

Translating Culture:

THE WORLD THROUGH INDEPENDENT PRESSES

by Monica Carter

“**A** great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations.” This is a truth as powerful and relevant today as it was when Ezra Pound first said it in 1917. Almost a hundred years later, independent presses strive to nurture a foundation that will be regarded as a “great age of translations.”

Voltaire, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Cervantes, and Proust—these are the names of great writers who wrote great books. These are writers we know. They are taught in schools, stocked at libraries, and sold in bookstores. They are part of our cultural lexicon. And they are all translated.

I can definitively say, and I know that I am not alone in this, that these works have changed my life. They have added richness and texture to my intellectual life, expanded the boundaries of my understanding of the human condition, and inspired periods of self-reflection. They have introduced me to cultures and histories outside of my own point of reference and given me a lifelong passion for reading books about people and places that exist far beyond American borders. I have learned to explore the foreign, to welcome it, to understand it, instead of being intimidated by it.

Because of this love of translated literature, I often wonder what translated works will become part of our cultural lexicon in the future. Considering that only three percent of literature published in the United States is translated, the search for great works from other countries is difficult, if not disappointing, because the major publishing houses are not dedicated to creating and maintaining a global reading culture. Unless a foreign author has a proven sales record in the United States, the possibility of

that author being published here is woefully deficient.

This is where independent presses save the day. Snubbing their noses at the myth that publishing has become another corporate-run establishment destined to snuff out the fires of innovative and risky forms of artistic expression for the sake of profit, independent presses travel abroad to seek out high quality works from international authors and deliver them to loyal American readers who seek them out.

This point was most recently proven when the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to France’s Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, providing a great lift to the independent publishers who had already published his works. University of Nebraska Press, David R. Godine, and Curbstone Press enjoyed sales of Le Clézio’s work due to their own dedication to discovering and promoting quality international literature, not simply by following current market trends. This was also the case when Elfriede Jelinek won the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature—only the British indie, Serpent’s Tail, took a risk on this controversial writer and published her works, long before she was ever discussed as a major contributor to the international literary scene. And what of the now popular Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño? Farrar, Straus & Giroux posthumously published his masterpiece *2666*, but New Directions Publishing recognized his talent from the onset, being the first to publish his work in English, not to mention the current but less marketable *The Romantic Dogs*, a bilingual collection of his poetry.

What’s even more encouraging is that independent presses are surfacing whose primary goal is seek out translated litera-

ture of merit and promote it wholeheartedly. There’s Brooklyn-based Archipelago Books with the mission statement, “a not-for-profit literary press dedicated to promoting cross-cultural exchange through international literature in translation.” And Europa Editions who tout the fact that two-thirds of the books they publish are works of literature in translation. Or how about Open Letter, University of Rochester’s publishing house that prides itself on being “one of only a handful of U.S. organizations with a commitment to cultivating an appreciation for international literature.”

Independent presses give us what is essential in an era of economic and cultural globalization—the chance to improve ourselves and to better understand the world around us through the universal voice of literature. I don’t know where the next Proust hails from or who the current Dostoyevsky is, but I do know if it weren’t for the pioneering efforts of independents, I would never have the chance to find out. **F**

Monica Carter is a writer currently working on a novel, Eating the Apple. She has published short stories with the most recent piece, “Metal”, being published in the 2008 August issue of The Battered Suitcase. A frequent reviewer for the Web sites, Three Percent and Kissed by Venus, Ms. Carter also runs her own blog dedicated to international literature, Salonica. Her interview with Greek writer Amanda Michalopoulou is featured in the issue #22 of Dalkey Archive’s Context magazine. She works at Skylight Books, an independent bookstore in Los Angeles.