

For the love of literature

Ros Schwartz talks to Aletta Stevens about her illustrious career in literary translation, and reveals why every book she works on presents a new challenge



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator, and founder member of ITI. She has been published by Faber and Faber. You can read her profile at <http://uk.linkedin.com/pub/aletta-stevens/11/630/636>.

Ros Schwartz FITI is a high-profile translator who has translated more than 60 works of fiction and non-fiction from French into English. In 2008 Ros and Amanda Hopkinson's translation of Dominique Manotti's *Lorraine Connection* won the CWA Duncan Lawrie International Dagger Award, and their translation of her latest book, published as *Affairs of State*, was released earlier this year. In 2009 Ros was awarded the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Ministry of Culture for her contribution to the translation of French literature. Since 1987 Ros has run a small translation company specialising in PR and marketing, the visual arts, and texts requiring creative stylistic input. She is also Vice-Chair of English PEN's Writers in Translation Programme.

Here, Ros talks to Aletta Stevens about the challenges of literary translation, championing new authors, and how she got started in the profession.

The biographical details at the front of the book intriguingly state that you 'dropped out of university and ran away to Paris in the early seventies'. Was this a deciding factor in your future translating career?

Absolutely. In Paris I had all kinds of jobs, from answering the phone in the Gare d'Austerlitz call centre to picking grapes in Provence and teaching English in companies. I dipped in and out of a whole range of social milieus, which attuned my ear to the different registers of the language. By the time

I came back to the UK in the early 80s, having just spent a year in India, I was considered completely unemployable (not surprisingly!), because the only thing I could do well was speak foreign languages – I also have Italian and Spanish – and employers saw that as having little value. With no work experience in the UK, I found it impossible to get a job – I was too much of a maverick. So I had no option but to carve out a niche for myself. I launched myself as a translator by writing to publishers. Back then translation wasn't professionalised and it was enough to say 'I'm a translator' for work providers to take it on trust. Fortunately for me.

How did you get your first book project?

The first book I translated was *I Didn't Say Goodbye* by Claudine Vegh, in 1979. It is a series of interviews with French Jews who were children during the war and whose parents perished in the concentration camps but somehow arranged for their children to be hidden, thereby saving their lives. I was living in Paris at the time and the book was given to me by a friend. It made a profound and lasting impression on me, and I felt compelled to translate it. I'd never translated anything before, and had no idea how publishing

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worked, but I just went ahead and did it. I made contact with the author, who was delighted that I had translated her book, and she put me in touch with her publisher, Gallimard. I eventually found a publisher (Caliban in the UK and E.P. Dutton in the US).

Had you translated a crime novel before you started on the Manotti books?

Yes, *Women in Evidence* by Sébastien Japrisot, in 1989.

Does it get easier to translate an author when you do more than one book by that author, or does each book have its own challenges?

You become familiar with their stylistic quirks – Manotti, for example, uses a terse, telegraphic style and writes in the present. But each book presents its own set of challenges. Our latest Manotti title, *Affairs of State*, relies a lot on a grasp of the interneccine warfare within the various French government departments.

Why were two translators needed in the first place, and what are the advantages of that?

Two translators weren't needed. Translators sometimes decide to collaborate because of time constraints or pressure due to other commitments. I've collaborated with different colleagues on a number of books and each time it's been a rewarding experience. I've learned a tremendous amount from them and it has taught me a lot about my own quirks. Often passages that are problematic for one aren't for the other and vice versa, because we have different strengths and weaknesses, and brainstorming over problem sections is much more fun than struggling on your own, so it takes a lot of the pain out of the process and is just hugely enjoyable. I think the translation is enriched immensely. It's important to collaborate with someone who has a similar sensibility and approach.

Did you mind translating the



passages of violence in *Lorraine Connection*, and is there any writing you would object to translating?

The violence didn't particularly bother me as it was so integral to the plot. I think when I translate violent or shocking material, I tend to focus very much on the nuts and bolts of the job and that somehow distances me from the content. It's only on reading it through afterwards that it hits me and I'm amazed to read my own words. As for objecting, translation is very much a matter of empathy, so I would say no to anything that I didn't feel was right for me.

How do you translate a book together with another translator? How do you divide the roles?

Usually one translator does the first draft, the second works on that, using track changes and comments so there is a record of their interventions, then we both revise the second draft and meet up to thrash out any outstanding problems. Or we take half the book each and revise each other's work. It depends on the book, the deadline and our respective availability. It's definitely more time-consuming, but the result is always worth it.

Do you key in your first draft, or do you use a dictating machine

Ros (standing) shares her wisdom and experience with attendees at a recent workshop (see overleaf for review)

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or voice-activated software?

Yes, I do. I used Dragon on one book and was agreeably surprised, but dictation doesn't come easily to me and I do a lot of research by googling while I'm translating, so it suits me to be at the keyboard.

Do you ever propose book translations to publishers, and is there a particular writer you'd like to champion?

Yes, that's how I started getting commissions. I used to go to the Frankfurt Book Fair and seek out interesting books. I unearthed an untranslated work by Senegalese author Ousmane Sembène, and was commissioned to translate it (*The Black Docker*, 1987). If there's a book I'm keen on, I suggest it to publishers. I'm working on two books at the moment so I don't have time to champion anything actively, but I am

looking for a publisher for *Le Message* by Andrée Chedid, an Egyptian writer who is based in Paris and writes in French. I translated *The Return to Beirut* in 1989 and have been a fan of hers ever since.

You have highlighted the poor fees that literary translators are paid. How do you combine commercial and literary translation?

Presumably you're referring to the survey carried out by the European Council of Literary Translators Associations, CEATL (www.ceatl.org/docs/surveyuk.pdf). I combine commercial and literary translation by fitting the books around my commercial work, which as you know is unpredictable. I always have one, or sometimes two books on the go. I work on these early in the morning, at weekends, sometimes in the evenings. I only take on books that have longish deadlines (which I think is essential anyway, you can't rush a literary translation), and set myself a daily target number of pages. I don't always manage to keep to it, but if I fall behind, I make up for it a few days later.

What was the most exciting or unusual book translation you have done?

Every book is exciting in its own way – each one brings a new set of challenges. One that stands out for me is Aziz Chouaki's *The Star of Algiers*, which I co-translated with Lulu Norman (*Serpent's Tail*, 2005). Chouaki is a jazz musician and his language is terse with a powerful rhythm. It was a huge challenge to find the right voice and heartbeat for the English. The other project that was both stimulating and daunting was doing a new translation of Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, to be published in September. I was conscious that readers would be familiar with existing translations and make comparisons. Close reading of the French made me realise just what a work of genius it is, and that's pretty intimidating.

What is your next project or what are your ambitions for the future?

I'm working on a non-fiction book at the moment and would like to get back to fiction. I look forward to a time when I can do less of the commercial work and more fiction.