



# THE WALL

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## INTERVIEW WITH LOLA LAFON AND CHLOÉ DABERT

***The Wall*, published in 1963, seems to have become a classic of a literature of “extreme experiences.”**

**Lola Lafon:** I've read this novel countless times over the past ten years. I like to come back to it as a major source of inspiration. Over the first lockdown, I was struck by the similarities with the experience of confinement described by Marlen Haushofer. We were going through a collective experience which, paradoxically, had thrown up a wall between us. The novel begins with a woman waking up one morning to discover that a wall now separates her from the rest of humanity. We all went through this feeling of separation, each in our own way, and just like the character's body changes to face those great transformations, the body of our society changed as well.

**Chloé Dabert:** We wanted to work together again after the musical reading of *Mercy Mary Patty*. When I started reading the novel, I felt like I was diving straight into Lola's mind. I read it all in one go, without thinking about how to adapt it. I was struck by the very cinematographic and contemplative writing. There's a latent tragedy, which you can feel coming from the very first pages. Yet what I'll remember from the novel is the relationship to nature; soothing images even as we know that what will come from nature might prove fatal. What also struck me is the fact that we have no idea “when it's taking place.” It could very well have been a novel written today, with the idea of doing away with technology. This temporal confusion creates an even closer connection to the narrator, to her diary.

**How did you approach the adaptation of the novel for the stage?**

**Chloé Dabert:** I wanted to start with the image of Lola as a writer come to pass on the story of this woman, of whom we know next to nothing, by writing this fake diary. I like the complexity the relationship to writing creates, the richness it adds to the character's inner life. We're working with a theatrical form, focused on the image of a woman telling a story. From there, we built a poetic object, thanks to the presence of the fourth wall. There's a balance to be found between the need to tell the story on the one hand, with its twists and turns we have to show the audience, and on the other the desire to convey those long descriptive passages, those moments of meditation when the narrator talks about the landscape that keeps her separated from the rest of the world. The novel never tells you how and why the wall appeared. You have to keep that mystery. What I wanted here was to find a mode of representation that wouldn't be an illustration of the text, to work mostly with suggestion. If the spaces you build are sufficiently open, the imagination remains free to project itself. This is the same mindscape as the page you're reading. I wanted to work on small elements, for props to be an eloquent support for the performance without saying too much, so that Lola could remain the incarnation of that woman.

### **What does Marlen Haushofer mean to you as a writer?**

**Lola Lafon:** There is in the novel, but also in the writer's life, a relationship to the world so specific that I can't but draw a parallel between those two worlds. When Marlen Haushofer wrote the novel in 1963, she was married to a dentist, a housewife hemmed in by the infamous 3K: *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (children, kitchen, and church). Writing was a way for her to question the space around her. I can't but think of Virginia Woolf's room of one's own. In the novel, the more the physical space surrounding the narrator shrinks, the larger her space of freedom grows. And this thanks to the knowledge she acquires by questioning her relationship to herself and the social norms that used to constrain her, and by observing the transformation of her body. Here, writing saves her life, prevents her from losing her mind, and her story only ends when she runs out of paper to write on.

**Chloé Dabert:** The quest for emancipation of this female character also leads to a more universal feeling of liberation. She gives us the courage to accept the unpredictable, to remain open to learning from the transformations of the world. It's a reflection on the difference between isolation and solitude. She is isolated but not alone, because she is surrounded by life in its many forms.

### **Do you think that there is a more transgressive relationship to the world in literature written by women today?**

**Lola Lafon:** The job of writer is still associated socially with virility, when there are many published women writers. In France, male writers are still seen as intellectual authorities who are asked about what happens in the outside world. Female writers are asked about their private lives, about sexuality, motherhood, feelings: in other words, the inner world. In many festivals, you'll find "literary" panels on one side and "women's literature" panels on the other, with female writers who have little in common brought together. I think that adding "women's" to literature implies that it is a subcategory. I see writing a novel as first and foremost trying to tackle what you don't know, including formally. I like the idea of writing towards the outside world, to change the landscape.

**Chloé Dabert:** Marlen Haushofer didn't write this novel as an activist. She made troubling assumptions that are more about the role one thinks they have to play and about what happens when it suddenly disappears. This "one" is important here, bringing us back to a reflection that can find an echo in each and every one of us.

Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux in February 2021 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cleach