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A moving childhood story and an impressive body of work

Suzanne Deriex, aged 98, is one of the great exponents of French-speaking Swiss literature.



Suzanne Deriex
(*1926)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

“Are you going to die at the same time as Daddy?” asks seven-year-old Jeanne, putting her mother on the spot just like the other adults whom she has been bombarding with questions. The little girl even has something to say about religion, cornering the Catholic chaplain about the wealth of imagery in his church. Jeanne is Protestant. She thinks it is the most natural thing in the world for her grandmother to pass away. “She was old, ill and widowed.” But when Michou, as she calls her mother, contracts blood poisoning, Jeanne’s harmless questions take on a tragic significance. Michou then dies, casting an indelible shadow on her daughter’s hitherto innocent, sheltered childhood. The last sentence in the novel has wise words on death: “We always arrive too early if no one is expecting us.”

Deep but light-hearted

“L’enfant et la mort”, a dialogue-dominated narrative about childhood, has a light-hearted delivery despite its difficult storyline. Published in 1968, it was the third novel to appear under the Suzanne Deriex pseudonym. The first was “Corinne” (1961), the story of a teacher who falls in love with a student. The second almost reads like a thriller: “San Domenico” (1964) is about a young woman who falls for the charms of an Italian spy. The author behind the Deriex pseudonym was Suzanne Piguet-Cuendet, who was born on 26 April 1926 in Yverdon to a physician father, married a lawyer, and had three sons.

She is now almost blind and will have just turned 98 by the time this article goes to print. Nevertheless, she continues to produce literature from her home in Cully on the shores

of Lake Geneva. Deriex worked on her magnum opus until 2019 (when its fourth volume “S’il plaît à Dieu” was published). The work is a series of historical and biographical novels totalling 1,756 pages (volume 1 “Un arbre de vie” was published in 1995, volume 2 “Exils” in 1997, and volume 3 “La tourmente” in 2001). The books

centre around one of the author’s ancestors, Elisabeth Antoinette, who belonged to the famous Gonzenbach family in Hauptwil, Thurgau, for whom Hölderlin once worked as a tutor. They cover an entire era in the family’s history, starting in 1763 in Hauptwil with the death of Elisabeth’s mother, who leaves behind a husband and three daughters, including Elisabeth.

“Elsette”, as she was better known, would later get to know the greatest minds of her time – from Pestalozzi and Lavater, to Albrecht von Haller and Voltaire. Back in 1968, Deriex also wrote a literary account of her grandmother’s life, called “Les sept vies de Louise Croisier née Moraz”.

For delinquents and misfits

Besides these novels, which put her family’s past into historical context, Deriex always put a lot of time and effort into highlighting social issues. “Pour dormir sans rêves” (1980), her impassioned plea for a better way of dealing with young delinquents, is authentic because Deriex’s oldest son ended up in prison for his affiliation to a 1968 movement of young radicals called the Blousons dorés (golden jackets).

Deriex, a deeply religious person who studied theology after meeting Karl Barth in Basel, also wrote “L’homme n’est jamais seul” – a 1983 novel about assorted misfits who escape their lonely existence through the help of kind people.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Das Kind und der Tod” – Irma Wehrli’s German translation of “L’enfant et la mort” – is available from Verlag Th. Gut, Zurich (volume 23 of the “Reprinted by Huber” series).

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