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Booklover -- Admiring the Translator

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"There are no women here."

It was true. It was an all male school. Who had ever heard of such a thing? I was mightily annoyed by that concept.

And then when I was fourteen, **Yale** began admitting women. And when I was eighteen, I started my freshman year. The ratio of men to women in 1973 was eight to one.

I wasn't worried about being in a minority of female students. Already the iconic **Whiffenpoof** song had changed from "Mother of Men" to "Bright College Years." I was worried about homesickness. Beautiful as the campus was, New Haven that first autumn was far too hot and sunny for a Seattleite. The winter was too cold and snowy, summer was too humid, and there were no mountains off in the distance. In contrast to my wealthy, woody home suburb, there were few evergreen trees, and multiple street people.

But I loved being there. I especially loved the cathedral entrance to **Sterling Library**, and the smell of the stacks, and the dim little study carrels on floor 6B, with the tiny, leaded-glass panes in the windows. I loved the funny, clanking elevator in the stacks, and the joys of just browsing the aisles. Also, it turned out that alongside the walkway to my college dorm room, I passed one of the few big Douglas firs on campus. In fact, if I pushed flat against one wall of the room, I could see that tree from my window. So I could get a little Pacific Northwest hit from time to time.

The tree was the highlight of the walkway. The edgy part of the walkway was the bench occupied by **Mr. Jones**, our resident panhandler.

Mr. Jones was amiable and laid back, given more to lolling than to hassling anyone, but he made suburban little me slightly jumpy. Mostly, he greeted the male undergrads. In fact, the hippest and most ironic of the white boys, the guys from Cleveland and Los Angeles, would exchange high fives with him, or lock thumbs in a power handshake. They didn't call him **Mr. Jones**. They called him "**Brother John**." I didn't call him anything. We pretty much topped out at the wordless-nod-of-acknowledgement stage.

In the fullness of time, I graduated, moved to Portland, went to work for **Blackwell**, and lo, after a dozen years, **Yale** needed an approval profiling session, and the sales rep actually invited me to come along. I was ecstatic. I imagined three days of meetings in one of those wonderful rooms up in the stacks of **Sterling**, immersed in that smell, surrounded by those little diamond-shaped window panes. I would look up favorite professors who were still there. I would find the classroom with the big stained glass mural of the Arts and Sciences. I would get a lobster grinder from **Broadway Pizza**, and eat it in my college courtyard!

Alas, our profiling visit was scheduled during spring break, so all the professors were on vacation, and the place felt deserted. Some buildings were locked, and the campus had sprouted a number of security gates since my time, so poking around was limited. Worse yet, our three days of meetings weren't up in

those **Sterling** stacks, but in an underground, fluorescent-lit room in **Cross Campus**, the undergraduate library. During a break, I did run up to **Sterling** and throw myself on the mercy of the guy checking that people going up to the stacks had **Yale** IDs. "I'm an alum," I said, "and I just need to go up there for five minutes and smell the stacks...."

He waved me in. I suspect I wasn't the first alum to beg for entrance.

It was a blissful five minutes. The elevator clanked as always. The stacks smelled exactly like *Essence of Book*. The little, slightly-purple pane of glass in my favorite carrel was still cracked. I was happy.

After the profiling session ended, I headed out for the lobster grinder and the imagined visit to my college courtyard. I knew the colleges were all locked, but I was hoping some kid had stayed on campus for spring break, and would just happen by and let me in. I was planning to use my pathetic, "I'm an alum," act that had worked on the library security guy.

It was late in the day, and there was almost no one in sight. I rounded the corner of the walkway, and there was the bench. And there was **Mr. Jones**, enjoying the sunset. I was thirty-something, and wearing my visit-a-customer duds, but he knew me instantly. I have never been greeted more warmly by anyone. He sat up and beamed, and said, "Well, HI! How have YOU been?"

And I sat down on his bench, and we caught up on the intervening years. Somebody remembered me. It was a wonderful visit. 🐼

Booklover — Admiring the Translator

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425) <jacobsdf@musc.edu>

The lights in the **IMAX Theater** go dim to total dark. But even before eyes can adjust to the man-made night, the gargantuan screen explodes with the sun reflecting off the panorama of snow-capped mountains. The proud climber faces the camera. Mount Everest has been conquered once again. Does anyone ever wonder who exactly hauled the cumbersome approximately 35 pound **IMAX** camera up into the death zone of Mount Everest to document someone else's triumph? I do. All the glory to the smile and the invisible photographer is a footnote.

This booklover, living in the oxygen-rich sulfur-spiced zone at sea level, has a similar enigma: "Who are these translators that haul beautiful English words to the paper so that I can write for you about my random discoveries of novels by **Nobel Laureates** in literature who do not write in the English language?" Each time I savor a sentence, a story line, the subject matter, a scenario or a scene I find myself remarking: "And I am reading this in translation." Since I am not reading the words that earned the author the highest of

literary prizes, I wistfully muse what magic might come to the particular piece of literature if read in the native language.

I have yet to present the works of my favorite **Nobel** author to you — **Gabriel Garcia-Marquez**, and I promise I will, but today I want to introduce **Edith Grossman**, the translator of many of his novels. As I read each of **Garcia-Marquez's** works I completely lost myself in the exotic surreal imagination of the scenes that danced from every page. Then one day as if a bird had lit gently on my head, pecked a small hole and delivered a seed of an idea to flower I realized that my affection was not only for **Garcia-Marquez** but also for **Grossman**. She was the one presenting this phenomenal gift to me.

Once upon a time I could read Spanish but time and disuse has eroded this skill. I marvel in **Edith Grossman's** ability. I gladly accept her invitation into this wonderful arena of literature. I am mesmerized, mystified, and magically transported by the English words that a translator gives to represent the story from author to reader. Their command of

two languages must exceed most people's command of one. I am grateful for their skill and effort. The relationship between author and the translator must be one of trust and respect. The author trusts the translator to give his words a voice in the world audience while being faithful to the language and yet allow the story to be enjoyed.

A little Internet sleuthing on **Edith Grossman** provided me with her photograph and a glimpse of her journey into translation. She began translating the poems of **Juan Ramón Jiménez** as an undergraduate. A **Fulbright scholarship** gave her a year in Spain after which she completed her doctorate in Latin America literature at **NYU** and began her career as a university professor. In the late 1980's she was asked to submit a sample translation for **Garcia-Marquez's** new novel "Love in the Time of Cholera." This set the stage for her transition to a full time translator. We, the lucky readers, rejoice in

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our ability to wander in **Garcia-Marquez's** surreal world.

Future columns will also introduce both **Ivo Andrić**, born in Travnik Bosnia in 1892 and who won the **Nobel Prize** in 1961, and **André Gide**, born in Paris France in 1869 and who won the **Nobel Prize** in 1947. The two books that I have added to my small but growing **Nobel Literature Library** are *The Bridge on the Drina* and *The Immoralist*, respectively. Both books have Notes or Forwards by the translators that give us a peek into their mindset.

Lovett Edwards writes in the Translator's Forward of **Ivo Andrić's** *The Bridge on the Drina*: "It is always an invidious task for the translator to comment on an author's style. It should be — and I hope it is — evident in the translation. **Andrić's** style has the sweep and surge of the sea, slow and yet profound, with occasional flashes of wit and irony. One subtlety cannot, however, be conveyed in translation: his use of varying dialects and localisms. I have conveyed then in the best manner I could, since a literal use of dialect would, even were it possible, be pedantic, dull, and cumbersome."

Dorothy Bussy first translated **André Gide's** *The Immoralist* to English in 1930. In 1970 **Richard Howard** offered a new translation and writes in the Translator's Note of the book: "For forty years we have had a fair sense of this famous recital, why not now

a fairer still?" "My effort, then, is to persist even further in the letter of the work itself. For **Gide** belongs, we now see — and happy the prospect would have made him — to that company of authors with whom we cannot be satisfied. We keep turning them over in our minds, returning to them: all translation date, certain works never do." Almost 40 years later I read these words and marvel at the insight of how the right word conveys the perfect meaning, concept, idea of the story. And yet this is still a difficult feat when cultures, dialects, and languages collide.

More Internet sleuthing provided another glance at the relationship between the author, **Orhan Pamuk** and **Guneli Gun**, the translator of **Pamuk's** book, *The New Life*. Interestingly, **Gun** is of Turkish descent and she writes fiction in English. **Patrick T. Reardon**, of the *Chicago Tribune*, recounts the "doozy" of the exchange between **Pamuk** and **Gun** over the use of the word "doozies." "The Turkish word [used by **Pamuk**] can be translated 'strange' or 'odd,' but 'doozy' is such a vibrant word. And the Turkish word had a kind of colloquial sound to it."

The subject of **Nobel Laureates** in Literature is obviously a passion and whenever I find a good opportunity I find a way to get the conversation going on this matter. **Avondale Wine and Cheese** located on Savannah Highway in the **Avondale Business District** is a funky foodie boutique shop where you can enjoy a glass of wine, unique handcrafted cheeses, and conversation with a variety of fun people that pass through the door. One Monday evening,

I met **Bill** and his wife **Ava** at **Avondale Wine and Cheese**. **Bill Lavery** is a retired Professor of Russian and Eastern European History from **Furman University**. We were enjoying our wine, cheese and conversation when the subject of novels and translators was soon on the plate. **Bill** gave me numerous suggestions of translators to research and related fun stories of his travels in both Russia and Eastern Europe. Ultimately he shared this personal story with me. Before **Bill** became a retired Professor of Russian and Eastern European History he was a student of **Walter Arndt** at the **University of North Carolina**. **Walter Arndt** is currently Professor Emeritus at **Dartmouth** and is a noted translator. His translation of **Alexander Puskin's** *Eugene Onegin* won the **Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize** in 1962. **Puskin** is considered the pinnacle writer for the Russian people and the difficulty in translating his works is in the conveying of the "Russian soul." **Arndt's** translations were more literal, and academic as compared to **Vladimir Nabokov's** translations that were more colloquial and loose. According to **Bill's** story, the two "vied, sparred and spate at one another" about their disparate approaches. So **Bill** finds himself studying Russian from **Arndt**. "**Arndt** used to send us (seven Russian lit types and me, a, pardon the word, mere historian) to the board with a quatrain, drawn by chance, chalk and a dictionary." We worked, I sweated, and he reviewed the work. Gazing at mine, **Arndt** said, "**Mr. Lavery?**" "Sir," I said. "You have the soul of an ox." "Yes, sir," I said. "End of the story." 🍷

Little Red Herrings — We're All Me-ists Now.

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

In a widely and rightly reviled movie, *Wall Street*, **Michael Douglas** plays a sinister character by the name of **Gordon Gekko**. The movie is hardly subtle (get it? Gecko, evil, lizard-like? This was before the Geico commercials made them lovable) and is silly in the extreme. But in one particularly ham-fisted scene, the reptilian Gecko proclaims to a bunch of servile wannabes that "Greed is Good." The scene is supposed to send theatergoers running from the movie screaming, and if shown following the current economic meltdown, might well end in a melee. **Madoff** notwithstanding, today's culture is worse. As I contemplate the "Decade of Greed" as the eighties is called, I find myself longing wistfully for them if today's "Digital Me Decade" is the replacement.

How can that possibly be, you ask? The rapid and furious demise of so many national newspapers set me to thinking about all of this (or as some of you are muttering, set me off). One by one, some of this country's greatest newspapers are going the way of all flesh, or the way of all pulp, or whatever you want to call it: they're going the way of the dustbin, and I for one am crying in my beer (actually it's a glass of Chateau Lafite Rothschild,

but beer, not wine, made the metaphor). We're losing, and have lost, vast numbers of newspapers, and we're all going to be the worse for it. What's replacing them is what some blithely refer to as "a different medium, the Web" but what **Nicholas Negroponte** has more accurately called the "Daily Me." The Daily Me is a series of RSS feeds (perhaps that first "s" stands for "stupid" and not "simple") that literally "feed" our biases. We're all me-ists now.

I find the loss of papers and their ersatz digital replacements very troubling and began digging about for research when I ran across **Nicholas Kristof's** *New York Times* op-ed, "The Daily Me" (March 19, 2009). **Kristof** and I are on the same page. Newspapers are dying, reporters are losing their jobs, and we, the public, are losing something very valuable: balance, thought, mental challenge. In place of all that, we're getting a confirmation of our most brittle myopias.

You can read **Kristof's** op-ed, so I won't repeat it here. What I suspected and feared, **Kristof** confirmed. People who surf the Web for news are really looking for something with which they agree, not something to stretch their minds or cause them to reconsider long held and possibly erroneous views. It's hard to

avoid if you read a newspaper. Whether you're conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Independent, apolitical, religious, atheist or what-have-you, you're going to be confronted with a different view in a good newspaper.

Please note the modifier. I know only too well that newspapers across the country ride their own ideological hobbyhorses. But even in the most slanted of them, you're going to find something that makes you pause and think again. In today's sound bite, eye-byte, twitting [sic] world, that's about all we can hope for. And it isn't a bad thing, either. It's never too late to reconsider your views, whatever they are, if only to be confirmed that you're holding them in the brightest possible illumination of mind that you can. **Owen Barfield**, an Inkling and a close friend of **C. S. Lewis**, contended that once you think you have all the faith-belief stuff down pat and are pretty certain of where you stand and what you think, that's a good time to throw it all away and start over again. This is not a bad view for the most tightly held of ideals. It's fine if you end right back there, and chances are you will if it's one of life's verities. But human frailty and endless penchant for error can never be underestimated.

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