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Translated from Page to Page:

Cultures, Norms, and Opportunities

From the Editors: In this collaborative conversation, we are thrilled to feature the words of several YA translators who address explicitly the intricacies of conveying stories across languages. We are grateful for their candor as they share both the challenges and the joys that come with the translation process and hope that their willingness to engage in this thoughtful and public conversation will highlight just how important their work is to the field.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author. We compiled the responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the resulting piece. We hope that in reading this piece, you gain both an increased appreciation for these authors and the value of translated works of YA fiction and nonfiction.

How do you acquire the opportunity to translate a particular title? Do you have a choice in what you translate?

Avery: In the US, the traditional sequence is 1) a publisher overseas publishes a book; 2) a US publisher buys the rights to publish it in English, perhaps at an international book fair; and 3) the US publisher commissions a translator. Translators do not have direct choice, but they may position themselves to receive commissions by networking and building up a resume. One way to do this is to translate

samples of works for overseas publishers, which they use to sell rights at the book fairs.

There are nontraditional ways to land translation jobs, as well. For example, an author and his wife hired me to translate an unpublished novel that they then pitched to US and Japanese publishers. It happened to sell first in the US and then in Japan.

Laura: Books come to me through various routes.

Sometimes I translate an excerpt for a Dutch publisher, who then talks to British and American publishers at one of the book fairs and shows them the sample excerpt. If you're lucky, the publisher will like your style and ask you to translate the whole book. Other times, I'm approached directly by the English-language publisher who asks me to write a report on the book or, if they're already convinced, to translate the whole book. When I've worked with publishers for awhile, I get to know their list and what kinds of books they're looking for. In that case, I might discover a book that I think would be of interest to them, and then I recommend it.

I wouldn't choose to translate a book that I didn't enjoy in some way. Translators spend so long working on a title that they have to get along with it.

Olga: For me, the choice of a book to translate is always collegial. I translate from English into Russian. A publisher in Russia suggests the title, but

it is always my decision whether I want to work with the particular book. Sometimes (not that often lately), I am able to suggest a particular book to a publisher. Then that publisher buys the rights, and I translate. For one or two publishing houses, I sometimes serve as a scout and read and review potential texts for translation. At the moment, I am negotiating a new assignment with a new publisher who approached me because I wrote a review of several books by the prize-winning author of the book in question.

Mara: I am always approached by editors. This sometimes results from a sample translation I've done for a literary agent, cultural institution, or rights representative at a publishing house. Other times, it is based on a recommendation. I wouldn't say that I have a lot of choice in what I translate, since I don't have a "day job." Translating is how I make my living, and there aren't very many titles translated into English.

Lyn: Most of the time, publishers approach me. I also look for books each year when I'm in Portugal; I attend book fairs and scour publishers' catalogs for possibilities. Sometimes authors who write in Portuguese or Spanish contact me directly.

Do you work in isolation, or do you work with others? In what ways, if at all, do you collaborate with authors in the translation process? Does a community of translators exist? Do you draw upon one another's expertise?

Lyn: The PEN Translation Committee consists mainly of translators of adult literary work, but they have appreciated my perspective as a translator of books for young people. I point out that it's hard to persuade adults to read books in translation if they haven't encountered them while young. I've been active in the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) Translators Group and am working with other translators, publishers, and librarians through the Global Literature in Libraries Initiative (GLLI). Our focus with GLLI is to engage in outreach to libraries and the general public to build an audience for books in translation. We have to make the case for translation because publishers

won't make these books available if they believe there's no readership for them.

I have worked directly with authors who have hired me to translate their works, and I've translated books where I've never met the author at all. (I also have never met the translator of my own YA novel, *Gringolandia* [2009], which came out in Italian two years ago.) Some authors want to have input into how their books are translated, but in most cases, authors trust the translator because they don't know English or don't know it well enough. With that trust comes a huge responsibility to get it right—not only to reflect the voice and intention of the author, but also to make sure the final product works in English in the United States.

A final component of my collaborative process is working with the English language editor. I came to translation later in life, after writing fiction for teens, and I appreciate the mentorship of two award-winning translators, Groundwood editor and Vermont College of Fine Arts faculty member Shelley Tanaka and my editor at Enchanted Lion, Claudia Bedrick.

Olga: For many years, I worked alone. Translation is a lonely occupation. Lately, I have worked with a co-translator (she happens to be my sister). We have translated nine books together, even though I live in New York City and she lives in Moscow. I also had a very interesting collaborative experience on a translation with an author who wrote his book in English but also is fluent in Russian. The experience of working closely with another author who knew the target language but not fluently was rather difficult. We did not reach a level of true collaboration, and the work was quite challenging and even painful at times.

Speaking of a translators' community, I am lucky to have two of them. There is a community of Russian translators in Moscow. I have many good colleagues and friends there, and I always feel that I can ask for help or advice. There is also the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA), a community of translators with whom I regularly discuss their work and mine.

Mara: My work is essentially done in isolation, although I always have native speakers to whom

I ask questions, particularly when translating from the Spanish of the Americas. I used to never consult authors, but in recent years, that has changed. I now enjoy having some back and forth with them, and I feel it always improves the final draft. It can be a bit of a strange dance, humbling in ways for both parties. It's important to delicately establish your right to STET (the indication to "let it stand" when you want to reject an edit), as with editors. I think working from Catalan has fostered my relationships with authors. Because of the importance of an English language translation for a literary work from a minority language, there is more of a sense of appreciation and, in turn, responsibility.

I have several friends who are translators, yet for most of my career, I've worked from Barcelona, so I've been far from the community of English language translators. In Spain, literary translations are a much bigger part of the market, and conditions are more standardized (which is not to say better, except in the case of royalties). Now that I'm living in New York, I am involved in a community of translators, which is most helpful in terms of comparing notes on negotiations. It is very supportive, though there is still a real struggle for further professionalization of translation in the US.

Avery: Translation is writing and, as such, is solitary. I've found it helpful to join two professional organizations—SCBWI and the Tokyo-based Society of Writers, Editors, and Translators—and attend their events when possible. I also join email lists, post to a group blog, attend the Asian Festival of Children's Content in Singapore, do school visits, and share my work with staff and students at the school where I teach. Interaction and feedback matter!

Laura: Translation is a pretty isolated job, but I like it that way. However, I have collaborated with other translators in the past—at workshops, in particular. Working with others is fun, and I can learn a lot, too. But ultimately, it is a solitary profession. Organizations like the UK Translators' Association, ALTA in the US, the Emerging Translators' Network (ETN), and the SCBWI are great sources for advice and networking, though. It's good to have colleagues all over the world with whom you

can share knowledge and experience. The world of translators is quite tightly knit. I've already met the other translators in this discussion, in fact, either in person or online. We're a friendly bunch as a whole.

What is one notably interesting thing you've learned about another culture in the translation of a particular title?

Olga: I was translating *The Rootabaga Stories* by Carl Sandburg (1922) when I was still living in Moscow. I learned a lot about America and even about baseball. I knew nothing about the game that was then practically unknown in Russia. Now I am in the unique position of living in the US and translating books into Russian for various Moscow publishing houses. It gives me a chance to bring my hands-on knowledge of American culture into my translations. One of my latest translations had a chapter about tattoos and another chapter about cancer awareness walks. I learned a lot.

Lyn: In Europe, people are more open to depictions of the human body in books for children. For instance, the original version of *The World in a Second* (Martins, 2015) contained a spread of a barbershop in the Azores with pictures of topless women on the walls. For the US edition that I translated, the illustrator had to change those pictures to volcanoes.

Avery: I never knew that in the mid-1960s, after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, many homes in Tokyo still had no bathtubs. Lots of people went to public baths. When I was translating *J-Boys: Kazuo's World, Tokyo, 1965* by Shogo Oketani (2011), I relished a scene in which a group of grade-school boys and a group of middle-school boys are in the men's side of a public bath—a big room with faucets and communal tubs—and the older boys are singing a Beatles song. A local *yakuza* gets irked and throws cold water on the boys, thrilling a younger boy they had teased earlier.

It was fun to translate this passage and get people thinking about (and chuckling over) how times have changed, especially now that Tokyo is preparing for the 2020 Olympics.

Laura: I've come to appreciate that there are so many more similarities than differences across places and people. That's why we all need to expand our reading lists. No matter where we're from, our human experience unites us.

How do you work to share unfamiliar cultural norms and values with readers who might have little knowledge of or experience with them?

Laura: If I'm describing an unfamiliar custom or character, such as the Dutch Sinterklaas, for example, I might weave a brief explanation into the story if it's important for the plot or potentially interesting for the readers. I don't like to over-explain, though. If I can, I let the text do the talking. It's great if readers feel inspired to go off and do their own research, too.

Mara: In novels for adults, I favor the stealth gloss, which is basically like sneaking a footnote-like explanation into a subordinate clause, but in books for children, I often adapt such things as holidays, mythical creatures, songs, games, food, etc., depending on whether the elements are fundamental to the plot. In Spain, it is the Three Kings, not Santa, who bring presents on January 5th, and instead of the Tooth Fairy, a mouse called the Ratoncito Pérez collects teeth. Catalan Christmas traditions are quite scatological, including a "shit log" you have to feed for awhile and then beat with a stick so it will defecate little gifts. You have to make a judgment call every time you attempt to convey such elements of culture; you don't want the text to read like someone explaining a joke when it should read as funny.

Avery: I have used different approaches for different texts. With *J-Boys*, the publisher requested the inclusion of sidebars on many pages to define unfamiliar items and events, from tatami to the Tokyo fire bombings. In *Tomo: Friendship through Fiction: An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories* (Thompson, 2012), the editor included a glossary that briefly defined key terms. In the story I translated for *Tomo*, "House of Trust" by Sachiko Kashiwaba, I also inserted short explanations in the text—identifying a *furisode* as a "long-sleeved showpiece kimono,"

for example, as this mattered to the story (about a teenaged boy learning kimono fitting). I love Mara's term for this approach: stealth gloss!

Olga: For me, there are several ways to transmit unfamiliar cultural norms together with some unfamiliar facts and many little bits of new knowledge. It is especially difficult to reach the right balance between domestication and foreignization when translating children's books. On the one hand, the text should be accessible to children without too many extra explanations or footnotes. On the other hand, without introducing new information, children will never learn about different cultures. I personally learned a lot from translated children's books when I was growing up. I try to keep this balance and provide an opportunity for readers to accept a new culture as something not alien.

Lyn: I sometimes add a small explanation to the text or in a translator's note. In *Three Balls of Wool* (Cristina, 2017), a picturebook set in 1967–1968, I expanded the author's note that introduced the Cold War, the right-wing dictatorship in Portugal, and the Communist dictatorship in Czechoslovakia; I also suggested a map that showed Europe during the Cold War and today.

Generally, the younger the readers, the more likely a translated book will be "domesticated," or adapted to the readers' culture. This "domestication" often includes changing names that may be difficult to pronounce. With books for older readers, I keep the original names and cultural references unless they rely on racist or colonialist tropes.

What do you most enjoy about this work? What is uniquely challenging?

Avery: The unique challenge is the lack of demand for translations in the US children's book market. In my work for SCBWI, I recently obtained 22 years' worth of translated book logs from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This center receives copies of most new children's books published in the US each year and compiles valuable data on racial representation, which has informed the We Need Diverse Books movement. The CCBC also

tracks translations. By counting titles in their logs, I learned that translated books have accounted for fewer than 3 percent of new children's books published in the US since 1994; most years, they accounted for fewer than 2 percent. (Note: I used the CCBC's estimated total number of children's books published in the US from 1994–2014 to calculate these percentages. The CCBC no longer posts this estimate.)

What this means in practical terms for my colleagues and me is that few translators can make a living in children's literature. Japan (the home of my source texts) publishes up to 5,000 new children's books annually. Yet in 22 years, only 57 books translated from Japanese, in total, were logged at the CCBC.

Lyn: My challenge is convincing publishers and readers to take a chance on a story that doesn't have a familiar name attached to it and may not have a predictable structure or conform to popular genres. It's like asking you to see a quirky foreign film rather than the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

Laura: I enjoy finishing translations. There's something hugely satisfying about completing that long journey and taking a story all the way from one language into another. It's also lovely when your books arrive in the mail—seeing those words finally on the pages of a proper book. That's always great.

Challenging? Ah, the challenges are all part of the fun. Puns can prove tricky, but it feels so good when you have a sudden brainwave. Inspiration can strike at the strangest times; it's as if your brain is working away in secret and then suddenly spots a solution in an unexpected place.

Mara: When working with books for children, I really enjoy exploring the intersection between text and image and the challenges of rhyme. In general, I feel lucky to have a job where I am constantly learning new things. Most challenging are probably the sedentary lifestyle and relentless deadlines.

Olga: The most enjoyable part is learning new things about other countries and other cultures and gain-

ing knowledge around minute details and important facts. I enjoy the challenge of figuring out the ways of rendering all of that into a new language and into a new culture. Unlike in the US, the stream of children's books in translation is pretty steady in Russia, but it is very painful to see that American children and young readers rarely read books written and illustrated by contemporary Russian authors and artists.

How do you conceptualize your role as a translator? Do you see yourself as a writer?

Mara: I prefer to think of myself as a craftsperson working with words.

Lyn: As a translator, I shine a spotlight on world literature that I want to make available to children and teens in the US who can't read the books in the original language. Like most writers these days, I'm both a literary artist and a tireless advocate for my books. I feel ownership for the books I've translated as well as for the books I've authored, and I appreciate being part of the collaborative effort to bring these translated books to readers.

Laura: You know the expression: writers write. Well, that's what we translators do all day, every day (or most days, anyway). We're definitely writers. Are we authors, though? Hmm, not really. So that's perhaps a useful distinction in this context. We don't come up with the ideas; we work with the language.

Avery: Indeed—I see myself as a writer but not as the author, and when I translate, I write to honor the author's story. This I can never do by “converting” it word for word, like Google Translate; I must interpret, unpack cultural norms, make choices about idiom and register, and coax the story to flow in a different language. Yet in doing so, I cannot rewrite the story. To use an analogy sometimes applied to translators, a performer of classical music may interpret a score in many ways—indeed *must* interpret it, for the piece to soar—but she will not depart from the score itself, for to do so is to compose a new piece.

Olga: A translator is a bridge or a ferry to another side of a cultural river. Rephrasing (Americanizing) the metaphor which was used by Russian poet Alexander Pushkin: translators are the Pony Express of Education. When I translate, I do not feel myself a writer. I am a vessel that transports someone else's work to another side. At the same time, I am a writer. I have published (again with my coauthor) three books for children, and I regularly write about children's books. I believe that the writing experience enriches me as a translator, but it is important not to go too far in feeling that I am a "co-writer" when I translate.

Olga Bukhina lives and works in New York City. She has translated 30 books from English into Russian, including American, British, and Canadian young readers' novels and picturebooks, as well as historical fiction, nonfiction, and scholarly books. Among the authors whose works she has translated are Louise Fitzhugh, Jacqueline Kelly, B. J. Novak, Carl Sandburg, Elizabeth George Speare, Enid Blyton, Elizabeth Goudge, Philippa Gregory, C. S. Lewis, Philippa Pearce, and Jean Little. She has recently coauthored three children's books and writes about children's literature for various journals, collections, and online publications in Russia and in the US. She also serves as Executive Director of the International Association for the Humanities.

Mara Faye Lethem has translated novels by Jaume Cabré, David Trueba, Albert Sánchez Piñol, Javier Calvo, Patricio Pron, Marc Pastor, and Toni Sala, among others, and shorter fiction by authors such as Juan Marsé, Rodrigo Fresán, Pola Oloixarac, Teresa Colom, and Alba Dedeu. Her translation of *The Whispering City* by Sara Moliner recently received an English PEN Award, and two of her translations were nominated for the 2016 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Last year, she was hired by Barcelona's City Hall to redact the successful application that earned the Catalan capital designation as a UNESCO City of Literature. She is currently on the 2017 PEN American Translation Prize jury.

Lyn Miller-Lachmann is the author of three award-winning novels for teens—*Gringolandia*, *Rogue*, and *Surviving Santiago*. She translates from both Portuguese and Spanish to English. Translations include the picturebooks *The World in a Second*, *Three Balls of Wool*, *The Queen of the Frogs*, and *Lines, Squiggles, Letters, Words*. She is a board member of the *Global Literature in Libraries Initiative* and a member of the *PEN American Center's Children's Committee and Translation Committee*. She divides her time between New York City and Lisbon, Portugal.

Avery Fischer Udagawa is the International Translator Coordinator and Japan Translator Coordinator for the SCBWI. An American based in Thailand, she teaches Japanese at International School Bangkok. Her translations from Japanese to English include the historical novel *J-Boys: Kazuo's World, Tokyo, 1965* by Shogo Oketani and the story "House of Trust" by Sachiko Kashiwaba in *Tomo: Friendship through Fiction: An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories*.

Laura Watkinson lives in Amsterdam and translates from Dutch, German, and Italian into English, with a particular focus on children's books. She founded the Dutch chapter of the SCBWI and is the society's Dutch Translator Coordinator. Her recent translations include three Dutch children's classics by Tonke Dragt for Pushkin Press: *The Letter for the King*, *The Secrets of the Wild Wood*, and *The Song of Seven*.

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