

Reading the world

Aletta Stevens reports from a recent event that sought to explore the attitudes of UK readers to translated literature from the Continent and beyond



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What was the last book you read in English translation? This was one of the questions asked at the workshop on translated literature at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution on 4 February, attended by the ITI Western Regional Group, to explore the attitudes of UK readers to less well-known literatures. The workshop was organised by Dr Rajendra Chitnis, senior lecturer in Czech and Russian at the University of Bristol, as part of a research project creating 'the opportunity for the first sustained comparative analysis of how, through translation, the contemporary literatures of smaller or less well represented European nations endeavour to reach the cultural mainstream. It brings together researchers from typical examples – Czech and Slovak, Portuguese, Scandinavian and South Slav – who work as cultural translators in both academic and public-facing contexts.'

The expert view

Participants were asked to complete a survey in advance, which included such questions as 'What made you read it?', 'Do you go out of your way to read books in translation?', 'Are they easy to find?' and 'Can they tell us or show us things that English-language literature can't?'. By the time we arrived, the survey had been completed by 300 people, mostly from reading groups in the Bath/Bristol area.

There was a distinguished panel of three: Simon Winder (publishing director, Penguin Classics), Nic Bottomley (owner of Mr B's Emporium of Reading Delights, Bath) and Stephanie Seegmuller (associate publisher and chief operating officer,

Pushkin Press), who each gave their view of translated literature.

First up was Simon Winder, who reminded us that a considerable proportion of the Penguin Classics list consists of books from other languages, including the entire oeuvre by the French-Belgian crime writer Georges Simenon, creator of the fictional detective Maigret, first translated into English in the 1960s. The Maigret novels are now being retranslated by several translators and reissued at the rate of one a month, and Penguin has set up a translators' forum to ensure consistency across the work. Penguin Classics is also

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reissuing CK Scott Moncrieff's 1920s translation of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of things past*). And to celebrate Penguin's 80th birthday, Penguin Classics has just launched the Little Black Classics series: 80 short classics (unabridged) at 80 pence each, 48 of which are from languages such as Persian, Greek, Russian and Arabic. Finally, the imprint is venturing into new territory by commissioning a number of translations from Romanian.

Second to speak was Nic Bottomley, whose bookshop prides itself on offering a personal service with a difference. His well-read staff are keen on foreign literature and offer something called a Reading Spa: they talk for 20 minutes with a customer to

recommend books related to the customer's tastes. Mr B's sells a great deal of translated literature, partly because his staff recommend it and partly because there are customers of all ages who actively seek it out, especially in the literary fiction and crime genres (think of the recent interest in Scandinavian crime). He credits small presses such as Pushkin, Peirene, And Other Stories and Harvill Secker for their beautifully presented books. His best-selling translated book of 2014 was *The Foundling Boy* by French author Michel Déon.

Growing interest

Finally, Stephanie Seegmuller, who runs Pushkin Press with Adam Freudenheim, reported an increase in turnover. She believes that more people are reading translated literature, whether Icelandic chick lit or Catalan crime. Readers are looking for something different. Getting the books into the shops is key for visibility, and the appointment of James Daunt as MD of Waterstones has further facilitated this. At Pushkin, the finished translation goes to an English copy editor (who may or may not know the language it has been translated from) and then to a proofreader, both of whom will ensure that it does not read as a translation. Stephanie believes that the translated book then takes on a life of its own. Sometimes readers think the translation is bad, but what they may mean is that they do not like the style. The new translator of Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (*Hunger*, 1890) has criticised the old translation for inaccuracies, although Robert Bly's 1967 version was very popular.

The presentations were followed by small group discussions, in which each speaker joined in. Handouts with questions about reading habits prompted debate. We talked about whether the term 'literary fiction' was off-putting, and whether an increase in translated mass-market books would be appealing.

All in all, we were presented with a refreshingly optimistic picture: the market for translated literature seems to be buoyant. 

LINKS:

www.bris.ac.uk/translating-sen
<http://pushkinpress.com>
www.penguinclassics.co.uk
www.mrbsemporium.com