

Japanese author Nobuko Takagi writes with a fluidity that complements the hard, metallic background story about swords and daggers and the families that made them. Her descriptions of sex, especially, sluice through the reader's conscious with careful deftness; American sex rarely appears so wholly, unabashedly pleasurable on the page without devolving into a trite display of flesh.

Like the greatest love stories from around the world, *Translucent Tree* is a sad one. But it's also one that makes

us look inward, to wonder if we too have been lucky enough, willing enough, to welcome the kind of passion that changes us. **F**

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SPEAKING OF WRITING

EVERY OCTOBER PUBLISHERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD gather at the Messe in Frankfurt for the International Book Fair. If you can imagine five football fields (some two stories), arranged by country, filled with booths displaying books from around the world, and jammed with people speaking every language under the sun, you have some idea of the scope of this event. American publishers come to both sell and scout. Most rights managers have been dealing with the same people for years, and after a small introductory courtship dance, books are discussed, both present and future, deals are made and the essentials of a contract are finalized.

The challenge for a small publisher, with few contacts and a small purse, is in the scouting. Every country has its favorite sons and daughters and, by and large, very few are known in the United States, where fewer than three percent of all books published are translated from a foreign language, as opposed to roughly fifteen-twenty percent in the rest of the civilized world. What I have found is that sales figures per se mean nothing; it seems that any author of real merit sells a minimum of 150,000 copies in the Netherlands, but that number doesn't "travel" at all in the US. The question you have to ask is "Who are your best authors, and who will people be reading a decade from now?" And this is a question that can be asked as cogently about the frontlist as the backlist, and is generally one that the better rights directors are eager to answer. Especially from an American. That is how we found our way to Georges Perec, certainly our bestselling foreign author.

This is also how I "discovered" Le Clezio. Gallimard has a literary reputation second to none in France, and when I met with its rights director at the Fair in 1982, I simply inquired who she thought were the best contemporary authors on their list who had never been translated into English and were unknown in America. She suggested three: Sylvie German (a total newcomer), Patrick Modiano (whose work had appeared sporadically in the US) and J.M.G. Le Clezio who had, in fact, been published previously by Atheneum but with the demise of the firm, and its remarkable editors Mike Bessie and Harry Ford, had not been heard from in years. I bought all three. I had long hoped to start a list of uniform books in translation and *The Prospector* was the first book on that infant initiative. It was reviewed occasionally—and sold—marginally. For reasons I have yet to understand, we printed 6,000 copies in hardcover; when the Nobel Prize was announced this year in October, we still had 600 in stock some twenty-five years later. The book was selling at the rate of about twenty copies a year. We never remaindered or overstocked it. We had, by and large, forgotten about it, although we had, most fortunately, contracted for and begun the translation of Le Clezio's masterpiece *Desert* that is due out Spring '09.

What, if anything, does this prove? Perhaps that it pays to listen to the suggestions of smart people, or that working the floor and asking questions is as effective a way of discovering talent as sitting in a booth or a hotel bar and hoping the information will find its way to you. Like all of publishing, it's a crapshoot. In this particular game, we won in the end. But could we have predicted it? Certainly not. Did we expect it? Be serious. It just goes to show that there probably is some justification for publishing what you consider superior fiction and hoping that whatever God there is in heaven will someday throw a favor in your direction.

The Verba Mundi list now has over thirty titles and includes authors as diverse as Aharon Appelfeld, Robert Musil, Isaac Babel, Dino Buzzati, Georges Perec, Anna Seghers, Christa Wolf, and Goran Tunstrom, as well as Le Clezio, Germain, and Modiano. —David R. Godine, Publisher

An excerpt from The Prospector has been kindly provided by David R. Godine and is reprinted on page 42.

