

AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN  
GISÈLE VILLENEUVE AND DUNDURN PRESS

In 2008, XYZ Publishing of Montréal was sold to Dundurn Press of Toronto. And so, *Visiting Elizabeth* moved to a new home.

**Dundurn Press:** Tell us about your novel.

**Gisèle Villeneuve:** Writing *Visiting Elizabeth* turned out to be one of my most exhilarating creative projects to date. The high energy of the voice that kept flowing on the page sustained me throughout the various drafts of the work. The voice's particular appeal comes from the weaving of French into the English narrative and thus turning the long-standing, famous Canadian two solitudes into a pair of happy lovers. The reader follows vivacious nineteen-year-old Ariane Claude and her band of friends, including her older friend, the Elizabeth of the title, through the feverish streets of Montréal during what could be termed the big party that began with Expo 67 and lasted until the end of 1969. Through it all, Ariane keeps reinventing herself, mainly through her highly creative use of needlework. In the end, she becomes her own oeuvre d'art.

**DP:** How did you come up with the idea for this work?

**GV:** I had been searching for a particular narrative voice that would celebrate my love of the English language, but without abandoning my native French. I was searching for a framework that would encapsulate the playfulness and the richness of two languages living in one text. One day, I sat at the computer and let it rip, so to speak! What emerged, loud and clear, was Ariane's voice.

**DP:** How did you come up with the title?

**GV:** Several years ago, I caught a sentence on the fly, part of a conversation in which a man was saying: "... visiting Elizabeth in the afternoon." The phrase struck me with

infinite possibilities. That became my working title, until my editor and I decided to shorten it to Visiting Elizabeth. And then, I further thought: Elizabeth is the grand name par excellence in the English language. Since Ariane was learning English from Elizabeth, an anglophone Montréal artist, she was in essence visiting Elizabeth, the woman, and Elizabeth, the language.

**DP:** Did you have a specific readership in mind when you wrote your book?

**GV:** Any reader who loves entering a specific world between the pages of a book and who wants to be an active participant in the adventure is my reader. The unilingual English reader who might be intimidated with the French in the novel should relax. I never intended to leave anyone in the margins of the book! The unilingual English reader will be able to follow the storyline, because any French encountered, even if never translated, is always in context. The bilingual reader will simply reach another level of meaning. And the bilingual reader with some knowledge of Québec culture will reach yet another level of meaning. Several unilingual readers have already told me, and quite emphatically, that they “got” everything. Besides, each time a reader comes across a word he or she recognizes, it’s a thrill! People always end up surprising themselves that they know more than they think.

**DP:** How did you research your book?

**GV:** The research for this book was minimal. I did a bit of archival work; such as consult a number of newspaper articles about some of the era’s events and a few books about Expo 67. I interviewed friends with a sharper memory than my own. And I went to Montréal to scout locations. For me, it meant to reacquaint myself with the streets and neighbourhoods in which I was setting my story.

**DP:** What was the creative process like for you?

**GV:** A fantastic adrenaline rush from the moment the narrative voice emerged in early 2000 until the last revisions before the book went to press in late 2003. This was such an unusually charged project that even rewrites, copy-editing, fact checking, all those details that many writers loathe were a pleasure. The level of energy never abated.

**DP:** What was the hardest part of writing your book?

**GV:** I am a maniac with details. I believe details are what anchor a story; what ground it. I created a system of file cards in order to keep the complex edifice of details from collapsing and to ensure that I would not trip on continuity. You know the kind. George is short on page ten and a tall, lanky guy on page two hundred. I had to tread carefully.

**DP:** In your own work, which character are you most attached to, and why?

**GV:** I create characters that have something to show me, an aspect of the world I may not have seen until I started creating those imaginary people. Even their flaws shed light on my thinking process. However, at the moment, Ariane Claude in *Visiting Elizabeth* still holds a particular attraction, because she dares do things in her youth that I might have done myself had I thought about doing them. Let's say that she acts on her impulses, whereas I was too reasonable to do so. That's why we write!

**DP:** Has a review or profile ever changed your perspective on your work?

**GV:** Not really. Except perhaps Jim Bartley's review in the *Globe & Mail* who understood the English/French hybrid of the work and reassured readers not to fear it. He also wrote that the novel was "bracing proof that the two solitudes make captivating bedfellows." He nailed my approach on the head.