



AUTHOR Q & A
with **HERMÉNÉGILDE CHIASSON**, author of *Beatitudes*

GLE: Why did you choose to use the biblical *Beatitudes* as the starting point for this collection?

HC: The *Beatitudes*, or the Sermon on the Mount, is one of the most beautiful poems ever written. It has a sense of grandeur that transcends literature and moves in the real world of intense reality and hope in humanity. It moves away from the vengeful and paranoid God of the extremists and extends the idea of kindness and peace as the true sense of spiritual quest. This is also what I try to put forward in this long list of people that you encounter in *Beatitudes*, people doing simple actions, tending to their chores, or trying to make sense of absurd situations. Jack Kerouac had the same intentions and recognized it when he extended the notion of beat to beatitude to a sense of harmony, the Buddhist idea of holiness everywhere in the world.

GLE: Was your upbringing a religious one?

HC: It seems that the religious aspect of literature has had a great deal of influence on my writing. This probably comes from growing up in a house where there were no books other than religious books. I remember my mother bought me a Bible from a peddler, probably the biggest book that I had ever seen. At some point we also had a school-teacher who decided that we should memorize the next Sunday's gospel. I remember every Friday we were randomly selected to recite these texts — I still consider this the strongest influence on my conception of rhythm and my sense of psalmody.

GLE: There's a passage in your book that says "these people, despite the frenetic pace that pushes us along the path and the daily flow of absurdity that makes us anxious, the nerve centre of terror that paralyses us." You've tapped into something about our overwhelming fears and anxieties in this new century.

HC: It comes from being submitted to so many prophets of doom. Everything that we do is going to kill us. Everything that we love or admire is spoiled by our unending quest for perfection. Whatever we do or eat causes cancer, whatever people we admire have done bad things in their lives, whatever we see as beauty will turn around and deceive us. I just got tired of that.

These poems are about trying to find a place where you could close the door and forget the sound of this frenzy that keeps accelerating. There is this beautiful sequence in the film *Babel* when you see the point of view of the deaf Japanese girl at a discotheque where everybody yells at everybody in order to communicate in the musical noise, and she hears nothing. You see, with her, the agitation around but in a perfect silence. For me this is a form of peace, of serenity, to be in the world without being in it. I am not

saying that deaf people are in paradise, but sometimes I think it would be a great gift if we could turn the noise on and off, turn the world on and off.

GLE: You wrote *Beatitudes* in French, and it was translated into English by Jo-Anne Elder. Do you always write in your mother tongue first?

HC: Yes I do. Although nowadays, I do write in English more often, for many of the speeches I do, especially the very long ones, are often written in English. When I write poetry it is usually in French for rhythm, and images are often linked to that intimate knowledge. This is why I have great admiration for people who translate poetry. They take unto themselves to create something that would still retain a great deal of the original but will become something else in terms of images or music, almost becoming co-writers in their own right of a new book.

GLE: How important is it to choose the right translator?

HC: A translator is truly your other voice, and you need to develop a sense of trust that will work on both ways of a strange contract, for the translator has to honour that trust and realize that she or he has a great responsibility. This relationship might not be as necessary if you do understand the other language — as in this case — but, in the case of a language that you don't know, this trust becomes a blind act of faith.

GLE: There is a wonderful rhythm to the language of *Beatitudes*, it almost feels like a performance piece.

HC: This is something to which I devote a great deal of energy in French.

I am glad that translated into the English version. With each language having its own rhythm, it's difficult for me to evaluate if it does function in the translation. This is all to Jo-Anne Elder's if it works that way. I have been working for more than ten years on that book, reading out loud and changing the order of the words or stretching some sentence or accumulating the effects so that the idea and the sound would match. Of course after every session I was saying to myself that it was ready, only to find out at the next session that it was all wrong and that I had to start over.

It's a great deliverance when it happens, when you have the object in your hands with the title and your name and the editor and you know that "a book is born," as one of my teachers at the Visual Studies Workshop would say.

GLE: The passages really speak to people. Did you want people to recognize themselves in this work?

HC: I know every person who inspires every particular fragment of that book.

This is a form of chronicle about something that most of them did not notice most of the time. I wanted to make it as a form of dedication to their inspiring generosity and emotional grandeur.

GLE: There are moments of joy, but much of it is very haunting.

HC: *Beatitudes* starts with a lower-case letter and ends with a comma. It has no beginning and no end; it is never punctuated. It is like humanity, which extends itself beyond time and space. It's like the stream of life, and I get a great sense of joy from it because it flows on a very oral perspective that connects on the breath. In that sense, it is very close to prayers, which also have their own music and carry an immense sense of hope. I do not say that *Beatitudes* reaches that magnitude but that is what I wanted to do with it. The first title of that book was "The book of prayers," and I changed it to "*Beatitudes*" because all my books only have one-word titles and also because I wanted it to be something that would carry a message of joy about a world which is still inhabited by beauty, as long as we want to see, hear, and experience it.