

**Please write a response (no longer than 2000 words) to the following extract from the beginning of Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1981), translated by William Weaver (2007). You might like to analyse the way in which the author and/or the translator presents reading and the roles of the reader and writer. You should also draw on your own encounters with books.**

In this extract of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Calvino ponders the question *What should you read?* The answer is personal, but Calvino does suggest reading classic books. Aside from the classics one of the most important types of literature to read is translated fiction. Translating foreign literature makes the author's words accessible around the globe so a wider readership can enjoy and engage with it.

In this extract of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Calvino demonstrates the vast choice of books available to read. The hyperbolic description of the selection of books at the front of the shop 'extend[ing] for acres and acres', illustrates the overwhelming nature of the decision the reader has to make in choosing what to read. Calvino emphasises that this decision is challenging through the extended military metaphor which likens the different sections of books to a 'barricade' or 'ambush', conveying hostility to the reader in order to portray the temptation the reader feels to buy all of the books in the shop as a struggle they must overcome. The impossibility of reading every book in the world is certainly true, as there are close to 130 million of them<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the extract, Calvino uses zoomorphism to describe the books to 'dogs ... in the city pound' to present them as trapped and helpless, expressing the book's (and therefore author's) desire to be read, as well as placing the power back on the reader, as it is ultimately their choice to read the book or not.

The particular choice of what to read remains a personal one, which Calvino asserts through the names of each section of books. He relates each category to the impact it has on 'you', which reflects the individualistic element to choosing a book: you can be told what to read by teachers and friends, but the enjoyment of the book is something deeply personal and subjective<sup>2</sup>. The second person narrative used in alternating chapters in *If on a winter's night a traveller* also serves to create intimacy between the reader and the writer, as if the latter is directly speaking to the former. Calvino himself acknowledges this emotional connection, saying that one cannot feel indifferent to *their* author, even defining themselves with the help of and in relation to that author<sup>3</sup>. While this aspect of self-definition does not apply to every author one reads, books express an author's attitudes and philosophy, and the public upon reading cannot help but make a judgement about the writer as a person based on their works. For example, while I wholeheartedly agree with Hardy's critiques of religion in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, his dehumanising descriptions of women as animals make me uncomfortable even when in the context of comparing the Patriarchy's exploitation of women and nature. Therefore, reading is not only a subjective experience in choice of genre and author, but each reader's interpretation of a text is something personal because of their own engagement with the author's philosophies.

The structure of the text reveals what Calvino suggests for us to read. As 'you' go deeper into the shop, the 'troops' become harder to fend off until the last 'ambush of the Books Read Long Ago Which It's Now Time To Reread and the Books You've Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It's Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them' is reached, suggesting that these are the most valuable books to read. This sentiment is echoed in his

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<sup>1</sup> <http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-up-and-be-counted.html>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1038177](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp_txn_id=1038177)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1038177](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp_txn_id=1038177)

essay published in 1986 *Why Read the Classics?*<sup>4</sup>, in which he explains for what makes a book classic and why it is so important to read them. At the beginning of the essay, he examines the shame of many readers in not having read enough classic books, although quickly points out that it is in fact, impossible to read them all, and ones should not be ashamed to admit that. In the next section he argues that there should be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth because a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say. The joy of rereading a classic years after one's first encounter with it is that although the book remains a constant, the reader has developed the tools they need to fully analyse the book, and their gained life experiences shape the way they read the book, so the reader can simultaneously relive the joy of reading the book for the first time, as well as gain a deeper and more mature understanding of the book. For example, upon rereading *Lord of the Flies* earlier this year, my favourite book as a ten-year-old, I reflected that I didn't register Golding's allegorical message as a child. However, this level of personal growth isn't necessary to reread a book: its primary purpose should be to entertain the reader; Calvino himself states that 'the important thing is to enjoy reading my book, independently of the work I have put into it'<sup>5</sup>.

The set of criteria that defines a classic book is difficult to pinpoint, and opinion about what these should be differs greatly. The overarching requirements are to do with the age, value, and impact of the book. Age is the easiest to quantify, and books are generally only considered a classic some time after their publication date. This test ensures that a book is still widely read and enjoyable beyond the historical setting it was written in, but there is no specific number of years that a book must survive before it is permitted to enter the hall of classics. Even then, there are books that are declared classics, despite being published as late as 2019<sup>6</sup>, thereby rendering the book's age unimportant in deciding whether it is a classic. The second benchmark for deciding whether a book is a classic or not is its value, which is near impossible to standardise for an experience as subjective as reading. Some argue that a classic must capture the essence and flavour of the context it was written in, that it is a pioneer of its genre, or be of outstanding aesthetic quality<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps the solution to the ambiguity of these two factors is to conflate the two, defining a classic as any book that merits re-reading 5, 10, even 100 years or more after its publication<sup>8</sup>, focussing on a novel's ability to endure, rather than a minimum age, and determining a book's value as anything that is worth reading multiple times.

The third factor in deciding whether a book is a classic is its impact. In this extract, Calvino suggests that the books exist in relation to each other through the military metaphor. The sections of the bookshop work as a 'barricade' or an 'infantry', forming part of the army of books that the reader is confronted with, connecting the books to create a larger organism, which can be seen in novels references earlier works in the canon, such as the allusions to *The Pilgrim's Progress* in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* which not only aid in the understanding of the later but serve as a critique of Bunyan's novel. As Calvino so articulately puts it 'A classic is a book that comes before other classics; but anyone who has read the others first, and

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?p\\_txn\\_id=1038177](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?p_txn_id=1038177)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.waterstones.com/blog/21st-century-classics-fiction>

<sup>7</sup> <https://oomscholasticblog.com/post/what-makes-book-classic>

<sup>8</sup> Zneimer, Lia, citing Smith, C. Christopher <https://oomscholasticblog.com/post/what-makes-book-classic>

then reads this one, instantly recognizes its place in the family tree<sup>9</sup>. The most valuable books being at the centre of the shop again assert how important they are, like they are at the core of the literary world. When looking at the roots of classic literature, the importance Greek and Roman Poets cannot be understated, as allusions to Greek and Latin Epics pervade throughout the literary canon from Ulysses to the works of Shakespeare. As they are written in Ancient Greek and Latin, two languages that are no longer spoken, these essential texts highlight the role of the translator to make foreign texts accessible to a wider readership.

It is important while reading *If on a winter's night a traveller* to remember that it was originally written in Italian. Although Weaver worked closely with Calvino to translate his fiction over several decades, the task of maintaining the implied meanings hidden in word choice and sentence structure in translation, while ensuring the text sounds natural in the target language is a difficult balance to strike for the translator and unfortunately one that so often goes awry. One of the most notorious examples of how implicit meaning is lost in translation is in the opening lines of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus *Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte*<sup>10</sup>, so often translated as *Mother died today*<sup>11</sup>, while the literal meaning remains the same, the softness and warmth<sup>12</sup> conveyed by *Maman* becomes colder and impersonal, completely distorting Meursault's attitude towards his mother. This distortion is amplified by the translation of *mère* as *mother* as well in the telegram just two sentences later, which is far more formal than the *Maman* of Meursault's inner thoughts. One with no understanding of Italian, relying on Weaver's translation completely, must therefore question what meaning has been lost when reading *If on a winter's night a traveller*.

When translating fiction, another flaw that translators must avoid is an excess of misguided originality<sup>13</sup>. The Hunter translation of *La compagnie des Tripolitaines*, in changing the title to *Under the Tripoli Sky* is guilty of this pitfall. While the title does translate the lyrical style of Hamedia's novel, the drastic change in focus cannot be ignored. Told from the point of view of a young boy, Hadachinou, the novel revolves around the lives of women in Tripoli. To omit the presence of femininity from the title is to distort the reading of the novel by steering any non-French-speaking reader away from the author's intended focus of the novel, the role of women within 1960s Libya, and the oppression they faced. The role of the translator is not to interpose their own interpretation of the text, but to authentically translate the narrative techniques, characterisation, themes, plot, and style<sup>14</sup> of the novel.

Despite these issues, reading translated literature is an invaluable experience for any reader. Not only does it broaden the range of books available to a reader, allowing a more diverse understanding of the world. Literature an accessible and engaging ways to consume media that allows people to understand another's perspective. The reading process may be longer and less enjoyable initially, as there may be necessary research to do in order to

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp\\_txn\\_id=1038177](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1986/10/09/why-read-the-classics/?lp_txn_id=1038177)

<sup>10</sup> Camus, Albert *L'étranger* 1942

<sup>11</sup> Camus, Albert *The Stranger* Gilbert translation 1946

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino>

<sup>14</sup> <https://translationjournal.net/journal/14fiction.htm>

understand the context of the book or specific elements of it. For example, when reading *Under the Tripoli Sky* I had to research the names of foods mentioned such as Assida, a traditional Libyan dish, or the political state of Tripoli in the 1960. Yet ultimately because of this background reading I had a fuller understanding of the world that this narrative is a part of, therefore enjoying the book more. Translated fiction allows the reader an insight into a different culture in an easy and engaging way and communicates the author's ideas to a more diverse readership.

Ultimately, books are a form of entertainment, but also a way for readers to engage with the ideas that the authors share with them on a philosophical level. The role of the translator is then to authentically translate the text so that these ideas are not misconstrued by the reader. In this light, the most valuable books to read are classics, which offer a fascinating insight into the past and greatly influence the world of literature, and foreign fiction, which promotes a diverse range of authors with life experiences and perspectives wildly different to a reader's own.

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