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## Interview: Emma Ramadan on Translating Anne Garréta's Not One Day



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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This article is part of a series of interviews with the translators of the books on the [Albertine Prize 2018](#) shortlist.

Emma Ramadan is a literary translator based in Providence, RI, where she co-owns [Riffraff](#), a bookstore and bar. Her translations include Anne Garréta's *Sphinx* and *Not One Day*, Fouad Laroui's *The Curious Case of Dassoukine's Trousers*, and Anne Parian's *Monospace*. Her forthcoming translations include Virginie Despentes' *Pretty Things*, Brice Matthieussent's *Revenge of the Translator*, and Marcus Malte's *The Boy*.

**You translated Anne Garréta's first book, [Sphinx](#), into English thirty years after it was written, and now [Not One Day](#), fifteen years after it was written. Could you talk about each book's relevancy when it was published years later in English? Do you think the public reads the books differently with the time gap?**

I think a part of why *Sphinx* was so well-received when it came out in English in 2015 is that it came out at a time

when in the US we were finally starting to have real

conversations around gender identity, gender fluidity, false binaries, all of these subjects were rising to the forefront. People thinking over these things weren't confined to silence, their questioning was embraced and celebrated. As opposed to when Garréta originally tried to publish the book in 1986 and it was rejected from a certain French publishing house for being seen as too vulgar. *Sphinx* is the kind of book that lets you project yourself onto the characters no matter how you identify, and there's something so special and so rare about that, and people are hungry for that right now.

*Not One Day* fits nicely into the category of literary, feminist, intellectually engaged memoirs finding increasing popularity right now. There are many women changing what we think of as "confessional" writing - Maggie Nelson with *Bluets* and *The Argonauts*, Sheila Heti with *How Should a Person Be...* These women writers are redefining what it means to write about oneself, and I think people are really receptive to that right now.

**I read an interview in which Garréta said that during your translation of *Sphinx* she "couldn't take that book any longer, and I went into one of my modes, which is radio silence. And Emma finished the job all by herself, and bravely." How was your collaboration on this recent work with Garréta, because each time she has been required to revisit books she wrote years ago?**

My collaboration with Anne Garréta went much further on my translation of *Not One Day* than it did on *Sphinx*, because Garréta was much more comfortable revisiting *Not One Day* than she was revisiting *Sphinx*. She had written *Sphinx* when she was 23, it was her first book, and it was painful for her to go back and look through it. All she saw were the places that made her cringe, which I'm sure most writers can relate to. At the beginning of my time translating *Sphinx*, Anne was generous enough to meet with me once a week over steak and wine, talk about the book and its inspiration in a general sense, look over the first few pages to see if the voice was right, but then, as she said, radio silence. I translated the book without her help from there.

For *Not One Day*, I started translating the book, Garréta and I had a few Skype calls where we went over specific questions I had and she walked me through her thinking on a few subjects, some references I might have missed, etc. Particularly in the first and last sections which are deeply philosophical. And eventually, once I'd produced a more polished translation draft, she read through it and gave me feedback and suggested changes. Garréta's

involvement was especially valuable for a book like this that's so personal; it's important to be able to tune into both her emotions and her thought patterns. And who better to help me achieve that than Garréta herself?

*Anne Garréta's Not One Day*

**In *Sphinx*, the gender of the protagonists is unclear, whereas in *Not One Day* the focus is on women. Did you feel like you were in a female universe when translating *Not One Day*?**

Yes and no - I think Anne Garréta's universe is a little less binary and a little more inclusive than male/female. Most of the chapters focus on women, but there's a chapter about a love affair with America, and a chapter about someone who identifies as a woman but biologically is not, the erotic desire of a mysterious secret admirer—of the unknown. Mostly I felt like I was in Garréta's universe, which is quite particular and becomes all-consuming, a universe with so many possibilities that is constantly pushing open your worldview.

***Not One Day* is deeply intellectual, yet describes desire, something so deeply physical as well. When you were immersed in the work, did you feel like you were working on two different planes?**

For me, the book is less physical and more emotional. We're reading Garréta's memories, her real life experiences, her painful recollections. When viewed through the prism of memory, desire in this book turns into something raw and emotional rather than physical. The sexiness is sapped out of it and instead the memory of boredom or hurt floods these experiences. But yes, there is a meld between that vulnerability of opening yourself up to memory, and the intensely intellectual, philosophical realm that Garréta thrives in. It may seem like the two planes are at odds, but I don't think one can exist without the other in Garréta's writing, which is what makes it so captivating, and real.

**What stands out the most to you in terms of originality in *Not One Day*?**

Apart from the melding of the intellectual and the emotional — there's of course the constraint. This is effectively a diary, an outpouring of emotion and memory and thought, written without going back and making changes, exactly as these events are remembered in the moment, so Garréta says in the introduction. But there's a catch: we find out at the end that one of the chapters isn't real, is fiction. And so we as readers are suddenly in the realm of suspicion. What we thought was a vulnerable, no holds barred memoir in fact has a protective shield over it.

One of the chapters is fake, so any one of them can be fake.

So can we really trust in the emotions laid out in the book? How do we connect to a book like this, when the chapter we might have related to most could be made up? What does this mean for the book, and why insert this barrier between the reader and the text? I don't have the answers, but I could spend hours thinking about the possibilities.

### **How would you describe Garréta's writing within contemporary French fiction?**

I think what drew me so much to Garréta's work is that she's using themes at work in almost all fiction - romance, desire, love, human connection - to make a bigger point about something, whether it's about gender or society or writing itself. Something similar is also at work in the writing of Virginie Despentes, who writes novels that seem like pulpy love stories, but make larger statements, grinding away at society and its conventions, subtly but unmistakably.

And of course Garréta is a member of Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, a group of writers that uses constraint), which is still active. But whereas constraint is often used in Oulipian literature for the sake of play and challenge, I think Anne is more interested in how constraint can be used to change things - society and literature - to broaden our way of thinking about language and the world.

Garréta isn't just writing about being queer, she's queering writing itself, which is something you don't see often. Garréta's writing seems to align with Monique Wittig, for example, who also queered language in her many works including *The Opoponax*, and some of the ideas behind the movement Wittig was a part of in 1970s France - écriture féminine (though I know Garréta has her fair share of problems with the group) - more so than any other movement in contemporary French fiction.

### **Is there a recent work of fiction or art in the US that you would compare Garréta's work to?**

I read Alan Hollinghurst's *Swimming Pool Library* and *The Spell* while I was translating *Sphinx*. This was a recommendation from my thesis advisor in my cultural translation masters program at the American University of Paris, Dan Gunn, to see how someone writing in English might write a (queer) love story in a high register with elevated vocabulary.

Finally, this might sound like a strange comparison, but Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* reminds me of Garréta's writing in its brazen and unapologetic mix of raw emotion, high intellect, and searing societal commentary. Kraus moves

between all three realms seamlessly, writing about her

obsession with a man named Dick, mixed in with her thoughts on women in the art world, and you see that same meld of ideas in both *Sphinx* and *Not One Day* as well.

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