

Our place in the line

Women writers are less likely to be translated into English than men. But this is changing, thanks to a group of dedicated campaigners. Dina Leifer reports



Dina Leifer translates from French and Italian to English, specialising in literary, marketing and editorial texts. Her first book translation, *Progress or Freedom*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019. Her translation 'Journey at Dusk', a short story for young people, was published in the anthology *Odyssey* by Alma in 2017. Dina began translating professionally after completing her MA in Translating Popular Culture at City, University of London in 2015. She previously worked as a journalist, editor and content writer. She has a BA (Hons) in French and Italian from Manchester University.

There is no lack of women's writing in any culture,' says Dr Margaret Carson. So why, she asks, are relatively few women translated into English? 'Why do men seem to be at the head of the line? Why are the women who do get across less likely to get reviewed or receive an award?'

Carson, who teaches at the City University of New York, is one of the co-founders of the Women in Translation (WiT) Tumblr. She and publisher Alta L Price set up the site in 2015, as a way of displaying graphs and data which illustrate the translation gender gap. Since then, it has grown into an archive of data, writing, research and online activity about women in translation. Yet still, today, less than a third of fiction and poetry published in English translation was written by women.

At the first Translating Women conference in London on 31 October and 1 November last year (see the last issue of *ITI Bulletin*) an inspiring group of activists gathered in London to talk about this deficit and what could be done about it. Many of the delegates meeting in real life for the first time knew each other already from blogs and social media campaigns. In fact translator Tina Kover said it was like a 'family reunion', with writers, translators

and academics all talking about their work to promote women's writing in translation.

Unrecognised women

So why are women writers so under-represented in this area? Carson has some possible answers. To start with – and perhaps most importantly – women writers are less visible overall. Even in English, where some of the

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'big hitters' like Hilary Mantel top the best-seller lists, men's writing is often taken more seriously – and this is very much the case in other languages too. 'If they are not written about by well-known reviewers or featured in "top 10" lists, women writers are less likely to be on the radar in their own country, let alone abroad, and it is more difficult for editors to build a case to translate them.' The knock-on effect is that

fewer women are nominated for literary awards, and as a result fewer women win those awards; national cultural bodies tend to champion more male than female authors; and more male than female authors are featured at book fairs around the world (where publishers promote the books for which they have particularly high hopes of translation).

There has been some shifting recently – especially with major international literary prizes (see the timeline box) going to women, but there is still a long way to go. 'We have to keep pushing, or things will revert to how they were before,' says Carson. In any case, there are plenty of countries where this progress is fairly minimal. Nicky Harman, who translates from Chinese, has interviewed several Chinese women writers about their struggle to be noticed and taken seriously on their national literary scene. Some say they are treated as a separate species from male writers and that they are expected to limit themselves to certain topics. Most writers who are considered 'great' in China tend to be male, and so are most of the judges on awards panels.

Pushing for the positive

Literary translator Rosalind Harvey backs up Carson's point. In 2016 she wrote a critical response to an article in *Full Stop* magazine by reviewer Matt Bucher about new writing from Latin America which cited only five women writers out of a total of 37. Harvey pointed out that Bucher's approach illustrated the way in which women writers are triply absent: they are published less, they are translated less, and their absence is not even noticed. 'They are simply not there.'

WOMEN IN TRANSLATION TIMELINE

2008: Launch of the Three Percent Translation Database (named after the widely used statistic that only 3% of books published in the US are translations)

2009: Founding of the VIDA Count, an annual report of the male/female ratio of who gets reviewed and published in major English-language literary magazines

2013: Allison Anderson's blog post 'Where are the Women in Translation?' appears on *Words Without Borders*, the online international literary magazines

2014: London Book Fair panel on 'Where are the Women in Translation?'

2014: August is designated Women in Translation Month, and the initiative is launched online with the hashtag #WITMonth

2015: The Women in Translation Tumblr is founded

The idea is that ‘real’ writers are male: ‘women’s writing’ is a bolt-on. ‘When we are there, we’re noticed as being out of place.’

‘I think a lot about what society expects from women: how we are looked at and what additional expectations gatekeepers place on women writers,’ adds poet, translator and academic Aviya Kushner. ‘The list of acceptable topics [for women writers] was always shorter – if they were allowed to write at all.’ She describes this desire to pigeonhole women writers as a unique form of oppression which she calls ‘expectation bias’, which also increases as women grow older (in particular, older women are expected not to be interested in or write about

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sex). And interestingly, the expectation that women writers should stick to the domestic, which prevails in many countries, is reversed for women from countries where there is conflict: they are expected to write only about the conflict and not about their personal or home lives.

Kushner has defied these expectations by getting her translations from Hebrew of two Israeli women poets published. One is the debut collection by a 92-year-old, which deals with the issue of sex in old age, and the other a collection by Yudit Shahar, a working-class poet who writes movingly about her daily life. ‘There is a bias from every angle,’

Kushner argues forcefully. ‘Pre-empt that. Try the unadorned truth. Create space through activism – writing, reviewing, speaking – and highlighting the individuality of women.’

New writings, new spaces

Creating space through activism also describes the work of Dr Chantal Wright, coordinator of the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, who points out that the number of books translated by women has increased since the prize was founded in 2017. On the prize website, Wright pays tribute to Meytal Radzinski, creator of the Women in Translation Month. The initiative has been effective in raising the profile of women writers around the world, particularly on social media, with the hashtag #WITMonth and the #womenintranslation Twitter account, @Read_WIT.

Another WiT activist who was inspired by Radzinski’s work is Salwa Benaissa, founder and editorial director of *Project Plume*, an online literary magazine which aims to foster cross-cultural exchange between women writers, translators and readers worldwide, and to be as diverse as possible. The magazine is volunteer-run at the moment, but Benaissa and her team are looking for a method of sustainable funding. They also plan to develop innovative ways to promote writing and for readers to access it and consume literature, moving beyond the current formats of e-books and pdfs, which she feels are no more than ‘backlit books’. Print is still part of this vision, but new options are also important: ‘We want to bring people together to try to make it more tech-accessible.’

‘There is a wealth of literature out there that is not getting into people’s hands,’ says Dr Helen Vassallo, who founded the Women in Translation conference with Dr Olga Castro. In a heartfelt speech at the conference,

Vassallo explained how she had made a radical change in the direction of her academic career after realising there was a ‘massive gap between what I enjoyed and what I was writing about’. This had led her to create the Translating Women blog and research project. She and Castro had organised the conference to bring WiT campaigners together and ‘build bridges between academia and industry’. She urged delegates to ‘keep talking’ about international women’s writing.

‘This is not a fad, not a passing “ism”,’ Carson concludes. ‘Read more women in translation, post about it online, write letters to editors, translate articles on women writers on *Wikipedia*. Do not accept the fact that books by women are being passed over by the gatekeepers. Say to publishers: “Examine your pipelines. Take a look at your book lists. Including more women will not damage your list: it may well enhance it.”’



Where next?

If you want to find out more about the Women in Translation movement, look for the hashtags #womenintranslation and #WITMonth on Twitter. You can also check out these key organisations and websites:

- *Translating Women*, a blog and research project founded and run by Helen Vassallo of Exeter University (<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/translatingwomen/>; on Twitter @translatewomen)
- Biblibio book blog by Meytal Radzinski, founder and organiser of Women in Translation Month (<http://biblibio.blogspot.com/>; on Twitter at @Read_WIT)
- Women in Translation Tumblr, founded and run by Margaret Carson and Alta L Price to record data, writing, research and online activity about Women in Translation (<https://womenintranslation.tumblr.com/>)
- The Warwick Prize for Women in Translation. Awarded annually to the best eligible work written by a woman, translated into English by a translator or translators of any gender, published by a UK or Irish publisher (https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/womenintranslation/).

2015: Writer Kamila Shamsie calls for publishers to launch a Year of Publishing Women

2016: Han Kang and Deborah Smith win the Man Booker International Prize for *The Vegetarian*

2017: Launch of the inaugural Warwick Prize for Women in Translation

2018: Olga Tokarczuk and Jennifer Croft win the Man Booker International Prize for *Flights*

2019: Olga Tokarczuk is awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature

2019: The first Translating Women conference is held in London