



Living Texts

“A person lives in his language like a fish in water,” says Latvian writer Inga Ābele. “That’s why authors don’t know that much about their own work—because they live inside it. If an author wants to test the strength of her work—be it a novel, story, or play—it should be translated.”

Ābele’s 2008 novel, *High Tide*, has been tested multiple times. First translated into Italian and Swedish, it was translated into English in 2013 by **Kaija Straumanis ’12 (MA)**, a graduate of Rochester’s literary translation program and editorial director at Open Letter Books. Housed in Dewey Hall, Open Letter is one of only a few publishers in the English-speaking world devoted to literature in translation.

In Straumanis’s hands, Ābele’s novel held up extraordinarily well. In December, the American Association of Teachers of Slavic

and East European Languages chose Straumanis’s translation, published by Open Letter, over 37 other translated works for the 2015 Best Translation into English award.

Ābele is unrestrained in her admiration for Straumanis’s work. “Kaija isn’t just a translator, [she’s] my coauthor,” she says. “She had her vision of how the text could continue to develop. When we translate, we also edit.”

Straumanis first translated the novel for her master’s thesis. “It’s just a very beautiful book,” she says of the original work. “It’s very poetic in certain ways, without being poetry. There’s a bare-bones emotionality to it. It’s spare without being minimalist.”

For Straumanis, translation involves capturing “the structure, the register, and the tonality” of a work. For *High Tide*, as in all her translations, she strove “to duplicate the experience that you get from reading the original.”

Straumanis was raised in Minnesota by Latvian parents. She grew up bilingual, speaking Latvian at home, and going to Latvian school and summer camp. Latvian culture is “very literary,” she says. Her home was full of novels, books of poetry, and plays.

AWARD-WINNING TRANSLATOR: Straumanis, photographed in a self-portrait above, helps bring world literature to English language readers as editorial director of Open Letter Books and an award-winning translator of Latvian literature.

The language itself, she adds, “is very poetic, and it lends itself very well to poetry, song lyrics, literature, and things like that.”

Straumanis wasn’t entirely satisfied with the corpus of Latvian literature to which she was exposed in her supplemental schooling. One of the three Baltic republics, Latvia has spent most of its history under Polish, Swedish, Russian, and, later, Soviet rule. A history of occupation produced a rich body of nationalistic literature. Even some of the more recent Latvian literature, she says, continues to reflect that past. But not Ābele’s *High Tide*. “One of the reasons I loved the book so much is that it wasn’t heavy with the post-Soviet sensibility,” Straumanis says.

The novel is the story of a woman’s life, told in reverse chronological order. It examines choices and their consequences, allowing readers to see consequences before being introduced to the conditions and choices that produced them.

What makes the work especially challenging for translators is that each chapter is stylistically distinct. One chapter is a dialogue, another a monologue, another a letter, and so forth. “Ābele is also a poet and a playwright, so the book plays with those stylistic genres,” Straumanis says.

Straumanis, who travels to Latvia about once a year, met and came to know Ābele as she was completing work on her translation. “We clicked,” she says of their first meeting. “Now every time I go back to Latvia, I go and visit with her and her family.”

Just as Ābele does not have the final, or only, word on her own work, Straumanis knows—or certainly hopes—that her translation won’t be the one and only English rendition. “Fifty years down the line, someone may pick up my translation and say, ‘I think I would do it differently,’ and retranslate it,” she says. “Tastes will differ, language usage in English will differ. The text is a living thing. It moves on, and it moves on from one language to another.” **R**

—KAREN MCCALLY ’02 (PHD)

Kitchen Venture

Barry Yarkoni ’74 says he first learned to cook by watching Julia Child on television. He now hopes to play a role in inspiring many more new cooks as chief operating officer of the Wolfgang Puck Cooking School, the Los Angeles celebrity chef’s online venture that Yarkoni helped found and launch last fall.

“This is the most fun I’ve had since Gilbert basement,” says Yarkoni, an engineer-turned-executive, who was a resident advisor on the basement floor of Gilbert Hall when he led the residents in the founding of an ultra-local newspaper, *The Gilbert Cockroach*.

Yarkoni has been partnering with David Sculley, former CEO of Heinz, in multiple online ventures for the past several years. This latest one, however, is something of a dream job for Yarkoni.

“We have a small, collegial team,” he says of the core staff of five men and two women. “Everyone involved in this venture loves to cook. It’s unusual to be in a group that includes a bunch of men sitting around a table comparing recipes.”

Puck, whom Yarkoni met through Sculley, is the major partner in the operation, which is a separate entity from the chef’s Fine Dining Restaurants Company and product lines under Wolfgang Puck Worldwide. Yarkoni and Sculley are the other partners in the venture, which is “located” at WolfgangPuckCookingSchool.com.

The school has a different aim from most cooking shows on television, according to Yarkoni. “You might pick up a few things, but [cooking shows are] more entertainment than education,” he says. “Right from the get-go, we wanted to make this really educational.

Wolfgang really loves to teach, and I think that’s been one of the secrets to his success.”

Yarkoni prepared the groundwork for a successful online business operation, according to Sculley. “Barry brings amazing business experience to this assignment, including automating every business process online,” he says. “So the company operates virtually with great efficiency.”

Yarkoni and Sculley worked for three years on the financial and legal issues to bring the project to fruition. They had a studio built just for the school, located in the Pacific Design Center, right next to one of Puck’s catering kitchens. “We have these awesome facilities 20 feet away, with walk-in refrigerators and freezers, and a huge industrial-scale dishwashing operation.”



Puck’s lessons, however, are designed to be accessible. No walk-in refrigerators or industrial dishwashers are required for participation. Indeed, Yarkoni hopes a few of his classmates will give the school a try. As a partner, he’s been able to establish special benefits for designated VIPs. Anybody can get a 14-day free trial to the subscription service. But Rochester alumni aren’t just anybody. “I set up the guest code ‘Meliora,’” Yarkoni says. “It gives you a month free, with no credit card required.” **R**

—KAREN MCCALLY ’02 (PHD)

PUCK’S RIGHT-HAND MAN: Yarkoni, pictured at the Pacific Design Center, home to Wolfgang Puck’s studio kitchen, is chief operating officer of the celebrity chef’s new online cooking school.