

2.15 – On All Things Translation with Kate

Angourie (host)

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. In reference to this particular theme of translation, I would also like to acknowledge that many Indigenous Australian languages have been tragically lost. Last year, my mother performed in an orchestral and choral requiem written and composed by Deborah Cheetham called *Eumeralla, a War Requiem for Peace*. This requiem is sung entirely in the ancient dialects of the Gunditjmara People, and is about the Eumeralla Resistance Wars, which were wars between the European settlers and the Gunditjmara Indigenous People in south west Victoria, which is the state in which I live. This happened in the 1840s to the 1860s, and resulted in a lot of death and destruction. And when Deborah Cheetham visited the battle ground in Victoria, she was so moved, um, that she created and composed this requiem. The recorded performance is available on YouTube, and it will be linked in the show notes. And I think, due to the theme of translation, and reading and experiencing stories in other languages this month, I thought it would be very apt to mention it, and highlight how, throughout history, some languages have been considered more important than others. And those that have not been considered important have been, ah, almost completely eradicated. When I was writing this episode, I was reminded of this performance that I saw, and how incredibly moving it was to watch something that was performed in an ancient dialect that I had never heard before, and that had often been ignored in history. So, ah, if you are interested then I would highly recommend checking it out, it's in an incredible piece of music and it will be linked in the show notes.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

Hello, and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

Kate (guest)

And I'm Kate Rice.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

I am very excited to be talking to one of the smartest people I know, um, my mum: Kate Rice. She has a PhD in the ethics of playwriting about real events, and she is also bilingual and a translator, so I thought it would be very apt to interview her for this episode. What's your relationship with languages? Because you started learning German when you were quite young, right, when you were younger than I am now.

Kate (guest)

I guess I first became aware of other languages, and of German in particular, when we had a German exchange student come and stay at our house when I was five years old. And she was so ... glamorous and lovely, and she – you know, she taught us all a little bit about Germany, and about German, and I was the only person in the family – a family of, you know, four – um, who could

pronounce the word “*Schwarzbrot*” correctly. Which, um, obviously made a big impression on me. I mean, it’s quite possible that, as a five-year-old, they were just being nice to me, going: “Oh, that’s so cute! You’re the one who can do it!” But, I – you know, from then on, I felt: “Ooh, I can do this, this is something that I can do, and that – that not everyone can do.” So, yeah, it kind of started from there. I had a book about German and Germany, and tried to teach myself, and then I learnt it at school, and then I ended up being an exchange student to Germany myself. And it wasn’t until I was there, of course, that I actually became fluent. Learning in school is – certainly the way it was taught then – is not the same.

Angourie

And so, then, when I came along, and when Kalliope came along ... when we were ten – when I was ten and Kalliope was seven, you decided to move the whole family to Germany. And that was a big change for everyone. And, yeah, can you talk me through, like, why you wanted that decision, and why you wanted Kalliope and I to learn another language?

Kate

Well, the experience of learning another language and being immersed in another culture ... you know, I should qualify it by saying of course it’s not that foreign a culture – not that different a culture from ours. It was still a very – a rich, Western democracy, um, so not that different. But then – but the experience of learning another language impressed me greatly as a person, and I continued my love with Germany, and my love of German, I kept up my language as much as I possibly could. And, um, Jeremy, my partner, was also very supportive, and we knew that we wanted to have that experience as a family, and – and share that experience, and I wanted you, as my children, to understand what it means to know what an – to know that there are other cultures and there are other languages.

We thought about going elsewhere, but we decided as a family Germany was probably the best place to get this experience because I already had the language, so we knew that we would get in faster than we would if we went anywhere where none of us could speak the language. Um, that’s why we chose Germany. And also, it was helpful that, ah, that Jeremy is a British citizen, so that’s why we – why we went there. And it was – it was a very difficult thing, I knew it would be hard, um, but I ... and I knew it would be painful in lots of ways for you, um, and I remember feeling very upset at various points when it was really difficult, but then I firmly believed then – and I still do – that it was gonna be worth it. And it really is. That experience of, um, of understanding what it means to live in another language and see another language is the kind of experience that you can only get that way. You can’t learn it any other way, you have to experience it and live it.

Angourie

Yes, I remember being ten and being, like: “Oh my God, you’re ruining my life.” But I think – I think even then I knew that this was gonna be one of the most valuable experiences in my life, and I am so grateful for it now, ’cause I think it just informs, um – yeah, I just think I’ve been very lucky, because it has informed my whole life and how I look at languages, and reading, and culture. And so, transitioning into, um, reading and translation: when did you first start working in translation?

Kate

Ah, well, it was in Germany. We’d been there for ... I think we had initially planned that we – we could stay for six months, but then when we were there, we loved it so much we wanted to stay, but that meant that Jeremy and I would both have to work. So we started looking around for what

jobs we could do, um, and I saw an advertisement for a translator for a women's magazine. So like, ah, like a gossip-y, um, beauty, advice, ah, interviews with stars, lots of articles on sex and um, astrology, all that kind of thing. I saw this ad, they were advertising for a translator who would translate the German magazine into English, so that it could then be translated into other languages. Because this – this magazine didn't just appear in Germany, it appeared in, you know, Belarus, and Romania, and Poland, and all these other places. And most of those places they could – they had a direct translator who could do German into the target language, but for Indonesia and a couple of other places, they didn't have a direct translator. So they needed someone to do German, English, and then it would go English, Indonesian. So I saw the ad, and I thought: "Hey! I read women's magazines, I can write, I can speak German, I can do this." Even though I don't have a degree in – in translation, although I did do – I did do German at tertiary level, but I don't have a translation degree, which is a different skill. Anyway, I actually found a German women's magazine, took an article from it, translated it into English, and I sent it in, and said: "Look, I can do this!" Um, and then I didn't get the job, but, as it turned out, the person who did get the job couldn't start for six weeks, or a couple months. So they took me on while they waited for her, and then when she got there, they kind of rearranged the position, and decided to carve the – just the translation part out of the position. So, I continued working as a contractor, so I kept doing it. And then, when I moved back to Australia, I kept doing it. So, I actually kept doing that job for about six years ... about six, seven years. And then, finally, they got rid of the department after much, much restructuring, and um, then I found work with another translation company. So, I still do that occasionally.

Angourie

What kind of stuff do you translate now?

Kate

Sadly, the company I work for now does not do astrology or, um, celebrity interviews, or sex advice. Um, for a long time I was doing press articles, newspaper articles about a bank, and then the other things I've picked up have been, like, company reports.

Angourie

Did you prefer the magazine?

Kate

Oh, yeah, the magazine was hugely fun! It was really good. It wasn't at all challenging, but I did like it. And you know – and the fashion was fun. I did enjoy it.

Angourie

So, this – all of this translation is, ah, non-fiction, or it's – it's not fiction, it's not novels. But what is – I think – what's your process of translation, and how does that – how do you think that process might also be applied to, um, novels and fiction. And what – what challenges and ethics come with that, you know?

Kate

Um, so the first question: what my process is. The first thing I do is I translate it fairly quickly for sense, in a kind of straight, prosaic way. So I – so I get the meaning out. And then the next one, I make it beautiful. I kind of go back and make it – make it more, make it make sense in English,

rather than as a more direct translation. And – and going back to the original, as well. And then I go back over it. I think – basically, the main secret with translation is to keep going over it, and over it, and over it, to make sure that it's right. Because you make mistakes, people make mistakes all the time. Um, from what I've read about creative translation, um, and my understanding of it, is that it's similar but there's more work involved in, um ... it's not really just about getting the meaning and then making it sound fluent in the target language. It's – because there are so many different layers of meaning in fiction, there's a lot more detail involved in working out what the associations are with each image and with each word, and trying to keep them consistent throughout the novel – so – or the play, or whatever it is you're translating. So that – so that if a word is used in a particular sense in one part of the book, it is used in the same sense in another part. In – you know, with non-fiction that's not as crucial.

Angourie

Yeah. Have you translated fiction before?

Kate

Only my own little bits, because ... yeah, not really. Not really. But in my – my PhD was ... I – I created a theatre piece, um, based on a real event that happened in Germany, and so I read a lot of German works, including fiction, for that. And then I would translate them myself to use when I quoted them in my work, rather than using someone else's translation.

Angourie

Why did you choose to do that?

Kate

Partly because I could. Sometimes because there was no translation, that the translation didn't exist. There is – I do remember a particular quote from *Alone in Berlin, Jeder Stirbt für Sich Allein*, that I used. And there is a – there was a word that came up there that was difficult to translate, and I translated it differently to how I saw it done elsewhere.

Angourie

What are the ethics of translating something into another language? Like, is there a code of conduct? Where can you take creative liberties and where should you not? And how do you think that might be different in terms of translating non-fiction and translating fiction.

Kate

Ah, well, there – if – if one were to be an accredited translator, which I'm not, you have to – you have to basically – it's like signing a Hippocratic oath for a doctor or something. You know, you have to pledge to be accurate. So, ethically, you know, there is an ethical responsibility in the job of translating to keep it faithful to the original. However, anyone who speaks two languages – or even someone who doesn't really quite speak two languages – you know, it's pretty easy to understand that – that there is no such thing as a direct correlation. Like, you can never do an absolutely direct, faithful, um, translation. They don't match up, there's no exact equivalent. So there's always gonna be a little bit of a process in there, and I guess the idea of holding translators accountable is to, um, keep them aware of that and mindful of that. And, obviously, you know, you're not allowed to distort, exaggerate, lie, you know, make your translation say what you want it to say rather than what it actually says. It is a bit different in fiction. I guess your imperative is to create a work of art

that, at the very least, is of the same standard as the original, and, to the point that you can, says the same thing as the original. But, you would find – you would – that in a work of art, and particularly for the stage, that – that certainly translators and theatre makers will take a lot more of a liberty with – with that, with what that means. To say: “Well, I’m being faithful to – in this aspect, by completely changing this other thing.” I mean, the only example I can think of is I remember going to a – a lecture – a talk given by someone who’s done a lot of theatrical translation, and she was talking about the “inside windows”. That in Ibsen, um – cause Ibsen, huge, you know, hugely influential playwright, and there is a scene where they talk about taking out the “inside windows”, because in Scandinavia, in winter, they will put on another layer of window, and then when it’s summer they take that layer out. And that was a thing, and some translations just ignore that completely, or change it completely, saying: “Well, nobody understands what that even means, so we can’t – so it’s not going to mean the same thing, so we’ve gotta take it out and replace it, and put something else in there.”

Angourie

I recently read a work translated from Korean for the theme this month, and it’s the first – first novel I’ve read translated from Korean, and I ... I chose it not knowing how much wordplay there was gonna be in there. There was one section where – let me see if I can find it ... So, so she’s looking at someone – she’s looking at someone crying in the rain, and she says: “I recall the common figure of speech between tears and rain.” And when I read that, I wondered if that is a Korean saying, or phrase, that can’t be translated literally, so she just translated it in that way. What do you think of that?

Kate

Yeah, see that kind of thing, you just think: “Well, there’s something lost there.” Or, maybe there isn’t. But, and – and that’s – that is the – that’s always the challenge of reading a translation, that I – that I do find frustrating, that you can never know. Like, you read a phrase like that and go: “Oh, is there a common figure of speech? Or does this mean something else? Or is this to say that the person who’s making that comment makes up that kind of stuff?” Dunno. Yeah, that’s tricky.

Angourie

Do you read a lot of translated fiction? I mean that – I – I know that your favourite book of all time is translated from German, so –

Kate

Well, no, my favourite – my favourite is the German. Of course –

Angourie

So, do you – in your mind, do you see them as two separate works of fiction?

Kate

Yeah. Yes. The work is the German work, and that’s my favourite novel. I did read it in English first, and then I read it in German. I wanna go back and read it again, because I love it so much. What was the question? Do I read a lot of translated fiction ... not a lot. Yeah, and it’s for that reason, it’s because – and – and I know that’s – it’s kind of bad. And I remember saying that to somebody in my twenties, I was like: “Ah, I don’t read translated fiction because it’s not the real thing.” And they were like: “How – how can you – that just shuts you – yourself away from so much literature.” And

it's true, and it's true. And I – I think the – you know, in the absence of speaking a million languages, if you want to get – if you want to get an understanding of other cultures, definitely read translated fiction. You gotta read translated fiction if you can't read the originals. But, I also, as – as a translator and as someone who does speak another language, I do find it – it can be a little frustrating to read translated fiction and then go: "But is that really what it means? Don't know."

Angourie

Have you ever read, ah, fiction that was originally written in English, translated into German?

Kate

That seems like a really weird thing to do.

Angourie

I did that!

Kate

Oh, you did it! Oh, that's right! Yeah, because – well, I mean, yes, and I – I encouraged you to do that, because it's a way of helping your language, when you read as – read something that you already know. Yeah, for sure. No, I haven't done that. But – but, I can see the – I can certainly see the value in it. But – but no, I would be more likely to read things in German that are – that were originally written in German. The – the trick is, for me, finding a – finding something that is challenging enough, but not too challenging. So I'm read – at the moment I'm actually reading a German novel and it's probably – it's too hard for me. It's a bit like – it's like reading through a screen, like I can't get the full picture all the time. But it's – it's good to challenge myself, I guess.

Angourie

So, you do think that – that there are subtleties that are lost when you translate into another language, and that is really upsetting and sad.

Kate

Ah, yes, there are – of course there are gonna be subtleties that are lost. However, that is not a reason not to read translated fiction. So, everyone should definitely read it, and I was just being arrogant, that time that I declared: "No, I'm never reading translated fiction."

Angourie

I think you make – I think you make a really valid point, because when I was reading this Korean work, I was thinking: "Oh my gosh, I – I feel like I'm missing a few things here." And that made me sad. And it kind of – but also, there is ... would I rather read something that's translated and miss out on all these little things, or not read it at all, and just pick up something that's written in English? I think the – the story that I read, I – I loved it, I thought it was really interesting, and I can get by with not knowing those little things. Although, I did find a – I found a review online that was written by someone who is fluent in Korean and English, and he broke down a few of the translations, and how the translator approached translating the wordplay that was used. And it appeared that a lot of creative liberties had to be taken because she – she makes word associations with words that rhyme. And so – or words that sound the same but are spelt differently, and of course that's not gonna – that's not gonna work if you translate it directly – literally into English. But, I still think it was a valuable experience.

Kate

Absolutely. And, of course – of course, you know, and it's like – it's like watching a film in, you know, foreign language films. You don't get everything, but what you do get is a different perspective on the world, and the more open and – and curious you can be about – about that – that whole new world that is opened up for you, then the better. And also, you know, shout out to translators. I mean, translators work hard and they spend years working on novels to get them as close as possible and as right to possible. And, translators are also writers, because, you know, you gotta know how to string a sentence together in English to – you know, to make it sound good. So, yes, a translated novel is always going to be a valuable – a valuable thing.

Angourie

Is there anything else you wanna talk about in terms of translation and fiction?

Kate

I suppose – when you were talking, I was thinking about films and how, in a way, a foreign language film is a lot – is a much more accessible way to get that experience and that perspective, because you can still see ... you get all the advantage of the craft and the artist – the artistry and the imagery and everything, and then it's just the words, just the dialogue, just the tip of it that's – that has to be – has to be translated. And you can pick up so much from the way they speak, and even if you have no idea how, um, anything – anything of the language.

Angourie

Out of all the German works you've read, do you think that they have this, kind of, common, um, style of writing or way of telling a story that is distinctly different from how, um, English-speaking authors construct sentences, or use metaphors, or similes, or story-structure?

Kate

Well, their sentences can go for paragraphs, which is pretty amazing. And, ah, and the other thing that you would never get in the – in an English ... is the verb to the end thing. So, you know, you can – you can be reading a German sentence that's gone on for almost a whole – full paragraph, and then you get the verb right at the end. Which is a – you know, in English, when you write, it's a – you know, it's a thing for writers to kind of keep the last word as one that holds the meaning for the entire sentence. And I think in German it's easier to do that, um, and English writers often do that – good ones do, but not everyone gets to. But in German, maybe it's a bit easier. Um, I don't know, I think cultures are kind of bound up within their languages. So – so, so much of what I love about Germany comes out in its – in the language as well as in the history and the culture and the – and the stories that I'm attracted to in German culture. I think the same could be true of any language.

Angourie

Alright, well, I don't think I have anything else to ask you. But, thank you for so much for coming on the podcast, Mummy, it was so – it was so great, and you're so smart, and, yes, you know so many things.

Kate

Thank you for having me on your podcast, Angourie, I have very much enjoyed it, and um – and yay. Thank you. I think it's wonderful – I think it's wonderful what you're doing, and I think it's really

exciting that you've got people out there who're interested to, um, read books, and talk about them, and listen to other people talk about them, too. So, thank – thank you, and thank you to the listeners.

[theme music]

Angourie

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Kate

Bye, thank you!

[theme music]