

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID DOLLENMAYER UND SUSANNE KLINGENSTEIN



David Dollenmayer is a literary translator from German into English and emeritus Professor of German at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts. Now retired from teaching, translating is his main occupation. He says that he was always interested in the close reading of texts. Gradually he realized that “the closest of close readings is a translation rather than an academic commentary”. In 2008 he won the prestigious Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator’s Prize for his translation of Moses Rosenkranz’s memoir Childhood. He has translated novels, memoirs, and correspondence by such authors as Elias and Veza Canetti, Anna Mitgutsch, Bertolt Brecht, Elias Canetti, Peter Stephan Jungk, Michael Kleeberg, Stefan Klein, Marie-Luise Knott, Michael Köhlmeier, Willibald Sauerländer and Hansjörg Schertenleib. His translation of Martin Walser’s A Gushing Fountain was published by Arcade in April 2015.

Literary Scholar Susanne Klingenstein appreciates the appearance of a Walser novel in the US.

Who was your favourite German author so far?

I think my favourite is always the last one that I have done. I am not being coy... I don't really have a favourite but I loved translating this novel by Martin Walser.

Why did you choose him?

He sort of chose me. He came to the US two years ago. I think it was, in 2013 to read from his new novel called “*Muttersohn*” and he gave readings in Chicago and Boston and I think just in these two cities and for Chicago he chose a passage from “*Der springende Brunnen*”... “*Ein springender Brunnen*”... that he wanted to read there. And so they needed a translation of a chapter because there was no English translation. And I did a chapter and he was very pleased with the translation when I met him in Boston subsequently and we went in search for a publisher.

And you fell in love with the text?

I did. I did yeah exactly.

Is there a special occasion why this book is being published now, “A Gushing Fountain”?

Yeah, I think that's a long story but since this book, this novel was published in Germany in 1998, there has been no subsequent book by Walser that has appeared in English. And I think it has partly to do with the sort of brouhaha that developed right after this novel was published. There was first of all a review of it in “*Literarisches Quartett*” in German TV, which was very critical of it and in fact literally accused it of anti-Semitism. And then subsequent to that Walser was given the Peace Price of the German book trade and he gave

a very famous speech in Frankfurt in which he objected to Auschwitz being used as a moral club to beat the Germans with. And so that caused a huge scandal. And he thinks and it is probably true that that's why no subsequent of his has been published.

There were good translations of him. He is read in German departments, he is written about by American Germanists but virtually unknown to the American reading public.

If you can talk about this text a little- what were the specific challenges or was it easy to translate?

It presented some really interesting challenges and the wonderful thing was that he was extremely generous with his time and we had a very fruitful exchange of emails, all during the time I was translating the novel. I think the biggest challenge was what to do with the Alemannic dialect, which appears in the novel. Because there is no real good equivalent in English and so... but he actually builds into the novel a really useful device for - for instance North Germans who might not be able to make head or tails of a sentence in dialect: and that is there is a ... most of the sentences in dialect in the novel take place during conversations in the restaurant kitchen, which is a sort of a central location in the novel. And there is a dishwasher, who is called "the princess", who is always standing at the sink and washes dishes and she cannot stand dialect. And so every time someone is saying something in dialect she immediately repeats it in standard, high German. And so I could think of no other solution than to actually have the dialect sentence in English translation, then have the high German sentence and then give an English translation. And I hope it works.

And your working relationship with Walser: did you see each other or was it all by email?

It was all by email until my wife and I were taking a vacation to Germany and Italy in October of 2014, anyway. So we stopped by and he was very generous to spend some time with me. And we talked about...because I was still in the middle of translating it at that point. So we had a wonderful stay with him and his wife and daughter.

Klingenstein: I think the combination of now - it is 2015, it is exactly 70 years since 1945, Martin Walser has been a figure who has accompanied the growth of the Federal Republic, really since the beginning. To now have a book published that recalls the 1930s, that recalls the very beginnings of the Federal Republic, that recalls the way in which he became a writer, in addition to David Dollenmayer's really powerful translation in a really fluent, liquid, modern American English, that will not just help his reputation, it will actually really put him on the map. I think it has been very necessary to have this novel translated and I am very pleased that it is happening.