

Interview Relay: NBG interviews Susan Bernofsky/ Susan Bernofsky interviews Jenny Erpenbeck

Jenny Erpenbeck and translator Susan Bernofsky won the International Foreign Fiction Prize in 2015 for *The End of Days* – an achievement Erpenbeck describes as ‘a great honour.’ The novel tells the story of one character’s five deaths throughout various points in European history – from a Galician town around 1900 to contemporary Berlin – and has been praised internationally. *NBG* managed to track down both its writer and translator during their very busy schedules...

NBG: Which of your numerous achievements are you most proud of in your career up to now?

Susan Bernofsky: I suppose I’m proudest of having a publisher I admire (W.W. Norton) trust me to translate a new Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. It was nerve-racking, nail-biting work too, especially at the beginning, though once I was immersed in the project I began to take so much pleasure in Kafka’s wacky sense of humour that it helped me to forget that the pressure was on.

NBG: What did it feel like to receive recognition from the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize?

SB: I can’t tell you what a thrill it was to have my work singled out along with Jenny’s for that major

award, particularly given how many other authors and translators I admire were on the shortlist. It’s such an honour, and I’m especially happy that the attention that comes with the award will get Jenny’s wonderful novel more readers in the English-speaking countries.

NBG: What are you working on right now?

SB: I’m writing a biography of Robert Walser while translating Yoko Tawada’s novel *Etüdes im Schnee* for New Directions (to appear under the title *The Memoirs of a Polar Bear*). It’s a three-generation family saga in which the main characters are all polar bears, but it’s definitely not a kids’ book. Challenging, funny, and political.

Susan Bernofsky: What made you decide to write about the plight of asylum-seekers in Berlin?

Jenny Erpenbeck: Many politicians and individuals in Europe wish nothing but death upon them. Through their quest for a future within our countries, we Europeans are forced to commit explicitly to moral attitudes for the first time in post-war history. The European authorities may want to know the names of the refugees so they can put them on some kind of list, but the refugees present

us with the real question of who we are and who we want to be. Each and every one of us could in the distant, or even perhaps near future, become a refugee, but after sixty years of peace in Europe many of us are missing the life experience to grasp this. Peace does not generate generosity, but rather hatred in many places. I find this interesting.

SB: Whom do you most want to read this novel?

JE: Those who are afraid.

SB: Can you imagine a sequel?

JE: I’m not a journalist but a writer. This book was not meant to be a description of the path of some refugees in Berlin. It is my way of thinking about the loss of a lifetime, waiting, the difficulties in finding a new identity in general. Thinking about what time means to us as human beings hopefully puts across an idea of mankind instead of an idea of nationalities. The questions I wanted to pose about all this I put in the book. So there’s no need for a sequel.

SB: What books from German (or other languages) have recently most excited you?

JE: György Dragoman, the Hungarian-Romanian author’s great new novel *Scheiterhaufen*. I also greatly admire his first book, *The White King*.



© Katharina Behling

Jenny Erpenbeck is a German director and writer. She won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2015 for *The End of Days*. Her other books in English translation – all translated by Susan Bernofsky – are *Visitations*, *The Books of Words* and *The Old Child and Other Stories*.



© private

Susan Bernofsky directs the translation programme at Columbia University’s School of the Arts. Her awards include the 2015 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, the 2015 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize, the 2015 Ungar Award for Literary Translation, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator’s Prize and the Calw Hermann Hesse Translation Prize. She blogs about translation at www.translationista.net.

Variations on a Theme: Carolina Schutti and Joanna Walsh discuss poetic prose

As part of my role as translator in residence at the Austrian Cultural Forum London, I’ve curated a new miniseries of events entitled *Variations on a Theme* where Austrian and British authors come together to discuss a theme or subject they share in their work. At the end of February, authors Carolina Schutti and Joanna Walsh joined me in the ACF London’s Salon to discuss their work in the context of the evening’s theme of ‘poetic prose’.

Schutti, whose novel *einmal muss ich über weiches gras gelaufen sein* (‘once I must have trodden on soft grass’, reviewed in the previous issue of *NBG*) won the European Prize for Literature in 2015, talked about how rhythm, repetition and music are vital in her work. The stories that make up Joanna Walsh’s new collection *Vertigo* have been described as being poem-like, and she told us how the poets she admires share her interest in the mundane and the writing of private consciousness. It was a pleasure to talk with these authors and hear about their shared value for precision,



© Marja Dziurosz

of every word counting, and of writing condensed prose that leaves space for the reader’s imagination.

The next *Variations on a Theme* evening will take place in September. See www.acflondon.org/literature-and-books for details.

By Jen Calleja