Translating a page-turner

Literary translation is a challenge – but an exciting one. Aletta Stevens gets some tips from Ros Schwartz at the Crimefest Translation Workshop

Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator, and founder member of ITI. Her translation of the biography of the Dutch film director Paul Verhoeven was published by Faber and Faber.

On 23 May seven members of the ITI Western Regional Group left behind the Sunday afternoon heat in favour of the cool, elegant surroundings of the Marriott Royal Hotel in the centre of Bristol. This was the venue for the four-day International Crime Fiction Convention Crimefest, which has been held annually since 2008, inspired by the American convention Left Coast Crime. On the final day of Crimefest, ITI Fellow Ros Schwartz, celebrated for her translations of French fiction and well known to ITI members for her style workshops, had generously offered to lead a two-hour translation workshop.

Our gathering of some 25 participants consisted of writers, journalists and editors, as well as professional translators with a variety of mother tongues.

Finding your voice

Ros gave a brief introduction to the distinctive style of the crime writer Dominique Manotti, whose work she and Amanda Hopkinson have recently translated to international acclaim (see interview with Ros, pp22-23, and book review, opposite). Manotti's gritty, realistic stories are reflected in her staccato, no-frills style, which presents a different translation challenge from the more literary styles of fiction. Ros has been fortunate in being able to communicate with the author during the translation process. She then summed up the points to look out for when translating fiction. There is no formula, as every book is different, but it is crucial to find a coherent voice that works in English. This means not 'sitting on the fence', but taking decisions based on your own reading of the novel. It is important to be faithful to the spirit of the book, rather than to the letter. The fiction translator has to create the same response in the reader as the author, recreating the sounds and rhythms to produce a similar effect in translation. It is a fine balance between creative freedom and a respect for the author. Punctuation, in particular, is an issue in the case of a writer such as Manotti whose short sentences often lack verbs. As a counterpart, Ros quoted the example of Anthea Bell's translation of *Austerlitz* by the German author W G Sebald, whose sentences are especially long. In either case the translator has to take a decision on the extent to which a change in punctuation can improve the readability of the English text without abandoning the original altogether.

After this introduction, we were split into four groups, each containing at least one person with a reading knowledge of French (there were no French native speakers) and at least one translator. Our task was to look at one A4 page from the draft translation of Manotti's *Affairs of State* – Ros and Amanda Hopkinson's translation was recently published by Arcadia – and the equivalent page from the original, *Nos fantastiques années fric*, and to identify the translation problems. Whilst we were grappling with this, Ros went round the groups and provided helpful tips and background information.

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The English represented the first draft of the translation and contained instances of two possible translations separated by a forward slash. Ros explained that she always keys in the first draft of the whole text as quickly as possible, inserting whatever translation possibilities come into her head, and then goes back to address these choices during subsequent drafts. The first clue for our discussion was the date at the top of the page, June 1985, which guided us in determining how modern the translation should sound. Another consideration was whether the language was appropriate for the different elements of the text: dialogue, prose and newspaper article.

Overcoming stumbling blocks

In addition to punctuation and the absence of verbs, we discussed tense, as the French frequently uses the present tense where English would use the past tense, and also crime fiction often makes use of the present tense to engage the reader. It is important to remember, however, that the author has made a conscious choice to use a particular tense and that we should respect her/his intention. Whatever the decision, it is of course vital to decide on the tense – as well as other constantly occurring features such as contraction (for example, 'it's' and 'aren't') – at the beginning of the translation process, rather than having to change it all at the end. Other stumbling blocks included titles as well as abbreviations such as 'RGPP', which could be explained either in a glossary at the back of the book or in the text itself with a phrase such as 'the Paris police intelligence service'. During heated discussions

PHOTOGRAPH: ALETTA STEVENS

The participants (left) get to work on practical exercises

as to whether the phrase 'shoulder to shoulder' was too literal a translation of '*épaule contre épaule*' and had the wrong overtones, Ros suggested always trying to stand back from the translation to see the bigger picture. As we did so, the picture emerged and we began to see the male characters with their heads together, poring over the papers. Other useful tips were to read the translation aloud, also to other people; to highlight the key words in a passage to help decide what must be retained and what can be 'played around with'; and to print out the draft in a different font from the one you have been looking at for a long time. Ros pointed out that English is a particularly rich language because it contains words of Anglo-Saxon as well as Latin origin, which give the English translator a greater choice of vocabulary.

Finally, we all came together again and received a copy of the published translation of the page we had looked at. Those groups who had managed to come to a consensus read out their final translation. This clearly pointed out the dangers of rewriting, where an alternative version may sound easier on the ear but ultimately shows a disregard for the author's original style.

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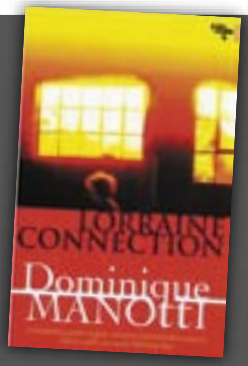
BOOK REVIEW

Lorraine Connection by Dominique Manotti, translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Ros Schwartz (Arcadia Books, £8.99)

Not every female professor of 19th-century economic history turns crime writer, and not every crime writer has been a political activist. Yet both can be said of the French author Dominique Manotti, who published her first novel in 2000 at the age of 58. In the 1960s and 1970s she supported various political causes, including the independence of Algeria. Her stories have variously been set against a background of the rag trade, horse racing, 1980s French politics and corporate takeovers. They have been called 'seedy' and 'sexy', but they are always intelligent, politically informed and socially aware. Not afraid to tackle issues such as racism, sexuality and hypocrisy, Manotti is a truly *engagé* author, her writing being a kind of 'crime with a conscience'. Her books have been exceptionally well received in the British press.

Lorraine Connection – which is also the original French title – is the third Manotti novel, after *Rough Trade* and *Dead Horsemeat*, to be published in English, and the second to be translated by Amanda Hopkinson, former Director of the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, and Ros Schwartz. Part One opens in a cathode ray tube factory owned by the Korean Daewoo group in Pondange, Lorraine, in northern France. It is the only employment in the former iron and steel manufacturing town, including for the local Arab population, and working conditions are appalling. It is obvious where Manotti's sympathies lie when she describes how the factory workers stage a strike following an industrial accident, and the impact this has on their subsequent fate against a backdrop of corporate corruption, drug dealing, blackmail and brutal murder. As Rolande, one of the female characters, concludes: 'The lives of the working class count for nothing'.



After a major fire has broken out at the factory at the end of Part One, Part Two introduces the men at the top of the Alcatel company, as they attempt to find out why the rival Matra-Daewoo alliance has beaten Alcatel in the bid to privatise the publicly owned military-electronics concern, Thomson. Suspecting foul play, they stage a private investigation whilst the police are trying to discover who started the fire at the factory. Gradually, the reader gets an insight into the lives of some of the factory workers, both male and female, and begins to see how powerless they are in the overall scheme of corporate and political decision-making. Manotti's distinctive staccato style creates urgency and swiftly sets the scene. The thoughts of her characters in *Lorraine Connection* are printed in italics and at times are written in an almost telegrammatic style, giving the reader an instant insight into their internal world, whether they belong to the workers or to the management.

'Manotti's distinctive staccato style creates urgency and swiftly sets the scene'

This is not a cosy detective novel in the English tradition. Manotti uses a different investigator for each of her books, thus not providing the sympathetic continuity and security of a Miss Marple or an Inspector Dalgliesh. In *Lorraine Connection* private detective Charles Montoya is not introduced until page 64 – after the storyline is well and truly developed with a host of different characters – and the degree to which the reader gets to know him is limited. Nevertheless, the story quickly gathers pace after his arrival and he certainly represents the good character, one we hold on to until finally there is some kind of justice.

www.dominiquemanotti.com
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