

Translator Steph Morris, interviewed by Sarah Robinson

Full, unedited version.

**How did you get into translating and how has your career unfolded?** I'd always written in one form or another, initially fiction, latterly poetry, so after I moved to Berlin in 2001 and learned German, I began translating. I'd done a lot of creative writing workshops and could string a halfway decent sentence together, a skill not universally demonstrated at the time, compensating for any German-language proficiency I still lacked. I know some translators suffer from isolation but in my case I was part of communities from the start and always have been. I joined networks of general/commercial translators and soon scooped up all the arty, obscure, left-field, intellectual work no-one else wanted. I declared a moratorium on visual art texts later but still translate for the Pina Bausch Foundation and Tanztheater Wuppertal, for Swiss contemporary jazz label Intakt, and other high-brow institutions. My first degree was in fine art, and I managed to turn this potentially disadvantageous qualification into a USP. Now I'd actually say creativity is an essential qualification. That said, in the early days, to prove myself, I sat the rigorous Diploma in Translation. I had joined a class to prepare for it, which later I was to teach. Workshops and peer feedback have been crucial to my development. I run a monthly workshop in London and I hope to get back into translation teaching soon.

**What have been your most enjoyable translation projects?** Given the above, it's been a pleasure to translate novels by Martin Suter, well-crafted stories without avant garde pretensions. Otherwise the most enjoyable job has been my latest, Brigitte Reimann's diaries, Vol. II. [see page XX] It's rare to feel people urgently need to read the text you're translating, that it will provide unique insights and change their lives and they would be deprived without your work. This is stuff you just couldn't know without reading German, about what it was like to be a woman, an artist, a citizen, in 1960s East Germany.

**Do you have a favourite translated work by somebody else?** Thomas Warburton's translation of Tove Jansson's *Tales from Moominvalley*.

**What advice or tips would you give to new translators?** You need confidence, both interpersonally, to assert yourself as a freelancer, and creatively, to assert your interpretations of literary texts and the language you've chosen to recreate them in. You need lateral, creative thinking as well as its opposite, straight-up precision, and a lot of brains in general, which begs the question why you would do such an ill-rewarded job – so make sure you love it! In the literary sector there are already too many excellent translators chasing too few jobs, and you might become my competitor, but I would never discourage someone with clear talent! And the good news is that generally, outside of literature, there is heaps of work translating from German, so you can diversify. The same skills are rewarded and the money is better.

**Does being European form part of your identity? What does it mean to you?** I'm 'from' a continent, not a country. I spent around a quarter of my life in Berlin, Germany, and I have an NRW thing going on, with the EÜK in Straelen, Wuppertal etc. I've also spent time in Granada, Spain. I am 'from' those places in proportion to the amount of time I've spent there. I don't have one national identity any more than I have one regional identity (part midlands, part London, pinch of Yorkshire and Somerset). I get Fernweh; I feel trapped on this island and relieved to be on the mainland, free to roam the Schengen zone. Then I miss the island.

**Does this European identity come into play in your translation work?** I'm at home in the German writing I translate, or transported to a place I'm curious to visit, and I hope to make my readers at home in my English translations, or make them want to travel there.

**You are often in Europe for your travels, how do you view Europe now and has your view of it changed?** I feel quite 'use it or lose it' about mainland Europe now – feeling the need to visit often. CBT discourages regret, but, well, I could have applied for dual UK-German citizenship while I was living there. It didn't seem necessary. But I grew up with the iron curtain drawn, in the era before cheap flights, so I'll adapt to any, ahem, changes. Being a Brit on the continent has become awkward for new reasons. We've embarrassed ourselves, but embarrassment is the least of it; I've actually heard people of colour in Spain discussing whether it's safe to come here any more. Still I've been warmed that old friends and colleagues in Germany and throughout the continent have made me feel welcome and at home. There's a sense our connections are more important than ever.

**Finally, is there anything else you would like to add for the piece that we perhaps haven't covered so far?** Am I available? Yes, thanks for asking. I'm in the market for another book shortly. I've got various arts projects and poetry translations on the go, but a tightly woven, gripping but literary novel would hit the spot.