

# EDITOR'S NOTE

## Book Talk

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*In the sometimes prestigious, often competitive, and always volatile publishing industry, few book houses have maintained as consistently high a reputation as Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Located in an undistinguished brick structure overlooking New York's seedy Union Square, the FSG offices are all business. Space is at a premium, most of it serving as a vast library of in-house titles. Individual offices, even of senior staff, are small and modest.*

*On a recent visit I discussed with senior editor David Rieff the relationship of publishing to international affairs generally, and the specific role of Farrar, Straus & Giroux. To begin, I asked Rieff—a long-time resident of France and a world traveler—if there exists a real connection between books and international affairs. Do they, that is, have a genuine influence?*

There's no doubt they *can* be very influential—think of SOLZHENITSYN. It is his work, more than anything else, that has persuaded Western intellectuals of the horrors of Communist governments. The effect is perhaps most obvious in France, where people will tell you that the truth about the Gulag as *revealed* by Solzhenitsyn has changed their way of thinking.

I think you could argue that both the discrediting of communism as a system of government and (perhaps more important) as an ideal has as much to do with the testimony of various writers—most notably of JOSEPH BRODSKY and of NADEZDA MANDELSTAM—as it does with the lessons of the Cambodian hecatomb, the Vietnamese boat people, or what we have begun to understand about the massacres in China during the last fifteen years. Solzhenitsyn, after all, didn't really tell us anything we didn't already know; rather, what was new was the authority with which he related it.

*What guides Farrar, Straus & Giroux in its selection of foreign works—potential sales?*

FSG is one of a declining number of publishers who try not to let economic considerations prevent them from publishing really important books. We are also one of the few American publishers still willing to publish first novels by foreign authors. I can tell you that this involves quite a lot of risk for us, since most books by foreign writers—even quite famous ones—fall into the "terrific reviews/red ink" category. But again, it is a question of committing oneself as a publishing house to a given author, getting the word (and the books) out. Examples include ALBERTO MORAVIA, CESARE PAVESE, MARGUERITE YOURCENAR, PETER HANDKE, and, more recently, SIEGFRIED LENZ, whose new novel, *The Heritage*, we've just published under our Hill & Wang imprint.

Of course we know perfectly well that some of our authors will never make us any money. This is certainly the case with most books of poetry. But publishing is also, in some sense, in service to literature, sententious

as that may sound. This belief has led us to publish such important foreign writers as PABLO NERUDA and, more recently, HEBERTO PADILLA—a marvelous poet who recently arrived in the U.S. from Cuba.

*What is the criterion for "quality"?*

We base our decisions on aesthetic criteria, commercial criteria (this almost exclusively in cases where we decide we *will* publish a book), and some rather more indefinable sense of the work's importance. Of late we have had the impression that Eastern European literature is experiencing a tremendously important artistic surge, and we have made efforts to publish such writers as the Czech JIRI GRUSA and Poland's TADEUSZ KONWICKI. You will, I think, hear more about them.

*But does foreign literature have an effect on its American audience?*

Americans have a funny tendency to look upon themselves as the world. To some extent this is a result of geography: We are not only a country but also a continent. The contrast with Europe is obvious. When, for instance, a book about Hungary is published in Paris, there isn't much difficulty in interesting the French audience. After all, the distance between Paris and Budapest is roughly the same as that between New York and Chicago. Americans seem to find it hard to get interested in what's "out there"—preferring, as it were, to wait until it "moves" here. An obvious example of this tendency is Mexico—a terribly important country globally, and particularly for the U.S. We have been publishing CARLOS FUENTES for many years and have worked very hard to see that his writing gets the recognition it deserves.

*Do U.S. books have influence abroad?*

American books have a fantastic influence abroad, and American writers are taken very seriously indeed. An ISAAC SINGER, a PHILIP ROTH, or a BERNARD MALAMUD (to name three FSG authors with strong reputations abroad) very much deserve their renown. The fact of the matter is that most good American writing is translated into French, Italian, Spanish, and German.

*How does translation affect the original work?*

Translations are a mixed bag. The Japanese are hopeless. Everything gets translated—extremely badly. A publisher in Tokyo actually said to me that for a Japanese to speak English "too" well was to be less Japanese. So you can imagine the result.

The Germans, on the other hand, do absolutely splendid work....As for the U.S., I think the level of translation is remarkably good, all things considered.

*And the future? What can we expect for the publishing world?*

I think things will probably get a little bit worse for a while, but I really don't think the time will ever come when American publishers won't want to publish good books from both here and abroad.

—J.T.