

Too many unskilled cooks

Translating Marlon James' multivocality into Norwegian

Juliane Wammen

In August 2018, the small independent Norwegian publisher **Mime Forlag** published a translation of the Booker Prize winning *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Jamaican-born **Marlon James**. The novel takes an attempted assassination of Bob Marley as its starting point and is at the same time a modern history of Jamaica told through a myriad of different voices: Twelve different characters tell the story, their voices interchanging in short chapters, and the book has been rightly praised for (among other things) its precise and skillful rendering of the voices of these characters.

So, Mime Forlag decided, rather unusually, to have the book translated by not one, but twelve different translators, to make sure the differentiation was being maintained. So far so good: Mime Forlag may be commended, both for taking a risk by publishing a brilliant, but by no means mainstream novel in the first place, and for attempting to rethink the translation process. Thus, when publisher Kristian Bjørkdahl was asked by *Morgenbladet's* Marius Lien if they had “drawn the names [of the twelve

translators] from a hat”, he explained the selection process as follows:

“A part of it was a kind of typecasting. We took one of the voices and mulled it over for a little while, and then the four of us brainstormed: Who do we think of when listening to the voices in the novel? Then we drew up a shortlist for each character and started at the top.”

Writers, not translators

From a literary translator's point of view, though, something felt a bit off. First, the idea that you need actual different people to translate different voices in a novel seems to undermine the idea of the author's (and in this case also the potential translator's) skill at writing: If you thought a writer wasn't able to write different voices with different tones in a convincing way, you'd be undermining the whole idea of novels representing a multiplicity of voices and worlds, which is arguably one of the main characteristics of any great novel.

Let us, however, grant the Norwegian publisher that they really tried to do something different and experiment

with the form – and perhaps it actually might prove interesting to have different people translate different voices: a way of taking the actual multiplicity of literature seriously, doing away with the much flawed and misguided “lone genius” idea. But the real issue, from the literary translators’ point of view, was that the publisher commissioned this audacious task to people who are amateurs and inexperienced in the field of literary translation: the twelve people asked to do the translation weren’t translators by profession, they were (are) primarily writers of fiction, and most of them had never translated anything, or very little, previously.

This points to the overall problem, namely that the respect for literary translation and translators is such that a publisher would assume that an author with no experience could do the job just as easily – and perhaps even better. The publisher might have experimented with the idea of different actual people translating the work. This kind of cooperation in translation is not at all uncommon: there are many benefits from sharing the work, of course, both practically, logistically and artistically, and it might all make for a better end result. But then why not ask twelve different professional translators who have the skill and experience needed to do the difficult job? Tellingly, when interviewed about the translation in a radio show, some of the writers expressed their amazement at how difficult it actually was to translate, and some even underlined their individual unwillingness to translate e.g. very racist words and expressions, as Gro Dahle also told Marius Lien in the abovementioned interview.

The translators’ reaction

When asked about the case, the Norwegian Association of Literary Translators, **NO** commented that they were not happy about the whole set up, even though they haven’t published any official statement on the matter. The above-mentioned feeling of being disrespected is strong, but maybe more importantly, from the association’s point of view, the publisher did not use the Norwegian standard contract for translation, “**normalkontrakten**”.



Marlon James

Photo: Mark Seliger (markseliger.com)

The written agreements between Mime Forlag and the writers made clear that the writers would get their fee in installments, in accordance with the sales. The standard rate was used, but because sales didn’t go well, the full fees were never actually paid. In fact, Mime Forlag is now closing down, partly because of the risk they took translating this book.

As sorry as one may feel for the publisher and their laudable dream of “only publishing things we love ourselves”,

as Kristian Bjørkdahl expresses it, this doesn't change the fact that the people who translated this novel didn't get paid properly for the work they did, according to the agreements that the NO worked hard to reach in order to protect the Norwegian literary translators. This points to another, and just as serious problem, namely that inexperienced authors translating a difficult work such as this do not necessarily know what to expect and might end up being underpaid and losing their rights.

“It is about society's overall view of literary translation as a craft”

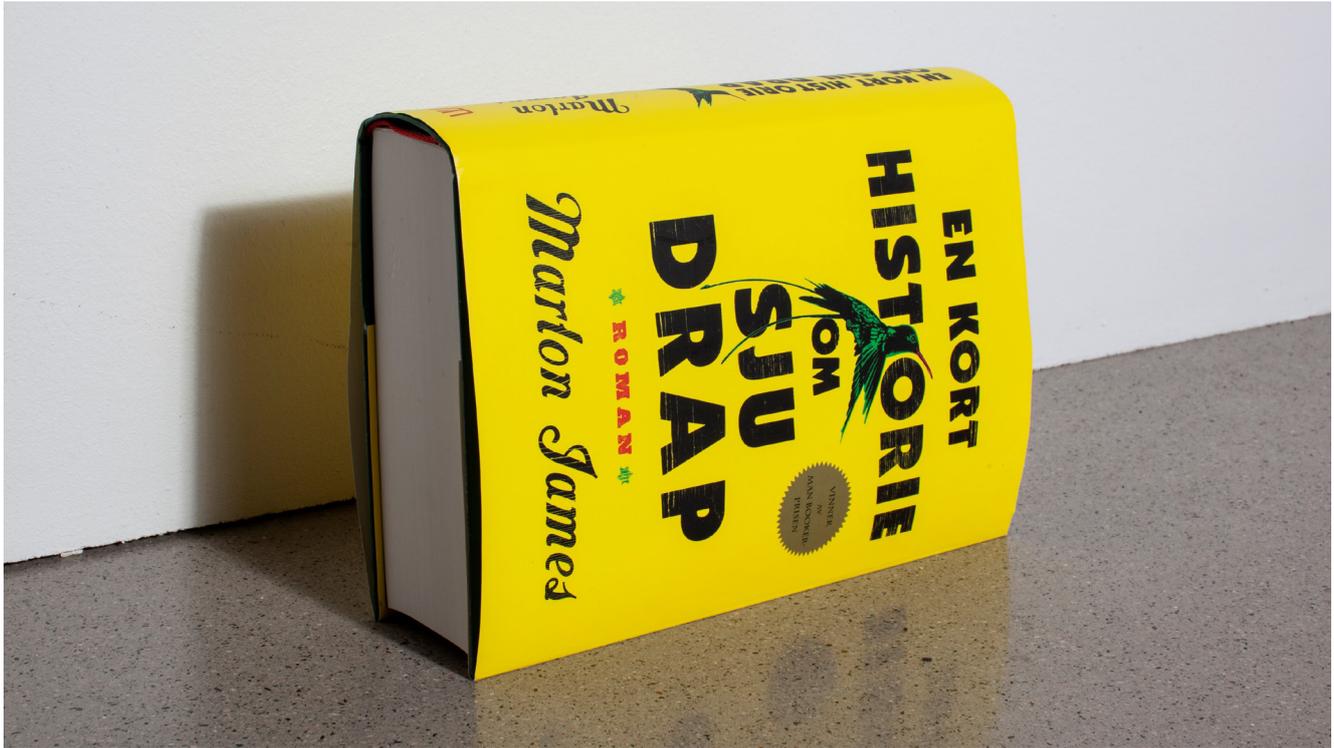
This story, then, is not just about Mime Forlag as either hero or villain (“independent publisher struggling to publish great literary works” vs. “evil publisher exploiting poor translators”), neither is it a (common enough) case of literary translators complaining about not getting the respect they feel they deserve – although these quite human and real emotions of course also play a part. It is about society's (including the writers') overall view of literary translation as a craft, a “taken-for-grantedness” of the position of the literary translator and the skill and effort it takes to be one. As in every

other profession, there are different levels of competence and experience, but automatically assuming that anyone who is a (good) writer is also a good translator, is a fallacy: Even when not taking the obvious need for a high level of linguistic skills into account, writing and translating still require quite different kinds of sensibilities and talents.

Respect for professionalism

How did the actual novel end up, then? Well, the few reviews of the book went from rather unkind (see Ola Jostein Jørgensen's review in [BLA](#), 14.12.18) to noncommittal (see Odd W. Surén in [Mellom](#) #1, 2019) when it came to the translation. Among other things, Jørgensen thought the result was inconsistent and didn't do justice to the variety of voices and the skill of the original work – and this is unfortunate for the life of the book and for the Norwegian readers (and, as it turns out, for the publisher). But it does underline that commissioning amateurs to do work requiring highly skilled professionals is probably never a good idea – whether it is performing caesarian sections, teaching children math or translating novels. Or, as literary critic Ola Jostein Jørgensen puts it, just because you are really skilled at synchronized swimming, doesn't mean you can run a marathon.

Isn't the whole point of being a literary translator, and doing your job well, that you actually are capable of speaking in different voices and covering different stylistic scales and tones of speech? Many times, being a literary translator has been likened to an actor playing different roles or a musician playing different compositions on the same instrument, avoiding the sad,



Cover of the Norwegian translation of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (Jan Brøssen & Log Hurt / BLA Bokvennen litterær avis)

common-place assumption that a good translation of a literary work is just a pale copy of a shining original. In a case like the translation of Marlon James' multifaceted, skillfully written piece of literature, this analogy makes more sense than ever: A good literary translator, with the required talent and provided with a realistic deadline, can of course translate a book with so many different voices, not because this person's voice is the (Norwegian) equivalent of a voice of a character in the story, but because they know their art and craft and how to use it.

Marlon James' *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, published by Riverhead Books 2014, and translated to the Norwegian *En kort historie om sju drap* by Torgrim Eggen, Nina Lykke, Lars Ramslie, Simon Stranger, Birger Emanuelsen, Benedicte Meyer Kroneberg, Gro Dahle, Cornelius Jakhelln, Ørjan Nordhus Karlsson, Marius Leknes Snekkevåg, Ninni Nyhus and Jørgen Toralv Homme.

The novel won the **Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2015** and has been translated into 32 languages.