

# TRANSCRIPT

## INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN WALSER



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**We are about to meet with the writer Martin Walser. His novel “Ein springender Brunnen” has just been published in the United States under the title “A Gushing Fountain” – the occasion for this interview. We would like to know how his books are perceived abroad, whether and how the discussion about coming to terms with the past, which is so controversial in Germany, is conducted over there, and what he is now working on. After all, Walser turned 88 years-old in March 2015.**

*Welcome, Martin Walser, hello!*

Good day.

*I'm much looking forward to this interview. Your books have been translated in more than thirty countries. In 2015 – that is, right now – “A Gushing Fountain” has been published in the United States. Are you pleased? Here's the translation lying on the table.*

Yes, I must say I'm very pleased by it. For me there's no better occasion to talk about translations than the publication of *A Gushing Fountain* in America. The translator, David Dollenmayer, was in constant contact with me – most of the translators are. Every week, we exchanged two or three e-mails when he had questions. I judge a translator by his questions. It's by his questions that I notice how close he has got to me. You can forget about a translator who has no questions. Dollenmayer had marvellous questions – and he made a fabulous translation.

*What did he ask, for example?*

When at the end he put all his questions, I had the feeling that I hadn't written the book in High German at all, but in dialect – because my language is very bound up with my region.

*In your writing, every word counts, and also the lines between the lines. Your books are very popular in China, among other places. How can you be sure that what is important for you comes through in the translation, that it's been translated correctly?*

China is a good example. In this case I'm dependent on the questions posed by the translator. The questions put to me by my Chinese translator were always highly intelligent ones. He also told me how difficult it is to render my words in Chinese. We had long discussions. Naturally I can't judge what then came of it, but through the contact I saw that he had to be a great translator.

*Your newly translated book “A Gushing Fountain” (“Ein springender Brunnen”) is about the childhood and youth of Johann under Nazism in Wasserburg on Lake Constance. It's really your own story, Mr Walser. What about it could fascinate or interest readers abroad today?*

It's not for me to answer that question. I can't judge. Since the book has gone down well everywhere it's been published, one could hope that America too will have a certain understanding for my Johann. And their approach to the book shows me how close they've come to this character.



*Could you describe more exactly how close they've come to the character of Johann?*

Yes. When I finished reading the translation, I wrote to Dollenmayer that I now prefer reading his translation to my original – because he was so close to the latter. I can't convey this to you in the abstract; you have to read it. With imagination and considerable inventiveness, he reconstructed the intimacy of my language in American English. This must, I think, have a certain effect.

*You were present as a journalist at the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt in the 1960s. The Nazis have occupied you all your life and in all your works. "You cannot cope with such a past", you have recently said in an interview. But what then? Is the life-long literary treatment of such a past the necessary way of dealing with it?*

The treatment of our guilt ... I don't speculate about how others do it; I know only that I've never been able to come to terms with it, that in all my works – novels, plays, essays and so on – I've had to do with it again and again. It's simply not done with. I once wrote: "Since Auschwitz, not a day has passed". This is a guilt that can't be come to terms with by a fashionable word like "coping". There may be generations for which this is different, but in my generation coming to terms with the past has never ceased.

*What subjects do you think interest readers abroad particularly – I mean those readers who are interested in Germany?*

Well, I have some experience in this matter. One of my pleasantest experiences in America was the translation of *Dorle und Wolf (No man's land)*. In the four major newspapers in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco there were marvellous reviews of the book. These newspapers dealt with the circumstance that a German writer was telling a story about the division of Germany. They were very observant and very intelligent discussions.

*You've just turned 88 – a belated happy birthday! That's not actually so old.*

Hmm.

*Let me ask quite provocatively: What do you still plan to do?*

Now, at present, I'm writing a novel, which I hope to have done in autumn.

*Does age enter into it? Or play along with it? Or co-determine the writing? You once said: "You can write books only at a certain age; they won't come sooner and they won't come later".*

I'm sure I'm not the only one who knows that age plays an increasingly larger role. How does Wagner put it in *Parsifa*? "Age is a conquering burden". I think that's very well put.

*"It occurs to me what I lack", you once said – and you write it up. What do you still lack now?*

Now I'm about to tell you that.

*I hope so!*

Naturally, you lack something different and perhaps more – at all events something different – at 88 than when you're 50. That's why I allow myself to, why I must, continue to write. When people sometimes suggest, "Well, he's now so



old, why does he still write?”, I can say: If at 50 I could have written the books I now write, I would have written them then. I couldn't. Therefore I'm writing them now.

*Thank you, Martin Walser, and good luck! I wish you good thoughts and all the best for a long future.*

Thank you.

Translation: Jonathan Uhlener  
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