

HÉTU, JULIE. *Mot*. Montréal: Triptyque, 2014. ISBN 978-2-89031-961-5. Pp. 204. \$22 Can.

This three-generation saga begins in Lebanon after the failure of the Egyptian-Syrian political union and just before Lebanon's disastrous entanglements in the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967. Such backdrop of internecine strife in the Middle East does not really continue as a plot point after the opening chapters, but it does suggest a self-destructiveness that will inform the entire novel. Little Cybèle escapes her native Lebanon with her mother in the dark of night and under an assumed name so as not to be traced back to a father who will eventually be accused of treason and duly executed. Mother and daughter begin life again in Majorca, Spain. As Cybèle grows into a young woman, her sadness is sublimated through artistic expression in the form of paintings with a mildly disturbing beauty. When she embarks on her first and only adult love relationship, bringing with it marriage and family, real violence seeks her out, eventually compelling her to abandon her husband and young children and to return to Lebanon. The remainder of the novel follows the lonely lives of Cybèle's children, Elmihra and her much younger brother, Mot. As Elmihra grows up motherless and virtually fatherless, she adopts her culture's fascination with corridas and bull-fighting; in fact, slight as she is, she trains as a matador. Impressionable young Mot, utterly devoted to his sister, remains in thrall to her talent and celebrity. To divulge much more of the plot would spoil the suspense that Héту takes pains to build. Suffice it to say that the seeds of violence sown in the first generation find fertile soil in the third. Although the dust cover claims that the novel displays the "tendre violence" of ancient Greek tragedy, I would take issue with the descriptor, "tendre." The term must overlook the depicted savagery of political repression in the form of brutality, rape, and torture. Admittedly, Héту creates characters who are drawn to an estheticized encounter with death: all the family members of the last two generations are artists of some sort whose paintings, music, poetry, and of course bull-fighting, romanticize, indeed, eroticize death. These leitmotifs of thanatophilia contribute, as much as the action itself, to a sense of inevitability if not full-blown doom (hence, appropriate comparisons to tragedy's fatality). But this reader would have preferred more psychological development of the characters to convince us, as the ancient Greeks do so well, of the deep and explicable humanness of this tragic tale.