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The Unsung Heroes of Literature

As a translator by original profession, I am acquainted with both worlds: the one of the mediator and interpreter, straddling two cultures, loyal to the author as well as the target audience, and the other of the author herself who has her work translated into foreign languages.

Servants – that is what our translation studies professors told us we were to become. I never liked the concept. I prefer to see the translator as a partner. Translators need a very similar set of skills to the authors; sometimes, they are more educated, and often more disciplined, and in some cases, they may be better writers than those whom they translate. They are also the most attentive readers you will ever have. No literary critic, no fan, not even your own mother ever reads your novel or poem with such close attention, examining every redundant comma, every sloppy metaphor, every inconsistency. Sometimes translators are the first ones to discover mistakes after your text has been read by your family and friends, your editor, and two proofreaders. They have to pick up every piece of your text, look at it closely and then put it in the right place of the jigsaw puzzle in the target language. Of course, a translator can do a lousy job and make your work a commercial flop. Or they can elevate your prose and make your book a bigger success in the receiving culture than it was back home.

Most fiction titles coming out every year in my country are translations from foreign languages. When you ask a Czech about their favorite book of all time, often they will name a foreign work of fiction they read in translation without even realizing it.

Translators are the unsung heroes of literature, hardworking, diligent, and very often underpaid. They facilitate not only interlinguistic but also cross-cultural communication. They enable remote communities to learn from and about each other, and it is only fair to put their names on the covers of books next to the authors', something that publishers in my country have only recently started doing.

Remembering well the agonies of my translating days – not knowing what this or that meant, not being able to find an expression in any dictionary or even online, I try to be most helpful to my translators. I rely on them to fix every error; I trust them to tweak my text so that the target language audience would best appreciate it. Discussions with translators are often enlightening and eye-opening. Images and ideas I take for granted may not be comprehensible in another language and culture – it makes me stop and think about them.

I believe my translating background has had a fundamental impact on me as a writer. I don't write as freely as I would, had I not been influenced by my training. I always write with the translator in mind, asking myself – would this be translatable, is this pun necessary or am I just showing off? It may be my impression only, but it seems to me that writers with a background in translation write differently than their colleagues with other professional histories. They seem to be more cautious, to have more respect for the written word, which may not necessarily be an advantage. Sometimes their texts read like translations. Either because of a subtle interference of the other language, or because they treat language more consciously or conscientiously than writers without that professional experience.

The last book I translated was in 2018; and I may never translate another one. It is all work and very little play for me, whereas with writing, it is the other way round. Therefore, I am even more grateful to my translators.

While computer-assisted translation and various AI tools have been taking over the field of translation in recent years, it seems that in literature, flesh and blood translators will still be indispensable for some time. So, let us cherish them and hail their work because they bring us closer, and they make the world a more connected and colorful place.