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Interview: Charlotte Mandell on Translating Compass

By [Olivia Snaije](#)

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This article is part of a series of interviews with the translators of the books on the [Albertine Prize 2018](#) shortlist.

Charlotte Mandell, photo Tim Davis

Charlotte Mandell has translated over 40 books from French to English, including work by Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Jules Verne, Guy de Maupassant, Marcel Proust, Maurice Blanchot, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Jean-Luc Nancy, Mathias Énard and Jonathan Littell. Her translation of Mathias Énard's *Compass* was shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker International Prize. She lives in the Hudson Valley with her husband, the poet Robert Kelly.

You translated Mathias Énard before—his massive, stream of consciousness, *Zone*. What were the similarities and differences with *Compass*?

Actually I translated two Énard books before *Compass*: *Zone* and *Street of Thieves*, both very different. And I've just finished a fourth for publication (by Fitzcarraldo in the

UK and New Directions in the US) next year, called *Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants*, about Michelangelo being commissioned by the Sultan of Constantinople to design a bridge over the Golden Horn.

Both *Zone* and *Compass* are told from the point of view of a single narrator over the course of a set period of time: one night for *Compass*, the time of the train ride from Milan to Rome for *Zone*. And both involve extensive interior monologue (Franz Ritter's narration in *Compass* does have sentences, but they have the same dreamy, run-on feeling as the narrator's thoughts in *Zone*). And both *Zone* and *Compass* contain a sort of surrealistic dream sequence, when the narrators fall asleep for a brief period – those were some of my favorite parts in each book. (Both dreams involve some kind of mode of transportation: an ocean liner for *Compass*, a train for *Zone*.)

But *Zone* is very different from *Compass*: as a former soldier, Francis Mirković, the narrator of *Zone*, isn't nearly as erudite or well-read as the scholar Franz Ritter in *Compass*, so the references in *Zone* have more to do with wars that have happened in the past, and with the war criminals that Mirković has been researching. Whereas Franz has one true love with whom he is obsessed, Francis had many love affairs, none of them very lasting. The narrative voices in both novels are radically different from each other.

Like *Zone*, *Compass* is packed with references-in particular about music and art. Did you need to do much research and if so, what were some of the books you used, or websites that you consulted?

For the music, YouTube was a huge help; but since I grew up listening to classical music, the musical references weren't as bewildering to me as they might have been for someone new to classical music. (There was one piece of music with which I wasn't familiar – a waltz that Sarah liked, "Sarah's theme," for flute and cello, which I found out recently was composed by Mathias himself, and exists only on paper!)

The internet was immensely helpful in researching all the texts mentioned in the book. Fortunately most of the Arabic texts referenced, like al-Shidyaq's *Leg Over Leg* and Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, have been translated, and can be looked up online. My old copy of FitzGerald's *Rubayat* of Omar Khayyam was helpful for reference.

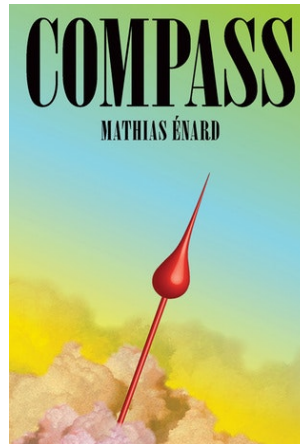
The story takes place in one night but it is the story of an entire life—was it difficult to get the rhythm, and is this shortened yet compact time frame easier or more difficult to work with?

It was difficult at first, since Franz has such a distinctive narrative voice, but after about 50 pages I felt I had slipped into his skin, and the voice came more naturally.

Translation is such an interesting exercise in inhabiting other characters, other voices, until you make them your own. It's one of the reasons I like translating so much: I can shed my ego completely and become someone else, for the duration of a novel.

You have translated Tunisian author Abdelwahab Meddeb, did your knowledge of the Arab world help with the subsequent translations of Énard's books?

I think Meddeb's interest in Sufi literature might have helped me when I was translating *Compass*, since Sufi thought and mysticism are so important in the novel. Henry Corbin, Sohrawardi, Rimbaud were all important to Meddeb, and influenced his work as much as they did Énard's.



[Compass, by Mathias Énard](#)

What stood out most to you in terms of originality in this work?

The novel resembles an intricate tapestry in the way it weaves together scholarly references with intense eros: Ritter's thirst for knowledge is almost as intense as his love for Sarah, the other main character in the book. Mathias has called the book "a thousand nights in one" – just as the *Thousand and One Nights* allows its narrator to live through telling stories, so *Compass* returns its narrator to life through his endless quest for love and knowledge. As I was translating the book I could see the patterns start to emerge, as in a tapestry, and I found that intricacy and detail and harmony thrilling, and enthralling.

I read in an interview that you don't read a book before you begin translating it. Was this the case with *Compass* as well?

Yes, it's the case for every book I translate! I wouldn't be able to translate a book if I read it beforehand—I would probably just give up in despair. I feel I'm more a part of the creative process when I haven't read the text beforehand, since it's taking shape as I write, the way a book does for the author. Of course when it's done I go back and revise, and revise, and revise, but there's nothing like the thrill of translating a book and not knowing what comes next.

Do you work closely with Énard on your translations of his books?

Generally I try not to ask Mathias too many questions while I'm translating the book, since I like to be alone with the text during the translation process—it's usually afterwards that I'll ask him anything I'm unsure about. If I have a question I'll text him through WhatsApp and he'll usually answer right away.

It almost feels like there are two way of reading *Compass*—one which would be for the pure pleasure of reading, and accepting that some of the numerous historical, cultural and geographical references will remain unexplored, and another, much more academic reading of the book for which one would stop and investigate the references one doesn't know-would you agree?

Yes, I think that's right. When I read *Finnegans Wake* I was mostly just interested in the play of language, so I didn't read the notes on it—I wanted to be open to whatever images the text caused to arise in my head. One can read *Compass* in the same way, enjoying the complexity of the sentences and the imagery it evokes. One can also be intrigued by certain references—Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, in my case—and want to read just those texts, without looking up every reference mentioned.

Fitzcarraldo has made things a little easier by supplying a playlist: <http://blog.fitzcarraldoeditions.com/Compass-playlist/>

and the lovely *Public Domain Review* has supplied a list of texts: <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/texts-in-mathias-enards-Compass/>

How would you describe Énard's writing within contemporary French fiction?

History, as well as current political events, play a huge role in all of Énard's novels; Énard has a masterful way of making history personal, so that it influences not just the way a character thinks but also the way he acts, the way he writes, the way he imagines. History shapes Énard's

characters in a profound and convincing way. A few other French authors (Christophe Claro and Jonathan Littell come to mind) are able to do this, but I think Énard stands out in his universality: his novels are not quintessentially ‘French’.

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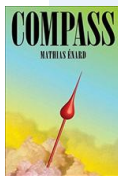
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