

Lathey, Gillian (2015) *Translating Children's Literature*, Translation Practices Explained, London and New York: Routledge, 162 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-80376-3. £24.99.

Gillian Lathey's study introduces a number of theoretical, historical and technical issues that are relevant to the translation of children's literature, with a focus on fiction and poetry. The book is addressed to translators who are new to the practice, from "the experienced professional who occasionally takes on a commission to translate a children's book" to "the children's writer who turns his or her hand to translation, and the trainee literary translator who wishes to specialize in translating for children" (p. 10).

The introductory essay outlines the history and evolving definition of the genre, from the fluid boundaries that characterized its early instances (when works intended for adults would be appropriated by and adapted to a young readership, as in the cases of *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*) to the highly specific and often water-tight sub-categories of the modern publishing world ("early years", "pre-schooler", "pre-teen", "adolescent" "young adult"). The very definition and age limits of "childhood", Lathey points out, vary through time and across cultures.

In this light, identifying a set of problems that are specific to translating children's literature as a whole may seem an overwhelming task. Lathey meets this challenge by organizing her discussion into six relevant topics: narrative communication with the child reader (chapter 1); translating names, cultural markers and intertextual references (chapter 2); translating the visual (chapter 3); translating sound (chapter 4); retellings, retranslation and relay translation (chapter 5); children's publishing, globalization and the child reader (chapter 6). Each chapter follows the structure of the entire *Translation Practices Explained* series: a specific aspect is first addressed through a number of relevant case studies, followed by a list of discussion points and a set of practical exercises.

The case studies presented in each chapter partly draw on a previous collection of essays edited by Lathey (2006). Such case studies include the translations of Astrid Lindgren's novels, of the *Astérix* comic book series, of Jean de Brunhoff's *Histoire de Babar* and of Carlo Collodi's *Le Avventure di Pinocchio*. However, Lathey's new book expands the scope of the case studies by introducing, among others, Elizabeth Laird's collection and translation

into English of Ethiopian folktales. In the other direction (i.e. from English into other languages), the case studies rely on some of the most widely translated English-speaking authors, such as Frank L. Baum, Roald Dahl, C. S. Lewis, A. A. Milne and J. K. Rowling.

The chapter on retellings, retranslations and relay translation provides a particularly interesting illustration of the problems entailed by the translation of fairy tales and folktales. These represent a rather special case within the field of children's literature in that, being embedded in the oral tradition, the translator may have no access to the source text, or there may be more than one "original" source. Lathey presents a palette of translation strategies that apply to this particular case, from Philip Pullman's philological choice to "triangulate" between Grimm's original fairy tales, pre-existing translations and his own translation, to Arthur Ransome's creative retellings of Russian folktales, and the relay translations of the *Arabian Nights* that "reached the West through multiple retranslations" (p.124), most of which were based on Antoine Galland's French translation rather than on the original Syrian source text.

Each of the topics addressed in the individual chapters opens up whole fields of research. Lathey's intent to address in a few pages themes as vast as the translation of dialect or—an even more colossal task—the translation of sound (covering reading aloud, poetry, wordplay and onomatopoeia and nonsense literature) inevitably presents a few limitations. In the scant 14-page long chapter on "Translating the Visual", such limitations become particularly evident: Nikolajeva and Scott's (2001) distinction between picture books, illustrated books and books with pictures (corresponding to the decreasing importance of pictures with respect to the text) is briefly mentioned but never really developed in terms of its crucial implications for translation. Moreover, unlike Lathey's previous collection of essays (2006), the book features no pictures – quite a shortcoming given the subject at hand.

Due to the overarching purpose of covering such a wide range of topics, some of the conclusions drawn from individual case studies may sound somewhat hasty. For instance, when discussing the translation of the place name "Privet Drive" in the *Harry Potter* series, Lathey suggests that the Russian translator "seems to have misunderstood 'privet' for 'private', then transliterated 'privet drive' as 'прайвет драйв'" (with both "i" pronounced as /aɪ/) (p.48). However, the name change could also be motivated by the fact that a direct

Cyrillic transliteration of “privet” (pronounced /ɪ/) would produce the Russian word привет (“hello”), which in turn would give an inappropriately welcoming connotation to the address of the unfriendly Dursley family.

Another such instance can be found in the chapter on “Translating Sound”, where Lathey presents the following translation of German poet Christian Morgenstern’s nonsense poem “Das grosse Lalula”:

C. Morgenstern,

Tr. A. Bell (1998)

Das grosse Lalula (1905)

Kroklokwa~~f~~zi? Semememi!

Kroklokwo~~f~~zie? Seemimeemi!

Seiokrontro - prafriplo:

Siyokronto – prufli~~p~~lo:

Bifzi, bafzi; hulalemi:

Bif~~t~~si, ba~~f~~tsi; hulaleemi:

quasti basti bo...

Quasi basti bo...

Lalu lalu lalu lalu la!

Laloo laloo laloo laloo la!

[...]

[...]

When discussing this case of nonsense translation, Lathey suggests that “‘Translation’ is possible into English simply because the two languages are closely related, so that Bell’s English replicates the aural quality of the German original with minimal alterations” (p.108). In fact, Morgenstern’s original neither is nor sounds German, no more than Bell’s text is or sounds English. It merely modifies the spelling in such a way as to allow an English speaker to pronounce the nonsense words almost—but not quite—in the same way as a German speaker would pronounce them. In this particular case, Lathey appears to miss the ironic intent that is intrinsic to any translation of a radically nonsense poem: translation is possible not because of the linguistic proximity between any two languages, but because (such is, I believe, the point of Bell’s exercise) translation is *always* possible—even when it is impossible.

Finally, I should point out a few misspellings in the original quotes in French and Italian:

“villain chasseur” should be “vilain chasseur” (French, p.33), “scuoloa” should be “scuola” (Italian, p.51) “coquerico” should be “cocorico” (French, p.97), and “risotta” should be

“*risotto*” (Italian, p.123). These typos would need to be fixed should the book go through a second edition.

Moving the focus away from these specific points, Lathey’s work manages to cover a lot of ground and highlights a number of very interesting points regarding the translation of children’s literature, such as the asymmetrical relationship between author/translator and audience (children’s books being usually written and translated by adults rather than by children) and of the strong imbalance between the amount of literature translated from and into English (as a result, children speaking minority languages tend to be more “accustomed” to reading translations than English-speaking readers).

As a translator, I found the discussion points and practical exercise particularly worthwhile, and the advice provided will help beginner translators avoid the most common pitfalls encountered when translating children’s literature, such as the tendency to over-explain, oversimplify or to unnecessarily raise the tone of the original. Lathey’s advice to check a draft translation by reading it aloud (p.110) is also very useful, as younger audiences are more likely to have the book read aloud to them by an adult.

In conclusion, in spite of a few specific points of contention, I believe that Lathey’s study is a sound contribution to the study of an often underrated translation practice and deserves a place in the library of anyone interested in the theory and practice of the translation of children’s literature.

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References

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