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# An audience with Anthea Bell

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## Aletta Stevens reports on an appearance by the multi-award-winning translator at the Bath Literature Festival

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On 2 March, eight members of the ITI Western Regional Group took their seats among the expectant audience at the Guildhall in Bath to hear the prize-winning literary translator Anthea Bell OBE interviewed as part of the Bath Literature Festival. Introduced as a versatile translator of many different books 'from Asterix to Freud', Anthea Bell has translated children's and adult literature from French, Danish, Polish and German to English, including W G Sebald's *Austerlitz*, and Władysław Szpilman's Holocaust survival memoir published as *The Pianist*, which was made into a powerful film by Roman Polański. Her prizes include the Schlegel Tieck Prize for translation from German, The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, the Helen and Kurt Wolff Prize, and the Austrian State Prize for Literary Translation. Despite her advancing years and modest appearance, her formidable mind is as sharp as ever, recalling foreign book titles at the drop of a hat and sharing anecdotes of writers and publishers she has met over the years.

With her wide experience of translating German literature and her work on *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* for the New Penguin Freud, Anthea was well prepared for *Die Welt von Gestern* (*The World of Yesterday*) by the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), one of the most famous writers of the 1920s and 30s. This autobiography, written in exile in Brazil shortly before Zweig committed suicide, is a nostalgic look back to the Vienna of the late 19th and early 20th century up to the rise of Hitler. It contains portraits of literary, musical and intellectual figures he knew at the time, including Freud, Richard Strauss and James Joyce. Anthea was keen to point out that Zweig himself had been a translator, not only of a play and a novel, but also of poetry by Baudelaire, Verlaine and Keats. In *The World of Yesterday* he stated that he still regarded



**Anthea Bell had many anecdotes to share**

translating as 'the best way for a young writer to gain a deeper, more creative understanding of the spirit of his own mother tongue'.

The fact that Anthea is also known for writing translator's notes and afterwords lends her an unusual authority as a translator. The Pushkin Press, the London-based independent publishing house specialising in translations of European classics and contemporary fiction, have reissued many other Zweig titles, most of which she has translated. The recent collection *The Governess and Other Stories* contains the short story 'Did He Do It?', inspired by the English detective genre. It is set near Bath, one of the places where Zweig lived after fleeing from Austria, which gives Anthea's appearance at the Bath Literature Festival an added poignancy. When we arrive at the festival bookstall after the talk, copies of *The World of Yesterday* have already sold out. Instead we buy the novellas *Journey into the Past* (*Widerstand der Wirklichkeit*) and *The Royal Game* (*Schachnovelle*), and queue up to have them signed by Anthea Bell herself.

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**The *World of Yesterday* will be reviewed by Aletta Stevens in the next issue of ITI Bulletin.**