Book review: interpreters and translators as literary creations

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Wortklauber, Sinnverdreher, Brückenbauer
DolmetscherInnen und ÜbersetzerInnen als literarische Geschöpfe
[Pedants, traducers or bridge builders. Interpreters and translators as literary creations]
Ingrid Kurz, Klaus Kaindl (editors)
Im Spiegel der Literatur Band 1
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The editors of this collection of essays know that we interpreters enjoy seeing ourselves depicted in book or film yet cannot help judging the accuracy of any description of our profession or its practitioners, even if the interpreter is no more than a convenient hook on which to hang the story within the confines of artistic licence. This book does not set out to provide an academic study of the interpreter in literature, but simply to give us a taste of how others view our lives and work.

Do you remember the film "The Full Monty" about steel workers in the north of England who decided to strip when made redundant? There is a scene where they try to learn dance routines from a film about a female welder who's also a great dancer. One of the would-be strippers comments "I hope she's a better dancer than welder, her oxygen mix is all wrong".

Like the welder, we cannot entirely switch off, so if we read or see a depiction of an interpreter, our critical faculties slip into overdrive. We inevitably put ourselves into the shoes of the protagonist (Selbstverortung in der dargestellten Welt).

This deftly edited short book considers 15 works of literature that feature translators and interpreters. The reviews were written by working professionals who submitted a short piece on a work that they had read.

The thread that runs through all the reviewed stories is the interpreter as perpetual outsider, a person who does not live entirely in just one culture, but commutes between them and is therefore rootless and envious of those with a clear-cut identity. Language is often the well-spring of a firm sense of self. Home for an interpreter is his or her native language, yet because of where they live interpreters may have lost their mother tongue - they are geographically and linguistically adrift. The constant processing of the world around us that multilingualism brings can be a burden, and the interpreter may envy others the security of speaking just one language.

Interpreters in literature appear ready made with all their languages - by accident of birth or linguistic osmosis - and few authors appear aware that most of us have had to acquire our languages
from scratch and learn our tradecraft. There are also some flashes of insight, for example the idea that sometimes you can only understand what people are saying once they’ve finished saying it (...bestimmte Aussagen erst im nachhinein auf ihre tatsächliche Bedeutung hin interpretierbar sind).

Some of the characteristics ascribed to interpreters ring a bell: an interpreter is always to some extent an outsider, aware of different ways of speaking, thinking and doing; an interpreter's own family history is often reflected in the languages she speaks; an interpreter never entirely switches off but is always on the lookout for that expression or well-honed phrase, and perhaps it is fair to talk of the "burden of bilingualism".

The reviewers find the portrayals of interpreters generally sympathetic, even insightful, although our colleague Sergio Viaggio is clearly no fan of Javier Marías' Corazón tan Blanco - the scene in the book where two interpreters work for a thinly veiled Margaret Thatcher and a thinly disguised Felipe González has acquired a kind of cult status amongst interpreters; I guess you either love it or hate it.

Each thought-provoking essay is short and deals with an individual work, which makes this a good book for dipping into.

As Robbie Burns said in his poem "The Louse" written in 1786:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!

The works considered are:

Liselotte Marshall - Tongue-tied
Ingeborg Bachmann - Simultan
Abdelkebir Khatibi - Un été à Stockholm
Suki Kim - The Interpreter
Jonathan Safran Foers - Everything is illuminated
Jesús Díaz - Siberiana
Jhumpa Lahiris - Interpreter of Maladies
Ágnes Gergely - Die Dolmetscherin (A tolmács)
György Dalos - Der Versteckspieler
Michael Frayn - The Russian Interpreter
Christine Arnothy - Toutes les chances plus une
Doris Lessing - The Summer before the Dark
Javier Marías - Corazón tan blanco
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle - The Greek Interpreter
Suzanne Glass - The Interpreter

Recommended citation format: