[HARDCOVER: UK]

The missionary proposition

BY **ANDREW ANTHONY**
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

There is no easy way to categorize this story of a Christian missionary's linguistic adventures in the Amazon forest. It's a little as if Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast* had been rewritten by Steve Pinker, but only a little. In 1977, Daniel Everett took his young family to live with the Pirahas, a small and remote tribe in the Brazilian interior with one of the least understood languages in the world. Supported by a missionary organization with the slightly misleading title of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, his aim was to learn Piraha so that he could translate the Bible.

As no Piraha could read or write, or even understand the concept of written language, this might have seemed like an act of vainglorious folly. But Everett had other problems. Within months, his wife and daughter almost died of malaria. And one evening, drunk on a trader's cheap booze, the tribe decided to kill Everett, who managed to talk his prospective killer into laying down his shotgun.

Then there was the language itself. Where did he begin? Piraha shares no root or vocabulary with any other known language. As no one among the Pirahas could speak any other language, Everett had to construct a painstaking system of trial and error. The job was made almost impossible by the fact that Piraha is a tonal language and many words appear to take an arbitrarily changing form.

Like a true missionary, however, Everett persisted over the course of several decades and gradually mastered the language. In the process he learned that the Piraha were not interested in the Bible, Christ or, indeed, any abstract philosophy or experience that they could not themselves witness. He also discovered that he no longer believed in God.

In many respects, Everett's memoir conforms to the myth of the noble savage. At first, he is shocked by the realization that Piraha women are left to die in childbirth, unattended by loved ones. And he is horrified when a young motherless baby, whose life he desperately tries to save, is killed by her father. But he comes to see these events as part of a culture that renders the Piraha the happiest and most contented people he has ever encountered.

If that were the extent of the book, it would amount to an interesting, if rather formal, travelogue, another tale of a presumptuous Westerner finding enlightenment in the depths of primitive society. The difference here is that Everett, an academic linguist, also presents a radical challenge to Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, which has dominated linguistics for half a century.

It always seemed a little odd that someone with Chomsky's belligerent ability to be wrong about almost everything in politics could be so right in another intellectual field. But the fact is that Chomsky saved linguistics from a behavioral ghetto. Noticing the complexity of human language skills, and the striking grammatical similarities that underpinned them, Chomsky proposed that the organizing principle of language — grammar — was not learned so much as encoded: humans were born, as it were, with a grammar gene.

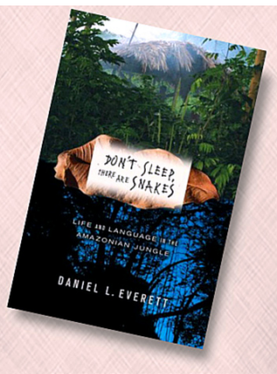
But it only takes one black swan to falsify the proposition that swans are by definition white. And Piraha, according to Everett, is the linguistic black swan that does for Chomsky. Instead of saying, "The man, who was tall, came into the house," Pirahas say, "The man came into the house. He was tall." This is because Piraha language apparently lacks what is known as "recursion," the process by which relative clauses are embedded in sentences to produce an infinite set of possibilities. It's this fundamental trait, Chomsky says, that distinguishes human from animal communication.

The fact that Piraha has no recursion, Everett contends, means that there is no universal grammar. What matters about language, **Everett argues, is that** it's cultural. We may all have the natural cognitive skills to derive meaning from language, but what determines the shape of the language, its basic architecture, is the surrounding culture.

It is not, he maintains, an accident that Piraha lacks recursion. Rather, it's a cultural imperative derived from what Everett terms the "immediacy of experience principle." Pirahas have little interest in that which they cannot directly verify, thus they communicate through a sequence of simple declarative assertions, negating the need for embedded clauses.

It's a fascinating thesis. The one obvious drawback is that it suffers from its own immediacy-of-experience principle. Everett is the primary interpreter and translator of Piraha and as there are only a few hundred speakers left, it's unlikely any linguist will ever possess sufficient knowledge to challenge his conclusions. Nevertheless, his conviction should give linguists pause for thought. There's only so much that can be deduced from the comfort of an academic's office.

Publication Notes



DON'T SLEEP, THERE ARE SNAKES: LIFE AND LANGUAGE IN THE AMAZONIAN JUNGLE
BY DANIEL EVERETT
320 PAGES
PROFILE BOOKS

SUNDAY PROFILE

Aleksandr Petrov at work.
PHOTO COURTESY OF TAIPEI GOLDEN HORSE FILM FESTIVAL

I am a realist. My works show the state of things … The fluidity unique to the medium is closely related to my worldview that life is changeable and erratic …

— Aleksandr Petrov, animator

There's no rushing this Russian

Oscar-winning animator Aleksandr Petrov's paint-on-glass technique is painstaking. In a 20-year career he's produced 86 minutes of work

BY **HO YI**
STAFF REPORTER

He has completed only five short films totaling up to 86 minutes during his 20-year career as animation director. Four out of the five were Oscar-nominated, including his adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, which won Best Animated Short Subject in 2000. From the ancient Russian city of Yaroslavl, Aleksandr Petrov arrived in Taipei last week to attend the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (台北金馬影展), which has organized a retrospective of his oeuvre to date.

Considering his reputation as an artist living in seclusion, soft-spoken and mild-mannered, the world's top animator seemed charmingly affable at a press conference last Friday.

"It is the first time for both my son and I to come to a country located below the Black Sea," said the gray-bearded Aleksandr Petrov, smiling at his son Dmitri, who has worked with him since the age of 16.

Respected as the most accomplished practitioner of paint on glass, a painstaking technique almost always undertaken by individual artists rather than production studios, Petrov's style consists of using his fingertips to paint with slow drying oil paint on layers of backlit glass. After photographing a finished frame/painting, the artist modifies the painting for the next frame. The process was repeated some 29,000 times over the course of two years to complete the 20-minute *The Old Man and The Sea*. It took three years for the 26-minute *My Love* (2006), the artist's most recent work adapted from a novel by Russian writer Ivan Shmelyov.

The most difficult aspect of the meticulous method lies in the fact that unlike your average animated movie, which can be processed separately and pieced together later, the exacting technique demands a veracity born out of immediacy and a well-coordinated and precise performance from the artist. To Petrov, it's a special trait that attracts rather than repels.

Above: Aleksandr Petrov's *The Old Man and The Sea*. Right: Aleksandr Petrov, center, and his animator son Dmitri Petrov at a press conference in Taipei last Friday. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TAIPEI GOLDEN HORSE FILM FESTIVAL

"It creates a distinctive aesthetic since what is shown is what the artist originally conceives and envisions. There is no modification or translation in between," the 51-year-old artist said.

As images are manipulated directly under the camera and recorded frame by frame, each of them appears to emerge from the previous one and melt into the next. Such technique gives birth to a sense of fluid and organic movement, and visual effects that seamlessly fit to the artist's world of dreams, sub-consciousness, reverie and deliriums under a photo-realistic crust.

Petrov's art is often said to exist in a moment suspended between the real and the surreal. In *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (1992), inspired by the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the swirl of dark strokes and brushes renders Dostoyevsky-esque ravings into images, delivering a haunting psychological depth. A story about a 16-year-old student torn between a chambermaid and a mysterious femme fatale at the turn of the century, *My Love* uses vibrant colors and impressionistic flows to depict the boy's subconscious images and inner emotions.

Indeed, terms used to describe Petrov's films range from "romantic realism" to "impressionist painting come-to-life." Yet to the animator, his art is first of all a reflection of life.

"I am a realist. My works show the state of things … The fluidity unique to the medium is closely related to my worldview that life is changeable and erratic," he said.

As for his affinity to the tradition of Russian literature (four out of the five works are based on Russian texts, including *The Cow* (1989), **which was adapted from** a short story by Andrei Platonov and which propelled Petrov onto the international stage), the humble artist said it is merely a natural procedure to express one's reflections after reading a novel or story.

"I don't know how to express my thoughts with pens so I paint. To me, the most important thing is to reach a balance between the author and myself. In order to respect the original work, I have to restrain myself from getting too personal. And that includes the choice of style and the mood created," Petrov said.

Working as a lone artist for his earlier works, Petrov became a project leader when he teamed up with a Canadian production company for *The Old Man and The Sea*, the first large-format animated film shot in the IMAX format. Ten artists, animators and designers were recruited to complete *My Love*, about 20 percent of which was painted over video scenes in a process similar to rotoscope in order to reach a higher level of accuracy in terms of character movements and facial expressions.

Trained as a painter in the beginning of his artistic upbringing, Petrov admitted that the transition from painter to animation director was painful and jokingly called it a "mistake."

"The most ideal way for me is to do everything all by myself. It's much easier because I don't need to communicate with others or make concessions," he said.

As a lone artist or a team leader, Petrov has found and mastered an artistic expression he said is natural and integral, whereby in a painting (i.e. paint-on-glass), all elements are parts of a integral, organic whole. "It just matches my personality — simple, real and nothing fancy," he said.

The last screening of Petrov's works at the Golden Horse is on Saturday at Vieshow Cinemas Durban (德安威秀影城) in Taichung City.

[HARDCOVER: US]

China and Taiwan: Whose pain is it anyway?

Atrocities proliferate in Michael Berry's analysis of how the representations of massacres on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are fought over by social groups

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

A History of Pain? I had to laugh when I saw this title. It reminded me of *Heaven: A History*, another absurdly impossible project, seemingly, that nonetheless proved eye-catching. But looking into this new book I see that it actually refers to China's — and Taiwan's — history over the past 150 years or so, a period that was painful, and also of course fatal, to many, with much of the suffering, according to the author, self-inflicted.

In fact, there was a previous Chinese book with a name that translates as *A History of Pain* — a novel written about the bloody transition from the Song to Yuan dynasties by late-Qing Dynasty author Wu Jianren (吳趼人, 1866-1910). Atrocities proliferate in it, including the massacre of an entire city. Translator and professor Michael Berry discusses this book, and it clearly gave him the idea for his own quirky title.

What Berry's own book, published last month, actually deals with are artistic representations of six crucial events — Taiwan's 228 Incident and its earlier Musha Incident (of 1930), plus four traumatic crises in China: the Nanjing Massacre of 1937; the Cultural Revolution as it occurred in Yunnan Province; the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989; and (rather surprisingly, but more of that later) the handover of Hong Kong in 1997.

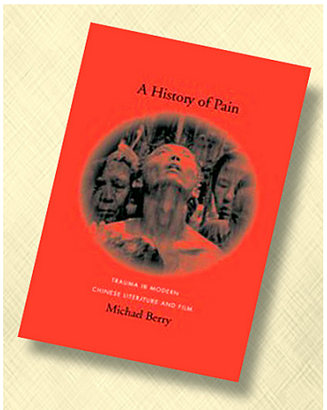
Taiwan's Musha Incident, known in Mandarin as the Wushe Incident (霧社事件), was the occasion when approximately 300 Atayal Aborigines attacked Japanese officials at an elementary school sports meeting in Nantou County, killing 134 of them, many by decapitation. The event, and especially its leader Mona Rudao, has been endlessly mythologized in Taiwan, and Berry cites comic strips, poems, films that illustrate this. The problem, however, is that this was an entirely Aboriginal attack that the Chinese-descended Taiwanese also wanted to commandeer into the history of their anti-colonial struggle.

It's interesting to remember that a year after coming to power in 2000, the DPP administration minted NT$20 coins depicting the head of Mona Rudao. These are no longer in circulation, but the exercise was an indication, according to Berry, of the way different groups in modern Taiwan continue to vie for "possession" of that murderous event.

Far and away the most interesting — and radical — response to it, Berry argues, was the 1999 novel *Remains of Life* (餘生) by the Tainan-born writer Wu He (舞鶴). This 210-page stream-of-consciousness narrative, that contains only 20 sentence breaks, not only mostly deals with the area of the massacre as it is today but also indulges in elaborate sexual fantasies and, in a manner virtually unheard-of in the Taiwan context, questions the morality of the killings in themselves. The book awaits an English translator, though a section of it can be read in English in *Taiwan Literature: English Translation Series No. 13* (July 2003).

Wu has also written about the events of 228, notably in a widely anthologized story *Investigation: A Narrative* (調查:敘述) where he again refuses any simple, "patriotic" approach and instead espouses an interweaving complexity that suggests that the truth about most things is unknowable, and that all you can be certain of is "pain," a word echoed and re-echoed in the story by a pet mynah bird.

Publication Notes



A HISTORY OF PAIN
MICHAEL BERRY
420 PAGES
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

There's much else about 228 in this book because, as the author states, there was remarkably little in English on the trauma's cultural repercussions, especially in fiction, until Sylvia Li-chun Lin's *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* [reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on March 30, 2008.

Quite why the author opts to concentrate on the agony caused by the Cultural Revolution in Yunnan rather than anywhere else is unclear. Obviously an event lasting 10 years and spawning many different kinds of writing in China — "scar literature," "search-for-roots literature" and so on — couldn't be treated complete. Yunnan had the advantage of being the location for Dai Sijie's (戴思杰) novel and subsequent film *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (小裁縫) and Chen Kaige's (陳凱歌) film *King of the Children* (孩子王). This is probably the least rewarding chapter in the book, but then the Cultural Revolution can hardly be said to have received inadequate coverage elsewhere.

The inclusion of Hong Kong's handover appears problematic, but the author is well aware of this. What he points out is that it was an example of an event widely predicted as likely to be apocalyptic that turned out, on the surface anyway, as nothing of the sort. China's experience of pain, in other words, which had almost become routine, led to vividly imagined expectations of a recurrence. It didn't happen as anticipated, but the books and films were written and made in advance nonetheless.

Berry calls this phenomenon "anticipatory trauma," but does point out that the emigration from the territory that took place before 1997 was real enough. This was representative of the mass movements of people that have often accompanied China's recent convolutions — emigration, and student applications for asylum in the countries where they found themselves, after the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 being another example.

One of the characteristics of these traumatic events, Berry argues, is that they are disputed. Beijing disputes Tiananmen and Tokyo disputes the numerically far more terrible massacre of Nanjing. This is, of course, part and parcel of social groups wanting to control the representation of past events — how they are seen, how they are remembered and, particularly, how they are understood.

"Modern China's trajectory has been one of discontinuity, displacement, social unrest, and historical trauma," writes Berry. Taiwan has certainly been fortunate by comparison, though not without its own awesomely dark interludes. Despite the heady, bloodless early days of the French and Russian revolutions, happiness can be said to abide in times where almost nothing important (in a political sense) actually happens.