

# NEWS AND VIEWS PROFILE

## ANNE MILANO APPEL



*Anne Milano Appel, Ph.D., is a freelance translator from Italian into English. A former library director and language teacher, she has been translating professionally for over sixteen years and is a member of ATA, ALTA and PEN. Notably, her translation of Stefano Bortolussi's novel Head Above Water was the winner of the 2004 Northern California Book Award for Translation, and in September of this year Yale University Press will publish a U.S. version of her translation of Blindly by Claudio Magris (first published by Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Canada in 2010).*

*Recent publications include P.O. Box Love, a novel by Paola Calvetti (St. Martin's Press, January 2012) and Maurizio de Giovanni's I Will Have Vengeance: The Winter of Commissario Ricciardi (Hersilia Press, February 2012). Forthcoming later in the year, in addition to the Yale publication, is Goliarda Sapienza's The Art of Joy (Penguin UK and Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a memorable work written over a nine-year span and published posthumously.*

When I first tried my hand at Italian literary translation in the late 1990s, Anne Milano Appel instantly became my idol. Her name was in all the right conference programs, literary magazines and academic journals and, of course, on some terrific books. Since then I've continued to follow her career with a mixture of awe, admiration and unabashed envy, but I've never had the pleasure of meeting her. When I was recently asked to profile an ATA member for *Source*, I seized upon the opportunity to interview Anne so that I could finally find out how she has managed to be so successful as a literary translator in the famously unfriendly world of publishing.

Traci Andrighetti: *I've seen your name so often over the years, Anne! And because your maiden name, "Milano," is obviously Italian, I've always wondered how you acquired the language.*

Anne Milano Appel: My grandparents all came from Italy, and as a child I spent a lot of time with my grandmother who spoke no English. Though I spoke to her in English and she spoke to me in her mixture of Sicilian and Italian, we understood each other perfectly. I guess I internalized Italian, which I call my "nonna tongue." Later, I studied Italian in college (my Ph.D. is in Romance Languages and Literature), and over the years I've spent periods of time in Italy.

TA: *Literary translation, especially from Italian to English, is an extremely tough field to break into. How did you get your start?*

AMA: The first thing I need to say, Traci, is that there is no magic formula, no one-size-fits-all approach. Having said that, I can tell you that there are three key words that represent approaches that have worked for me: serendipity, Machiavelli and networking.

Serendipity, of course, is looking for one thing and finding something else (much like what is usually said about Columbus's discovery), and my own serendipitous moment came when I landed my first U.S. book contract, with City Lights in San Francisco. I had submitted a proposal for one book and got offered another one instead.

Machiavelli's *Fortuna* is a creator of opportunity, not just the ruler of men's actions: if Fortune seems not to be favorable, an individual must create his own destiny. In the case of a later book, I had the good fortune to come upon the author's work while in a bookshop in Rome. I seized the occasion to propose the book to a well-known U.S. publisher, and since the publisher's usual translator was unavailable (more good fortune!), I was given the opportunity to translate it.

Networking! Networking! Networking! The importance of personal contacts cannot be stressed enough. I have always made it a point to cultivate not only agents and editors, but also their assistants and anyone else involved in the production process. A third book, for example, was offered to me years after I first approached the editor (who also happened to be a translator) as a colleague and later submitted proposals (which were never accepted). The editor eventually came to me for a book that was published a few years ago.

So though there is no magic formula, you never know what you might find (serendipity) or what opportunity (*occasione*) you may be presented with. The key is to be persistent while laying the ground, recognizing (or creating) the opportunity and taking advantage of it.

TA: *During your career as a literary translator, you've translated fiction, non-fiction and even (gasp!) poetry. But before we talk about your publications, I'd like to know if there are any books you haven't published. I ask because it really bothers me that there are unpublished literary translations on personal computers around the world that may never be made available to the public.*

AMA: Yes, it bothers me too, Traci. I suspect every translator has a few things she's translated (maybe not whole books) that have failed to find a home out in the world and have remained *in cassetta*, in the drawer, as we say in Italian. I think of them as

“the ones that got away.” In one of the bookcases in my study, I have a special section dedicated to these lost loves, as it were. Some are recent, some go back many years.

Enzo Fontana’s novel *Among the Lost Souls* (*Tra la perduta gente*, Milan: Mondadori, 1996) is a project that interested me when I first began translating professionally. Set in 1321, it is a fictional account of the final days of Dante Alighieri. Because of my interest in Dante, I translated seven chapters, but was never able to attract the interest of a publisher. A more recent work that I would love to translate is Caterina Bonvicini’s *The Equilibrium of Sharks* (*L’equilibrio degli squali*, Milan: Garzanti, 2008), a novel which in France was awarded the prestigious Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Héroïne *Madame Figaro* for best foreign fiction. The suggestive metaphor of the title allows Bonvicini to portray the struggles of a young woman navigating the shark-infested waters of life. While her father, who films sharks underwater at close range, insists that the demonized shark is crucial to the equilibrium of the sea, Sofia herself requires the equilibrium and protection her father represents.

Each of the unpublished translations on our personal computers is a lost opportunity — not just for the translator, but also for the reader who will never get to enjoy the author’s work.

TA: *The difficulty in finding a publisher, particularly for less commonly translated languages like Italian, makes each of your many publications that much more important (not to mention inspiring). Which one of these books was your favorite translation project, and why?*

AMA: Any time you’re asked to name a favorite, it becomes a matter of choosing between apples, oranges and pomegranates. So I’ll name three:

Claudio Magris’s *Blindly*, because of the linguistic and stylistic challenges the text itself posed, and because of the terrific experience of working with a truly magnanimous author, always supportive and willing to give of his time.

Giulio Leoni’s *Mosaic Crimes*, because of the “Dante investigates” angle and its refreshingly irreverent take on the Supreme Poet: hard to resist when you’ve written your doctoral thesis on the *Divina Commedia*!

Elena Kostioukovitch’s *Why Italians Love to Talk about Food*, for its comprehensive approach and underlying scholarship, its delightfully entertaining style, the many charming literary references it contains, and because of the childhood memories it brought back: *cannoli*, *cassata*, *marzipan*, *arancini*, *caponata*, yum!

I know I said I'd name three, but there is one more favorite project I need to mention: Stefano Bortolussi's *Head Above Water*, because of the opportunity it afforded me to learn from one of the best editors I have had the good fortune to work with.

TA: *Speaking of Claudio Magris, I couldn't help noticing his provocative quote on your website: "both when one translates and when one is translated, there is a strong sense that the translator is truly a co-author, part accomplice, part rival, part lover...." So, what was it like working with him?*

AMA: Well, Claudio, of course, is a translator himself so he is sensitive to the process and extremely respectful of the author-translator relationship. I first saw those words quoted in an interview where he recalled his own early experiences as a translator, as well as later when his own work began to be translated. So... An "accomplice"? A collaborator perhaps, a partner in the challenge to recreate the author's work in another language. "Part rival"? Not in an adversarial sense certainly, but maybe as a counterpart or complement. "Part lover"? Here I must resort to that wonderful Italian word *affiatato*. The dictionary will tell you it means "working well together" but it's more than that. The closest we have to it in English may be "empathy" or "affinity." The etymology of *affiatato* tells all: from the Italian *fiato*, breath, it refers to a close understanding or accord suggestive of the harmonious act of breathing in unison. For the translator this means grasping the author's thoughts or feelings *al volo*, in a flash. Beyond *affiatamento*, Magris for his part was a willing and active participant in the translation process, seemingly anticipating every question, every uncertainty, every curiosity that the translator might experience. He did this in a 48-page letter he sent to each of the translators of *Alla cieca*: in it he offered his translators some very clear guidelines and suggestions, along with a general account of how he came to write the book, explanations of very specific details, and references to citations and sources found in the text.

TA: *Working with an author who is also a literary translator sounds like the ideal experience. What would you say are the particular skills or qualities of the ideal literary translator?*

AMA: Is there such a thing as an "ideal literary translator"? I mean, since we all agree that the "ideal literary translation" doesn't exist. Remember Borges and his rejection of the concept of *the* definitive translation? For him, every translation is a "version," an approximation, not *the* translation, but *a* translation, one of infinite possibilities. Maybe the ideal translator, like the ideal translation, is like the unicorn that Rilke writes about in his poem: "the unbelievable... the legendary creature," yet there he stands.

But I suspect this isn't a very helpful answer to the question. Antonio Tabucchi, the recently deceased Italian writer and translator of the Portuguese poet Pessoa, said that translating is like journeying toward a work ("Tradurre è viaggiare verso un'opera"). So what skills or qualities might facilitate that journey? The most obvious thing that comes to mind is an interest in literature. Not just literature with a capital "L," but books and reading in general. Being able to write well in the target language is, of course, essential, as is a close familiarity with the source language and culture. A curiosity about language is also key: I love tinkering with words until I find just the right one. To quote an old Gaelic verse (anonymous, Robin Flower, tr.) about hunting mice and words: "I and Pangur Bán, my cat... / Hunting mice is his delight / Hunting words I sit all night." Or as Humpty Dumpty put it in *Through the Looking Glass*: "When I use a word, ... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less" (Lewis Carroll, Chapter VI).

Aside from these practical *sine qua nons*, I think being able to listen to the author's voice, to "channel" the voice in your head as it were, is vital. To some extent, all translators are mediums. In a preface to a book by Barbara Lanati (*Pareti di cristallo*, Besa, 2007), Gianni Vattimo wrote that the text to be translated is always an appeal to be heard: "È sempre un appello che chiede di essere ascoltato...."

Finally, Tabucchi gives us two more traits that we legendary unicorns should have. Speaking in a radio interview about his own experience translating Pessoa, he said that creating a translation paradoxically requires arrogance and humility ("Per fare una traduzione ci vogliono paradossalmente arroganza e umiltà"). Arrogance because it is a great responsibility that takes courage and daring; humility because of the impossibility of achieving perfection.

TA: *Based on your thoughtful and beautiful responses to my questions, Anne, I would have to say that you're as close to ideal as literary translators come. Grazie mille for the wonderful interview.*

*For more information about Anne Milano Appel, please visit her website [www.annemilanoappel.com](http://www.annemilanoappel.com). There you will find a complete list of her translations, publications and awards, sample translations of her work, feedback from her authors, publishers and readers, and much more (I particularly enjoyed the quotes about translation!).*