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White by Marie Darrieussecq
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Reviewer: Michael Worton

Headline: My name is white: Michael Worton is enthralled by Marie Darrieussecq's Antarctic meditations

Contemporary French fiction does not cross the Channel often enough. This is not because there are no exciting new authors in France, but because there is a perception on this side of the Channel that French writing is abstract and intellectual in a way that we, "les Anglo-Saxons", find difficult. The themes are, however, those to be found in home-grown novels: sex, youth, ageing, death, politics, the desperate need for a sense of identity in an uncertain world, etc. What is different is that the best French novels, while often slim, are unashamedly poetic and speculative.

Foremost among those translated into English is Marie Darrieussecq, who burst on to the international scene with her first novel, *Pig Tales*, a finalist for France's prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1996 and an international bestseller in 1997. The story of a woman who is slowly transformed into a pig, it is as much an assault on the modern dangers of a totalitarian state as an attack on the way society manipulates and (literally) shapes women. Comparisons were inevitably made with Kafka and Orwell, but Darrieussecq herself offers an alternative lineage, saying that she would like to write novels that occupy a space somewhere between Mary Higgins Clark and the doyen of the French New Novel, Claude Simon.

Her subsequent novels had less international success, perhaps because they are less satirical and infused with an anxious melancholy. All explore a world in which certainties shift and people disappear, a world that Darrieussecq's hypnotic style renders compellingly fascinating. **White** shows Darrieussecq at her imaginative and poetic best. It takes time to enter fully into this world of snow, ice and nothingness, but after 10 or so pages, the reader is enthralled.

The story is apparently simple: a diverse group of specialists have come to construct a permanent European base at the heart of Antarctica, in competition with the Americans. The main characters, Edmee and Peter, are themselves international migrants, Edmee being a French woman who was brought up in Canada and now lives in Houston with her Nasa-based husband, while Peter, originally from some unnamed country, became a naturalised Icelander while still a child. Both are fleeing something in their pasts and have chosen this project in order to be some place where they do nothing except their allotted daily tasks.

The scientists communicate in the international pidgin English of science, usually about the trivia of their ice-restricted life, where every movement is complicated and the normal becomes outlandish: spilt Coke is instantly petrified into a mound of

brown crystals, a celebratory bottle of champagne spontaneously cracks open lengthwise, Peter careers after a wind-blown plastic bag of urine only to have its crystallised contents explode in his hand when he catches it.

Is this a novel about nothing? Or about nothingness? Yes and no. The attraction of nothingness is what draws Edmee and Peter to Antarctica's frozen wastes to escape some half-named tragedies and another kind of nothingness at home. They find that the infinite whiteness of the Antarctic is both full of meaning and "old and ignorant as water", and that Antarctic white is in fact blue leading to greys and even blacks. It is also "the fusion of nothing. All colours mingle there until the prism is shattered."

The novel teems with facts: the time it takes for a cigarette filter to degrade in a humid climate (500 years); how a colony of king penguins was wiped out by a virus that caused bleeding from their eyes and beaks; how local time at the South Pole is determined simply in order to allow the best range of telecommunications with Europe, North America and Australia, and so on.

Most originally, the novel's plural narrators are ghosts: the ghosts of Scott, Amundsen, Shackleton and all those who died in Antarctica, as well as the personal ghosts of the past that Edmee and Peter bring with them. These ghosts are fascinated by "the drift of mental continents" and how human bodies resist atmospheric pressures; they "float in unreason", striving to create and negotiate misunderstandings. They are mysterious, metaphysical speculators, yet they never seem to be just a novelist's conceit, but bind the novel together into an ultimately unfinished meditation on space, time, physicality and love.

The novel's ambition demands audacious writing, and Darrieussecq certainly has nerve. The description of Edmee and Peter's lovemaking is one of the most beautifully seen, thought and felt in modern literature, as when she describes Edmee's vulva: "The colour of the leaves of crumpled skin fluctuates, beige/purple; curtains, hangings, shutters. If he leans more heavily on her thigh, the leaves open, one tautens, the other wrinkles up a little more, and their pearly pink interior is revealed to be almost blue there where, like a highly polished slide, the vagina begins."

She also confidently mixes metaphors, as when juxtaposing the personal and the cosmic: "Giant squids surge up from the gulches; glaciers calve down their litters of icebergs; tectonic plates thrust up through the surface of the magma: this is the very least that must happen, after Pete and Edmee have joined together, if the physics of the world is to right itself."

Her use of onomatopoeias ("Hiiiiss", "chuuut", "Bing bang", "GgnGgnGgnGgn") may not always convince, but her visual acuity is sensational and the darts of humour will please the most grounded of Anglo-Saxons. Above all, her imagination of a frozen world where life is rethought from outside and through the physical is a major achievement. This is indeed writing on a grand scale in a slim volume.

Michael Worton is the Fielden Professor of French Language and Literature at University College London.