

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 3

Artikel: An enchanting flood of words and images
Autor: Linsmayer, Charles
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051811>

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An enchanting flood of words and images

Remembering French-speaking Swiss author Catherine Colomb (1892–1965)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

When the Lausanne “Guilde du livre” competition jury consisting of Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, Gustave Roud, Edmond Jaloux and Paul Budry received a copy of the novel “Chemins de mémoire” (Memory lane) from a certain Catherine Charrière in 1944, Paul Budry immediately identified the typescript as being that of Catherine Tissot, who had won the “Patrie Suisse” magazine competition in 1932 with a book called “Trop de mémoire” (Too much memory). This earlier work – the story of two women who let their imaginations go, reminiscing about their childhood despite the world essentially having “no place for dreamers like them” – was published in 1934 by Attinger in Neuchâtel under the vaguer title of “Pile ou face” (Heads or tails). To avoid confusion with the previous work, “Chemins de mémoire” also had a completely different title when the “Guilde du livre” published the novel in 1945. Acknowledging the castle on the shores of Lake Geneva where the author (and her characters) spent their childhood, the publisher christened the book “Châteaux en enfance” (Childhood castles). This was only possible after the author had disclosed her real identity.



Catherine Colomb
(1892–1965)

Time in Britain

The author’s real name was Marie-Louise Reymond. Born on 18 August 1892 in Saint-Prex, she was the wife of a Lausanne lawyer and the mother of two children. Catherine Colomb was her maiden name. After finishing her university studies in Lausanne in 1916, she went to Britain to do a doctorate. It was there that she caught the whiff of blue blood, discovered Virginia Woolf and, in 1921, secretly started to write books – after marrying her husband and dropping

“Chanoz left the care home, purchased some tatty bric-a-brac and set up shop on the cobbles among the fuchsia. Children dressed in traditional shawls stood there gawping at him as he laid out gold-headed needles, soap in light-green wrapping, and bootlaces. There were countless bootlaces. Enough for anyone to strangle all the mute people of Louis Laroche’s harem.”

(Excerpt from “Châteaux en enfance” in “Tout Catherine Colomb”; Éditions ZOE, Geneva, 2019)

out of her doctoral studies. Her third book, published in 1953, now under the Catherine Colomb pseudonym, lamented a long-lost childhood from the perspective of death, employing vivid imagery and almost no linear narrative. For the first time, the publisher (Éditions Rencontre) retained the author’s original book name, “Les Esprits de la terre” (English translation by John Taylor: “The Spirits of the Earth”, 2016).

Time of the angels

Another nine years passed before Catherine Colomb finally achieved literary renown, when “Le Temps des anges” (Time of the angels) was published by Gallimard in Paris, three years before the author died on 13 November 1965 at the age of 73. “Joseph woke to the steady whoosh of angels flapping their mighty wings” is how the novel opens. And the similar sound of waves lapping on to the shores of Lake Geneva persists throughout the book, lending a gentle, muffled rhythm to a horrific narrative of hate, deception, and murderous intent.

As in Catherine Colomb’s other books, the story is a fascinating journey down memory lane –and surprisingly reminiscent of the works of such authors as Gerhard Meier and Gertrud Leutenegger. “Le Temps des anges” conjures up a flood of words and images that shine through its dark, bitter subject matter and lack of linearity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “The Spirits of the Earth” is available from Seagull Books. Catherine Colomb’s complete works are available in French from Édition Zoé, under the title “Tout Catherine Colomb”.

CHARLES LINSMAYER IS A LITERARY SCHOLAR AND JOURNALIST BASED IN ZÜRICH