



2025 French-American Foundation Translation Prize

Finalist Interview with Alison Strayer, translator of *The Use of Photography* by Annie Ernaux (Seven Stories Press)

Q: What did you enjoy most about translating *The Use of Photography* by Annie Ernaux?

Alison: Basically, I think it's always the same enjoyment (though the process is not all pleasure – hope I'm not nitpicking), which is that of being inside an author's voice for an extended period of time; two voices, in this case, because the book is written by Ernaux and her then-lover Marc Marie. Ernaux, in *L'atelier noir*, alludes to her process as a "corps à corps avec l'écriture" – a hand-to-hand combat with writing. I cannot think of a better way of describing translation (I am referring here to literary, rather than technical translation) than as a *corps à corps* with language. And the gratification derived from that combat, is a huge, visceral sense of closeness to, engagement with language and an author's voice.

As for translating *The Use of Photography*, specifically, it would take too long to go into the linguistic aspects of enjoyment, which are many and double-sided (i.e. not exactly pleasure, but valued experience). But I can say that I very much enjoyed the love story, which was quite different from any other love story depicted in the books I have translated by Annie Ernaux in the past. It was a love against death story (there is a real possibility that she will die, more than she really spelled out in the book). I loved the details, not only those contained in the photo descriptions but the details of life outside the photos. There is a great deal of sensation in the book, a lot of weather, temperature – the palpable heat of the tragic canicule of 2002, the heavy humidity of the cluttered house of Marc's late parents; the rain of Brussels, the sun of Venice. There is food, fresh-cut lawn, bees buzzing in the chimney, many many colors and textures (clothes, furniture); there is the Kyo whose cat-presence is very tangible. There is the pervasive (rather than emphatic) fact of Annie's malignant breast tumor, the markers on her skin to guide the radiation treatments, an awkward chimo harness to be worn, the loss of her hair. There is the US invasion of Iraq on the radio, Annie's ineffectual peace banner, the cries from the great demonstration in the street below her room at the Pasteur institut – so many precise time markers side by side with the more intemporal, sensorial ones, the weather, lights and shadows, colors, food, music, sex. I very much enjoyed "being inside" of all that as I worked.

Q: *The Use of Photography* uses both photography and the written word as storytelling mediums. How did you navigate translating the various narrative tools that Ernaux uses in her book?

Alison: In *The Use of Photography*, the narrative tools are multiplied because the book has two authors, two narrators. This required constant vigilance. The distinct



features of each writer's voice, the language used, had to be identified and conveyed. Each author approached their "chapter" differently (the process, in short, was this: separately, they wrote about each of the fourteen photos they'd chosen together, but never saw each other's writing until the book was in the editing stage). They often did not begin the "chapter" with the description, but with a memory, or a reflection, for example. It was fascinating to see the twists and turns – the path, the trajectory – of their thinking as the chapter unfolded towards, or around, and then away from its nominal subject, the photo.

While translating, I never looked at the photos – well, maybe two or three times, but came away no more enlightened. In the original French edition I was using for reference, the photos had very poor definition. I only really saw those photos once the original color plates were sent to me by .jpg, long after I'd finished the translation. All this to say that I worked completely from the text, that is, from the diary entries of Annie Ernaux and Marc Marie. The photos I "saw" (and was immersed in) while translating were the ones that developed and kept on developing in my mind, based on the authors' words.

In short, from the start, I was very much engaged in their project of describing the photos as closely as possible, to convey them as "still lifes", to use Annie Ernaux's expression: to render both the individual elements of the images as well as the impressions created by the whole. I stayed very close to their sentence structure, looked for English equivalents in terms of register, imagery, etc. (this mirrored the task of respecting and conveying the distinctions between the two voices). The photos grow increasingly abstract as the book goes on, so the translator really has to depend on the authors' turns of phrase, similes, associations and images. And finally, there's the stage (though this part of the work always starts of its own accord) of working on the English rhythm - rhythm always contains and transmits a great deal of meaning, I find. Rhythm was always there, but, naturally, for a long time in the translation process, it was governed by the native cadences of French.

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?

Alison: While it is a privilege to share a translation prize nomination with the writer of a book, it is a very special honor to be recognized, solo, as a translator.