

Thoughts on Translation

Yoshimoto Mahoko

For a long time I have wondered why we can enjoy music, fashions, and movies from around the world nearly at the same time as anywhere else, while there is always a considerable time lag before books that are successful abroad come slowly into our midst. In our rapidly moving world, I like the slow pace of translation, which can assure one of producing quality work; therefore, the anxious process of awaiting publication can itself be rewarding when the book is published.

In translation, the translator is everything. Over the years, I have been fortunate to have my work translated by many fine translators even though I don't speak a word of their language. The translators are of different nationalities, genders and personalities, yet they all seem to share a certain talent. They share their love of Japan and their deliberate choice to learn Japanese, knowing it would not be easy. But, there is something more—a certain skill for rendering subtleties of meaning. The depth of understanding that translators display has often made me wonder whether they possess some kind of supernatural power.

I should clarify that I am speaking here of my own novels. Other writers seek translators most suited to their work. My writing contains many subtle uses of the language. I don't mean they are littered with proper nouns familiar only to Japanese (just as Stephen King's novels are filled with brand names of American products). My message is very clear, but I weave together many bits of information and images, which makes translation difficult.

A professional is truly amazing—they will take my words and spin a magic in their own language that replaces them with the appropriate wordings and expressions in the reader's language. When I see this, I feel the translator and I

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have encountered each other deep within my stories and shared something significant. Often a translator will say, "When I first read the story I didn't understand it, but after translating it, I do." When two people join in the task of spinning out the same story, a depth can be achieved that does not seem quite of this world. If my stories were alive, I think it can be said that they are reborn in translated form with the same spirit that sustains the original.

The world is closely linked today. I once traveled to Italy with an editor who had (for some reason) made a cameo appearance in the movie "Topaz," directed by well-known novelist Murakami Rytí. The film had just opened in Italy and his wild performance had made a deep impression on the hearts not only of Japanese, but of Italian viewers as well. Countless people stopped him on the street saying, "Hey, you're the guy in that movie" or "Haven't we met before?" What an amazing age this is, when we can communicate on a global scale, almost simultaneously.

I would not want to rely on simultaneous interpretation, which usually turns out to be pretty uninspiring, but I would like to see more Japanese novels translated into other languages, at least as often as foreign novels are translated into Japanese. Just as national borders no longer stand in the way of people meeting face to face, I hope that writers of all kinds can find translators they are compatible with and that Japanese fiction can be introduced to other countries in a natural form.