CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Amélie Nothomb

Loving sabotage

Le Sabotage Amoureux

Presented by: Yoana Ganowski

***Loving Sabotage*, originally titled *Le Sabotage amoureux*, is the second novel by the renowned Belgian author Amélie Nothomb. Published in 1993 by Albin Michel, this autobiographical work recounts the author's three-year stay in China from the age of seven, between 1972 and 1975. Set in Beijing, this short book recounts the first relocation of the young Amélie, following her father Patrick Nothomb's appointment as the first Belgian *chargé d'affaires* in the People's Republic of China.**

After leaving her native Japan, the young girl finds herself in a radically different world at the heart of the communist PRC. Through the eyes of the child, the story reveals life within the San Li Tun ghetto, a diplomatic enclave that becomes the setting underlying tensions between opposing political and social systems. Her time in China is a formative experience, marked by the discovery of love, cruelty, and betrayal, particularly within her relationship with Elena: a beautiful girl who teaches her some bitter life lessons. Above all, however, the protagonist becomes embroiled in a global conflict when the children in the gated diplomatic district experience a degree of freedom previously unknown to her, largely due to a lack of parental supervision. In their efforts to alleviate boredom, they invent an elaborate game that reenacts a version of a World War, or at least what they imagine it to be, dividing themselves into two opposing factions. The Allies include children from Belgium, France, West Germany, Cameroon, Mali, Morocco, Zaire, Algeria, Italy, Romania, Chile, and others, while the adversaries are represented primarily by East German children. The war swiftly assumes a new collective objective: the fight against communism. This childish battle becomes a central fixture of their daily lives, sustained over the course of three years.

Beneath the guise of a love story, Nothomb unveils, with wit and innocence, a harsh political reality hidden behind childish behaviours shaped by lingering residual symptoms of the Second World War. This theatrical "war", filtered through the children's perspective, reveals an unexpected brutality: they display savage, vulgar, and merciless conduct, marked by unsettling rawness. Yet a trace of innocence remains, as these fierce battles and mock tortures are, ultimately, just play. The fictional war also encapsulates the ideological tensions of the era: the roles, hierarchies, and interactions among the children mirror the political convictions of their diplomat parents, who serve as emissaries of their respective nations. This network of international relations is reflected in the children's interactions: for example, the young West Germans join the Allied camp at their parents' behest. The children initially found the rationale behind the change difficult to comprehend, which resulted in their expression of discontent. This was despite the fact they had initially organised themselves according to linguistic affinities. Through its offbeat humour, tinged with tragedy and rooted in the Belgian literary and cultural tradition, the novel succeeds in satirizing conflict in its broadest sense while delivering a sharply critical perspective. Nothomb deftly subverts political codes, infantilizing and dismantling them with finesse.

Another striking political dimension of the narrative lies in the young protagonist's attempt to comprehend communism. Throughout her journey, she interrogates this pervasive yet elusive ideology, perceiving its manifestations without fully grasping its underlying principles. Her reflective process is shaped by both observation and the conduct of the adults around her. She gauges its significance through her father's remarks on the Chinese government's opacity and its refusal to engage in transparent dialogue with foreign diplomats. She also notes the abrupt replacement of interpreters when questions from foreign diplomats become too pointed, alongside the dissemination of newspapers containing distorted information. Her surroundings further inform her inquiry: the absence of contact with locals, the bleak and ugly monotony of concrete-dominated urban landscapes, and the sense of isolation and alienation she experiences within the diplomatic ghetto. Everything in this society appears unfamiliar, and she gradually comes to associate this strangeness with communism. For her, the ideology ironically becomes synonymous with "a country where there are fans", a trivial, mundane yet emblematic detail that encapsulates her sensory and symbolic encounter with ideological otherness. One thing remains certain: throughout her stay, she is driven by a persistent desire to unravel this political enigma.

In 1993, Amélie Nothomb received the Jacques Chardonne Prize, followed in 1996 by the Atout-Lire Prize for *Le Sabotage amoureux*. That same year, the novel was adapted into an opera by Daniel Schell, and in 1999 it was staged as a play by Pascal Lissillour. The book has often been interpreted in its critical afterlife as a whimsical tale in which war merely serves as a childish backdrop. However, it can also be read as an ironic and layered reflection on political agency, in which children adopt and imitate the codes of power.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing