Discovering difference: studying translations for children at Roehampton

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At the beginning of the 1990s, Kim Reynolds and Pat Pinsent began to put together a range of exciting courses to form a new Children's Literature MA at Roehampton University. Seizing the opportunity to develop a keen and long-standing interest in both children's literature and translation, I offered a module on Children's Literature in Translation that would, I hoped, introduce students to the work of the best writers for children across the world and to the skills and artistry of those 'unsung heroes' (Michael Ignatieff), the translators. We started small, of course; I can recall four of us sitting round a table and learning from one participant, Tomoko Masaki, that a translated Japanese picture book which appeared to be a joyous account of a birthday party, was in the original quite a tragic little tale – a stark instance not of translation, but of editorial invention of a text to fit the pictures in a British publishing house.

Tomoko's revelation was only the first of many memorable contributions from MA students that have highlighted both the role of translation and cross-cultural influences in the international history of children's literatures. Overseas students come into their own on this course, both as experts in their own national children's literatures and as bi- or multilingual speakers of languages other than English. British students have listened spellbound to accounts of the subversive role of the Greek children's literature during the Turkish occupation, when it was taught secretly in church crypts; of the fragile development of an indigenous children's literature in the Philippines through successive waves of colonisation; of the emergence of graphic novels for young adults in Taiwan and the equivalent manga tradition in Japan. Student seminar presentations like these are the starting point for essays, several of which have reached publishable standard. Students have also generously enriched resources by donating books in original languages (*Pinocchio* in Italian and *Pippi Longstocking* in Swedish) or out-of-print translations – the marvellous *Papa Pellerin's Daughter* by Maria Gripe and *The Satanic Mill* by Otfried Preussler are now available to future students by this route.

So what actually happens on those dark winter evenings at Roehampton in the translation class? We begin by comparing different translations into English of stories with which all students are familiar: Perrault's *Cendrillon* (Cinderella), the Grimm Brothers' *Aschenputtel*, or *Pinocchio*. It is not necessary to know the language of the original – indeed, the course was originally designed for monolingual English speakers – but, whenever possible, access to source languages adds a further dimension to discussion. What gradually emerges through comparison of source and target-language texts is evidence of what Theo Hermans (1996) has called the translator's 'discursive presence'. Translation doesn't just happen in a straightforward word-for-word manner: there is clearly a filtering consciousness at work making linguistic choices, adapting the context of the original, aligning it with models in the receiving culture, omitting text or adding explanations. Close textual analysis and comparison also tease out requirements unique to translating for children – an appreciation of read-aloud qualities in stories for the very young, or of the role of the visual in picture books and the 'bande dessinée'.

Both the many variants of the Cinderella story and translations of Pinocchio illustrate the impact of didacticism, or of changing notions of what is good for the child, on the

translation process. Censorship leads to the complete omission of any mutilation of the sisters' heels and toes in translations for a child readership of *Aschenputtel*, although some translators merely tone down such gruesome passages. And in a familiar pattern of context adaptation that often underestimates the child reader's ability to engage with the unfamiliar, the Oxford World Classics edition of 1996 replaces Italian dishes with shepherd's pie and steak and kidney pudding. To bring such discussion up to date, seminars on the Harry Potter series in recent years reveal the speed and effectiveness of global marketing, with translators under pressure as never before as each new title appears. A close reading of the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, with students bringing along translations into their native languages has initiated debates on the translation of Rowling's playfully ironic and colloquial tone; on how to convey the 'Britishness' of a text that relies on a knowledge of boarding school traditions and, more specifically, on translating the non-standard English spoken by Hagrid. Even the opening line of chapter one presents the translator with a challenge: how to render the address 'number four, Privet Drive', resonant with suggestions of suburban conformity and neatly-mown lawns, in the target language?

A second, but equally significant, strand to the module is the literary content and form of children's texts from across the world. A rediscovery of *Pinocchio*, for example, establishes Collodi's satirical intent, the story's impact as a linguistic and literary icon in Italy and its position alongside *Peter Pan*, *Alice* and *Pippi Longstocking* as one of the great children's texts about the paradoxes of growing up. Landmark children's authors of the twentieth century Erich Kästner and Astrid Lindgren also appear on the syllabus. No-one has understood or written for the five-totwelve-year-old better than Lindgren. The pace, intensity and rhythmic language of the fairytale fantasy novels *Mio my Mio*, *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Ronia the Robber's Daughter* are her greatest achievements and, sadly, little known in the UK. Finally, two sessions on British and translated literature on the Second World War allow for enlightening comparison of texts that tell different sides of that particular story.

That leaves just a little time for poetry, the hardest translation task of all, and for discussion of recent translated publications that cause students to re-think the notion of difference in the form and content of children's books. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Where Were You Robert?* or Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* signal an intellectual edge to continental European fiction, while the hard-hitting political writing of Anne Provoost's *Falling*, or the powerfully elliptical domestic dramas of Bart Moeyaert's *Bare Hands* are examples of an impressive wave of new realism in Belgian novels for young adults. Fortunately, the course has always evolved to accommodate both the cultural histories of participants, and the welcome increase in the publication of translations. Translated books appear on the reading lists of undergraduate sessions at Roehampton, too, and there are plans to include children's literature as a specialist option on a new Translation MA. From the array of academic dissertations and essays generated by the course, to the comment of a graduating MA student that she now looks out for translated books and makes a point of giving one to her children at Christmas, there is plenty to suggest that studying translations for children opens minds and leads to unpredictable discoveries.

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