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As told to Greta Rainbow, 2465 words.

Tags: Writing, Family, Collaboration, Success, Inspiration, Focus.

On challenging preconceived notions

You published your novel *The Extinction of Irena Rey* in March [2024]. As an acclaimed literary translator, you're not unfamiliar with being interviewed by the book sections of newspapers. But how is the press run now that you're in the author role?

It's been really nice. I'm grateful to my publicist in particular who has been holding my hand throughout this entire process. I'm going to keep writing books so I can continue having her send me a schedule every day with everything I'm supposed to do. I published what I thought was a novel before, *Homesick*, which is called a memoir in the U.S. It was with Unnamed Press, a small press in L.A., and I did a tour but I didn't do as much publicity and marketing.

As Olga Tokarczuk's translator, for a long time I was desperately trying to get people to read her. And then we won the Booker and she won the Nobel Prize, and all of a sudden we were in the spotlight. I always hated public speaking and things like that but I got a little bit used to it.

What do you think about the marketing of a memoir versus a novel?

I've never resolved that question. I mostly read novels and I haven't really read that much memoir, so I was surprised to learn that I might have written one. I think there's a lot of discomfort, maybe specifically in the US, around defining what is strictly true about someone's life and there's a push to force them to acknowledge that truth or untruth. In other places I translate from, like Argentina, it's totally fine to write the classic semi-autobiographical novel. And I don't think people call into question your authenticity just because you say that it's a novel. I think readers should call anything anything, and probably authors should get to choose how they label their own book.

I recently read *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* by Coco Mellors, and in it a character says, "I don't like novels, I like books."

I mean, whatever works. My preference is for breaking down those kinds of boundaries. I like prose poetry, I like multimedia and experimental works. And that's kind of the direction that literature is heading in.

***The Extinction of Irena Rey* is definitely blending the real and the imagined. It's about a famous Polish author and her translators, told from the perspective of one of them and "translated" by her fictional colleague. And it's in this very surreal woodland setting. What was your research and development process like?**

I went to the Białowieża Forest in 2017, which is when the book is set. I had heard about what was happening in the forest, which was that the Polish government had started logging in the national park and there was widespread concern that habitats were being destroyed in a way that had never really happened before. The trees themselves were being taken out of the forest and what was being planted in their stead was just oaks, which is a Polish national symbol but not historically or naturally the predominant tree in the forest. So there was just a lot going on, and I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

I was in the reserve part of the park, talking to a park worker who mentioned in passing this fungus that was growing on a diseased tree. And I thought the look of the fungus was so striking. It looked like a horse's hoof, it was huge and hard, like a disembodied thing from an animal that was sort of floating on a

tree. And he told me this whole story about *amadou*, which was for a very long time the title of my novel. And I got really, really fascinated by it, in itself and as a metaphor for translation. I saw both the incredible power of translation to regenerate a cultural ecosystem, and the potentially darker side of translation that involves erasure and destruction along the way to that regeneration. Obviously, all of my work as a translator played into that, and my getting to know other translators of Olga. But it was really the image of this fascinating little creature that I wanted to have as the underpinning of the whole book.

That does feel like the distillation of the essence of the story, which it takes time to get to. I was so distracted by the characters before I started to see the bigger picture. They could be a whole sitcom cast.

Definitely some of the inspiration comes from TV. Alexis is kind of based on Alexis Rose from *Schitt's Creek*. They do all represent some version of things I've thought about translation at some point over the course of my career. The two main heroines of the book, Alexis and Emelia, represent the stereotypical opposite poles of translation philosophy. Emi is super faithful, obsessively so. Alexis, who is of course the U.S. translator, is a little bit more... I mean the nice way of saying it would be that she's a "freer" translator and potentially a criticism that could be leveled at her is that she is arrogant and feels like she has every right to change whatever she wants. I don't know any translator who is as extreme as either of them. When I started out as a translator, I was probably closer to Emi: very devoted, a bit more cautious. Now I wrestle with the temptation, especially with writers I've been working with for longer, to buy into the idea that this is a collaboration maybe a bit too much. I find myself wanting to rewrite certain things or even be tempted to make certain cuts. Writing Alexis was probably a way of working that out in my mind and trying to restrain myself a little bit more. Some of the other characters I wrote purely because I thought they'd be a great person to have around in this situation. Freddy the Swedish translator is straight out of a sitcom. Sorry, I had to sacrifice the Swedish language for the sake of humor.

Did you come out on the other side of the writing feeling like your thoughts about translation had been clarified in some way?

I hope to keep consistently reflecting on my own cultural preconceived notions about style.

What do you think about the novel as a format for ideas? You could have written a long essay about translation. What does fiction allow you to do that nonfiction does not?

The goal is to reach a wider readership. If I were to write a long essay or a book to be published by an academic press, I would just be preaching to the choir. What would be the point? What I want to do is advocate on behalf of translator visibility, but also visibility for the original language and for collaboration in general. These are goals that I see as being important in cultural and environmental terms. I don't want to work hard for years to publish something for a dozen people who I already know and who already agree with me.

The fictional plot allows the reader to inhabit some of these questions about translation philosophy, to see them getting dramatized to the absurd extreme. I decided to make it a structural part of the book, too, to have the story be told supposedly by Emi in Polish, which is not her native language, and then translated into English by her arch nemesis. Because the translator is constantly interjecting through the footnotes, the reader is forced to always question what they're hearing. When you are reading a book that's been translated, every single word that you're reading was chosen and written not by the author whose name is on the cover, but by the translator. Really thoughtful and wonderful readers of a lot of international literature might not have stopped to reflect on that particular question before.

You have been an advocate for putting translators' names on the covers of books, and your refusal to take on a translation project without the promise of adequate credit has inspired thousands of others. You wrote an open letter addressing this in 2021; how does it feel a few years on?

I definitely have seen a shift in publishing towards crediting the translator more. I don't know if it impacted my own career hugely, but I just feel like the field of translation is very clearly expanding in really healthy ways. There are some editors who are keeping up with all of these shifts, and the remaining thing we need to do is to help bring on the others who are not yet on board. Then finally we might reach a really wonderful place where international literature is more commonly mixed with U.S. literature. I want true diversity in literature, like biodiversity in a forest, as well as a celebration of difference formally. That would be so beneficial to readers, future writers, and society at large.

What is your approach to collaboration and your opinion about being on different ends of it?

My editor, Daniel Loedel, who's an amazing novelist himself, pushed me hard between the draft of *Irena Rey* that he bought and the next, more polished one. I completely overhauled a lot of elements of the plot and the timeline. I was forced to think in a way I don't think I've ever done. I spent a month deeply rethinking, and that was really hard. I had newborn twins at the time. But it was all so magical and rewarding once it felt like things were falling into place. That is the kind of editing collaboration that you cannot have when you are the translator—at least not in a traditional publication process—because you wouldn't rethink how a character is depicted, or whether or not this scene should occur in this place. In general, you don't even get asked to make cuts, even when you can see that the editor might prefer that the book be a little bit shorter, which seems like it's often the case.

There's also a flip side. I didn't have a buddy to work with, that other team member or partner in crime.

I think that resulted in me feeling more dependent on the characters themselves. Obviously I recognized that they were fictional! I wrote my first draft when I was at a residency in Switzerland, in the middle of nowhere and mostly not talking to other human beings because it was the fall of 2020. That allowed me to immerse myself in the world and have weird conversations with my characters, which made it feel collaborative even though it was just *me* collaborating with *me*.

Did suddenly becoming a person with twins impact your writing?

I was in this immersive writing state and then I did the opposite, where I couldn't write for more than three minutes without somebody screaming. The main concern that came between the first and second drafts was that there were whole sections that could only be clear to me what was going on, because I was so *in it*. Being a person with a three-minute time limit forced me to clarify a lot of things about the work to myself and hopefully to other people. The other impact of my twins is that I probably won't write another book for a few years.

What does balance look like for you?

I am obsessed with my children and it feels like nobody wants to hear that when I'm speaking in professional contexts. But I find my kids so fascinating. Conveniently for me, as someone who's really interested in language, they're at this point where they're experimenting not just with words but grammar. You can actually see the wheels turning. And that's actually all I care about at the moment. I'm not doing as many translations. I also didn't have an academic job in the past, which meant that I had to earn money as a freelancer, which means working triply hard to get commissions outside of doing the assignment itself. I do have a translation coming out in the fall, *The Plains* by Federico Falco, an experimental novel about grief that I'm really excited about.

Some people want to pretend that their work is the only thing in their life, and I so appreciate you acknowledging that it's not the case. What is your ideal work setup, with kids or without?

I do really need isolation. I'm so jealous of my husband. You could literally put him on the ground outside and he would be perfectly productive, would have no idea that cars were driving by. I need an assurance that I won't be interrupted. If it's just a room, that's fine as long as I can close the door. That's why I love residencies. I mean, I love them for other reasons. I've made really great friends, met artists that I wouldn't have otherwise. But the ideal space would be this luxury treehouse, at the Jan Michalski Foundation. That's literally the ideal for most people, I would think. Anything that has a little bit of access to nature so that you can take a walk when you need a break.

You're married to another translator, right? The dynamic is very interesting to me as a writer dating another writer.

I never dated writers and I used to swear I never would date a writer. Then my husband came along. I think translators are nicer people than writers in the sense that they're not quite so precious about their egos and not quite so competitive. That's been my experience, anyway.

I translate from Polish and he translates mostly Ukrainian writers from Russia. They're close enough that we can ask each other questions. I've studied Russian, he studied Polish, we've both studied Ukrainian. But our preferences in terms of what we translate and what we read are different. I like contemporary women's prose, especially fiction, and he's interested in formal poetry above all else and early-20th-century writers. It never feels suffocating. We live our own creative lives, then eventually give each other something to read.

Jennifer Croft recommends five works of translated literature:

Ramifications by Daniel Saldaña Paris, translated by Christina MacSweeney

Strange Beasts of China by Yan Ge, translated by Jeremy Tiang

Grey Bees by Andrey Kurkov, translated by Boris Dralyuk

The Red Book of Farewells by Pirkko Saisio, translated by Mia Spangenberg

Love in the Big City by Sang Young Park, translated by Anton Hur

Name


Jennifer Croft


Vocation


writer, translator

Fact

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