

An Interview with Literary Translator Charlotte Collins



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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Before becoming a literary translator Charlotte Collins worked as an actor and radio journalist in both Germany and the U.K. She was asked to write a reader's report for Picador of Robert Seethaler's novel *A Whole Life* and she became so enthusiastic about the book that the publisher was convinced and bought the rights. Her translation of *A Whole Life* was shortlisted for the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. Charlotte Collins will be speaking at [International Translation Day](#) at the British Library in London on September 30th, 2016. She answered the following questions for Bookwitty.



You translate from German to English--how did you become acquainted with this language?

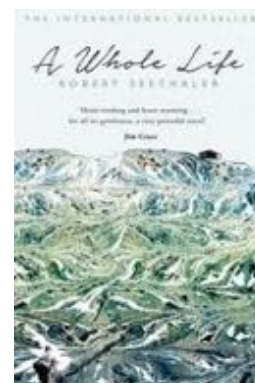
I did German A level at school, but decided to study English Literature at university rather than Modern Languages. Then I went to drama school, after which one of my first jobs was a tour of Germany. I met someone there, and stayed on, first in Munich, then in Cologne, where I worked as an editor for DW Radio. It was through total immersion that I became fluent.

You're fairly new at translating literary fiction: your first book was Robert Seethaler's *A Whole Life*. Was it overwhelming to experience such immediate success?

Not overwhelming – the success is the book's rather than mine, though of course it's wonderful to be a part of it. I'd describe it as surprising, exciting, deeply satisfying.

How did you approach translating *A Whole Life*? Did you first seek the tone?

As I do any literary translation – sentence by sentence, trying to shape it as precisely as I can, to be as faithful as possible to the author's meaning and intention while giving it space to flow smoothly and sound good in English. The challenge with *A Whole Life* was to recreate the spare and simple prose, but ensure that it was also robust enough to convey the profundity. It was vital that it should not come across as banal, so yes, tone was very important. I worked hard to polish each phrase, each sentence, each paragraph, balancing each section within the whole.



Did you work closely with the editor on the translation? With the author? Does he speak English?

Kate Harvey, who commissioned me to translate *A Whole Life*, is a wonderful editor. She really loved the book, and edited the translation very sensitively. We conferred

about every detail. It also had a great copy editor; he clearly had some knowledge of German because he was able to cross-check things with the original.

Robert actually speaks far better English than he thinks he does! He's pretty fluent. However, as a writer who agonises over every sentence, he understandably doesn't feel comfortable expressing himself in English – especially in formal situations like interviews. We didn't work together on *A Whole Life*; there were just a couple of small points where I asked him to clarify his intention to help me make the right choices in English. I did have quite a few questions about another book of his that I've translated, *The Tobacconist* (published in English this October), and he was happy to answer those by e-mail.

How is working on a book different from a play or an essay?

Well, a book is a lot longer, for a start! You have to learn to pace yourself, and I guess that comes with practice. But the length means you can really immerse yourself in it; you enter deeper and deeper into the world of the book. I love that. When I'm right inside, the translation starts to flow almost of its own accord – the first draft, anyway.

Translating articles and essays is generally much faster, because you don't have to be quite as attentive to voice and tone. You may have to do quite a lot of research, though; or they may use dense academic or specialist language. I love translating plays, and it's always a treat when I get to sections of dialogue in a novel. Because of my background in theatre, radio and voice-over, I feel very at home with words that are written to be spoken.

You've been working on some other books, one of which is a co-translation. Have you ever co-translated anything before? What do you think of the experience?

I'm co-translating Nino Haratischwili's *The Eighth Life* with Ruth Martin, for Scribe UK. It's 1,275 pages, and I didn't feel I could manage that all by myself! Ruth and I also worked with Shaun Whiteside on a co-translation of Frank Schätzing's *Breaking News*, but the publisher only required a draft of that (as the basis for a screenplay), so we didn't do any collaborative revision.

Ruth and I met a few years ago at the [BCLT summer school](#). We worked together on an extract from one of Nino's earlier books, and realised that we shared a very similar approach. I wanted to work with her on *The Eighth Life* because I thought it would be fun, and it really is. We each translate our respective sections, then hand over to the other, who has free rein to edit, make comments, suggest alternatives. It's fantastic having someone I trust, and who's on such a similar wavelength, go over my work with a fresh eye in such detail. I'd say we probably accept about 98% of each others' edits. I was worried that it might be slightly painful, but I actually find it really exciting. By the time we've finished it's not a question of who translated which section; every page is a joint effort.

As a translator, have you participated in literary appearances and festivals? Is this a role that you enjoy playing, as opposed to translators a mere ten years ago, who were mainly invisible?

I've done a couple of events at the Edinburgh International Literary Festival, and there were a few more around the Man Booker International shortlisting. Next month I'm doing a workshop at a school as part of its literary festival.

I think it's really important for us to get out there and make people aware of what we do. It's a fascinating thing, after all, for people to consider that the book they're reading was written by the author in one language, then completely rewritten by the translator in another. Most people outside the profession have never really given much thought to that process.

I'd never done any public speaking at all before last year, and was very nervous about it, but so far, to my surprise, I've enjoyed it. I think it's fantastic that literary translators are gradually becoming more visible, and are being invited to speak at these sorts of events. It validates our work, not just as individuals – it raises the profile of the profession and helps people understand what is involved. Good translation is, by its nature, transparent, but I see no reason why that should mean the translator should also be invisible.

Do you feel that English-speaking readers are more open to literature in translation now?

It certainly seems so. We've had the dreaded 3% statistic hanging over us for years, and we're often told how hard it is to persuade people to read books in translation. The recent Nielsen Report really put paid to that. The percentage of literary fiction published in translation has risen only slightly since 2001 (3.5% in 2015) – yet that tiny number of books manages to account for 7% of sales in literary fiction, and 5% of fiction overall! This proves that there's a good appetite for fiction in translation, and that well-chosen books can sell extremely well. I hope it's going to be an incentive for publishers to go out and buy more foreign fiction – we're hungry for those stories.

In collaboration with Free Word, Words Without Borders and English PEN in celebration of International Translation Day

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