



To cite this article:

Savin, Cristina. "Interview with Olivia Hellewell, Literary Translator and Translation Studies scholar." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 16 (December 2021): 55-58.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Interview with Olivia Hellewell, Literary Translator and Translation Studies scholar

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Olivia Hellewell is a translator from Slovene to English of literary fiction, children's fiction, and non-fiction in the field of arts and culture. In 2019, Olivia's translation of an excerpt from Katja Perat's novel *The Masochist* was awarded first prize in Asymptote Journal's Close Approximations translation contest. She is the translator of Goran Vojnović's *The Fig Tree* (Istros Books, 2020) and Dunja Jogan's *Felix After the Rain* (Tiny Owl, 2020). The latter, a children's book, was selected by the Centre for Literary in Primary Education as one of their best books of 2020. Olivia has also translated poetry and short stories from Slovene into English. In 2020 Olivia established the Less Translated Languages Network. More information about her work can be found at <https://www.oliviahellewell.com/>.

Cristina Savin (CS): You gained your Bachelor of Arts in Hispanic Studies and Russian with East European Studies from the University of Nottingham. You then decided to specialise in Slovene language. What made you choose Slovene as your language of focus and become a translator of Slovene literature?

Olivia Hellewell (OH): That degree title remains a bit of a mouthful to this day! In my final year of undergraduate study, it became clear that translation was one of my favourite applications of language; I loved our group Russian translation seminars where everyone would come with their own version and we'd pick a text apart. And there was an Advanced Spanish Translation seminar too, where there was more of a literary focus. It was one of my Russian lecturers who told me about a Postgraduate Diploma opportunity, which was a year-long course available to students of a Slavonic language to take up another. They knew I was interested in pursuing translation, and suggested that adding another language to my skill set could be an advantage. I was applying for graduate jobs, but the Diploma appealed too, and it turned out that I was awarded the funding. So I had the choice of learning Serbo-Croat (as it was then referred to) or Slovene, intensively for one year. I knew very little about either language, so I did a bit of searching and discovered that Slovene had a grammatical dual (in addition to singular and plural forms, there's a separate form to use when describing only two people or objects) and I thought that sounded like a challenge I wanted to get my head around. I really think back though, there was more to it than pure grammatical curiosity... at the time, I think I was still wondering whether a career as a translator in the European Commission might have been an option for me. The fact that Slovene was an official EU language, and Croatian wasn't, at that point, probably helped finalise that decision.

CS: As a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies at the University of Nottingham, you are currently working on a project titled 'Developing the Supply-Driven Translation Model Beyond a Small Nation Context'. Can you tell us a little bit about this project?

OH: The concise answer to this is that it's all about writing up my PhD for publication, and starting to make steps towards taking that research forward. One of the key goals for me during this postdoc was to think about how I can frame my research for a broader Translation Studies

audience, because even though I have written exclusively about Slovene literature in translation, I know anecdotally from other colleagues that what I've observed isn't unique to Slovenia, by any means. Each context has its own specificities, of course, but I'm really interested in opening up that conversation about how literary translations happen when there's no obvious market demand. One of the questions I'm interested in is whether or not efforts to fund and 'supply' literary translations are a preserve of so-called 'small' nations and/or languages much less frequently translated into English, or whether this is actually something that takes place in many literary cultures, regardless of relative size or the perceived cultural capital of a language (and a spoiler: the conference I held as part of my postdoc in 2020, entitled *Supplying Translation*, showed that this really wasn't the case).

CS: I'd like to draw on the intersection between your experience as a translation scholar and your passion for literary translation. How do they inform and influence each other?

OH: As you can see from my first answer, one of the most important influences is that pursuing an academic career created a space in which I could explore literary translation. Whilst it was interactions with translators outside of an academic institution that were probably the most formative (I'm thinking about making train journeys to London for translation events and talks etc), I don't think I would have had the time - or maybe wouldn't have given myself permission? - to pursue that interest if my employment had been elsewhere. I have always loved how translating from Slovene has granted me a critical angle with which to approach theoretical texts - I'm thinking particularly about those you encounter on a syllabus as a student in the UK, such as those you might find in the Translation Studies Reader, edited by Lawrence Venuti, for example. I often found myself thinking 'hang on, I'm not sure it happens like that with Slovene literary translation', and such thoughts, which came from practical experience, led to ideas that I've then been able to explore in my research.

CS: Goran Vojnović's 2016 novel *Figa* has been hailed as 'one of the best Slovenian novels in recent years'. Your translation of *Figa (The Fig Tree)* was published in October 2020 by Istros Books. What attracted you to this book and how was your experience of translating *Figa*?

OH: I suppose first and foremost, I've always been interested in Goran's writing, and the space that he occupies in contemporary Slovene cultural life. As I was learning Slovene, he was one of the first authors I was introduced to, and his first novel had not long been published. When I was a postgrad, our Slovene lecturer at the University of Nottingham invited Goran to come and speak to us, and we translated some excerpts of his novels and essays. Then, many years later, having enjoyed Goran's first two novels, I was in Ljubljana one summer and was able to get my hands on a copy of *Figa*. I started to read it, and was hooked; it was a combination of the familiarity of Goran's style, but a different pace. And I think my spoken language was at a particularly strong point, too, so this confidence in my language and a love of the writing just meant that I devoured this novel. I wrote notes in the margins, I started to hear the character's voices in English, and I wanted to tell my friends and family about it: so I made it known to the publisher that should there ever be an opportunity to translate this book, I would love to be the one to do it.

Perhaps this will change, as I'm sure that future projects - if I'm lucky to have them - will also be memorable, but I have a feeling that translating *The Fig Tree* will always be something that stays with me. Lots of things made it an incredibly rewarding translation experience: first and foremost, it's a great novel, and one that I loved personally. It will never not be a joy to spend time immersed in language and characters that you love! And then it was a process that brought so many other experiences, too: I had the opportunity to work collectively on an excerpt with

a group of brilliant Slovene-English translators, when I based my 2019 British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School workshop around this novel; Goran is a pleasure to work with - so professional, so up for discussing queries and questions, and always good fun to work with at promotional events; and then, to top it all, it was a project that kept me company during some particularly challenging periods of my life, both healthwise and otherwise, including being locked down for the first time during the first months of the pandemic in Spring 2020.

CS: Would you like to give our readers an idea of your current - and future - translation projects?

OH: I fear this answer may be shorter than I would like! I'm currently working on a small side project and am translating some short stories for an anthology. But we're yet to apply for funding, so I can't say too much more. Only that I've been able to choose the author myself, and that was exciting for me (previous projects have often been offered to me, rather than me pitching them to others). At the moment I'm teaching part time at Nottingham University and writing up my PhD research for publication, so unfortunately that doesn't leave much time for translation projects. Lots of dreams, too little time!

CS: In October 2020 you launched a call to the Emerging Translators Network (ETN) to canvass for opinion among translators who translate from languages that are typically not quite as prominent in the Anglophone publishing world. Your call was met with interest and enthusiasm among ETN members and led to the creation of the *Less Translated Languages Network* (LTL Network). Can you give our readers a sense of what the LTL Network is about?

OH: This was an idea that emerged from my residency at the British Centre for Literary Translation. I found, quite often, that in conversations between fellow translator-in-residence William Gregory, and translator and academic Cecilia Rossi, I would interject with points about how translating from a language such as Slovene doesn't necessarily match up with the typical discourse about literary translation. Such as the advice one might encounter at networking events, for example. A lot of what gets said about pitching to publishers, or negotiating fees, for example, could sometimes feel quite distant from the reality that I had experienced as a translator from Slovene. And so much of what motivated me to put out the call on the ETN was wanting to be reassured that I wasn't alone in thinking these things or encountering these challenges... particularly with practical things such as navigating differences in pay, handling the processes that come with being commissioned by a source culture publisher (translating your contract, so that it can be vetted by the Translator's Association, for example) and so it was really heart-warming to receive so many replies. In that sense, it was all about seeking community, and, I suppose, reassurance.

It still feels very early days, and I think that the network may continue to evolve. So far I have really valued our meetings, and have learnt a lot from more experienced colleagues. I guess in that sense, we've thus far been more of a collective: but I think personally I would like it to be more open - perhaps a platform, and a source of information, that others can dip into freely. We shall see.

CS: The members of the LTL Network meet on a regular basis to discuss strategies to promote literature produced and published in less translated languages; and to bring them to an English-speaking readership. One of our strategies is the publication, in the second half of 2022, of a special issue of *The AALITRA Review* to celebrate less translated languages and literatures. We have already received an impressive number of submissions for the special issue, including translations with commentary, research articles and book reviews. The LTL Network is working on a few other strategies to promote authors and translators who work across less

translated languages and literatures. Would you like to give our readers some insight into these strategies?

OH: I think the special issue was a great idea, and I was really excited to hear how many submissions were received. We've otherwise been discussing plans for an anthology of short fiction, perhaps with a specific focus on contemporary authors. This is because one of the things that many translators in the group raised was the fact that it's often "canonical" or "classic" authors that tend to be translated from languages that are less typically the source of literary translations into English. If not much is translated from one particular language, there's a view that what is translated must be somehow 'representative' of that literature, or source culture, even. That's obviously incredibly problematic, and also impossible - but to resist that notion, we want to actively spotlight authors that aren't members of the so-called literary establishment.

Beyond this, I think our future plans still hinge on the problems in defining 'less translated languages'. From my standpoint, being a UK-based translator, with English as my first language and Slovene as my second, a 'less translated language' could basically be any language that isn't English, French or German. Maybe Spanish, too. But how could one network possibly cater to all translators of languages other than those four? So there's something more than the 'less translated' issue that the group is touching on, I think. It's to do with structural questions, it's to do with visibility in the Anglophone publishing world, and so much more. It's a huge question and it's something that I'm sure we'll continue to discuss for many more meetings to come. Questions about what the network is, how it can be useful to all kinds of different people working under such specific conditions (albeit all under a similar banner), and how we take it forward are questions that are always in the back of my mind. In a sense, I don't ever expect to solve them: I just hope that we can do good things with it along the way.

CS: Thank you Olivia for an insightful interview!