

**A Talented Few? Exploring the Trajectories of Prize-Winning
Literary Translators**

Antony Hoyte-West
Independent scholar
United Kingdom

Abstract

Within the hierarchy of the wider translational professions, it is commonly accepted that literary translators enjoy a privileged position. However, it is only comparatively recently that this recognition – in the form of international awards and prizes for translated literary works – has come to broader public attention. In the British context, two of the most prestigious literary translation awards are the Booker International Prize (relaunched in 2015) and the EBRD Literature Prize (first awarded in 2018). In recognising growing scholarly interest in literary translators themselves and their biographies, this contribution aims to contextualise the history and development of these awards, before focusing attention on the pre-award career trajectories of the prize-winning translators. Using information from a variety of sources, this contribution aims to see if there are any factors – such as age, gender, or educational background – that this high-performing set have in common. As such, it is planned to provide useful exploratory information on the composition of this select and talented group of literary translators.

Keywords: *translation prizes, Booker International Prize, EBRD Literature Prize, literary translation, sociology of translation, literary translator studies.*

1. Introduction

In terms of building bridges between different languages and cultures, the role of translation in adapting to an ever-changing world is of paramount importance. Its prominence in ensuring the circulation

of literary works in the global literary system is well-attested (e.g. Heilbron & Sapiro 2007). In the United Kingdom, recent years have seen rising interest in the winners of literary translation prizes, as demonstrated by the fact that they have received column inches in leading newspapers such as *The Guardian* (2023). Indeed, the current range of literary translation prizes awarded in the country comprises many distinctions which have either been relaunched or newly created in the last few years. These include the objects of analysis of the current contribution, the International Booker Prize and the EBRD Literature Prize, as well as other awards such as the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize and the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation (for more information, please see Hoyte-West 2023a).

In seeking to focus directly on profiling the prize-winning literary translators, this exploratory contribution intends to offer general preliminary data on the trajectories of this select and talented group of practitioners who are responsible for translating works of literature into English. In addition to being a component of the author's wide-ranging project on aspects of literary translation in the British context (see Hoyte-West 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), the focus of the current study links in with wider research in the broader discipline of Translation Studies which has foregrounded the stories and biographies of translators and interpreters as practitioners. As such, Klaus Kaindl's landmark conceptualisation of Literary Translator Studies (Kaindl 2021), which introduces the edited volume of the same name (Kaindl, Kolb, & Schlager 2021), follows on from two decades of sociologically-focused analyses by leading scholars, with some of the many examples including Anthony Pym's underscoring of the role of "translators as people" (Pym 2009: 27), Michaela Wolf's range of sociologically-inspired work (see e.g. Wolf 2011) and Andrew Chesterman's declaration of the sub-discipline of 'Translator Studies' (Chesterman

2009). Indeed, several of the studies contained in Kaindl, Kolb, & Schlager's (2021) pioneering collection looked at the biographies of specific literary translators, typically from a historical perspective. Among others, these included Mary Bardet's portrait of the late nineteenth-century French translator Jeanne Heywood (Bardet 2021), Sabine Strümper-Krobb's foregrounding of two translators of Scandinavian literature (Strümper-Krobb 2021) and Markus Eberhardter's study of translators in late Habsburg-ruled Galicia (Eberhardter 2021). In addition, biographical aspects of literary translators have also featured in several other recent studies, including Ewa Rajewska's analysis of twentieth-century Polish women translators (Rajewska 2021) and Petar Vodenicharov's study of the paths taken by the first female professional translators in imperial Russia (Vodenicharov 2022). And furthermore, though written for a more generalist audience, Anna Aslanyan's engaging examination of translators and interpreters in the historical and contemporary context also incorporates stories relating to the trajectories of several literary translators from the early modern era up until the present day (Aslanyan 2021).

2. The two translation prizes and the aim of this study

There are many prizes around the world which recognise excellence in the domain of literary translation. These can span many different language combinations, genres, and countries, and are deservedly attracting more and more scholarly attention (see e.g., Hoyte-West 2019; Dahl & Svahn 2021, etc.). The current study, however, zooms in on two of the leading British prizes for literary translation into English. These are the International Booker Prize and the EBRD Literature Prize. Both of these highly prestigious prizes are awarded on an annual basis and recognise the literary translation of a work

originally written in another language into English. Of the two, the International Booker Prize is the older, having been first launched in 2004 before its format was completely changed and a new version was introduced in 2016 (The Booker Prizes 2023a). The EBRD Literature Prize was launched by the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) in 2017, with the express objective of promoting works from less-translated languages (EBRD 2023a). In addition to the prestige and publicity for the winners, both prizes also come with a handsome financial reward which is split equally between the original author of the prize-winning work and its literary translator; for the EBRD Literature Prize, the winning sum consists of £20,000 (EBRD 2023a), whereas for the International Booker Prize it is £50,000 (The Booker Prizes 2023a).

With the focus of this study firmly on the prize-winning translators who have been recognised with these two awards, the aim of this contribution is to provide an exploratory overview of the composition and trajectory of this select group of literary translators – i.e., the winners of the International Booker Prize (2016-2021) and the EBRD Literature Prize (2018-2021). The *ad quo* date of 2021 was chosen in order to correlate with the other interlinked research projects conducted by the author, such as his in-depth profile of the EBRD Prize for Literature (Hoyte-West, 2022).

Using a desk-based qualitative approach, the data sources consisted of open-access online information. The objective of the present article was to acquire preliminary data about the age, gender, and educational background of the prizewinning translators, with the internet resources consulted including the official websites of both prizes, media websites, relevant Wikipedia entries, as well as social media profiles on the professional networking website LinkedIn.

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3. Findings and observations

Based on information taken from the websites of the relevant prizes, the two tables below present the core information about the prize-winning work, original author, and literary translator. Table 1 details the selected winners of the International Booker Prize between 2016 and 2021:

Year	Prize-winning book and original author	Translator	Source language
2016	<i>The Vegetarian</i> by Han Kang	Deborah Smith	Korean
2017	<i>A Horse Walks into a Bar</i> by David Grossman	Jessica Cohen	Hebrew
2018	<i>Flights</i> by Olga Tokarczuk	Jennifer Croft	Polish
2019	<i>Celestial Bodies</i> by Jokha Alharthi	Marilyn Booth	Arabic
2020	<i>The Discomfort of Evening</i> by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld	Michele Hutchison	Dutch
2021	<i>At Night All Blood Is Black</i> by David Diop	Anna Moschovakis	French

Table 1: Information about the winners of the International Booker Prize (2016-2021)

Source: The author, based on The Booker Prizes (2023b)

Table 2 presents the selected winners of the EBRD Literature Prize (2018-2021):

Year	Prize-winning book and original author	Translator(s)	Source language
2018	<i>Istanbul, Istanbul</i> by Burhan Sönmez	Ümit Hussein	Turkish

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2019	<i>The Devils' Dance</i> by Hamid Ismailov	Donald Rayfield (with John Farndon)	Uzbek
2020	<i>Devilspel</i> by Grigory Kanovich	Yisrael Elliot Cohen	Russian
2021	<i>The King of Warsaw</i> by Szczepan Twardoch	Sean Gasper Bye	Polish

Table 2: Information about the winners of the EBRD Literature Prize (2018-2021)

Source: The author, based on EBRD (2023b)

As outlined above, Tables 1 and 2 illustrate that a total of 11 prize-winning literary translators were recognised during the time period under analysis. This included 6 annual winners of the International Booker Prize (2016-2021), and 5 winners of the EBRD Literature Prize between 2018 and 2021, the first four years of its existence. The reason for the discrepancy in numbers is because in 2019 two translators (Donald Rayfield and John Farndon) were credited for the winning English translation of Hamid Ismailov's novel *The Devils' Dance*.

In terms of the range of source languages covered by the prize-winning translators, these comprised Arabic, Dutch, French, Hebrew, Korean, and Polish in the case of the International Booker Prize. Regarding the EBRD Literature Prize, works translated from Polish, Russian, Turkish, and Uzbek were recognised. As such, this demonstrates that there was very little overlap in terms of the source languages for both prizes; there were no linguistic repetitions in any of the prizes, and Polish is the only source language to feature twice among the prize-winners (in 2018 for the International Booker Prize and in 2021 for the EBRD Literature Prize).

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Turning to the literary translators themselves, in terms of gender, 7 of the 11 prize-winning translators were female and 4 were male. However, interestingly, all six winners of the International Booker Prize were female (100%); whereas four of the five winners (80%) of the EBRD Literature Prize were male, with just one female winner (Ümit Hussein, in 2018) during the time period surveyed.

Tables 3 and 4 present the information about the age and educational background of the prize-winning translators under analysis:

Year prize awarded	Literary translator	Age range	Education
2016	Deborah Smith	20s	BA English (Cambridge); MA, PhD Korean Literature (School of Oriental and African Studies)
2017	Jessica Cohen	40s	BA English (Hebrew University of Jerusalem); MA Near Eastern Studies (Indiana University)
2018	Jennifer Croft	30s	BA Russian Studies and English with Creative Writing minor (University of Tulsa); MFA Literary Translation (University of Iowa); PhD Comparative Literature (Northwestern University)
2019	Marilyn Booth	60s	BA (Harvard-Radcliffe); DPhil Middle East Studies (Oxford)
2020	Michele Hutchison	40s	University of East Anglia; University of Cambridge; University of Lyon
2021	Anna Moschovakis	information not found	Philosophy (University of California, Berkeley);

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			MFA Creative Writing (Bard College); MA Comparative Literature (French and American) (Graduate Center of the City University of New York)
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Table 3: Age and educational information about the winners of the International Booker Prize (2016-2021)

Source: The author, based on various sources¹

Year prize awarded	Literary translator	Age range	Education
2018	Ümit Hussein	information not found	Italian and European Studies; MA Literary Translation (University of East Anglia)
2019	Donald Rayfield	70s	BA, MA, PhD Modern Languages (University of Cambridge)
2019	John Farndon	50s	Earth Sciences and English (University of Cambridge)
2020	Yisrael Elliot Cohen	information not found	BA Slavic Languages and Literatures (Harvard University); PhD Slavic Languages and Literatures (Yale University)
2021	Sean Gasper Bye	information not found	Modern Languages (University College London); International Studies (School

¹ Sources consulted in the preparation of Table 3: Alter (2022); LinkedIn (2023a); Magdalen College, Oxford (2023); Nederlands Letterenfonds (2023); Park (2014); Poets.org (2023); The Booker Prizes (2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h); The University of Tulsa (2018); Wikipedia (2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f).

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			of Oriental and African Studies)
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Table 4: Age and educational information about the winners of the EBRD Literature Prize (2018-2021)

Source: The author, based on various sources²

Further to Tables 3 and 4, information with regard to the age of the winning literary translators at the time they received the prize was not always easily obtainable. For some of the International Booker prize-winners, the relevant age range could be ascertained through details available on the Prize's official website or through other sources such as media articles. As such, data was found for five of the six International Booker Prize winners, noting that 1 winner was in their 20s, 1 in their 30s, 2 in their 40s, and 1 in their 60s. For the EBRD Literature Prize, however, information for only two of the prize-winners could be located, with 1 winner in their 50s and another in their 70s at the time of the award.

Turning to educational aspects, as outlined in the footnotes to Tables 3 and 4, details of the universities attended and degrees awarded were synthesised from a variety of sources. This exploratory analysis revealed no clear differences between the winners of the International Booker Prize and the EBRD Literature Prize. Among the range of tertiary institutions featured, it was noted that the 11 prize-winners had all attended highly-regarded universities which were primarily situated in the Anglophone world, with 5 of them having attended either Oxford or Cambridge. In addition, Ivy League universities such as Harvard and

² Sources consulted in the preparation of Table 4: EBRD (2023b); Jewish (Litvak) Community of Lithuania (2017); LinkedIn (2023b, 2023c); The Continental (2023); Wikipedia (2023g, 2023h, 2023i).

Yale were represented, as well as other top universities such as the School of Oriental and African Studies and University College London in the United Kingdom and Northwestern University and the University of California, Berkeley in the United States. Two of the prize-winning translators had also studied at universities in Israel and in France. As far as could be observed, there was a distinct preponderance of advanced degrees, with the data available online showing that at least 8 of the 11 translators held a postgraduate degree; indeed, this number may be even greater as sometimes only an institution or subject of study was mentioned, rather than a specific type or level of degree. Four of the translators held doctoral degrees (PhD or DPhil). In terms of the academic subjects studied, these were overwhelmingly located within the humanities, with just one translator having studied science and another international studies. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority had studied modern languages and literatures; several had studied English literature and two had also studied creative writing. Interestingly, just two of the prize-winning translators were listed as holding degrees in literary translation. These qualifications were obtained at prestigious institutions in the United States (the renowned MFA at the University of Iowa) and the United Kingdom (the pioneering MA at the University of East Anglia); in addition, a further prize-winner was listed as having studied at the latter institution, but no exact degree information could be ascertained.

Conclusions

In drawing together the findings of this exploratory study on the winners of the International Booker Prize and the EBRD Literature Prize, it can be stated that this group of prize-winning literary translators share a number of common characteristics. They work from a range of source languages into English, with both male and female

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translators represented, although there are distinct gender differences between the two prizes during the time period under analysis. Though it was somewhat challenging to obtain full information about the ages of all the prize-winners at the time of the award, nonetheless the data available illustrates that translators at all stages of their careers have been recognised by these prestigious accolades.

In terms of educational background, the vast majority of the literary translators received advanced degrees in the humanities, typically in a literary subject, from highly-ranked universities in the English-speaking world. However, it is notable that few of the prize-winners actually hold a degree in literary translation. Hence, it would be fascinating to see how the craft of literary translation was acquired by these experts and how they were able to make it their career – for example, whether it was through mentorship programmes, by ‘learning by doing’ or other practice-based approaches, or if it was simply in the hands of fate. In this regard, this is where the limitations of the online-only scope of this preliminary study become apparent, thus uncovering ripe possibilities for further research – ideally, through contact with the literary translators themselves.

In addition, during the course of undertaking this study, it was also observed that many of these prize-winning translators are highly active beyond their day-to-day work of translating literature. By way of example, this was seen in terms of their service to the broader profession (e.g. by participating on the boards of relevant professional organisations or through campaigning for the greater visibility of literary translators within the publishing industry and beyond). In addition to their literary translation work, other prize-winners are also active as scholars in academic literature and translation studies, as well as in media and publishing – for example, through founding a publishing house with a special focus on showcasing translated works.

Accordingly, further studies could explore the post-award trajectory of these highly-accomplished practitioners, and the object of study could also be expanded to include more recent winners of the two prizes, as well as the laureates of other translation awards in the broader British context. As such, it is clear that by exploring the trajectories of these expert professionals, insightful contributions can be made to the burgeoning sub-discipline of Literary Translator Studies.

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Antony Hoyte-West

affiliation: Independent scholar, United Kingdom

position: PhD

email: antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com

research interests: literary translation studies; sociology of translation and interpreting; the professional status of translators and interpreters; historical and contemporary language policy.

Selected publications:

- (2023): "Scaling Olympus: Exploring official language certifications at the CEFR C2 level" (Antony Hoyte-West), in *Ezikov Svyat (Orbis Linguarum)*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 78-87.
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