Careers in Translation_ An Interview with Julia Sanches

Fri, Apr 24, 2026 10:09AM 31:34

SPEAKERS

Speaker 1, Gemma Jackson, Julia Sanches

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Announcer,

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Welcome to this episode of Inside Publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.

G Gemma Jackson 00:21

Hi everyone. My name is Gemma, and I'm the UK podcast lead for the SYP. In this episode, I'm joined by literary translator Julia Sanches. She translates from Spanish, Portuguese and Catalan and has been shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. As well as discussing her career journey, we talk about her views on literary prize culture, how she approaches a project, and why translation deserves more recognition in the UK and the US. I hope you enjoy!

G Gemma Jackson 00:51

To begin with. Could you talk me through your career journey so far? Perhaps, how you began working as a literary translator? Was that always what you'd wanted to do, or how did it come about?

J Julia Sanches 01:05

I had no idea that literary translation was something you could do until my last year of university. I don't know why. I have a theory that we don't teach kids how to read in translation in school, and so we just don't think about it. But I grew up in a Brazilian family that moved around a lot, so translation was always a large part of my life. We spoke Portuguese at home, but then English or Spanish or French at school or in like, outside of the home. And so I was always thinking about how to transfer meaning from one context into another. But yeah, in high school, I would read the classics, many of the classics, not all of them, obviously in the original language. I do not read ancient Greek or German or Russian or many, many languages, but I read Madame Bavaria in French. I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Spanish, etc. And my last year of university in Edinburgh, I was a little bit bored of English Lit, and decided to do a comparative project. And I wanted to look at this modernist Brazilian novel called Macunaima by Mário de Andrade And Cain by Jean Toomer, Black American writer, writing around the same time as Mário de Andrade, but in very different hemispheres. And my supervisor, or maybe it was just an administrator, I don't know who it was, said that I could only do that if both texts could be found in English, so that there needed to be a translation of Macunaima and I found one in the University of Edinburgh library, and that was my first introduction to sort of close reading and translation into all of the possibilities that are opened up by a text's existence in another language, I think the rest was history. I went to the bclt summer school that summer, and then impulsively applied to a master's degree in Spain in comparative literature and literary translation, one that no longer exists because it was very cobbled together and did not teach me very much about translation at all. And then eventually I moved to the US for visa reasons, rather than anything else, and wound up working in publishing. I was an assistant literary agent at the Wiley agency for three years, and that taught, taught me all about the back end, helped me make connections. And then again, on impulse, I decided to quit and only translate because I've been waking up at like five in the morning to translate for two hours before going to work for 10 hours at the literary agency, and I was feeling like a very shriveled shell of a human being, and that is a long story of how I made it to this point begin.

G Gemma Jackson 04:29

You were saying you were doing translation for like two hours in the morning. Was that like a kind of freelance project that you had ongoing? Or was it...

J Julia Sanches 04:41

Yeah, I in the time that I was working at the Wiley agency, I was still translating samples for publishers in Brazil. And I also translated a co translated a novel, not a novel, sorry, it was a book of non fiction. And so the only time I really had to work on these things was in the early morning. I am a zombie at night. I do not function after like the sun goes down and I'm just I'm down with it. And so it was sort of squeezing. I would do readers reports for publishers as well. I was just trying to make sure that I could continue to be a literary translator. Right before I started working at Wiley, I translated my first book, also non fiction, by Susana Moreira Marques is a Portuguese author who I am still translating today, and I just it was what I wanted to do, very much and but as we all know, the economics, the practicalities of being a literary translator are not easy.

G Gemma Jackson 05:53

Can you talk a bit about Cedilla and Co, the translators collective? How was it founded, and what influences it had on your career?

J Julia Sanches 06:02

So at the time, I was, I'm still friends with, but met at the time this other translator called Sean Bye, who translates from Polish, and he was also working a very demanding job in translating. In between, we got together one day and decided to form a collective as a way to help each other establish themselves as as literary translators. I, by then, had translated one book. I think Sean had translated one book. We invited a spread of translators from many different languages to join us. It was mostly other languages and also based in New York, because we were, at the time, based in New York, and I think our initial plan was more ambitious. We wanted to revolutionize how translations get submitted, because I had experience with the agency model, and we wanted to figure out if it was possible to lessen the burden of all the unpaid work that we do, which is scout for new projects, write pitch letters, translate samples, and then try to find a home for that project. It's hours and hours and hours of work. And you don't always succeed, right? You can't always actually place the project that you are moving along with passion alone. And so that ended up just becoming that, that ended up falling apart, and just ended up becoming us, sharing resources, going out to drinks with editors and telling each other about that editors taste sort of like doing the networking thing, but coming together to share what information we had. And I guess we don't really do anything anymore. We're kind of dormant to non existent, and I think that's in large part because we succeeded like I now work full time as a literary translator. Shawn works part time as literary translator. And then we have Allison Markin Powell who translates Japanese, Heather Cleary who translates Spanish, Alex Zucker who translates Czech, all of these. Jeremy Tiang, who does everything, but translates Chinese. Jeffrey Zuckerman, I mustn't forget Jeffrey, we've all sort of made it work to different degrees and extents.

G Gemma Jackson 08:32

How do you find books to translate? Do you? I'm sure it differs on every single project. But how do you actively like really looking for something to translate. Or do you get things suggested to you? How? How does that work?

J Julia Sanches 08:49

I met the lucky part of my career where books come to me. Not always. So, for example, there's this. So, yeah, it's sort of like half of it is not half. I'd say 30% is me trying to find books to translate new authors who I jive with. And then about 70% is publishers coming to me because I've established myself as a translator of a certain kind of literature in X languages. For the 30% where I do the pitching, there are certain prizes I follow, or I'll go to a bookstore and ask the booksellers for advice, or ask the authors I translate for who they're reading. There's this author called Irene Pujadas, who's Catalan. I like to say young, because she's about my age, but I don't actually know how old she is, and I don't know if I still count as young. And she wrote this collection of short stories called Els desperfectes that was published, published by a small press in Catalonia who I really that I really like. They have this sort of prize, a novel like, you know, like the Fitzcarraldo Novel Prize, but they have a literature prize. And so she got that first book published through that. And I read one of the stories. Really liked it, translated it for a translation workshop that the institution, the Catalan Cultural Institute, was holding, and it just languished on my computer something like three years. And then an editor I know in Brazil met this editor at the New Yorker and told him about my work, and I just sent him whatever I had, which happened to be the story, and it ran in the New Yorker short fiction, sort of like flash fiction section that they do in the summer. And I think then she wrote a novel, and I think that novel has a US press. I'm just waiting for details. And so that was like, it was sort of Kismet. It was sort of just reading randomly and seeing what, what clicks for me. Because you, if you're going to pitch an author, you're going to spend a lot of time doing unpaid an unpaid labor of love to get them placed. I'm lucky that I also translate from languages with agents, so Portuguese and Spanish and and Catalan is a heavily agented language. Catalan has a lot of funding behind it, and so that helps find publishers, because in which I mentioned earlier, they will fund the entire translation and then also give money for, I think, publicity.

G Gemma Jackson 11:55

Do you pitch to, like agents of the authors or to the publishers?

J Julia Sanches 11:59

When I pitch, it's usually to the English language publisher. If I read something that I really like and find out that there's an agent involved, I might ask if they have a budget for a sample so that I can get paid to translate a short sample that would help them sell the rights. Doesn't always happen.

G Gemma Jackson 12:17

Okay, and do you have a lot of interaction with the author while you're translating, or before or like during the process?

G Gemma Jackson 12:26

Your translations are with multiple publishers. So do you pitch to different publishers based on the the project, and what would fit well with each publisher is that how?

J Julia Sanches 12:26

that's the idea. That's what I try to do. I haven't lived in New York now for a decade. And the thing with publishing is that there's a ton of turnover. Everyone's overworked and underpaid, so I don't actually know who the young editors are anymore. I have to get down there and start taking people out for coffee. But the idea is that you figure out what the profile of a publisher is like, what kinds of who have they published before? What kinds of books do they seem to release, and then figure out who the editor behind that is, because feel like we often end up sending translated literature to the same five people, but it's much more interesting to me to find editors who are open to a book in translation and don't think of translated literature as a genre, but like, yeah, part of the ecosystem,

G Gemma Jackson 12:26

How has your perception of the industry changed, like, over the course of your career? And, yeah, maybe along with, like, the change in attitudes towards translation and becoming more maybe more popular, still a long way to go.

J Julia Sanches 12:26

It depends on the author. I always have a list of questions to send, because I like to be very careful, and also I translate from Spanish and Portuguese. That are these languages are spoken across a good chunk of the world, and so there's a wide variety of Spanishes that I encounter, and I don't have intimate knowledge of all of them, but not all authors are interested in interacting with you extensively, but I've, generally speaking, they've everyone I've worked with has been very receptive to fielding my questions. Sometimes we develop friendships. Sometimes I look at my phone. I mean, I used to be this kid who revered authors. I read. Read so much the authors were the coolest thing in the world. Sometimes I look at my phone on WhatsApp, and I'm like, Oh my God, all my favorite authors are just like on my whatsapp. What a privilege!

J Julia Sanches 12:28

I feel like I'm not in the best position to answer this, because I get the sense I started my career sort of as we were entering the heyday of literary translation, and so it's felt like a pretty healthy ecosystem in my experience. But I know it wasn't always like this. I know fewer books used to be translated during my career, what happened is, there was the women in translation movement, and so books by women writers in translation increased. But I don't know the pendulum swings back and forth. And so what we're seeing in the United States, and I think in the UK as well, is a huge decrease in funding for small publishers who do the bulk of publishing work in translation. So I don't know if we're going to swing in the other direction because of politics, at least in the US, it's hard to say.

G Gemma Jackson 15:59

Some of your novels have been on the international booker long and shortlist. How does that affect your translation and your, I don't know, your outlook professionally.

J Julia Sanches 16:12

It affects me in that people i i started having more name recognition, and so I would have to make even less of an effort to find work, which is really nice. I don't know if it affects me in any other way. It's really lovely for to see that recognition for the authors that you're championing. Prize culture is strange. It's almost one of the only ways for translators to get that windfall, you know, to get a little bit more money so that you can settle down, pay off some student loans, and to get the sort of more attention toward your work, but at the same time, it's Just five people in a room making an informed decision, and that those five people in the room are constantly changing. So having to rely on prizes to increase our visibility or move some books on shelves is less than ideal, but it seems to be what we have, and it's also not very transparent. I don't know what I mean. It's probably, actually no, it's probably more transparent than I'm saying it is. I just haven't looked at the website and seen what, like, what you what the parameters are for application. But, I mean, they've talked about it a lot. People have talked a lot about how prizes can be disadvantageous to small presses, because the press has to pay for the author and translator to come over if they don't win, and they don't sell the as many copies as they'd like, then they're faced with this massive burden of putting up two people in London for a few days on the off chance that they will win. It's, I don't know. I think it's a thorny prices are sort of thorny. I say this having been on a judging panel, which is really fun. Sort of, what do you think about prizes?

G Gemma Jackson 18:12

It does help in that I see you see a lot of like, publicity and like at the moment with the International Book a short list and long list at the moment, you see them at the front of all bookshops. But then it would be nice to see that same championing of translated fiction throughout the year, and not just in like price seasons. Yeah, it'd be great to just see like a, like a 50 50, of translated and non translated work in a book shops, or more than

J Julia Sanches 18:39

which is what it's like in so many other countries! When I was in Brazil, the this one bookstore I went to in downtown Sao Paulo, there was one shelf for Brazilian literature, and like, actually two or Brazilian fiction, and like two shelves of foreign fiction, which is the reverse problem. There are places where there's too much fiction from other places as What a crazy problem to have, right? And so there's less attention given to the work of Brazilian authors. But in the in English speaking countries. It would be really nice if we could increase it from the I think we're still lagging at around 3%

G Gemma Jackson 19:27

do you think the translated scene is similar across in the UK and the US?

J Julia Sanches 19:33

What do you mean by the translated scene

G Gemma Jackson 19:35

like the percentage of in bookshops of translated fiction?

J Julia Sanches 19:39

I think it might be healthier in the UK, but I'm not actually sure. I have no data about this. The much smaller market, the UK than the US.

G Gemma Jackson 19:50

I suppose it might vary across states and across the US. I don't know.

J Julia Sanches 19:55

Yes, no, this is a very, very, very large country. Yeah.,

G Gemma Jackson 19:59

yeah, I forget that!

J Julia Sanches 20:02

Yeah, no, it's huge. It's gigantic. I honestly don't know enough about that. I do know that. You know the London Book Fair happens there, and there is a section of it dedicated to translators. The International Booker is a big deal. Much bigger deal there than the National Book Award is here, which is like our we have the translation like one of the big translation prizes is the National Book Award in translated literature. And that only started again, like a few years ago. It hadn't existed for a long time, and it moves far fewer books than the international Booker does. Interesting, yeah, I don't know why the they just announced a short list for the International Booker, and Taiwan Travelogue is on there, and that was the winner the year that I judged the prize for the National Book Award. It's very good book.

G Gemma Jackson 20:58

What's it like judging prizes?

J Julia Sanches 21:00

What's it like? It's like five people in a room talking about books! I mean, I think you to judge a prize. Well, you have to. Or at least my philosophy about judging prizes involves thinking of what the prize does like the year that Han Kang won for The Vegetarian there was this renewed interest in Korean literature, and it opened up a space for Korean literature in the English language. I'm sure there are other things that were happening that I'm not aware of, but I feel like that was the watershed moment, and so I like to to think of, where have we what are some literatures we've over-awarded prizes? How can we right the balance? Obviously, merit, literary merit, is important, but I also think it's important, it's crucial, to keep in mind that literary merit is not some sort of objective thing. Most of us in the West have grown like have been fed on Western literature, and so we think of good literature as following certain parameters of Western literature, and so reminding yourself to sort of think about the book differently and forget momentarily What are, what esthetics you've been brought up on, to open it up to different kinds of esthetics and different kinds of of novel writing. I think that's the hardest bit, trying to unlearn everything that you've been learning for 30 something years.

G Gemma Jackson 22:51

How do you approach translation? Do you like read aloud? Do you is the rhythm of sentences? Like something that you put highly like, how do you go through that process? Do you write a whole outline then go back and do the finer detail?

J Julia Sanches 23:09

I translate each book a little bit differently, but generally speaking, I start from the beginning and I translate in what I call a spiral. So, like, I'll translate a certain amount of words or pages in a day, and then, but the next day before I start translating more, I edit what I had translated the day before, and it just helps me keep the tone and the voice consistent that then again, I do a lot of co-translating as well. And in a recent co translation project, the book is told from four different by four different non human entity entities. And so my co translator and I did was actually pull out every single voice and isolate the voices and work through one voice at a time before we stitched it back together again. And it was a really fascinating process, because not only did it help you maintain a consistency in the voice, but it also for a book that's told from all of these different perspectives, it helped you just it sort of created a situation which all you were getting was this one perspective, which is how that narrator would feel like they don't know. So it's narrated by a tree, a mirror, a pickup truck and a spray suit. It's set on a tobacco farm in southern Brazil. And so, like, obviously the tree doesn't know what the mirror is thinking. And so it, like, creates that bubble. And then when you revisit the book, reading the whole thing from start to finish, it's just a different experience. It was really cool. I.

G Gemma Jackson 25:00

Wow, that sounds so cool. I'm excited to read that when I can! so do is your You've worked as a like co translator on other projects. Is it always a similar like you discuss everything together and make all the greatest decisions alongside each other in a similar way?

J Julia Sanches 25:18

Yeah, so I've done this. I say that I'm very promiscuous about CO translation. I have quite a few co translators. I love them all equally. It depends on the project, right? Sometimes co translating a novel is a different experience from co translating a series of short stories. The short stories you can just like, pick and choose a few and then do drafts and then do go through edits together. But you're always at some point in the process finding your way to a unified view of the text, right? So you have to talk about the character, talk about the plot, talk about what the book is doing, and try to establish this is what we believe about the text, and these are the decisions we're going to make. And that's really fun. It does take a little longer than translating a book on your own from start to finish, because you have that back and forth. You have to discuss things. But I think it can. It's such a rewarding experience. I feel like people are doing it more and more often than they used to. I think I can't remember who said this. It might have been Johannes Goransson, who says that translation troubles the idea of single authorship, and co translation troubles that even more. And I do like to trouble things.

G Gemma Jackson 26:44

Yeah, that's really cool. Like, because there's always been the view of the like, authorship has been such like a solo pursuit of and so that's amazing. It's becoming more of a like, community thing, group thing. What advice do you have for people who are aspiring to work in the publishing industry, maybe as a translator or like working with translators?

J Julia Sanches 27:10

Find your people. Find your community. I think that's one of the most important things I ever done. I ever did, was find my community. Never stop thinking of yourself as a worker, even if you are doing what you love and fight for fair wages, fight for fight for everything that people have been fighting for for centuries. Because otherwise it can, it can become quite unsustainable. And if you want a career in in this world, then you have to make sure that you're supported in the right way. In that world, a lot of in the US, we've just recently formed the Literary Translators Division within the National Writers' Union, which is the first time that literary translators have been properly unionized, and that's been really inspiring. It's a lot of work. You know, you know, more meetings than anyone wants to attend. But it's, it's really, I'm really grateful to be surrounded by people who know how to think of themselves as artists and workers at the same time. I feel like we, we lose sight of that very easily, because we're constantly told you do what you love. So what's the problem with working 70 hours a week? There are so many problems with working 70 hours a week.

G Gemma Jackson 28:32

Okay, so final like question, what are you reading at the moment? If you have time t to read alongside your translation!

J Julia Sanches 28:41

What am I reading at the moment...

G Gemma Jackson 28:43

What book would you recommend for listeners to read?

J Julia Sanches 28:48

Okay, so a book that really blew my mind is not in translation, and I read it recently, and it's been on my list for a long time, is The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing. I finally, I had a quiet period, and so I basically spent all week reading this book. And it just made me feel so happy that novels can be written this way. It's so innovative. But I'm also just finished reading what's it called? Leila Lalami's Hotel, Dream Hotel. Is that what it's called? Yes, The Dream Hotel, which was interesting. It's one of those speculative novels where she takes something that is very present in our world and just pushes it further, and it's enraging, likethe context itself, like what happens is enraging. And then I'm also reading the Distant Fathers, which is a Italian memoir by Marina Jarre translated by Ann Goldstein and in the US, is published by New Vessel Press, and that's It's beautifully written. It's a very interesting she's she grew up partly in Latvia, the author, before moving to Italy during the Second World War, or pre even, possibly even before the Second War, and her father was Jewish and her mother was Catholic, probably no while a Waldensian, Waldensian, it's a, it's a, it's a type of Protestantism, I believe that I had zero awareness of before opening this book, and that's been really, really fun as well. I make a point of trying to read for pleasure. I don't always succeed, but if I'm going to do something that is so demanding and poorly remunerated, I should continue doing it for the right reasons.

G Gemma Jackson 30:59

Thank you for listening to Inside Publishing. I've been your host, Gemma. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts, it really helps us reach more people. Also feel free to let us know your thoughts on social media or send suggestions our way at podcast.syp@gmail.com See you next time!