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Interview: Tess Lewis on Translating Christine Angot's *Incest*



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.

Tess Lewis photo Sarah Shatz

[Tess Lewis](#) is a writer and translator from French and German to English. She translated French author Christine Angot's *Incest*, about the narrator's incestuous relationship with her father.

It seems like this translation must have been incredibly difficult, first of all with lines blurring between fiction and reality, then with shifting cadences in the language and mood. Can you describe how you went about this translation?

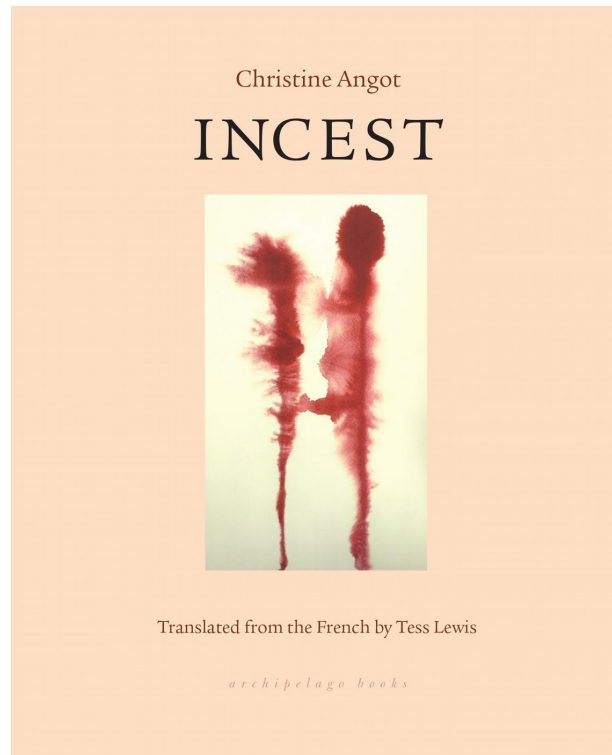
This was one of the most difficult translations I've done. The greatest challenge for me was capturing the rhythm, pacing and sporadic frenzy of Christine Angot's prose. Not only does the narrator's voice echo the inner turmoil she feels revisiting and describing the physical and psychological trauma she suffered, but it also conveys the lasting distortion of the way she sees the world and relates

to others—her “incestuous mental structure.” The emotional pitch of the prose in *Incest* varies according to the narrator’s frame of mind, so I had to find modulations attuned to those changes. In addition, the style and narrative approaches in the book’s three sections differ dramatically, so I had to rethink my own approach for each.

I always read my translations aloud to catch any awkwardness or lapses in rhythm. That test was even more helpful than usual with this book since the style is idiosyncratic, very much that of spoken language with sentence fragments and repetition, very associative, very ‘Angot-centric’, as it were.

I read that before you begin a translation you like to find books in English that have a similar connection. Did you do this for *Incest* as well? If so, which were the books that you chose?

This translation was a new experience for me in several ways. I did look at books like [Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*](#) and [Augusten Burroughs’ *Running with Scissors*](#), but in the end I wasn’t able to find anything usefully similar in English. So instead I focused on the books and sources Angot incorporates into *Incest*, including [Hervé Guibert’s *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*](#), [Marguerite Duras’ *Savannah Bay*](#) and Gilles Deleuze’s *L’Abécédaire* (Alphabet Book). What I found most helpful in the end, though, was the audio book recording by Christine Angot of her recent book, [Un Amour Impossible](#). Listening to it, I had her real as well as her authorial voice very strongly in my head as I worked to recreate her prose in English. *Un Amour Impossible* focuses more narrowly on her parents’ relationship but covers much of the same ground as *Incest*. The thematic overlap and the background information on her parents and her childhood filled out my understanding of *Incest*.



[Christine Angot's *Incest*](#)

The section in which Angot describes the actual incest with her father is a difficult read. Was it difficult to translate as well?

That section is harrowing to read, much less recreate. I usually work hours and hours at a stretch, but with the difficult passages in *Incest* I had to take a break quite often, like coming up for air. There is a sense of emotional claustrophobia that runs through the entire book which I also found draining but less drastically than the explicit section at the end of the book. I hope I've managed to create that atmosphere for English language readers because it's essential to Christine Angot's achievement in *Incest*.

What stood out the most to you in terms of originality in Christine Angot's novel?

The fearlessness with which she portrays her flaws and explores and exposes feelings of shame while at the same time reflecting on writing as a means of asserting control over one's identity—public and private.

Did you work with Angot on the translation?

Although I have worked with several authors on earlier translations, I didn't have the opportunity to be in touch with Christine Angot for this book.

Here in France Angot inspires passionate debate, almost more about her personality than her writing. Have you found a different reaction in the

US—what has been the reaction of readers in events that you have participated in?

Unfortunately, I missed Christine Angot on her last two visits to the United States. On both occasions I was out of the country when she was in New York. I've heard from friends who went to some of her events that the readings and conversations were very interesting. The events were all conducted in English and that certainly affected her rapport with the audience. Besides, not many people here are aware of the strong reactions she has provoked in France and this gives the book the chance to be read more on its own terms than was possible in France.

Do you see Christine Angot's writing as an example of a certain kind of contemporary literature in France today?

Although she rejects the 'autofiction' label, Angot's writing was certainly a major influence on French autobiographical fiction. I think it's very interesting that three of the books on the shortlist are grounded in the shifting sands between autobiography and fiction and all three authors object to their work being called 'autofiction'.

Tags

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