**Antonia Lloyd-Jones**

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*Authors and their translators don’t always come into contact, but they may have a lot to gain from getting to know each other. In this talk Antonia Lloyd-Jones, a literary translator from Polish into English, will explain the benefits for both authors and translators of building relationships, and will give advice on how to do that to mutual advantage, while avoiding some potential pitfalls. Using examples from the experiences of authors and translators, Antonia will offer some practical ideas on how they can help each other to: secure the interest of publishers; work together to produce the best possible translation; and jointly contribute to the promotion of their published work. The talk will last for an hour, followed by the opportunity to ask questions.*

**Introduction**

My work as a translator of Polish literature into English for more than 30 years has brought me some of my best and most valuable friendships, which are with the authors whose work I translate. So, as you’re at the start of your careers, I thought I would share with you some of that experience, and some thoughts on how authors and translators can build mutually beneficial relationships that help them at various stages. Perhaps you won’t feel it applies to you, but perhaps you’ll give it some thought.

I’m going to start with a story. During the first lockdown, in May, when we were still feeling shocked by this strange new situation that has turned our world upside down, I was contacted by Milica Markić, an eminent translator from Polish into Serbian. She’s one of the many translators around the world with whom I feel a special kinship, because we’ve translated the same books. Milica was contacting as many translators of books by the Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk as she could, and asking them to make little videos of readings from their work. She then assembled all our readings into an amazing single recording that she posted on YouTube. It features 50 translators reading 2-minute extracts of their own choice from their translations of Tokarczuk’s books in 36 languages. It was a very reassuring and uplifting experience – despite being stuck at home amid uncertainty and anxiety, there were 50 of us, from all over the world, not just Europe but Japan, China, India, California, all coming together and proving that whatever can happen to this world, literature is a force that unites it and gives it hope. It led to a Facebook group for Tokarczuk’s translators, named Okna – Windows – the title of an essay she wrote about the view from her window during the pandemic, which several of the same translators went on to translate and publish.

I’m sure you’ve heard of Olga Tokarczuk, and you may even have read her work – if not in Polish, then in translation by one of our happy family. When she was awarded the Nobel prize last year, a crowd of us met up in Stockholm to congratulate her and to be together, holding our own special celebration on the evening when she was given her prize. It was a remarkable feeling, the crowning of the work we’ve all been quietly doing for years, and a high point in all our careers that we were able to share with her and with each other. And it’s fine testimony to the sort of writer she is and her relationship with her translators – it was her work that brought us all together and bonded us in a special way.

Last year, Olga wrote a remarkable essay, the English title of which is “How Translators Are Saving the World”. Let me read you part of the (abridged) translated text: “Lately I have often stood alongside a translator as I have launched books published in other countries. It’s hard for me to express the relief that comes with being able to share authorship with someone. I was delighted to relinquish at least a little bit of my responsibility for the text, for better or worse… I took genuine pleasure from knowing that not all questions would be directed to me, and that in that object made out of printed pages, not all of it belonged to me. I think that many writers would share this sense of relief. The most astonishing thing, however, was the fact that the presence of the translator opened all sorts of bold new worlds for me… touching on issues I found unfamiliar, mysterious, even. My text acquired a kind of autonomy, like a rebellious adolescent deciding to run away from home to a music festival. The translator would take over calmly, showing the text to the world from a different perspective, becoming its support and vouching for it. What bliss. Translators free writers from the profound loneliness that is inherent in our work… Translators come to us from the outside and say: ‘I have been there too. I have walked in your footsteps – and now we will cross over this border together’. And indeed, the translator literally becomes a guide, taking me by the hand and leading me across the borders of nation, language and culture.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So how do you get to a point where as author and translator you’re appearing at festivals together?

I realize that in the early stages of your career, some of what I say might sound unrealistic to you, but maybe I can give you some food for thought, and best of all, some practical advice. In our professions it’s good to be proactive, to make things happen for ourselves rather than wait for them to happen. Which demands some confidence and energy. But I think there is a strong *synergy* in the literary world, and we can all tap into it to our benefit, and our enjoyment.

Of course I can only speak fully for my own experience as a translator of a ‘small’ language into a ‘big’ one, and I realise that in your individual countries things may not be as straightforward, publishing varies, cultures vary – but maybe I can offer some ideas worth considering.

**First of all, how can authors and translators help each other to get published?**

As an established translator, I am quite often approached by authors who want to interest me in their work, in the hope that I will translate it into English. Yes, potentially a translator can help an author to find publishers for their work among the publishers in their target country. But quite often the hopeful authors aren’t aware of certain realities. In my case, I often have to explain that only from 3 to 5 percent of all the books published in English – close to 200,000 in the UK (which is ten times as many as in Poland) and over 300,000 in the US – are in translation. And not many of those are literary, which means the competition is immense. Sometimes they’d like me to translate their book, and they say they’ll pay, but they don’t know that translation is expensive, and even when you have a translation, there’s no guarantee that it’ll find a publisher. So I explain to them that ideally they need to have an agent, or else the sort of publisher in their own language who has the capacity to sell foreign rights for them.

If you’re a translator, and you’re approached by an author who would like you to translate their book and help them to find a publisher, do explain this to them. If you really like the book, and think it’s one you feel passionate about translating, the best thing you can do for the author and yourself is to translate a few sample pages, and prepare a book report – a summary and an assessment, explaining why you like the book, why you think it will sell, and who’s going to read it. Then you could pitch those materials to potential publishers, in effect acting like an agent. You might even be able to place the sample with a literary journal, which would be a way of showcasing the author’s work to potential book publishers. Seeing a piece of an author’s work in translation in print gives book publishers confidence – there’s nothing like adding a link to an online journal to the materials you’re pitching.

But neither the author nor the translator should have unrealistic expectations. Ideally, there should be an agent or publishers’ foreign rights director involved, who will have useful contacts with foreign publishers, and a presence at the important book fairs where rights are bought and sold. Translators who prepare samples and book reports for those agents and publishers often have a good chance of being commissioned to translate the whole book if and when the rights are sold. It’s not a guarantee – the publisher might prefer to employ someone else they’ve worked with before – but it puts you in a very strong position.

Sometimes as a translator, you feel very strongly about a particular book and you just have to translate it – but if you’re hoping for publication, do be realistic, and make sure your author understands the situation. Translating a large part of a lengthy book at the author’s expense with no guarantee of publication is a calculated risk – if you ever do go down that road, make sure there’s a written, signed understanding between author and translator at the start, setting out the limits of the work and the realistic expectations. There’s nothing more disappointing for author and translator than translating a long text (or paying for one to be translated), only to find nobody’s interested. The author thinks it’s the translator’s fault, the translator feels helpless, and nobody gains.

I asked some of my colleagues who are both writers and translators what sort of experiences they have had. As translators, most of them had not risked trying to help novelists to find publishers for their books in translation. “Most of the times when a writer has commissioned me to translate something we haven’t managed to find a publisher, to be honest,” a translator from Dutch into English told me. “One ended up self-published, sometimes a short story did get placed in an online magazine, but generally there aren’t many fruitful experiences.” A translator from Serbian into English told me that “I am approached all the time by authors who want to pay me to translate their book. Most recently an author came to me with his 1000-page memoir. What I told him is what I always say: that I’ll be happy to translate 30-50 pages of excerpts for a per page, or per-word fee, and then if the author and/or I find a publisher, I will contract with the publisher for the full job and pay the author back the money they put up for the excerpts. But I won’t spend a year or more translating a 1000-page book that may or may not find a publisher.”

She’s right – samples should be enough to convince a foreign publisher. But if the author has proper representation, the translator who’s interested in their work can make a huge contribution by preparing materials to help the agent or publisher’s rights director to sell the rights. The translator may also know of grants towards the cost of those materials – in some countries, Poland for instance, there are state-funded grants towards translating samples and preparing materials. Translators can help authors and publishers by knowing about this sort of funding.

While agents and publisher’s rights directors have international contacts and go to book fairs (such as London in the spring, and Frankfurt in the autumn) to try to sell the rights to their authors books, the translators will also have contacts within the publishing industry in their own country, and can help with suggestions and supportive conversations to convince the editors whom they know or have worked with in the past. As well as knowing editors, translators generally know the market in their own country – they have a sense of which books will appeal to the readers, and how they compare with existing titles.

The best results come from teamwork, between the author, his or her agent or original publisher, and a translator who feels committed to that author’s work. That said, there are always **exceptional cases** where an author and a translator can work together towards successful publication in translation without the involvement of an agent or publisher’s representative. A best-selling Polish novelist told me that in France his translator is so good at finding publishers for his work, that he treats him as an agent, and formally pays him 10% of the money he receives from the French publisher for his rights. That said, he and the translator have developed a strong working relationship, and friendship, based originally on rights sales made by the Polish publisher in the past, so they have already established a good basis of trust.

There is one important area where a reliance on translators is really the only opportunity for an author to have their work appear in other languages. And that is **poetry**. Poets rarely have agents, or publishers with the capacity to sell their work abroad for them. And so very often, it’s through translators that a poet’s work becomes known internationally. Here’s what a prolific translator, poet and publisher from Spanish into English and the other way around told me: “It’s often the translator who does the publisher-finding on behalf of the poet, especially from languages that are less commonly spoken. I’d say the vast majority of poetry translations tend to happen thanks to the persistence or promotion of the translators. In the English-speaking world this is definitely the case”.

I have my own experience of this. I rarely translate poetry, because you do need the time to try to send the translations out to poetry journals, and to keep track of where they’ve gone, and whether they’ve been rejected or not. But I was contacted by a Polish poet, who asked me quite insistently to translate some of his poems – which I did for free, because I liked them, but I didn’t believe very strongly in my translations. I promised nothing – I said I had no time to get them published. But the poet was very determined, and he then sent them to journals himself, and suddenly I started receiving cheques for the licence to publish the translations (because of course even when an author has paid a translator for a text, the copyright belongs to the translator). Once my translations of his poems had appeared in more than a dozen literary journals, he asked me to approach book publishers. Thanks to the advice of other translators who’d already had success with poetry, I was able to find him a book publisher. Ten years on, we now have two full collections in English and his work has appeared in the New Yorker, all because as an author, he was persistent, and came to me to ask for my help with something I thought had little potential. Now it’s the translators into various languages who come to him, asking if they can translate his work. So if you’re a poet, or a translator who wants to work on poetry, you can work together well, as long as your expectations are realistic and you’re not worried about money.

These days I don’t have time to help the authors who approach me, so I politely explain that I’m too busy, but I might recommend them to another translator – sometimes I know which of my colleagues might be interested.

So my advice to the authors is that directly approaching potential translators doesn’t guarantee you publication in a foreign language. It might lead at the very least to some useful advice, but ideally, unless you’re a poet, you need an agent or a publisher with the capacity to sell rights. And if you’re a translator, be realistic if an author approaches you, and if you very much want to translate a particular author, team up with their rights representative.

The second thing I’d like to tell you about is **how can authors and translators work together to produce the best possible translation?**

Surprisingly perhaps, even when a translator has been commissioned to translate a book by a living author, it doesn’t always occur to them to have any contact with that author at all. I asked a British historical novelist about her experience with translators. “I’ve never had any contact with my translators,” she said. “Not sure if this says something about other translation cultures or about me! But it does make me mistrustful of the process because I end up with no idea whether the translations are true to my work or not. I absolutely wish I’d had contact with them, and should probably have been more proactive in asking the publishers to put us in touch. Lack of experience, I guess.”

As the poet I work with always has useful comments on my translations, I asked him about his cooperation with other translators. And found out that, although he’s translated into about 20 languages, he only gets questions from me and his German translator. “Mostly they don’t ask any questions, but I’d rather they did, because it never hurts. If they don’t, it means either they’re geniuses, or idiots. I think there are more of the latter in the world. And so I value the translators with whom I can consult.”

One of my colleagues who is an author as well as a translator, had a less-than-ideal experience with the translator of his novel into a language that he translates from: “The translator has only been in touch because I insisted repeatedly that the publisher connect us, at which point she was very friendly, and now we’re hopefully having a dialogue about how to translate the one-word title, for example, which is important. She wanted to leave it in English, but I definitely don’t want that, so am encouraging her to be creative and to come up with something completely new.” He doesn’t sound entirely confident, does he? Maybe the translator was nervous about contacting an author who knows her language, but it seems to me a mistake not to get in touch.

Maybe some authors aren’t terribly interested in translations of their work. But that seems odd to me – surely their books are their babies, being sent out into the world to an uncertain fate? From the translator’s point of view, I can’t imagine not having questions for my authors, or simply being curious about them. Most of the colleagues I asked agreed with me, and they came up with lots of good advice for how to build a relationship of trust once you have your publishing contracts in place.

Naturally, as an author whose work is going to be translated by someone you don’t know into a language you don’t know, you might feel anxious. Can this person be trusted to understand my work properly? How can I make sure? I think in this case both the author and the translator can do things to mutual benefit.

Here’s the first piece of advice on what to do for a positive result, from a recent interview with a translator of German literature: “Early in the process, I wrote to the author to introduce myself (as I routinely do with new authors), and we wound up establishing a fine working relationship.” As an author, unless you already know the translator, you have to trust the publisher to choose the best person for the project. As a translator who is likely to have questions for the author, you can reassure them by making that early contact. You only need to send a friendly message to say that you’re working on the book, and you’ll probably have some questions for them later on. It’s a good idea to say roughly when they can expect to receive them. You might want to tell them a bit about your previous experience, or anything you have in common. It shows them you’re a professional, who is taking their feelings into consideration.

**Questions for the author**

But assuming you have made contact, when it comes to the stage where you’re ready to ask questions, it won’t be a surprise for the author. The translator should consider when and how to ask their questions; it’s usually best to wait until you finish the translation, and have managed to reduce your list of questions to the ones that only the author can answer. It’s not helpful to bother the author with questions to which you can find the answer yourself on the internet. If you seem unable to do your own research, you might undermine the author’s confidence in you.

Here’s a nice comment from the translator of Serbian literature: “I wait to ask my questions until the translation is done because sometimes they are resolved in the course of later editing. But I enjoy showing the author, through my questions, that I have read carefully and am paying attention. Also that I have the humility to admit when I don’t understand something.”

It’s also a good idea to ask closed questions. So rather than asking vaguely, “What does this mean?” it’s best to ask, “Does this mean X, or does this mean Y? Have I understood your intention here?” I find authors are quite surprised by some of my questions, because of course they just write, without the same analytical process that I apply when I’m translating. I keep asking myself, why did he or she choose this word? What was their intention in phrasing it like this, rather than another way? But they will have written it subconsciously, instinctively knowing what they want to do. So sometimes our questions seem strange to the author. Olga Tokarczuk tells me that we all ask different things, though of course we also share questions; the translators who worked on her huge historical epic, *The Books of Jacob*, formed a support group, and exchanged information and research for their work on this monumental book that took the author eight years to write.

My own experience has been very positive: I send the author a list of questions once the translation is more or less finished, and they provide me with written answers – in the case of Polish writer Paweł Huelle I even get what amounts to a set of miniature short stories in response, a little literary gem for each question. I would wish all authors and translators to find that these exchanges are the basis for the start of a good relationship that will carry on through their careers, and friendship too.

An area where a translator needs to be sensitive is when they find a mistake in a book. We’re all human, we all make mistakes. If the translator knows the author, they can point errors out – usually the author is grateful. According to his English translator, the Dutch author Gerbrand Bakker makes a sport of seeing which errors which translators will notice, and once said to him: “Oh, you’re good, even the German didn’t spot that one.” (Though apparently the French translator, who was the next person to translate the same book, found one the English translator had missed!)

Polish reportage author Mariusz Szczygieł collects up his translators’ corrections and then amends his books accordingly in new editions. No one reads a book as carefully as the translator, so they’re bound to spot the details. But if you don’t know your author yet, the best way to handle errors is to point them out to the editor. The editor is a useful go-between, and that’s one of the things they’re paid to do.

Authors should be ready for questions from editors too; once the translator has delivered the translation, the editor – who is, after all, the first reader in the target language – will come up with suggestions and questions for the translator, but the translator might not always know the answers, and might have to consult the author. Of course the translator can help the author to liaise with the editor on these and other issues. Occasionally some extensive editing is needed before a book will work well on the given foreign market. I heard a good example from an author who also translates from Dutch, and on top of that, used to work as an editor. She translated a book about seaweed. “The editor suggested various elements that should be added, that the author and I researched and added together. We wrote the extra sections at her kitchen table, and worked through the recipes in the book together, changing and adding to them. The English version is some 30 pages longer than the Dutch and has different illustrations. This showed me the importance of trust and collaboration as equals. Otherwise those extra sections would have taken a lot longer to get right. And sitting down in person was the best way to do it, better than lots of emails.” I think it sounds like a fun way to work too.

I’ve sometimes helped to suggest cuts or revisions that an editor has requested. My authors haven’t always been thrilled at changes to their text, but we’ve negotiated, sometimes not changing things after all, sometimes agreeing that a careful modification will make the book better for this particular market. For instance, these days translators into English can run into issues of political correctness – publishers are concerned about text that some people might read as offensive. In these cases, rather than tell the author there has to be a cut, I have suggested ways of rewording the text that both the author and the editor can accept.

I for one have been lucky working with my authors, but what if things aren’t so straightforward? **Here are some tips for trouble-shooting.**

What if, as an author, you really don’t feel confident about the translator? And what if as a translator, you feel that the author is trying to take too much control? These problems do occur.

Short of knowing all the languages into which their work is translated, an author can only gain full reassurance that a translator is fully competent once the book is published and is well received. But the author does need to let the translator do their job and to accept that they know their own language. One of my colleagues puts it like this: “Authors have to accept that translation is an imperfect art – not everything can be transferred into a foreign language, as most authors know. So the translation is a new work, and the translator is its co-author. Ultimately the translator should have the last word, because she’s better placed to look at the translation from the point of view of the most important people in the entire process – the readers. Most authors I have worked with have accepted the final judgement of the translator, and also that the translated text is a new text written in my language, that it is my text, that it is not and can’t ever be a word-for-word carbon copy of the original.”

If you anticipate difficulties, it’s best to try to resolve them at the very start of the project. This is the publisher’s responsibility – if the author has doubts about the translator, they should talk to the editor about their choice. If the translator has concerns, they too can ask the editor to be their intermediary. Rest assured that it’s not usually necessary.

**Thinking ahead for potentially difficult situations**

Sometimes a translator is presented with a particular linguistic challenge, when an author has used different kinds of language – such as a regional dialect, slang, or elements of made-up language, or dialogue in a second language that their readers know (an example I came across recently was a Belarusian novel where some of the characters spoke Russian, which was salient to the story). The author knows that his or her original readers will see the point and understand their intention, but the translator might have to find a creative solution that involves moving away from the meaning of the original text, or making a compromise. In this sort of case, it’s a good idea for the translator to decide on a strategy at the start of the work, and to put it to the author, just to make sure they’re happy with it. Or modify that strategy if they’re not.

One of my colleagues had a difficult experience with an author whose novel involved some linguistic complications of this kind. This translator is especially careful to establish good relationships with his authors. “It has always been my strategy to work with authors,” he told me, “as I want to be confident that they’re happy with the finished product, and also to be in a position to counteract any future criticism with the claim that everything has been seen and approved by the author. In general this has worked well for me, and I haven’t had any conflict with anyone. My methodology, agreed informally with the author in advance (and ideally agreed in writing via email) is to send them a few chapters at a time, asking them to send me their comments within a reasonable time frame. Usually they reply with a few questions and remarks, point out the occasional error, and then I make revisions.”

So far, so good – that sounds like the right approach. But then he told me:

“However, I once encountered an author who had a different understanding of translation from my own. She wished to be intimately involved in the translation process, and have the right to check everything. In other words, to control the translation process, or at least that’s how it felt to me… I realized that I should have had a strategy worked out and agreed in advance. I decided that next time I worked with a writer I didn’t know, I’d consider asking their previous translators about their experience, and before the contracts were signed, I’d discuss with the publisher (the editor) the extent of the author’s right to interfere in the translation process and make changes to my work.”

That sounds quite drastic, and it’s an unusual, extreme example, but in some cases it makes sense for both author and translator to think ahead and see things from each other’s point of view from the outset. And best of all, make contact early on, if only by email, talk, show that you’re both aiming for the best result and that you’re a team.

One of the publishers with whom I regularly work once said how good it is when a team builds around an author whom he is publishing in translation – a good agent, a good translator, a good editor and a good publisher – and then that team goes on to produce a string of great books and to share wonderful careers.

I should add that although I’ve tried to find examples for you from a range of countries by asking authors and translators to tell me about their experience, some of the processes involved in publishing vary from place to place, and so some of my advice may not be applicable. As translators, you’re likely know what happens in your own country, how pitching to publishers works, what stages are typically involved in editing and so on. So if you have established contact with your author, you can help them to understand how things are done in your country.

**Thirdly, how can an author and a translator work together to promote their joint publication?**

I think there is a lot that a translator can do to help promote and market the book he or she has translated.

Translators can help their authors by using social media to promote them. Olga Tokarczuk’s translators have been particularly active, with not just the Okna Facebook page, but an “Olga Tokarczuk in English” page. Translators can take part in interviews and podcasts or write blogs, for journals and sites dedicated to translated work, and – even better – just to literature in general. Apart from helping to sell books, it’s enjoyable, it’s career-building, and best of all, it makes translated literature into a mainstream art. In the English-language countries, where there is such huge competition on the book market, people tend to think of translated literature as secondary to English-language literature, but the more visible and vocal translators become, the more “normal” and mainstream foreign literature will be.

When I’m negotiating contracts, I tell the publisher that I’ll be doing everything I can to help market the book – I call it my “value-added”, a reason why they should pay me a royalty. But I also do it because I care about the author and the success of “our” book. I don’t just try to help with the promotion events, but I’ll suggest well-known people to write cover blurbs or puff quotes, or compile lists of potential reviewers or people well placed to comment on the book. I once sent a book, out of the blue, to a famous writer, with a hand-written letter to tell him the author is a fan of his work. There was no expectation or request, but, a few months later, he chose our book as his Book of the Year in an influential newspaper. If I hadn’t sent it to him, he’d never have known it existed. Of course he could rightfully have ignored my letter, or not liked the book, but it was worth the risk – I had nothing to lose. Also it was fun – I liked having the excuse to write to him, and still remember the nervous excitement of sending off the book, wondering what he’d think.

The chances are, that if there is a cultural institute representing the author’s country in the translator’s country, the translator knows the people there. For instance, there’s a Polish Cultural Institute in Bucharest, among other cities, and a Cervantes institute in Belgrade, among lots of other cities. These cultural institutes exist to promote their country’s arts, including literature, so a translator is in a good position to hook their publisher up with the relevant institute as a source of funding and advertising for a promotional event for their book.

Translators are often aware of the literary festivals organized in their own country too. If their publisher is too small to have a dedicated publicist whose job it is to make suggestions to festival organizers, the translator could try to do that. The translator may have good ideas for presenters well-suited to interview the author.

Translators can also take part in these events; sometimes they need to act as interpreter for their author, and sometimes they appear alongside the author in their own right, as, essentially, the co-author of the book in translation. As Olga Tokarczuk said in the quote I read at the start, they make a new and special contribution, giving her work a new autonomy.

I’d like to think that authors are willing to invest some time in promoting their book in translation. Most authors enjoy the opportunity to travel; though of course it’s work, it’s not a holiday, and it can be quite demanding - it often means several days away from home for one small fee. Quite often, the translated book comes out several years after the original, and the author has moved on; “I can’t remember it now,” they tell me. Here the translator can play a role, as it’s fresher in their experience.

If they have got to know each other, translators and authors can suggest creative events, such as translation duels: two translators translate the same piece of text without consulting each other, and then, in the presence of the author, a moderator compares the texts and discusses their choices with them. No one ever forgets taking part in a translation duel, or watching one either. It’s great fun, audiences love it, and it sells books. Everyone comes away surprised at what translation actually involves.

Some books are ideal for multimedia presentations, with photographs, music and extracts from the book read by me and the author – I did this effectively with Polish novelist Jacek Dehnel, who had written a novel based on his grandmother’s life, in which he mentioned that all the family photos had been burned by Red Army soldiers; of course, after it came out in Poland, a distant relative had surfaced who had copies of the lost photographs. So for our London event we showed them. and played his grandmother’s favourite pieces of music, mentioned in the book, to illustrate our readings. We sold several box loads of the book at that event – every copy the publicist had brought.

In all cases where a translator takes part in promoting a particular book, he or she should be paid a fee for participating, whether that means speaking about their work, interpreting for the author, or translating promotional essays commissioned from the author for publication in the press. Of course there’s no obligation to do any of these things – some people hate performing in public. As Jacek Dehnel told me: “I’ve had cases of translators who didn’t want to take part in the promotional events at all, because they were shy and found it awkward, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But usually these events have been very successful, and I love it if the translators take part too ― most of them give a lot of themselves.”

Going abroad to promote your work can also be an adventure. Many of my authors have stayed with me when they’ve come to London to promote their work, and we’ve taken the opportunity to go on a trip and have some fun. It’s great to spend time together, talk about what they’re working on now, plan for the future, get to know how they think and how they look at things. Sometimes I see my jokes or ideas appearing in their next book, and then I know we really are working together.

**And finally, the perfect relationship**

I’m going to finish off with one of my favourite stories about a fruitful cooperation between author and translator. It comes from Roland Glasser, who translates from French into English. He translated *Tram 83*, a novel by the Francophone Congolese author, Fiston Mwanza Mujila. It’s set in a seedy nightclub in a rebel-held part of a city in a central African country that’s in the middle of a revolution, and it’s about the edgy friendship between an idealistic writer and a cynical wheeler-dealer, each of whom takes a different approach to their strange and dangerous environment. It’s full of very specific slang and must have been very hard to translate.

In *Asymptote*, a translation journal, Roland wrote about the first evening he ever spent with the author, at a restaurant serving Congolese food in a district of northern Paris.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here’s how he how he tells the story:

“I had first read *Tram 83* four months previously, and within a few pages I was almost physiologically transported. I could feel the sweat coursing down my back, and smell the fetid stink of bodies, beer, diverse bodily fluids, garbage, and grilled dog meat. It was pure literary orgasm, engendering a raving, expletive-laden book report for Will Evans of Deep Vellum Publishing in Dallas, who bought it. Two months later, I turned myself inside out, at some cost to my sanity and personal relationships, to craft a two-chapter sample securing me the right and privilege of rendering Fiston's ‘jazz novel’ into English. Now, as I stroll with Fiston toward the restaurant, the book has become a critical success in France, garnering several major prize nominations and a full-page cover spread in Le Monde des Livres. Cometh the hour, cometh the man, but I have yet to translate another word.”

So at this stage, Roland had championed a great book, convinced the publisher, secured the translation commission, and only then had the book become a success in its own language. He goes on to say what he gained from seeking out and meeting the author before starting on his translation, and how the rapport they established on a night out in Paris was the first step to producing a joint book that was a huge success for both of them.

That book took both author and translator on their first trip to the United States, for a madcap promotional tour that took them across the country from New York via Texas, to Seattle and California. Afterwards, Roland did the most incredible interview with Fiston Mwanza Mujila, published in the *White Review*, January 2016.[[3]](#footnote-3) It’s one of the most exciting, fruitful and life-enhancing author and translator collaborations I have ever heard about, the perfect illustration of the sort of relationship I’m trying to encourage you to have in your careers. I’ll finish by reading you some highlights, but do look it up if you can.

Roland asked Fiston how he felt about the many questions he asked about the text, and here’s some of his reply:

“Well, in the beginning I said to myself: ‘This guy is crazy! Who does he think he is, asking me a thousand questions? What have I done to him?! Does he think I’m going to translate everything for him?!’ That was my first impression, but then I realised that it’s more reassuring to have a translator who asks lots of questions, rather than having a translator who doesn’t ask any at all, or very few, and that I would feel uneasy with a translator who feels they understand my text completely, who thinks they understand everything I say… I prefer a translator who asks me questions because I know where I draw my texts from, I know where and how my texts are born. They are not born just like that, on the main square; they come from far away, from my internal village, and not just the Congo, but from deep within myself, from discoveries that reflect several imaginary worlds. When a translator doesn’t ask me any questions, I tell myself that I should be worried. So it was a pleasure for me to be asked these questions, and to answer them, to make myself available. Over time, I realised that it was important, not just for me but for the people who will read the text in English. It was important, I think, to provide a little bit of guidance regarding certain words.

“When you were asking your questions – I knew that it was important to mention certain things, even apparently trivial things, but which might prove to be important, not just for yourself, not just for *TRAM 83*, but for other texts of mine, because beyond this particular translation project, I would really like it that if I write other texts, that you, Roland, translate them into English. To have found a translator for this language, and not change translators as one would pairs of shoes.

“That really touches me, that you would want that. And it’s true that you having answered all these questions, as well as the fact that after doing this tour together, and having heard you talk a lot about certain subjects, I understand much more about you and your literary work, so there will surely be references in things you write in the future that will be familiar to me. I’ll get the hidden references and allusions without needing to ask you the same questions again.”

Then Roland asked what it was like for Fiston to perform readings from his book on tour with his translator. Here’s part of their conversation:

FMM: “It’s interesting to work with my translator, to do these performances with you, Roland, because it’s a process of humility, to hear my text read by someone else, to accept that, and to share this pleasure with you on stage, this pleasure of speaking the words, of speaking the text. This has truly been a very beautiful experience for me. It really pleases me to see the way you shift from translator to a… I won’t say actor because what we’ve been doing isn’t acting…”

RG: “I too got a lot out of these collaborative moments on stage with you; because while it is true that the translation itself was somehow a kind of collaboration, it was a discrete collaboration, a remote collaboration – except, of course, those moments where we discussed certain questions that I had. But it was quite something to find ourselves actually creating this third thing together. First there was your French text, and then there was my English text, which was also your text, and then there was this third thing composed of both elements.”

FMM: “Yes, I found that when we got here and began our tour, I had to break this author/translator relationship, because it was a relationship where we discussed the words and phrases you didn’t understand; but here we switched into another relationship, one that was more collaborative, but also pleasurable, because we enjoyed ourselves.”

So here is the perfect example of a great friendship born out of literature, and one that has a future. When I asked him about it the other day, Roland summed it up nicely: “Basically it all boils down to food + lots of beer”.

If you’re still with me, thank you for listening.

1. The abridged version of this essay was translated by Jennifer Croft and published in *Korean Literature Now*, June 2019. <https://koreanliteraturenow.com/essay/musings/olga-tokarczuk-musings-how-translators-are-saving-world>

The full text in Polish was published in the June 2019 issue of *Książki* magazine, and recently within a book of essays: Olga Tokarczuk, “Praca Hermesa, czyli jak tłumacze codziennie ratują świat” in *Czuły narrator*, Wydawnictwo Literackie 2020, pp. 73-92. [IF POSSIBLE, PLEASE TRANSLATE DIRECT FROM POLISH]

The quotations above are on pp 86-87:

Ostatnio wiele razy stawałam ramię w ramię z tłumaczką czy tłumaczem, kiedy prezentowałam swoje książki wydane w innych krajach.

Trudno mi wyrazić to poczucie ulgi, jakie przychodzi, gdy można z kimś dzielić własne autorstwo. Cieszyłam się, że mogę choć częściowo pozbyć się odpowiedzialności za tekst, dotąd wyłącznie mojej, na dobre i na złe. [...] Czułam prawdziwą przyjemność, że nie wszystkie pytania będą skierowane do mnie i że w tym przedmiocie złożonym z zadrukowanych kartek nie wszystko do mnie należy. Myślę, że wielu piszących podziela ze mną to uczucie ulgi.

Najbardziej zdumiewające okazało się jednak to, że obecność tłumaczy otwierała sfery dla mnie niepojęte i że wdawali się, on czy ona, już niezależnie ode mnie, w dyskusje dotyczące spraw dla mnie nie do końca zrozumiałych, obcych, a nawet tajemniczych. Oto tekst uwalniał się ode mnie, czy może to ja odfruwałam od niego. Nabierał jakiejś autonomii, jak zbuntowany nastolatek, który postanowił, że urwie się z domu na Przystanek Woodstock. Tłumaczka pewnie brała go w swoje ręce, pokazywała światu z innych stron, stała za nim murem, ręczyła zań. Co za radość! Tłumacze uwalniają nas, piszących, od głębokiej i wpisanej w ten zawód samotności, [...]. Tłumacze przychodzą do nas z zewnątrz i mówią: ja też tam byłam, szłam po twoich śladach, a teraz razem przekroczymy granicę. Tu tłumacz dosłownie staje się Hermesem — bierze mnie za rękę i przeprowadza przez granicę państwa, języka, kultury. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/fiston-mwanza-mujila-tram-83/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-fiston-mwanza-mujila/>

NB FOR TRANSLATION INTO FRENCH, PLEASE CONSULT WITH ROLAND GLASSERAND FISTON MWANZA MUJILA [↑](#footnote-ref-3)