

There's a "sense of momentum with German literature at the moment, a recognition that there are stories to be told and excellent story-tellers to tell them". Rebecca Morrison, Editor of the London-based publication *New Books in German*, is assessing the achievements of this twice-yearly showcase for (mostly) contemporary German literature now that it has entered its second decade. For *NBG*, as it is known, was founded in 1996 and each issue coincides with the Frankfurt or London Book Fair.

Published by the British Centre for Literary Translation, it is supported financially by the Austrian, German and Swiss foreign ministries, the Austrian Cultural Forum, Switzerland's Pro Helvetia, the Goethe-Institut in London and Munich, and the Frankfurt Book Fair, and has been accompanied since 1999 by a website (www.new-books-in-german.com). It publishes reviews of German-language titles thought to have translation potential, plus information on prizes and background articles. The key aspect of the reviews is that they, and the selection process adopted from the outset, are impartial. "We're trying to hand-pick titles that might have a chance in an incredibly tricky market," Morrison explains. "We're not dreamers or idealists; we realize that not every title published in German will stand a chance. But our role is also to inform, and I feel it's extremely important to

Child by Jenny Erpenbeck (Portobello, which will publish her *The Book of Words* in December). Then 50% of the Marsh Award for Children's Literature shortlist was by German writers: Cornelia Funke, Lilli Thal and Kai Meyer, whose *The Flowing Queen* (Egmont), translated by *NBG* adviser Anthea Bell, was the eventual winner.

Morrison, *NBG*'s steering and editorial committees, and its readers' panel are entitled to be proud that "we can look forward in 2008 to publication in English of a swathe of titles featured in our Autumn 2006 issue", the bumper tenth anniversary issue launched at last year's *Messe*. These include Thomas Glavinic's *The Work of the Night*, due from Canongate, Ilija Trojanow's *The Collector of Worlds* (Faber) and Sasa Stanisic's *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson). Moreover "nearly all the shortlisted titles for the 2006 German Book Prize, and a couple on the long list, have been picked up by British publishers".

Morrison dedicated the anniversary issue to Rosemary Smith, *NBG*'s first editor, for having "turned what might have been a worthy day-dream into reality". What were her own credentials for taking on what she clearly feels is a stimulating and worthwhile assignment?

A Scot from Aberdeen, she "came to German literature as a student of French and German at Oxford", moving after graduation to Berlin, following a year in Regensburg, where she

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Not lost in translation

Vivienne Menkes meets Rebecca Morrison, editor of New Books in German, as she reflects on its first, successful decade

show the breadth of what's being written in German." There has always been an emphasis on "debuts or new voices", and on smaller publishers. She gives the example of *Der Perfekter Kellner* by Alain Claude Sulzer, published by tiny Epoca in Zurich (which flourishes thanks to P G Wodehouse translations). Having featured in *NBG* in 2005, it was sold to Bloomsbury, which will publish it next year as *The Perfect Waiter*.

Although aimed primarily at editors in English-language houses, which may be prepared to publish translations but need help in selecting titles suitable for their market, *NBG* has become increasingly international. The magazine is now translated into Spanish by the Madrid Goethe-Institut and made available online. "This has really opened up the Spanish and South American markets," says Morrison. The Rome Goethe-Institut translates a selection of reviews for its website, as well as sending them as an e-newsletter to Italian publishers and others. "So although most of my Frankfurt meetings are with German-language rights directors, an increasing number are with other European publishers," says Morrison, who will raise *NBG*'s international profile still further by speaking at a podium discussion at the Fair on book prizes and their influence on rights sales.

Her upbeat stance is clearly well founded: the website is now averaging 450,000 hits a quarter; and this year has produced some real successes, starting with the appearance on the long list for the *Independent Foreign Fiction Prize* of two German-language titles: Eva Menasse's *Vienna* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), an *NBG* discovery which went on to reach the shortlist; and *The Old*

was "introduced to a lot of German theatre and did a lot of reading". She also spent much time listening to music, and remarks: "A lot of people come to German through music." Berlin was her home, with interruptions, for seven years. In 1997 she changed countries again, becoming editorial assistant and German reader at New York publishers Arcade. After two years she returned to Berlin to join the Eggers & Landwehr Agency, as well as translating from German part-time. "Agenting was still so new in Germany," Morrison explains. "Eggers & Landwehr was only eight years old, yet it was one of Germany's older agencies." Her job included attending readings and "being almost a talent scout, seeing what might translate into published form. Writers such as [Russian-born] Wladimir Kaminer, who's been published by Ebury, came up through the readings scene, which was fantastic in Berlin."

Armed with this experience, she set up her own Berlin agency in 2001, with an Indian list (she was representing Penguin India and OUP) and one Polish client. Fortunately Znak in Krakow published Pawel Huelle, whose *Mercedes-Benz* (Serpent's Tail in Britain, Beck in Germany) "financed the office for the first year". But by 2003 she was ready to move back to Britain: "I'd always wanted to live in London. It's such a huge draw for anyone interested in books and publishing." Living by translating and writing reports on German books, she became a reader for *NBG* and, in 2005, Editor. She is clearly well suited to the job.

Stand 5.0/E955. Rebecca Morrison will take part in a discussion on book prizes at 3pm today in the International Centre

Morrison: reviews titles with translation potential

