



## Interview with Frank Wynne

### 2024 Translation Prize Fiction Winner

- 1. You won this year's award for your translation of *The Annual Banquet of the Gravediggers' Guild*. What inspired you to translate this particular book, and what do you hope your translation does for the story and its readers?**

I was fortunate to be gifted the privilege of translating *The Annual Banquet of the Gravediggers' Guild* by Mathias Énard's usually translator, Charlotte Mandell, who was unable to take it on for personal reasons. I've admired Énard's work since I first read *Zone* more than a decade ago and (vainly) attempted to get a UK publisher to take it on. From the moment I read *The Gravediggers' Guild*, I was swept away by the richness of the scene setting, and by the wild, exuberant use of language – the shifts of time and location, the uses of multiple registers of French, which required me to invent a Rabelaisian voice for the Banquet scene, write screeds of dialogue in rhyming couplets, parody the poems of François Villon and find some way of translating a courtroom scene where, in the original, the witness is questioned in French and answers in Poitevin–Saintongeais!

I think all translators are drawn to texts that seem, superficially, almost impossible. We respond to the music and cadence of a text, to the voices that we hear as we read. Énard's novels are a masterclass in narrative voices, in weaving music and magic into the text. His writing (especially in *The Gravediggers' Guild*) is as much a paean to the nature of language – its history, allusiveness, and infinite variety – as it is a narrative and a meditation on what it means to be human, to be mortal.

What I hope is that the prize will bring more readers to this bawdy, riotous, touching tale, that it might make them laugh and think and (who knows) take this as a platform to read Rabelais and Villon, Lucretius and the medieval bards – to luxuriate in the whorls and vortices of language, thought and rebirth.



**2. What does winning the French-American Foundation Translation Prize mean to you?**

Few prizes are as important to me as the French/American [Foundation Prize], because, unusually for a literary prize, the jury is composed of other translators. What is being celebrated, therefore, is not simply the talent of the author, the weight and heft of the novel or non-fiction book, but specifically the skill of the translator in reforging and recreating it in English.

What impresses me, year on year, is that the juries of the French/American [Foundation Prize] ably recognise great feats of translation, the lyrical and the visceral, the formally inventive and the emotionally literate...It is a prize awarded by translators to translations – there can be no higher praise.

**3. You were born in Ireland and moved to France in the 1980s. What inspired you to make this move, and where did your interest in translating French literature come from?**

This is a story as long as it is mundane. I moved to Paris on a whim (more or less). I had never visited France, and never spoken the language (high school French classes in the 1970s did not require us to speak the language, only to read – so I arrived speaking the way that Maupassant wrote, to much hilarity). Quickly discovering that I had an aptitude for languages, I immersed myself in French literatures(s) of all kinds[,] marvelling at the ways in which language is not merely a way of saying, but [also] shapes and defines what is said. I began translating purely for my own entertainment (I never thought I would ever be asked to translate for publication), and my first attempt was a full translation of Romain Gary/Émile Ajar's *La Vie devant soi*, which I loved so much that I wanted my anglophone friends to be able to read it (the Ralph Manheim translation was out of print at the time, so I did not even know it existed).



My slow journey to becoming a translator began by working with bandes dessinées – I translated, published and edited graphic novels for a variety of UK and US magazines and presses, and thereby came to know a number of (literary) editors and publishers, one of whom gave me my first opportunity to translate a novel. For several years, I had a day job (as most translators do) and spent evenings and weekends working on translations – which in those early days were few and far between. At some point, I decided that – for better or worse – this was the one thing that I wanted to do, so I quit my day job, took a hefty salary cut, and devoted myself primarily to translation.

**4. In addition to translating works from French, you've also translated works from Spanish. In your opinion, what is a unique challenge that French-to-English translators are faced with, compared to translators of different languages?**

When asked, I always explain that I translate from Frenchs, plural – Francophone literature not only spans many hundreds of years, but also many variants of French. I have loved being able to translate authors from Morocco and Algeria, from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon, from Lebanon and Martinique... While these countries share a language, that language is individual to each – it varies in its sonorities, its rhythms and its structure. It gives rise to stories and novels that are rooted as much in a place and a culture as much as in the language itself. Translating from French can offer extraordinary formal challenges (whether attempting to render Racine or Houellebecq, Kourouma or Del Amo), and it is – above all – an endless journey of discovery, at once linguistic, social, and cultural. I can think of no work more rewarding [than] one which [is] constantly surprising, illuminating and filled with wonder.



**5. Our Translation Prize is the only prize of its kind to solely reward the translator. In your own words, why is it crucial for translators to be recognized for their craft?**

To me, it has always been crucially important that translators be recognised for their craft. Like actors or musicians, they perform a text so that others can read and hear it. There are editors (who shall remain nameless) who say "any translator could translate this book, but only the author could have written it," and in doing so, they fail to realise that *every* translator would produce a different text, just as every pianist will give a different performance of the *Goldberg Variations*, and every actor a different performance of *Hedda Gabler*. Translators are no more interchangeable than any other kind of artist; their role – despite popular conceptions – is not that of replacing one set of words with another, but of reading and assimilating a text with such a degree of intimacy that they can produce a text (different in every word and every particular) that somehow preserves not merely the sense, but the power, the pulse, the nuance and the particularity of the original. It is, first and foremost, an act of *writing*, one that not only requires access to another language, but also the empathy, compassion, curiosity and skill to make it live again and sing again in another language, another world. As the Nobel laureate José Saramago put it, "Writers create national literature, but world literature is written by translators."