

It has been said that translators are like conductors - committed to the work, yet bound to interpret it in his or her special way. Or like directors of photography, a comparison which seems more appropriate, since we usually remain just as invisible to the public as camera operators. But let me tell you: The relationship between author and translator is much more like the relationship between master and servant.

You will be surprised to learn that the famous Don Quichote is anything but dead - no, he's the gentleman with the red shoes in the front row, and I have the honour and the pleasure to be his steadfast Sancho Pansa. While my master goes galloping through a world in great need of improvement, fighting dragons, giants and other adversities, I saunter along on my little donkey, doing my best to keep up with him, which, given his speed, isn't all that easy. Bound by written and unwritten contracts I must follow him through all the vagaries and strokes of genius, all the comedies and tragedies he will invent. Needless to say that being a servant can be arduous. As any translator will confirm there are few things as tedious and cumbersome as translating a sloppily written book. And here is one of the reasons why translating Tom's books is such a pleasure: You will find so many wonderful sentences, but not a single one that's sloppy, and I would like to use this opportunity to thank you for that.

My master, the Don, has a unique way of depicting conflicts between individuals or between man and nature, conflicts that occasionally culminate in tragedies - think of Mungo Park in "Water Music", an explorer who follows his obsession into the dark heart of Africa and in the end loses everything, not only his worldly belongings and the woman who loves him, but also his life. Or think of Lonnie in "The Lie", a young man whose harmless white lie (plus his utter stupidity) eventually shatters his existence. Or think of Dave LaJoy in "When The Killing's Done", an idealist who wants to do good, but uses the wrong means and pays with his life. These tragedies are of course self-inflicted, which makes them not only incredibly human, but also, when told by Tom, incredibly amusing. One of the great things about his novels and stories is the fun one has watching all these people do what they do. "At an age when most young Scotsmen were lifting skirts, plowing furrows and spreading seed, Mungo Park was displaying his bare buttocks to Al-Haj' Ali

Ibn Fatoudi, Emir of Ludamar." Now who could put aside a novel that opens with a sentence like that? Tom's books abound with passages that made me laugh out loud even when I revised the galleys - and that's usually the fifth time I go through that particular book.

It makes sense to say that it is helpful for master and servant to be on the same wavelength. My master and I share the notion that mankind and many species are more or less doomed, one reason being that there are far too many of us on our poor little planet. Climate change, species extinction, ecological destruction, mass migration, racism - the list is long, and prospects are bleak. In an interview he once said: "All problems of the world would be solved, if only we could refrain from reproduction for, say, one hundred years." But chances for that are slim, aren't they, and so there we are.

Luckily we are both blessed with a sunny disposition. Given the condition the world is in it might seem paradoxical, even schizophrenic, but as far as my personal life is concerned I am, like Tom, and in spite of all adversities, an optimist. Something will come up, and life will go on - till the end. Until then I'm determined to remain as open, curious and compassionate as possible. It is an attitude that helps me keep my sanity, an attitude I find reflected in Tom's novels and stories, and it's why I will gladly saunter after my Don Quichote and follow him into whatever adventure he will devise. If we're going to hell in a bucket we may at least enjoy the ride.