

Book Review

Unfaithful: A Translator's Memoir

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By Suzanne Jill Levine

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Lawrence Venuti wrote in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* that a translation is judged as successful when the reader is able to read it without being conscious of the fact that it has been translated. As such, the translator produces “a self-annihilation that results from the very act of translation,”¹ erasing any trace of themselves from their finished product. This attitude has allowed the translator, and their artistic labor, to go unrecognized. Suzanne Jill Levine’s memoir, *Unfaithful: A Translator's Memoir*, is one work within the broader movement to center the translator not just as interlocutor, but as an author and subject in their own right.

Levine is an icon within the world of literary translation; in 2024, her more than fifty years of contributions to the field were recognized with the PEN/Ralph Manheim Award for Translation. By the time she reached her mid-twenties, Levine had already published translations of several greats of Latin American literature, including the groundbreaking Manuel Puig, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Julio Cortázar, and Carlos Fuentes. However, *Unfaithful* does not center these famous authors, but traces the personal and academic trajectory of a distinguished translator as the protagonist.

While many of these authors grace the pages of *Unfaithful*, the memoir centers Levine’s subjectivity in relation to them. She lived through and witnessed some of the most influential moments of the second half of the 20th century, not just as a translator but as the protagonist of her own narrative. She picked up colloquialisms in *castellano* during her junior year study abroad in Francoist Spain in the 1960s. She engaged in dialogue about Fidel Castro within the Latin American literary milieu during the Cold War. She championed marginalized authors and lost friends to the AIDS epidemic. She even smuggled marijuana back from an exchange program in Colombia. One highlight of *Unfaithful* is the author’s ability to place her personal experience in the broader political context of the time, be it the Vietnam War or the Latin American dictatorships.

Unfaithful is divided into two parts. The first, “Close Encounters,” charts Levine’s youth and foray into translation, including lengthier chapters on her relationships with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, and Adolfo Bioy Casares. The second, “Stops Along the Way,” is briefer, with short chapters on other authors she translated or with whom she had friendships, among them Carlos Fuentes and Reinaldo Arenas. Her writing reveals personal, sometimes scandalous details about their lives without ever veering into graphic exposé.

For her position within this literary movement and her association with noteworthy authors, Carlos Fuentes deemed Levine “the Lolita of the Boom.” Throughout the first half of the book, Levine herself reveals her self-consciousness about how she was perceived, particularly when accompanied by her partner Monegal, twenty-five years her senior. She does not shy away from commenting on recurrent instances of machismo throughout her career, which range from leering and underestimating

¹ Lawrence Venuti, “The Translator’s Invisibility,” *Criticism* XXVIII, no. 2 (1986): 179.

her to more egregious comments, sometimes from her literary friends. These episodes shed light on what Levine had to overcome in order to achieve success in the field of translation as a woman.

Notably, all of the chapters dedicated to distinguished authors whose works appear in Levine's translation are about men. Indeed, a recurring theme throughout the memoir is the author's negotiation of her position in relation to men, frequently as the only woman in the room. The one exception is a brief chapter kicking off the second part, entirely devoted to the author's friendship with American literary critic Susan Sontag, who encouraged Levine's writing outside of academia and translation. These tales of women's friendship, in addition to episodes involving other women authors like Silvina Ocampo, demonstrate their scarcity within the literary scene. More importantly, they reveal the importance of women like Sontag and Levine offering each other support in their male-dominated fields. Even though they do not all appear in the memoir, in her career Levine has translated outstanding women authors like Ocampo, Cristina Rivera Garza, and Guadalupe Nettel.

During a question-and-answer session at the 2025 conference for the American Literary Translators' Association, the author shared that she views this memoir as the third in a trilogy of her works, the first being *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction* (1991) and the second *Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions* (2000). Moments of *Unfaithful* reveal this dialogue with Levine's earlier publications, which reveal snippets of her translation process without becoming a manual. She shares chronicles of her "close collaboration" with Guillermo Cabrera Infante on *Three Trapped Tigers*, which was heavily featured in *The Subversive Scribe*. She adds, however, private details about their friendship and work relationship, including the sentiment that they were kindred spirits who shared a (Groucho) Marxian sense of humor. Students of translation, in particular, will appreciate these practical anecdotes, such as her endeavors to capture in English the natural Argentine voices that Manuel Puig uncannily documented in his novels.

Unfaithful lends individual insight to the life of renowned translator Suzanne Jill Levine, with interesting anecdotes spanning her enduring career. Where Levine shines is in her successful positioning of her experiences within the shifting sociopolitical contexts that she has needed to contend with and adapt to throughout her career.