

The challenges awaiting Marije de Bie

A talk with the new head of the Amsterdam Translators' House

*Hanneke van der Heijden
& Gertrud Maes*

Located in a residential area close to works by Rembrandt, Van Gogh and modern artists, but far away from the buzzing lines of tourists waiting at the museums' entrances, the [Amsterdam Translators' House](#) offers residencies to translators working on Dutch literature. Last September, Marije de Bie succeeded former director and literary translator Peter Bergsma, who led the house since 1997. On a rainy day in December, while preparations for the annual '[Translation Days](#)' were in full swing, Marije de Bie talked with us about her impressions of the Dutch translation landscape and the challenges awaiting her.

Marije de Bie (1977) has been engaged in languages, literature and translation ever since she enrolled as a student at the department of Latin and Classical Greek at Amsterdam University, "where the focus is very philological". Upon her graduation she taught classics in grammar schools for several years, then did a Master in Publishing in Oxford, and continued her career as an editor at two major publishing houses in Amsterdam. There she collaborated with foreign translators of Dutch authors, and with Dutch translators working on fiction

written elsewhere in the world. But the fast-paced reading routine, common in today's publishing world, eventually started to bother De Bie. She decided to resign and later applied for this position that allowed her time for slow reading. "At the translators' house I'm a host to the residents of the five rooms that we have available. My new position seems to combine the best of being a teacher and being an editor. The many contacts with translators from all over Europe, the possibilities of discussing their work with them and their opinion on Dutch and Flemish literature, promise a more quiet and profound way of dealing with literary texts."

But hosting translators in the literary, linguistic and more practical aspects of their profession, is only part of De Bie's job. De Bie is also a staff member at the Dutch Foundation for Literature, the umbrella organisation of the translators' house, and has responsibilities in policymaking. What are current topics in translation policy?

A dire need for young translators

The Amsterdam Translators' House



Marije de Bie opens the annual “Translation Days” activities in Amsterdam, December 2018
Photo: Chris van Houts

is visited by translators from all over Europe and beyond. In 2018, the House hosted 50 translators of 22 different nationalities. But however varied the linguistic background of the visitors, the residents are remarkably similar in age: while most residents are elderly translators who have been in the profession for a long time, young translators starting out are a minority. “The underrepresentation of younger residents is partly due to their personal circumstances, which often don’t permit them to leave their homes and jobs for a one or two month-stay in Amsterdam, and partly to the present selection criteria at the translators’ house which are easier to meet for experienced translators. We might reconsider them.” But the small number could also be caused by a lack of young people in the field. A recent user survey shows that half of the translators of Dutch literature is now over 55 years old. “Recruiting young translators is one of the biggest challenges. Not only

in the Netherlands, but all over Europe few young people decide to start a career as a literary translator.” Participation in projects like *The Chronicles* and *de Vertalersfabriek*, where translators are mentored at the start of their career by experienced colleagues, is one of the ways in which the translators’ house attempts to improve this situation.

Supporting the literary market

The age factor is not the only challenge awaiting De Bie. “With the changes in the book market that we’ve been witnessing over the last years, convincing publishers to keep on publishing translations and securing the position of translated literature on the book market has become another major task. Now that the number of readers has been dropping, publishers in the Netherlands and abroad tend to think of book translations as expensive projects, in terms of both advance payments and translation costs.”

“Yet translators could do a lot too to strengthen their position and the position of translations in the market.”

De Bie sees several ways for supporting translators as well as publishers.

“First of all the Dutch Foundation for Literature offers grants to translators and publishers: publishers worldwide who wish to introduce Dutch authors to their markets, can apply for a [Translation Grant](#). The Foundation also tries to monitor the [quality of literary translations](#), from and into Dutch. In collaboration with other partners we organise translation workshops, meetings and trainings. This year I hope to talk to publishing houses, existing translators’ initiatives and other players in the literary field. But I also hope to organise regular informal meetings, such as a monthly cocktail. It’s very important to build a common platform.”

“Yet translators could do a lot too to strengthen their position and the position of translations in the market. Their knowledge of the literary landscape in their source culture is very valuable to a publisher. During my time as an editor, translators’ views, for example on how ‘their’ books were

received in the authors’ countries, taught me a lot. It helped me sharpen my thoughts, and often provided me with arguments I could use, for instance when presenting a title to the publisher.



Translators’ House Amsterdam
Photo: Gerhard Jaeger

Translators’ higher awareness of this value could strengthen their position vis-a-vis the publisher. Teaching young translators how to present themselves and their knowledge, both of the language and of the literary landscape, is one of the things we aim at in projects like *de Vertalersfabriek*.”

Diversity in the body of literary translators

A third challenge is exemplified by an [open letter](#) in one of the Dutch leading newspapers last year, written by the directors of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and other national art



Several years ago, **Gertrud Maes** exchanged French cuisine for French literature. After a bachelor in French Language and Culture and a master in Translation Sciences at the University of Amsterdam, and a practical at *La fabrique européenne des traducteurs littéraires*, she started working as a literary translator. Spring 2018 she was nominated for the Elly Jaffé Stipendium, an award for promising translators during the first five years of their translation career.

Gertrud Maes
Photo: Martin Waalboer

foundations. They announced that a more inclusive policy will be pursued – in the selection of staff for the respective foundations, in the evaluation of grant applications from artists, and by stimulating young people starting out as an artist. “We want diversity to be self-evident. We want all stories to be told and all stories to be heard,” as it was formulated in the letter. De Bie adds: “This statement raises a lot to think about and to discuss, also in the field of translation, which is, after all, a field of cultural exchange par excellence. In terms of ethnic background, the body of literary translators in the

Netherlands shows very little diversity. Should this change? And if so, how could we diversify more? Could we do something to make the profession of literary translator more appealing to people with different cultural roots? The discussion also entails questions such as whether a specific ethnic background is an advantage, or even a requirement, to translate literary work that is set in a particular background. These questions are new to the Foundation, and very much a topic for discussion. Though it’s not always easy, we have to think about our position and role in this matter.”