

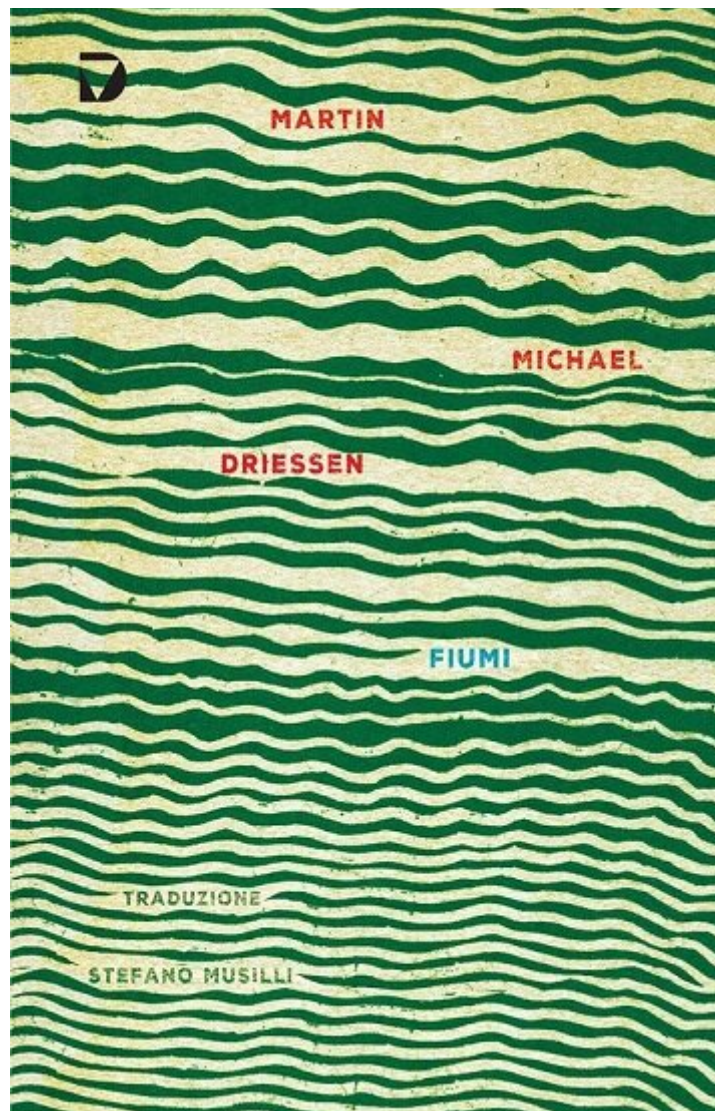


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September 7, 2020 (/interviste-1/2020/9/3/intervista-a-m-m-driessen-luomo-che-vive-sul-fiume)

Intervista a M. M. Driessen, l'uomo che vive sul fiume
(/interviste-1/2020/9/3/intervista-a-m-m-driessen-
luomo-che-vive-sul-fiume)





by **Andrea Cafarella**

translation by **Stefano Musilli**

Martin Michael Driessen is an author little known in Italy but quite well established in the Netherlands (the country where he was born) and in other countries. He landed in our publishing landscape in 2015 with his *Father of God*, published by Del Vecchio and translated by Stefano Musilli. For a few months now we can also find in the bookstore his *Rivers* (<http://www.delvecchioeditore.it/prodotto/fiumi/>) that in 2016 earned him the prestigious literary prize ECI. Always edited by Del Vecchio and with a clear postscript of the translator, Stefano Musilli. Two books very different from each other, yet united by a very precise and certainly *anachronistic* voice. Aptism in a good way: Driessen never seeks artifice, post-modern, the uncanny, the avant-garde, the memoir. He's not inclined to the fashions of the moment. Yet, for a strange turn of the wheel, *Rivers* is one of the most *illuminating* books I have read in recent years regarding the current historical moment. His voice has an ancient tone that reminds me of some of the best-

known classics. In particular, it seems obvious to me his strong propensity for the dearly loved 'landscape description' that nowadays we tend to identify as that "boring" part of the classics I was saying about above. Instead, in Driessen's writing, this dwelling on the movements of the landscape becomes – or rather: it becomes again – the only way to make the other forms of existence that revolve around the human being speak. When one wonders how to represent other forms of life, romantically – as Jeff VanderMeer has been doing for years, for example – one should question and analyze these kinds of narratives. Driessen's voice, while not focusing primarily on how to deconstruct the anthropocentric narrative, manages to make Nature speak – as if he were practicing Descola's lessons.

I am therefore very happy to be able to interview Driessen from this book, which, four years after its first Dutch publication, is now essential for a deep reading of this strange and interesting present, collective and intimate, of every human being and attentive reader who will want to ply his flow, gaining the many layers.

It is already the title that immediately give the clear idea of the preponderance of a concrete and symbolic figure that flows between the pages, that of the River. The book consists of three long stories set mainly around one or more rivers. Not only that: all the protagonists of these stories seem to face in some way also the *symbol* of the river: passage, border, threshold. This movement of characters does not always correspond to a predictable growth, as in the most classic of the coming novels, yet there is always this *encroachment* into the territory of the savage – represented precisely by the river – that inevitably comes to generate a transformation. What does this path actually mean, both within the stories and in a wider and/or more personal context, this *path* from a condition to a new and different self-experience?

He expressed it very well - the three stories talk about life-changing adventures of the protagonists. Throughout our lives some changes creep in, year after year, and others are more immediate and violent. *Rivers* are both examples. The unnamed actor of the first story is swallowed up by the river in the short amount of time of a canoe trip; The stories of Konrad and Julius develop more slowly, going through an entire generation; and in *Pierre and Adèle*, the burden of a troubled shared history is illuminated by flashes of introspection on both sides.

To tell it all the topic that I've always been interested in is the paradigm shift that can take place in the mind of a man or a woman. And I thought it might be a good idea to contrast it with a theme as archaic as the perpetual and changing course of rivers.

I recently read a review of the book that emphasized the psychological component of his stories, even mentioning Jung who had a precise interpretation of water-related symbolism. How is the symbolic figure involved in his writing and how does it interact with the psychology of the characters and the story itself?

Deeply... When a subject proves so powerful in our perception that it reaches the status of symbol - that is, something that is recognizable by all - it would be foolful not to exploit it in literature. I always interact my characters with the images that have been built of themselves and the world around them. This is, in my view, the essence of life and its meaning.

Reading *Rivers* I immediately came to mind the classics of Jack London and some tales of William Faulkner, at the same time I reflected a lot on the way that Horacio Quiroga had to represent the wild. And I couldn't help but think of Juan José Saer's *River Without Banks*, even though it had little or nothing to do with it. I find it really interesting to identify some qualities of writing by all these authors who have been able to explore the wild and stood out in this direction. How do you see your work in relation to these or other writers who have told Nature or have chosen places far from the cities to set their stories?

I have a lot of affection for authors like Jack London, Patrick O'Brian and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose heroes set out to travel to distant lands, leaving behind the comforting world of everyday life. This step in the imagination - projecting human behavior in circumstances other than those we are used to - is indispensable for me, as an author. Just as you can transpose a noteworthy piece of music, a good story is also proving to be so if it is convincing; that takes place in a here and now more or less away from ours makes no difference.

Describing what surrounds us is something anyone can do, more or less accurately. You can open a blog or write an address book. But this is not art. Art begins if you take it a step further: when you turn an initial perception into something that transcends the here and now as a writer and reader. Puccini has never been to China or Japan, yet he gave us the Turandot and the Madama Butterfly. Cultural appropriation is the lifeblood and soul of civilization, as I see it. I am not a teacher, let alone inclined to give lessons; but if I were to give advice to the young authors, I would encourage them, contrary to common thought, not to write about their lives or personal experiences, but about something they can imagine. I would encourage them to write a story designed for Homer, Dante, Boccaccio and Goldoni.

Obviously all the time I've been thinking about the talk that is developing in the anthropological field about the distance between Nature and Culture that has then converged in what Eduardo Viveiros De Castro calls Prospectivism. I simplify to the extreme: the main idea is that we could find new perspectives, precisely, for an ecologically sustainable living, if we looked at the conceptions of the world of some indigenous peoples with the intention of *understanding their* demands. Now, in *Rivers*, the protagonist of the first story, "Fleuve Sauvage", at one point reflects on what life in the wild means and comes to the conclusion that it corresponds to a "return to the origins". What does the character mean and what is "the meaning of life in nature" to you?

Well... the man in *Fleuve Sauvage* is a deluded. He is in no way looking for a 'back to basics'. He gets drunk to the death and his self-styled struggle against the forces of nature is all a farce. He tries to raise his sordid end to a heroic battle against Nature, but in fact succumbs to his own weakness. What is it to me, personally...? I don't think I'd last long in a confrontation of any kind with Nature, even though I like to pretend to be an adventurous guy.

I was very intrigued by a tiny detail of the second story. The protagonist owns only six books, all by Jules Verne. "It seemed to him that their content was so priceless that it could be enough for a lifetime." I don't know, I'd like to know more.

Yes, I understand the point. I think that the mental and intellectual horizons of each of us are, necessarily, limited motions. The scope of course is defined by education and the opportunities of life. So we are only experts in a very narrow field. And from that very small field we derive our identity, that is: the claim of a certain position in the great unknown world that surrounds us. As a result, we choose who we want to deal with and the friends and enemies we deal with from time to time. To survive, you need to know when to stop thinking.

So, as an author, I made Konrad limit himself to only six books. This is a deliberate exaggeration.

Compared to what I wrote at the beginning of the interview, about what the book's translator, Stefano Musilli, calls "an ancient pleasure" of storytelling, I immediately thought of an author who has been talked about a lot in recent years: J.R.R. Tolkien. In his writing it is evident the atavistic pleasure of description and showing. How do you build your landscapes? How much do they have to do with reality and how much does it allow to be shaped by the fantastic? Where does she take the exploration of the landscape and how do you set out with your eyes in the thick of these places of imagination?

I like hiking - once, when I was younger, I left the Vosges, then I lived there, and arrived in Italy on foot, inspired by Hilaire Belloc's book, 'The Way of Rome'

(<https://www.edizionicantagalli.com/shop/la-via-di-roma/>) - and, as I wandered from one country to another, I collected unforgettable memories of beautiful and intriguing landscapes, many of which have since converged in my stories.

Of course I often transform them, to adapt them to my narrative purposes, more or less as I did in the theater when I staged comedies and operas.

In *Rivers* all this is particularly evident in *Pierre and Adèle*, where I created the river Issou that divides the territories of the two rival families and that in Brittany there is not. But, for the rest, this invented landscape is true to reality.

In other books I have gone further with imagination, in exploring the dramatic potential of the landscape I have also included unlikely natural phenomena: in *Gars*, among other things, there is a valley in the ocean and Mongolia, a mountain formed by a pile of Unni killed; in *The Father of God* there is a lake that is mysteriously covered with two slabs of ice and the vessel of Jesus ends up being sucked into the middle. Of course I had a lot of fun describing the separation of waters, when Joshua crosses the Jordan River...

In my most recent novel, *De Heilige [The Saint]*, for the protagonist I imagined a fortress in the city of Metz that served as a prison, which is as real as Piranesi's drawings.

Creating a sense of belonging is essential to me. I wouldn't be able to write about a character without having clear within me the landscape in which it moves.

There may also be a deeper psychological reason behind my obsession with writing and recreating with words the landscapes I see in my mind. Perhaps it's a way to be sure that this world can no longer vanish - to save it from oblivion. Like everything I write, maybe it's my way of expressing the 'anger against the dying of light', to put it to Dylan Thomas. Or, by introducing André Malraux, 'Every art is a revolt against fairy'.

In the band it is clearly expressed that she lives "in a houseboat in the heart of the Dutch countryside", reassuringly, considering the settings of *Rivers*. This biographical feature brings to mind some books by Bjorn Larsson (who lives in a sailboat) set in the sea. Moreover, in recent months, at least in Italy, texts flourish, especially biographical or autobiographical, that tell of the choice to live far from the cities. In this context, the figure of Henry David Thoreau is dominant. What does it mean to live in a houseboat? Is it a choice that has to do with a philosophical vision, even before politics, or is it a condition derived from a series of concurrences that have little to do with the drastic choice that led the philosopher to the arch-lake Walden?

Living in a houseboat means there's a chance it's going to sink - as I did this year, which resulted in the loss of my entire library. Despite this, leaving the city behind and choosing this quiet little place on the water was a decision I never regretted. Before I lived on an isolated farm in the Black Forest and in a small village French.

It is a personal preference, however, rather than a philosophical question. I need silence and a lonely existence to write.



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