



International Fiction Book Club

Robert Seethaler – *A Whole Life*

Monday 19 November, 6.30pm by Zoom

The eighth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 19 November at 6.30pm.

We discussed *A Whole Life* by Robert Seethaler, translated from the German by Charlotte Collins, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Picador.

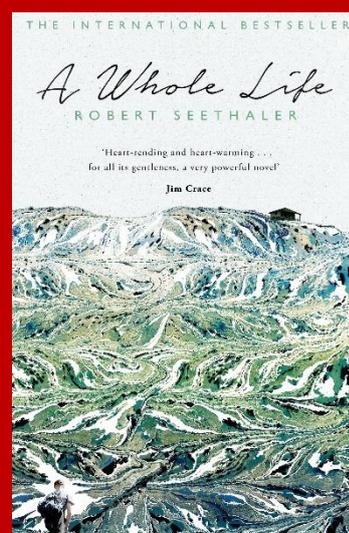
About the Book

Andreas lives his whole life in the Austrian Alps, where he arrives as a young boy to be taken in by a farming family. He is a man of very few words, and so, when he falls in love with Marie and wants to ask for her hand in marriage, he gets some of his friends to light her name at dusk across the mountains...

'For all its gentleness a very powerful book' **Jim Crace**

'A lovely contemplation of a life in solitude' **Ian McEwan**

'Charlotte Collins's translation is a great triumph'
Sunday Telegraph



We chose this book for its moving story of a solitary life and the great clarity and beauty of the writing. We were delighted that the translator, Charlotte Collins, could join us to talk about taking on the book, how a translator can develop a profound working relationship with an author, and how diffident authors can be.

If you haven't read *A Whole Life* yet, we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with Charlotte Collins follows.

Bill Welcome, Charlotte, it's great to have you with us.

Charlotte Thanks, it's lovely to be with you all.

Bill Now, you've heard our discussion up to this point, so we'll jump straight into the questions, if that's OK?

Charlotte Yes, go ahead.

Melanie Charlotte, had you read *A Whole Life* many times before you started translating it? And was it the kind of book that you came to understand and appreciate more and more, while you were translating it, and perhaps even since you finished translating it?

Charlotte: Yes, I'd say definitely. I hadn't read it many times before I started. I'd read it once to do a verbal reader's report for the publisher, and I think probably once more before I started. And I'd done a sample of a chunk of it for them. And when I first read it, I was just so excited. I was crying in places, and just so moved by it, and thinking I really, really, desperately want to translate this book. I didn't think that I had a chance of being commissioned, because I hadn't translated anything before. But when I did the report, at some point Kate Harvey, the editor, was asking about the language, and I answered her question, and then, without thinking, sort of came out at the end of the sentence with 'Can I translate it?' And she said, 'Oh, well, you seem very enthusiastic, so I don't see why not, if you do a sample, and we like it...' And that's how it happened. And I remember having dinner with a friend after I'd submitted the sample; and I knew Picador were considering at least one if not two or three other people, and I hadn't heard back from them. And I was thinking, it's not going to happen, it's not going to happen... I remember being in the kitchen with this friend and saying, 'I'm told translators often find a book and say, "This is my book." Well, this is *my* book, and I desperately want to do it.'

'I'm told translators often find a book and say, "This is my book." Well, this is *my* book.'

And then, as I was translating it – obviously I was aware of everything you said about the spareness, and simplicity of the style, but I came to admire it more and more as I was translating it, because when you're actually dealing with the knottiness of it, and the nitty-gritty of every single sentence, and trying to reproduce that, you come to appreciate things. If something's good, you come to appreciate why it's so good, and how it's much trickier than it actually looks. And if it's not good, you come to realise that as well. So yes, my appreciation of it definitely increased as I was translating it and going over it again and again. And also since, hearing people's reactions. I knew I loved it, but that's my taste; I didn't know whether anyone else – many other people – would love it as I did, or whether people would think it was too simple. 'It didn't have much of a story' is one of the things that I sometimes hear from people. And sure, you know, if you want a book with an exciting story, it's not going to be for you. But fortunately, I think the majority of people who read it do enjoy it. So that's been lovely.

Penny Does the other book of his you've translated – *The Tobacconist* – have a similar sort of feel? And what direction does it go in?

Charlotte Well, it was written before *A Whole Life* and it does have a more obvious 'story'. More happens; there's a bit more action. It's also, I would say, not as tight, not as condensed. You can recognise his wry humour, which is probably more obvious in *The Tobacconist*. I think it's obviously a Seethaler novel, but having now translated three of his, you can definitely see a progression from *The Tobacconist* to *A Whole Life* to the third one, which I think we might talk about later, which sort of condenses things still further.

'My appreciation of it definitely increased as I was translating it'

Penny Thank you. I'll look out for that.

Charlotte ...Actually, it's six, because he wrote three before *The Tobacconist*, one of which I've read; I haven't read the others. But they're more sort of humorous road-movie type things, and he – he and everyone else – definitely sees a caesura before *The Tobacconist*. I think he made a conscious decision to try something different, more serious and more literary.

Rebecca Following on from the way the conversation is going: I totally understand and identify with that idea 'I've found my book that I want to translate', but would you say that in Seethaler you have found the *author* that you're really passionate about? And I'm also curious, in that context, curious about the third book, which I'm assuming is *Das Feld* (The Field), which, I have to confess, I started reading, and I just kind of wandered off... (*laughs*). It didn't hold me at all, as the other two did. So, I would be interested to hear more about that, either now or later on, as fits the flow of the conversation.

Charlotte Well, it's interesting what you were saying earlier in the discussion about how a lot of German literature tries to pack everything into 600 to 700 pages. I think there are a lot of German authors who are really trying to be clever and intellectual and demonstrate that – and they probably are clever and intellectual, but they really want that to be the style of their writing. So from that point of view, when I came across Seethaler, it was exactly the kind of thing that I'd described early on to a German foreign rights director who asked me a very clever question. I was giving her my card, saying, 'Oh, you know, if you have any samples that need doing...' and she said, 'If you could translate anything, what, ideally, would you want to translate?' And my mind started spinning; I didn't have a prepared answer, and I thought I might as well be honest, so I said, 'Ideally, I'd like to translate something that's really well written, that is a really good story that I can get involved in and sink into, and one that, hopefully, will sell!' I enjoy translating things that are what I consider great literature, but maybe not the most complicated writing. It *can* be – I mean, Bill mentioned *The Eighth Life* by Nina Haratischvili, which I co-translated with Ruth Martin (which is one of the big fat ones), and I absolutely love that! She's got a very different style; hers is much, much richer, much more melodramatic, but it's not trying to be unnecessarily complicated. So you're really unpacking each sentence... That said, another author I translate is Stefan Weidner, who certainly isn't easy. He constructs his sentences so carefully, so well. You really have to unpack them carefully and repackage them in English – but that's, again, a challenge I enjoy,

because you can see exactly what he's doing when you get to it. He's not making it *unnecessarily* complex.

I don't know how I got to that... What was your original question?

Rebecca Do you feel you found your author, not just your text, but your author in Seethaler?

Charlotte Yes. I accidentally overheard him talking to his publisher – I was at the Hanser stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair, waiting to introduce myself as the person who was going to translate the book – and they didn't realise I was there. They were talking about the book and this person who was going to translate it, and I was kind of thinking I ought to hop in, but I didn't quite know how. And I heard him say, 'Does she get it?' And when we all started talking about the book, I was a bit tongue-tied and it wasn't coming out right; but then he turned around and burst out laughing, and gave me a big hug and said, 'She gets it!' I was trying to express how it touched me. And his books *really* touched me. And I feel like I know him and I know his writing well; and, you know, we talk on the phone about the books now. We didn't have much correspondence about *A Whole Life*, but we had more with *The Tobacconist*, and a lot more with *The Field*, the next one. It's interesting that you say you didn't like it as much. I'm kind of wondering what the response is going to be to *The Field*, which is a series of vignettes; it's the voices of the dead in a graveyard. And, yes, I know, there's *Lincoln in the Bardo* [George Saunders' winner of the 2017 Booker Prize], and they were writing at the same time, and Robert had no idea about this. But it's a very, very different book to *Lincoln in the Bardo*. It's even more pared down than *A Whole Life*. It's not a simple story in the way *A Whole Life* is – you get these flashes of people's lives that go together to create this mosaic that builds up eventually into an image of this small town. You get a sense of what the town is like, and where its inhabitants perhaps overlap. And it has that thread of the town running through it, but it doesn't have the thread of a *story* running through it. It's almost like short stories. And so I think it is quite different from the other two books, and I'm not sure that all the people who love *A Whole Life* are necessarily going to love *The Field* – but I do.

'He turned around and burst out laughing, and gave me a hug and said, "She gets it!"'

Stephen Hi, Charlotte. Can I ask two questions? They'll both be fairly short. The first is this: Is the title of the book an exact translation of the German?

Charlotte Yes. But the alternative that they were going with, in the book's publicity material, was *A Lifetime*. And I argued very strongly against that. The point was that it was a *whole* life. I mean, you could say that *Ein ganzes Leben* also means 'a lifetime'. But I was saying: I really think it's important that it should convey that his life is *whole*. He feels that his life is whole, and is not missing anything, so it was really important to keep that title.

Stephen The second question would be: the book feels very European, for a sort of European audience. And in terms of the fact that you were saying about big, epic, melodramatic types of novels, how has the book been received in America, where perhaps they may be – without kind of painting in broad brushstrokes – more into epic narrative?

Charlotte I'm not quite sure, to be honest. As far as I can remember, it was well received, but didn't sell in huge quantities. So I'm not quite sure what that tells us. I seem to remember there were some good reviews, but I think it did much better in the UK, comparatively speaking.

And I would say that there are a lot of similarities between this book and not just *Stoner*, but another book called *Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson, which is another novella about a man who ends up living a very isolated life in a different kind of wilderness – in the woods – and has lots of disasters. In fact, there was a mini-scandal in Germany, where somebody said there were too many similarities between this book and *Train Dreams*, and actually put it to Seethaler, and reported his response, which was that he was utterly aghast. And the writer of the article said he completely believed Robert when he said he had read *Train Dreams* about ten years earlier and completely forgotten about it. Obviously, some of the book had stayed in him and had been part of the germ of the idea of *A Whole Life*, but he definitely wasn't trying to crib it. But there are a lot of similarities.

Sam Hi, Charlotte. We've mentioned *Stoner*, and we've mentioned Denis Johnson, but I was wondering what other kinds of authors would you say that Seethaler is in dialogue with? Can you see any similarities, perhaps with other Austrian writers or, indeed, the writers from further afield? What kind of family of other authors would you group him in, if you had to?

Charlotte To be quite honest, I think you need to ask Rebecca – I'm not well enough read! I didn't study German; I read a lot of works in translation, but I don't have time to read as much German as I should. Most of what I read is contemporary German. Women writers, I would say. But I really don't read enough! So I'm sure Rebecca has a much better idea of what he might be in dialogue with than I do...

Rebecca I suppose, if I can jump in... I think one of the reasons I liked it so much is because it does stand out as different. Particularly, I guess, if we call the big epic novel the one where you're trying to give your authoritative view on twentieth-century German history – if you take that as a sort of a post-war German norm that's conditioned quite a lot of late twentieth-century writing. It's quite a male thing, and it's interesting that Charlotte says she reads more contemporary female writers.

I think there is something in *A Whole Life* that is unusual in taking that view – not the big sweep, but sort of a sideways view on this, through a voice and an experience that isn't ordinarily turned into the epic sweep through which we see German history. So I think there *is* something really interesting in what he's done. And perhaps you do need to look to women's writing to find that sense, to find comparable authors who are maybe giving a different take, or picking out history and telling it from a different angle. So that's one of the things that's really quite intriguing about him, I think, as a writer. It might be interesting to pursue the gendered aspects

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of *A Whole Life*. That's a slightly rambling answer, but maybe at least in part answers what you're asking.

Charlotte I think what also sets Robert apart is that he's an actor. He trained as an actor and worked as an actor before he started writing, and he still does act very occasionally in films or TV. He doesn't enjoy it, he says, but he will do it from time to time. I think, certainly when I was translating *A Whole Life*, but also with *The Tobacconist* – not so much with *The Field*, but with those two – I found that I would read the German, and it was almost as if I was projecting onto a screen and then describing in English what I saw. I think he's a very visual writer. And I think that's to do with being an actor, that he pictures things as you might see them on a screen. And I think there's possibly some of the quality of filmmaking, that probably condenses things in a way that maybe the long-winded German blokes might not do.

Kate I think you've covered my question already, really, about the difference between translating a novel with simple language compared to one containing more sentimentality. So I think I'll sit this one out, if that's OK.

Charlotte Not entirely, though!

Kate Oh, go on then.

Charlotte That was what I avoided saying earlier when I was talking about saying to the Picador editor, 'Can I translate it?' The question of hers that I was answering was actually your question. She said, 'What's the language like? Will it be difficult to translate?' And I said, 'No, it won't be difficult to translate. But you're going to have to be very careful when you do it. Because it's very *plain* language, and if it's not done in the right way, it's going to come across as banal.' And that was when I just said, 'Can I do it?' It just came out. And I didn't know whether I would be able to do it, and it was something that, when I was filing away at the sentences over and over again [*gestures*] – I'm sort of sitting there doing what I'm doing now, so: literally weighing things up, and trying to hear the music of the sentence. And if just one note was out of place, it was just going to go 'clunk' at the end, and it would be a boring sentence. And I couldn't tell you, probably not even with examples, what for me makes the sentence sing or what makes it go clunk. Because with Robert it's a very delicate balance.

Jo Hi, there. Thank you, first of all, for your comments about having 'my book', and again, about the language. Recently I saw he's got another one coming out soon. And I was wondering whether you were down to do that one as well.

Charlotte That's the one we were just talking about, *The Field* – or do you mean –

Jo Oh, no. There's a whole new one – *Der letzte Satz* –

'I'm told translators often find a book and say, "This is my book." Well, this is *my* book'

Charlotte *The Last Movement*. The title will probably be changed because it has a double meaning in German. It's a novella about Mahler's last voyage from New York back to Vienna, and he's kind of reviewing his life. It's very short. It's more in the vein of *The Tobacconist*, I would say. So in *The Tobacconist*, you've got Freud making an appearance and a couple of other famous

people who he reimagines, and here we've got Mahler, and Mahler again has a young lad who he occasionally interacts with and talks to and that sort of sparks off some memories. It's much lighter and more humorous than *The Field*, which is relief, I have to say. (*Laughs.*) I love *The Field*, but spending many months translating the voices and yearnings of dead people was a bit of a weight by the end. I was saying to Robert, 'I'm feeling quite depressed,' and he said, 'No, it's joyful! It's celebrating their lives.' – 'Yes, but they all die in the end.' And so does Mahler, but not really in the book. So yeah, it feels like he allowed himself a bit of light relief with that one.

Lisa Hi, Charlotte. I was quite interested when you mentioned your current relationship with the author, or maybe not speaking as much to him about this particular book as other ones, but whether you had to speak to him or do any research around the times that are mentioned within the book? And particularly I was interested in the 'Cold Lady', and whether or not that was a cultural reference from Austrian or German folklore, or whether that was an invention for the purpose of the book?

Charlotte Oh, that's just Robert. He does that. I'm always asking questions, saying 'What is this?' – 'Oh, I made it up.' I mean, in *The Field*, there's one bit where a character says 'like the Rocket Man in a film I was watching with Louise'. And I wrote to him and said, 'Which film are you talking about? This one? Or do you mean this one, or that one? Or are you thinking of the Elton John song, or what?' – 'No, I made it up.' Me spending an hour researching different Rocket Man films, and he's just thrown it in... With [*A Whole Life*] I think I put about ten questions to him, which by my standards is not a lot. I ask a lot of questions if I get the chance. He didn't know me very well then; I didn't know him very well then. And he was – I think he was under a lot of strain after this book came out, because it was so successful suddenly. And first of all, he'd done a year of touring around Germany and giving lots of readings and talking to people about it. And then suddenly it was translated, and there were all these other countries and other people and other translators asking him questions and asking him to do stuff. And I think after about two years of this, he really was kind of near to breaking. I mean, we had to bully him into coming over for the Booker event; he really, really didn't want to come. And when he came, he kept disappearing off. We were in the V&A, and we were told there were these times when they wanted the translators and the authors to be all together for a photograph. And every time, everyone was saying 'Where's Robert?', and poor Camilla, the publicity person, was having to go and find him. So I think, when I was asking him questions about this, with a couple of them he gave me an answer that was useful, and with the rest he just went, 'Oh, I don't know, I just wrote it like that.' Or I'd say, 'Should it should be more like this, or that?' and he'd say 'Well, both.' – 'Yeah, I know, but...' And then the ending, the very end, the last sentence: "'Not just yet," he said quietly.' (Now, what's the German? I can't remember the exact German...) I'd say, 'You know, it could mean this, or it could mean that. It's got an element of this, and that, and the other, and I can't get all of these things into English: what's most important?' He said, 'All of it.' – Please! It was hopeless. And he started to do that when I sent him a load of

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questions for *The Tobacconist*. That had a lot more period-specific and Vienna-specific questions, which he was able to answer quite clearly. But then there were others that were to do with word choices and so on, and he again started going, ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ And again, with *The Field*: he’d send me a long poetic sentence, but it wouldn’t answer my question! I had to say to him very clearly, ‘Robert, I need to make a choice, and I need you to help me by answering: is it this, or that, or the other?’ And he kind of buckled down and did it then. But he likes to keep things as vague as possible. He doesn’t like to be pinned down. He doesn’t like meanings to be pinned down. And he doesn’t like talking about, you know, his motivation. Someone asked in your discussion earlier – Sam, I think it was you who said something about the avalanche as a metaphor? And I thought: Robert would say, ‘No, I just wrote it that way.’ He always says he didn’t have any specific thoughts about, you know, what it might *mean*; it just means what he says.

‘I’d say, “Should it be more like this, or that?” and he’d say “Well, both”’

Margaret It’s fascinating about your process of working with him. Do you think that’s changed over time? Is that lassitude about what he meant by things that he trusts you to choose the right word? Do you feel that’s sort of progress that you’ve made in that relationship?

Charlotte I think he does trust me sometimes... which is annoying, because that’ll be his answer: ‘I trust you’! But I think the relationship that we have now is more helpful in that he’s much more prepared to talk to me about things, to answer my questions. As I said, at the beginning, he was not in a good place in terms of being bombarded by requests at that time. Now I think he’s much better in himself, and possibly more open.

Bill It’s often said that translators are an author’s closest reader: you’ve shown in the way you’ve talked, Charlotte, how you can get to a point where you can get one meaning and possibly two, but three is impossible. And often a pun is tricky. Now, Penny just put up on the chat: What is the title of the last book? And it’s something like ‘the last movement’, but what is the meaning that gets lost when you go from the German to the English?

Charlotte Well *Der letzte Satz* could mean either ‘the last sentence’, or ‘the last movement’, of a symphony. It’s Mahler, so it ideally should have that musical meaning; but also, you know, it’s the end of his life. So it’s kind of his last thoughts. And God knows what we’re going to do with that...

Bill If it’s any comfort, when I was editing Sebald’s books, we did *The Emigrants* first and then we did *The Rings of Saturn*. And then we went back to a book which in German was called *Schwindel. Gefühle*. And yes, you could have called that book ‘False – full stop – Feelings’, for example. But you would have lost its second meaning when you put those two words together, which is ‘vertigo’. So we went for *Vertigo* as being a more sellable title. But you must run across these sorts of problems regularly...?

Charlotte And then I contact Ruth Martin and say, ‘What would you do with this?’ I’m terrible with puns; I just phone a friend. The other thing that’s great with the wonderful literary translation community is that we have forums or, you know, Twitter or Facebook, where we’re always just saying: I’ve got this knotty problem, has anyone got any ideas? And people just pitch in – with something like *The Last Notes* (as Jo did on the chat just now). Maybe that will be what it will end up being called – thanks for the suggestion, Jo!

**‘It’s a delicate balance
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Bill So, just coming back to that question of how much you can bring over from the original language into English, I’m going to ask you a provocative question here. Do you think the fact that you had to make some choices – where you couldn’t get all the meanings that you might have needed and you had to choose – do you think the choices changed the nature of the book, when it comes into English? It has this wonderful simplicity, and the style of narration shows great restraint. And I wonder if that was slightly exaggerated or made to seem more important in English than it was in the German, just because you were obliged to make choices?

Charlotte. No, no. The choices were a few individual words. I can’t recall offhand. *‘Es ist noch nicht so weit’* (Not just yet,’ he said quietly: I wrestled with that, that last little sentence. But no, the style in German is, I hope, much as I’ve rendered it. I tried to stick as close as possible to the German without producing a Germanic sound in English, which was in itself quite a delicate balance. Because, as you all know, if you’re too faithful, it can end up sounding stilted. And sometimes that might be what you want to achieve. That definitely wasn’t what I wanted to do with this. But I did feel that he had clearly taken so much care crafting each sentence, and I heard during the whole publicity thing for the book that he would sometimes spend a whole day on a couple of sentences, getting them just right, and so I felt I owed it to him and to the book to do the same, and to try to reproduce as closely as I possibly could what he had done with the German.

I thought what you were going to say, Bill, was: did I think that something got lost? Because, you know, apart from the obvious ‘lost in translation’ cliché, that is a valid question that people often ask, as in: if you have to make choices – and you’re always making choices when you’re translating – in everything you’re doing, you’re choosing this word over that word. So possibly, yes, some things – I wouldn’t say ‘get lost’, but if you can’t bring them over, then you might find an opportunity to use another word that has implications or associations that

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the German doesn’t have, but that work really well. So I think we’re always sort of on the lookout for things that we can do in the target language that maybe the source language can’t do, that are still in keeping with the book. You don’t want to throw in some massive pun that really sticks out; but every word you choose ... it’s like tasting wine, because they each have different notes. They may have a little bit of citrus, or cinnamon, or whatever it might be; and some of the notes might

be the same, or some of them might be slightly different, but you hope you're going to create a similar, enjoyable experience. And I think there is a choice to be made with every book as to how closely you're going to try to reproduce the original in the target language.

Bill My last question to you, Charlotte, is this: you've been translating Bernard Schlink, Nino Haratischvili, you're in the middle of translating a number of Seethaler's books. Is there something else on your horizon that you're looking forward to translating as well?

Charlotte Yes, I'm about to start translating Benedict Wells's *Spinner*. It will have a completely different title in English. I translated his *The End of Loneliness* earlier. He's also got a new one coming out in German in the spring, and I'm just working on a sample from that. And when I've finished that, I'll be translating one of Nino Haratischvili's earlier novels, *My Tender Twin*.

Bill So you're keeping busy! Thank you very much for joining us. There's been a lot of detail on how translation works, the challenges you face; good luck with everything you do next.

Charlotte Thank you very much. It's been really enjoyable.

Charlotte Collins's prize-winning translations include works by Nino Haratischvili, Walter Kempowski, Bernhard Schlink, Robert Seethaler, Stefan Weidner and Benedict Wells. In 2017 she was awarded the prestigious Helen & Kurt Translator's Prize for A Whole Life.

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 14 December at 6.30pm** is *Based on a True Story* by Delphine de Vigan, translated from the French by George Miller, and published in paperback and eBook by Bloomsbury.

'A clever psychological thriller' *Independent*

'Compulsive' *Daily Telegraph*

'Don't miss it' *Daily Mail*

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

