



The journey from Blutbuch to Sea, Mothers, Swallow, Tongues

March 27, 2025

debut literary fiction Swiss Switzerland translation/translators

Translator Jamie Lee Searle reflects on her experience translating Kim de l'Horizon's Blutbuch, which won the 2022 German Book Prize.

A new challenge

The epigraphs in the Swiss author Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*, include quotes by Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari – “Whenever we think we are producing memories, in reality we are occupied with forms of becoming” – and RuPaul – “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag”. This intermingling of cultural registers was my first indication, as I began to read the debut novel in the summer of 2022, that this was a work which would defy categorisation. It also reminded me of the cautionary words of my university boyfriend, many years ago, who was grappling with his PhD on the concept of mapping in literature, and told me to steer well clear of anything involving Deleuze & Guattari. Reader, I didn't heed his words.

That summer, *Blutbuch*'s publisher *Dumont Verlag* asked me to do the sample translation, and I spent longer than I ever have on a 25-page extract. Compiled from different sections of the novel, it gave a feel of the multitude of voices and styles. In the narrative, as the gender-fluid narrator's grandmother begins to succumb to dementia, they set out to trace the matrilineal line into their family past; to find – or create – a language in which they can express their true identity.

The sample gave me an early insight into the complexity of its themes – including generational trauma, transphobia, class struggles, identity, language and gender constructs – and the weight of responsibility that accompanies translating them. But there was also lightness and joy, in De l'Horizon's playful, transgressive approach to writing.

I spent many weeks that summer immersed in the narrative, drafting and editing those twenty five pages, and wondering what I might do if the opportunity were to arise to translate the whole book. The rational part of my brain told me to think very carefully; I knew it would take far more time to translate than the average fee tends to justify. But at the same time, I found myself falling in love with the act of translation again at a time when I had become disillusioned – not with the work itself, but the friction and noise around it, the harsh financial reality of the creative life.

In the autumn of that year, *Blutbuch* won the prestigious German book prize, and the U.S. publisher *Farrar, Straus and Giroux* swiftly acquired the World English rights, then got in touch to say they loved my sample and wanted to commission me to translate the whole work. Instead of pausing to think it over properly, like I'd promised myself I would, I responded from my gut rather than my mind – in a way that I later realised was fitting to this book – and said yes immediately.

I negotiated a long deadline, and planned to start in spring/summer 2023. I still had other projects on the go, but was filled with a tingling excitement. I began to keep a

journal of ideas, thoughts, possible approaches. I had no doubt it would be the greatest challenge of my career to date. And how to actually do this? How to approach the many layers in this genre-fluid, gender-fluid work?

When I look back now on my experience of translating it, what I find is a constellation of moments, rather than a chronological trajectory.

– Jamie Lee Searle

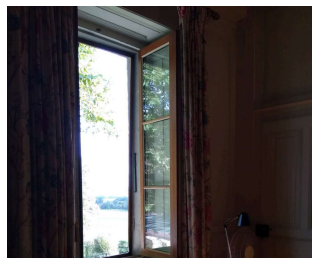
When I look back now on my experience of translating it, what I find is a constellation of moments, rather than a chronological trajectory. I struggle to remember in what order everything happened, but I vividly recall snapshots and experiences within that time. This is probably unsurprising, given how defiantly non-linear *Blutbuch* is. De l'Horizon's cites among their influences the work of Ursula Le Guin, and specifically her "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", in which she challenges that "the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there", instead seeing the novel as "a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us".

Eleven translators in Hinwil

One of the most influential moments in my journey of translating *Blutbuch* came early on, before I'd even begun my first draft in earnest. Looren Translation House in Switzerland hosted a workshop for eleven of *Blutbuch*'s translators, directed by Iryna Herasimovich and funded by ProHelvetia. Our native languages comprised Czech, Danish, Dutch, Italian, Croatian, Catalan, French, Spanish, Norwegian and Slovak, and we were all at differing stages in our translations.



Looren Translation House in Switzerland



Translating with a view at Looren house



Workshop at Looren House
© Eibert Besarlis



Workshop at Looren House
© Elbert Besaris

by the author – workshopping the text and its unique linguistic challenges. We covered an immense amount, ranging from the fine detail of specific dialect terms to broader discussions on identity, gender and language. It was fascinating to hear about the obstacles and opportunities that translators from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds would be facing.

One of the important elements in *Blutbuch* is the theme of gender identity, and how it is intricately interwoven with language. A key motivation for De l'Horizon in writing this book was to find a way to express their identity and body in a language that feels as rigid as the traditional gender binary. In German, as NBG readers probably know, nouns are gendered male, female or neuter; and mixed groups have traditionally defaulted to the male plural form. Efforts in recent years to make the German language more inclusive – by incorporating an * or _ in the plural, for example – have met with resistance among traditionalists and been seized upon as fuel by transphobic far right groups. Clearly, therefore, it's a language that doesn't provide a natural home or safe space for non-binary, gender-fluid bodies, and *Blutbuch* is De l'Horizon's attempt to push its boundaries – and break them if necessary – in order to find or create this home.

Each translator needed to find their own way of recreating this journey and struggle. In German the noun for 'child' is neuter – 'das Kind', with 'es' (it) as the pronoun – and it's therefore not unusual or jarring to refer to a child in this way, as De l'Horizon does in the childhood sections of the narrative. In French, while the equivalent for "the child" naturally evades the masculine/feminine binary, adjectives and past participles are gendered. The French translator, Rose Labourie, chose to incorporate inclusive endings such as "-ø" and "-æ", and to dispense with non-binary pronouns like "iel" or "ille" in favour of the incantatory repetition of "the child". Other Romance languages found similar solutions.

And the creative, innovative approaches that flew around in that room greatly enriched my work. I chose to render the child as 'it' in English, knowing full well this would read awkwardly. I welcomed this depersonalization in order to suggest the rigidity that exists elsewhere in German's gendered nouns. Though attributing a

consistent male or female gender to the child in the translation would have made it read more smoothly, I feel it would have been unfaithful to the sense of the original. This choice also emphasizes Swiss German's objectification of children and women.

Then, similarly to the Spanish translator, Ibon Zubiaur, I chose to occasionally incorporate "she" and "they" as pronouns, where it fit the perspective of the passage, in order to suggest the expansion and ebb and flow I see in gender fluidity, as opposed to the mere absence of binaries in gender neutrality. On this point, our conversations with the author at the workshop were invaluable. They emphasised that, while the book addresses themes of gender, they didn't write it for a specifically non-binary or gender fluid audience. It is much more about heritage and intergenerational trauma, about the stories we tell about who we are, and about possible and past lives.

The book's deep humanity became all the more evident at the end of that week, when Kim and I, and a few other workshop participants, travelled on to the Solothurn Literaturtage, a popular literary festival on the banks of a river in a picturesque Swiss town. Kim had several events there, and drew crowds that queued up and around the cobbled winding streets. This, and the response from readers over the preceding months, showed just how heard people felt by their writing. I've always believed that books have the power to change lives, and seeing this strengthened my belief even more.

On the final day, Kim, their Croatian translator, Natasa Medved, and I were interviewed on stage about our experiences of the workshop- it was a fun, joyous event which perfectly rounded off an inspiring week. I'm hugely grateful for that workshop and the rare opportunity to learn about the intricacies of translating German into other languages beyond my own. I carried those voices with me through the months to come.

A month in the chateau

On the closing day of the workshop, Kim had spoken to us about their overall desires for the translations. They gave us a permission slip to mix in our own voices, to have fun with it, to surrender to the process and the rituals of writing.

If the majority of the Looren trip was focused on working through the challenges in a methodical, collaborative manner, later that year, another journey to the Swiss mountains provided me with the space to play. In the autumn, I was invited to stay at Château de Lavigny on a ProHelvetia Fellowship. For a month, I had the good fortune to share the beautiful, grand building with four other translators as we worked in quiet collegiality on our respective projects.

One night, I was unsurprised when one of my fellow residents, a poet, told me the château was supposedly haunted. I heard the whispers of its ghosts too, but they didn't feel malevolent. I found mischievous delight in the knowledge that my bedroom had previously been a guest room for a world-famous writer who allegedly hadn't wanted women to translate his work, and that he might be looking on, enraged, as I used it to translate a text that so luminously challenges gender roles and binaries.

*It was here in the château that I drafted parts three and four of the novel, which include a stream of consciousness style that the author has described as *écriture fluide*, as well as countless neologisms, and Swiss dialect.*

– Jamie Lee Searle

It was here in the château that I drafted parts three and four of the novel, which include a stream of consciousness style that the author has described as *écriture fluide*, as well as countless neologisms, and Swiss dialect. Working on these, I learnt that a methodical approach wouldn't work. This was co-creation, the most inventive I have needed to be in any translation I've done so far. I decided to fall back on Kim's own words in the narrative, to trust the process itself: *I'm searching for paths into myself, into my body-memory. I've started this manuscript a gazillion times already, I've constructed plots ad nauseam. But it doesn't work, this plotting business, these already-trodden paths in the sand. The path has to emerge along the way.* (p. 38).

I incorporated as much movement as possible into each day, going for early morning runs through the vineyards, walking in the afternoons to soak in the still-hot autumn sun, nurturing my own creative rituals, like somatic dance. As often as possible, I put distance between myself and my laptop, enabling my mind to switch off. There's a unique connection between hand and paper; for me it's when ideas flow the most, so I would take my notebook down to the edge of the gardens with a cup of coffee, and stare out across the mountain landscape, the 'jagged teeth' Kim grew up among.

I began to develop a routine: morning run, mountainside notebooking, returning to my bedroom to draft on my computer – often using my voice dictation software, which at times mishears me, with often hilarious results, a wonderful tool for inventing new words on a project like this – then lunch. In the afternoons, once the sun had retreated behind the tree outside my window, plunging the desk into shade, I would relocate downstairs to the smallest room in the building; a nook with a tiny desk and chair, filled with vinyl music albums, old photos and letters, and the most peculiar knickknacks. It formed a stark contrast to the expansive landscape outside, and somehow, tucked away in this miniscule room, I felt free to let my imagination soar. In just one month at Lavigny, I managed to draft more than I had in the previous few months in England – a testament to the power of residencies and "a room of one's own".

The final stages

Unsurprisingly, even the title of this book posed a translation challenge. “Blutbuch” is a compound noun of “Blut” (blood) and “Buch” (book). The ‘blood’ element evokes bloodlines, themes of family and inheritance; and also violence, as experienced in transphobia and the forcibly-imposed gender binary. For the German-language reader, further connotations would appear as they immersed themselves in the narrative: the title also refers to the “Blutbuche”, the copper (blood) beech in the narrator’s childhood garden. And in the Bernese German dialect, “dä Buch” means “the stomach/belly”, subtly suggestive of other recurrent motifs: feeling emptiness and fullness in the body, digesting ideas.

I knew from the start that it would be tricky to find a title that encapsulates all of these things, but naïvely thought the ideal solution would become clear by the end of the translation process. Kim, FSG and I had long video calls and went through pages of options before finally settling on the poetic, multi-word title *Sea, Mothers, Swallow, Tongues* for the US version. Though I was initially unsure, it now feels like a fittingly fluid solution for a book that bursts its own borders.

One year on from Lavigny, working on the final proofs, I could still trace those mountains onto the sky outside my window in southern England. And each time I reach the end of the narrative, it still moves me to tears, regardless of how many times I’ve read it by this point. It has made me more courageous as a translator, and for this I will always be grateful. I hope I have found a fittingly luminous and joyous voice in English for the author, and can’t wait for readers to encounter it.

Read more about Kim de l’Horizon’s *Blutbuch*, which won the 2022 German Book Prize, [here](#).

The English translation of *Blutbuch* is forthcoming as *Sea, Mothers, Swallow, Tongues* with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and as *Blood Book* with Sceptre later this year.

Our warm thanks to the Embassy of Switzerland in the United Kingdom for their support of this article.



Jamie Lee Searle is a literary translator, writer and mentor. She translates fiction and non-fiction from German and Portuguese into English, and also works as a consultant for publishers and organisations including **New Books in German**. She has held translation and writing residencies in New York and Vienna, and is a **Royal Literary Fund Fellow** at Southampton University.

Photo credit: Sophie Kandaouhoff

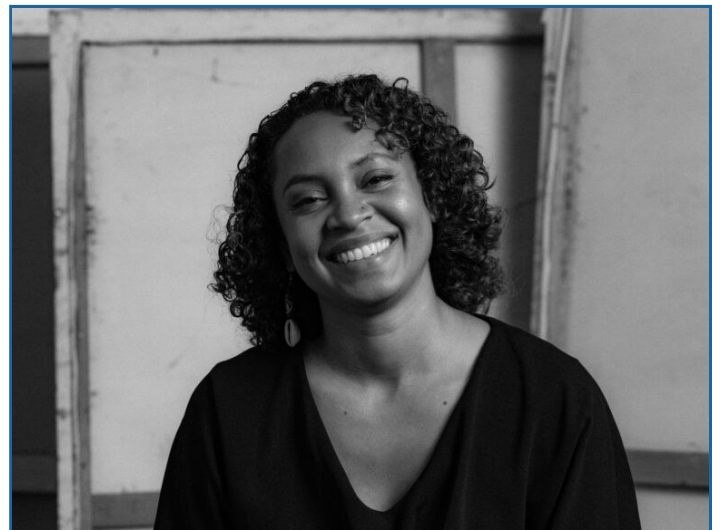


Jury recommendations: spring 2025

February 28, 2025

Our spring 2025 selection features book titles from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, handpicked by our expert jury as particularly suitable for an international audience.

[read article...](#)

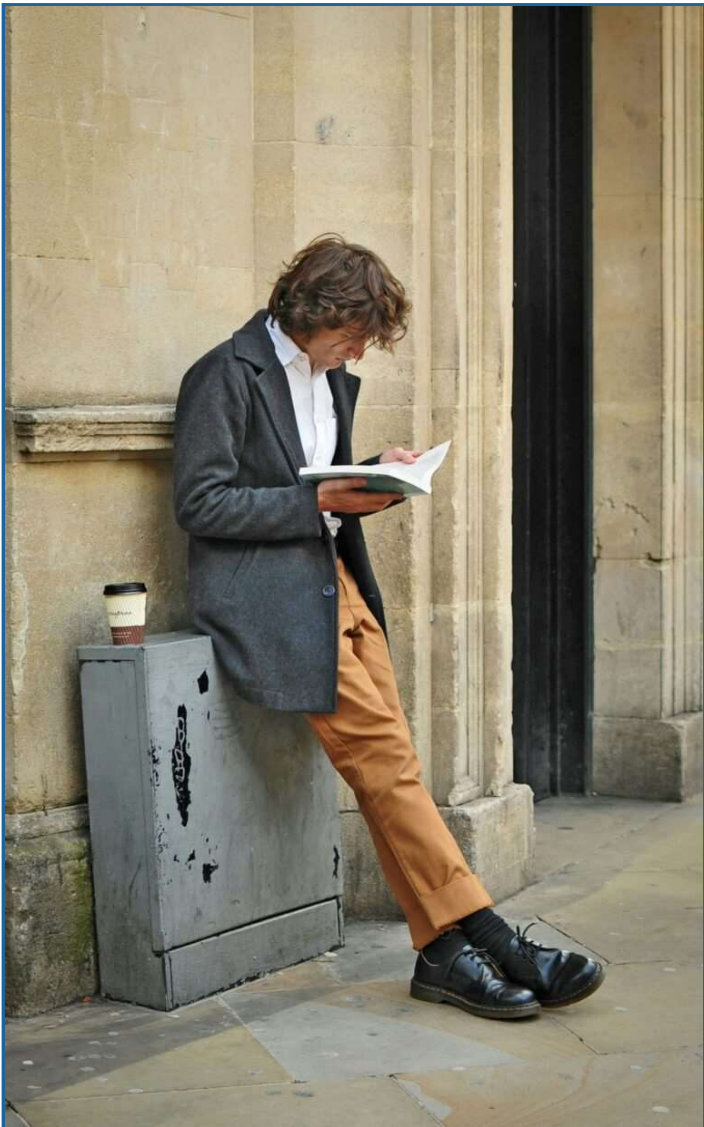


Kaffeepause mit...Melody Makeda Ledwon

April 7, 2025

The translator, interpreter and founder of the Black Translators Network in Germany speaks to NBG about her work, the founding of the Network and support for translators.

[read article...](#)



DE → EN – Enjoy in English

April 3, 2025

This regular page brings you a selection of German-language titles that have just been, or are soon to be, published in English. We cover fiction, crime, nonfiction, children's and YA, short stories, poetry and dramatic arts.

[read article...](#)

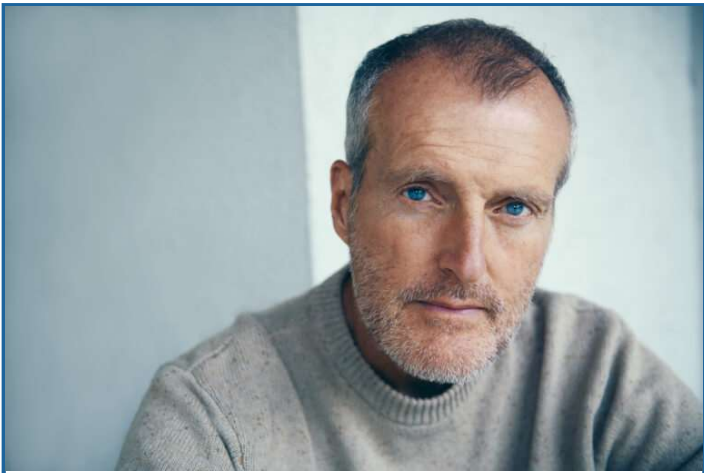


'All the everyday things...you leave it all behind' – an interview with Gabriela Stöckli of Translation House Looren

March 31, 2025

As the much loved translator's retreat gears up to celebrate its 20th anniversary, we spoke to Managing Director Gabriela Stöckli about the house and landscape, creating community, and fostering linguistic diversity.

[read article...](#)



'The human drama...takes centre stage.' An interview with Robert Seethaler

March 31, 2025

The Café with No Name, the latest novel by International Booker Prize listed author, Robert Seethaler, has recently been published in English translation by Katy Derbyshire. In advance of his visit to the UK to speak about his book, he found time to catch up with *New Books in German*.

[read article...](#)



The journey from Blutbuch to Sea, Mothers, Swallow, Tongues

March 27, 2025

Translator Jamie Lee Searle reflects on her experience translating Kim de l'Horizon's Blutbuch, which won the 2022 German Book Prize.

[read article...](#)



'I spend years thinking about a story before I even put a single sentence on paper.' An Interview with Cemile Sahin

March 20, 2025

*Cemile Sahin spoke to New Books in German at the launch of the English-language edition of her novel, **All Dogs Die**.*

[read article...](#)

