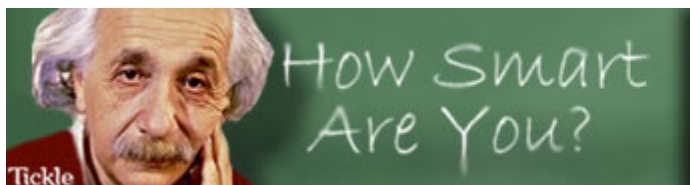


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Online Magazine Removes Cultural Blinders

By JULIE SALAMON

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The baby on the table was a nice touch.

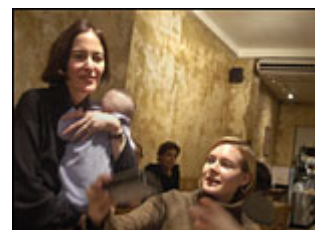
What could better illustrate the unorthodox methods of three women determined to bring foreign literature and commentary into the United States outside conventional publishing routes? They are the editors of Words Without Borders, an Internet magazine that features writers from around the world in English translation. When called for an interview, Alane Salierno Mason, the magazine's founder, said sheepishly that since the editors' offices are virtual, they would have to meet, as they always do, in a cafe.

They showed up on a frigid afternoon on West 72nd Street in Manhattan, armed with statistics on the cultural imbalance of trade and the hopeful zeal of revolutionaries. And with Luc, the infant son of Ms. Mason, who is on maternity leave from her job as a senior editor at W. W. Norton.

First the statistics that helped inspire Ms. Mason: a widely cited 1999 report from the National Endowment for the Arts calculated that about 3 percent of the books published in the United States were translations, compared with 40 to 50 percent in Western European countries.

Then, the zeal: "I really thought after Sept. 11 we would feel more of a need to know about the rest of the world, to realize how urgent it was to know what people were thinking and feeling and writing about America and themselves," Ms. Mason said. "It's very easy to throw out phrases like 'the Axis of Evil,' the enemy, and we really don't

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Alan Chin for The New York Times
Alane Salierno Mason holding son, Luc, and Samantha Schr and Dedi Felman, all (except editors of Words Without Borders).

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know who these people are."

"Words Without Borders" (www.wordswithoutborders.org), supported by two grants totaling \$65,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts, went online in July by presenting what the editors call "literature from the Axis of Evil." The first three issues had essays, reporting and book excerpts from writers in North Korea, Iraq and Iran who might be famous in their own countries and regions but are almost unknown in the United States.

They include stories of war, exile and everyday life from perspectives that can seem mysterious or startlingly familiar. The theme of this month's issue is "Prose Tangos," focusing on Argentine writers. January's issue concentrated on writings from the Balkans.

The idea took root well before Sept. 11, when Ms. Mason heard from a group of German publishers, complaining as usual about the provincialism of Americans in the world of letters. She said she began to think about her own lack of knowledge of new writers from other countries, came up with the idea of an online magazine and applied for a grant.

"I thought if they funded it, I would go out and find people to work with. And if they didn't fund it I would put this idea to rest and go on my merry way and let go of this obsession."

The money came through, and she was left with the question: "How will I find people who want to do this, which will take huge amounts of time and energy and won't make anybody any money?" She found fellow idealists in Dedi Felman, an editor at Oxford University Press in New York, and Samantha Schnee, former senior editor for Zoetrope: All Story, a literary journal founded by Francis Ford Coppola.

"For all of us there's a personal element involved," said Ms. Felman, whose parents spent their formative years in other countries. Ms. Schnee was born in Scotland but was brought up mainly in Texas by physician parents. "For me, there was always an awareness of the otherness of culture and feeling like the other," she said. "I had been frustrated at Zoetrope with the inability to put forth voices from outside America."

Ms. Mason comes from an Italian-American family. She connects her passion for this project to the realization that the existing translation of an Italian novel she loved had steamrolled all the lyricism out of it. Just as an exercise, she translated the book, "Conversations in Sicily" by Elio Vittorini, and the translation was published by New Directions in 2000. She was gratified, she said, when she began receiving letters from people who reacted to the book as she had.

The online magazine reflects a searching sensibility. Its table of contents guides readers not only to articles, poems and stories from other countries, but also to works about plains, deserts, cities, forests and villages. Click on the subject heading of "coasts," for example, and you'll be referred to "Games on the Banks of the Danube," a work of fiction by Ivan Ivanji, translated by John K. Cox from the German. In the "forests" category are poems by Ahmad Shamlou, translated by Zara Houshmand from the Persian. The site also recommends books for travelers.

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People in the translation business, accustomed to tales of woe, have greeted Words Without Borders with enthusiasm. "It makes us feel not as lonely trying to do what we do," said Lucinda Karter, director of the French Publishers' Agency in New York, which represents French publishers in the United States. Ms. Karter said that in the last 20 years sales of books to American publishers had steadily declined, from about 80 a year in 1983 when the office was founded, to a low of 40 in 2002. She added, "Maybe there is a new movement," observing that last year her office sold 46 books, the first increase in a decade.

The revolution isn't here just yet. The book business has been suffering generally, which has made major publishers even more wary of what they perceive to be the risk of translations. "The only thing I find that really works are the great writers of almost a Nobel level if not a Nobel," said Robert Weil, executive editor of W. W. Norton, who has been working with translations for 25 years.

"We tend to think of translation as great literary work," said Esther Allen, chairwoman of the PEN translation committee and translator of the recently published "Dancing With Cuba," a well-received literary memoir by Alma Guillermoprieto about the Communist revolution there. "Other people are writing history, political analysis and mass-market detective novels. Maybe we should read their junk, too. At least there would be more of an interchange."

Ms. Allen, a member of the board of advisers for Words Without Borders, is more optimistic about the magazine than she once might have been. Two new publishers of books from abroad are Archipelago Books in Brooklyn and Aliform Publishing in Minneapolis, which specializes in Latin American literature.

"Things seem to be emerging," she said, and offered another sign. Last spring an anonymous donor gave PEN \$730,000 as an endowment to support literary translations.

As for Ms. Mason, recalling the enthusiastic reaction to her book translation, she said, "That reminded me how a little spark can travel, which is something we have to believe in as literary editors because most of what we publish doesn't sell or doesn't sell right away."

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