

The AALITRA Review  
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## An Interview with Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, Literary Translator

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Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp is a British translator of Arabic, German and Russian fiction and non-fiction. She is the translator of Fadi Zaghmout's *The Bride of Amman* and co-translator Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing*. She has also translated plays from Russia, Syria and Lebanon, and several Arabic short stories and children's books. Her blog can be found at <https://ruthahmedzai.wordpress.com/>

**Jennifer Stockwell (JS):** Tell us a bit about yourself and your language background – how did you get to where you are today? Who or what has most inspired you? What shapes your choices of the variety of language-related occupations that fill your time?

**Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (RAK):** I have always been an obsessive language learner and knew I wanted to work with languages somehow, and translation was what I loved most in my undergraduate degree (German and Russian). I met an inspiring French translator in my early twenties who translated English novels in her spare time and perhaps she gave me the first inkling that this was a possibility. But although I translated a few chapters of a Russian novel for my MA dissertation, and hoped to get a contract to publish the whole book, it didn't occur to me then that translating fiction could be the basis of a career.

After graduation I was still focused on working as an in-house translator in a major organization. So I was pleased when I landed a job as a UK government linguist and straightaway began an intensive Arabic course – fantastic, until I realised after 5 years that big organizations and bureaucracies are really not for me. I was keen to become a freelance translator but a bit nervous about making the break, so took up an opportunity to teach Russian part-time in a school. I was already teaching Arabic a few hours a week too, and the steady teaching hours over the next couple of years gave me a stable basis on which to build up my translation portfolio and find clients.

It was when I was on maternity leave with my first son that I realized how much I missed translating foreign fiction, which had been such a large part of my degree at Oxford. I had been reading a lot of Arabic fiction as a way of studying the language, but it was the summer school at the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, that inspired me to take the leap and start translating. The next step was winning a place on the New Books in German “Emerging Translators” program, a fantastic scheme where early career translators from German are given a paid commission to translate an extract from a contemporary novel. All the translators attended a workshop with the brilliant translator Shaun Whiteside where we critiqued each other's translations and brainstormed ideas for tricky passages. Finally, we were paired up to edit each other's work before publication in *New Books in German* – a showcase magazine promoting contemporary works from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. This experience was a real confidence boost and made me realize the power of collaboration.

After that the biggest impetus that propelled me forwards as a literary translator was the BCLT mentorship. I didn't have a book to work on at that stage so I set myself the goal of translating six short pieces (chapters or short stories) and getting at least one published. I just about managed and loved the chance to experiment with six different authors' styles, with constructive feedback from my mentor, Professor Paul Starkey. It has led on to further work in lots of serendipitous ways.

**JS:** How does your typical week look? (Although I'm going to guess there is no such thing as typical!) It would be interesting to visualize how you might spend your time as a translator.

**RAK:** I mentioned that I used to teach, but this year I finally reached the point where I accepted that I didn't have time to anymore, as with three languages and so many interesting translation projects landing in my inbox, there's always pressure on my time – especially juggling work around two small children. But I do think translation and teaching balance each other very well and I'd love to go back to it one day, especially by combining the two and teaching translation.

What I love about freelancing is the variety. When I'm working on a book or a long translation, there are days or weeks where I work in a similar way, editing for hours and hours on end, but I vary my location a lot as I'm easily distracted! When I translated *The Bride of Amman*, I was very nomadic with my laptop, and the editing stage was fun as the text seemed imbued with memories of where I was when I translated that particular chapter for the first time. If I'm not working on a big text then I'm often juggling various jobs at the same time, so I might go from medical translation in the morning to editing a colleague's literary prose in the evening.

**JS:** Further to this, any tips on managing workload and time as a freelance translator? What advice do you have for aspiring literary translators?

**RAK:** One of the hardest things about freelancing is working out what to charge for your time and defending your right to a decent salary. It's helpful to get into the habit of timing yourself as you work, excluding idle web browsing when you get distracted, but including research, which is a very time-consuming but essential part of translation. I try to keep a tally in my accounts spreadsheet of how long a job took me, so I can quickly see how much I earned per hour (because usually I charge by word or page) and I get a sense of where my strengths and weaknesses are, what sort of timeframe to allow for a job, and what is a reasonable fee to suggest to new clients. This is particularly important as it has made me realize just how incredibly slow literary translation is compared to more formulaic business, legal or medical translation, where even though a lot of research is involved, there is at least something approaching a correct answer. In literary prose, there is never an easy answer; just endless drafts of trial and error, and hopefully eventually hitting on the perfect solution.

**JS:** How do you identify novels or stories to translate? Do they come to you or do you discover them and find a publisher? How does that process work?

**RAK:** In a couple of cases, to expand my portfolio during my BCLT mentorship, I made contact with the author or publisher and asked permission to translate and publish an extract or chapter. You can translate without permission but can't publish anything online or in print without the permission of the copyright holder. Some translators have advised that you're more likely to get a response from a busy publisher if you say you've already translated an extract rather than saying that you want to.

On the whole though, work has come to me from editors who have seen my work in journals or through word of mouth recommendations. I have twice been asked by a publisher to translate a book because I'd already published translations of extracts by the author in question. It is worth making contact with editors of journals as well as publishing houses, and getting to know their list and submission preferences, so that you can suggest books or stories to them when you come across something you love. Sadly I don't have a lot of time for pitching work to editors, but I did have (eventual!) success through this route once, when I wrote to about twenty publishing houses about a Syrian book – *The Shell*, by Mustafa Khalife – which I felt absolutely had to be published in English. Pitching books, or doing reader's reports, can be a good way to get to know publishers, but on the other hand even if you bring an amazing book to a publisher's attention and they buy the translation rights from the

original publishers, they won't necessarily commission you to do the translation. And unfortunately, even if you are asked to translate the book, if the publisher can't offer a decent fee for the translation you might not be able to accept the job anyway.

**JS:** Tell us about your most recent experiences of translating two books from Arabic to English? What were the challenges and what did you learn along the way?

**RAK:** More than anything, I've been challenged by tenses in Arabic. I've always known they were tricky because they're so vague compared to the very precise English tenses, and they just operate differently in narrative prose, but when editing *The Bride of Amman* I found I was in such a muddle that I had to draw out a timeline for each chapter, marking where the narrator was in relation to the events described – for example, was the perspective from later on the same day, or several weeks later?

Because the book is chopped up into segments narrated by five different characters, I also worried that I would blur the five voices together. In fact, the Arabic wasn't particularly nuanced in this regard, but I still wanted to edit each character in isolation to reduce contamination from one character to the next. I think editing the chapters out of sequence like this was helpful for reading the text differently and analysing the internal logic, as well as seeing where my earlier chapters needed more work, but I expect this is a strategy I might adopt again with non-fiction more than with fiction.

A challenge I often face with Arabic, unfortunately, is poor editing of the original text. But on the flipside, I'm often extremely relieved when I ask a colleague about a puzzling sentence and find that it's not just me – it's definitely a typo!

**JS:** Tips for the translation process: what are your greatest challenges when approaching a literary translation? What are your primary considerations, and what strategies do you employ in approaching a new translation?

**RAK:** I think it always takes me a while to get into my stride, and I'm much more cautious early on, leaving a lot more alternative translations, question marks and comments in the margins. Although writing lots of notes can seem fiddly and slow down the first draft, it is often worth it when I go back to edit and can no longer remember why I chose one particular solution. Sometimes it's the scribbled notes in the margins that contain the gems that I go back and put in later.

I tend to try to do my first draft as quickly as I can, and very roughly, as even after reading the book or story through before starting, it isn't until I've made myself translate it that I really get into the details of the text and get a feel for how I want to convey the voice, the register and the tone. I find there's no point chiselling away at the detail until I've got the rough outline in place. A lot of questions you can get distracted by earlier on are resolved later in the text anyway.

And after that, there is no end to the rounds of editing a text might need before it's ready. Of course I have got quicker with experience, but I still like to print out and edit several drafts on paper before I'm happy. Allowing ample time to take a break from the text before the final edit is essential: I need to be able to see the text with new eyes (even with a new type font so that the line length changes and the text layout is affected) and a fresh perspective.

**JS:** What advice do you have about the practical aspects of being a translator, i.e. pay, contracts, publishers, networking, selling yourself?

**RAK:** Join your local professional body, such as the UK's Translators Association (part of the Society of Authors) or ALTA in the States, for up-to-date advice and access to networks of colleagues and potential clients. The TA in the UK offers free contract vetting and advice for members, which is very reassuring, especially as you can join as soon as you are offered your first contract for a book-length translation. Both the TA and the Emerging Translators Network offer an extremely friendly and supportive email discussion group and regular

events including panel discussions and workshops on every aspect of breaking into this profession and surviving.

With regards to pay, although to get a foot in the door in publishing we all find ourselves having to do poorly paid or pro bono work at times, it is important to remember to value your skills as a highly qualified, multilingual professional and to resist contributing to the downward pressure on rates. It is frustrating for full-time translators to have to compete with those translating in their spare time, as an extra to another career, but having said that it might be reasonable to compromise on the fee if you can negotiate a very far off deadline for a book and can fit it in around other better-paid translation work. At all stages it is worth politely educating or reminding publishers and editors who are not linguists of the work involved in translation; many simply don't realize what a challenging and time-consuming task it is, and what kind of remuneration is realistic.

In the UK there are some fantastic opportunities for schmoozing with publishers and translators alike: good ones include London Book Fair, International Translation Day, the Translate in the City summer school (evening events are sometimes free even if you're not a paid-up participant in the course) and SLOVO Russian literature festival. Sign up to publishers' mailing lists and follow them on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to hear of opportunities and book launches – another good place to get chatting to publishers and dazzle them with your knowledge of contemporary Somali literature, or whatever your niche may be!

**JS:** What are your favourite translation resources – your most-used links and the most well-thumbed books on your shelf?

**RAK:** For Arabic, I'm quite traditional with an extremely well-thumbed copy of Hans Wehr never far from my reach, which is full of notes in the margins (I have a pristine hardback copy too, for when I am ashamed to be seen with that tatty copy!). For all my languages, I have several dictionaries of idioms and colloquialisms I couldn't live without. There are some great dictionaries online but I still need my big paper tomes, especially when I'm concentrating on a text and don't want to get distracted by keeping a web browser open. When I sat the Institute of Linguists' Diploma in Translation for Arabic, I actually brought a wheelie suitcase with me full of dictionaries. I use thesaurus.com every day but I still love browsing through Rogets too.

**JS:** What are your current and future projects?

**RAK:** I'm just about to embark on another joint translation, but of Russian non-fiction this time: a very dense academic text on historical Turko-Slavic linguistics. Hard, but right up my street! There are also two novels in the pipeline, but as the publishers are applying for translation grants there is no way of knowing how long it will take before a contract materializes, if at all, so I will have to take other work if it comes up first.

**JS:** What would be your dream novel (or novels) to translate? Or what *sort* of novel? What draws you to a new project?

**RAK:** I'm still hoping to find a publisher for *The Shirt*, a lovely Russian novel I started translating way back in 2004. But more generally I would love to translate children's fiction – picture books, chapter books, young adult – you name it. As for novels, I'm particularly interested in historic settings, for example I would love to translate *The Nabatean*, a novel by Egyptian author Youssef Zeidan about the fall of the ancient civilization centred round Petra in Jordan, and the rise of Islam. But above all, my dream is just to have more time to read and to find more dream novels to translate in the first place!

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