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Books

'Zitwer factor': Before her, few readers outside Korea heard about Korean thrillers

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New York-based literary agent Barbara Zitwer / Courtesy of Barbara Zitwer

New York-based literary agent recently inked a flurry of deals with big Western publishers to release Korean novels globally

By Kang Hyun-kyung

Exporting Korean novels is a delicate and time-consuming job that requires network with big Western publishers as well as a significant level of knowhow in pitching translated books to them.

Literary translators are the first batch of specialists taking part in the pre-publication process. Unlike other translators who convert Korean into foreign languages verbatim, literary translators are given some room to modify original texts to help readers of target languages easily understand the context of the novel.

Once their partial or entire translation of the book is completed, the ball is in the literary agents' court.

The role of literary agents is pivotal, partly because they are responsible for finding local publishers who can publish the Korean novels.

Finding publishing houses is a waiting game, according to New York-based literary agent Barbara Zitwer.

"The advances are not high and it takes a long time, sometimes years to get an author published and noticed," she said during a recent Korea Times interview. "I worked on Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian' for more than 10 years before I sold it to Granta and also Ashes and Red... In many ways, I am supporting the advancement of my Korean author's literature myself and it is not easy."

Over the past decade, Zitwer has discovered "diamonds in the rough" and helped them expand their readership globally.

She said searching for publishers for Korean novels has become tougher than before as more people are participating in the decision-making process inside publishing companies.

"Today, everything is very corporate and there are boards and marketing and sales people involved with every acquisition decision," she said. "Now, big boards have to approve an acquisition, so it is incredibly difficult to market and promote and sell a Korean book that was partially translated into 20 or 30 pages of English. I think that is the biggest stumbling block right now."

In Korean literature's global presence, there is such a thing as the "Zitwer factor."

Before her, few foreign readers were aware of the existence of Korean literature. After she worked with a number of Korean authors and helped them make their successful international debuts, the star writers were able to expand their readership base globally. So for those Korean authors, Zitwer is a critical middle person who served as a bridge between the writers and influential Western publishers.

Kim Young-ha's "I Have the Right to Destroy Myself," Pyun Ae-young's "Ashes and Red" and Han Kang's "The Vegetarian," Hwang Sun-mi's "Leafie" and Shin Kyung-sook's "Please Look After Mom" were able to reach out to Western readers, thanks to Zitwer.

Zitwer herself is not shy about her role behind the meteoric rise of Korean literature on the global stage.

"Korean authors are successful because they incorporate classic thriller elements, but they have made the genre their own," she said. "It is common knowledge in the West that these authors would not be published outside of Korea if it wasn't for my work. I discovered them and worked very hard to sell them to excellent publishers who understood them and would publish them well. I didn't sell them to the tiny, literary non-profit publishers which are great but if you want to become a mega global bestseller it is essential to have big distribution and the support of a major commercial publisher."



This combined image shows, from left, book covers of Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian', Yun Ko-eun's 'The Disaster Tourist', Shin Kyung-sook's 'Please Look After Mom,' and Jeong You-jeong's 'The Good Son.' These works were published in the United States and Europe, thanks to Barbara Zitwer.

She said Korean thrillers have their own sensibility that can be compared to Scandi Noir.

"I think 'Koreanness' is the reason readers love them... I mean reality one step up. The element of truth seeking and honesty in characterizations and profound themes that are Shakespearean are always depicted in the most original way."

Zitwer called the Korean authors "sleeping giants" who were waiting to walk across the world to reach readers who were waiting with great excitement. And she likened herself as a maestro of an orchestra.

"My team of co-agents around the world are as dedicated as I am and we all work very closely together like an orchestra playing in tune and together making the best symphony for each and every author," she said.

Kwak Hyo-hwan, president of the state-run Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea), agreed that there has been a seismic shift in the global presence of Korean literature since the 1990s.

According to him, people outside Korea already know about Korean literature. As a result, expressions like "introducing" Korean novels or "helping Korean literature go global" are inappropriate.

"Such phrases were most often used in the 1990s. Back then, Korea was desperate to promote Korean literary works outside the country and expressions like introducing Korean literature or globalizing it were widely used in public discourse. It sounded as if the country was pleading with foreign readers to recognize them as part of world literature," he told reporters during a news conference held on July 6, weeks after he took the helm of the institute. "There has been a shift in the presence of Korean literature since then and this is obvious as we've seen a number of Korean novelists recently win literary awards."

The poet-turned-LTI Korea president went on to say that during his three-year tenure, he would put top priority on opening the first chapter of Korean literature as part of world literature.

He didn't specify what he meant by "opening the first chapter," but it seems to mean that he was willing to do his utmost to keep Korean literature bearing fruit internationally.

Recently, a flurry of deals have been signed to sell Korean novels to Western publishers.

Im Seong-sun's award-winning 2010 thriller, "The Consultant," was sold to Bloomsbury U.K. last week. It will be published in the United States and United Kingdom in 2023.

Shortly after the deal, Barbara J. Zitwer Agency also closed a deal with Liza Darnton of Amazon Crossing for Lee Jung-myung's new novel, "Broken Summer," which was translated into English by Brother Antony (An Seon-jae).

Zitwer revealed excitement about her new contract.

"This is my first deal ever with Amazon Crossing who has enormous reach and muscle to market and promote translated books. They love 'Broken Summer' and see it as a World Book Day pick for 2023," she said.

The book will be published worldwide in English.

Korea's irreplaceable thriller author Jeong You-jeong's new book, "Perfect Happiness," has been translated by the award-winning translator Sean Lin Halbert.

Zitwer said "Perfect Happiness" is a "highly sought-after thriller that will captivate readers all around the world."

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