

Two Translators with a Swedish

TATTOO

By Tony Beckwith

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What is it like to translate a blockbuster bestseller? How does it feel when your translation of a best-seller becomes a successful movie but you share in none of its financial rewards? What is it like to work as a husband-and-wife literary translation team? I learned the answer to these questions and many more when I was invited by the Austin Area Translators and Interpreters Association (AATIA, www.aatia.org) to interview Tiina Nunnally and Steven T. Murray for a Harvie Jordan Lecture Series event billed—in a nod to that blockbuster bestseller—as “Two Translators with a Swedish Tattoo.”

The two translators in question (neither of whom sports a tattoo) came to Austin for the weekend from their home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My first question—the one that translators always want to ask other translators—was: how and where did they learn Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and German well enough to translate them into English?

Nunnally was born in Chicago and grew up in the Midwest. Her mother was Finnish, so there was a Nordic connection from the very beginning.

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Her father also spoke Finnish so both parents used it as their “secret language” to talk to each other without being understood by the kids. When she was 17, Tiina went to Denmark as an exchange student for a year of total immersion. (That is the way to learn a second language—by not speaking your first one for a year.) The experience changed her and made her “realize that language is very important to identity. It makes your mind more flexible about how people see the world, and about how people express themselves.” She then taught herself Norwegian and Swedish (she already spoke German and Russian). There were no academic positions open in her field at the time, so she spent 10 years with Scandinavian Airlines in Seattle, which she loved and which gave her plenty of opportunities to use her languages.

Murray was born in California and grew up in Manila, Mexico City, and San Diego. With that nomadic back-

ground it is not hard to understand his early interest in languages. He first went to Europe when he was 20, and over the next few years spent time in Germany and Denmark (including Jutland). Murray says he “was fated to become a translator” and, like many artists before and since, supported himself doing a number of different things along the way. Until now, of course, when he is fully occupied as a freelance literary translator. And not just any literary translator; he produced the English version of Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium Series*, setting the standard for Swedish crime fiction everywhere in the English-speaking world. And yet one looks in vain for his name in these books. Instead, in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, for example, on the fourth page it says “Translated from the Swedish by Reg Keeland.” Huh? Murray explains that the publisher’s edited version differed enough from his translation to make him use a pseudonym for the

British edition. He has also used the *nom de plume* McKinley Burnett.

That makes five names between them, because some of Nunnally's books are translated by Felicity David, a pseudonym she sometimes uses for works published in Britain. Make that five names and over 80 books. The couple has been translating literature for many years.

Regarding the use of aliases, Nunnally explains that she and Murray do not like to use pseudonyms because they are both firmly committed to the idea that translators should receive credit for their work, which is "something that literary translators have to fight for every inch of the way." And, obviously, a pseudonym hides the translator's true identity and prevents credit from being given where it is due. As happened, for example, when an article in *The New York Times* listed Reg Keeland as the translator of the *Millennium Series*, and Murray was not mentioned at all. "On the other hand," continues Nunnally, "if the translation has been so altered from what you originally presented—by the publisher, the editor, or the author—that it no longer represents your work, and you can no longer stand by it entirely, then you have to decide whether you want your name on that book. Is it going to hurt your reputation as a translator? Is it going to hurt your reputation as a writer?" That is how she felt about the British edition of *Smilla's Sense of Snow* and told the publisher to remove her name from the translation. The publisher did so, but instead included "Translated by F. David" in *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, as the book was called in England. Nunnally says that if they had asked her, she would have come up with a much better name, but since the die was already cast she decided to use it, once she had

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fleshed it out to Felicity David, which she thought sounded much better.

Nunnally is well known for her translation of Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the Norwegian trilogy, and *Pippi Longstocking*, the children's book by Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren, among many other works. But *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, by Danish writer Peter Høeg, was her highest-profile project. It became an international bestseller and was awarded ATA's Lewis Galantière Award in 1994.

Literary translators will sometimes contrast the pros and cons of translating works by living authors with those of translating authors who are no longer with us. Murray, for example, notes that "dead authors are much less trouble." In *Smilla's* case, unfortunately, friction marred the experience of working with a living author. Not all writers trust a translation of their work into a language where unfamiliarity breeds doubt. Translation is, after all, an intimate affair between the translator and the text, and sometimes three is a crowd. In this case, Nunnally was paid by the word and received no royalties from a book that sold millions of copies. She saw people on the bus reading it and knew she "wasn't getting a dime for all those books." Then the movie was made and there was no stream of royalties from there either. "I don't sign those kinds of contracts anymore," she says.

Murray does not either. Contracts are a complex process in any context. Literary translators who negotiate their own are sometimes at a disadvantage and may leave too much on the table. Nunnally's publisher was reluctant to demand payment from the production company for using her translation of *Smilla's Sense of Snow* as the basis for the movie. They said they would sell a lot of books on the coattails of the movie, which is true, but beside the point. The publisher also told Nunnally that there was no precedent for translators getting paid when their work was made into a movie script. This is obviously where an agent can be of enormous help, and at a certain point becomes essential. As a beginner, of course, you have no leverage, no track record, but later on, with a few books under your belt, there are contracts you can walk away from if the terms are unacceptable.

The experience with *Smilla's Sense of Snow* prepared Murray to negotiate when the books in the *Millennium Series* were going to be made into movies. "I called the production company and asked how much they planned to pay me for my *copyrighted* [his emphasis] translation that they were going to use as the basis of the movie script." The company made an offer and this time there was a happy ending.

A well-deserved one, too, because translating the *Millennium Series* was

a challenge on several levels. Murray says the publisher originally asked if he could do all three books in six months. “I told them I may need six months for each one, or maybe I can do all three in nine months. It wound up taking 11 months.” Unsurprisingly, he does not remember much about that year! When I ask how hard it had been to capture the nuances of Swedish subculture in the books, he explains, “Stieg Larsson had a very American writing style. It flowed like butter into American English.”

Not every translator is married to a translator, and as one who is not, I was interested to hear what Nunnally and Murray had to say about working as a husband-and-wife team. Harvie Jordan, for whom AATIA’s lecture series is named, was one of the founding fathers of AATIA and the first assistant administrator of ATA’s Spanish Language Division. A freelance Spanish <> English translator and Spanish and English voice talent, he mentored many and encouraged even more. When I was seriously considering stepping away from my day job and becoming a full-time freelance translator, I asked Harvie what one needed most to be successful in the field. He said, “a wife with a real job.”

“That’s me!” says Nunnally gleefully. She and Murray met at a conference on Scandinavian literature. “He was a publisher at the time, so I went up and asked him for a job. And that’s how we met.”

In an interview published in *The Seattle Times* in 2001, book editor Mary Ann Gwinn wrote, “Like most literary folk, the couple dream of hitting the bestseller list. Nunnally works part-time as an office manager for an architectural firm; employment that gives them both medical coverage.” That was 12 years ago. Today, they are both full-time—bestselling—literary

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translators, which raises questions about competition and collaboration.

Since they work in the same languages, I ask if they ever had to decide who would translate a book. Murray says it all depends on the scheduling since, thanks to the boom in Swedish crime fiction, they both stay busy with many projects, current and in the pipeline. Nunnally adds, “But you’re [Murray] better with certain kinds of books. You’re better with lots of slang and dialogue. I’m better at the more literary kind.” To which Murray turns to me and says, “She does the ones that win the prizes.” Nunnally replies, “But you’re the one who does the best-sellers.” It all evens out.

Their offices are at opposite ends of the house, and they work together on some projects, alone on others. They have different work schedules, as one would expect, and different styles. He listens to music while he translates, she does not. They meet for lunch, exchange lots of e-mail, edit each other’s work, and read their translations out loud to each other, which sounds like the ultimate in quality control.

“When you’re working on a novel for several months you get really close to it and can start missing things. Reading the work out loud helps to hear how far it has come on the journey from the source to the target language. It’s good to have someone read your work because you want the book to sound as though it was written in English,” says Murray.

During the question-and-answer period at the end of our conversation, a

member of the audience asks the pair about their formal education in translation and whether they had mentors. Murray says he had two mentors in technical translation in the Bay Area, but none in literary translation. Nunnally explains that she has a master’s degree in Scandinavian studies and is working on a PhD in Scandinavian literature. “But when I was in college, there were no courses on translation. Our generation had to learn it for ourselves.” They both started out as technical translators—Murray spent years translating documents for Swedish nuclear power plants—but they were always translating literature on the side, and longed to do it full-time.

Regarding their current projects, Murray says he is working on a German book, *Snow White Must Die* by Nele Neuhaus, which is enjoying great success in Germany. Nunnally has just finished *The Land of Dreams* by Vidar Sundstol, a Norwegian detective story set among Norwegian immigrants settled on the shores of Lake Superior.

In terms of advice they have for aspiring literary translators, Murray recommends translating books for fun, to get the practice of working with literature. Nunnally thinks that “when you start out you should do books you are in love with. Later on, you’ll have to do books that you don’t necessarily like, but you’ll get paid for it.” They both insist that, as with any art, practice is the key. Harvie Jordan would certainly agree with that.

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