

English that for me! Publishing children's books in translation

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The Anglophone world is notoriously unreceptive to fiction in translation. It would, however, be wrong to assume that there is some deep-seated, atavistic opposition among English-speakers to translated texts. There is no questioning the popularity of translated titles like *Heidi* and *Pinocchio* (to the extent that some English speakers are hardly even aware that these texts originated elsewhere),¹ and such classics of world literature as *Madame Bovary*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Don Quixote* are readily available in any Anglophone bookshop or library. The current vogue for Scandinavian crime fiction is another notable example of widely read literature in translation – and yet, the generally accepted figure for books in translation on the UK and US markets is between two and four per cent including scientific and technical titles, which must leave the figure for fiction at a very low level indeed. This contrasts with the figures for most mainland European countries, where the percentages are almost always in double figures and in some cases exceed fifty per cent.²

Writing in *Outside In: Children's Books in Translation* (2005), Nicholas Tucker asks the pertinent question why there is a British problem with regard to publishing children's fiction in translation, but he might more accurately have called it an Anglophone problem, for the phenomenon of very low numbers of translations is widespread in the English-speaking world.³ There are doubtless complex and inter-related reasons for this phenomenon, and Tucker's suggested explanations make interesting reading. My own view is that the global hegemony of Anglo-American culture leads to a form of linguistic arrogance among Anglophones. There is an assumption that we have

¹ I asked a group of education students to identify the languages of origin of a dozen children's classics, half of which were not English in origin. Many of the students thought several of the foreign titles had been written in English, including *The Little Prince* and 'The Little Mermaid', though everyone identified *Heidi* as foreign (Swiss, Austrian, German), presumably because of the very distinctive setting of the story. ² The figure of 2–4 per cent is quoted for example in *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2012/07/books-translation>. The figure of 3 per cent is so well established as the translation percentage for the US that the University of Rochester's translation centre's website is actually called Three Percent. ³ Nicholas Tucker, 'Children's books in translation: why is there a British problem?' in Deborah Hallford & Edgardo Zaghini (eds), *Outside In: Children's Books in Translation* (London, 2005), pp 10–11.

'enough' books in English and do not require to look beyond Anglophone borders for books to publish. A kinder and no doubt also valid explanation is that Anglophones are not used to the idea of translation in extra-literary contexts: we are rarely the ones wearing the headphones at international conferences, for example, and when we travel abroad it is increasingly easy for English-speakers to communicate in our own language. The rest of the world, or a good part of it, is arguably, and presumably unwittingly, complicit in this: in their eagerness to perfect their English, or perhaps simply because English is now such an obvious lingua franca in any international context, native speakers of other languages tend to go out of their way to converse in English with Anglophones they encounter, and this unfortunately tends to confirm some English-speakers' assumption that 'English is enough'.⁴ The worldwide vogue for Anglo-American culture also extends to literature: those who can read English do so, and those for whom it is a struggle seem to want to consume Anglophone books in translation, for not only is English unreceptive to literature in translation, it is conversely the most translated-from language in the world.⁵

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that almost no contemporary children's novels are translated into and published in English. The novels of the German author Cornelia Funke, published by The Chicken House in the UK, are an outstanding exception, and a number of other Anglophone houses are translating children's books,⁶ but these represent a tiny portion of the market as a whole. One explanation often put forward for this is that English-speaking children are intimidated by foreign author names that they don't know how to pronounce. There is doubtless some truth in this, but English-speaking football fans are quite comfortable with foreign players' and managers' names, for example. A strange-looking name in print is more of an obstacle of course than names that are in constant use in the broadcast media, but I believe that resistance to foreign names may be exaggerated – and where there is such resistance, I suspect it is more at bookseller than at reader level.

If UK publishers publish few children's books in translation, the situation is worse in Ireland, where, setting Little Island aside for the moment, almost no books for children are published in English translation. Indeed, not many books for adults are published in translation either (with the notable exception

4 Maeve Conrick, 'Language policy and multilingualism in Ireland: perspectives and strategies' in Joachim Fischer & Rolf Stehle (eds), *Irish-German Studies 6: Contemporary German-Irish Relations in a European Perspective: Exploring Issues in Cultural Policy and Practice* (Trier, 2012), pp 197–208, here: p. 204. In the same volume, see also Arnd Witte, 'Gardening in a gale: German language teaching in the Republic of Ireland since 1961', pp 209–28. 5 <http://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatlist.aspx?lg=0>. 6 These include Allen and Unwin in Australia, Gecko Press in New Zealand, Kane Miller in the US, Groundwood Books in Canada, and Bloomsbury in London. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and doubtless there are other examples internationally.

of the output of the international publisher, Dalkey Archive Press, which has a presence in and links to Ireland)⁷ This is best understood in the context of the recent history of publishing for children in Ireland. Most Irish writers of fiction for children were published in Britain until the 1980s, when a number of Irish houses began publishing children's fiction. The Irish boom in children's publishing in English was relatively short-lived, probably because publishing children's fiction is financially very difficult, especially in the face of competition from a world centre for children's publishing in the neighbouring country. Of the half-dozen or so publishers who published children's lists in the 1990s, only the O'Brien Press (always a leading house in this respect) continues to publish a substantial children's list. Mercier Press publishes occasional children's titles, Poolbeg no longer publishes for children, and Aran, Attic, The Children's Press and Wolfhound have ceased publishing altogether. Given that a frequently stated aim of those involved in the children's publishing industry in the 1990s was to provide Irish children with books by Irish authors that reflected their readers' culture and experience, it is hardly surprising that translated titles hardly figured at all.⁸ The O'Brien Press did try its hand with two titles from French, but did not consider it a successful experiment and no longer has an active interest in sourcing children's books for translation.⁹

Little Island Books began publishing in 2010.¹⁰ It was founded with the express intention of publishing children's books in translation alongside books by Irish writers. I had a long-held and passionate belief in the cultural value of providing English-speaking readers, especially young readers, with books originating in other languages and other cultures, and was also interested in translating children's books from German myself. Since Little Island's foundation, approximately twenty per cent of our output has been books in translation (it should be noted, however, that our output is small, and twenty per cent amounts to no more than a couple of titles a year). Since 2010, Little Island has published four books translated from German, one from Swedish, one from Finnish, one from Brazilian Portuguese and one from Irish, and a fifth German

⁷ The same is not true for the Irish language, and the history of translated titles in Irish is long, complex, interesting and beyond the scope of this article. See however Caoimhe Nic Lochlainn, 'Tarts and treacle, roast potatoes and buttermilk: domestication in Irish-language translations of children's literature', above. ⁸ This goal was often articulated at conferences and similar events in the 1990s. ⁹ Elisabeth Navratil, trans. Joan de Sola Pinto, *Survivors: A True-Life Titanic Story* (Dublin, 2000), and Franck Pavloff, trans. Chris Mulhern, *Brown Morning* (Dublin, 2003). O'Brien did not experience particular buyer resistance to translated titles, but had difficulties sourcing satisfactory translators, according to correspondence I have had with the publisher, Michael O'Brien. In contrast, sourcing translators has been the least of Little Island's problems, but it should be remembered that there was no model of publishing children's books in translation at the time of O'Brien's translations. ¹⁰ Little Island was originally an imprint of New Island Books, but quickly became independent, and has been publishing its own list since 2011.

title is currently under way. Our intention is to continue to publish in translation and to expand the range of source languages represented.

Alongside the globally pervasive, broad cultural reasons for the low numbers of books in English translation in general, there are also more particular difficulties facing publishers who wish to challenge the status quo and publish books in translation. The first of these is a perceived difficulty in sourcing and assessing suitable titles. In fact, though, it is relatively easy to build up a network of international children's books contacts, by attending the Bologna Book Fair, joining IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) and keeping in touch with organizations like the International Youth Library. Recognized sources of children's titles suitable for translation include the White Ravens selection of titles from all over the world (published annually by the International Youth Library), the IBBY honour lists (published biennially), the catalogues of various national translation promotion agencies and lists of award-winning and award-nominated titles in various countries. It is, of course, useful if the publisher has in-house language competence, but most publishers do have at least some such resources, or have access to readers with the requisite skills. It is also possible to find books without having a reading knowledge of other languages. Foreign publishers who are keen to have their books translated into English can usually supply rough translations or at least good synopses of their books in English. This can be enough to identify a book as interesting to an English-speaking publisher, after which it is a case of finding an experienced and trustworthy speaker of the language concerned to provide a reader's report on the book itself. Just like Anglophone titles, books written in other languages also have to meet the publisher's general criteria and fit well with the list, and readers have to be familiar with the publisher's taste and the requirements of the list as well as being able to read the language in question.

In the face of the enormous numbers of books published annually for children, it is useful to remember that one really good recommendation may be enough. For example, the International Youth Library's enthusiastic recommendation of *Isdraken* by Mikael Engström, originally published in Swedish, led directly to our publishing this title as *Thin Ice*, and an introduction to the Dutch-Austrian writer Rachel van Kooij through the Austrian Embassy in Ireland and the Goethe-Institut prompted us to publish *Bartolomé: The Infanta's Pet*.¹¹ German in particular serves as a useful gateway language. German publishers issue large numbers of translations, especially from other northern European languages, so a reading knowledge of German can, for example, make Swedish or Dutch titles accessible. It was because a German edition of *Isdraken* was available that we were able to read it and offer to pub-

¹¹ Mikael Engström, *Isdraken* (Stockholm, 2007), published as *Thin Ice*, trans. Susan Beard (Dublin, 2011). Rachel van Kooij, *Kein Hundeleben für Bartolomé* (Vienna, 2003), published as *Bartolomé: The Infanta's Pet*, trans. Siobhán Parkinson (Dublin, 2012).

lish it in English. Translators working independently also sometimes recommend titles to publishing houses. This model is more prevalent in countries where translation is a recognized part of the publishing scene, and publishers rely on translators to draw their attention to titles they might consider. In the Irish context, where translation occupies a more marginal position, we have had no difficulty in sourcing translators through translators' associations and on recommendations from various contacts. In the case of *Isdraken*, for example, we drew up a shortlist of Swedish-English translators whom we identified through various translators' organizations, information supplied by the Swedish Arts Council and personal contacts, and made a selection from the shortlist based on a sample translation of an extract from the novel.

Translation is of course a considerable extra expense for a publisher, though there are usually subventions available from the countries of origin of books to be translated. The level of subvention varies considerably from country to country. The Scandinavian countries tend to be generous with their translation funds, as does Germany to a slightly lesser extent, while Austria unfortunately seems to be less well-positioned in this regard. Our own translation promotion agency, Ireland Literature Exchange, whose primary function is to fund foreign publishers who are translating books by Irish authors, also makes very welcome contributions towards incoming translations, and we have been fortunate to receive funding from them that has helped to make good shortfalls in funds from countries of origin. An unfortunate consequence of variance in funding from country to country is that publishers are likely to be influenced in their choice of titles by the subsidy levels offered by the funding bodies in the countries of origin. Another possible consequence is that publishers may restrict themselves to low-risk, popular titles at the expense of more interesting, possibly outstanding books with less commercial appeal. This in turn can mean that the books that are translated may tend to be those where the markers of the originating culture are less prominent, which rather undermines the cultural value of publishing in translation. A complicating factor is that funds can only be applied for after the rights to the book have been acquired and a contract with the translator is in place. This in effect commits the translating publisher to considerable financial outlays with no guarantee of funding to meet those commitments. Experience helps, of course. Negotiating with funding agencies in advance of signing contracts and getting at least some indication of whether funds might be available and to what level is a partial solution, but the requirement to have contracts in place before funding is secured is a considerable disincentive to publishers.

If I were to identify a single change that would help to encourage translation, I think it would have to be an improvement in the system whereby publishers, who are already taking a risk in publishing a book at all, have to take an additional risk on translation costs. There could be creative solutions if international translation promotion agencies arranged their conditions so that transla-

tors' interests are protected without exposing publishers, particularly small ones, to the risk of having to make up substantial shortfalls in translation costs. If translation grants could be offered provisionally, before contracts are signed, rather than retrospectively, after publishers have paid for rights and committed to paying the translator, this would take a good deal of the risk out of the equation and would make translation a more attractive proposition for publishers.

Translation costs for picture books tend to be considerably lower, owing to their smaller word counts. However, because of the high production costs of picture books and the very small Irish market, which makes it almost impossible to sell them in sufficient numbers to cover their costs, Little Island has not so far ventured into publishing either home-grown or translated picture books. The practice of co-publication, whereby print runs of picture books in various languages are printed simultaneously for different publishers in different markets, is standard in picture-book publishing. Little Island's first venture into colour publishing is *Cow Belle Beauty Queen*, an illustrated story with images in black and green rather than in full colour. It is also our first venture into co-publication. This book was originally published in full colour in Finnish, but we heard that it was being published in German with alternative, two-colour illustrations. Since we had already established a cordial relationship with the German publisher, Boje, we decided to work with them to produce an English edition and have it printed along with their print run, using the German illustrations.¹² We were fortunate to receive good funding for the translation from both the Finnish translation agency FILI and our own agency ILE, and we also, most unusually, received a grant from FILI towards the production costs, which has enabled us to produce the book very attractively and in a format we have not previously used. This has been an interesting experiment for Little Island and we look forward to building on this experience.

Since our aim at Little Island is cultural, we do not set out to localize the books we translate, or to erase the markers of the originating culture. On the contrary, we encourage translators to leave personal and place names in the original language, for example, so that readers are aware that they are reading a book that was written out of a different language and culture. Often only relatively minor adaptations are required to make the 'foreign' aspects of the text accessible to young readers. We occasionally change names of characters, where the original name seems too difficult, or conversely where the original name is so similar to the English version that it can look like an error and be distracting for readers. For example, we decided to change the spelling of 'Liisa' in the book translated from Finnish to the English standard 'Lisa', to avoid irritation or confusion. Sometimes a name can have a joke element to it, and in that case we would tend to substitute an English name that

¹² Leena Parkkinen, trans. Ruth Urbom, illus. Katja Wehner, *Cow Belle Beauty Queen* (Dublin, 2013).

reflects the joke. We always consult originating publishers and authors as well as translators about name changes. In the case of German street names, which look very long to Anglophone readers, partly because the word *Strasse* [street] is tagged onto the street name and not separated out as a different word, we sometimes use the German street name without *Strasse* and add the word 'Street' in English. This compromise preserves the Germanness of the name but makes it a little easier for young readers to manage. We generally retain titles such as Frau and Herr. Where cultural differences may confuse readers, we make an effort to compensate. For example, in publishing *Over the Wall*, which is for quite young readers, we included a brief note about the Berlin Wall (the fall of which is important to the story) and we explained differences in everyday life, such as the early start of the school day in Germany.¹³

Whereas we try to preserve personal and place names in the text, we take a more radical approach to titles. This is because titles are a very important marketing tool, and a title that is faithful to the original but is unlikely to appeal to our market is self-defeating. Table 1 shows how we have treated the translation of titles, which are laid out in chronological order of English language publication.

Table 1

<i>Original title</i>	<i>Original language</i>	<i>Literal translation of title</i>	<i>English title used</i>
<i>Belgische Riesen</i>	German	Belgian/Flemish giants	<i>The Great Rabbit Revenge Plan</i> (2010)
<i>Die Welt steht Kopf</i>	German	The world is upside down	<i>Over the Wall</i> (2010)
<i>Isdraken</i>	Swedish	The ice dragon	<i>Thin Ice</i> (2011)
<i>Hurlamaboc</i> (2011)	Irish	Violent uproar	<i>Snobs, Dogs and Scobies</i>
<i>Die schrecklichsten Mütter der Welt</i>	German	The most dreadful mothers in the world	<i>The World's Worst Mothers</i> (2012)
<i>Kein Hundeleben für Bartolomé</i>	German (Austria)	Not a dog's life for Bartolomé	<i>Bartolomé – The Infanta's Pet</i> (2012)
<i>Messageam para voi</i>	Portuguese (Brazil)	Message for you	<i>The History Mystery</i> (2012)
<i>Miss Milky Ray</i>	Finnish	Miss Milky Ray	<i>Cow Belle Beauty Queen</i> (2013)
<i>Fennymores Reise</i>	German	Fennymore's journey	<i>Fennymore and the Brumella</i> (forthcoming 2014)

¹³ Renate Ahrens, trans. Siobhán Parkinson, *Over the Wall* (Dublin, 2010).

We determine the English-language title in consultation with the translator and the originating publisher. The contract we make with the originating publishing house grants them the right to be consulted on the title, which is a guarantee for the author that a title he or she objects to will not be used, but we have never had a dispute with an originating publishing house, an author or a translator on our choice of title. The author of *The Great Rabbit Revenge Plan* took a little persuading, however, that 'Flemish Giants' was not a good title for the Anglophone market.¹⁴ The author, understandably, valued the mysterious quality of the title, and argued that other translating countries had simply translated it directly. In English, however, the name of the breed of rabbit that the title refers to is 'Flemish Giants' rather than 'Belgian Giants', as it is in other languages, and it seemed to us that this was simply not an appropriate title for our market. The author was gracious enough to accept my proposed title. The author of *Over the Wall* was delighted with my title, as she agreed with us that the German title was rather vague and she liked the allusion to the Berlin Wall. The author (who is also the translator) of *Snobs, Dogs and Scobies* came up with the new title herself, on the grounds that the Irish title, though attractive and onomatopoeic, could cause confusion with the Irish-language original.¹⁵ We loved the title 'The Ice Dragon', but felt it had the ring of fantasy, which might give the wrong impression of the kind of book this is. The story is grittily realistic, and is set partly in the Arctic Circle. *Thin Ice* retains the mention of ice in the original title and makes reference to the protagonist's precarious position. This book, originally published in Swedish, was subsequently published in Danish. The Danish publisher bought our cover image for their edition, and also used our title (directly translated into Danish), though publishers in other languages had retained the original title in exact translation.¹⁶ The author of *The World's Worst Mothers* was keen for us to use that title, almost an exact translation of the German, for the English version, and we agreed with her that it is a splendid title.¹⁷ 'Not a Dog's Life for Bartolomé' was never going to be a runner in English. The reference to 'a dog's life' is entirely appropriate to the story, but the phrase isn't commonly used in the negative in English. We originally intended to call this book 'Bartolomé – The Infanta's Dog' but then thought it might sound as if it was a book about an actual dog. In the end, we chose to use 'pet' rather than 'dog', as it is more ambiguous. 'Message for You' was not a bad title, we felt, but my Little Island colleague, Elaina

¹⁴ Burkhard Spinnen, trans. Siobhán Parkinson, *The Great Rabbit Revenge Plan* (Dublin, 2010). ¹⁵ Elizabeth O'Hara, trans. Elizabeth O'Hara, *Snobs, Dogs and Scobies* (Dublin, 2011). The original Irish title was published under the author name Eilis Ní Dhuibhne. Ní Dhuibhne, *Hurlamaboc* (Dublin, 2007). ¹⁶ Mikael Engström, trans. Kina Bodenhoff, *Tynd Is* (Helsingør, 2011). ¹⁷ Sabine Ludwig, trans. Siobhán Parkinson, *The World's Worst Mothers* (Dublin, 2012). ¹⁸ Ana Maria Machado, trans. Luisa Baeta, *The History Mystery* (Dublin, 2012).

O'Neill, suggested the catchier and more intriguing title of *The History Mystery*. This is a book we feel will do particularly well in schools, as there is a strong educational theme in it, and the use of the word 'history' in the title seemed a good indication of that.¹⁸ The title 'Miss Milky Ray' was already in English in the original Finnish text, but nevertheless wasn't altogether comprehensible for Anglophone readers. On reading the book it becomes clear that Milky Ray is a chocolate bar, and the 'Miss' in the title is intended to indicate the winner of a beauty contest. Since the beauty contest in question is for cows, I came up with *Cow Belle Beauty Queen* as a clearer and more amusing title. Finally, I feel that 'Fennymore's Journey', though descriptive of the subject matter of the book, is a rather bland title, and I proposed *Fennymore and the Brumella* as an alternative title. I can't explain the word 'Brumella' here, as there is an important plot point wrapped up in it that is not revealed until the last chapter, but I think it has the advantage of being attractive as well as mysterious.¹⁹

The subject of titles brings me to my final point about the challenges involved in publishing children's literature in translation. We put considerable thought into our book covers. In the case of our first two translations from German, we named the translator on the cover as well as the author. We felt that books by foreign authors might meet with some resistance in the bookshops, and we hoped to counteract this by using my name, which is well known to booksellers as the name of an established Irish children's writer. We also felt it was important to honour the translator on the cover. However, neither of these books sold well, although one of them enjoys the advantage of being short, very simply written and especially appropriate for schools, and the other has the advantage of being an outstandingly well written and very funny novel for older children. We have been told that the illustrations on the covers of these initial publications were 'too young' for the intended audience, and we were advised that using the word 'translated' on the cover may also have been a factor, since it draws attention to the fact that these are translated titles. It is impossible to know which of these two factors played the bigger role here, but in any case, we never used the word 'translated' on a cover again, and our subsequent translated titles have all been more successful. This is unfortunate, as we would like to be able to recognize our translators' contribution by naming them on our book covers. We respect the translator's professionalism, and we have always enjoyed good relations with translators, with whom we work collaboratively in editing the text.

There is a generally held belief in publishing circles that translated titles don't do well, and we have certainly heard of some bookseller resistance to our translated books, but by and large this has not been a problem for us and our

¹⁹ Kirsten Reinhardt, trans. Siobhán Parkinson, *Fennymore and the Brumella* (Dublin, forthcoming 2014).

translated titles have sold reasonably well and in some cases better than titles originally written in English. We conclude that books in translation can hold their own in the marketplace as long as they are well jacketed, have attractive titles, do not draw specific attention to their foreign origin on the cover, though retaining their identity within the text, and, of course, are excellent books. Not having the author available to help with promotion is of course a drawback. We have been lucky enough to be able to bring three of our translated authors to Ireland, with the assistance of various cultural bodies here and in the countries of origin of our translations. Even a brief visit is useful, though it's not the same, of course, as having an author on hand to attend festivals and speak at events throughout the year of publication and beyond.

Our next challenge is to get our translated titles accepted into the award systems. The Marsh Award for Children's Books in Translation, for example, has in the past excluded our titles from their competition because it is a UK-based award and we are in the Republic of Ireland. I am very glad to say, though, that we have been given to understand that this position is likely to change and our books in translation will probably be eligible for the next round of Marsh Awards. The CBI Awards for children's books do not have a translation category, which is entirely understandable, given the fact that so few foreign-language children's books were translated into English in Ireland until recently. My feeling is that we do not need a separate translation category, but that the eligibility criteria need to be changed so that a book translated by an Irish person can be considered in the same way that a book written or illustrated by an Irish person is eligible. We are very glad to note that the Reading Association of Ireland awards, which are focused on fostering specifically Irish-published books (and so exclude books by Irish people that are published outside Ireland), are prepared to consider our translated titles, since they are Irish-published.

We are immensely grateful to the cultural bodies, domestic and foreign, that have supported us and continue to support us in our translation endeavours and we hope to build on our experience and continue to bring other voices to young Irish readers. At an event at the Bologna Book Fair 2013 organized by the UK's Outside In World organization, we met publishing colleagues from other countries who are also committed to translation and, most encouragingly, to the idea of publishing collaboratively, and we look forward to exploring new and perhaps more robust models of publishing in translation that will secure the future of this absorbing and exciting but, it must be admitted, rather precarious venture.