The great popularity of *Struwwelpeter* and its influence on English children’s literature owes much to the quality of the first translation of 1848. The surreal nature of Heinrich Hoffmann’s pictures is translated into grotesque verbal exaggeration, making them even more comical than the German original. The assimilation of these cautionary tales into the British comic verse tradition guaranteed the survival of this translation while most of its many successors soon disappeared from the market. But who can be credited with this particular instance of cultural enrichment through transfer? We don’t know; he or she is not named on the publication. An appealing speculation about his or her identity was put forward by Duncan Mennie: “The translator’s skill in manipulating nursery words of the time like ‘sloven’ and ‘nasty physic’ makes one suspect the hand of a woman, possibly one of the poor English governesses who ate the bread of exile in so many countries of Europe in the nineteenth century” (Mennie 1948: 5) Anonymity was a not uncommon fate for translators of children’s literature before the mid-20th century. The lack of accreditation, commensurate with the peripheral position within the literary system and general low status of children’s books, made their translators not just invisible but, as Gillian Lathey puts it in this superb study, of all their colleagues “the most transparent of all” (5). In *The Role of Translators in Children’s Literature. Invisible Storytellers*, the first survey of its kind of the history of translated children’s literature in English, Lathey, Director of the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature at Roehampton and editor of a comprehensive reader which collated key essays on translating for the young reader (2006), pays tribute to these translators and sets out to make their work more visible.

Although “translated tales have enriched children’s reading since the mediaeval period and shaped English-language children’s literature since its inception” (2), very little has been written so far on the history of this aspect of English-language children’s literature. The twofold aim of Lathey’s pioneering study is “to trace in outline the chronology and impact of translators and translation on the history of children’s literature written in English” and to “give an account of the motivation and methodology of translators working for a child audience” (8). By doing this, she wants “to draw attention to a process so often taken for granted
[...], and to appraise and appreciate the translators whose craft and art requires the talents of an accomplished writer and a fingertip appreciation of the range of nuances in at least two languages” (5). The scope of the study is hugely ambitious, the timespan runs from the 15th century to the present day, and it touches upon numerous topics relevant to the profession and practice of translating for children.

The introduction provides a short account of the sparse work done on the subject to date, and names the specifics of translating for children. The two most important aspects of translation practice for this audience are, firstly, “the censorship or manipulation of texts in line with contemporary norms and expectations concerning childhood”, in other words the influence of time- and culture-specific notions of what is regarded suitable for children. The second is “developmental issues that take on increasing significance as children’s literature becomes more differentiated according to age group” (7). The actual receptive ability of child readers is at the heart of children’s literature translation; alien elements are often eradicated from translations which are heavily adapted to their target culture, allegedly on the grounds that young readers will not understand them. The decisions made by editors and translators depend on their assessment of child readers: how, and how far, should they convey elements from the source literature that are new and (as yet) unknown, elements that are linguistically and culturally foreign? What children actually understand, and how much “foreignness” they can and do cope with is the great black box of translating for children. As Lathey rightly points out in her concluding chapter, a greater emphasis on empirical research is needed if these questions are to be answered; until then there is no hard evidence in favour of “foreignising” or “domesticating” translation. However, as the study amply illustrates, the faithful-free dichotomy famously encapsulated in Schleiermacher’s image of moving either the author or the reader while leaving the other in peace has, throughout the history of translating children’s literature into English, almost always plumped for author mobility: “to aid fluency and to avoid the alienation of the young reader, cultural context adaptation has always been a common practice in translations for children” (118). Some translators, such as Edgar Taylor, translator of the Grimms’ fairytales, even used young readers as an excuse to “deviate a little from strict translation” (119). Amongst the few historical exceptions to this rule, is Georgana Sarah Godkin, translator of Edmondo De Amici’s Cuore in 1895, who believed that “the British schoolboy of to-day […] would prefer to see school life in a foreign city as it is, depicted by one of the country, not toned down with the local colour eliminated” (ibd.).

The study is divided into two parts, with Part One covering the 15th to the end of the 19th century and Part Two the 20th and 21st centuries. Its chapters are organised chronologically and focus on types of texts translated (didactic, religious, imaginative), dominant source languages (French in the 17th and 18th centuries,
with the influence of German increasing in the 19th), and topics such as gender (“The Translating Woman” in the 19th century), twentieth century classics, prizes awarded for translation or the consequences of globalisation on translating for children today. Both parts close with a useful summary chapter and, in the case of the final chapter, with desiderata for future research. Using material from “biographical, bibliographical, and historical sources and from translators’ prefaces, afterwords, notes, and other writings” (5) and, in the case of contemporary translators, extensive interviews, the study illuminates issues of selection, translation strategies and motivation. Within each historical period “hotspots” (9) of translation activity, influential translations or translators are discussed in greater detail.

The first of these is William Caxton, best known as the founder of the first British printing press in the late 15th century. Not so well known is the fact that Caxton was also a prominent translator. What makes him interesting in the context of children’s literature is that he translated The History of Reynard the Fox (1481) and Aesop’s Fables (1484), which became a children’s favourite, as well as a schoolbook and a courtesy book for young girls, both of which are presented in the first chapter of the study on translated texts for children in the early modern period which were primarily considered with pedagogical matters. A chapter on popular fiction in translation looks at romances and fables read by children in the mediaeval and early modern periods. Although not written specifically for children, these were greatly enjoyed by them in adapted and bowdlerised form, especially in the course of increasing availability of cheap editions from the late 17th century onwards. The earliest written examples of the fairy tale were not addressed to children either, but some of their translations were. Perrault’s first translator, Robert Samber, dedicated his translation to a specific child and occasional comments within the text, such as the definition “Now an Ogre is a giant that has long teeth and claws, with a raw head and bloody bones, that runs away with naughty little boys and girls, and eats them up” convey, as Lathey observes, “a tongue-in-cheek admonition typical of the storyteller accustomed to a child audience” (54). Further ‘hotspots’ include translations by Mark Anthony Meilan of Berquin’s The Children’s Friend, Mary Wollstonecraft’s translation of Christian Gottihlf Salzmann’s Elements of Morality for the Use of Children in 1790 (translated by her “because their moral messages matched those in her own publication for children” (7)), and, of course, the English translations of the Grimms’ and Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales. Briefly addressing differing degrees of recognition and autonomy enjoyed by women translators of texts for children in the 19th century, Lathey contrasts Mary Howitt, the first published translator of stories by Andersen, who “represents the female translator as traveller, keen language learner, and assertive professional” (97), with others such as Leonora Lang, a member of a group of females who contributed to Andrew Lang’s famous anthologies of
folk and fairy tales and who “received but a cursory acknowledgement of their efforts” (97).

By the late 20th century this practice of anonymity had more or less been abandoned and Lathey observes that translators have “generally left behind the modesty topos of early translators’ prefaces” (201). The chapter “Translator’s Voices” includes illuminating interviews with three outstanding contemporary translators Anthea Bell, Patricia Crampton (“the ‘grandes dames’ of translation for children” (179)), and the relative newcomer, Sarah Ardizzone. Lathey is particularly well qualified to write in her chapter “Rewarding Translation for Children” about the awards which have worked to raise the profile of translated children’s literature. The Mildred L. Batchelder Award, established in 1966 and conferred annually to an American publisher for the most outstanding book translated into English, served as a model for the biennial Marsh Award for children’s literature in translation, which was set up in the UK in 1996. Lathey is a co-founder of the Marsh Award and has acted as judge for the Award since its inception.

The title of the book *The Role of the Translators in Children’s Literature. Invisible Storytellers* invokes Lawrence Venuti’s famously provocative study *The Translators Invisibility: a History of Translation* (1995). In privileging the translator, it is in keeping with what Andrew Chesterman has identified as the latest paradigm in translation studies following the linguistic, cultural and cognitive ones: the social. Indeed one might, from the title, expect an exclusive focus on the agents of the translation and their habitus. But the study does not have a strict sociological orientation — Bourdieusian or otherwise. Although the focus is on translators and their work, it is also hugely interested in the actual translated texts and their reception, in this way documenting translators’ contributions “across history to children’s reading lessons and pleasures” (xv). Lathey reminds us that, although the translated moral tales of Mme de Genlis and Arnaud Berquin in the 18th century and Christoph von Schmid’s religious stories in the 19th are of “great socio-cultural and historical significance”, it is not they but the *Arabian Nights*, fairy tales, and romances “that are remembered with passion” (195) in autobiographical accounts of childhood reading. By attending to the agents of translation as well as their texts and their recipients, Lathey avoids the danger registered by Michaela Wolf in 2007 of a sociology of translation which, having lost sight of texts, exists without translations.

By addressing such a broad historical scope, as well as numerous issues such as gender, prizes, differences between US and UK translations, relay translation and retranslations, this ambitious study casts its net very wide over the field of translating for children. It cannot, inevitably, hope to pay equal or sufficient attention to all aspects and periods. The history of 20th and 21st century translations together with contemporary issues pertaining to them can hardly be done justice to in just over 70 pages. But this is a criticism common to every study which is the first of its
kind. Lathey herself writes modestly: “This book can only offer a starting point for such a major undertaking” (5), and in her conclusion she pinpoints desiderata for future research in the area: the role of female translators for children, the translation of children’s books in English-speaking areas and countries other than Britain, the multilateral exchanges and children’s literature, the history of the translation of picture books into English, “the intriguing differences that have emerged between the conditions and practice of translation for children in the US and the UK” and children’s responses to translations (199). In these concluding remarks about further research Lathey expresses the hope that her survey will become a “source book for future researchers who seek to answer some of the questions it raises” (199). This is indeed a most impressive “source book” which will prove invaluable to researchers and critics. Beautifully written and impeccably researched, it unearth a wealth of historical detail and identifies many relevant questions. On her motivation to write the study Lathey has this to say: “Translators’ contributions across history to children’s reading lessons and pleasures are recorded here in the hope and expectation that scholars will pay more attention in the future to the origins of the cross-cultural influences that have shaped English language children’s literature” (xv). With this masterful study, she has led the way.

References


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