Foreign Fiction

There was a dustup not too long ago about Tim Parks' suggestion (in the NYRB blog [2])

that foreign writers are adapting their prose--even if it's still written in their native tongue--to the structure of English. He contests that it has gotten easier to translate novels because "contemporary writers [have] already performed a translation within their own languages". Whether or not this is evidence of the English language's unfortunate dominance and bulldozing of local culture, or a natural adaptation among writers wanting to communicate as widely as possible, is left somewhat up in the air. It's an interesting argument, but I wonder how much relevance it has to most readers.

With the exception of certain big fads like the current Nordic wave (spearheaded by Stieg Larsson), translated fiction is a neglected area. But if Parks is right, even if you do virtuously pick up a foreign novel, you might not be stretching your mental faculties as far as you thought. It's hard for me to judge for myself, not having read much (any) recent foreign literature in its original language and then in translation. To an extent I think it's a moot point if you're not doing that, though; whether or not it was pre-translated, the book is post-translated when you read it. And I think there's still plenty to be got from reading the words of someone whose perspective, if not whose syntax, is so different.

In that spirit, may I present Three Percent [3], which awards the annual Best Translated Book Award. Its 2011 winner fits in with the Scandinavian trend, though it is a bit more literary than the crime thrillers that have become so popular. Tove Jansson's (who also wrote the Moomin books!) The True Deceiver [4] is a wintery psychological tale of a woman inveigling herself into the life of her small town's one prominent citizen. The prize's shortlist [5] provides a good entry point for those seeking to expand their horizons with quality books from far off and wanting more of a selection. The 2011 list includes six different languages. N.B.: Britain's Independent Foreign Fiction Prize [6] is another good resource.

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Posted by Meg K. on Jul 3, 2011

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