Jacks-of-all-trades

The Rise of Literary Agents in the German Book Market

Literary agents have long played an integral role in the US and UK publishing scenes. It is now self-evident that writers are represented by agents – those indispensable masters of negotiation. Andrew Wylie, renowned for his massive advances and aggressive business methods, explains the relationship as follows: ‘We are engaged to help, so essentially we do anything and everything that people want. Absolutely everything.’ Wylie, also known as ‘The Jackal’, founded his agency in New York in 1980 and opened its London branch in 1996. The most famous of his over 800 authors include Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul. Across the pond, London agent Andrew Nurnberg is just as successful and well-known as Wylie. His agency first opened its doors in 1977, later followed by offices in Moscow, Budapest and Prague, and his authors include Doris Lessing and Alex Garland. The world’s first literary agency, A. P. Watt, was founded in London in 1875 and is still in business today.

By the mid-1990s Germany was catching up, and literary agencies began to appear in Berlin that were modelled on their British and American counterparts. Karin Graf was the first, having previously worked as a translator from English. Her clients include some of Germany’s best known authors, such as Ingo Schulze, Karen Duve and Tereza Mora. Then came Petra Eggers, a former editor at one of Germany’s traditional publishing houses, S. Fischer. Eggers initially specialised in authors of non-fiction and, along with Matthias Landwehr who quickly came on board, turned the Eggers & Landwehr agency into a force to be reckoned with in Germany’s publishing scene. Matthias Landwehr in particular – the former press officer at Berlin Verlag – acquired a reputation for negotiating advances of up to half a million marks for his authors, on a scale which had previously been unheard of in Germany. Since then, the one-time partners have separated and now they each run their own highly successful agencies. Landwehr represents the likes of Florian Illies, Christian Kracht, Frank Schirrmacher and Benjamin Lebert, while Petra Eggers’ agency acts on behalf of authors such as Christoph Peters, Helene Hegemann and Richard David Precht.

The justification for and importance of literary agencies is now rarely up for discussion, even in Germany, where they were once seen as charlatans who imposed themselves unnecessarily between authors and publishers. Werner Lüscher of the Löcher & Lawrence literary agency sees the importance of the role played by his and other agencies in their capacity to turn authors into equal partners of the publishers. There are approximately one hundred agencies currently operating in Germany, while around sixty percent of authors are represented by agents. Uwe Held, a literary agent at the Berlin-based agency Mohrbooks, believes that this figure will increase further: ‘An author who wants to make a name for themselves in the book market doesn’t look for a publisher anymore, but first finds themselves an agent.’ The ever-increasing significance of the mediating role played by agents goes hand in hand with changes in the structures of publishing organisations and in the way they operate. Editors are increasingly becoming programme-managers who are happy to rely on the work done by agents, as they themselves lack the time to sift through the huge volumes of manuscripts. The agents are taking on a valuable filtering function.

Before Berlin became the city of choice for newly founded literary agencies, attracted by its high concentration of authors, journalists and publishers, Zurich was the capital of literary agencies in the German-speaking world. For more than fifty years the three traditional agencies of Mohrbooks, Liepman and Paul & Peter Fritz have resided in close proximity to one another in Switzerland’s literary capital. While the Swiss trio have a major focus on English-language literature (translations from English make up over sixty percent of books that are translated into German), the Frankfurt-based agency Mertin focuses on Portuguese- and Spanish-language literature from around the globe. It was founded in 1982 by the translator Ray-Güde Mertin – who translated Clarice Lispector, António Lobo Antunes and José Saramago, among many others, into German – and since Mertin’s death in 2007 the agency has been led by Nicole Witt. Today the agency represents 150 authors, sixty percent of whom are Portuguese-speaking. Witt laments the dominance of English-language titles on the German book market: ‘It’s often an uphill struggle. Many authors from Latin America are simply not translated.’ While Spanish ranks in seventh place for translations on the German book market, known for its openness to translated titles, Portuguese is not even in the top twenty of the most commonly translated languages. But that could be about to change. In the last two years alone more than forty books have been translated into German, primarily from Brazilian Portuguese. Witt hopes that Brazil’s appearance as guest of honour at this year’s Frankfurt Book Fair will have a lasting effect and that – once piqued – the interest in Brazilian literature will remain strong.

By Holger Heimann.

This autumn, at the Frankfurt Book Fair (9-13 October 2013), the Literary Agents & Scouts Centre, known as the ‘LitAg,’ will mark its thirty-fifth anniversary. In 2013, the LitAg has sold out all 448 tables for the second year in a row – bringing a record number of 619 agents and scouts to the Book Fair.

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