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Interview: Helen Stevenson on Translating Alain Mabanckou's *Black Moses*



By [Olivia Snajje](#)
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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.



Helen Stevenson is a piano teacher, writer and translator, and lives in Somerset, in the UK. She has translated works by Marie Darrieussecq, Alice Ferney and Catherine Millet, as well as several books by Alain Mabanckou, of which [Black Moses](#) is the latest.

***Black Moses* is your fifth translation of a work by Alain Mabanckou. When you receive one of his novels do you feel like an old friend's voice has arrived? Is it easy for you to get back into "channeling" Mabanckou in English?**

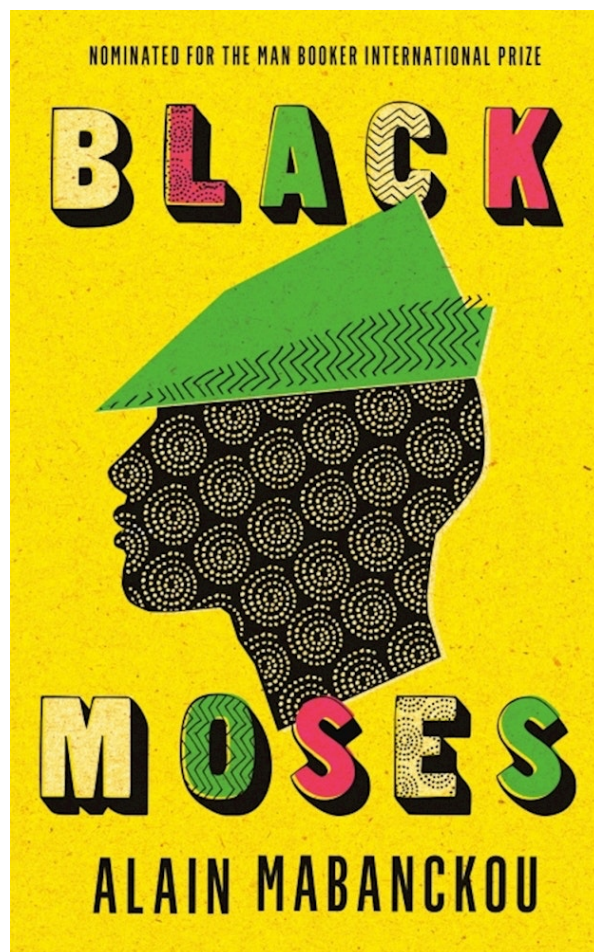
Yes, I'd say it is definitely like an old friend - but then he is an old friend, in more senses than one. It's always exciting to read the new book of someone whose work you love and admire and have read all of, and of course that's even more the case when you know the person. As the translator it's riveting and exciting to see what they've come up with now. But yes, it's difficult to get back into, of course - or at least, it's not straight forward. For me it's like playing a musical instrument - where you wouldn't dream of having a year off from playing. You need to keep practicing, keep listening to yourself, keep thinking about what the 'composer' intended, wondering how you can improve. Always remembering that that you can and must do this infinitely better than a machine!

Mabanckou's work is getting translated now in English closer to the publication date of his novels in French. Is this because he has found an audience now, and if so, have you seen this audience growing?

I don't watch the sales figures, but I am certainly aware that people are increasingly interested in Alain's voice in the world and in his work. I imagine - and I hope, for his and his publishers' sake, that that interest will be reflected in increasing sales.

What, for you, was particular in *Black Moses*, and what were the challenges and delights during the translation?

Some of the previous novels have been bitter and dark, where others have been tender and more reflective on childhood. *Black Moses* is the darkest of Alain's books to date, I think, though child-like-ness and, actually, innocence, are at its heart. He excludes more light from it than from others of his books. *Black Moses* is almost like *Candide* - calamity after calamity befalls him. I don't feel the satirical distance you might feel reading *Candide* - though the humor is not dissimilar. I feel with Alain that you need to bear all his works in mind as you read the latest one. It is a composite picture - of Africa, of a life, of a maturing mind looking back, looking forward.



How did you decide on the title, *Black Moses*, as opposed to the French title, *Petit Piment*?

It was an inspiration of Nick Sheerin, at *Serpent's Tail*. It's an ironic title, because the character/narrator isn't leading anyone to freedom out of captivity - yet, anyway.

You have translated many strong female French voices such as Marie Darrieussecq, Alice Ferney and Catherine Millet, could you describe the process of becoming Alain Mabanckou's voice in English?

It's true that I've usually translated female writers. I am very happy being the voice of someone who on the surface I don't resemble at all - though we are roughly the same age: one of the recurring images in Alain's books is of Concorde passing overhead in the sky - this is a very strong memory from my childhood, too, though whether I actually experienced it or just imagined it, I don't know. Having a memory in common can be very powerful, even between people who appear to be in many ways dissimilar. We also have read many of the same things and been formed by them, and we share a profound love of the French language, though neither of us grew up actually speaking it every day at home. What I don't have is Alain's point of view on Africa, of course, or *negritude*, as a white woman. But I think difference can be a strength for a

translator. You don't always want to see a king playing a king in the theatre, or even a black actor playing Othello - I hope these analogies aren't crass. What I'm trying to say is that distance can make for a good translation, the energy and imagination required makes you do better. There's a certain amount of method acting that goes on in your head over the course of translating a novel, or series of novels.

Do Mabanckou's vocabulary and rhythm change according to whether his characters are in Africa or in France?

It's less to do with where the characters are, and more that Alain constantly plays with different registers of language. Some of his most wrecked, washed up and desolate characters will speak the most elegant French, with echoes of Hugo or Rimbaud. He confounds expectations about how people in different situations or from different conditions may speak - or about which long-lost register might assert itself in a moment of crisis. This is one of the fascinating aspects of his work - for me, anyway.

Do you work closely with Mabanckou on his translations? Have you met him?

Yes, Alain and I have met quite a number of times, and when I lived in rural France he came to stay with me and my family a few times. I remember being in the garden and hearing him typing away in a room upstairs, with the next book underway. But I never work with him on a translation. I feel on the basis of my own experience as a writer that once a book is completed the last thing an author wants is to get into the nitty gritty of translation details. I have a feeling that Alain appreciates the fact that I don't bother him with questions. I like the fact that he appears to trust me. Very occasionally I'll message him about something, but usually only once I've finished the whole book. I think that the distance between us is quite healthy and good for the work. I guess if he was unhappy he'd let me know!

How do you go about a translation? Do you read the book first? Do you read other books as references before starting in on the translation?

I've read a lot of African literature since I first started translating Alain's work, well over a decade ago. It was a new world for me, and it's enriched my life more than I can say. I can't believe how little I understood before, how ignorant I was! But I don't deliberately 'read up'. Of course I read the whole book through, more than once, before I translate it. Not to do so would be like a conductor trying

to conduct a piece of music without first becoming intimately familiar with the score.

Have you translated other Francophone writers and has Mabanckou's writing given you an appetite to translate other Francophone authors from Africa?

No - I feel it's quite an exclusive relationship. I think that's right. I translate Alain Mabanckou not 'African writers'. Beyond that, I always welcome new authors to translate though - it's not an easy living to make!

Tags

- 2018 albertine prize
- black mooses
- french literature in translation
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