The Wound
By Laurent Mauvignier

Summary

Solange’s 60th birthday party takes place on a seemingly normal winter afternoon. With the arrival of Solange’s alcoholic brother Bernard, however, it does not take long for the celebration to unfold into a debacle that recalls “the Events” in Algeria 40 years earlier—events that came to be known as the Algerian war, which everyone had tried futilely to forget.

_The Wound_ is narrated by Rabut, Bernard’s cousin. The two men experienced the atrocities on the war frontlines in 1960. Rabut, being one of the only people around to empathize with Bernard, delineates the process of recovery from an infected wound that causes ceaseless pain. The author, Laurent Mauvignier, brilliantly and boldly presents how the Algerian War—always present, yet always repressed—continues to eat away at those it affected—and, perhaps, at France itself.

For more information: [https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Wound.676020.aspx](https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Wound.676020.aspx)

About the Author

Laurent Mauvignier was born in Tours, France in 1967. A Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters, between 1999 and 2014, Mauvignier has published 12 novels in French with Éditions de Minuit, for which he has received several awards. Mauvignier has been praised for his ability to express deep paradoxical emotions that strike readers at the core. The French literary magazine _Lire_ has named Laurent Mauvignier one of the major French writers of today.

For more information: [http://www.laurent-mauvignier.net/en/biography.html](http://www.laurent-mauvignier.net/en/biography.html) (in English)

[http://www.laurent-mauvignier.net/biographie.html](http://www.laurent-mauvignier.net/biographie.html) (in French)

About the Translator

David and Nicole Ball, both independent translators in Northampton, Massachusetts, have published several translations separately as well as together, including Abdourahman A. Waberi’s _In the United States of Africa_ (Nebraska, 2009).

Historical Context

France initially began its occupation of Algiers (then called “French Algeria”) in 1830. On November 1, 1954, a socialist party in Algeria organized a resistance movement, creating the National Liberation
Front (FLN) to end France’s colonial rule of Algeria and bring independence to Algeria. As a result, the Algerian War ignited with the insurrection of the FLN in November 1954, and lasted until the spring of 1962. It was not until March of 1962, after many secret peace negotiations with the FLN, that French President Charles de Gaulle finally decided to grant Algeria its independence by signing a treaty called the Evian Accords with the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. Not long after gaining independence, there were several attempted coups d’état and a revolt by supporters of French Algeria. Many people—both Algerians and Algerian-born Europeans—fled the country to escape threats of violence; most settled in France.

### Key Characters

**Bernard (Feu-de-Bois):** French army veteran who returned to France 15 years after his fellow veterans

**Solange:** Bernard’s sister

**Rabut:** Bernard’s cousin and army comrade, the book’s narrator

**Février:** A distant friend of Bernard and Rabut, and a comrade from the same battalion

**Nicole:** Rabut’s wife

**Mireille:** Bernard’s ex-wife

### Key Passages

*What are they like, under their veils?*
*The gross, idiotic jokes that revolted me,*
*Is it true that Muslim women shave their pussy?*
*Things like that.* (p.87)

*Now he dreams of having a trade, being a mechanic, working in a city and leaving the boredom and fatigue of the fields behind. He wants money. He imagines that with money everything will change.* (p.120)

*The more time passes, the more he repeats to himself and the more he can’t help thinking that if he were Algerian he’d probably be a fellagha. He doesn’t know why he has that idea and he wants to get rid of it very quickly, as soon as he thinks of the doctor’s body in the dust.* (p.162)

*The fear in your belly. But where is that fear? Not in the photos. None of them show that.*
*So what is it, what is it that remains, exactly?* (p.210)
And I remember the shame I felt when I came back from over there, when we had returned, one after the other, except for Bernard—at least he spared himself the humiliation of coming back here and doing what we did: . . .but the war, no, no war, there wasn’t any war; and there’s no use looking at those photos again and looking for at least one, just one that could have told me... (p.211)

### Questions for Discussion

1. What effect does this novel’s first-person narration have on the reader’s understanding of the story?
2. In what ways do you think the book’s impact would be different if it had been told from Bernard’s point-of-view?
3. What common thought patterns and preoccupations do the characters share?
4. How is this story, “The Wound,” relevant today?
5. What is the significance of the title?
6. What societal pressures and familial tensions play a role in Bernard’s behaviors?
7. What assumptions or stereotypes were made by the characters regarding Algeria or France? How did they impact the characters’ actions or thoughts?
8. Which post-war effects do you recognize from the book that mirror or differ from contemporary war stories?

### Book Reviews

“One of France’s most talented writers, Laurent Mauvignier always kept a low profile on the literary scene—until his stunning novel about the Algerian War became a runaway bestseller.”

- **France Today**

“Mauvignier is an important French author who has received multiple literary prizes, and the book, in addition to being translated by two translators whom we have worked with on several excellent prior projects, resonated well with our list thematically and in subject matter given that it deals with the Algerian war. His writing gives us a remarkable sense of place: the colors, sights, smells and the “feel” of a rural French town in winter, or an Algerian village in the summer heat, or the countryside on both sides of the Mediterranean. He also has a gift for giving us the sense of a group, its collective feeling and its different individual members, finding details of speech or action that give life to people at the party, soldiers in the regiment, Arabs in a village or inside a house. The sense of language is equally remarkable. Mauvignier imitates spoken lower-class French brilliantly. The spoken language is reported and woven rhythmically into the narrative. He invents a style that is neither written nor oral, but somewhere between the two. It’s a beautifully written book that deals with a subject (men at war, lives torn apart) that is relevant today.”

- **Erika Rippeteau, University of Nebraska Press**

https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Wound,676020.aspx

“The Wound gives us a France that few American readers will recognize, it is a land and a people marked by a history in which memory and violence can seem indistinguishable. . . .David and Nicole Ball’s translation is as elegant as a flick-knife – superb version of this viscerally important novel.”
Why include Genet’s quote in the opening [of the book]? 

“The war in Algeria, as viewed by Genet, has inspired many writers. This quote seemed to reflect what I wanted to express in this novel.”

Why the title “Des Hommes”? 

“Before being a novel about the war in Algeria, it was primarily a novel about memory. I wanted to highlight the ignorance of a generation in a country where history is ignored. As for those who were hairy, it was said that they would become men.”

Where did you get the idea for this novel? 

“The idea came with the desire to write, with the pictures of Algeria that I have seen, brought by my father. There was no talk about it, so I did not get to ask questions. I did not write immediately, I waited to be technically and psychologically ready to prepare myself. At first I felt unable to go ahead with this book in France. It is very difficult to talk about Algeria. Evoking the “Pieds-Noirs”, the harkis, etc. I still had fear that people would smite me for it.

Tell us a little about the novel’s structure, which is reminiscent to theater... 

“I wanted my novel to flow throughout the course of one day. For it is not a historical novel, but a novel about the past. The temporality is, thus, as important as space. I also wanted to create a contrast between France and Algeria choosing winter and snowfall, in opposition to the sun and the sand. The first phase takes place during a family party, Solange’s birthday party. There, we meet the two main characters, Rabut, the narrator, and Feu de Bois, a homeless person on the corner, who offers a gift to his sister Solange, which then causes a stir in the village. In response, Feu de Bois eventually turns his anger against the Algerian who was invited to the banquet and against his family. In the second phase, we go back 40 years earlier with the same characters.

I’ve realized that most French novels on Algeria were bad. Why? Because they wanted to explain everything, give their opinions, etc... On the contrary, American films about Vietnam are mostly very good simply because they did not comment on the war, but they make it come to life through the characters. In The Deer Hunter, for example, the first hour of the film shows a wedding, which is followed by three quarters of an hour of hyper-violence where the characters are parachuted into war without understanding anything. I wanted Algeria to emerge as a defining moment, as a revelatory moment, like a photo, without a narrator, but right after the beginning of the novel.”
With this structure, the character Feu de Bois will regain his name in a backward manner. It's like when you meet someone. Gradually, as you get to know them and they tell you snippets of their life, you get to know their attitude better.

Writing, like living, is a little like weaving, there are coincidences, choices...

For me, writing a novel is not about giving answers, it is about asking questions. This requires that the ending evoke a feeling of incompleteness.

The two main characters are like two sides of the same person. For Bout de Feu, unlike for Rabut, the past is impossible to overcome."

Have you expressed yourself in this novel as you wanted to?

“It’s still a surprise because when one dreams of an object, it is always a bit particular when it is there, finished. And there’s always a little disappointment because there is always the hope that a book can change the world.

But I wanted to write a novel about silence, about the lack of dialogue between these characters when it comes to talking about a certain event — a taboo on all wars. And I think that’s what stands out.”

Interview with David and Nicole Ball

• What was interesting and/or challenging about this translation?
• Why do you think this book should be shared with English-speaking readers?
• How did the multiple points of view in The Wound affect the translation process?
• How did you navigate multiple aspects of this book: Algerian culture and history as the subject, French as the language, and then English as the language of translation?
• Were there any common phrases or words specific to the understanding of this novel that were difficult to translate into English?
• In your opinion, what effect does the process of translation have on a story?
• Is there anything else you would like to add about this book?

“As far as we know there are few works of fiction written about the Algerian war and the scars it left on the young draftees returning home. As in the Vietnam War here in the US, the veterans didn’t or couldn’t talk about what they had done there. Same lack of purpose, of motivation, often the same sense of shame in seeing war crimes routinely committed, the same lack of recognition for what they went through. Doing and seeing terrible things and being unable to talk about them leaves deep wounds on people, and as Genet suggests in the short text Mauvignier used as an epigraph, the wound can even become the man. That’s why we thought the novel would resonate with American readers.

Laurent Mauvignier’s novel is remarkable, first, for its sense of place: the French village in winter, the boat trip to Algeria, the military base near Oran, the city of Oran itself which has the sweetness of peace when the soldiers are on a short leave, and in the end the frantic chaos of the last week of the war in the city, with the frenzied flight of the French settlers and the joy—and vengeance—of the Algerians. Smells, colors, sounds are always strongly
rendered: they make you feel like you’re constantly there with the young men or that you are one of them.

There’s also the author’s feel for simple people, for the way they talk: hesitant, unfinished sentences, silences, difficulty in finding words, in expressing feelings.

And finally there’s the intense evocation of the horrors of the Algerian War, both from the point of view of the soldiers and through straight narratives.

Translating Des Hommes has been challenging for several reasons. The difficulty was not so much in rendering multiple points of view as multiple modes of narration: the semi-oral, semi-written indirect mode of speech and narration is Mauvignier’s trademark, as is his use of punctuation. The lack of punctuation in some paragraphs—the fight between Bernard, the main character, and his cousin Rabut, the narrator of the village events, for instance—intensifies the sense of violence between them. Some other passages try to express intense fear through rhythm and peculiar use of punctuation; sometimes also, sentences are left dangling with no punctuation sign at the end. Blank spaces of various sizes play a similar role: they break the rhythm or provide a moment of respite. All these effects are jarring in English, but we chose to respect them.

Another problem of translation related to point of view is the use of the general pronoun “on”, so common in French. It puts the reader both in and outside the group: the people in the village of La Bassée, both actors and witnesses of the dramatic events of the particular day that sets the narrator Rabut’s speech into motion, and above all the group of soldiers. We tried to navigate tactfully between “they”, “we”, “you,” and the passive form, depending on the circumstances of the narrative. Finally the title Des hommes, so simple, yet so complex in French, literally either “Some Men” or “Of Men” or even “Men.”

The sense is rendered explicit as you reach the end, after you’ve been through the horrors perpetrated on both sides: “They were men, just men.” But there’s no way we could translate it literally and have an acceptable English title. It took us a very long time to come up with “The Wound”, inspired by the Jean Genêt epigraph. We were comforted in our choice later on, when we found out that the German translator had the same idea.

If the translation is successful, that is, if we succeed in finding English expressions and styles that produce an effect on the English-language reader equivalent to that produced on the French reader, while remaining as close as possible to the lexical meaning and intentions of the writer, the historical and cultural subjects will come through. Translators deal with words, after all.”

Nicole & David Ball - Northampton MA, February 2015

These are the last paragraphs of the novel, when Rabut, who gives us the focal viewpoint of Part I and narrates Part IV, is stuck in his car after being up all night, back in the village of La Bassée. He is stuck in more ways than one, for he will never be able to get out of the past. We tried to convey the emotion of this terrible, almost musical coda:

I stayed in the car like that. And then all of a sudden I was glad the car was stuck in the snow, glad I couldn't move anymore, at all. I thought I just had to wait, it felt good, too, for a while, that nothing moved, it felt good to stay put, as if I were hanging by a thread. At some point I listened to the radio a little, then nothing but the silence. I thought again of Bernard, of Chefraoui. I thought of Solange again, who was probably with the gendarmes.
I told myself for the first time that I felt like going back there, maybe, and that I'd like to see if there are farmhouses with square courtyards, almost white, and if there are children playing soccer in their bare feet. I would like to see if Algeria exists and if I, too, had left something more than my youth back there. I'd like to see, I don't know. I'd like to see if the air is as blue as in my memories. If they still eat kémias. I'd like to see something that doesn't exist but lives inside yourself, something you keep like a dream, a resonant, palpitating world, I would like to, I don't know, I never knew what I wanted, there, in the car, just not to hear the bombardments or the screams anymore, not to know what a charred body smells like anymore, or the smell of death—I'd like to know if you can begin to live when you know it's too late.

Nicole & David Ball - Northampton MA, February 2015

Suggestions for Further Reading

Events, museums, books, movies
Havard Film Archive
A series of multi-decade films depicting the Algerian War of Independence from a variety of perspectives.

About French Corner

Works in translation play an important cultural role in the U.S. and around the world. They face the two-fold challenge of making what is unique about an author and his or her culture intelligible to the reader. French Corner connects the Cultural Service of the French Consulate in Chicago with publishing houses and bookstores to make French books in translation more accessible to American readers and to increase the visibility of French-speaking authors in the Midwest. It fosters an interactive experience among the readers, building a reading community interested in discussing these works, and includes Francophone authors in the conversation about their work in the U.S.