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FOUND IN TRANSLATION

How do you bring a voice like Philip Roth's to other languages?
Josée Kamoun opens her book of tricks



CHRISTOPHE BEAUREGARD FOR TIME

AT HOME WITH WORDS: Kamoun's translated 26 books, including, so far, six by Roth

in reading my books they're finding out something about America they want to know," says Roth. Now Kamoun, who has translated 26 books by 15 authors in her 20-year career, is busy with *The Plot Against America*, due out in France next fall.

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At an age when many writers are winding down, Philip Roth is enjoying a remarkable creative surge. The American author, now 71, has published six breathtaking novels in the past nine years; he won the U.S. National Book Award in 1995 and the Pulitzer in 1998. His latest, *The Plot Against America*, is near the top of U.S. best-seller lists. But like other acclaimed authors writing in English, Roth depends on gifted but unsung translators to bring his books to audiences abroad. In France, Roth is especially fortunate to have had his recent work rendered by Josée Kamoun. She has translated the novels responsible for the resurgence of his popularity in France. "I think [the French] think that

In September, French publisher Gallimard issued three Roth works, all translated by Kamoun: *The Dying Animal* (now a French best-seller), *Shoptalk* and a new, more accurate translation of *The Counterlife*. Before Roth had even published *The Human Stain*, his best-selling 2000 meditation on race, sexual scandal and identity in America, he was discussing its special challenges with Kamoun. "He told me, 'Josée, this one's got a word that might be a bit difficult,'" she recalls. The book's narrative hinges on a misunderstanding of "spooks," which is both a term for ghosts and a 1950s racist slur for African-Americans. Sitting in her book-filled Paris apartment, Kamoun, 53, explains that she quickly thought of the word zombies, which in French can have its own derogatory double meaning. But it wasn't quite right. She was eventually forced to rely on the translator's last resort — a footnote — to explain the two English meanings. "I'm still not happy," she says. "Even now, three years later, I'm still on the lookout for a better word."

What makes a good translation? For Kamoun, it's being true to the author's voice. Averaging 10 pages a day, over the course of six or seven hours, she works in bed, with just the original text, her computer and her cat, Faustus. Once she finishes a first bulky

draft, Kamoun puts it away for a while, then gives it an average of four revisions. While some translators will first read a book from cover to cover to get a sense of the work, Kamoun relies on spontaneity. "If [a book has] been well-received, I will read it for the first time as I translate it, to have the surprises and discoveries a reader would," she says.

Born in Tunisia, Kamoun was raised in Marseilles and studied English at the Sorbonne in Paris. Her second translation, Stephen Marlowe's *Memoirs of Christopher Columbus*, won the Prix Grévisse translation award, and she turned to books by John Irving. In 1999, she began her first Roth translation — the awesome family saga *American Pastoral* — and met the author at a colloquium on his writing in Aix-en-Provence. Since then, she has regularly consulted him on her translations, a luxury his other translators don't enjoy. "She comes to see me and we work together," Roth says. "She also writes me with questions about American references that aren't clear to her. Few translators have bothered to do this."

In 2002, for the wistful, erotic novella *The Dying Animal*, Kamoun even spent six days sitting on the floor of Roth's New York City apartment, typing in French as he paced and read the text aloud. "She wanted to hear the cadences," says Roth, "and I wanted to know whether, at any point, she was at all unsure of my idiom and its precise connotation." When it was done, Kamoun and Roth celebrated over bowls of spaghetti at an Italian restaurant. Neither could muster a word during dinner. "We were exhausted, spent of language," she recalls. Roth and the other writers she translates know how valuable her contribution is. And discerning readers sense it, too.

Reference: <http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901041213-880218,00.html>