

So you want my arts job: literary translator

Author and translator Elizabeth Bryer shares her thoughts on the collaborative magic of translating literature.



Author and literary translator Elizabeth Bryer. Photo: Percy Cáceres.



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The world of Anglophone literature is quite insular – testament to the geopolitical dominance of the English language.

Globally only 3 percent of works published in English are translations from other languages, according to Elizabeth Bryer, a literary translator who works from Spanish to English.

'Thanks to English's history of imperialism and today's globalisation, while plenty of English-language works get translated into other languages, not enough are translated into English – and those leading the way are the smaller, independent publishers,' Bryer tells ArtsHub.

Translation allows a much wider range of voices to be heard. And some recent translated works have earned wide acclaim: Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains*, translated by Omid Tofighian, won a spate of Australian literary awards in 2019. It is, to date, the only translated book to have won the Non-Fiction category at the Australian Book Industry Awards.

But Bryer, who is also the author of a novel – *From Here On, Monsters* (<https://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/reviews/writing-and-publishing/jemimah-brewster/book-review-from-here-on-monsters-by-elizabeth-bryer-258566>) – that touches on translation and retelling, says that while challenges exist for translators starting out in Australia, some support is available. The [Australian Association for Literary Translation](https://aalitra.org.au/) (AALITRA) is a national organisation for the promotion of literary translation with events, conferences and resources, while the [Australian Multilingual Writing Project](https://australianmultilingualwriting.org/) (AMWP) showcases the linguistic complexity that 'resists and persists in Australia today'.

The Australia Council of the Arts recently also announced a [Translation Fund for Literature](https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/funding/funding-index/translation-fund-for-literature/) which will support both international publishers wanting to translate Australian works and Australian publishers translating foreign language works, provided they use Australian translators. Internationally, the [PEN/HEIM Translation Fund Grant](https://pen.org/pen-heim-grants/) – which Bryer received in 2017 for her translation of Aleksandra Lun's *The Palimpsests* – has supported nearly 200 projects.

There still aren't as many opportunities for translators in Australia as there are overseas, but here Bryer shares some of the secrets of literary translation.



Elizabeth Bryer's novel, *From Here On, Monsters* and her translation of Aleksandra Lun's *The Palimpsests*.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN LITERARY TRANSLATION?

I resisted the call of literary translation for years, despite it being the perfect marriage of my interests, because I thought that I wouldn't be able to feed myself if I had two vocations (writing and literary translation). Then I read Claudia Salazar Jiménez's *La sangre de la aurora* and wanted to press it into the hands of everyone I knew. After translating that novel, I was hooked. I also have a language-teaching gig for six months of the year that provides some semblance of security, however tenuous, to counterbalance the vicissitudes of translation and writing contracts.

To get started in doing this kind of work, there are some fantastic funding opportunities such as the PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant. Another starting point is to get short stories published in literary magazines or on sites such as *Asymptote*. I also point budding translators towards Chantal Wright's terrific resource (http://s3-euw1-ap-pe-ws4-cws-documents.ri-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/9780415745321/how_to_get_started_in_literary_translation.pdf) [pdf], which I found really helpful for demystifying the process. And, to see what publishers are looking for by way of proposals, see *And Other Stories'* [tips on proposal writing](https://www.andotherstories.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ros-Schwartz-advice-sheet-to-translators--Getting-into-Print.pdf) (<https://www.andotherstories.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ros-Schwartz-advice-sheet-to-translators--Getting-into-Print.pdf>) [pdf].

Finally, I'm always looking for new translation projects at The Lifted Brow's (TLB) Brow Books. You can pitch through our [submission portal](https://theliftedbrow.submittable.com/submit/69639/book-manuscripts-translations) (<https://theliftedbrow.submittable.com/submit/69639/book-manuscripts-translations>). And as for how I got started there, in 2017 I became the inaugural translations editor of TLB's flagship quarterly *The Lifted Brow* after sending a proposal to then-editors Annabel Brady-Brown and Zoe

Dzunko. But that's just one of many ways to start volunteering at a lit org like TLB: for example, current translations editor of *The Lifted Brow*, the incredibly talented Hassan Abul, started out as a TLB intern.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT LITERARY TRANSLATION?

Probably that it involves words neatly equating to other words in a different language, and so is a matter of knowing two languages and matching these, part for part. It's true that you need to know at least two languages to translate, but translating is a process that is distinct from speaking or writing in another language, and it involves a different skill set.

'You need to be able to empathise with the voice of the work and enter a creative dialogue with the author.'

Any single paragraph can be translated in so many ways, so having an overall translation strategy that is in tune with the ethics and aesthetics of the work, as well as with the power dynamics of the two languages, is crucial. But so is the more intuitive side of things: you need to be able to empathise with the voice of the work and enter a creative dialogue with the author.

WHAT DOES THE PROCESS TYPICALLY LOOK LIKE?

It depends on the authors and editors involved. In the case of authors, it's important to gauge how much collaboration they would like. Some authors are very detail-oriented and are excited by the possibility of discussing shades of meaning; others would prefer you to make your decisions independently, and to cast an eye over the proofs only. Once I have a polished draft, I usually send through a list of questions. These might be about shades of meaning, or about character motivation, or about inconsistencies in the narrative – things I haven't been able to work out from the text itself. Sometimes authors incorporate some of the outcomes of these discussions into subsequent reprints of their own texts.

After this, if the author reads English, I'll ask if they would like to see the manuscript before I deliver it to the publisher, or if they would prefer to wait for the edited manuscript and/or proofs. Then comes the negotiation: sometimes authors will ask why I've made a certain decision; I love this part of the process. It gives me a chance to think over details in a different light and it's a really beautiful part of what otherwise is very solitary work.

IF YOU WERE INTERVIEWING SOMEONE FOR A TRANSLATOR ROLE, WHAT WOULD YOU BE LOOKING FOR?

I'm unaware of any literary translator in-house positions that require interviews, though that really would be a dream! If there did exist such a thing, I would be looking for a nuanced understanding of at least two languages, and of several literary traditions in both languages. In other words, a love of reading and a love of language. I would also look for someone willing to take creative risks and to devote themselves tirelessly to another person's work. Someone who can balance the big picture with the detail, who cares equally about both, and is willing to do the care work that translation inevitably involves.

WHAT'S EXCITING ABOUT LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION RIGHT NOW?

So much! Women in Translation Month (#WiTMonth), which has just come and gone, is a great time to reflect on the power structures that determine whose story gets told (with 'women' being both too capacious and too narrow a category).

[This essay by Mui Poopoksakul \(https://electricliterature.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-thai-feminist-duanwad-pimwana/\)](https://electricliterature.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-thai-feminist-duanwad-pimwana/) is a fascinating meditation on the way translation and the encounters it engenders can lead to tectonic shifts in thinking.

Some books I would recommend:

- Rita Indiana's slender, ambitious *Tentacle*, translated from the Spanish by Achy Obejas – a restless, explosive riot of a novel not for the fainthearted
- the atmospheric short-story collection *Flowers of Mold* by Ha Seong-nan, translated from the Korean by Janet Hong
- Norman Erikson Pasaribu's deeply felt, intimate poetry collection *Sergius Seeks Bacchus*, beautifully translated from the Indonesian by Tiffany Tsao
- Brow Books' latest title, Duanwad Pimwana's *Bright*, translated by Mui Poopoksakul – a series of affecting, bittersweet vignettes about a boy raised by the community after his family abandons him, with the narrative style mirroring the scattershot energy of childhood

In other words, a whole lot of books and discussions have me very, very excited about literary translation right now.
