

BOOK REVIEW

Man Over Machine: *The Interpreter*

By SUSAN GLASS

March 29, 2004

In his State of the Union Address in January of 2000, former President Clinton predicted that in the near future, translation devices will replace living interpreters and will translate "as fast as you can speak." In response, the President of the *American Translators Association* wrote to President Clinton:

"Despite the increasing compactness and cleverness of all the computing devices now on the market, human speech remains something that can be interpreted correctly only by human beings.... Nothing can replace the truly accurate, nuanced job that a trained human translator produces."

Suzanne Glass's novel *The Interpreter* (published 2001) demonstrates just how superior is a human interpreter to a machine.

The protagonist, Dominique Green, is a dedicated, conscientious interpreter who accidentally overhears a conversation during a medical conference. The conversation involves a possible breakthrough in the treatment of HIV — a breakthrough which must be kept secret.

At first, Dominique is elated: her close friend, a Swiss man named Mischa who is dying from AIDS, may have a chance to recover! Then, Dominique is devastated by a sudden realization: as a professional interpreter, she is bound by a vow of confidentiality, which to her is as binding as a doctor's Hippocratic Oath.

A translating machine would have no ethical conflict in this context: a vow is a vow. But Dominique is not a translating machine — she is a human being, torn between her professional and personal obligations. Her superiority to a machine lies in her power of choice.

In this instance, Dominique remains silent — yet struggles to repress her humanity to do so, and feels she is letting down not only one friend but two, since her best friend Anna is hopelessly in love with Mischa.



The second protagonist of the novel is Nicholas Manzini, the medical researcher who might have achieved a breakthrough in HIV treatment. Nicholas is an Italian working in New York, cut off from any personal and social ties. Isolated in the lab of an impersonal pharmaceutical company, he is treated like a research machine rather than a person.

Nicholas is looking for a cure for leukemia. Trained as a pediatric oncologist, he has become a researcher because he could no longer bear to watch children dying. During his research, he accidentally stumbles on a possible cure for HIV.

Reticent by nature and fearful that his breakthrough is only a fluke, Nicholas is reluctant to be pulled into the limelight and decides to keep his discovery secret. He confides only in one colleague. The colleague, however, talks Nicholas into signing a lucrative contract to work on the discovery with him at another pharmaceutical company.

The contract requires Nicholas to keep his discovery secret until he can transfer to the other company. Nicholas has to wait a year to complete his obligations to his current company before

he can make this transfer, but he prefers it this way — he is not as interested in fame and fortune as his colleague.

Nicholas's decision raises another ethical question: is he morally bound to make his discovery known immediately in order to possibly save the lives of HIV patients? Nicholas's answer to this question is that he cares more about children dying from leukemia and does not wish to abandon his original research.

Nicholas and Dominique meet at a medical conference in New York, where Dominique is interpreting from English to Italian. When Dominique emits a small laugh after finishing her interpretation, Nicholas, who is in the audience, becomes aware of the human being behind the voice he has been listening to. He is intrigued and walks over to the translation booth to meet the person behind the laugh.

When Dominique and Nicholas meet, they are magically drawn to each other. Coming from utterly different backgrounds, with different native languages, they find that music is their common bond.

The British Dominique, whose mother is a Holocaust survivor, is struggling to overcome her traumatic childhood. She seizes the opportunity to go to New York and escape from the “meta plan” for her future prepared by her parents and the boyfriend she leaves behind.

Nicholas had been raised by a widowed mother, now deceased, and feels rootless in his native Florence. He is easily convinced by his Italian employer to go to New York as a “loan” to the American subsidiary.

Introverted and private, Dominique and Nicholas protect their relationship and shield it from the world as their secret personal haven. They believe they have found their soul mates, yet each holds a secret from the other, not knowing how crucial their secrets are.

Dominique is trapped in the realm of interpreting other people's words, suppressing her own voice. Nicholas is bound by contract to remain silent about his findings until he can transfer to the new company. When Dominique tells him about Mischa, Nicholas struggles with the desire to tell her about his discovery. He remains silent, telling himself that the chances his findings can save Mischa are moot.

The story is told in two interwoven monologues — one by Dominique and the other by Nicholas. Each of them speaks from the perspective of hindsight, but without sacrificing the intrigue of the story. A short monologue by Anna when she meets Dominique and Nicholas provides a third perspective, as Anna perceives the weight of the secret oppressing each of them and wonders about its cause.

Anna is also an interpreter, but unlike Dominique, her love for Mischa overrides any other consideration. When Dominique finally confides in her about what she overheard, Anna provides the catalyst that shakes Dominique out of her passive acquiescence.

When the truth finally comes out, it is with a violence that shatters Dominique's and Nicholas's private haven. Yet, can their feelings for each other still be salvaged? Will they keep a promise they made to each other at the height of their romance?

With *The Interpreter*, Suzanne Glass, a former interpreter herself, opens the door on a highly unknown yet fascinating profession. She also tells about the power of words — both when they are suppressed and when they are spoken. For interpreters, words that are translated just “float out of your mouth” and “dissolve into nothingness,” but words that are originated have the power to carve lives. As Dominique realizes:

“Speaking the words, far from strangling them, would give them a truth. Speaking them would lend them a life of their own, allow them to dance free, released from the confines of [one’s] mind to decide on their own direction. They didn’t need to be carved into the wall of a cave, engraved on the bark of a tree, or penned on a piece of parchment to continue to exist.” (p. 155.)
