



International Fiction Book Club

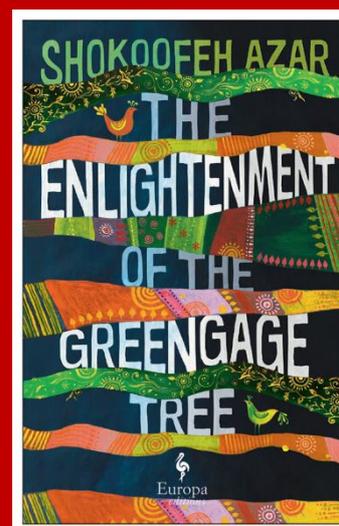
Shokoofeh Azar – *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree*
Monday 20 July 2020

The fourth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 20 July at 6.30pm.

We discussed *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* by Shokoofeh Azar, translated from the Farsi by Anonymous, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Europa Editions.

About the Book

Set in Iran in the decade following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* is a richly imagined novel narrated by the ghost of thirteen-year-old Bahar, whose family is compelled to flee their home in Tehran for a new life in a remote village close to the Caspian Sea. In this way they hope to preserve both their intellectual freedom and their lives, but even there they find themselves caught up in the post-revolutionary chaos that sweeps across the country.



We chose this book because it is an intriguing novel from a region of the world that English-language readers know little about, and because the Booker International judges thought so highly of it they short-listed it for this year's prize. We were delighted that Michael Reynolds, Editorial Director at Europa Editions, could join our discussion from Rome, to explain some of the background, to talk about the book and tell us about what's involved in acquiring and editing books originally written in a language the editor does not speak.

If you haven't read *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with Michael Reynolds follows.

Bill Swainson Good evening Michael. How are you – and where are you?

Michael Reynolds Well, thank you. I'm calling from Rome. I'm in the neighbourhood of Rome called La Suburra – because it was the first little settlement outside of the 'urbis', that is the 'suburbis' – a very old part of Rome, where Europa has an office. So I'm visiting Europa's European headquarters.

Bill I wanted to start, Michael, by asking if you could tell us first of all a bit about Europa, because you have an unusual publishing model, and then go on to tell us how you found this book.

Michael Europa *is* an unusual company and it's no coincidence that I'm back here in Rome because it was founded by an Italian couple, Sandro Ferri and Sandra Ozzola Ferri, who also have a publishing house, Edizioni E/O, that's been operative now for something like forty-five years – Europa's a much younger company— and from the beginning E/O's plan was to bring authors into the Italian market that hadn't been discovered or published. In their case that meant, back in the early days, writers from Eastern Europe. They were both fascinated by the writing that was happening in Eastern Europe and that nobody was really publishing here in Italy. That's how they got started.

After a couple of decades of growth and success, they were starting to feel – well, a combination of things: on the one hand – I now realise that if I start with one hand I've got to have three hands! – But anyway, there was a sense that the Italian market was a bit saturated and there wasn't as much space to do such innovative and interesting projects as there had been 20 years earlier; then there was also the frustration that a lot of foreign publishers feel when it comes to selling the rights to books by their authors to Anglo-American publishers, which are historically and infamously resistant to purchasing those rights and publishing works in translation.

And then, around about the same time September 11 happened – the events, of course, were very shocking – but they also felt that the aftermath was of real concern too because there seemed to be this global communication breakdown. And I think they started asking themselves what as publishers they could do to address that. And so Europa Editions, the company that they founded, in 2004, was a response to all of those things – the tight Italian market, the frustration at not being able to sell rights and then the cultural mandate



‘Anglo American publishers ... are historically and infamously resistant to publishing works in translation.’

that they felt as publishers that they should do something in the Anglo-American world that allowed more communication between people via books.

I had actually been working in the Italian publishing house for a year when this bubbled to the surface and so I have been involved with Europa Editions from the very beginning. Over the years our publishing programme has always included around 60 per cent works in translation, which is a really unusual model for an American publisher. There are a couple of UK houses that have a similar model, but in America there are some very big, very good, publishers that will do one or two books in translation a year and then there are very good and very small publishing houses that only do translation. Mixing it up that way – not drawing distinctions between the works in translation and works not in translation – but only going after the things we wanted to publish, good works of fiction, that was and still is today an unusual model in the United States and to a certain degree also in the UK.

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I think what that means – and I’m getting to the question of acquiring this particular book – it means we’ve got eyes all over the place. I don’t mean to disparage other editors and colleagues and friends, but very often editors in Anglo-American markets are heavily reliant on agents to bring them projects. You know, they have a good nose for what is a good book and how to separate the good from the bad. But in most cases there’s not a lot of that pro-active going out into the world, and, in our case, looking at who’s been long-listed for prizes, which publishers do we share an affinity with, which small magazines are doing interesting work. We do a lot of that and not only in English-language markets. We’re looking all over the place for things that spark our curiosity or ignite our interest.

In the case of the *Greengage Tree* it came to my attention when it was long-listed for Australia’s Stella Prize in Australia. I like the Stella Prize a lot, I think the shortlist consistently includes books of great quality and importance. When the long-list was announced that year, I was looking through the publishers and there was a publisher I hadn’t run across before and it turned out that this publisher, based in Australia – Wild Dingo – was a very new publisher and one that was specialising in works by refugee writers. So it was those two things that really got my attention: the fact that it had been long-listed for this prize that I’d been following closely for a long time, because I think they have a great eye, and the fact that it had been published by a small, new, mission-driven publisher that seemed to be doing interesting work. That’s when I got in touch with them and asked if I could take a look. And they were overjoyed to send the manuscript my way. And that’s how this started, with that first read.

Bill Right, there are lots of questions that as a fellow publisher I'd like to ask, but they'll have to wait for another time, though I will just say that a number of them (including how publishers find the books they publish) were discussed during the BCLT Summer School Publishers' Panel, which is now online [*if interested, see link at end of this transcript*]. Now, back to *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree*. Jo, would you like to ask the first question?

Jo Hello. I really enjoyed the book. I loved the fantastical little stories it contained, but I kept thinking, as a translator myself, about this anonymous translator. I wondered if there was any chance of finding out more: are they still based in Iran, or is it their family ... in short, why the anonymity?

Michael I think I can maybe answer one of those questions. If I were to answer more of them it would mostly be supposition. I do know that the translator is no longer in Iran. The other thing that may have caused some confusion is that the Australian edition of this book does name a translator, but it's a pseudonym. When we asked whether we should use the same pseudonym, the translator chose to use 'Anonymous' for the US/UK edition. I don't think there was anything nefarious about it, it was just a genuine concern about safety.

Jo It's understandable, given the subject matter.

Michael And that's where this choice came from. Perhaps having had experience with authors who wanted to remain out of the spotlight, we were quite willing to go along with this request, while at the same time we felt we had to say something because there is an obligation to at least acknowledge that this is a translation and that it has been translated by a person.

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Bill The book doesn't really have a linear structure, it has a returning or cyclical structure, and each chapter contains a tale. Earlier we were talking quite a bit about questions of style. Stephen, you had an interesting question about one aspect of the book's style.

Stephen Hi Michael and Daniela, thanks for joining us and thanks for bringing the novel into English. My question really is, if you're able to say, how did the translator deal with the different styles of writing contained in the novel – I'm thinking particularly of chapter 12 which is this fairly long stream of consciousness type of writing that was very different from other aspects of the novel?

Michael Reynolds Again, I'm not sure if I can answer that question, but I can tell you one or two things that may offer some insight into that. The first is, well generally at Europa – this is a long conversation so I won't go into it in detail here – we're somewhat loath to do deep developmental editing to works that we're bringing into the English-language market – we do feel that what we should be bringing to American and British readers is the book that readers

read in the original language, idiosyncrasies and all is. So that again is peculiar, in many ways, because very often a book will be domesticated or streamlined or cut – ‘nobody’s going to get that, so we’ll just cut that reference out’ or ‘this is stylistically too much of a jolt, too different from the previous style so we’d better smooth that out’ – we’re generally loath to do that kind of editing at Europa.

I will say that there were some things in the book that I wanted to address with the author, perhaps more than I would normally. Nine out of ten of those things she said ‘no way, you’re not changing that’. Everything that I asked her about – ‘maybe this could be tidied up a bit’ – turned out to be well thought out, done by design, and it often had a connection to Persian story-telling style, or fables, and these were connections she wanted to retain.

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The other thing I know about the translation is that it was a fairly collaborative effort, the author and translator were in conversation, they were in touch with each other, and the author was involved and responsive to questions, so I can only assume that the translator was convinced that having juxtaposing styles was the right thing to do because that was how it had been written.

Sam Hi, Michael. My question really is about the footnotes. I don’t know if the manuscript that initially came to you already had footnotes or if there was an editorial decision to include them. I’m just wondering how the decision to include footnotes can be squared with, say, more commercial concerns?

Michael Reynolds I will say that a lot of the questions I had for the author were about the footnotes, and whether they could work within the fictional conceit and the suspension of disbelief, and whether they were going to pose difficulties for its commercial reception. Shokoofeh was very keen that most needed to stay, that they were germane to the understanding of the story and would have to stay. For a publisher of fiction, footnotes are a last resort, so I was a little concerned about the number of footnotes in this book. As a publisher ultimately you have to voice your concerns, which are based on your sense of what’s best for the book, but ultimately you have to trust the author.



Shokoofeh Azar © Bijan Mahabadi

Daniela Petrarca (Director Europa Editions UK) Hello everybody. I have a question, well, it’s a question and an observation really. Could it be an Iranian thing, the footnotes, because we have another book from a French Iranian author in which much use of footnotes are much used, in fact in a really narrative way? I’m talking about *Disoriental* by Négar Djavadi.

Michael Reynolds I can only imagine what it must be like for an Iranian to encounter your average English or American reader, and feel that they are pretty ignorant about the country you come from. I'm thinking of poor Shokoofeh in Australia, or many of the questions that Négar encountered when she was touring in the United States. There are generations of American readers, intelligent people, but people who know so very little about Iran, who know the country as little more than an enemy state somewhere out there. And when you come from a country that is so extraordinarily rich in history and culture that must be so frustrating. So I wonder if that breeds a desire to second guess, trying to get out ahead of the questions, a desire to explain, also to give context to things.

Lisa Hi, I admitted earlier that I had very little knowledge of the time the book was set in, or the atrocities that happened, and I found myself wanting to Google absolutely everything, and that does play into the footnotes and how it was decided what to include. I was just picking up on one here about 'tar masters' and I didn't even know what a 'tar' was. We don't get a footnote about what a tar is, but we do get a note about some tar masters. I was wondering whether that could have been addressed in an introduction. (I'm not a big fan of introductions and tend to read them after I've read the book.) I wanted to enjoy the book without knowing every single level of details, but then there was so much I didn't understand, so could that have been dealt with in an introduction?

Michael Reynolds Yeah, it's a really interesting question. Generally we've avoided introductions for the same reason that we've avoided footnotes. It makes a book feel scholarly or it makes it feel, you know, that reading this book is medicine rather than enjoyment. We've used introductions a couple of times, probably more often than we've used footnotes. But as I said, I think, after suggesting that perhaps footnotes might interfere or that some were not as necessary as the author felt, in the end you've got to go with the wishes of the author.

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Bill Chris, you had an interesting question about dissenting voices.

Chris Yes. Hi, Michael. Thank you for coming on and thank you bringing us the book, Michael. It's written in clearly a dissenting voice, from an Iranian national who's now outside of Iran and feeling safe to do so. That dissent did not just relate to the Islamic Revolution, but it predated that and went way back to pre-Muslim times in some of its affections and orientations, and I was wondering how important was that in picking up the book and its success?

Michael Reynolds I think it was important and a few minutes ago Daniela mentioned a book we published by a French-Iranian novelist called *Disoriental* by Négar Djavadi. *Disoriental* was another extraordinary book that enjoyed great success with readers. I think it was even more

explicit in that book that the characters that were a part of that novel were part of a long line of dissenting voices and that dissent, despite the prevailing regime, has a long, deep and illustrious and important tradition in Iranian culture. I confess I was influenced by having read and published *Disoriental*, so when I detected something similar in this book, although it's dealt with a very different way, it really appealed to me a lot.

Rebecca I've been really enjoying the discussion so far and finding it really interesting. The question I had follows on from what Chris was saying, but also goes back to the point you made about literature trying to avoid being medicinal in some kind of way and thinking about what sort of readers are you reckoning with, and are you making a bit of an assumption about why people turn to translated literature in the first place?

One could say that this was purely a piece of dissenting literature that one might read in order to educate oneself about the situation in Iran. One observation about translated literature can be that it's always putting forward those dissenting voices to map onto our expectations of the world and to use literature to understand politics and history, rather than, perhaps, just to find really good literature by some other criterion.

So I'd just be really interested to hear your thoughts on that, particularly given you emphasised at the start that the press's founders wanting to give a voice to Eastern European writing, which shows you've a long tradition in thinking about these things.

Michael Reynolds It's funny, I don't think I've ever really thought in those terms, but I do think you can find a lot of rhetoric – in the sense of pedantry, grandiloquent, politicised language – in certain cultures when voices are not dissenting, that is, when they are mainstream voices, even if they're story-tellers. I find I often run across an unsustainable level of rhetoric, the sense that you are being hit over the head with an official line. You know, it's hard for me as a reader to appreciate that, to find myself in that kind of *sanctioned* storytelling. Now, surely there's a lot of rhetoric in dissent as well, but maybe if it's the result of a long history of dissent there's more room for good story-telling, for human characters, and something that I more easily recognise – obviously shaped by my own biases – as good literature.

One of the things, I suppose, that has been important for Europa as a press over the is to connect a writer's voice with a readership in the markets in which we're operative. It's probably been even more important for us to be connecting readerships. With this idea that we were born in this period of great communication breakdown. So the idea that we can connect readerships is really powerful to us. When we hear stories of a reader who was travelling – when it was still possible to travel – in Vietnam and sitting on a bus and somebody across from them is reading the Vietnamese edition of a book by an author we

'It's probably been even more important for us to be connecting readerships'

published, and these two people communicate, connect through that shared experience of reading. It feels like that that's what we, as a publisher, are here for.

The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree has recently had enormous success as a samizdat edition in Iran, an underground boot-legged edition, which says to me that there's something in that book that appeals to a great number of readers in Iran and is representative of what a great many people feel in Iran. Being able to connect those readers with readers in the UK and the US is what we're trying to do. So, yes, there are certain assumptions about who is going to read this book.

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Margaret My question originally was about the choice to have the translator referred to as anonymous rather than with a pseudonym, which you've answered by saying it was the translator's choice, because I wondered whether it was a ploy to foreground the danger – not a marketing technique exactly – but making it more obvious that it was not just some writer we hadn't heard of, that it was an actual issue.

Michael Reynolds I'm always ready to take credit for strokes of marketing genius. So that's exactly what it was!

Margaret It was also very interesting that we have previously discussed with other books the original readership and how much they would know. Clearly, in this case, I guess it was aimed more at a public outside Iran, knowing, as she did, that it would not, in the current political situation, ever be published there until things changed a lot. (**Michael** I think that's fair to say.)

But fascinating, though, to hear that is actually circulating there, especially as in the book itself there are so many books and texts – and the history of books, and banned books and burnt books – and then eventually this scribbled manuscript in the prison at the end, which I guess is the book within the book. So it's fascinating to hear that it's going round as a samizdat text rather than as a published book. It's become itself, which is fascinating.

That wasn't really a question.

Michael Reynolds It was a lovely comment.

Bill Well we're almost out of time but I can see that Rebecca has one more question. Rebecca if you can frame it succinctly in a way that Michael can answer succinctly, please go ahead.

Rebecca I've just realised as the conversation's gone on that I'm slightly unclear on two points. One is whether the book has actually been published in Persian. And the second question is the extent to which Australian version differs. Presumably it was translated for the Stella Prize nomination. Had you just taken that translation and published it or did you work on it?

Michael I can answer both of those questions. It was never published officially in Iran, in Persian, until recently it began circulating as an underground samizdat text, in really significant numbers actually. We essentially used the Australian translation (maybe there were some small edits), but the translator is not in Iran and not in Australia, so I felt there was nothing in the translation that would be especially impenetrable for any English-language reader, so we don't need to make that many changes.

Bill And now you're on the shortlist for the Man Booker International, decision on the 26th of August. Do you fancy your chances?

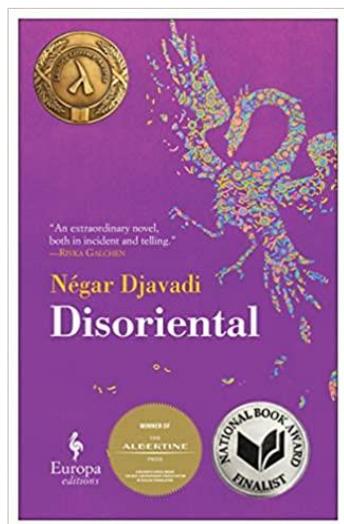
Michael Of course! Though there are some good books on the shortlist. It would be diplomatic to say I'm just happy that this book is on the shortlist, but I really want it to win. I think it's a deserving book, and so far as I know, no novel written in Farsi has ever won the Booker International Prize. In fact, I don't think a short-listed book has been translated from the Farsi, so it would be a great moment if that were to happen.

Bill On that very happy note, thank you for bringing us the book and for joining us this evening. We wish you the very best of luck.

Michael It was a pleasure. Thank you very much for inviting me.

Other books and links mentioned in the discussion:

Disoriental by Négar Djavadi, translated from the French by Tina A. Kover (Europa Editions)



The BCLT Summer School Publishers' Panel, moderated by Bill Swainson, with Katharina Bielenberg (MacLehose Press), Anne Meadows (Granta) and Sam McDowell (Charco Press), addressed a number of the questions raised in this discussion, especially about how and where publishers find the books they publish. It is now available on YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/aHCmWtb8jyU>

Michael Reynolds is Editor in Chief at Europa Editions, whose list of authors includes Elena Ferrante, Amélie Nothomb, Domenico Starnone and Hiromi Kawakami. Born in Australia in 1968, he joined Europa in 2005 and now lives in New York with his family.

Bill Swainson is a freelance editor and literary consultant, a trustee of Litfest and, with Sam O'Donoghue of DeLC at Lancaster University, convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 17 August at 6.30pm** is also a Booker International short-listed novel. *The Adventures of China Iron* by Gabriela Cabazón Cámara translated from the Spanish by Fiona Mackintosh and Iona Macintyre, published in paperback and eBook by Charco Press.

We will be joined by both translators for this session.

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com.

