

## **Turning the Tide for Translation: Six Questions for Susan Bernofsky**

With the ceremonial awarding of two honors annually in June – the Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator Prize and the Gutekunst Prize for Emerging Translators – the Goethe-Institut New York celebrates the art of translation. We asked Susan Bernofsky, translator of numerous authors including Jenny Erpenbeck, Uljana Wolf, and Yoko Tawada, six questions about translating and translated literature in the US.

### **Why does the English-speaking public need literature from the German-speaking world?**

The German language has an incredibly rich literary tradition and there are different approaches to storytelling that we just don't have in English, different ideas about how you go about writing a novel, what a story is. The whole *feuilleton* tradition doesn't really exist in the same way in English, and it has been so productive for literary expression in German. And I think that bringing this literature to American readers and to English-speaking readers in particular really opens new doors about thinking about how to tell a story and what a story is.

### **What are the particular challenges of translating from German?**

The German language is so fantastic. You can be incredibly specific in it; you can be so precise. The language, because of its more technical grammar, its declinations, allows you to put things in different order so that you have all this flexibility and all this incredible precision of expression. And it's very difficult to translate that into English, in which we're a more sort of verb- and vocabulary-based language, whereas in German you have different prefixes which will tell you, "I took my first bite out of an apple." The first bite is expressed by just the prefix: *angebissen*. I love the economy of the German language and I'm always looking for ways to capture that in English. And then in German you get to make these incredibly long sentences in a way that doesn't feel forced or unnatural, so there's a whole different sort of thinking that's possible. We struggle in English to capture that. It's the translator's job to figure out how to create that sense of expansiveness in the sentence without breaking all the rules of English grammar.

### **Why do American publishers only publish such a small quantity of translations?**

The number of translations that have been published in the US, I think, is beginning to increase again. There's been a whole new crop of mostly smaller publishers specializing in translated literature, and I have a sense that there's a lot of interest from younger readers in reading international literature now and literature translated from German is one of the most translated languages right at the moment. I think it's because of the rich literature written in German and people's awareness of what you gain by

reading the literature in translation. I think publishers used to think that they couldn't sell books that were translated as well as they sell books that were written in English. There was just actually a study in England finding that the translated books were in many cases selling better than similar books written in English. I think there's something of a renaissance going on of interest in translated literature. So, I think that tide is turning.

**Have you ever been so confident of a book, that you translated it without having signed a contract with a publisher first?**

So translating a book without having a contract is the kind of crazy thing that a young translator with a lot of energy and time and hope might do. I did stuff like this when I was young and now I'm old and cynical and will not, absolutely not do that. But I do want to point out that Yoko Tawada, who is a wonderful, wonderful author who I now translate regularly for New Directions, is someone that I started translating just for fun in the 1990s. I translated a story of hers that I found in a magazine and I sent it to her and said "Hi, I'm nobody and I translated this story of yours that I like. Can I publish it?" And she wrote me right back and said, "Oh, fantastic you translated my story! Here's another one. Would you translate this one too?" And then you know next thing I knew I had translated about 100 pages of her stories including one novella, *The Guest*, years before I ever was able to find a publisher for it. So, it sometimes happens, but usually it's dangerous for translators to do that.

**What do you think of the assertion, that certain authors are untranslatable?**

My short answer is that there is no such thing as an untranslatable author; there is only an author whose translator has not yet been born. The longer answer is I think it's more a question of particular books than it is of authors. James Joyce is a famous example. *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* is much more translatable than say *Finnegan's Wake* and *Finnegan's Wake* is one of those books that's barely translatable because it was written in several languages to begin with, nonetheless there are several translations of this book into German. And I think that books that are difficult to translate really call on the translator's writing skills and sense of how to create literature in the language you translate into. Difficult books require particularly creative and innovative translators and translations.

**Why is it, that more German-speaking male authors are translated than female authors?**

This is not just a German question. This has been a question that has been discussed very much in the international translation field recently. Why is it that so many more male authors get translated than

female authors and not only that but the ones who are translated are much more likely to win the bigger prizes in translation than female authors. And there've been a lot of people who are doing some serious work on trying to figure this out. Katy Derbyshire has been working on this very hard. Margaret Carson has been working on this with Alta Price, to try to figure out how it's happening that the female authors are sort of slipping through the cracks more in translation. It has in part to do with publishing practices in the German-speaking countries and other countries that are affected by this phenomenon, sort of the sense that if we can only pick our top couple of authors for translation well, you know, the men are perhaps floating to the top of that pile faster. I think that it's important for us to be aware as readers if we really enjoy reading books by women in English, probably we would also enjoy reading books by women in translation and seek those books out. There are a lot of really fantastic female writers all over the globe, and I think that that tide is turning too. I think we are going to see a lot more fantastic translated literature by women available.