

# The Translator's Voice

## The Art of Editing Translations

In December 2013, the German Book Office (GBO) New York hosted a translation workshop at the Goethe-Institut New York. Due to the great interest in last year's translation competition, and in response to the ever-increasing numbers of requests for translators from US editors, the GBO decided to create a more involved translation-related event with two goals: to cultivate talent and to connect translators with editors.

The workshop was organised by Susan Bernofsky, Director of Literary Translation at Columbia University and acclaimed translator of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (forthcoming in 2014), as well as works by Jenny Erpenbeck, Robert Walser, Yoko Tawada and Herman Hesse. The participating translators came from all over the United States, as well as one person who flew in from Germany: Laura Leichum (Washington, DC), Marshall Yarbrough (Brooklyn, NY), Kurt Beals (Memphis, TN), Anne Posten (Queens, NY), Elizabeth Janik (Norfolk, VA), and David Burnett (Germany). The group met in New York City to discuss their translations and hear how translations are received and dealt with by editors. Two of the



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Susan Bernofsky, Director of Literary Translation at Columbia University organised the translation workshop

workshop participants competed for the translation prize in 2012, Kurt Beals, who was the winner, and Elizabeth Janik, who was the runner-up.

In advance of the workshop, each participant translated excerpts from Kafka's 'The Truth about Sancho Panza' and Sarah Stricker's *Fünf Kopeken*. Stricker's novel was hailed in these pages as an 'exceptional debut' which 'confronts the thorny issue of German-Jewish relations head-on and without any of the usual clichés' (*New Books in German* 34, autumn 2013). The samples were sent to Susan as well as to Declan Spring, Senior Editor at the New Directions publishing house.

In the first part of the workshop, Susan discussed and offered solutions for passages the translators were having problems with. The group found it remarkable that Declan, who doesn't read a word of German, was able to identify the exact same problems when he came in to share his edits. Riky Stock, Director of the German Book Office, said that the 'energy in that small conference room was mesmerising: a group of talented translators

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and experienced editors, going back and forth with the nurturing guidance of Susan Bernofsky, showed what a challenge it is to deliver a superb translation of a literary novel. They learned a lot from Susan, from the editors, but also from each other.'

Anne Posten happily commented on the productivity of the group, stating that 'six translators can discuss their work on the same text for six hours and not get angry, defensive or egotistical.' Kurt Beals noted the importance of keeping your voice (as a writer) in mind when translating: 'The translation exercise was a good way to see how much voice can do in a translation. For the most part the various translations agreed in meaning, but voice and tone made a lot of difference.' These comments highlight an interesting take-away message from the workshop: every translator's voice – keeping in mind that translators must not only translate texts, but essentially re-write them in a new language – is noticeable, even through the lens of another writer's story.

Editor Tom Mayer of W.W. Norton came in to do a 'live-editing' of the texts once the translators had revised their translations, which gave them the opportunity to see an editor at work. He made suggestions purely on how the sentences read to an American with no understanding of the German language, and treated the translators just as he would treat his own authors. He edited with great consideration, and on the spot.

Marshall Yarbrough commented that the suggestions Tom Mayer gave to the group were particularly helpful: 'He said that it was important to consider a specific section in terms of 1) its position in the paragraph 2) its position in the chapter 3) its position in the text as a whole.' Laura Leichum also found the editors' and Susan Bernofsky's input very helpful: 'This particular workshop experience re-emphasised to me how vital it is for a translator to tap good and relevant resources whenever possible to help with his or her task and that feedback from trusted readers, be they peers or professional editors, is essential.' Susan Bernofsky said of the effectiveness of the workshop: 'There's just no substitute for sitting down with other committed translators and editors and hashing out the finer points of a passage and how they can be made to work in another language.'

After hearing from the editors, the group discussed the translations amongst themselves for a while longer before joining the German Book Office's Fräuleinwunderparty, a celebration of fifteen years of the German Book Office in New York. The extended group discussion proved that everyone worked well together; both the translators with each other, and the translators with the guest editors. Given this success, the German Book Office looks forward to hosting more intensive translation workshops in the future.

By [Grace Moss](#), German Book Office New York



Sarah Stricker's debut novel *Fünf Kopeken*.