

**A Conversation with Amélie Nothomb
by Heather Hartley**

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Paris, les Champs Élysées, Virgin Megastore, September 2008, early evening. The huge waiting crowd included the French intelligentsia, Sorbonne students, businessmen, the Parisian jet set, Marilyn Manson look-alikes, *bobos* (the bourgeois-bohemian crowd), the press, and a man who appeared to be a priest. This book launch, in celebration of *Le Fait du Prince*, Amélie Nothomb's seventeenth published novel, was *l'événement* of Paris's fall literary season; similarly, her 2009 novel, *Le Voyage d'Hiver*, is the main event of her publisher's fall season.

Every year since the 1992 publication of her award-winning first novel, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (forthcoming in English, as *Hygiene of the Assassin*, from Europa Editions in Fall 2010), Amélie Nothomb has published one novel a year, brought out in high style each September during *la rentrée*, when the most sought-after books appear on the French market. Her publishing house, Albin Michel, opens its season with her book launch. Her novels have been translated into over thirty languages, including eleven in English, and her awards include the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française, the Prix René-Fallet, the Prix Alain-Fournier (twice), the Grand Prix Jean-Giono, and many others.

She's a phenomenon in France. In the tradition of Dead heads, groupies called "les Péplantes" (their name derives from her 1996 novel, *Péplum*) devote a good portion of their lives to following Nothomb from reading to reading, attending her lectures, and keeping up with the latest details of her peregrinations. But Amélie Nothomb is not French. The daughter of Belgian diplomats, she was born in Kobe, Japan, and spent a large portion of her childhood abroad in China, Laos, Bangladesh, Burma, and back in Japan. Many of these experiences are an integral part of her novels.

Her dark, witty books often draw directly from life experiences up to the period of her midtwenties and deal with themes ranging from complex familial relationships (in particular with parents), awkward first love, adoration and rivalry between best friends, and

spiritual awakening. Add to this Nothomb's depiction of the exotic, deeply rooted differences between East and West and her fascination—or obsession—with language, food and the body. Linguistic and cultural misunderstandings are often at the center of her novels and the plot plays out around these confusions and misinterpretations. Her prose is replete with the elegance and hierarchical structure inherent in French. After studying philology at l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, she has an ear finely tuned to sound and expression.

The French have completely adopted her, doting on her as on one of their own for nearly twenty years, yet her work has been overlooked in the United States. It could be that the very things French readers love and admire in contemporary fiction don't translate well--figuratively speaking--to a native English-language audience. (The English translations themselves are very well attuned to her sense of and sensitivity to language.) Or it could be that Americans expect French-language literary fiction to be more along the lines of the concise, minimalist prose of Michel Houellebecq or Catherine Millet, rather than, in Nothomb's own words, her "megalomaniac bent" toward lyricism, as she said in a book review in the *New York Times*.

Yet Amélie Nothomb is an extremely gentle, sincere, and generous person. Greeting me in the lobby of her publishers, she graciously offered me coffee, tea, or an electric fan--it was a humid morning. In her smallish office, crowded with piles and columns of letters stacked in all directions, she helped me fasten down my papers as they fluttered in the breeze.

Nota bene:

In some portions of the interview, I've included the original French phrase for clarity in hopes of better illustrating Amélie Nothomb's vivid, rich use of the language.

Heather Hartley: I think that Rainer Maria Rilke was and still is a very important writer for you. You explained, "Reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* when I was seventeen gave me permission to write." What did the *Letters* reveal to you?

Amélie Nothomb: I come from a family in which literature is sacred and where one reads a lot. There's a very, very high esteem for literature. It's wonderful to come from a family where there's this great esteem, but at the same time, it doesn't encourage you to write at all-- on the contrary. Because if literature is seen as an act that's so sacred, the only possible thing you can think is, "I don't have the right to write, I don't have the right to write," because it's a sacred act and who am I to imagine that I have this right?

So I would never dare to have had the ambition to be a writer, even though I do think that somewhere, somehow inside of me, I did have the real need to write. But I wouldn't allow myself to even think it.

Then I read *Letters to a Young Poet*, and in this masterpiece, Rilke poses this question of writing in a totally different way. In his eyes, the only question that someone who wants to write should ask themselves is: To what point do I need to write? Is it a question of life or death? From the moment where it's a question of life or death, then you have the right to write. If it's not a question of life or death, you don't have this right.

For me it was such an incredibly new way to see things. It's really thanks to Rilke that I dared to write.

HH: In his *Letters* he wrote, "A piece of art is good if it is born of necessity." And for you writing is a necessity--urgent, organic, and fecund.

AN: Completely.