

Alison Hennessey, Senior Editor at Harvill Secker, talks to NBG



Harvill
Secker



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The Role

As senior crime editor at Harvill Secker (an imprint of the Random House Group), Alison Hennessey is responsible for commissioning and publishing crime, thrillers and suspense in the English language and in translation.

The List

Hennessey is always on the lookout for the very best homegrown and international crime and thrillers, which can range from a straightforward police procedural to a terrifying psychological thriller or a more literary novella with a strong suspense element. With some illustrious names including bestsellers Jo Nesbø and Henning Mankel on the programme, new authors have high standards to live up to. 'For me', says Hennessey, 'the best crime and thrillers are well paced and structured, with an original premise, strong writing and believable characters that hook you in from the very first page. What I'm always hoping to find is that rare book that keeps you reading into the small hours and then has you running into work the next day to press it into the hands of your colleagues and make them read it too.'

Translation

When deciding whether a book is worth translating, a number of factors come into play: 'Does the book have an interesting, original premise; has the book or author won or been nominated for any prizes in their home country, or do we believe they have the potential to win prizes; are they doing something different to our existing authors; and crucially, can we see a readership for them?'

A sample translation helps enormously with the decision. But before Harvill Secker acquires a book in translation it will usually commission a report from one of its readers to provide a sense of the plot and the quality of the writing as well as the potential appeal to English readers.

'We are very lucky to work with a range of excellent translators', says Hennessey, 'many of whom we have been working with for years, although we also love to discover new translators. This was, in part, why my colleagues set up the Harvill Secker Young Translators' Prize, as we appreciate how difficult it can be to establish yourself as a translator.'

Each translator works in a different way and many have a very strong relationship with the authors they translate, going directly to them with any queries. 'Some of our translators start out by writing readers' reports for us and they are often an excellent source of recommendations for authors we should be considering for Harvill Secker, as they know our tastes and our list and what we're generally looking for in a potential new author.'

A particular issue in dealing with works in translation is that there is still a perception amongst some readers that translated works are automatically more difficult or somehow more literary than works written in the English language, but Hennessey thinks this is definitely something that's starting to change as people become more accustomed to reading in translation or watching subtitled television.

The Future

On the translated side of the Harvill Secker crime list, in 2016 we can look forward to a very creepy and claustrophobic Brazilian thriller called *Perfect Days* which, says Hennessey, 'I have been raving about to colleagues since I read the translation. I was so unnerved by one particular scene that I had to put the book down for at least an hour.' There will also be a very dark Scandinavian thriller called *The Crow Girl* which has already been a huge sensation across Europe, particularly in Germany, as well as more books from Harvill Secker's established authors, including Fred Vargas, Jo Nesbø and Henning Mankel.

Interview with Jackie Smith

NBG interviews the translator Imogen Rose Taylor

How did you get into translation and how has your career developed?

When I moved to Berlin from England, I just said yes every time I was asked whether I translated. That way I had odds and ends of translation work all through my Masters and PhD and managed to build up a few contacts. Then, a few hours after I'd handed in my PhD thesis, I got an email from Michael Heyward of Text Publishing asking me to translate Sascha Arango's *The Truth and Other Lies*, and of course I said yes to that too. I'm now working on my third book with Text.

What have been your most enjoyable translation projects?

My very first translation project was to put Brahms' *Forty-Nine Folk Songs* into singable English verse. That was great fun. I always read my translations aloud, but that was the only time I had to sing them. Another exciting project was translating the screenplay of *The Truth and Other Lies*. Sascha Arango is a screenwriter by trade so he wrote his own script. It was fascinating to see

how a novel gets 'translated' into film; so many things that have to be spelled out in a novel can be left unspoken – and vice versa.

Do you get in touch with the living writers you translate? Is there a palpable difference between translating a living and a dead author?

Yes! I get in touch with them – and meet them too. It's the reward for all those solitary hours with only dictionaries for company. My questions tend to be pretty niggling ones to clear up ambiguities or check obscure words. Whether an author is dead or alive doesn't really affect the translation work. But maybe there's a different feel to it; if the author's dead, you're a little more in control and a little lonelier.

What are you working on at the moment? Do you tend to translate one book at a time, or have several projects on the go at once?

At the moment I'm working on *The Scholl Case* by Anja Reich,

a true crime story. I only translate one book at a time and tend to get quite sucked in by it. But I also translate sample extracts and other bits and pieces along the way.

Which book would you still like to translate? Are you interested in translating a particular genre other than crime fiction?

I've translated some Peter Kurzeck with Stefan Tobler and would love to translate more. Walter Kappacher is another author who has been too long neglected. I'd be happy to take on any genre, but I would like to work on something more literary and/or older at some point.

Would you say that it's easier or harder to find projects by basing yourself in Germany rather than the UK?

I don't think many translators find projects by knocking on publishers' doors, and it doesn't matter where you send your emails from; if it did, I wouldn't be translating for a publisher in Melbourne. It's definitely



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a bonus to have easy access to German bookshops, libraries and newspapers – and to be surrounded by native speakers who will answer your questions.

What advice would you give to new translators? Do you find that schemes such as the Emerging Translators Programme from NBG are useful?

Hang on in there. It takes patience – or stubbornness, if that sounds too virtuous. The NBG Emerging Translators Programme was a great help to me. Above all, it was very encouraging.

Interview with Meg O'Sullivan