

# Translating Alex Capus

## An Interview with John Brownjohn

### How did your first commission to translate Capus come about?

I first came to translate Alex Capus when Barbara Schwepcke offered me *Eine Frage der Zeit*. Having been interested in the Anglo-German conflict in East Africa (1914 – 18) ever since cutting my teeth on William Boyd's *An Ice Cream War* and Giles Foden's *Mimi and Toutou Go Forth*, I leapt at it. I wasn't disappointed. Capus had painted a graphic picture of the absurdity and tragedy inherent in that remote theatre of war, complete with rich characterisations of the principal characters, notably the hilariously eccentric Commander Geoffrey Spicer-Simson.

### The commissioning publisher is a German-speaker, and so was able to acquire the book based on her own reading assessment of it, but we all know how rare this is – so do you, as a translator, sometimes have a role to play in the process whereby publishers discover and acquire new books?

Barbara Schwepcke is better equipped to assess submissions than most UK publishers, being bilingual, though I do know one who has been diligently learning German for several years in order to do this himself. I have sometimes tried to 'sell' a German book I like, hitherto without success. Writing reports for publishers, as I occasionally do when time permits, is not my favourite occupation and tends to remind me of essay-writing as an undergraduate. For one thing, I don't have a very analytical brain and am not good at picking the bones out of a text; for another, even after years of translating scores of books, I have to admit that I don't 'scan' a text as easily in German or French as in English. I suppose I'm still subconsciously translating as I read.

### *A Matter of Time* is, as you say, a rich and vivid book – as your first time with this writer, how easily did the English voice of the book come to you?

Where *A Matter of Time* was concerned, I didn't experience any great difficulty in finding a

voice for the book. The author had captured the English side of the story remarkably well, possibly because he himself has a good grasp of our language. I had of course to bear in mind that his characters were almost a century old, so there was always the hazard of anachronisms to be avoided. Generally speaking, what I liked about *A Matter of Time* was the way it brought out the humanity of the characters in both the hostile camps. I think most English readers would readily have empathised with the German shipbuilders.

### And now, four Capus books later, do you think you learned things from the first book that informed, or helped, you in later books?

Of course every author has certain stylistic idiosyncracies which one learns to deal with, and Capus is no exception, so I now feel thoroughly at home with his work.

### You're 'at home' with it now; but even in the first book, you said the voice came to you quite easily. What makes a writer easy to translate?

I really can't analyse what makes me feel at home with Capus' work – either authors are congenial or they aren't. It can't be that their personalities infect their work, because I've pleasurably and profitably translated several books by a (long-dead) author I cordially detested. Although I'm not due to meet Alex Capus for the first time until this spring, I know from our many exchanges of emails that this certainly won't apply to him! It's a great advantage to have an author with such a good grasp of English, and I seldom use more than a few words of German when communicating with him.

### The prose of your Capus translations is incredibly poised, and seems very carefully wrought. Do you spend a lot of your time on very close editorial tinkering?

Yes, I suppose I do. I find it impossible to edit and polish a text on the screen, with the result that I usually produce at least two progressively edited hard copies

of any translation. I also read every word aloud to myself, and not just in the case of dialogue, as I naturally learnt to do in my excursions into screenwriting with Roman Polanski and Jean-Jacques Anneau. Where straight prose is concerned, I find this helps with punctuation. More generally, once one has established a voice for a particular book, rereading a translation in hard copy enables one to homogenise and render it consistent throughout.

### *Sailing by Starlight: In Search of Treasure Island* is the one basically non-fiction Capus you've translated, but most of them have some factual grounding, often in the English-speaking world; how does this affect what's required of you as their translator?

Most of Capus' books are based on fact and have entailed a lot of English-language research on his part, so I often have to trouble him for bibliographical references (*Sailing by Starlight* in particular entailed getting hold of all the quotations from Stevenson's letters, diary, etc., and pasting them together with the text). He not only answers all these requests with the utmost patience but takes a great interest in my completed drafts, which I always email him, and I've more than once made useful modifications at his suggestion. Conversely, he's always grateful for any minor points I raise.

### Looking at Capus' writing as a whole, what distinguishes it particularly? Earlier in this conversation, you used the word 'humanity' – is that important, do you think?

Yes, I think 'humanity' is a keyword in Capus' writing. He always gives one a sympathetic insight into the essential humanity of his characters, from the homesick German shipbuilders in *A Matter of Time* to the young lovers in *Léon and Louise* to the youthful bank robbers in *Almost Like Spring* or the three protagonists in his latest novel *A Price to Pay* which I have just finished translating, as ever with the greatest pleasure. Like the majority of his work, it contains a substantial ingredient of historical



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**Alex Capus** is an acclaimed and award-winning Swiss novelist, four of whose books have thus far appeared in English, all of them in translations from the German by John Brownjohn, published by Haus Publishing. Much of Capus' fiction deals with the effects of key historical moments, setting the beautifully drawn, deeply human characters he creates against vivid backdrops of historical fact. *A Matter of Time* (published in English in 2009) tells the story of an attempt to transport huge ships by land across Africa, just before the outbreak of the First World War. *Sailing By Starlight* (2010) is a non-fiction account of Capus' own attempt to track down Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Capus returned to fiction with *Léon and Louise* (2012), a love story (based on a story from Capus' own family) set in France over the course of the two World Wars. *Almost Like Spring*, published last year, is set in the early 1930s, and has at its centre the story of a pair of famous Swiss bank robbers.

fact, but it also owes a great deal to the author's vivid imagination.

### One last thing – we've been talking about Capus, but your list of translations is very extensive and extraordinarily varied. So the big question – what makes a good translator?

What makes a good translator? Apart, of course, from a knowledge of the source language and facility for writing in one's own, an almost chameleon-like ability to take on a wide range of stylistic colourations: to disappear inside a foreign author's head to such an extent that the reader will find it a challenge to remember that the original text had to pass through the translator's mind on its way into English.

**Daniel Hahn** is a writer, editor and translator with some forty books to his name. He is currently national programme director of the British Centre for Literary Translation.