



2025 French-American Foundation Translation Prize

Finalist Interview with Ruth Diver, translator of *A History of the Big House* by Charif Majdalani (Other Press)

Q: What did you enjoy most about translating *A History of the Big House* by Charif Majdalani?

Ruth: There was so much to enjoy about translating Charif Majdalani's *A History of the Big House* that it's hard to choose. I had already worked with the author, on his *Beirut 2020* journal, and it was fascinating to learn about his family history in Lebanon and the ways it intersected with world history. The novel is set around the turn of the century – the 19th to the 20th, that is – and I began translating it at a time when our 21st century was starting to unravel with the Covid-19 pandemic. The novel offered both the solace of an escape into a lost world as well as the tonic of a vast historical perspective. The prose was such a delightful challenge too, with its long, fluid, arabesque-like sentences. What I most loved about the book – which I read in its entirety for the first time as I was working through the first draft of my translation – was the way in which the author handled gaps in the historical record, by taking the readers along with him in his process of imagining the various possibilities and reconstructing the events needed to fill those gaps.

Q: In addition to translating from French, you also translate from German and Russian. How have you had to adapt your translating strategies between languages?

Ruth: Although I have done commercial translation from my other languages, I have published literary translations only from French – so far. As a bilingual New Zealander who grew up in France and was educated in the French system, this seemed the natural choice. But I would love the challenge of taking on a project from German, having lived in Germany and Austria for many years, or from Russian, my first literary love. I don't imagine that my strategy would be much different in those other languages: get down a rough first draft, make sure all the elements are there in the English, then polish, polish, polish.

Q: The French-American Foundation Translation Prize seeks to honor translators and their craft, and recognize the important work they do bringing works of French literature to Anglophone audiences. What does being named a finalist for this prize mean to you, and, in your own words, why does a Prize like this matter?



Ruth: Being named as a finalist for the French-American Foundation Translation Prize has been a great thrill, especially as I find myself in the company of colleagues whose work I admire and respect. It's so easy to forget, when reading a work in translation, that every word, every punctuation mark, every paragraph break represents a decision on the part of the translator. Our task is a painstaking, often under-recognized process – a delicate art of interpretation. Translation prizes like this one allow us to step out from behind our desks and into the limelight for a moment. But they matter most because they build bridges between cultures, and not just between the USA and France – for let us not forget that French is not only the language of France but an official language in 26 countries, and one widely spoken in many others all over the globe. A prize like this one brings the wide Francophone world to readers of English, including, to mention a few of this year's finalists, Réunion Island, Québec and Switzerland, as well as Charif Majdalani's Lebanon.