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Page 1 of 2

Review of the week

Naughty Sophie gets a new life

An enchanting series of books written in French more than 150 years ago by 'the children's Balzac' has finally been translated into English.

Review by Sophie Masson

A book whose main character bears your own name casts a powerful spell on a child, especially when you know that your name was inspired by that same character and one of your sisters bears the same name as one of that character's best friends, Camille. Such was the case for me with *Les Malheurs de Sophie* (*Sophie's Misfortunes*), by the Countess de Segur (1799-1874), the great 19th-century French children's author, who has been described as "the children's Balzac" for the quality of her detailed pictures of family life.

But it wasn't just egotistical thrill that made this book one of the most beloved of my Francophone childhood. It was its magical, engaging, humorous warmth, the sense of being totally in Sophie's world as she falls into her self-inflicted misadventures, with or without her cousin Paul or her friends Camille and Madeleine. Little Sophie de Rean has all the best intentions but her impulsive, generous nature, devouring curiosity and tomboyish daring lead her time after time to forget that she is supposed to be a little lady. She has a fiery temper but a good heart; she feels guilty about worrying her gentle mother, tries

hard to emulate her more sedate and obedient friends but just can't help herself.

She is unforgettable and, like generations of French children before and after me, I adored being in her lively, loving world and plunged happily into the book's two sequels, rereading them, too, several times. Though irrepressible Sophie was always my favourite, I also really liked her friends the "good little girls", who weren't really goody-goodies at all but kind and helpful and who revealed many human complexities throughout the books.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, of course, but it is the astonishing freshness of the author's writing that make her characters come alive in such a realistic, moving and timeless way. Though these books were first published in the 1850s and '60s, they do not feel dated. The countess's style is unique – a mixture of lively narration and simple dialogue set out something like a playscript. She launches into her stories straight away, without dull scene-setting. Though she does not talk down to her readers, she doesn't use the ponderous language or complex constructions that can make children's books of



Children's fiction

THE FLEURVILLE TRILOGY:

Sophie's Misfortunes
Camille and Madeleine
The Holidays

Countess de Segur

Simon & Schuster,
\$16.99 each

this period difficult for modern children. Indeed, it is hard to think of any other children's books of the time, French or English, that can be read with as much immediate ease by modern children without the need for adult intervention.

It is doubly astonishing when you consider that the countess's native tongue was not French but Russian. Nee Sofya Feodorovna Rostopchina, she was the daughter of Count Rostopchin, the governor of Moscow at the time of the Napoleonic invasion and responsible for the controversial burning of the city. Persecuted for it later, he took his family into exile in western Europe when Sofya was a teenager, eventually fetching up in France. It was in her father's Parisian literary salon that Sofya met the man who became her husband, Count Eugene de Segur, but it wasn't until 1857, when she was 58, that she wrote her first book, a collection of fairytales she had invented for her grandchildren.

The book was an immediate success but it was her next, *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, that really made her reputation. Published as the launch title in Hachette's new children's imprint *La Bibliotheque Rose* (which still exists), it sold out at once. Over the next 12 years, she wrote 20 books and so successful were they that her output basically bankrolled Hachette's other titles. Her books have sold more than 30 million copies and are considered to be not only classics in France but also part of what it means to grow up French.

But though the Fleurville books have been read with such enormous pleasure by generations of French children, until now they have never been translated into English. (Only one book out of the countess's rich output has ever appeared in English before: *L'Auberge de l'Ange Gardien*,

or *Angel Inn*, translated by the English children's author Joan Aiken.) So it was very exciting to discover that the trilogy had not only been newly translated into English but by an Australian translator, and published by an Australian publisher to boot.

Translator Stephanie Smee, who was raised by parents who spoke and taught French and who has an honours degree in French from the University of Sydney, discovered the books as an adult when a French friend alerted her to them. She was so immediately captivated by them that she decided to translate them.

She has done a brilliant job. I still have my battered childhood copy of *Les Malheurs de Sophie* and can vouch first-hand for the fact that in Smee's sensitive, light hands the

translations have all the appeal, the engaging charm and warmth of their French originals. She manages to capture the author's fresh voice perfectly, at last opening up the gorgeous world of these most beloved of children's classics for English-language readers.

The books have been beautifully produced, with attractive covers and format and lively illustrations by Simon Sturge at the beginning of each chapter. They are highly recommended and will greatly appeal to young readers, especially – but not exclusively – girls.

Sophie Masson's latest novel is *The Phar Lap Mystery* (Scholastic Press).

