



The Art of the Translator: translating children's books into English

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Nicholas Tucker on translating children's books into English.

So many books that we take for granted (eg **The Arabian Nights**, the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, Hergé's Tintin) are works in translation, linking us to authentic voices from other cultural traditions and times. Yet contemporary novels in translation remain hard to find. Elvire, Lorris and Marie-Aude Murail's **Golem** books, best sellers in France, have now been translated from the French for the English language market but how did their translator, Sarah Adams, confront the many problems of connecting a slang filled French language story set in a tough Paris suburb to English speaking young readers? **Nicholas Tucker** explains. <!--break-->

The past two years have been good times for Golems. Invented by the ingenious Rabbi Loew in sixteenth-century Prague, these lumbering mud monsters are still refusing to lie down and quietly disintegrate. Paul Wegener's classic silent horror film **The Golem** is newly available in DVD, while Jonathan Stroud's **The Golem's Eye** and Carlo Gebler's **August 1944** have both helped keep this particular myth alive. And now, from Walker Books, **Golem 1** and **2** have just hit the shelves, with three more titles still to come. Having already sold more than a million copies in France, there are high hopes that these pocket-sized novels in translation at only £4.99 each could lead to further Golemania over here as well.

Written by Elvire, Lorris and Marie-Aude Murail, France's most famous literary siblings now all middle-aged, these books feature a Golem made from pixels rather than mud, encountered through a mysterious computer game. He initially becomes visible to 12-year-old Majid Badach, a first generation French North African pupil in 8D, the noisiest class in a particularly tough secondary school in France. Their geeky teacher also gets involved, as do the rest of the class, his mother, and various other interested parties. Up against them are two sinister hit men from B Corp, a supermarket conglomerate with headquarters in Geneva. Intended as a way of passing on subliminal messages to all potential shoppers, the game was never meant to be released. The directors of B Corp now want it back, and are none too fussy about how they get it.



Cultural differences

This story line is well in the tradition of the all-action comic strip series always so popular in France. Much of it takes place as if on a computer screen; another reason for its instant success with the young. But unlike the white, bourgeois world of René Goscinny's **Le Petit Nicolas** school stories, that sold so well in the 1960s, Majid and his fellow pupils live in a run-down housing estate packed with immigrant families. To make this world more relevant to readers over here, the translator Sarah Adams has transplanted the setting from suburban France to an unspecified inner city in North Europe. The end result is a series of tough, streetwise stories that could well appeal to that rarest of all mammals, the

dedicated British Boy Reader. The stakes are high.

Supported both by Walker Books and by a grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Adams spent three months in Marseille among the Algerian community and some of its rising rap stars before starting on the actual process of translation. She soon decided that most of the indicators revealing that these were originally French stories should go. While there are still some references to 'Couscous City', the Moreland Estate where Majid lives is now usually referred to by its proper name, with his own particular section known as Hummingbird Tower. There is no longer any mention of Paris, and the fact that characters live in 'bars' or horizontal blocks sometimes a kilometre long would only trouble a sharp-eyed UK reader expecting to find more familiar tower blocks instead. The hapless teacher, now named Hugh Mullins, regularly awards marks out of twenty, another French trait, and also attempts without much success to teach some extraordinarily formal English lessons. Pupils who fail too many exams are required to repeat the whole academic year, and the sweet mint tea handed out by Majid's Berber mother also survives. But these are only details. The central images of unruly classrooms, petty crime and rubbish-strewn estates with lifts that only occasionally work cross all national barriers, making these books as immediately relevant over here as they are in France.



Translating slang?

While French immigrants tend to come from North Africa, with its Maghreb and Creole influences, most new British immigrants hail from West Africa, Asia and the West Indies, all with very different linguistic heritages. The main challenge for Adams was how to transcribe the French multi-ethnic slang with which most of these stories are told into English without making her characters sound like Ali G hybrids. After her return to Britain she tried out various equivalents to the French slang in these stories on teenagers that she knew in Brixton, where she currently lives, and in Hackney, where she has contacts with schools. The variations between the linguistic responses she received North and South of the Thames were often enormous, let alone the many differences she also discovered between French and British street slang. There is for example no equivalent over here at the moment to the current French national obsession with backslang.

But even if slang could be perfectly translated from one country to another problems still persist. Accurately written down slang that is very much of its time can soon come to seem extremely dated. At its worst, when reproduced six months later it may sound like the utterances of those well-meaning parents or teachers who try to impress younger generations with their knowledge of what is actually being said by teenagers at the moment; a quest bound to end in failure. Adams' final solution to all these problems was to go instead for the rhythm and colour of language, choosing words that might be made up but which sound right to her, hitting a tone that feels current without actually dating. In this she is consciously following Carlos Fuentes, and his belief expressed in a recent lecture that 'Translators can't convey the slang of our times accurately, because slang is language in constant transformation. So we have to give slang an 'onomatopoeic resonance' by transforming language into comical expression.'

There is plenty of such expression in the English versions of the Golem books. Readers who enjoy playing with words may still not be able to make much of backslang like 'land-More tate-es' for Moreland Estate. But they will surely warm to characters whose language can be every bit as opaque as their own must seem to the uninitiated. Here, for example, is ten-year-old Momo, baseball cap on back to front, explaining things to a television camera crew. 'Me bro's bluds hang with the 8D crew, innit. An' dey is biggin' it up, like, 'bout a ghost in ing-Humn-turd ment bases.' His despairing interviewer thinks she will have to make use of sub-titles if this is ever broadcast, but in the context of the story what Momo says is perfectly clear. Adams has since gone on to win this year's Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation for her work on Daniel Pennac's novels **Eye of the Wolf** and **Kamo's Escape**. Her skill as a translator is never in doubt.

The final message of these books is a call to all dispossessed young people to resist both the commercial forces out to exploit them and the temptation to take the wrong path in their own lives. The Golem itself finally comes out as a force on the side of the poor and overlooked, just as he was to the persecuted Jews in medieval Prague. These little books

have done particularly well in France with multi-ethnic audiences not otherwise much given to reading. Nice if the same proved to be true over here, innit?

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Golem 1: Magic Berber (1 84428 614 2) and **Golem 2: Joke** (1 84428 615 0) by Elvire, Lorriss and Marie-Aude Murail are published by Walker at £4.99 each.

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