

Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A. in Global Communication & Applied Translation program.
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Katy Derbyshire

Katy Derbyshire is a British, Berlin-based translator of literary fiction, and recently the head of V&Q books, an imprint of the German publishing house Voland & Quist Verlag. Derbyshire has decades of experience translating German authors, from Christa Wolf and Clemens Meyer to Olga Grjasnowa and Heike Geissler. Her other projects, such as the blog “love german books” and the “Dead Ladies Show” podcast and live show point to her broad range of talents in addition to translation. Derbyshire has won numerous awards, among them the 2018 Straelener Übersetzerpreis for her translation of Clemens Meyer’s Im Stein (Bricks and Mortar). She has also written articles on the role of women in translation and literature and helped start the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation in 2017. The interview below was conducted over email.



I read in an interview that you started translating because you were in Berlin with “no useful qualifications apart from speaking English and wanted to get out of dead-end jobs.” How do you think translation relates to other careers in its requirements for getting started professionally? There don’t seem to be any essential certifications or degrees, but are there more subtle barriers to entry than official ones like those?

I think that depends on the setting the translator will be working in. In Germany, for instance, many clients expect translators to have a relevant qualification, which I did obtain once I decided to move into translating (the Institute of Linguists’ Diploma of Translation, via the University of London, which is a one-off examination that I sat at a testing center in Berlin). Certified translators of official documents require a masters-level degree in translation. In the literary field, however, formal qualifications are less relevant. However, in order to be contracted in the first place, translators need to build up experience of working with different types of text. They need contacts to clients, in the publishing world and elsewhere, which are difficult to build from scratch. So, perhaps comparable to the situation for writers, journalists, artists, there are some subtle barriers to entry.

You recently made the move to the publishing world with your new position with VQ books. How do you feel your translation experience has prepared you for work in publishing, and what are some differences you’ve noticed in the work from both sides of the aisle (as translator and as publisher)?

My translation experience gave me a broad overview of the workings of getting a book into print, what order processes happen in: obtaining rights, contracting a translator, editing and copy-editing the translation, typesetting, proofreading, sending to print. It also gave me a lot of valuable contacts in the publishing world. The differences are that a publisher accompanies the book all the way through its life, from conception (buying rights, choosing a translator) to creation (cover, font, editing) to sales (distribution, marketing, arranging events). Also that we have a rolling stock of new titles, some published simultaneously, and so on, which I find means I have to divide my affection and attention between more books at once.

You've worked on translations by Christa Wolf and Clemens Meyer. Is working with East German authors any different from the West, or are the differences between individual authors more powerful, regardless of origin?

I don't think writers' origins play a major role in differences between writing style within one language, although East German literary influences may be more Russian-heavy, I suppose. The differences between Christa Wolf and Clemens Meyer, however, both East German but of different generations, were huge. The biggest difference when translating Christa Wolf was that she's the only writer I've ever translated who's not alive, so I had no opportunity to ask questions.

How has the COVID-19 crisis affected your work, either translation or publishing? I'd imagine it's put a damper on the conventions and publicity events, but have there been any impacts that might not be so obvious? Or is translation a profession especially well suited to working from home?

Translation is well suited to working from home, although I've never enjoyed working from home and have always tried to find external workspaces. Publishing is not well suited to working from home – a lot of it is talking over ideas, socializing; even gossip is important. The crisis has put a huge damper on that, as well as on book fairs and events, which are a highlight of our professional lives. In subtler ways, it has also made people more anxious, more risk-averse, more prone to making understandable mistakes when working under such difficult conditions. And it has made buying books harder.

In working with a lot of women writers, do you find yourself having to translate the viewpoints of women from German cultures into the English culture as well as the English language? E.g., foreignization vs. domestication of the text: is getting the words right enough, or do you find yourself having to translate the cultures as well, with all the ensuing baggage and difference? Or are German and British conceptions of womanhood/feminism relatively compatible? Assuming the distinction exists at all or is separate from male authors.

I'm not sure the distinction exists, and I don't feel I can separate conceptions of womanhood and feminisms by country. Part of that is because we never know how each reader will perceive a text, so I can only interpret it as I see fit, render my own subjective reading into English. What might be different is the para-texts: jacket copy, publicity material, translator's notes – that's where we have an opportunity to impart extra information that's not in the novel, explain assumed knowledge or tackle cultural baggage. There are times when we do this consciously, but I can't say I've noticed a difference between translating men and women.

What's your process for working on a translation? Entirely digital, entirely analogue, typewriter and paper dictionary, pen-and-paper and online dictionary, or something else entirely?

I work almost entirely digitally, overwriting a Word document of the original (which I usually have to make myself out of a PDF) to make a Word document of my translation. I use mainly online dictionaries, except for a few specialist ones like a dictionary of clichés, rhyming dictionary, police dictionary, thesaurus. I do prefer reading background material (rather than reference works) in analogue form, so if I'm researching tuberculosis in the early 20th century, I'll find a book about it, and also if I read writers who have been influential on the texts I'm working on.

Take your favorite work of translation, or the one you're most proud of. What was it, and how did you end up working on it? E.g., did you choose the book/short story collection or was it assigned, etc.?

If I have to choose, it was Clemens Meyer's Bricks and Mortar. I talked about it to Fitzcarraldo Editions, who knew I'd translated a previous book of his for another publisher. It was a mutual pitch, I suppose – they were tentatively interested already, I thought they'd be a great home for the book, and we egged each other on to do it. Our first meeting was at the London Book Fair, before Fitzcarraldo had published anything at all.

How important have you found building a relationship with the original author to be? Do you tend to work closely with authors, or are they more hands-off, or does it vary?

It has proven quite important for me to have a good relationship with the authors. They need to trust me to do a good job and allow me to make minor adjustments. I need to understand their writing and feel comfortable working on it. When that's gone wrong at either end, it makes for a less good translation. I want the freedom to make my translation choices alone, but the reassurance that the author agrees with the general direction, and that comes through communication.

This interview was conducted by Wilson Ekern.