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Interview: Michael Lucey on Translating The End of Eddy



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.



Michael Lucey

[Michael Lucey](#) is a professor of French and Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley. He translated French author [Édouard Louis](#)' *The End of Eddy*, a portrait of an unbearable childhood in a poverty-stricken village in northern France.

You translated sociologist Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, which, like *The End of Eddy* evokes a working- class world and homosexuality.

Édouard Louis studied with Eribon. In what way do the two books differ?

Didier Eribon was looking back at his childhood and adolescence from several decades' distance, and trying to establish how his own story and his own family history fit into larger collective histories, the history of several generations, from World War II to the present. Édouard Louis was looking back on his childhood and adolescence from only a few years' distance, so the focus is much tighter. His book is understandably visceral and sensory, caught up in scenes of physical and verbal interaction of great immediacy. The two books share a preoccupation with understanding the experience of sexual and social domination, or the experience of the self-formation of a minority subject under conditions of great difficulty. It is easy to imagine how a book like *Returning to Reims*, when it falls into the hands of someone like Édouard Louis, would be experienced as enabling, as offering a set of tools for taking hold of your past experience and making something out of it.

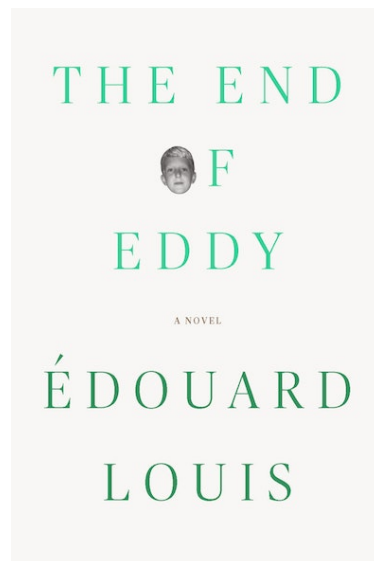
You have worked on the theme of sexuality in the work of more classical French authors. Can you describe how their descriptions and language differ from Édouard Louis'?

Different writers have different affective qualities to what they write, different textures. They may share the fact of writing about sexuality, even about social inequality, and they may write with unquestionable subtlety and brilliance about their experience. Still their writing will feel different. Édouard Louis recently wrote some pages about Violette Leduc, who is an author I've worked on, and where there is, perhaps, a similarity of feeling. His connection to her, he says, has to do with a shared status as a transfuge, someone who was not born into a literary or intellectual or even middle-class world, and who has had to fight to gain entry into such a world, thereby in some way betraying their world of origin. At one point, he says that Leduc wrote as a form of complaint, that her works reveal to him "a way of screaming." There is something affectively very specific about Louis's writing. It may sometimes be very subtly done so that you might almost not notice it, but his writing is a way of screaming about injustice and inequality that is very specifically his own.

What was the most challenging aspect of the translation?

I would say that to capture the texture I just spoke of was one of the biggest challenges, the emotional nuance, ranging from the coldly analytical, from frozen indifference, to utter emotional and intellectual confusion, to intense pain and outrage, to fierce physical and

emotional longing, to a growing understanding of injustice looming behind all of those other qualities.



[The End of Eddy by Édouard Louis](#)

What stood out the most to you in terms of originality in Édouard Louis' novel?

A really interesting feature in *The End of Eddy* is the distinction between what is in roman type and what is in italics. It's in some ways (but not entirely), a distinction between orders of language, between spoken and written, between language that is discursive and language that is felt. But just because what is in italics emphasizes the order of the sensible or the spoken does not mean that it is not, in its own way discursive, that it does not represent what we could maybe call an indigenous way of understanding the world. The felt and spoken language of the novel represented conceptual work of a different kind than was going on in the text in roman type. I thought the interplay between those two registers was really fascinating.

How did you decide on the title of the book?

Actually, the editor in the UK, Ellie Steel, requested that I use that title. I liked it just fine. I've read some people suggesting that "Finishing Off Eddy Bellegueule" would have been a more literal translation. I'm not sure of that, and we know literal translations aren't always the best choice in any case. "En finir avec" might be translated "Finishing off," but that's a bit gangsterish; it might also mean putting something behind you, or washing your hands of something, or getting something done with to move onto something else, or getting something over with. No reason to believe "finishing off" would be the best choice. The last name, Bellegueule, is also an intriguing problem. How do you translate names and what they signify? Bellegueule literally means something like "prettymug", or it could be "goodlooker" (even though I've

never heard of anyone having either of those last names), but it's also immediately obvious to most French speakers that it's a working class name, and probably one from northern France. So especially for French people who aren't working class, it sounds both comical and working class. It's hard to find an equivalent in American English, because last names aren't so obviously identifiable as working-class or middle-class. If you imagine having a last name like Snodgrass (which is a real English last name), and imagine how often you might be made fun of if that was your name, that might give you a sense of what having a name like Bellegueule would be like in middle-class circles, especially for a schoolkid. Or imagine a character in a novel named Chaz Goodlooker; that would maybe explain the incredulous reaction of Eddy's new schoolmates when they hear his name in the Epilogue to the novel. But changing the last name of the character doesn't seem the wisest option for a translator. Leaving it out of the title seems to have been an effective decision.

Is there a recent work of fiction in the US that you would compare *The End of Eddy* to?

There's a film documentary called [Rich Hill](#) from a few years ago that I think shares a lot of qualities with *The End of Eddy*. It's not much about sexuality, but there's nonetheless something about the texture of the film that feels similar to Louis's novel.

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