

**Clara  
Dupuis-Morency**

*translated by* **AIMEE WALL**

**Sadie  
X**

*a novel*

# **Sadie X**

**Clara Dupuis-Morency**  
*Translated by Aimee Wall*

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To those in whom I live,  
so that something else may exist.

## NOTE

In 2013, scientists from the Genomics and Structural Information Laboratory at the Université Aix-Marseille discovered one of the largest viruses ever identified, a giant virus that is not only not pathogenic to humans but also does not care about us at all. They called it the Pandoravirus.

The name (chosen because this virus would “break the foundations of what we thought viruses were”), that is, the attempt to assign a definition to the discovery of a completely new reality, one that defies our previously held assumptions, and for which science does not yet have adequate language, makes this already the stuff of literature, a moment at which thought takes centre stage.

This novel borrows language from the brilliant work of these researchers, language that makes it possible to conceive of the Pandoravirus, to allow for its existence in our world.

Details of the characters’ lives come from other stories, other situations.

PART 1

**PANDORA**



Sadie is not a philosopher. Back when she was still studying philosophy, when she still thought it was her calling, one of her professors spoke about what he called the three humiliations of humanity. The first by Nicolaus Copernicus, who dethroned the Earth from its place at the centre of the universe, showing it was nothing more than a *tiny speck in a world-system*. The second by Charles Darwin, who spoke of our animal ancestor, destroying humanity's claim to a separate and superior status in creation. And the third by Sigmund Freud, who demoted the human "I" from its position as *master in its own home*, reducing it to dependency on *the most scanty information concerning all that goes on unconsciously in its psychic life*.

With this, Sadie's professor, an eccentric, broke down the walls of the discipline. It was rather unorthodox to venture into such scientific terrain within the Faculty of Philosophy. He emphasized the importance of each of these knowledge revolutions, fomented by the controversial work of each of these men and the resistance they faced. He repeated the word several times, hu-mil-i-A-tion,

stressing the fourth syllable, building excitement until they could behold all of History stretching out before them, the chain formed by these summits, and identify the extraordinary moments in which thought had brought about radical change, these moments he called invidious, stubborn, ungrateful to the past, moments that, through the cataclysm created by this new vision, gave shape to the future.

After that slightly unusual course, Sadie never again heard anyone speak of the scientific revolution in the philosophy department, and she never again heard talk of science until the day she met François Régnier a few years later. She'd signed up for a seminar outside of her own program. Régnier was a physician working on research in France. During his semester on a fellowship at the Université francophone de la Montagne, he was appointed head of his first laboratory in Marseille. Régnier studied viruses.

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He began the first class by presenting, without any preamble, an inventory of everything viruses lack and everything that therefore disqualifies them from the category of living thing. His voice sounded rusty, as if he didn't use it often, his hands lifted from the table in jagged gestures, Sadie remembers it perfectly. A virus cannot be divided. A virus has no ribosomes, the little machines that read genetic code. A virus cannot translate its own code into activity. A virus does not reproduce by itself. A virus is not a cell. Régnier's nervous tics sent waves of unease through the classroom. Then, his litany of negations created a cadence. He persisted, holding that dissonant note. Régnier was not a handsome or particularly elegant man, but he had a dis-



tinctly erratic way of projecting himself into space, and the inventory of missing qualities he recited in a jittery, syncopated rhythm unsettled something in the composition of the air. There was an electricity in his words that disrupted the consistency of the present.

From one class to the next, Régnier's negative taxonomy became a poetic scansion that subtracted more and more with each utterance. He excluded more and more qualities of the living from the virus, creating for the students a continually diminishing figure. They began to expect that by the end of the semester they would arrive at a pure and essential core, from which nothing further could be stripped away. Some students grew impatient, rejecting this stratagem, denouncing his pedagogical methods. In order to follow his thinking, Régnier's students had to agree from the start to step out onto precarious foundations and submit to a certain conceptual vertigo. During the last class, partially vindicating his detractors with a final middle finger, he came to the conclusion that a conclusion was impossible. What they were looking for was elsewhere. From one class to the next, over the course of this journey of privation, the students' very idea of absence, of lack, was reversed, overturned. And it was then that Régnier shared his precious idea, the final nail in the coffin.

*The virus is not the viral particle,  
that little box we use to describe our idea  
of what a virus is.  
A virus is what happens when it leaves the box and  
enters the cell. A virus is a relationship.*

It was all there already—the major original idea of his work, the initial intuition that would keep the kaleidoscope of thought turning, remixing and reassembling the same elements that were all already there.

This was how Sadie came to Science. Against the grain. She first encountered the structures and foundations of the discipline through their destabilization. A whole world of theory opened up to her in a state of seismic disequilibrium. But she'd accepted it; it was clear that she had already accepted all of it. She had no frame of reference by which to evaluate Régnier's method, but she was struck by the way his thinking was contaminated by its subject: he thought infectiously. She had never seen anything like it, the way he let his observations seep into the core of the very notions he needed to draw on to make sense of what he saw. A tightrope walker of the intellect.

In that grim classroom, where a few narrow windows—mere slits, really—looked out onto the interior courtyard of a rather carceral panopticon, Régnier created an opening to a dimension Sadie had never imagined, a minuscule world that evades our gaze and yet is swarming everywhere among us. In that rumble of the living, Sadie discovered a mode of thinking in which the concepts themselves came alive.

She wrote down everything she could manage to catch as he lectured, she took notes ardently, her notebooks becoming the archive of frequently incomplete sentences she'd spend the next decades meditating on, decoding. She wrote furiously, wanting to get it all down. But her notes, hasty and rushed, could never quite

capture everything. Her notebooks—top quality, always impeccable, governed by a clear and efficient transcription system in which meticulous, irreproachable handwriting was carefully aligned and proportioned—gradually filled with barely recognizable letters, disfigured by the avidity of her mind. The fear of letting words slip by unrecorded intensified. She'd had this obsession since childhood, a preoccupation that had led to the development of her efficient transcription technique. But in Régnier's classroom, her system was of no help. This was something else, and it had to be contained. A new world of knowledge required a new language of gestures. As she wrote, she could glimpse in her peripheral vision the way her scribbles were sully-ing the beautiful pages of her notebook, but she didn't have time to linger over her uneven, and before long disgraceful, handwriting. Over the course of the semester, her movements intensified as she adapted to the unpredictable rhythm of Régnier's speech. Her hand grew less concerned with properly closing a letter's loops, it gained confidence, and she soon took a certain pleasure in the chaos of her poor handwriting.

Many of her classmates could not keep up. They sat silently in their seats, out of their depth. So it fell to her—she could keep up, she wouldn't give up—to record the high-wire act of ideas. Sadie had the growing impression that Régnier was speaking to her and her alone.

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Despite having spent her formative years trying to wrap her head around conceptual structures, each one more complex than the last. Despite having lived, in the first years of her adult life, *inside*

those abstract architectures, moving from one speculative fortress to another, sometimes by the official passages of History, other times hitting narrow dead ends, improvised crossroads. Despite all this.

Régnier's lectures thrust her into the realm of the living. The constructions she had explored and investigated were suddenly flattened. The whole structure that should have allowed thought to move to another order of reality, to move beyond the coarse, crude appearances of the common world—she suddenly realized that it was all going nowhere, that it was only responding to the need for thought to embed itself deeper and deeper inside more and more complex structures, producing an exponential quantity of concepts that were effective only in pushing disorder and chance outside its walls. In the Faculty of Philosophy, there was no possible escape from this deleterious world of illusions, but instead an ever more sophisticated system of compartmentalization.

When she thinks back to those days, Sadie tends to forget that she had in fact resisted that breakdown of her universe, seeking refuge for a time in ancient texts that seemed more relevant to the questions that were awakening in her. It was reassuring, for a time, to look back, to return to the beginnings of the philosophical tradition that had shaped her and search for something that might have been forgotten, left behind on the journey to rationality. Thales of Miletus, Anaximander, Heraclitus: she spent some time wandering through the strange and scattered remnants of their worlds and put that archaic knowledge, still all mixed up with the myths it was trying to leave behind, into dialogue with the new science whose language she was just now learning. Those

thinkers who had lived on islands off the coast of what is now Turkey, where the solid world meets the liquid world, in an environment much more fluid than the desert that had given birth to our monotheistic traditions, did they not still have something to teach us? Was there not still a link between the study of life and the development of thought? Could she find a moment when philosophy had not been a defensive reflex against the unexpected?

It was too late for Antiquity. Within the drab green concrete walls of the university, as she discovered the moving complexity of the most basic structures of the living world, she realized how much mental energy she had invested from the very start of her education in pushing away the unpredictable, random nature of the sensory world. So much energy spent trying to extricate herself not only from what makes up every part of each one of us but also from what, at every moment, we are participating in.

Sadie never finished her studies in philosophy. She converted, at the age of twenty-five, to science. She abandoned the doctoral thesis she'd begun writing on the prophetic vocation of philosophy. She left philosophy and its moribund corridors, and she left many other things at the same time—her family, her city, her country. She did not answer the call of philosophy. She took another path.

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That is what Régnier gave her. He made her see the sterile illusion to which she would have devoted herself. He was the first person in that cozy prison of ideas to offer something else. The concrete

that she had once thought inert began to hum with innumerable life forms, millions of viruses, and bacteria, invisible particles. All that life had always been there, under her nose. In return, he recognized an awakening in her. She went to see him in his office and he made space for her. He took the time to walk her through the phenomena he was studying, of which the class received only a fragmented, condensed version. During their conversations, which quickly became informal, he hinted at the potential implications of his research, and soon his hypotheses too, sometimes even the rough ideas he was preoccupied with. He let her see the unfinished stage. She could tell that he was lonely. He would never have admitted it, but it stung to not be taken seriously, to be an outsider in his field. She slipped into that gap of pain. He hated them all, but the cycle of his resentment, in which he directed his contempt for his peers back at himself, didn't stop there. It kept the machine running, and it transferred to his research with an aggressive energy. She saw all of this. Régnier had a furious brilliance.

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Sadie is not a philosopher. She put that call on hold, picked up another line. But she did hang on to that fable, from that period in her life, the time before she met Régnier, the fable from the history of ideas—the story of the three humiliations of humanity. The knowledge now taking shape in her, twenty-five years later, is not exactly the answer to a philosophical question, but she nonetheless has the impression of returning to a question whose limits she could not assign to any field of human thought. The next humiliation, the one she sees looming every day, will not, she thinks, arise out of the epiphany of a single mind, nor will it be

embodied in the revolution that will bear its name. No, this humiliation originates with a very small life form, so small it is already here among us, already a part of our lives, muscling its way in every day, colonizing us, becoming a part of us.

If we are to believe the majority, it is a life form so small that it has no real place within the kingdom of the living. We use its name to speak of those we want to cast out of humanity. Parasites, we call them. Vulgar parasites.

But the parasite will soon have the last laugh. Sadie is there to bear witness. Every day, she goes to the laboratory and takes her place behind the microscope and vials, and every day she is witness to the spectacular life of viruses.