



Katharina Bielenberg, Associate Publisher at MacLehose Press, talks to NBG

Interview with **Hannah Weatherill**

The Backstory

'It seemed quite natural for me, with three German grandparents and an outlook towards Europe, to join a publisher that specialised in translations', recalls the publisher Katharina Bielenberg, and after stints with the literary scout Koukla MacLehose and Penguin, she joined Christopher MacLehose at Harvill Press in 1994. She has since co-translated Daniel Glattauer's epistolary novels with husband Jamie Bulloch, and she also stresses the collaborative aspect of her work at MacLehose Press, an imprint of Quercus. As well as working with authors and translators, her role involves acting as liaison between MacLehose Press, publisher Christopher MacLehose and the many departments at Hachette – also internationally – and to be an ambassador for their small list both within the group and as far as possible beyond.

The List

The MacLehose Press motto is 'Read the World'. As such, the vast majority of books on their list are translations, but they are aware that they inevitably fall short of their aim. Instead they hope to be an invitation to read beyond domestic shores, which Katharina believes to be more necessary now than ever. Around a quarter of their titles are crime fiction,

and they have yet to acquire a German crime series, although there are possibilities in the offing. Otherwise, MacLehose publishes two or three German titles a year – this year's crop include Julian Evans' translation of Norbert Gstrein's *A Sense of the Beginning*, a complex and beautiful exploration of political/religious awakening in a troubled young man; and Steven Uhly's *Kingdom of Twilight*, translated by Jamie Bulloch, an 'ambitious but brilliant' sweep of post-war Europe following the lives of a handful of individuals looking for a homeland. As Katharina says, 'both tell us a great deal about Germany, but they also embrace universal themes that are especially relevant today'.

Past, present and future

When Katharina joined Harvill, W.G. Sebald's first English-language publisher, there were comparatively few publishers that specialised in translation. John Calder was one of these, and, like Katharina and literary agent Tanja Howarth, he attended the meeting that led to the founding of NBG back in 1996. Indeed, Katharina went on to be one of the three 'editorial advisors on book selection' for NBG's very first issue in spring 1997.

Now, in large part due to the support of cultural institutes and the EU's Creative Fund,

there are many more flourishing publishers of fine books in translation than there were when NBG was founded, both in the UK and in the US. 'They are our competitors in acquisitions, of course', Katharina says, 'but we look upon them also as partners. There are enough wonderful books to choose from, and between us we aspire to publish the very best'. Katharina hopes that prizes for literature in translation will continue to rise alongside English-language equivalents, and really have an impact on sales through the support of mainstream media, bookshops and individual booksellers passionate about literature from abroad.

Katharina is a passionate believer in the positive impact of translation in society. After all, she says, 'Manja Harari and Marjorie Villiers founded The Harvill Press in 1946 with the aim of rebuilding cultural bridges in a shattered Europe'. In light of what she calls a 'deeply unconvincing and simultaneously disturbing movement to cut political and economic ties with our European neighbours and pull up the drawbridges', she feels that the role of translation houses has become more vital than ever, to encourage us to celebrate our differences, and remind us of what we have in common.