

Women in Translation Prize

An interview with Chantal Wright was conducted in English by Višnja Krstić

Chantal Wright, born in Manchester (UK), is an award-winning literary translator and an Associate Professor at the University of Warwick. She holds a BA in Modern and Medieval Languages from the University of Cambridge (UK) as well as an MA and a PhD in Literary Translation from the University of East Anglia (UK). Before coming to Warwick, Chantal Wright taught Translation Studies and German Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (USA), the University of Alberta (Canada), and Mount Allison University (Canada). She is the author of *Literary Translation* (Routledge, 2016).

Chantal Wright translates literary and academic texts from German and French into English. In addition to being shortlisted for the ‘Marsh Award for Children’s Literature in Translation’ twice – for Andreas Steinhöfel’s *The Pasta Detectives* (Chicken House, 2010) in 2011 and for Milena Baisch’s *Anton and Piranha* (Andersen Press, 2013) in 2015 – Chantal Wright was the inaugural winner of the ‘Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation’ for her translation of Tzveta Sofronieva’s volume of poetry *A Hand Full of Water* (White Pine Press, 2012). Particularly interesting is her experimental rendering of Yoko Tawada’s hybrid German-English text *Portrait of a Tongue* (University of Ottawa Press, 2013). Her most recent academic translation is of Antoine Berman’s *The Age of Translation* (Routledge, 2018).

Chantal Wright is the coordinator of The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation. The Prize, launched in 2017, will be awarded annually to the best work of literature by a woman which has been published in an English translation by a UK or Irish press. The inaugural winner, chosen from 58 eligible titles translated from as many as 24 languages, was Yoko Tawada’s novel *Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (Portobello Books, 2016), translated from German by American translator Susan Bernofsky.

Fostering the inclusion of international voices in the English-dominated Anglosphere seems to be one of the Women in Translation Prize's main goals. To what extent can academic efforts of this kind actually (re)shape the literary canon?

Well, we might have to wait a few years and see if the number of women writers being translated into English actually increases before passing judgment on the success of this particular endeavour!

The Prize plays other symbolic roles which I consider to be as important as bringing about change in the literary marketplace. It is a means of signalling that academia, and specifically my own university, Warwick – since I don't want to speak on behalf of the entirety of British higher education – takes translation seriously and is attempting to build a bridge to practitioners and promote what they do. There is suspicion in the literary translation community about Translation Studies in the academy, and there is often a failure within the academic community – perhaps more so within Literary Studies/English Literature than within Translation Studies – to engage with the practice of translation and with translators. Universities should throw their institutional weight behind an initiative such as the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation that has tangible benefits for groups beyond the university. In an age where tuition fees have ruined the sense of universities being public institutions in the UK – for the public, of the public, for societal good – a prize like this helps to keep a precious door open.

Constituting just 3% or so of the total publishing output, translations in general are largely peripheral in the UK. If books in translation are underrepresented, those by female authors are even more so, as merely 30% of those newly published translations are of women writers. How are these calls for inclusion of women writers reflected in the book market?

Statistics aside, I do think the situation of literary translation is slowly changing in the UK. There is more reviewing of translations in the media, although this reviewing is not always more informed, and literary translators have become active spokespersons for their profession and for translated literature at literary events around the country. It will be interesting to see whether Brexit brings further improvements as politicised readers feel the need to internationalise their reading matter.

In terms of the inclusion of women writers in the book market, there have been some concrete developments. Independent publisher And Other Stories, which is based in Sheffield, has made 2018 its year of only publishing women (<https://www.andotherstories.org/2018/05/11/2018-is-our-year-of-publishing-women/>), for example. The need to make sure that women's voices are adequately represented is part of a wider movement taking shape in British society at the moment. In the past few days I have read a newspaper article on the publication of a new collection of audition monologues for BAME actors to help them fight back against the type-casting that non-white actors experience at audition. And there's an ongoing discussion about the barriers facing working-class actors who want to go to drama school. A more equal and diverse society and culture won't happen overnight, but I'm optimistic that change comes in small increments.

Women in Translation Month, celebrated every August since its creation in 2014, is another important initiative highlighting the translation industry's gender asymmetry. Over the course of this month, excerpts are shared on social media, new titles are announced, and a series of literary gatherings are organised across the UK. Are today's editors, in light of these events, more willing – or, should I say, less reluctant – to commission a translation project involving a female author than was the case some ten years ago?

We have American translator and blogger Meytal Radzinski (<http://biblibio.blogspot.com/>) to thank for Women in Translation Month. In her blogposts from WiT Month 2018, Meytal talks about the need for WiT Month to move out of the niche and go mainstream. Women in Translation isn't yet receiving the kind of attention it deserves. Quite frankly, translated texts, irrespective of the gender of their authors, still have a hard time finding acceptance in the Anglophone marketplace, and the gender imbalance means that texts by women authors find it that much more difficult. More enlightened publishing houses – and these are generally the smaller, independent ones like And Other Stories – have got the message and are, indeed, pioneering in their activism, but there's still a long way to go.

Fiction from Eastern Europe in general appears to be marginal in the Anglo-American transnational field. In recent years, Istros Books, a pioneering UK-based

publisher, has brought a number of titles from Southeastern Europe to the English-speaking world. What is more, earlier this year, Flights, written by Polish author Olga Tokarczuk and translated by Jennifer Croft, was announced as the winner of the Man Booker International Prize. Do these examples indicate a growing interest in fiction coming from this previously neglected literary space? Has the Warwick Prize received any submissions of books from the Balkans or Eastern Europe?

The judges actually commented on the number of submissions from Eastern Europe that were received for last year's prize. In 2017 three of the five shortlisted titles were from Eastern Europe, including a title by Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich. This year we received 53 entries in total for the prize and of these, 7 were from Eastern Europe (Croatia, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia). 4 out of these 7 have made it on to the longlist of 15, which is impressive and shows that literature from Eastern Europe is both being translated well and finding resonance among an English readership. I think there is a growing interest in Eastern Europe as a literary space, which perhaps has to do with the fact that it is almost thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and that freedom of movement within the EU has brought together groups of people who were previously unable to mix. I cannot speak for literary production in Eastern Europe as I don't have access to the languages, but the titles that are making it into English translation speak to younger generations processing their parents' past, the Communist past, so this may also be a historical moment of taking stock, one of which English readers are lucky enough to be on the receiving end.

By publishing the list of eligible titles, the Women in Translation Prize is creating a portfolio invaluable to academics, publishers, and translators alike. Are there any other platforms or databases you would like to recommend to researchers who want to search works by women that have appeared in an English translation?

Yes, Meytal Radzinski's statistics on gender and translation, mentioned above, are invaluable. Chad Post of publisher Three Percent also collects statistics on newly translated books in the US, and these statistics are now housed on the Publishers Weekly database:

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/home/index.html>

As a prolific literary translator, you have actively worked on bridging the gender gap by translating a number of female authors, including critically-acclaimed ones, such as Yoko Tawada and Milena Baisch, as well as those who have yet to gain official recognition. What other women writers would you like to see in an English translation? Does the gender criterion play a role when you select your next translation project?

Since I work for the University of Warwick, any books by women I translate while I am still an employee will unfortunately be ineligible for entry into the competition. This obviously means that I'll be concentrating my efforts on male writers from now on! In all seriousness, it is something of a scandal that Simone de Beauvoir has not yet received the English translation that *Le Deuxième Sexe* deserves. Scholars Margaret Simons and Toril Moi have written extensively about this and I won't re-cap their arguments here, but why haven't a team of feminist intellectuals and philosophically-minded translators been allowed to take this on? I can't imagine the work of a male intellectual receiving comparable slapdash treatment. I do think about the gender of the author in my own reading choices and make a conscious effort to seek out women writers.

Finally, what are the future plans for the Women in Translation Prize? Any intentions of extending the eligibility criteria or partnering with overseas institutions?

I am hoping that the Prize is just getting started, particularly as the city of Coventry, where the University of Warwick is based, will be UK City of Culture in 2021 and this would be a great opportunity to bring some international women writers to the city in partnership with the Prize. We are looking for a sponsor to ensure the longer-term future of the Prize and we would indeed consider partnering with an overseas institution. We have restricted the eligibility criteria to UK and Irish publishers at the moment because we are a very small team and have a modest budget, but with more financial support we could potentially make this a worldwide Anglophone literary prize, which would be a very exciting development.

