

Lost and found

Writing and reading translations

Frank Wynne

Two years ago, I was offered the opportunity of editing an anthology of short stories in translation. The remit was to select 100 short stories spanning up to one thousand pages, at least 40% of the stories and their translations into English should be in the public domain to moderate the budget for permissions, but otherwise I was encouraged to interpret the brief as widely or as narrowly as I chose. The publisher suggested calling the book “Found in Translation”. Though initially, I bridled a littler at this title, in time I came to accept it as a statement of intent because there are few tropes I find as infuriating as the three words “lost in translation” – the hackneyed headline uninspired reviewers routinely reach for when called upon to write about ‘world literature’, thinking a fleeting allusion to Robert Frost will lend gravitas to their own words. As a journalistic headline it seems to me lazy precisely because Frost is *not* suggesting that translation is impossible, but highlighting the fact that certain aspects of language (sound, rhyme, rhythm, etc) cannot be directly mapped between languages. Frost was not the first to voice the thought; indeed, it was rather better expressed a century

earlier by Shelley when he wrote: “the plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower — and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel.” Literary translation, then, is not about what is lost, but what is *found*; translation is the careful nurturing of an alien seed so that it can blossom again in a new language.

I accepted the commission with a naïve enthusiasm, excited at the prospect of showcasing the short story in its many forms around the world. Only after I had signed the contract did I begin to wonder precisely what such a book might be and I realised the daunting, terrifying scale of the task ahead.

To dispense with the obvious: there is no such thing as the 100 Best Short Stories whether in translation or otherwise. Every anthology, by its nature, is subjective. In order to make a selection, I first had to read. Obviously, it is impossible to read *every story ever translated*; how then was I to decide when I had read enough? Since the book has now been published, I now know the answer: you will *never* have read enough.



Frank Wynne is an award-winning literary translator, from French and Spanish, writer and self-confessed terribleman.

Frank Wynne

Photo: Nick Bradshaw

Unknown unknowns

There were writers whom, I felt, *had* to be included, writers who, over the centuries, invented and reinvented the short story – Cervantes and Guy de Maupassant, Chekhov and Thomas Mann, Borges and Karen Blixen. But, as I took my first faltering steps in compiling a list, I came face to face with the limits of my ignorance. Some years ago, Donald Rumsfeld was widely mocked for suggesting that knowledge can be divided into *known knowns*, *known unknowns*, and, famously, *unknown unknowns* – yet this seemed to me to precisely describe my dilemma: there were writers and cultures I knew well, those I was aware of but had not read in any depth, and – crucially – there were cultures that were unknown unknowns. And so, I contacted the hive mind of literary translation – translators I knew personally, those I know only through groups on Facebook and elsewhere, editors, writers and readers who might offer suggestions, and advice and on what and who to read. Thankfully, I received hundreds of recommendations, and had countless conversations and squabbles with friends

who championed a particular story or author, with readers who passionately insisted X was the finest short story writer who ever lived and others equally adamant that X was wildly overrated.

In the year or more I spent reading, I felt the thrill of discovering voices that were new to me, and the ineffable pleasure of rediscovering authors (often in new translations). Editing an anthology, I discovered, is a microcosm of the reading life, a journey filled with startling insights and the occasional disappointment that an author read years ago does not quite stand up to rereading.

New voices

From the start, I decided that, since there could be no perfect anthology, I wanted my rattlebag to be *ambitiously* imperfect, to include as many languages, eras and cultures as could be crammed between the covers. I was unreasonably excited to discover “The Stone Guest” a magnificent short story translated by Shelley Fairweather from Hamid Ismailov’s original Uzbek. It goes without saying that I cannot claim it is

the best short story ever written in the language since, like so many cultures, Uzbek is little represented in English translation, but I felt it was important for the anthology to include voices new to me, and hopefully to readers. What began as a sprawling list of almost 300 stories, I gradually whittled down to about 160, and, from here – as we acquired permissions – the list was refined to 100. There were stories that I wanted to include but could not – either because permission was refused, or because the rights holder – often a literary agent – simply asked for more money that had been budgeted. In one case, a translator wanted to revise his published translation but could not do so in time for it to be included.



Found in Translation
Photo: Tim Flohr Sørensen

Found in Translation, then, is the result of inspiration, advice, recommendations compromises, and many months of reading. While I can read in a number of languages, I decided not to read the originals, since for fully two-thirds of the stories I had access only to translations. If, as Susan Sontag says, translation is “the circulatory system of the world’s literatures”, then translators are the beating heart that makes it possible for stories to flow beyond borders and across oceans. Their task is as simple as it may seem impossible: to quote Günter Grass, “Translation is that which transforms everything so that nothing changes.” It is not a matter of finding equivalent words (since there is never an exact equivalence), but of weighing the weight and heft of words while striving to preserve the cadence and the rhythm of a sentence, to reinvent a pun, to produce a voice that lives on the page. What persuaded me to include an author or a story was the painstaking work of a translator “finding” the author in English, it was the impact – emotional, intellectual, visceral – of the story, whether Antonia Lloyd Jones masterful account of “The Birch Grove” or Saul Bellow’s hilarious version of “Gimpel the Fool”. I hope that the resulting anthology – or, to use the term that I prefer, “rattle-bag” which has the clank and clatter of things found, scavenged, unearthed, jostling between the covers, clamouring for attention – rises to the challenge set by Robert Graves: “A well chosen anthology is a complete dispensary of medicine for the more common mental disorders, and may be used as much for prevention as cure.”