

STRANGERS ON A PLANE

BY TONY BECKWITH



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The flight to Buenos Aires was scheduled to depart at 7 pm from the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, and I was already on board. My aisle seat was one of two tucked against the side of the aircraft in the main cabin. I stowed my carryon bag in the overhead locker after removing the book and notepad I planned to use during the flight and putting them in the seatback pocket in front of me. As I was removing my pillow from its plastic wrapper, a young Asian woman stood beside me and said, “Excuse me?”

I stood up to let her take her seat by the window, then we both settled in, fastened our seat belts, and got ready for takeoff. As the plane reached its cruising altitude and leveled off, we busied ourselves—she with a laptop, I with a book. When dinner arrived we exchanged a few words as trays were passed back and forth. Then she pulled her blanket up to her chin and leaned her head against the panel beside the window. I read for a while and then I too dozed off. The following morning we again exchanged a few words when breakfast was served. Then we landed and went our separate ways.

Exactly one week later, on my return flight, I was once again settling into my aisle seat when a voice beside me said, "Excuse me?" I looked up and, as my mother would have said in such circumstances, you could have knocked me over with a feather. It was the same woman, and we would once again sit side-by-side through the night on our way back to Dallas. The extraordinary serendipity of the situation broke the ice, and we both smiled and acknowledged each other as though we were long-time acquaintances. In rather halting English, she remarked on the improbability of our second encounter, and I said, "Really, what are the odds?"

She frowned slightly and admitted she was not familiar with that expression. I used a gambling analogy to explain that "odds" in this context referred to the probability of something happening compared to the chances that it would not. She nodded and murmured something in a language I did not understand. I shrugged and raised my eyebrows. "Yes," she said, "big odds!" We both smiled again and then continued to prepare for takeoff.

Once we were on our way she asked me if I had had a good week in Argentina, and we chatted comfortably for a while. She told me she worked for an IT company in California, and had spent the week at a client's office in Buenos Aires installing new software. I was duly impressed. When dinner was served, one of the flight attendants spoke to me in Spanish and I answered, also in Spanish. My companion asked me how I came to be bilingual and I told her my story. When she asked what I did for a living I told her I was a translator. "Ah!" she blurted out, and went on to say that she now understood how I had been able to give her such a clear explanation of the meaning of the phrase *What are the odds?* When I asked her what, exactly, she was talking about she said, "That's how your mind works." According to her, my explanation showed that I could empathize with what it was like to approach an unfamiliar concept from a different language, and instinctively knew how to provide her with the data she needed to be able to understand it. She said that, as a translator, my mind automatically straddled languages and was comfortable examining ideas from discrete linguistic perspectives. Long after dinner was over and she had gone to sleep, I was still thinking about what she had said.

How exactly does a translator's mind work? How does it slip its moorings and drift, untethered, free of linguistic attachments that might interfere with its pursuit of pure meaning as seen through a prism of cultural connotation? And, is that ability something one must innately possess in order to become a successful translator, or is it something that can be learned? Whether one has come to literary translation via an academic path or has found one's way to the craft by other means, a key question must be whether one's mind "works that way." To be sure, one must be well provided with patience, tenacity, stamina, and a love of words, among other attributes. But unless one's mind is flexible enough to straddle a pair of languages and experience both cultures to the point where ideas and concepts can find their mirror images, one may not be fully equipped to produce the kind of literary translation that readers and reviewers refer to as "inspired." Just as a mathematician must have a feel for numbers, and a writer must have a way with words, a translator's mind must be limber enough to identify with an author's intent and express it accurately and sensitively in another language. This process is, I believe, where translators find their bliss.

Sometimes I can sleep on an overnight flight, but usually my mind is wide awake and ruminating, as though cruising through the darkness at 30,000 feet helps me to see more clearly than when I have both feet on the ground. I asked the Argentine flight attendant for one last cup of coffee, and turned to the project I had planned to work on during the flight: a book review for the Spanish Trade Commission's New Spanish Books initiative.¹ As I started reading the book I'd been commissioned to review, I reflected, not for the first time, on how well this exercise can serve the literary translator. To review a book one must read it very carefully and take notes as one does so. The guidelines I had been given in this particular case called for a concise, well-documented report that assessed the author's skill and style, the book's suitability for translation and similarity to other popular works, the plausibility of the dialogue, whether the subject matter would be of interest to a US audience, and so on. Everything the author had poured into some 300 pages of prose had to be distilled into a review of no more than 700 words. To accomplish this, I would have to read the book as closely as a translator does.

Once I had finished the review I would presumably be on intimate terms with the writer's style and have a firm grasp of her novel's linguistic and cultural elements, and would theoretically be in a perfect position to translate it. Interestingly, in this context, a book review—like translation itself—can be considered a form of “re-writing” in the sense proposed by André Lefevere, the Belgian translation theorist who, at the time of his death in 1996 was Professor of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.²

It was very late by the time I put away my book and notepad. Only a few of my fellow passengers were still awake, staring blearily at their laptops and tablets, unwilling or unable to sleep. As I closed my eyes and pulled the blanket up around my shoulders, my mind drifted to another matter I had wanted to give some thought to on the trip: the question of self-publishing that was prompting a great deal of talk in translation circles. I remembered something of what I'd written a little while ago for Corinne McKay's “Please Discuss” column in *The ATA Chronicle*. Conventional publishing houses—which until recently were the sole option available to aspiring literary translators seeking to publish their work in book form—are a portal to that goal, certainly, but can also be a barrier, sometimes an impenetrable one. There are several reasons for the latter, some of them perfectly reasonable, since book publishers, like any other business, must be successful in order to survive. Acquisition editors sometimes err on the side of caution, and that caution has often been exacerbated by the fact that not all are able to read in a foreign language.

But the 20th century introduced the Internet and made us all publishers. The democratizing effect of the resulting “new media” has given literary translators the tools to bypass the traditional publishing world and publish their own work. Inevitably, this will create a flood of translated literature made available to anyone with access to an electronic device of some kind. Some translators believe that the American reading public is not adventurous enough to appreciate foreign literature, but surely this can't be true when we recall the popularity of works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Little Prince*, and, more recently, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, among many others. No, the market is there—the status quo has merely created an artificial bottleneck—and will surely be tapped

more deeply than ever by those who learn how to use the new tools at their disposal, just as self-published writers have done.

In the 21st century, then, self-published translators will have to reinvent themselves: when we drop the last three letters of “new media” we are left with a tantalizing glimpse of a “new me.” Literary translators will have to take on many of the roles normally performed by conventional publishers and become their own talent scouts, editors, copyeditors, designers, publicists, marketing specialists, legal advisers, and so on. Will everyone be up to wearing so many hats? That remains to be seen. For those who aren’t, we can assume that a whole new cadre of experts will be lining up to support them in their online ventures, creating new hierarchies that may one day prove to be just as powerful as the traditional publishing houses they’d like to replace. That was as far as I got because my long day finally caught up with me and I fell fast asleep.

In the morning there was the usual flurry of activity as we were served breakfast and prepared to land. *Café con leche* tastes so good when one has been up most of the night! My Asian companion and I joined the lines snaking through US customs and immigration, and then once again came to a parting of the ways. We shook hands warmly, aware that we had shared a somewhat unusual experience. I suddenly realized that we had never learned each other’s names, and now it seemed too late. “Goodbye,” I said. “Maybe we’ll meet again one day on another flight to Argentina.” She laughed and said, “What are the odds?”

1 The Spanish Trade Commission’s New Spanish Books initiative [newspanish-books.com], an on-line guide of titles with rights available for translation from Spain’s publishing houses and literary agents.

2 André Lefevere. *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 13.