

# 'A translation is your book with someone else's name on it' – Translator Burton Pike receives Friedrich Ulfers Prize

In the view of Riky Stock of the German Book Office New York, most of our *New Books in German* readers – many of whom are editors, translators, professors, critics, agents, rights managers, or voracious readers – would deserve a prize for championing German-language literature. You'll be glad to hear that such a prize exists...

The Friedrich Ulfers Prize, which is conferred during the annual Festival Neue Literatur, ([www.festivalneueliteratur.org](http://www.festivalneueliteratur.org)) was awarded for the first time in 2013. Endowed with a \$5,000 grant, it honours a publisher, writer, critic, translator, or scholar who has promoted the advancement of German-language literature in the United States. The prize was established through the generosity of esteemed Professor Friedrich Ulfers, Associate Professor of German at New York University, who has himself been a tireless advocate for German-language literature in the US. Previous recipients of the Friedrich Ulfers Prize include Robert Weil, Sara Bershtel, and the late Carol Brown Janeway. This year, the award was presented at the festival's exclusive opening ceremony on the 25th of February to Burton Pike, translator and Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature and German at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Burton Pike received the prize primarily because he is an excellent translator. Here is an excerpt from his acceptance speech:

'A witty translator wrote that a translation is your book with someone else's name on it. When I was teaching translation, I would tell my students, you need to identify the book's or the story's *rhythm*, how the words flow; you do that by reading the text aloud and listening. Then you fit the English words and sentences to the underlying pacing of the German, and you would be in business. For example, in translating Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* I determined that the underlying rhythm was a *waterfall of words*,

and I based my translation on that. The result, I think, sounds like Goethe, but in English. One result of this approach through rhythm is that all my translations of prose fiction differ from each other, because each one is based on a different rhythmic model.

I had one graduate student who translated a short story written by a young German writer, but he couldn't get the story to sound right in English. I asked him if he had read Raymond Carver. He said no. I said to him: "Well, the fellow who wrote this story has obviously read Carver. Go thou and do likewise!" He did, and it worked.

I co-translated Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* with Sophie Wilkins for Knopf, under the watchful editorial eye of the late editor Carol Brown Janeway. From a translator's perspective, reading Musil's text silently made the language seem impenetrable. I happened to discover that evenings Musil would read aloud to his wife what he had written during the day, and I had my "aha!" moment: what looked difficult on the page when read silently was actually a *spoken* rhythm, and reading it aloud everything fell neatly into place for the translator. Read out loud, *The Man Without Qualities* blossoms.

Flannery O'Connor said that "art is a product of the practical intellect," and that is certainly true of translating. Theories of translation belong to philosophy, not to the struggle of the translator trying to decide whether 'Geist' should be rendered as 'mind' or 'spirit'. Every writer and every novel or story must be translated on their own terms. So it's true

after all that a translation is your book with someone else's name on it.'

By Riky Stock, Director of the German Book Office New York.

Since 2010, Festival Neue Literatur has brought six of the most important emerging and established writers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland to New York City each February, where they join New York-based writers and moderators in a series of conversations and readings.

The theme of the 2016 festival, curated by acclaimed translator Ross Benjamin and chaired by celebrated and widely translated Vietnamese-American novelist Monique Truong, was *Seriously Funny*. This year's participants were James Hannaham, Jenny Offill, Siri Hustvedt, Ann Goldstein, Joshua Rothman, John Wray, and Natasha Wimmer, joined by Xaver Bayer, Sibylle Berg, Álvaro Enrigue, Iris Hanika, Vea Kaiser, Christopher Kloeb, Daniel Kehlmann, and Pedro Lenz.

More at [www.festivalneueliteratur.org](http://www.festivalneueliteratur.org)



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**Burton Pike** is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature and German at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Medaille für Verdienste um Robert Musil from the city of Klagenfurt, Austria. He has written extensively on Musil, has edited and co-translated Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (finalist and Special Citation PEN Translation Prize) and a book of Musil's essays, *Precision and Soul*, as well as editing a collection of Musil's stories. He has also translated and written the introductions to Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, and Gerhard Meier's *Isle of the Dead*, which won the 2012 Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator's Prize for the best translation of a literary work from German. More of his translations of prose and poetry from German and French have appeared in *Fiction*, *Grand Street*, *Conjunctions*, and other magazines.

## NBG Emerging Translators Programme 2016

This year's six chosen participants for the NBG Emerging Translators Programme were **Rachel Stanyon**, **Sinead Crowe**, **David Tushingham**, **Graham Hogg**, **Robert Cantrick** and **Philip Minns**. They came together on Saturday 12th March at the Goethe-Institut London to discuss and work through their commissioned sample translations of authors appearing in this issue with established translator Shaun Whiteside. You can read their sample translations for books by **Meral Kureyshy**, **Leta Semadeni**, **Anna Galkina**, **Antonia Baum**, **Abbas Khider** and **Michael Köhlmeier** on the NBG website.