



# An Interview with Literary Translator Deborah Smith



By [Olivia Snaije](#)

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Credit: Neil Hall/REUTERS

Deborah Smith, age 28, burst onto the literary translation scene this year when her translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* won the 2016 Man Booker International

Prize. In 2010 she began learning Korean and started an MA in Korean Studies, which led straight to a Korean literature PhD. Concerned with literary translation and underrepresented languages in English, in 2015 she founded a publishing company called [Tilted Axis Press](#). The first translations published will be from Bengali and South Korean, followed by Indonesian, Thai, and Uzbek. Deborah Smith kindly answered some questions for Bookwitty:

**You have expressed quite candidly how your choice to study Korean was a very rational one because it is a niche language with a flourishing publishing industry, and you thought there would be more opportunities. How have you felt about the language as you have progressively gotten closer to it?**

I still don't feel any especial affection or closeness to the Korean language itself, if that's what you mean. I love, and find a great deal of joy in, the texts I translate, the process of translation, working with language, etc, but when I think of 'language', I'm thinking of the English language. Perhaps it's the only language I'll ever know well enough to truly love.

**Has it overwhelming to have such tremendous success with a translation so early in your career?**

Yes it has. Particularly in South Korea itself, which I visited around a month after the Man Booker International award, and where I actually got recognized in the street. It's a tricky balance to strike, because on the one hand you feel like if you've been lucky enough to have been given this platform, you have the responsibility to use it to try and benefit translation and translators more widely. On the other, prizes which single out one book or individual are already sufficiently distorting as it is, you don't want to exacerbate that by setting yourself up as some kind of authority. Or by hogging the metaphorical microphone.



**Is it more difficult for a translator of "rarer" languages to pitch editors at publishing houses? How do you go about doing that?**

No, it's easier. I would never have had the success I've had if I was translating from a less "rare" language. I'm not sure how to answer the other part. I just pitch them.

**What was the motivation behind opening your own publishing house? How did you get the funding? Where do you see the Tilted Axis five years from now?**

The motivation to start a press focusing on Asian languages was essentially the same as the motivation to translate from one: the suspicion / knowledge that there are many incredible books out there that are far less likely to make it through into English purely because of the language they're written in, which was both a bias to redress and a niche to exploit. Our core funding comes from Arts Council England, but we've also secured translation funding for individual books from English PEN, the Daesan Foundation, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, and others. To be still going five years from now, without having compromised on our goals of fostering diversity and inclusivity, will be a success in itself.

**Is there one type of fiction that you prefer translating? Or do you like to alternate between styles and forms?**

I pretty much only translate two authors, Han Kang and Bae Suah, and I'd be more than happy to just continue doing books by them for the foreseeable future. I'm lucky enough to have found supportive editors for both who want to publish them continuously, and like most South Korean authors, they're incredibly prolific - a book a year is the norm - so it's feasible. But other translators seem to find this a strange idea, and usually advise me not to limit myself.

The two are different in many ways - Bae is more experimental, with her prose informed by her work translating German literature into Korean - but they're both highly literary writers. So if that's a 'type' then yes, that's my one preference, partly because it's what I personally enjoy as a reader and partly because it's what I'm good at. For instance, the more literary / experimental / unconventional the language, the less it matters that I know Korean primarily as a written, literary language. I don't think I'd be any good at translating work which took its cues from the way people

really speak, because I haven't lived in Korea and don't know colloquial Korean well at all.

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

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### Olivia Snaije

Olivia is a journalist and editor and manages the editorial content for Bookwitty in English. She is based in Paris.

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