

TRANNET 通信
世界の出版翻訳事情

Polly Barton



I've been translating Japanese for ten years, and by now it seems to me like the least exotic profession imaginable. Which is not to do it a disservice in any way—I love translating to death, and I feel extremely lucky to be doing what I'm doing, but as an activity it feels just as much a part of my life as being part of a certain family, or living in a particular house. Partly, that's just the way life works—even the divinest of houses or dreamiest of partners lose their fantastical sheen after a while—but I believe another big reason for that is that I've been living on and off in Japan since I graduated university, so the practice of moving myself between cultures, and of continually traversing the two languages and carrying across what needs to be taken, has become a major feature of my everyday existence. Translating things written by other people is, if anything, a welcome escape from that—a different voice or set of voices to work with, that enable me to step outside of my own head and into someone else's.

That's not how other people see the profession, though. When I meet people in a non-work related context outside of Japan and tell them what I do, they invariably shoot me a look of incredulity, which gradually subsides into a vague unease or wild-eyed curiosity. In fact, I've come to think that if being a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon is code for being extremely clever, then being a Japanese translator is code for being extremely weird. Quite possibly if you look conceivably Japanese then the reaction is less extreme, but I don't, really.

I've not always been so connected with Japan—in fact, I got off to a late start, in that I only began learning the language after graduating university when I went to teach English on Sado Island, a small and pretty remote island a ways off the coast of Niigata—but I have found that from quite a young age, the choices I make have often been met with befuddlement. In other words, I guess I've always been attracted to things that other people deem too weird to draw close to. I've also always been fascinated with language, and getting right into other people's heads, and I think I've probably always worked hard (or felt like I had to work hard) to make myself understood and others understood. I believe all of those factors set me up for finding translation such a rewarding task.

My first experiences with the act itself were in a small Japanese publishing company I worked for in London after my first sojourn in Japan, where I was put to work translating recipes. I remember at that point, looking up almost literally every other word in a dictionary. And yet somehow, even then there was something about it I found desperately exciting. Having words fed into your brain in one language, and then jiggling them about so that they fed out in another drastically different language felt both somehow radical, like I was somehow drawing close to the essence of expression itself, and suspiciously good fun. And that's what I've been doing more or less since. After being converted in that way of the joys of translation, I did a MA course in the Theory and Practice of Translation at SOAS, part of the University of London, after which I then worked for Nintendo of Europe for a while. During my time there, I was named the winner of the inaugural Translation Competition put on by the Japanese Literature Publishing Project (JLPP), which helped me making the transition through to being a full-time freelancer. I also had tons of help from various BCLT workshops and summer schools and things like that.

I've done all kinds of translations since then—non-fiction, art, academic, games—all of which have their perks, but it's with literary translation or anything approximating it, that I feel most at home. I've read avidly from an early age and books have brought me so much pleasure and insight, so there's something about it which feels in some way like it's what I was born into this world to do. Unlike with writing my own prose, when I'm translating I feel like I'm standing up for another person in my language, which brings not only comfort in numbers, but also stirs up a huge sense of loyalty. I get overtaken by the sense that I have to do this person (book) justice. Ultimately that's what drives me—although the word 'drive' maybe gives a false sense of just how much of a joy it is. When I finally sit down to translate something that I've been meaning to do for a while, I often feel like a great big dog splashing into a river of words, half-frenzied with excitement.

Sometimes it's difficult, of course. When I can't get something right, there's a feeling of having an uncomfortable blockage, like when you can't bring to mind a particular phrase. There are wonderful times when I hit on the ideal word or phrase or sentence, and other less wonderful ones when the perfect solution doesn't exist, at least within my reach, and I have to choose between two or three less than

perfect alternatives. However many times you read your own work, there are also some things that inevitably escape your notice. I've learned through various conferences and professional interactions with other translators how useful it is to get feedback on one's drafts. So often, a second opinion not only serves to solve a particular problem I've been wrestling with, but somehow opens up a window of sky in my brain that then lights up other sections of the translation too. If it's at all possible I always try and consult people—ideally other translators—about any problematic sections in the work that I do before the editing stage.

In 2017, I was lucky enough to have three books I translated published—*Spring Garden*, by Tomoka Shibasaki, published by Pushkin Press, which was my first full length work of fiction, and then two chapbooks in the Keshiki series from Strangers Press, *Friendship for Grown-Ups* by Naocola Yamazaki and *Mikumari* by Misumi Kubo. And then, on the back of the translation of *Mikumari*, I was also awarded a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant, in order to translate the rest of the novel, which I've been working on as of late, and which is finally drawing to a close.

Translating *Spring Garden* was kind of the perfect challenge for me. I enjoyed reading it so much, and found the atmosphere and the pacing of it very alluring, but I also wasn't at all sure initially if I could make it work in English. It was just so quiet and delicate, and so much hung on successfully creating a narrative voice that I didn't really trust myself at first to do it justice. There were also a whole lot of very typical Japanese elements. The idea of circularity and cyclicity is an important theme in the book, and one of the manifestations of this is the constant giving and recycling of presents. This is all tied up with the Japanese culture of *omiyage*, or souvenirs—the idea being that when someone goes away somewhere, she or he will buy presents, usually something edible, for her or his nearest and dearest, and her or his colleagues. It serves as a kind of 'spreading the joy' of having been lucky enough to go to a place—evening things out in some way. Well, in *Spring Garden*, this perpetual exchange is portrayed with a level of true-to-life detail that is both hilarious and tedious. There are these incredibly elaborate descriptions of someone who took a day off work to visit somewhere in Japan where they bought a particular kind of dried fish that is a regional speciality and then went to another part of Japan and bought another kind of *omiyage* and presented them both to his colleagues at work. I must say that when I first read that, my first thought was, Oh Lordy, what on earth am I going to do with it this? Every element of it just felt so specifically Japanese. It was a real trial to get the right balance—to successfully recreate the sense of how incredibly thought-out and intricate it all is while still maintaining interest—in other words, avoiding readers exclaiming "Enough with this dried fish nonsense!" and flinging the book across the room, while still doing the original justice. So one really nice moment for me was when I was speaking to someone who'd read it, and the first thing she said was, "Oh, I loved all the stuff about the regifting of presents, it was hilarious. I've definitely been guilty of that myself." And that was the first time I really realised, yes of course! We do that too in the UK!

Somehow that felt like a revelation that wasn't just specific to that case—another proof that usually, if you dig deep enough, then in most cases you can find if not parallels then at least resonances within the culture or cultures associated with the target language. The task for the translator is to dig really deep, and then bring those resonances in a concise way into her or his translations. Learning to do that proficiently is a lifelong task, and I don't pretend to be anywhere near that yet. But in any case, I feel like I learned an awful lot by translating *Spring Garden*, and also gained a lot of confidence in tackling books that maybe at first blush don't seem like the most translatable texts. I think—I hope—that there's growing interest in those kinds of books, too, from the readers' end—that more and more people are reading in translation because they want to delve into the myriad textures and new experiences offered by writings from other cultures, rather than just finding translated books that read exactly like a book written in English.

In fact, my sense is that translation is really having a heyday in the UK at the moment, and there are all sorts of exciting things going on. There's prizes being set up like the TA First Translation Prize and the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and independent presses like Tilted Axis and Comma Press and And Other Stories that publish lots of translated works, and there are various centres that do lots of translation related stuff, like the Writers' Centre Norwich and Free Word Centre in London. I've just moved back to the UK, after being in Japan for five years, so I'm looking forward to putting that sense to the test, and hopefully contributing to the exciting things going on there.

Polly Barton is a translator of Japanese literature and nonfiction who hails from London. She holds a MA in the Theory and Practice of Translation from SOAS, University of London, and was awarded first prize in the inaugural JLPP Translation Competition for her translations of Natsuki Ikezawa and Kobo Abe. Recent translations include Naocola Yamazaki and Misumi Kubo for the *Keshiki* chapbook series from Strangers Press. Her translation of Tomoka Shibasaki's *Spring Garden* was released by Pushkin Press in 2017. She can be found online at www.pollybarton.net.

Copyright(c) 2018 Polly Barton & TranNet KK all rights reserved



株式会社トランネット
〒106-0046 東京都港区元麻布 3-1-35
VORT 元麻布 4階
<http://www.trannet.co.jp>