

The cruellest month for translation

The power of Hamelin's fictional take on October Crisis is compromised in English

October 1970, by Louis Hamelin, translated by Wayne Grady (Arachnide/House of Anansi Press, 624 pages, \$24.95)

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Quebec author Louis Hamelin's novel about the 1970 October Crisis, *La Constellation du lynx*, was controversial when it came out in 2010, and for good reason.



Its thesis – the strange fruit of a decade of research – is that the authorities knew where kidnapped Liberal cabinet minister Pierre Laporte was

being hidden, and that they deliberately let him be murdered in order to discredit the FLQ separatist movement and prevent a government scandal. (Apparently, Laporte had Mob ties.) Aided by an Anglo spy, they also orchestrated the kidnapping of British diplomat James Richard Cross, right through to his "dramatic" release two months later.

"October 1970 is a work of fiction," Hamelin, the Sherbrooke-based literary critic for *Le Devoir*, is careful to state in his author's note in a newly published translation by eastern Ontario writer Wayne Grady. The book, he says, "is a reconstruction in which imagination took the place of historical investigation. The unofficial history was the novelist's mortar when faced with the patchy official version, which barely stands up to the slightest prodding."

At more than 600 pages, the book is hard to sum up. It has a wealth of colourful characters, travels through time (the Second World War to the early 2000s) and geography (Quebec, Oaxaca, Missouri, Moscow, France's Vendée, England's Berkshire, Italy, Jordan and South Korea), and as a novel of ideas has been favourably compared to the sociopolitical pageturners of Don DeLillo and Tom Wolfe. It's a highly entertaining read, and Hamelin, a winner of the Governor General's Literary Award for French fiction, lives up to his reputation as one of Quebec's best living novelists.

He and his translator also have a lot in common: Not only is Grady himself a GG winner (for his translation of Antonine Maillet's novel *Le huitième jour*), but his

translation of Hamelin's book is on the longlist of 13 for this year's \$50,000 Giller Prize, as is his own debut novel, *Emancipation Day*. Another meeting of minds: Just as Grady's new book grew out of a personal probe of a secret past (he found out his family's roots were part African-Canadian), so did Hamelin's grow from a desire to decode and rewrite the troubled *histoire de famille* of Quebec.

Spinning a tale out of a perceived conspiracy is nothing new; revisionism of the October Crisis is old hat in Quebec. In his end notes, Hamelin thanks Jacques Ferron and Pierre Vallières, intellectuals who honed theories of their own, and he even gives voice to a character named Falardeau, *à la* film director Pierre Falardeau, the gadfly separatist who made *Octobre*. What's surprising is to find further revisionism in the translation itself – and plenty of mistakes.

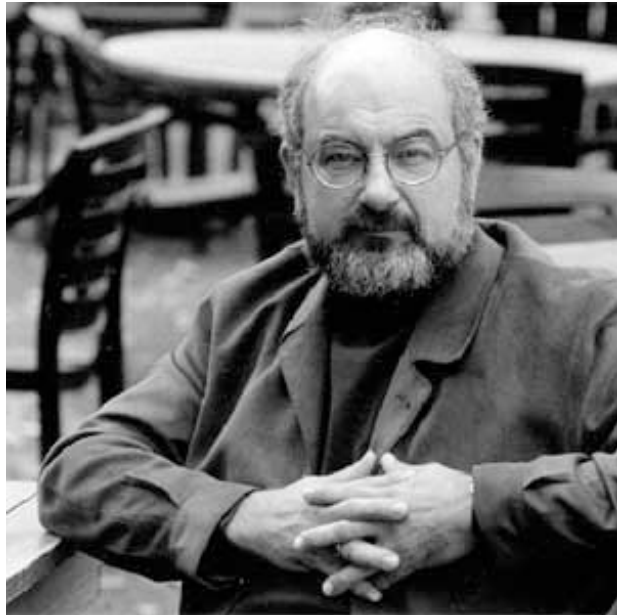
In his author's note in French, Hamelin says he used his imagination as "an instrument" to investigate the past; in English, Grady changes that to say it actually "took the place of" – i.e. replaced – the investigation. For Hamelin, the official version of the October Crisis "doesn't stand up," but Grady adds "barely," implying the official story has a grain of truth. In the novel, the slaying of hostage Paul Lavoie (Laporte) is described in French as a *mise à mort* (an execution), but Grady softens the blow by referring to it just as "a death." Elsewhere, the Lavoie affair is called *une histoire de fous* (a lunatics' story), but Grady makes it sound involuntary: "an absurd story." And when the prisoner Lavoie writes a pleading letter to Premier Albert Vézina (Robert Bourassa), saying his fate rests in his hands, Grady changes that to say his fate actually rests in the kidnappers' hands – quite the opposite.

Elsewhere, the vernacular of Quebec French is lost. "That's none of your Christly business" doesn't sound right, even in English (it's *ciboires d'affaires* in the original). Someone jokes that l'Île de Montréal should be called *l'Elle de Montréal* (the She-land of Montreal) because its inhabitants are *moumounes* (wimps), but in Grady's text the city is a You-land whose people are sheep.

Other translations are just plain wrong. *Hommes de terrain* aren't "men who work the fields," as Grady writes; they're "field men," or more generally, "men of the people." *Une cloche à fromage* isn't cheesecloth; it's a bell-shaped jar to cover cheese. A *procès* isn't a prosecution, it's a trial; a *perquisition* is not a police warrant to search a premises, it's the search itself; and a *document* is definitely not a documentary. Grady mistranslates a lyric by the rock band Révolution français (oops, no "e"): "Quebec'll know what to do /If they don't let us through" – in fact, the second line should be "If it can keep from getting screwed" (*S'il ne se laisse pas faire*). When a Quebecer says the police are *pas bêtes*, he means they're not stupid, not that they're "not animals." No one really calls a TV show an *émission* in English, or wishes that the authorities budge (*bougent*) – how about

"get moving"? The hostage John Travers (Cross) has a deadpan sense of humour (*pince-sans-rire*), but Grady mislabels it "arch." Le Ministre des Approvisionnements en Papeterie (Minister of Paper Supply) inexplicably becomes the Minister of Public Works and Paperwork.

The many mistakes are surprising coming from a man of Grady's professional stature – someone who, in his long career, has translated 15 novels by the likes of Yves Beauchemin and Dany Laferrière (misspelled "Danny" on Grady's



website, waynegrady.ca) and who, besides the Maillet book, has been GG-nominated for two more. But in an interview this month with his local weekly newspaper, the Kingston Heritage, the 65-year-old veteran said he gets by on less-than-perfect French: "You have to know the language pretty well but you don't have to be totally, completely, flawlessly bilingual," he said when asked about it. "The two (important) things, I think, are to be able to hear and reproduce the original writer's voice and to be able to write well in English."

In October 1970, the result is a decidedly mixed bag. When Grady gets things right, Hamelin's anglicized prose sings. The translator ably recreates the French alliteration of lines like *fougères foudroyés par le froid* ("clearings cauterized by the cold") and "a vestal virgin beset by virility," captures the poetry of expressions like snow clinging to a jacket "like flour to a filet of fish," and finds appropriate English ways of rendering expressions like the protest cry *Tru-deau au poteau!* ("Tru-deau no go!") But then, like a cold shower, comes a torrent of typos, missing words and dissimilar spellings. That little packaged cake should be a May West, not a Mae West. It's St-Germain-des-Prés, not Germaine; St-Jean-Baptiste Day, not Baptist; Parthenais Jail, not Pathenais; *bourgeoise*, not bourgeoisie. They shot cannons in the Korean War, not "canons." "In front of dashboard" sounds like bad Russian English, and "Did you want to speak them?" could use a "to." And make up your mind, please: Is it Park Lafontaine, Parc Lafontaine or Park La Fontaine? And is it La Savane Road, avenue Savane or la Savane? There are some howlers too. In a tavern, a guy shakes a salt shaker "like a censor" over his glass of draft beer. (Oops - make that "censer," like in church.) In a sex scene, a woman is said to have "a small, striped kitten inside her that growled" - actually, it's just her *chatte* (pussy). (I'll spare you the

mistranslation of *sa rose arrosée*.) And how did a facetious reference to a university's *Faculté affaiblie des lettres* (Drunken Faculty of Letters) become Faculty of Farts and Unopened Letters? As fiction, *October 1970* is a masterful *roman à clef* about a defining moment in Quebec history. Unfortunately, much of that mastery – and the linguistic keys to the incredible story itself – gets lost in translation.

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