

Authors and translators united

An interview with *Jennifer Croft* and *Mark Haddon* of the *#TranslatorsOnTheCover* campaign

International Translation Day 2021 saw the launch of #TranslatorsOnTheCover which calls on every writer to ask their publishers to include the translator's name on the cover of their work. The campaign's creators, Jennifer Croft and Mark Haddon, kindly agreed (at very short notice) to an interview with Counterpoint.

How did you both, translator and writer, come together to start this campaign?

Mark: I knew about Jennifer's work largely through her Booker International Prize-winning translation of Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*. When I subsequently read her article in the *Guardian* about the invisibility of translators, arguing that, since their hard creative work has gone into the choice of every word, they should be named on the covers of the books they've translated, I felt a stab of guilt. I'm in touch with a few of my translators (Harry Pallemans in Holland, Hamid Dashti in Iran...), but on the whole I've treated translation in much the same way as the whole book industry does, as something which happens invisibly and far away. The stab of guilt, however, was followed

by a lightbulb moment. Translators have virtually no power to change the status quo. Publishers have more than enough power but no motivation. I realised that if authors cared about the way their translators were treated then change might be possible. I contacted my own agents, *Aitken Alexander Associates*, and asked whether I could insist that all future translations bore the name of the translator on the cover. They were really supportive so I contacted Jennifer and we drew up a list of authors we thought might be interested in doing something similar.

It was when I got in touch with Nicola Solomon, the formidable chief executive of the Society of Authors, however, that momentum started to build. Between us we concocted a *letter of intent*, the society mailed all their members and by the time we reached 1,000 signatures, Pan Macmillan had already committed to naming translators on their covers.

As for Jennifer and I, we've still not met, if you discount a brief tactical zoom and a joint transatlantic radio

interview for the BBC. So we're definitely due some coffee and cake when we find ourselves in the same time zone.

“Publishers will hopefully see this as the path of least resistance”

Given the overwhelmingly positive response, how do you propose ensuring that this actually converts into more publishers putting translators' names on the covers of books?

Mark: The campaign now (beginning of Nov. 2021) has over 2,300 signatories and we've recently emailed all of them with suggested statements which they can forward to their agents and/or publisher to ask them to use their best efforts to put translators' names on their covers. There will be complications, of course. Some publishers are digging in their heels, none of them offering very substantial arguments, though some kind of prize must go to Pushkin Press who responded to *a letter from authors* by saying, “What is getting lost in this is the fact that the translator isn't the author and no one's really asking how the author feels.”

And there are, of course, territories where many mass market titles are translated and edited heavily in-house by groups of people in a way that means many books don't have ‘a translator’ as such. Nevertheless, if a substantial proportion of our signatories follow through with their public promise we hope that Pan Macmillan will be the first of many publishers to change their

policy, hopefully because they see it as morally right, or at least because it becomes the path of least resistance.

How do you foresee the campaign's influence on translations into and out of minority languages?

Jenny: Although it seems many other cultures already feature translators' names on book covers, it is certainly my hope that raising awareness of the collaborative nature of translations in general—of the fact that every translation is a co-written work—will help translators everywhere.

How would you respond to critical voices claiming that fair remuneration and fair contracts are more important issues than having one's name on the cover?

Jenny: Fair contracts come into play when translators are recognized as creative agents in their own right. By foregrounding the identity of the translator, publishers who feature



Covers of translated literature, naming the translator

Source: CEATL book cover collection



Jennifer Croft won the 2020 William Saroyan International Prize for Writing for her illustrated memoir *Homesick* and the 2018 Man Booker International Prize for her translation from Polish of Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights*.

Jennifer Croft
Photo: Private archive



Mark Haddon is the author of four novels, including *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and, most recently, *The Porpoise*.

Mark Haddon
Photo: Private archive

translators' names on their covers are demonstrating their commitment to this recognition and enabling readers to arrive at the same. If no one knows who the translator is, why should they receive royalties? If everyone knows that this is the person who wrote every word of this book, who advocated for the author to editors, agents, journalists, foundations, who's been posting on social media and organizing readings, then won't it feel impossible not to pay them what they deserve?

Letter of intent

"For too long, we've taken translators for granted. It is thanks to translators that we have access to world literatures past and present.

It is thanks to translators that we are not merely isolated islands of readers and writers talking among ourselves, hearing only ourselves.

Translators are the lifeblood of both the literary world and the book trade which sustains it. They should be properly recognized, celebrated and rewarded for this. The first step toward doing this seems an obvious one.

From now on we will be asking, in our contracts and communications, that our publishers ensure, whenever our work is translated, that the name of the translator appears on the front cover."