Book review: Found in Translation

A practitioner’s take on the new book by Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche

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Published: November 8, 2012 Last updated: December 2, 2015

**Found in Translation: How Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World**
By Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche
ISBN: 9780399537974

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*Out there things can happen and frequently do*

*To people as brainy and footsy as you.*

*And when things start to happen, don’t worry, don’t stew,*

*Just go right along – you’ll start happening, too!*

- Oh, The Places You’ll Go!

The above quote is from my all-time favorite book by Dr. Seuss. Thanks to Nataly Kelly and Jost Zetzsche, I now know that it took the translator more than a year to complete the Spanish-language version of this children’s classic. The story of Aida Marcuse, the Spanish voice of Dr. Seuss, is only one of many fascinating tales told in Kelly and Zetzsche’s new book, *Found in Translation*.

There’s been a lot of buzz lately about this book – so much buzz, in fact, that the first print run quickly sold out and a second had to be ordered within just a few days of the book’s launch in early October. That’s not bad for a work that was considered by Penguin Books, its publisher, to be enough of a niche book that it should be published under the Perigee imprint ("publisher of self-help, how-to, and pop reference books"). I guess this means that the authors have rightfully shown their publishers – and the rest of the world – that translators and interpreters are a force to be reckoned with!

Like a number of other practitioners in the field, I’ve been asked by the authors to share my impressions of *Found in Translation*, and I am more than happy to do so. Let me start by saying that I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book. I took an e-version along with me on a recent business trip (the review copy I’d been sent over the summer got lost in the mail), and more than once I found myself getting annoyed at the flight attendants for telling me to “turn off electronic equipment in preparation for landing”, because I was in the middle of yet another compelling story about “How
Language Shapes Our Lives and Transforms the World” (the book’s subtitle) and didn’t want to put it down.

That said, this would not be a proper review if I simply said I liked the book and left it at that. So let’s delve a bit deeper and see what Found in Translation has to offer readers – be they translators, translators’ mothers (at least one reviewer has already said it will make the perfect stocking stuffer for family members this Christmas), professionals in related industries such as interpreting, or members of the public at large.

First impressions

They say you can’t judge a book by its cover, and yet that is precisely where I am going to start. The cover offers potential buyers a diacritic-rich version of the book’s title (Mötley Crüe and Häagen-Dazs, eat your heart out!). This gives it an enticingly exotic appearance that is sure to please the layman, although it has probably already caused many a headache among linguists as they ponder how the words would be pronounced if they really were spelled that way. As for the slightly worn title, the authors themselves admitted in a recent interview that they weren’t that happy with it, the “lost/found in translation” meme having suffered from excessive media use lately. The marketing people at Penguin, however, apparently knew best and the encouraging sales figures so far would indicate that they were right.

Now let’s open the book up and see what’s inside. A glance at the table of contents tells us it is organized into seven chapters, each dedicated to a particular theme (business, religion, romance, entertainment, technology, etc.). Each chapter offers a collection of testimonials and case studies profiling the lives and work of language professionals in that field. A peek at the aforementioned interview with the authors tells me there are 90 some stories told in all. Perfect! Just enough to keep me busy on the next few flights.

Eureka!

I’m told by scholars of ancient Greek that this means “I’ve found it!”, and that is precisely the feeling I had as I started to read through the stories and personal accounts compiled in this book. Found in Translation is a humbling, eye-opening experience for any interpreter or translator: eye-opening, because it illustrates more effectively than any market study that the language industry is as broad and varied as the professionals who people it, and humbling, because page after page you are confronted with evidence that your own form of professional practice amounts to little more than one niche market among many.

My own professional niche (conference interpreting for international institutions) merits only a handful of references over the book’s 288 pages. There’s an interview with Hossam Fahr, head of interpreting services at the UN headquarters in New York, and another with Olga Cosmidou, his counterpart at the European Parliament. My field also gets a nod in the story of Peter Less, one of the interpreters at the Nuremburg Trials, and in the piece on interpreting at the Olympic Games. But when you consider that these stories had to compete with the likes of testimonials by interpreters working for the Miss Universe pageants or the Cirque du Soleil, or with accounts of how Harlequin localizes its romance novels, why Hallmark has a line of Spanish-language greeting cards, and how porn movies get their subtitles, you can see that the competition for the reader’s attention is fierce. It’s not like I’m saying I’d give it all up tomorrow to go join the circus, but still, after witnessing the sheer variety and colour of the case studies presented, this conference interpreter’s existence started to feel very grey and staid indeed.
Speaking of colour, readers may be wondering how the authors managed to bring together all of these stories into a single volume without losing their focus – or their readers – in the process. It’s true that the tone of the writing varies considerably from one account to the next, with pieces reflecting Zetzsche’s historical approach and Kelly’s industry research bent interspersed with profiles of practitioners and the occasional giggle-provoking foray into the world of the dreaded untranslatable (Fart juice from Poland, anyone?). Who’d have thought that a single book could contain a discussion of Luther’s first German translation of the Bible, an explanation of how volunteer translators worked with mobile technology to save lives after the earthquake in Haiti, and a treatise on the perils of ordering beer using hand signals in China? Somehow, the authors have managed to pull it off, not only demonstrating their skill as storytellers but proving their thesis that the world of translation and interpreting is even more broad-ranging than many of us might have thought possible.

What was my favourite part? Apart from the Dr. Seuss bit, I most enjoyed reading “Houston, We Need an Interpreter”, the story of Irina Yashkova, the NASA interpreter who facilitates communication between American astronauts and Russian cosmonauts on the International Space Station (talk about remote interpreting!). Yashkova apparently had to take the same nine-month spacewalk training as the astronauts in order to familiarise herself with the tasks carried out in space, as well as the names and functions of all the little buttons. I want to be that interpreter! Okay, so I don’t speak Russian and I’m not a certified flight controller – but I can always dream, can’t I?

It’s all in there... or is it?

If I had to fault the authors of *Found in Translation* for anything, it would have to be the lack of information on the working conditions enjoyed by the language professionals featured in the various testimonials. I know, it’s boring to talk job security and look at price tags all the time, but still, as I read the book, there were more than a few moments when I found myself wondering how the market for a particular language or interpreting service is structured. Yes, I learned that NASA, Hallmark, the CIA and others use in-house translators (presumably on decent contracts with benefits). And yes, I read that literary translators are frighteningly underpaid, and that cost of multilingualism in the EU is equivalent to “the price of a cup of coffee” per European citizen. But there were many other case studies where this more practical side of the story was overlooked. So, are 9-1-1 phone interpreters paid for their standby shifts or is it a volunteer service? Do round-the-clock escort interpreters for elite athletes and circus performers ever get to take a potty break? What do professional translators think of the fact that Facebook decided to crowdsource the translation of its interface? Did Dr. Seuss’ translator get paid the same for *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* (which took her over a year to translate) as for *Green Eggs and Ham* (which she reportedly dispatched in half an hour)? And those are just a few of the questions I was left with.

The educator in me also wishes that the authors had spent a bit more time looking at the types of training undergone by the practitioners featured in the stories. Many seem to have been self-taught on the job, or at least, little reference is made to any formal training they may have followed. Is the book taking a subtle stand on the question of whether translators and interpreters are born or made, whether they are learnable professions or a calling that you either have or you don’t? Or did the authors just think their readers would not be interested by the boring details of how the subjects of their case studies got where they are? It’s hard to say.

It’s possible that there just wasn’t enough room in one book to deal with all of these matters, and that we will have to wait for their next title to hear this side of the story. Be that as it may, the stated aim of *Found in Translation* was to show the world that translation and interpreting are an integral, if often invisible, part of our everyday existence, while offering readers an inside look at the people
who dedicate their lives to the language professions. Kelly and Zetzsche are to be commended for having succeeded in achieving this aim in such an informative and entertaining fashion.

One thing is certain: after reading this book, I’m quite convinced that my fellow translators and interpreters are brainier, footsier and considerably more happening than anything even the great Dr. Seuss could have dreamed up!

Recommended citation format: