

## HUMOR &amp; INSPIRATION

# Stuck at 3%: Why Can't We Have More Literature in English Translation?

Writer and translator asks and addresses important concerns for literary translation



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*Welcome to our weekly column offering perspectives on lit mag publishing, with contributions from readers, writers and editors around the world.*

Literary translation is the locus of the heat and innovation publishing today and the progressive, global conscience of the industry. Dynamic, feminist, diverse, politically engaged, and collaborative by nature, the literary translation community, at least my corner of it through my work with magazines and groups like [ALTA](#), [PEN America](#), and [ELTNA](#), is full of smart, knowledgeable, dedicated, and stubbornly optimistic word-warriors, many of them women.

Some have started their own independent presses, magazines, and collaborative media projects. The work we are doing together to break the 3% spell (the percentage of books published annually in translation from languages other than English) is as much social and ethical as it is literary; it involves initiating new strategies, presses, and magazine projects. This foment is despite a gloomy landscape: translation continues to be the most undercapitalized, misunderstood, and oppressed corner of publishing. Why?

One reason is the artificially low profile of translators everywhere. Our names are often absent from many book covers, book reviews and other references to our work, stealing

from us the bargaining power that comes with visibility, lowering the profile of our art, and denying the reading public its right to know whose words they are reading. We are invisible in film credits as happened to [Ann Goldstein in the recent movie based on her translation of \*The Lost Daughter\*](#) by Elena Ferrante.

This isn't just U.S. phenomenon, either. On a recent trip to Mexico, I was appalled to see that the majority of titles translated from English on offer at Librerías Gandhi show no translator on the cover, as if Quentin Tarantino had penned his "Meditations" in perfect Castellano. (Once you've seen it, you can't stop seeing it). Writer-translator [Jennifer Croft](#) wrote eloquently about this in her seminal [2021 article in the Guardian](#). Still, the publishing industry's a big ship that changes course ever-so-slowly; it carries a supercargo of antediluvian prejudices about translation itself and readers' willingness to embrace books in translation as "authentic."

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Let's do the numbers. While since the 3% figure has barely budged since the 70s, there has been a deluge of translations from English into other languages. [CEATL reports](#) that it reaches as high as 50% in Italy and up to a mind-boggling 80% of all books published in some smaller countries. This imbalance is mirrored in Hollywood, where major studios a decade ago were already earning a whopping [70% of film revenue in foreign markets](#), despite protectionist limits placed on the import of English-language productions in countries like France and China. In the USA no official trade limits are in place to prohibit foreign productions' entry into our electronic entertainment market, yet [only 3.5% of media presented annually in U.S theaters and streaming services is from foreign countries](#), a figure analogous to that of works in translation. What's happening?

The dominance of anglophone culture around the world reflects the persistence of a colonial mentality that, in turn, drives the industrial cultural complex. The asymmetry in

whose stories are shared across borders is both cause and symptom of the larger picture of social and economic domination, which produces a literary ecosystem that privileges anglophone narratives while tattooing American popular culture on the global consciousness. This hurts creators around the globe and deprives English-speakers of the stories that could inform their perception of our planetary reality. Frankly, it depresses me.

My meditation mentor tells me that we suffer when our thoughts don't match the reality we face. Literary translators are painfully familiar with this tension. We suffer the cognitive dissonance of knowing that the works we champion are both important and will encounter a wall of resistance from publishers who explain their position with puzzling market "realities" that remain undefended by data or analysis.

A brief aside for the uninitiated: There are three main routes by which literary works come to be published translation: 1) the publisher hires their go-to person to translate the work because it's a classic or it's hot for some other reason (penned by a famous person, centering a bleeding-edge topic); 2) an agent or publisher arranges the deal, sometimes at one of the big book fairs, and the rights purchaser hires a translator; 3) a freelance translator takes on an author's work and, like a literary Joan of Arc, prepares samples, query letters, and shops the manuscript to potential publishers, all on spec.

Lit mags, both those for general readerships and those that single-mindedly focus on literature in translation, play a crucial role in visiblizing freelance translators and their authors. Many are based at universities that subsidize them to some extent, and they are staffed by respected experts who are often translators themselves. Such bona fides make these magazines credibility filters and potential launching pads for works seeking book deals.

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High-quality magazines completely dedicated to works in translation include [World Literature Today](#) (Univ. of Oklahoma), called one of the “best edited and most informative literary publications” in the world by the Nobel Prize Committee. WLT’s offspring at the same institution, [Latin American Literature Today](#), focuses exclusively on literature from what Carlos Fuentes called “The Territory of La Mancha.” WLT, LALT, and sister publication [Chinese Literature Today](#) (CLT) in addition to debuting many writers in English also offer critical writing to explain why they are important.

The journal of [Two Lines Press](#) at the Center for the Art of Translation in San Francisco, is a prestige platform, and [Metamorphoses](#) at Smith College won my heart forever by publishing an Arab World double Issue in the midst of the Bush-era surge in the Iraq War.

[The Short Story Project](#), an international project based in Tel Aviv highlights short fiction from multiple languages translated into English and Hebrew. [The Buenos Aires Review](#), a bilingual journal founded by translators “presents the best and latest work by emerging and established writers from the Americas, in both Spanish and English.” [Asymptote](#), the winner of the 2015 London Book Fair's International Literary Translation Initiative Award, is a hive of production. [The Shanghai Literary Review](#) and [Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas](#) are indispensable sources and [Reading in Translation](#) at Oberlin College, where I am on the Board of Editors, fills the unique role of publishing translators’ reviews of work in translation.

Recently, in response to an essay by [Open Letter Books](#) Editor Chad Post entitled “[Will Translated Fiction Ever Really Break Through?](#)”, Editor [Stiliana Milkova](#) initiated a new feature entitled “Translators on Books that Should be Translated,” a clear invitation.

Many of the lit mags noted above are paying markets and offer a stellar editorial experience to contributors. For more lit mags that are explicitly interested in work in translation, [consult PEN’s list](#), which really should be much, much longer.

Publication in these fine journals, however, is far from a guarantee that trade book publishers or mainstream literary magazines will sit up and take notice. Translators receive

rejections that cite cliché reasons that works that have won awards and critical acclaim in their national markets cannot see the light of day in English. Here are a few of the bromides we hear with distressing regularity:

1. **“The market for literary translation is very limited.”** This is the Big But, the most common shoulder shrug, a self-fulfilling truism, the prologue to “no.” Call me a knucklehead, but I fail to understand why a great story in translation is any less marketable than a great story told originally in English. I don’t believe that readers inherently distrust translated literature or see it as unattractive per se. Has there ever been a year when we tested this “limit” by raising the quota of books in translation published to 5% to see what happened? No? Then how could we possibly know with authority that the market will not bear more translation? Madison Avenue, so clever at generating eager markets for vast quantities of crap no one needs, remains clueless about how to sell literature in translation.
2. **“I am not convinced the writer’s voice/style will communicate to readers”** is a close cousin to the popular “I don’t think the story is relatable for our audience”, a head-scratching submission response received by writer-poet-translator [Yilin Wang](#). It’s not hard to catch a whiff of the rank smell of racism in this “reason,” as well as a deeply-embedded lack of confidence in readers. Not surprisingly, voice and style vary from country to country and it is the professional translator’s job to bridge whatever comprehension gap may exist with grace, a feat we regularly accomplish without erasing our authors’ voices. In a content-driven world, why are publishers so uncurious about the diversity of great stories out there? And, perhaps more importantly, why do they esteem English-language readers so little that they assume that new and challenging work will meet with their incomprehension? But the best story about “unrelatability” comes to me from translator [Antonia Lloyd-Jones](#) who writes that she was repeatedly told by editors that [Olga Tokarczuk](#) was “too experimental.” After winning the Nobel Prize, however, Lloyd-Jones’s submissions of Tokarczuk’s work were suddenly greeted with “Wow, she’s so *experimental*!” Translators are experts in our specialties, so when we say an author is important, editors might try believing us.
3. **“Short story collections don’t sell.”** This old saw is among the most damaging since breakthrough works for foreign authors are often collections, not door-stoppers. Also,

it's usually short fiction that appears first in lit mags. Why this resistance to brevity in a world that promotes online content based on how few minutes it will take to read? Furthermore, literally everyone I know loves short stories and novellas. Maybe publishers fear being unable to make big bucks from electronic rights, and yet there are [top Netflix and Amazon movies and TV series adapted from slender works](#), among them "Eyes Wide Shut," "Yuma," "Brokeback Mountain," and "The Handmaid's Tale."

4. **"No one here knows who [insert name of crucial historical figure or author] is."** This is the Ignorance Plea, a circular argument. As a judge in Nassau County, Long Island once admonished me as I fought a ticket in a traffic court that closely resembled a potting shed: "Ignorance of the law is no defense." Likewise, editors' ignorance of world culture and history *and their false perception that readers are just like them* makes for a lousy defense. If Mexicans know about Shakespeare, shouldn't English-language readers know about Sor Juana?
5. **"We already published a [insert nationality here] author."** This infuriating "reason" for a rejection received by the award-winning translator from the Turkish [Aron Aji](#) requires no comment. After all, all Turkish writers are alike, right? (eye-roll)
6. **"It doesn't quite speak to the present moment for me."** [Jenny Bhatt](#) was puzzled by this assessment. "I've heard it with original English works and accepted it somewhat (not entirely)," she says. "But, with translations, isn't one of the major benefits that it speaks to a moment other than the present western-centric one? Whose 'present moment' exactly, I wanted to ask but didn't." For many book and magazine publishers, it seems, the "present moment" is a shrinking piece of real estate on the space-time continuum and code for "my present moment, now." In a world spinning ever faster, a week ago and an ocean away is deemed way too late and too far.

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There are, of course, good reasons for turning down works in translation, for example, “We don’t have the budget to pay you.” This is an objective concern when more people are splitting the pie and one we need to discuss among ourselves, with our authors, and with publishers at forums like [AWP](#)’s annual conference. Translators should not have to starve just to see their work in print. That said, a smaller guarantee for a larger slice of royalties, a piece of the electronic media rights pie, especially if the publisher promises a well-considered marketing plan, could be a good start. Literary translators and publishers must collaborate more creatively on everything, starting with contracts. [The Authors’ Guild](#) is indispensable as a resource for contract review and I find that the annual membership is more than justified by free access to brilliant contract lawyers. (If you’re not a member, become one now.)

It would be so much better, however, if the baseline deals were better written to begin with. Another good reason to reject a work in translation is “As presented, it simply fails to appeal to me.” There are many reasons this may be the case: the query letter may have failed to make a convincing argument; the acquisitions editor perhaps loved the query, but the editorial board was unimpressed; the translation might be subpar; the work may not suit the publisher’s profile as much as the translator hoped it would. In short, there are plenty of legit reasons to say “no” to any proposal. Why depend on clichés?

The dolorous and static 3% figure is not only the fault of anglophone publishers: responsibility also lies with foreign publishers who fail to promote their literary authors skillfully in the global marketplace, showing a lack of imagination when it comes to reaching out to lit mags to generate enthusiasm for their authors. Recently an agent dismissed my suggestion to promote the sale of rights to a new novel by an award-winning author that I see as a sure-fire classic. It was, he said, “conflict literature” and he was “sure” that publishers in the US and UK weren’t interested in that “genre.”

This echoes Jenny Bhatt’s point: in countries whose “present moment” is scarred by decades of violence, what are novelists supposed to write about? Shouldn’t English-language readers hear about that “present moment,” too, especially since it is partly shaped by our geopolitics? Is “conflict literature” really a legitimate genre anyway? Agents and

publishers in foreign countries often fail to estimate the appetite for their authors' works, promoting titles or not based on their own universe of false assumptions. What if they tested interest in their authors' output by engaging translators to translate fragments for submission to lit mags?

Indie publishers, a growing array of lit mags dedicated to literary translation, increasing numbers of trade journals interested in printing world lit, and a wide array of new media projects led by translators themselves are raising the profile of literary translation in the United States. But we still languish at 3%. What is needed is positive action by those with power. What if the most prestigious English-language literary magazines took a public pledge to raise the amount of work in translation they publish to at least 5%? What if they promised to include (or even to consider) the same percentage of books in translation for their year-end "best" lists? What if newspapers and magazines adopted as *de rigueur* crediting translators in their reviews and stopped quoting books in translation without mentioning the person who wrote the words? Those would be meaningful acts. New reading tastes and markets can be developed but only if we try.

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The daily reality of the coming generations of global citizens is going to become increasingly diverse. Which narratives make it to publication and which remain invisible to readers is a major factor in how and whether people will learn to understand those who are like them and those who are different. When readers don't have a chance to draw parallels between their own needs, dreams, and realities and those of people elsewhere, they are blinded to ways of seeing that are distinct from their own. A literary monovision ill-equips us to develop the empathy, openness, knowledge, and interpretive skills that a global reality requires.

Members of the translation community must boldly and consistently push back on book



and magazine publishers for failing to print more literature in translation. Translators must consistently demand better deals and that publishers print our names are on covers and wherever our works and words are cited. Neither translators nor the reading public should accept the present level of bias, laziness, creative erasure, and lack of rigor. Award-winning translator [Christina MacSweeney](#) is more diplomatic than me on this point: “Doubtless there are prejudices but there must also be concern about moving into an area where the publisher has little knowledge or expertise,” she says. “A little education might help.” Many lit mags are providing this education; publishers need only attend class and take notes.

The only way we will move the needle past 3% is if the literary community as a whole stands in solidarity with translators and develops a consciousness about the vital importance of our work. Translators must continue engaging in difficult conversations with each other, agree on certain standards, and insist on them in the marketplace. We must try, not just because we ourselves want to be seen but because others are invisible and it is the ethical thing to do.

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**Gary Gach** 3 hr ago ❤️ Liked by D. P. Snyder

Great questions and exposure in general. Much for me to digest, ruminate upon, understand, and, hopefully – as a literary translator since the 1970s – to act upon. Here's a backgrounder I wrote in 2008 adding some historical continuity to the conversation

<https://www.pastemagazine.com/article/lost-and-found>

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**Catherine Hiller** Writes The Pleasure Principle 4 hr ago ❤️ Liked by D. P. Snyder

Wonderful and persuasive! Perhaps anything translated is perceived as "literary," which while high praise for some is the kiss of death for publishers.

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