

ANTHEA BELL

The translator of Asterix and Kafka.

(*Europe.org*)

Any list of British translators has to start with Anthea Bell – and not just because her initials come at the beginning of the alphabet. Now in her mid-seventies, she is the undisputed doyenne of her profession, revered for her work in both French and German. Her own personal ABC runs from Asterix (whose adventures she has been translating since 1969) to Stefan Zweig, with Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann and W.G. Sebald lurking in the middle. The only thing she won't translate is poetry – 'Unless there is just a snatch of it in a novel. You need to be a poet to do it properly, though Heine goes suspiciously easily into English. Goethe is *very* difficult.'

The rosettes covering the wall of her study come as a surprise: does the International Federation of Translators really have a 'Best In Show' award? Disappointingly, the winners turn out to be the Birman cats with which she shares her house just outside Cambridge, most of them named after characters from Shakespeare ('My last two were Dorcas and Mopsa from *The Winter's Tale*').

At an age when others are slowing down, she remains as busy as ever. She has just finished translating the winner of the 2011 German Book Prize, Eugen Ruge's *In Zeiten des Abnehmenden Lichts* (*In Times of Fading Light*), which is set in East Germany but contains a good dose of Russian slang. 'There's a whole sub-dialect of improper words that Russians use,' she explains with professional glee. 'The German for this is the *Mutterfluch*: the "mother curse" – and it's not hard to work out what the "mother curse" is.'

Her love of languages started as a child. 'I was very unhappy at my boarding school: there were lots of compulsory prayers and games, which I hated – I'm a loner, not a joiner, as a lot of translators are. I'd started learning French and

German, and I saw books on the library shelves that I couldn't read, which was infuriating – so I worked at top speed to get the basic grammar. The first one I read, under the bedclothes with a torch, was Théophile Gautier's *Le Capitaine Fracasse*. I actually read English at Oxford, but my course included the history of the language and how it developed, and I'm fascinated by that: I like the beginnings of things.'

Her professional translating began with Ottfried Preussler's *The Little Water Sprite*. It was the first of many translations for children, including Cornelia Funke's Inkworld trilogy from German and Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales from Danish – a language which Anthea Bell reads but regrets she cannot speak. First and foremost, though, there is Asterix. What did she and her co-translator Derek Hockridge find most challenging about the books?

'It's the puns and the wordplay and the fact that you're tied to the pictures,' she says. Some French jokes simply won't translate directly, so she has to invent British ones instead (drunken Roman soldiers, for example, are found 'declining and falling all over the place'). Not only that, but the books are drawn with speech bubbles to fit the French text, which means that the English translation cannot be substantially longer or shorter: 'You *can* put just a few words in a large speech bubble, but it looks pretty silly – so you're counting up the letters on your fingers.' She compares it to making up clues for a cryptic crossword: a skill inherited from her father, who compiled the first ever puzzle for *The Times*.

Up until the death of René Goscinny in 1977, Anthea Bell worked closely with Asterix's two creators. It is a strange thing, she points out, that 'something so completely French' is the brainchild of two people whose families had foreign roots – Uderzo's being Italian and Goscinny's Polish-Jewish. 'But Goscinny had been brought up in English-speaking parts of Argentina, so he had very good English. He was wonderful; he hardly ever made a comment, and when he did it was pure gold.' Another close professional relationship was with

W.G. Sebald. 'He was a very, very nice man. He could have written in English, but he didn't want to: he wanted to write in his own, unique style of German, and that long, meandering style plumbs the depths of dreams and melancholy in the borderline between this world and other worlds.'

Translators today are divided into two camps: the 'visible' – who like to remind you that you are reading a translation by including footnotes on their choice of words – and the 'invisible'. Anthea Bell belongs very much to the latter.

'I try to be as invisible as possible: I believe that you should try to find the author's voice and put yourself into the author's mind. I never, never put footnotes in fiction: if you can't explain something in the text itself, there's no point in translating it.' The most important thing, she says, is that the book should read naturally: 'You can know the source language inside out, but if you can't write good English you're done for.'

One problem with translations, she acknowledges, is that they tend to become dated. An example is Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, whose standard English version (published in 1924) she was asked to revise. 'The old translation says of the girl Tony, "This Tony was a dainty little maid". These days we would say something like "a charming child" – and in 50 years that too will probably sound odd.' She is open-minded about new technology, extolling the virtues of the internet, though also warning of its limitations: 'It's very useful for, say, Austrian dialect words – you won't find the English equivalent, but it will give you something else in German from which you can deduce the meaning.'

She refuses to be drawn on the subject of European political union, preferring to leave such matters to her brother Martin (the journalist turned MP) and her son Oliver (a leader-writer for *The Times*). But she believes that cultural union exists 'very happily' already. 'When Asterix was first offered to English publishers, several turned it down because it was "too French",' she

remarks. 'But it turns out that Asterix has a European sense of humour. The gulf is between Europe and the United States – he's never sold as well there, because the Americans have not got enough history behind them. We're happy here to laugh at our ancestors, but they aren't quite able to.'

Finally, in the half century that she has been at work, has she come across anything that is completely untranslatable? Yes, she says: 'Alphabet books. I once saw one being offered to English publishers by a mad German which began with a picture of an eagle. "A ist für Adler"! Can you imagine?'