

What Can a Translator Do for You?

by Daniel Hahn, Writer, Editor and Translator

What do translators do? Well, mostly we translate. Which is to say, we take a book in one language and write it again in another language, changing all the words but keeping everything else the same. But we do a lot more than that, too, and we can be helpful in ways you might not yet realise.

1. We Discover Books

We read books in our source language, to get a sense of what's out there in the world, what's interesting and what might be worth recommending to our local publishers. Acting as informal, unpaid scouts, if you like. If we come across something we think urgently needs to find a UK home, we might work with the rights-holders to translate a sample of it for them to send to publishers – or we might shop it around ourselves, if we're sufficiently enthused to want to champion it. If you're an Anglophone publisher, we can advise you on what's interesting that's out there; if you're a non-Anglophone publisher keen to sell in, we can advise on the workings of our market and help you find a UK home for your books.

2. We Appraise Books

If you're a UK publisher who has somehow become interested in a foreign-language book but don't read that language yourself, we will read books for you (for a small fee) and write a "reader's report". Our report will summarise what happens in the book, describe what it's like (style, voice, etc.), assess whether it's really good and suggest how it might fit your list and the market you publish in or (occasionally) not.

3. We Make Connections

Our bilingual, bi-cultural access means we can be one of the bridges that enables a foreign book to find a way to its perfect English-language publisher, including through the means described above. If you're a potential acquiring publisher, you'll also want to know that translators, being particularly attached to the literature of certain countries, will also know the relevant national cultural promotional bodies and have contacts with any agencies that might have access to funding. Publishers with extensive experience publishing in translation might know the funding opportunities well; if not, we may be just the people to ask about this, too.

4. We Translate Books

Once you've acquired the book, we translate it for you! (Obviously.)

5. We Do Editorial Work

At editorial stage, we work like any other writer, with comparable expectations – we go back and forth with our editor, we answer copy-editor queries, we read and mark up and sign off our proofs – but we can also be a culturally-aware intermediary with the original author, where required. Books that have already been published in other languages often have relatively light edits in their English translation, but there's nothing to say that if required they can't be quite significant – structural, interventionist – as they can be with any author. As a potential bridge to the foreign-language author, we can help with that. (I've also been known to brief a book's jacket designer, when it was needed at an early stage and I was still the only person in the team who had actually read the book in question.)

Then the book is published! And it is wildly successful! And we all get fabulously rich! The translator included, of course. Because translators do also get royalties, not least because that's what makes it in our interest to help our publishers make the most of the book once it's out in the world – which leads me to . . .

6. We Promote Books (and Translation)

One of the significant shifts in the book-writing life in the last decade or so has been the change in what is expected of an author (audience-building, promotional events, social media presence, etc.) – and a comparable shift is happening with translators. So, with a translated book, you may find you have more than one person able to take on some of those roles. When authors are far away, or non-English-speaking, or somewhat reticent, or entirely dead, the translator can be their stand-in; and when the author is none of those things, the translator can still be a valuable addition to their publicity programme. We can do festival appearances – not just sitting next to the author to hold their hand and act as interpreter (that's a quite different job), but contributing to the conversation in our own right, with our own insights about the book and the translation process itself (you'd be surprised how interested audiences are in this bit). We can do radio, write guest blog posts, do social media promotion or school visits, we can be interviewed by newspapers – all the kinds of things you'd typically hope your author might do, but I've done them all to promote my translations, too.

In short, translators find themselves working as scouts, agents, cultural explainers, advocates, critics, intermediaries, writers, speakers, performers and publicists, and variations on these things and whatever is needed in-between.

(In a good year, we find a bit of time to do some actual translating, too.)



Daniel Hahn is a writer, editor and translator from Portuguese, Spanish and French with some 60 books to his name. His work has won him the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and the Blue Peter Book Award, among others. He is a past chair of the Translators Association and the Society of Authors.

Additional information

Find translators through the following websites:

- WorldKidLit has recommended readers and translators for translating into English: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1lDe-PhWPRZfEuli8Zi_dqiKLaY7Kfx8rjggma05Cas/
- The Bologna Children's Book Fair: <http://www.bolognachildrensbookfair.com/en/focus-on/translators-centre/world-directory-of-childrens-book-translators/world-directory-search/1079.html>
- The Society of Authors: <https://www.societyofauthors.org/Our-Members/Translator-Search>

Information about funding opportunities:

- The most up-to-date information about grants will be available through each country's arts organisation (many of which are provided in these resources). This can be tricky to navigate if you don't speak the language, but you can ask your translator for assistance. Note that for languages that are spoken in multiple countries, you will need to apply for a grant from the institute of the book's country of origin.

Other sources of information:

- Hear more about working with translators and their work through this blog run by a group of children's book translators: <https://worldkidlit.wordpress.com>

Note: all links are correct as of March 2019.