

What we gain in translation

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Reading the world



In my thirties, I over-ambitiously tried my hand at translating one of Rabindranath Tagore's more complicated novels from Bengali into English. I read voraciously in both languages — how hard could this be? Two weeks later, I was suitably chastened. I slunk back to my own writing, with far more respect for the fiendishly tricky art of the translators who made the works of Pushkin, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez and others so accessible in English.

Memories of that experience came flooding back with the announcement of the winner of the Man Booker International Prize, which was awarded on Tuesday night to the Omani author Jokha Alharthi for her novel *Celestial Bodies*. Set against the backdrop of a country redefining itself after colonialism, the novel tracks the stories of love, slavery, emigration and rapid change affecting women.

The award is a double first: Alharthi is the first female Omani novelist to be translated into English; she is also the first author from the Gulf to win the Man Booker International. The judges praised the novel's "delicate artistry" and the way Alharthi drew readers into a "richly imagined community" — one that for many of us will have been completely unknown.

That we are able to access this was thanks to Marilyn Booth, the translator who shared the £50,000 prize with Alharthi. When it was established in 2016, the Man Booker International set the rare precedent of splitting the prize money between author and translator, honouring and giving equal importance to the creative labours of both.

This is undoubtedly the right step. For me, one of the lures of the prize is that it is a reminder of the opportunities translators give me to roam far more widely than I ever could if I narrowed my reading of international fiction only to works originally written in English. This year's longlist ran to 13 titles from a wide range of languages — taking in Spanish, Arabic, French, Korean, German, Swedish, Polish, Dutch and Chinese — introducing their home cultures and voices to new audiences.

In the UK's literary fiction market, there seems to be a greater appetite for translated works these days, with surveys indicating a steady rise in sales — from Norwegian crime writer Jo Nesbo to French literary sensation Leïla Slimani.

Looking more closely at how this is made possible, it's striking that the process followed by great translators parallels that of writers. Translators are shadow writers, co-creators in another language. Edith Grossman, translator of Cervantes, told one interviewer: "You have to hear the original voice in a profound way, and then find the voice in English that best reflects that original. It's always difficult, challenging and immensely enjoyable."

García Márquez, paying tribute to Gregory Rabassa's pitch-perfect translations of his novels, understood what it took to re-create a book in another language. "That's why I have such great admiration for Rabassa," he told the *Paris Review* in 1981. "The impression one gets is that the translator read the book and then rewrote it from his recollections."

There are other writerly techniques. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, translator of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over The Bones of the Dead*, shortlisted for this year's Man Booker International, is not alone in carrying snippets in her bag, scribbling solutions as they come to her. Meanwhile, Ann Goldstein, translator of books by Elena Ferrante and Primo Levi, has an equally writerly process — typing out a fast first draft, and then a second, a third, a fourth, as many as the book requires.

Sam Taylor, who has translated books such as Slimani's *Lullaby* and Antoine Leiris' *You Will Not Have My Hate*, speaks eloquently about the emotion behind translating. "Part of what you're translating is the indefinable spark that pulses beneath the words, and if the book doesn't affect you emotionally, it's more difficult to render that spark into English."

I'm fortunate that I can also read Bengali and Hindi (I struggle with Sanskrit and can read Urdu, Oriya, Malayalam and Tamil books only in translation). For many who read in India, switching from the river of one language to the streams of another feels natural; the same might be said of many readers in Africa, continental Europe or Latin America. That more English speakers are reaching for the same fluidity is a tribute to the work of the world's translators.

The benefits of this are obvious. To quote one of Alharthi's memorable lines, beautiful rendered into English by Booth and singled out by the judges: "We get to know ourselves better in new, strange places."