a lot of Chiac in the first place, it could be done. But then with *Pour sûr*, there was too much. English readers can only tolerate so much, and that's understandable, but that's also for the editor to decide, you might say. And then I was worried that if he didn't put enough French in there, readers might forget that the book came from a Francophone milieu. But, finally, in reading the translation, I did indeed see that the French was everywhere. He ended up by composing a type of English that's a bit "Maritimer," but not too much, with the verbs conjugated more or less as they are in Chiac — you know, "j'avions, j'étions." I look forward to seeing how it's received. If it poses too many problems, people may back away from it. But that was his own challenge, to create an English that wasn't ordinary.

AC That's a big challenge.

FD Early on, when I saw the translation, I thought to myself, "Ah, I just won't get involved in it." Because, you know, the translator has a lot of things to consider when he embarks on a book project. So, if you've got someone behind you saying, "Ah, that, that, that," it becomes impossible. I didn't want to get involved. But in the end, upon reading it, I accepted his style and suggested only some things here and there.

AC The Acadian literary critic Raoul Boudreau has described Acadie as "doubly peripheral" in relation to the cultural centres of Quebec and France (33). The English-Canadian critic Tony Tremblay has argued that the reception of Maritime literature has been predominantly determined by aesthetic standards imposed on it by central Canada (36-38). This notion of "centre versus periphery" seems omnipresent in the region's literary culture in French and English, alike, although it is arguably absent from your body of writing. How do you see yourself responding to the idea of "periphery"?

FD I see it as an anchor. We are all peripheral to someone, but we are nevertheless anchored here. I have to say that all the references — as in *Pour sûr* — all the references to world literature, to France — less so to Quebec, but they are there nonetheless — I think that they are there

to show that, while we may be a periphery, we don't live in the sticks. We're not in the middle of the jungle, you know? I may have overdone it. You know how they say that working women who have families work three times harder just to prove themselves? On a literary level, it's a little like that.

AC I have in mind your characterization of the Zablonkis, for example, the couple that moves from Baltimore to Moncton. Upon arrival, their response to Moncton is one of amazement. There is a great deal of symbolic significance to such characterization, to such a gesture.

FD It may be a gesture, but it's also what I believe. I've known a lot of people who were not originally from Moncton but, having lived here, have come to appreciate many things about it. Nevertheless, you sometimes just have to put it into writing.

AC That kind of writing effectively declares that Moncton not only exists, there's also a rich cultural life here. The character Zed, for instance, listens to CDs by *Les païens*, while Carmen reads poems by Gérard Leblanc —

FD Yes, that's right, you have to lay it out plainly. I remember when I finished writing — I think it was *Pas pire* — I was interviewed by Marie-France Bazzo of Radio Canada in Montreal. She had read the book and said to me: "Ah, but I myself would like to move to Moncton!" That made me happy in the sense that, I thought to myself, well then, we *can* be the envy of someone. I mean, that's pretty major.

AC I've always enjoyed the way that *Pas pire* portrays Moncton: the Petitcodiac River in all its splendour, as well as the community you envision adjacent to Tidal Bore Park.

FD Yes, that little community, yes. There's an empty lot there right now. I've waited years for them to build my community! (*Laughs*)

AC I've always suspected that that imaginary community contained a subtle message intended for our municipal politicians.

FD Yes! Yes! To me, there is a message, but you have to be able to grasp it, you know. It's all about money. But listen, there's still a hustle and a bustle here. Like the city of Dieppe, the way that Dieppe is developing, you know, it's become a lively community.

AC Do your recurrent characters, such as Terry and Carmen or the Zablonskis, leave you alone between novels or do they continue to come to mind?

FD Right now, everything is pretty quiet. Since I finished *Pour sûr*, everything has been calm. I had the rudiments of a new book, but I pushed it out of my mind and, since then, there's been nothing. It's like everything is in its place.

AC Is there no new project on the horizon?

FD You could say that I'd like to work on something new, but I don't know what, and I'm not rushing things, either. I'm waiting to see how things go. My next project might be more of a play on the two languages. But then, you see, it risks becoming one of those books written for everyone and no one at the same time. It might not find an audience, because it is immersed in the two languages. At the same time, there may be an interesting "mix-and-match" to be done there.

AC Another challenge?

FD Yes, absolutely, and it feels like I'm more drawn in that direction at the moment. We'll see.

NOTES

¹ My translation. I would like to thank my research assistant, Delaney Clarke, for preparing a working version of the translation.

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