

Translating world favourites



Not everyone gets an exhilarating mix of challenge and fun in their job but **Máire Nic Mhaoláin** did when she translated the first Harry Potter book into Irish.

It's a translator's dream. A year and a half after its publication, people are still interested in your work! Invitations to speak on radio, write for magazines, address students. Of course the fact that it was a translation into Irish of J.K. Rowling's first Harry Potter book explains a lot.

Looking back, it was indeed a fearsome undertaking to reproduce in Irish this much-loved and much-translated work, a cult juvenile novel, sacred and inviolable as the Koran to Potter fans around the world. And to a large extent the same holds true for Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl*, just published in Irish this month. The wonderful thing is that so many people seem really fascinated by the translation process.

Theorists would love to know what goes on in a translator's head in the act of translation. And so would I. All kinds of things go on. Things the translator isn't even aware of. I'd say translation is about choices, about making suitable choices. People ask about words, but I find it's not so much the words – it's the sentences, getting the thing to hang properly when you've decided on the words. And you wouldn't believe the rewriting that goes on. Everything is fluid till the end. As someone said, 'a translation is never finished, it is just abandoned'.

People are especially interested in the handling of names in the Harry Potter book. However, that question was largely settled for me by the direction

that names of main characters (including cats, dogs, centaurs, dragons, owls) were to remain unchanged from English. The game of Quidditch was likewise to be retained, though I got away with Irish terms for the players, balls, etc. Ghosts, gadgets and such could be rendered in Irish. And so the Fat Friar (a ghost) became *an Bráthair Beathaithe* ('Ramhar' wouldn't alliterate), the Bloody Baron acquired an alliterative prefix as *an Barán Bithfhuilteach*, and Nearly Headless Nick became *Clás Cloigeann-ar-Éigean* (Almost-Headed Clás – *Clás* being a short form of Nicholas). All that study of alliteration in Early Irish prose finally pays off. The 'Put-Outer' (a sort of reverse cigarette-lighter) became *an Cuir-Astóir* (with echoes of *lastóir* 'a lighter') and the Remembrall – a ball to remind you that you've forgotten something – a disappointingly mundane *Uile-Chuimhneoir*.

And then there are the various categories of magical persons, titles of school texts, magic ingredients, and spells. And songs. Is it too much to hope somebody will notice the (imperfect) assonance in all songs? The same holds for *Artemis Fowl*. Please note the assonances (so not-English rhyme scheme).

Artemis is unlike Harry. Harry is a goodie, Artemis a baddie (essentially). But it's not just Artemis; the whole translation is tougher. 'Diehard with fairies' sums it up. The language is so smart and slangy. One occasionally needs terms like *peantatól sóidiam* and more high-tech stuff than Harry Potter could shake a wand at, but next minute one gets to use traditional Irish like *Tuatha Dé Danann* and *lios* and *sián*, and to decide a certain fairy belongs to the *ginid* class, and to avoid the word *sióg* ... And the imaginative possibilities of Irish names and surnames is just incredible.

Do I ever regret choices I've made in translations? I think everybody does, a little. But regret translating Harry and Artemis? Never.

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