

**Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*,  
New York: Fordham University Press, 2019,  
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Swimming conditions were not good on that Friday, July 21, 2017, at Pampelonne Beach, in the south of France, with strong winds and high waves. Anne Dufourmantelle, a 53-year-old prominent French academic and author, went into the water to rescue her friend's two children who were drowning. She went into cardiac arrest while trying to come to their aid and died. Her death made headlines for, while she often argued that living entails risk, the risk she took that day was fatal for her.

Her book, *In Praise of Risk*, defies classification. It is not an ordinary philosophical or psychoanalytic study but an extremely original mixture of the two. Dufourmantelle, who was both a psychoanalyst and a philosopher, calls up stories and insights, many of which are personal. It is not easy to read some of these as they are fragmented; sometimes vague, sometimes confused. But this is the way dialogue between a patient and psychoanalyst occurs and Dufourmantelle remains faithful to it. She speaks a language that interrupts itself. Turning to case histories, or fragments thereof, all cut short, she cuts herself off; she acts as an analyst in relation to her own philosophical discourse. She relies on the commitment of the reader to take up this task, which she has taken on herself: to question the basis of what it means to be human. Being a Levinasian, she is always in a relation to the Other. The Other that comes before Being, both in its absent and present form. She poses the question of the Other, which is also “the possibility of turning savagery into grace.”<sup>84</sup>

The form and content of the book are unusual. Constructed of outlined universal themes, carefully presented, and supported by original psychoanalytic situations. She is not afraid to lay bare what

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<sup>84</sup> Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 21.

it means to be human, or what it means to search for ultimate truth. “Prayer is a state of waiting for a word that you know will not come, but that, at the same time, is there inside you, deposited there from time immemorial.”<sup>85</sup> Each of Dufourmantelle’s case histories depicts a patient who risked their life in order to make space for never before acknowledged or articulated experiences, and fragments of life never lived before.

Throughout *In Praise of Risk*, Dufourmantelle asks difficult questions. Some of them the reader will have asked themselves before, some of them not. Can we risk forgetting the “I” when we turn everything into a universal, without in the process foreclosing the possibility of hospitality?<sup>86</sup> How do we not give up all hope, when all hope is defeated?<sup>87</sup> The shortness of the chapters affords a space that allows us to wander in and out of the text, to take a breath and contemplate the layer that was both added and dissected. It is impossible to know where you are going to end up. The more one advances, the more one realizes that the initial question was not really understood. But to ask about the risk, and to praise risk, should not be confused with the risk that Dufourmantelle took herself that day at the beach when she tried to save those children. *That* risk was to live. Risk itself is the start of life, the moment that it starts in obscurity. Risk is the only way to relate to any possible future. The author opens up the question of “taking the risk of not dying.”<sup>88</sup> She moves between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, Søren Kierkegaard, Elie During and Henri Bergson, posing the question of the Other. In another reflection, Dufourmantelle arrives at the hypothesis that the unconscious itself is incompatible with consciousness, not because it bears unwanted knowledge, but rather because it is turned towards the future: “Why at certain moments of our lives are we in advance of ourselves? I would like to think of the psychic reserve in us whereby we gain access to the future beyond the narrow confines of our consciousness, our class, our education, our fears, and our inability to confront alterity.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 164.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 122.

However, what is the risk, par excellence, for the author? It is not that of death or the loss of life. For Dufourmantelle, this risk is opening to something hidden, which she calls “intimate,” “intimate prophecy,” or “intimate time.” Guided by her experience as a psychoanalyst, she finds that “intimate time” unexpectedly comes at moments when the possibility of death is set aside. The photograph on the cover of the book shows Philippe Petit during his notorious high-wire walk on August 7, 1974, between the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The high-wire artist risks falling, most of all when he holds still, when he attempts to stand in place, almost without moving a muscle. He must restrain the very momentum that gives him stability. Suspension is not the arrest of time that comes before something else happens but the event itself, the passage into intimate time where, in reality, the decision has already been made although no one knows it yet.<sup>90</sup>

Intimacy rather than death, for Dufourmantelle, is what defines risk. The word “intimate” in French, notes the translator of the book, Steven Miller, refers to a radical or hyperbolic interiority, more inward than the heart, the heart of hearts (or what in French is called the *for intérieur*).<sup>91</sup> The author often relies on this sense of the word *intimate*. Dufourmantelle questions the reality, the truth of belief, something which can only be verified as lived. She sees this in her work as a psychoanalyst who does not expect that “the unforeseeable might appear, arise, manifest itself, and come to transform her life.”<sup>92</sup> But, if we dare take the risk, we break apart every possible reality and something else is revealed.

We live in a strange time, when the words “safe” and “secure” run through our daily life. Dufourmantelle opens another door. She asks us to do better, to relate to the Good that was there before there was any Being. And life? “Life is a heedless risk taken by us, the living.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, xxi.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 1.