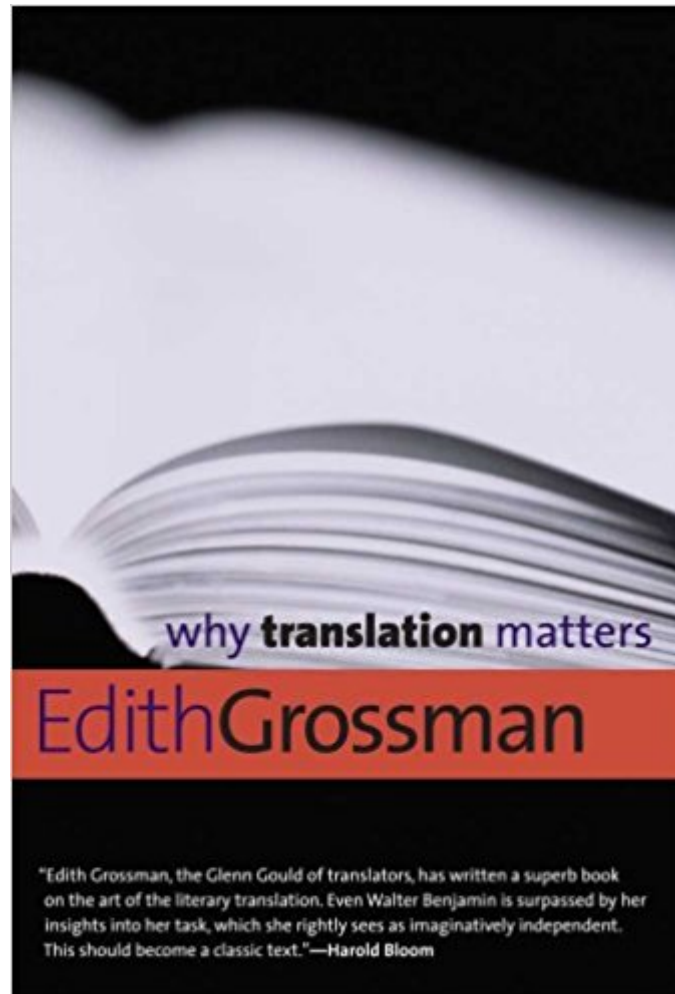




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Why Translation Matters (Why X Matters Series)



Synopsis

Why Translation Matters argues for the cultural importance of translation and for a more encompassing and nuanced appreciation of the translator's role. As the acclaimed translator Edith Grossman writes in her introduction, "My intention is to stimulate a new consideration of an area of literature that is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented. For Grossman, translation has a transcendent importance: "Translation not only plays its important traditional role as the means that allows us access to literature originally written in one of the countless languages we cannot read, but it also represents a concrete literary presence with the crucial capacity to ease and make more meaningful our relationships to those with whom we may not have had a connection before. Translation always helps us to know, to see from a different angle, to attribute new value to what once may have been unfamiliar. As nations and as individuals, we have a critical need for that kind of understanding and insight. The alternative is unthinkable. Throughout the four chapters of this bracing volume, Grossman's belief in the crucial significance of the translator's work, as well as her rare ability to explain the intellectual sphere that she inhabits as interpreter of the original text, inspires and provokes the reader to engage with translation in an entirely new way.

Book Information

Series: Why X Matters Series

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press; Why X Matters Series edition edition (March 8, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300171307

ISBN-13: 978-0300171303

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.5 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 16 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #236,594 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #95 in Books > Reference > Words, Language & Grammar > Translating #335 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > General #586 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Linguistics

Customer Reviews

"Grossman and others like her continue to offer us enlightenment. . . . [The subject] is passionately explored and patiently explained." •Richard Howard, New York Times Book Review "In this

slim but powerful volume, Edith Grossman argues that translation performs a function that is too often ignored or misunderstood." — Edward King, *Sunday Times* "A passionate defense of the translator's art." — Peter Terzian, *The Boston Globe* "A brief, forceful defense of [translation]." — Hillel Italie, *The Associated Press* "Grossman writes with passion and clarity, and with a wisdom acquired through decades of practice. . . . *Why Translation Matters* is well argued and stylishly written. Or, to put it another way, it is both able and seamless." — Daniel Hahn, *Times Literary Supplement* "Required reading for publishers the world over. . . . It should also be given to all reviewers, agents, writers and readers. . . . In clean language that is a pleasure to read, Grossman argues why and how a good translation is just that." — Julie Rose, *The Australian* "This is a valuable book and a valiant effort to explain the importance of translation." — Chad Post, *The Quarterly Conversation* "[Grossman's] investigation of the broad-reaching societal benefits of translated texts — which allow for exchange of ideas and insight — is captivating and refreshing." — *Choice* "Grossman is one of the multilingual crowd's best, and she explains exactly why this skill of decoding and reconstruction of an author's words, rhythm and intent is so important." — *San Francisco Chronicle* "Edith Grossman, the Glenn Gould of translators, has written a superb book on the art of the literary translation. — Even Walter Benjamin is surpassed by her insights into her task, which she rightly sees as imaginatively independent. — This should become a classic text." — Harold Bloom

Edith Grossman is the acclaimed translator of Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Mayra Montero, and many other distinguished Spanish-language writers. Her translation of *Don Quixote* is widely considered a masterpiece. The recipient of numerous prizes for her work, she was awarded the Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation by PEN in 2006, an award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2008, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, and the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute Translation Prize in 2010. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She lives in New York.

Though I am not a professional translator, I couldn't disagree more with the reviewers that found Grossman's *"Why Translation Matters"* a dry read. She is, first, an excellent essayist, and second, an articulate defender of translation's role in making great writing accessible across cultures, times and languages. In the preface she writes, "My intention is to stimulate a new consideration of an area of literature that is too often ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented." And in a little under one hundred thirty pages, she does just that, offering a succinct description of translation's role in

creating texts, presenting a clear rationale for why translation should matter to readers and describing how the misrepresentation of the translator's role by reviewers and publishers limits access to great writers. She caps the book with a lovely essay on the challenges and joys of translating poetry, presenting examples of other translators along with a bit of her own work. All told, an important work on translation role in literature and within the essay genre, a truly enjoyable read.

Edith Grossman, a translator of many important literary works, including Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, delivered much of this very fine, easy to read, and informative book as lectures at Yale University. She points out that translations make it possible for people to gain knowledge from other cultures and a wide number of thinkers. She deplores that many publishers diminish the value of translators by hardly mentioning them and reviewers who altogether ignore that the volume is a translation. She bewails that while fifty percent of all books in translation published world-wide are translated from English, English-speaking people are deprived of what they should know because only six percent of foreign language books are translated into English. In chapter 2, Grossman tells us about the two years she took to translate *Don Quixote*, the things she had to consider and the things she had to do. Should she read all the English translations of the masterpiece? Should she study the scholarly literature about the book? Should she consider the different scholarly views about various passages and add footnotes? Should she approach her translation of this four hundred year old classic as she handled the modern Latin writers that she usually translated? In chapter 3, she discusses how she and others handle translating poetry, and offers many examples. How does a translator capture the rhyme and rhythm of the original, its emotions, and its images, images from another country and, possibly also, a different time. Grossman is certainly correct. Good translators make significant contributions to every book they translate. In fact, some translations are a lively duet between the original author and his or her translator. The great philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), for example, who spent a decade composing his book on philosophy and was careful in selecting every word, told his translator, who rendered his *Guide of the Perplexed* from its original Arabic to Hebrew, not to translate his philosophical masterpiece literally. He wrote to him: "The translator who proposes to render each word literally and adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet much difficulty and the result will be doubtful and corrupt. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and then state the theme with perfect clarity in the other language. This however, cannot be done without changing the order of words, putting many words for one word, or vice versa, and adding or taking away words, so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates."

(Translated by Leon D. Stitskin in his Letters of Maimonides, Yeshiva University Press, New York, 1977.) Maimonides' use of translations proves Grossman's point about the need for translations to acquire information, for without being able to read translations, Maimonides probably would not have known enough to write his famous philosophical book. Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed is based in large part upon the Greek Aristotle's philosophy. However, Maimonides did not know Greek, the language Aristotle used. Maimonides' knowledge of Aristotle's philosophy came from the translations of the Greek into Arabic, a language he understood. Grossman focuses primarily on novels and poetry, and not on philosophical writings, such as those by Maimonides. However, her thoughts, as can be seen in the above quote, apply to all literature. They also apply to the Bible. Most of the millions of people who read the Bible forget that the Scripture they read is a translation from the Hebrew in regard to the Torah, and the Greek or, according to some scholars, from Aramaic to Greek to English, for the New Testament. They fail to realize that what they are reading frequently, indeed very frequently, is different than what is in the original. For example, should the opening words of the Torah be translated "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," as most translations render the Hebrew words, even though the heaven and earth were not the first creations, as can be seen in the next sentences. Or should the Hebrew be translated "In the beginning when God created the heaven and earth," as the eleventh century French commentator Rashi insisted; the later indicating that heaven and earth were not the first creation. Or take another example, the noun "Lord" as another name for God is well-known, but the fact is that "Lord" is not the name in the text. The Torah has the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God. When the Bible was translated for the first time, from Hebrew into Greek in about 250 BCE for Jews living in Egypt who spoke Greek, in a work called the Septuagint, the translators felt it was inappropriate to render God's name into Greek, so they substituted the word "Lord." Most future translations continued this practice. As a result, readers of the Hebrew Bible in translation are reading what the Bible does not say. Grossman's book is important. It raises our consciousness to the role and contributions of translators and how we need to respect their efforts and encourage publishers to use them much more frequently.

I'm not a professional translator. I'm just a young person interested in becoming a translator and exploring the possibility of getting a degree in it. I found her book to be absolutely phenomenal: I COULDN'T PUT IT DOWN!!! I read it on my iPhone with the Kindle reader app which came in handy because I found myself looking up words constantly--both new words, and words which I thought I knew, but realized I didn't quite fully understand once they were used in context. Moreover, her

passion in talking about books, authors, and translators made me actually look them up; beyond Wikipedia and Google, I even went to the library to check out some books that weren't on or to get the original edition in Spanish once I saw the ridiculous prices for the English version. She inspired me to read great literature as I was never inspired to read in high school. She inspired me to read more books about translating written by translators. And, she motivated me to actually go and pay for my first translation class--one that she will be teaching in New York this year! I can't wait! Everyone--translators, interpreters, students of English literature--should read this book!

A great book that offers insight into what translators do; however, if book were merely this, it would be a rather narrow focus for many. Unfortunately, many will not stumble on this book and will therefore lose out on the greater questions Grossman asks. Her defense of translation parallels what good Readers do: interpret written words in ascribing a meaning that makes sense for themselves. To paraphrase Grossman's interpretation of a quote by Octavio Paz: All reading IS translation (of thoughts into language). Book is divided into 4 sections: Intro- Why Translation Matters: Grossman accentuates translation's positive effect on cultures through mutual communication / understanding Part 1- Authors, Translators, Readers Today: Grossman discusses the different roles/tasks each brings into reading a text Part 2- Translating Cervantes: More of a nuts-and-bolts of steps Grossman went in translating "Don Quixote" Part 3- Translating Poetry: (Book waned for me here) Grossman talks about the structural demands (rhyme/meter/etc) of translating poetry, but gets bogged down IMO in defending some of her choices in translating Spanish Golden Age poems. Was a 5-star book until last section. If you are thinking of buying this book, I assume you already know who Edith Grossman is (and probably like Latin American lit); book will further your appreciation of what Grossman (and others like her) do and their contributions to our world-view.

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