THE AUTHOR WAS NEVER DEAD:

How Social Media and the Online Literary Community Altered the Visibility of the Translated Author in America

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Elizabeth Bradfield, Advisor
David Sherman, Second Reader

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by
Emily Botto
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Emily Botto
Abstract

The American publishing industry is notorious for its disinterest in translation. Although its notoriety has made most publishers very aware of the absence of translated literature in America, its perception as an unprofitable venture has prevented publishing houses from investing in the genre and thereby improving the small number of published translations. This thesis explores the possible ways in which translated authors and their readers can alter this perception by utilizing recent technological advances in global social networking.

“The Author Was Never Dead” will cover the history of and current environment surrounding literary translation in the U.S. including which translated novels have become successful and how that relates to the visibility of the translated author. Researching the slow growth in the visibility of the translated author and their cultural ambassadors on social media and online communities provides insight into how and why a translated book can gain popularity in a country known for its literary ethnocentrism.

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INTRODUCTION
An author, compared to other artists, is uniquely invisible to their audience. Singers, dancers, musicians, and actors, all appear in front of their audience, baring their faces and bodies in an art that asks the audience to connect with them as people. But writers practice art invisibly, writing and creating behind closed doors. By writers I include those who write for the previously mentioned art genres, as songwriters, choreographers, composers, and playwrights/screenwriters, all enjoy this same invisibility, assuming they and the subject are not one and the same. In this thesis, however, I intend to focus on authors as writers, specifically in the genre of translated fiction.

Though anonymity can be found in any art, only writers and visual artists can be both faceless and nameless. Some even use pen names in place of their own. This makes authors seem unnecessary when it comes to the interpretation of their work and decreases the likelihood of readers utilizing their knowledge of the author to inform their reading. The mass production of books separates authors even from visual artists in their invisibility, as their work is often distributed and interpreted without their input or presence. The published novel differs further from visual art in that an author’s manuscript is transformed in the publishing house, particularly through copy editing and design. The author often has little to no control over the cover of the book, the back-cover copy, and sometimes even the title. In the end, what the reader sees when they buy a book has nothing to do with the author, making him or her effectively invisible in bookstores. This is especially true for those writers I intend to focus on in this work, who are authors of fiction translated from non-English languages into American markets. For translated authors, the book goes through a second round of editing and design, in addition to the translation of the story, to prepare it for another nation of readers. The reality of the mass produced novel is that authors can only communicate with readers directly outside of their
stories, and the advent of the internet has allowed them to do so all over the world, providing each author with the choice to become visible or remain anonymous.

For some translated authors, anonymity can mean obscurity. American markets are already lacking in translated fiction; only 3 percent of all published books in the U.S. are translations, with fiction and poetry making up only around 0.7 percent of this statistic (Chad Post). When I learned of these statistics, most of which are decades old and lack updated studies, I became curious about how modern technology has affected or could affect how readers respond to translated authors and their works. Visibility has been attainable for American writers for years; even before the internet and social media entered our lives, an author’s life and personality were profiled in magazines and written about in books—though of course social media allows a more personal curation of authors’ lives as well as more direct contact with readers. Translated authors, however, enter the space with the disadvantage of speaking a different language and belonging to a foreign culture, making visibility something that many struggle to achieve. But this is currently changing as social media platforms begin to introduce modern translation software, allowing readers on social media to automatically translate author comments and reviews from other readers. This increase in the ease of communication has given translated authors the option to either connect with their audience or to allow the art to do so in their place. Both of these choices carry various drawbacks and benefits that the author must consider regardless of their decision. Anonymity holds the obvious drawbacks outlined above, but some authors, such as Elena Ferrante, value anonymity because it allows authors to be free of personal criticism and publicity. On the other hand, visibility as an author can be detrimental as learning about the writer’s personality and background creates a lens through which the audience reads their work. This can alter how the reader interprets the piece in a positive or negative way. In
Chapter 3 of this thesis, “Self-Branding and the Third Self,” I will detail how the visibility of some authors on social media has been a detriment to how their work is read. For those authors who have successfully created an image online, the opposite is true; communicating with readers and publicizing their work on social media is thought of, both by select readers and authors, as a benefit to the author-reader relationship.

Literary criticism of the twentieth century has long debated the author’s role in their work, and modern technology’s innovations have widened the borders of this clash of opinions. For example, literary scholars disagree on the benefits and ethics of visibility. Some claim along the lines of author Zadie Smith’s review in the New York Review of Books that “social networking software explicitly encourages people to make weak superficial connections with each other” (Z. Smith 2010). These claims often promote the ideas that Roland Barthes suggests in his decades-old but oft-quoted essay, “The Death of the Author.” Namely, once a piece of writing leaves the author’s hands, the author is irrelevant to the work, and, for all purposes, has “died” (Barthes 1967). When authors’ lives are on display for all to see, however, authorial objectivity is difficult to argue. In fact, many readers with insight on an author’s life aggressively connect this knowledge to the characters and plots of their books, “making” authors in a different manner than what was once common.

Two notable critics of the twentieth century, Barthes and Wayne C. Booth, were on the front lines standing on opposite sides of this argument. Although I have always disagreed with Barthes’ ideas implying that the reader is left to interpret the work without considering what the author intended, I have also always been interested in the relationship between the author and their work as well as the relationship between the author and the reader. In fact, the idea that the author is important to the reader’s interpretation of the book, and that the reader places import on
who the author is and where they are from, is central in what I intend to explore. Wayne C. Booth addresses these relationships in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by differentiating between the “real author” and the voice that exists within their work, or the “implied author.” If the author is dead, as Barthes claims, then the reader should not care about who the author is or what they look like. But if the author discovers or creates themselves as they write, finding a “second self” through their own words, and the reader’s “reactions to [the writer’s] various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine [the reader’s] response to the work,” as Booth implies, then knowledge of the author’s identity is essential for the reader to better understand the text (W. Booth 1961: 71). Barthes and his death of the author exist in perfect opposition to Booth’s implied author, as the independent interpretation of the reader and the reader’s identification with the author battle for dominance. This dichotomy of ideas clashes when comparing various successful translated authors, some of which, such as Elena Ferrante, lean toward the side of Barthes, and others, such as Fredrik Backman, clearly embody Booth’s ideas.

As a reader consumes a book, the author is invisible, a background player creating the world in which they become entrenched. As Booth suggests, however, “though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear” (Booth 1961: 20). The author may be invisible, but they remain forever present in the text, and for some readers a part of the experience of loving a book and sharing it with others is grabbing that invisible player and bringing them into the foreground, examining who they are and how that knowledge influences the meaning of the book. But is this act essential, or even of value to the reading process? And how does and how can the ubiquity of the internet and social media’s influence on our perception of people and popularity allow translated authors to better communicate and create relationships with American readers, and help American readers connect with translated works?
Why Does This Matter?
Literary translation is important on a universal level because it invites understanding and acceptance between cultures. In fact, American translator Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility* claims that the hesitation of U.S. publishers to publish translated literature causes “cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign” and “the mutual insemination of cultures is an important step in what our policy makers think of as international understanding” (2004: 250). Access to texts across the world through the universal reach of the internet allows more people in more places to read foreign works, theoretically leading to some version of this utopia of international understanding.

Without the translation of these works, however, access of American readers to other cultures exponentially decreases, further cementing this monolinguist and ethnocentric perspective on foreign texts—including the belief that, since so many texts are originally published in English, Americans have no need for translated work. Foreign authors are therefore encouraged to write in English regardless of their fluency since, according to Dr. Richard Mansell, “the search for global bestsellers among international publishers currently favours books in English” (Mansell 2017: 52). Although the U.S. publishing industry is entering a period in which readers encourage diversity both in the author and the work’s cultural content, when searching for this diversity internationally publishers continue to stay away from translation. This can be seen in recent bestselling foreign authors such as Chimamanda Adichie and Khaled Hosseini, both of whom wrote their novels in English in conjunction with the stagnant rate of literary translation in America. Of course, the inclusion of more diverse authors is a step in the right direction in comparison to an industry whose bestsellers were once almost exclusively male, Caucasian, and originating from the U.S. or the U.K. The tendency to favor diverse authors only if they speak and write in English, however, disadvantages foreign authors who might have
equivalent talent but less proficiency in English and narrows the range of culturally diverse content available to American readers.

One additional factor that disadvantages authors writing in a non-English language is the existence of indirect translations. Since not every translator can know every language, direct translation—defined as translation from the original text to the target language—for every text is an impossibility, making the reigning lingua franca, in this case English, a common in-between language. For example, few translators speak both Japanese and Lithuanian, so when translating a Japanese text for Lithuanian audiences the novel will often be translated into English first. According to Mansell, this is called an “indirect translation.” Since this theoretical translation is not meant for English-speaking audiences, it is unlikely for publishers to make the effort to edit the English version before translating it into Lithuanian, decreasing the quality of the version of the text that the target audience will read. However, if more novels are translated into English and released to English-speaking audiences, publishers in other countries can use the English version as source material. Mansell defines this as a “relay translation,” which “can be a blessing…if the first translator had taken the care to explain some cultural nuances that may be lost to readers from outside the country of origin” (Mansell 2017: 56). Translation into English can expedite the spread of the text to an even wider audience, allowing more texts to be translated into more languages even if there is no translator available who is capable of direct translation. Of course, not every author wants to be translated, and not every author wants to build an audience in the U.S. Certain works of literature are intended for a specific audience, and some authors do not wish to publish beyond that. In addition, the act of translation often changes the author’s message, which does not always remain in line with the author’s wishes. It is up to the author to decide to maintain their target demographic or to pursue a wider audience, whether
their intention is to make more money or because they believe that their work can benefit a more diverse crop of readers. But those who do make the decision to pursue translation can benefit from the translation of a work into English—granted their goal is to reach a large, multicultural audience—by maintaining the quality of their work through multiple translations and giving them a wider reach.

The mere absence of reliable and comprehensive statistics on the subject of translation in the U.S. is another reason why further research is important to help solve the problems outlined above. The 3 percent statistic that I first mention in the introduction and will continue to refer to for the rest of this thesis is quoted by thousands of sources and is generally accepted as America’s permanent symbol of failure when it comes to translation. However, some reports claim that the 3 percent number itself is false. For example, professor, author, and translator Esther Allen, who was involved in the initial research by the National Education Association that produced the 3 percent statistic back in 1999, claims that the study “covered only literary fiction and poetry” instead of covering what most people assume was all books published that year (Barron 2018). Since most reliable sources maintain that the 3 percent statistic is more or less factual, I will continue to rely on it throughout my research, but Allen’s statement only serves to prove that much of the data on this subject is confusing and contradictory and requires further research.

The importance of researching the visibility and invisibility of the translated author in the U.S. is to indicate that the visibility of an author, regardless of the manner in which they are revealed or presented, can improve the reader’s experience with the work and increase sales. In addition, this research will show how the emergence of recent technologies can make this visibility possible even for translated authors, who have always lacked a recognizable face and
voice in the past. If publishers in the U.S. can utilize social media and other communication resources to increase the visibility of translated authors, it will discourage both indirect translation and the commonality of authors writing in their non-native language. In addition, if foreign authors can utilize these same tools to promote themselves and connect with readers, both the act of communication and the act of reading their work will encourage cultural understanding.

**Overview**
I will answer the questions outlined in the introduction first by analyzing how authors have been “made” throughout the past century, outlining the transition of the making of authors from general interest and literary magazines to online blogs and social media. I move on in Chapter 2 to the history of translation, analyzing how corporate censorship took over the publishing world and the cause of translation’s current standing in U.S. publishing. In this chapter I will also cover how translated authors’ use of online resources has the potential to alter the current position of U.S. major publishers on literary translation. Chapter 3 of this thesis will address the community of readers and authors that has formed throughout the past two decades as online access became commonplace for people around the world. This chapter also outlines how self-branding was accepted by certain publishers and authors as a marketing technique and its pros and cons when presenting the author to the reader. Finally, in Chapter 4 I will present the new opportunities that self-branding and online literary communities bring by showing how three translated authors of varying backgrounds strategically utilized anonymity, visibility, or a combination of the two to succeed in a foreign environment.
CHAPTER 1: HOW AUTHORS ARE MADE
Throughout the past century, the way authors have made names for themselves has gone through a transformation, shifting from general interest magazines to mostly online literary magazines and social networking platforms. Carol Polsgrove in “Magazines and the Making of Authors” explains how 20th century authors often started as writers of short stories in magazines before graduating to full-length novels. Polsgrove writes that “magazines and book publishers have for more than a century participated jointly in the creation of authors” (Polsgrove 2009: 256). As examples, Polsgrove names Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, and Norman Mailer. Magazines gave these authors not only a broader audience but a starting point for their novels, as some of these stories were extended into full-length novels which were later published through independent houses. Many of those who failed at getting their novels published initially found success and at times fame in magazine publishing. These authors had no need to market their own work because magazine subscriptions were a continual self-marketing tool to individual authors, putting their work and their name out in the world by the simple fact of being published in a notable publication. These authors also used magazine writing as supplements to their income even after gaining more mainstream fame for their books. For example, despite the notable gap in time between him and the previously mentioned authors, F. Scott Fitzgerald “was pulling in well over ten thousand dollars a year on short stories alone,” during his prime in the 1920s, which equates to around $130,000 when accounting for inflation (Petite 2015).

However, the declining popularity and budgets of magazines in the mid-20th to 21st century has made it less likely for an author publishing his or her work in magazines to find opportunities for broader book publishing and even less for mainstream fame and fortune. This shift in the reading world began in the early 1970s when “magazines were experiencing new economic pressures” as television spread to 90 percent of homes in the country and magazine
fiction failed to “match television’s dramatic appeal.” As a result, magazines such as the *New Yorker* or *Esquire* began to slow their publishing of fiction (264). In fact, “The decline of fiction as a significant staple of consumer magazines was… the most dramatic change in magazines in the postwar years” (Polsgrove 2009: 264). The high turnover in magazine editors and the decreased budgets of magazines in general accelerated this process as most could no longer afford high-priced famous authors. Although there was also a strain on nonfiction pieces, according to Sey Chassler, editor in chief of Redbook from the ’60s to the ’80s—quoted in Gloria Steinem’s article on magazine culture, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising”—fiction took up too much space in the magazines and did not leave room for advertisements, which was the source of the majority of profit for magazines (Steinem 1990). This downward trend continued into the 21st century, as over the past 20 years the most popular magazines in the U.S. have slowly decreased their publication of short fiction and poetry. For example, although *The Atlantic* once published short stories monthly, it decreased its amount of issues per year from 12 to 10 in 2003. *The Atlantic* subsequently decided to drastically reduce its publication of fiction in 2005 when it lowered its 10 fiction publications per year to a once yearly issue offered only online to subscribers (“The Atlantic Monthly Cuts Back on Fiction - The New York Times” 2005). Other magazines such as *Vogue, Life,* and *The Saturday Evening Post* no longer publish fiction at all, and still others, such as *The Partisan Review,* no longer exist.

*The New Yorker, Harper’s,* and *The New Republic* are three national magazines that remain focused on fiction to some respect, however *Harper’s* boasts only 209,000 in circulation—for reference, *Harper’s* circulation was at 200,000 in 1860—and, in the words of its former editor, “Some years we break even, some years we lose a little and some years we make a little” (“Harper’s: The Best Magazine You Don’t Read - CBS News” 2008). In addition, *The*
New Republic decreased its issues from 20 to 10 issues per year in 2014, with subscription numbers dropping and the magazine losing money (Wyatt 2005). Although The New Yorker decreased its number of short stories per issue from two or three to only one in 1995, it has still managed to maintain and even grow its subscription numbers, which rose by 12.3 percent between 2017 and 2018 (Carr and Kirkpatrick 2002), (Moses 2018). Charging $120 per year for subscriptions, The New Yorker is arguably the only American magazine that can pay its short story writers well, depending on the author’s popularity and the quality and length of the story.

Since The New Yorker is one of the only magazines in the country where one can get recognized and promoted in non-literary American society and get paid well for his or her contributions, one’s options narrow considerably from what used to be a profitable and advantageous option for getting published in a traditional publishing house and/or as a novelist. Most importantly, most of the stories published by The New Yorker are written by already-established writers, meaning that very few people are getting their start through a story in this magazine (Kovarik 2011).

Despite evidently declining numbers both in magazine publishing and in these same magazines accepting fiction, authors often do get stories and essays published in well-known U.S. magazines. However, most of these authors have already been published and gained fans, since the magazine is more likely to publish when they are guaranteed a readership of the author’s already-existing fans. According to “New Yorker Fiction By the Numbers,” 113 of the 514 works published between 2001 and 2011 were written by only 10 different authors and around 30 authors account for almost half of the total works within this decade (Kovarik 2011). Therefore, most unknown fiction authors struggle to utilize magazines as vehicles for success since the devaluation of fiction as content of general interest magazines. Although unknown
authors are often published in smaller literary magazines, the low pay and lack of guaranteed results makes it unfavorable for many authors.

In the past, magazine subscription services effectively distributed authors’ fiction work to readers in a way that traditional publishing does not. In fact, readers’ “form of familiarity with certain media sources can be compared to the role of ‘word of mouth’ recommendations” (Ranjana Das and Tereza Pavlickova 2013: 386). A story getting published in the right magazine is the equivalent of a friend telling you to read it. As these magazines slowed their publishing of fiction between 1970 and the early 2000s, the opportunity for unknown authors to get published in mainstream magazines decreased, book publishers slowed in their attention to magazine authors, and the diminishing number of magazine subscribers no longer learned about authors through their byline. Consequently, the number of authors who can survive on and gather a following for their magazine work has dwindled. Translated authors are at even more of a disadvantage in this realm due to their decreased ability to communicate with editors as well as American magazines’ lack of budget and infrastructure for translating works, making it almost impossible for them to become “made” by getting published in U.S. magazines. So how can translated authors “make” themselves in the U.S. now, if not through magazines? The answer to this lies online.

There are a few different ways that authors have found to circumvent the loss of magazine fiction publishing, some of which included blogs and online literary magazines, which became commonplace online in the mid-2000s. This was around the time that these same magazines discontinued their print editions due to dispersed audiences and turned toward online publication to lower costs. Due to the high price of producing and distributing physical magazines, which currently can vary between $30,000-$50,000, the ability to publish magazines
online exponentially decreased the price of production. The amount of publications providing literary content subsequently increased after the emergence of the internet. Although the mere fact of being online allowed these magazines to keep themselves afloat, they were no more able to pay their writers publishing online than they were when the magazines were published in print, as online readers are hesitant to pay subscription fees. Senior reader of fiction at Harvard Review M.R. Branwen explained that sending submissions to an online literary magazine may not get a writer money but might offer increased publication credentials and a platform to reach readers (Branwen 2017). However, one of the reasons why magazines in the 20th century were such an effective platform to promote one’s work was the relative scarcity of magazines in comparison to the thousands of online blogs, magazines, and databases that are currently devoted to literary content. Magazines in the 20th century concentrated readers to a smaller amount of resources and content. It follows that the ratio of eyes to magazine stories before the internet was much larger than the ratio that exists now of eyes to each online story. The fact that online literary magazines often do not pay their contributors, do ask for submission fees, and are still relatively selective in their content despite no guarantee that the writer will reach a broader audience, has driven some writers to more independent forms of online promotion.

Blogs were, and remain, an alternative platform to accomplish the same goal as literary magazines while circumventing the figurative middleman—as in any publication that is selective in choosing works for publication. The name “blog” was coined in 1999, and by 2006 any blogger had access to free web services to create their blog as well as “easy-to-use ad services that, for a small fee, will place advertisements from major corporations on blogs, then mail the blogger his profits” (Thompson 2006). It appears Chassler’s worry about space for advertising was no longer a problem by the time blogs appeared, as websites allowed for endless room to
write and at the same time advertise sponsors. In addition, costs of creating a website had all but disappeared, making the cost of a magazine’s print run exorbitant in comparison. One of the earliest bloggers, Dave Winer, claims that a blog is the “unedited” version of a writer, as an individual can easily and cheaply publish their words for the public without the influence of a professional publication. As I outline in the introduction, the invisibility of the writer is enhanced by the edited and altered result of the mass-produced novel. It follows that the blog was the fictional writer’s first foray into visibility. Blogs were the first hint of authors having a voice outside of publications edited and designed by publishing houses, and the emergence of what I later name the “third self.”

Curiously, blogs have a similar proliferation to books, with word of mouth becoming tantamount to a blog’s popularity. Blogs also initiated a specific type of word-of-mouth marketing that occurred exclusively online or through digital means, as links were the primary ways in which people—often bloggers themselves—recommended the blogs of their peers. Not only do bloggers communicate and connect with readers but with each other, becoming “one another’s audience,” a phenomenon that continued in later years when social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter accumulated large author communities (The Economist 2006). Many authors have used blogs in addition to social media platforms to build an audience before self-publishing became possible—some with the hope of drawing the attention of publishing houses.

Self-publishing, once an almost unattainable goal due to the high amount of capital necessary to print and distribute, shifted as self-publishing platforms, such as e-books and print-on-demand, became available. While digital publishing and editing websites offered self-publishing e-books for between $100 and $2,500 depending on budget and marketing/editing
costs, print-on-demand made it possible for individuals to distribute physical copies of their books for an affordable price (“How Much Does It Cost to Publish a Book? A Detail of Full Expenses” n.d.). Although self-published books may not have taken over the literary world, the ability to publish and read books online has lowered the barrier of entry for authors unaffiliated with publishing houses. Print-on-demand (POD) services such as IngramSpark and Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) have accomplished this to a lesser extent, allowing self-published authors to distribute physical copies to readers. POD services are accessible for self-published authors because they print books based on individual orders and generally only charge a commission fee while print runs require large upfront fees and often result in more supply than demand. Although POD is not as profitable for self-published authors because there are very few who are well-known enough to participate in personal appearances or book signings, some do participate in Goodreads giveaways, and many readers express a desire to hold a physical copy. In 2007, Amazon was one of the first companies to make self-publishing possible and create a platform on which to publish, both for e-books and POD, and since then the practice has proliferated, particularly in the U.S. An author’s online presence, though not essential for the sale of every book, is paramount to self-published authors whose only—free—avenue for marketing is the internet. In these cases, author websites and social media profiles are the only ways in which they can communicate with readers and promote their books, as they do not have the support of a press’s marketing arm or even their imprimatur.

Finding success as an unknown author online is rare and requires experience and a fan base. Those who have done this successfully include E.L James and Amanda Hocking. James’ presence on Goodreads and fan fiction websites led to multi-million book and movie deals. She began to write her romance novels on these fan fiction websites, gaining an audience and
responding to their comments. Amanda Hocking accumulated thousands of Twitter followers while she wrote and published her YA novels between 2009 and 2010, and she also kept a consistent blog that maintained fan’s attention through author giveaways and hosting other authors on her site (Guardian Staff 2012). Although these are outliers and not the norm, a combination of good writing and good marketing, especially direct contact with fans and creation of a fan community, has historically been the key for self-publishers to find success with their books. Even traditional publishing houses are beginning to value the cheap and productive way that social media and website marketing can promote their titles. Marketing directors tell their writers to be active on social media to connect with readers, and authors are starting to create novels on Twitter (Goldhill 2015). Evidently, the internet is becoming an essential part of the publishing industry. Readers are not as likely to discover authors while reading The New Yorker as they are while scrolling through Goodreads.

The fact that magazines are no longer one of the only ways, or even one of the easiest ways, for authors to make a name for themselves could benefit authors from foreign countries. The inability of American magazines to support young or unknown fiction authors is evident in the declining budgets of once-popular magazines. Without magazines to act as recommendations engines for their subscribers, readers are instead driven online; to read reviews, to take recommendations from strangers and online friends, and to virtually connect with authors. With the globalization of the internet making connections to people across the world possible, not only can publishers network outside the American publishing center of New York City—which has long been an exclusionary fact for non-New Yorker publishers, authors, and agents—but readers can connect with their counterparts in other countries as well as the foreign authors themselves (Hench 2015). Foreign authors, publishers, and agents can utilize online tools, just as self-
publishing authors do, to market their books and build a name for themselves without a traditional American publisher. This is made even more possible due to the translation functions that are now available on most social media websites, which translate readers’ reviews and authors’ posts from any language into English. Social media, in addition, allows the foreign author to have a face and a voice, something that, in the past, was not possible unless this author spoke English and was able to travel.

While these historical events have allowed translated authors more access to their audiences and vice versa, historical events within the book publishing industry have led to the low percentage of translated novels in the U.S. The main goal of the publishing industry, like any other corporatized industry, is to profit—this is speaking of larger houses, not non-profit enterprises or university presses. But it was not always that way. Corporatization of the publishing industry, the history of which I will outline extensively below, is a leading cause for the disadvantages that translated authors face in the U.S. In the next chapter, I offer an overview of how translation in the U.S. rose and fell within a short period as well as the general progression of the publishing industry throughout the post-war years and up to the present.
CHAPTER 2: HISTORY OF TRANSLATION
In the 1940s, as World War II ended and trade and communication increased, the publishing industry entered a globalization process similar to what is happening now through the internet and social media platforms. Both during and after World War II, the destruction and rebuilding of Western Europe created a vacuum of goods and services of which the U.S. took advantage, using the rise of cheaper, paperback copies to more easily produce books. This ease of production decreased the price of manufacturing books, giving publishing houses the budget to produce excess inventory and send it overseas to fulfill international needs. These publishing houses now had the option of international distribution and, starting primarily with Latin America during the war as European distribution dipped, the U.S. began its pursuit of globalization (Luey 2009). The flood of European immigrants to America made it possible for this globalization to occur in both directions, as former European publishers moving to America to escape the war encouraged translation into English as well as English into other languages. For example, Pantheon Books, which from its beginnings produced primarily “foreign fiction and political and cultural material that challenged the status quo” was founded by German immigrant Kurt Wolff and was created by European immigrants after the war (Streitfeld 1990). Immigrants influenced the work that Pantheon published even after the independent publisher was acquired by Random House, Inc. in 1961, when Andre Schiffrin, son of Jacques Schiffrin, a Russian-French immigrant to the U.S., became the editorial director of Pantheon books. Schiffrin went on to publish foreign classic authors such as Michel Foucault, Jean Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir (“André Schiffrin, Key Figure in N.Y. Publishing, Dies at 78 - The Washington Post” 2013).

During the period directly after World War II, independent publishers such as Pantheon ruled the industry, publishing everything from literary fiction to nonfiction essays. According to
Dan Simon and Tom McCarthy in “Editorial Vision and the Role of the Independent Publisher,” however, this changed in 1960 when corporate publishing houses began to appear. (In this case, an independent publisher is defined as a single imprint, and a publishing house as a company with multiple imprints.) Corporate publishing houses rose throughout this decade and began to dominate the profits, which made it more difficult for independent publishers, including those who published primarily foreign fiction, to exist on their own. As a result, many independent publishers were acquired by the growing publishing houses. Random House, Inc. acquired Alfred A. Knopf, another publisher of translated works, the same year, and Pantheon Books one year later in 1961 (Simon and McCarthy 2009).

At first, this did not affect the workings of the recently-acquired imprints; on the contrary, the growth of small publishing houses into corporations such as Penguin Group and Random House, Inc. as well as the increase in size and profits for these houses gave editors means and access to travel overseas to conferences and research foreign authors. In fact, in the two decades following 1960, corporate publishing houses placed a high value on—mostly European—foreign works, and actively sought them out. For example, in 1962, Schiffrin traveled annually to London, Paris, and Frankfurt to shop for foreign works (Simon and McCarthy 2009). Although European translations were most sought after, translations also followed public interest, with Russian translation skyrocketing in the ’70s and ’80s during the Cold War. The academic literary circle reflected this trend, with the National Book Foundation creating a translated literature prize in 1967 to accommodate the “marked surge during the early 1960s, when the number of translations ranged between 4 and 7 percent of the total” (Venuti 2004: 12). According to Venuti, this statistic remained close to 6 percent until the late 1960s when it began to fall, stagnating in the 1980s at around the 3 percent mark that is so popularly
quoted today. This stagnation of translations caused the National Book Foundation to
discontinue its translated literature award in 1983—notably, 15 out of the 23 awards during this
16-year time period were given to European writers (“National Book Foundation, Presenter of
the National Book Awards” n.d.). The cause of the award and translation itself falling out of
favor is due to two historical events: the approaching end to the Cold War and the
corporatization of the publishing industry.

The first is relatively simple. As the Cold War began to thaw and the U.S. moved farther
away from World War II, U.S. interaction with and media coverage of Europe decreased, and the
amount of translations into English followed. The second cause is rather complicated and
involves mostly the reimagining of Random House, Inc. and corporate censorship, defined as the
censorship of certain content based on its lack of monetary gain. When S.I. Newhouse, Jr. bought
Random House, Inc. from RCA—an electronics company that acquired Random House itself in
1965—in 1980, changes began to occur, namely the acquisitions of five imprints and launch of
two more (“History of Random House Inc. – FundingUniverse” n.d.). As the company grew, the
bottom line edged aside literary excellence in the company’s priorities. As a result, in 1989,
Robert L. Bernstein, the chief executive and chairman of Random House who “published works
by dissidents around the world,” was “forced into retirement” (H. Smith 2019). Bernstein was a
human rights activist who, after serving as a member of a delegation from the Association of
American publishers to the Soviet Union in 1973, became interested in foreign affairs and
authors who did not have the resources to publish in their own country. Newhouse reportedly
ousted Bernstein because he did not pay enough attention to the bottom line and gave too much
latitude to his editors (H. Smith 2019).
Newhouse hired former banker, Alberto Vitale, to replace Bernstein, who soon instated the requirement to Pantheon books that “every title be profitable” and required Schiffrin, who was still the editorial director of Pantheon Books at the time, “to trim his staff or cut his publishing list” (Simon and McCarthy 2009: 211). Schiffrin, a supporter of Bernstein and a strong opponent of corporate censorship, reportedly believed that “the value of literature could not be measured by immediate financial returns,” and therefore refused to follow Vitale’s orders (“André Schiffrin, Key Figure in N.Y. Publishing, Dies at 78 - The Washington Post” 2013). Schiffrin swiftly followed Bernstein out the door. Schiffrin’s departure incited a mass resignation of senior editors from Pantheon books and a public protest by Pantheon authors. Because the costly process of translating works made it difficult for these projects to become profitable, Random House’s number of foreign works declined after Schiffrin left, and profitability became the main focus of Pantheon titles, as with titles for all Random House imprints (“André Schiffrin, Key Figure in N.Y. Publishing, Dies at 78 - The Washington Post” 2013). Although data on total translations at the Random House corporation are not available, the declining percentage of translations throughout the 1980s show a clear trend of decreasing the publication of foreign books after Random House disbanded the editors of Pantheon.

As the largest players in the publishing industry became corporations focused on profit, selling subsidiary rights for English works as well as exporting English-language novels rose in importance. By the same year that Pantheon books lost Bernstein—1989—U.S. book exports increased by almost 50 percent and imports fell by -4 percent, and in 1990, the year it lost most of its senior editors, exports rose by 27 percent.\footnote{In 1978, U.S. copyright laws changed, and American publishers began to print outside of the U.S. to save money “so that imports included American books manufactured abroad” (Nord, Rubin, and Schudson 2009: 34) Exports of books did not decrease dramatically until the mid-1990s, when the infrastructure became well-established and export growth stagnated.} For reference, exports increased by only 10
percent in the previous year (Greco 2005: 227). The profitability of exports and subsidiary rights “was also assisted by the increased willingness of those abroad to embrace U.S. popular culture” and a lack of similar interest in American markets (Nord, Rubin, and Schudson 2009: 32).

Although, of course, Random House was not the only house publishing translated works, it was the largest publishing house in the U.S. and is now undeniably so as it merged with Penguin Group, another American publishing stronghold, in 2013. It is also important to note that Penguin Random House is currently owned jointly by Bertelsman, a German media conglomerate, which bought Random House from Newhouse in 1998, and the owner of Penguin Group, Pearson, a British publishing company. As of today, almost all major U.S. publishers are foreign-owned as MacMillan was bought by another German conglomerate, Holtzbrinck publishing group, in 1999 and Hachette Book Group—formerly Time Warner Book Group—was bought by French publishing corporation, Hachette Livre, in 2006. Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins are two of the only major U.S. publishing houses that are American-owned.

Although one might assume that foreign ownership would increase the influence of foreign literature on the U.S., the acquisition of major American publishers to larger conglomerates only raised the need for profit. As Michelle Kratz found in the course of her research on the media conglomerate publishing mergers of the 1990s and 2000s, “the mergers initiated an increased demand for profitability which in turn led to an increased demand to sell more books; therefore, the obligation for promoting new ideas and information was greatly diminished.” As important as the bottom line was when corporate publishing houses began appearing in the U.S., the larger overheads and competition from other conglomerates further increased publishing’s focus on profitability (Kratz 2009: 14). Preoccupations about profits...
outweighed foreign influence as the parent companies of these publishing houses became not just corporations but large conglomerates.

Since Random House’s leadership change in 1990, promotion and publication of translated works into English remains the oft quoted 3 percent of all published books in the U.S. As stated in the introduction, fiction and poetry make up only around 0.7 percent of this statistic; the rest come from academic or nonfiction subject matter (Chad Post). Around 80 percent of translated literature comes from independent publishing houses, many of which are subsidized by universities or national arts funding including Open Letter (Rochester University), Dalkey Archives (National Endowment for the Arts, Illinois Arts Council, University of Illinois, etc.), and Seagull Books (University of Chicago). These small publishers are often only able to afford publishing 10 to 50 books per year and are unable to support themselves without the subsidies that universities and other sources provide. The book has, historically, been oft-subsidized, as “no manufactured product has been as shaped and subsidized by noncommercial forces as the book” (Nord, Rubin, and Schudson 2009: 181). Some of the biggest translation houses in the U.S., which I mention above, are currently funded entirely or partially by non-profits or universities. This tactic is common throughout Europe in many countries that carry a far higher percentage of literary translation; the issue is not that publishing houses that deal in translation need funding to survive but that there is not enough funding in the U.S. to do so to the extent of European counterparts. In addition, book publishing’s association with corporate and for-profit enterprises can make it difficult for non-profit or otherwise funding-based houses to find patrons (Joanna Demkiewitz).

Corporate censorship in the 1980s and ’90s strictly limited mainstream publishing of translated novels, raising the barrier of entry for translated authors. The acquisition of
independent publishing companies around the world by media conglomeration giants gave foreign editors the ability to communicate and connect globally, however the corporations continued to restrict the publishing of literary translations in America due to profitability concerns. Now, although editors at these corporations still have access to foreign publishers, editors, agents, and authors, they primarily sell subsidiary rights for American books to their connections rather than the other way around (Venuti 2004). Therefore, foreign literary connections to mainstream publishing corporations are made almost irrelevant to the success of foreign authors in the U.S. unless the author already has a large amount of visibility worldwide. Non-profit independent publishers lack these international connections, and the publishers willing to sponsor translations consequently have less access to foreign agents and editors. In addition, small independent presses publishing translated fiction struggle with both sales and funding due to the familiar assumption that translated fiction will not be profitable. Without U.S. interest as well as connections to publishers that accept translated fiction, foreign authors lack channels through which they can communicate with publishers and readers, remaining invisible to both. To circumvent the corporate censorship that originated with Random House’s purging of Andre Schiffrin and Robert Bernstein, foreign authors can utilize methods of online communication to not only make themselves visible to their readers—gathering a following and thereby attracting attention from corporate publishers—but also to U.S. independents specializing in translated fiction.

Through the globalization of the internet, these authors can surpass the disadvantage of living far outside of the publishing hub of New York City, communicating with publishers and editors, as well as share their lives, beliefs, and image with their main audience. This should lead to an increase in the publication of translated fiction. First, because the increased ease of
communication somewhat decreases publisher’s trepidation over dealing with a foreign author. For example, they can trust that the translator and author can communicate and can have queries answered quickly and efficiently over email or any other messaging service. There is no need to send editors overseas, nor to bring foreign authors to the states unless the book is successful enough for a book tour. In this way, the cost of publishing a translated book decreases as do the technical difficulties that might have existed before the internet and email became commonplace not only in the U.S. but in most foreign countries. Second, select journals’ and magazines’ loss of literary influence around this same period leveled the playing field to an extent, as the new media utilized by authors to post non-published content, the internet, was accessible to everyone.

In reality, this theorized increase in the publication of translated fiction in America has not yet happened, at least not when looking at the percentage of translations in comparison to all publications. Another perspective on this practice of looking at the percentage of the whole is that the unreasonably low percentage is in fact due to the U.S.’ incredibly high saturation of the book market. Professor Edwin Gentzler, director of the Translation Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, claims that English-speaking countries publish so many books that 3 percent of the total number is a much higher total amount than the amount of translations in a country such as Slovenia, where 70 percent of all published books are translations (Anderson 2014). This is even more relevant when considering the large amount of book self-published in the U.S., almost all of which are originally written in English, but still contribute to the total. When taking this perspective, it seems as though the reception of literary translation in the U.S. has improved to an extent, with the reinstatement of the National Book Foundation translated literature prize in 2018. As previously mentioned, this award was discontinued in 1983 while corporate censorship began to take hold in U.S. publishing. The reinstatement of this award as
well as national attention on various translated works may indicate a shifting public opinion toward translated fiction despite the stagnant 3 percent statistic. To take advantage of this, publishers and translated authors would benefit from utilizing digital resources to connect with U.S. readers. Although part of the reason why this has not yet occurred is because the lingual and cultural divide make effective communication difficult and sometimes impossible for translated authors, the appearance of translation algorithms for most messaging services and social media platforms could further open the possibility of publisher- and reader-author contact.

These changes may allow literary translation in the U.S. to follow the path of other non-traditional authors, including those who have self-published. These writers have utilized different media throughout recent literary history to overcome the invisibility of the author—to put a face and voice to the words and relate to the audience in a way that their manuscript might not achieve when put in front of an acquisitions editor. As I demonstrate in the following sections, the success of these marketing tactics varies author to author but translated authors or representations of them have progressively been recommending and promoting translated novels on social media, indicating that their adoption of these techniques is progressing.
CHAPTER 3: AUTHOR/READER RELATIONSHIP ONLINE
The ability to create an online culture of members interested in literary subjects is key in creating support and opportunity to translated authors. The internet has granted translated authors easier communication with authors, agents, and publishers, and the ability to learn from and interact with an entire community of authors and readers across the world has increased their chances of attaining visibility in the U.S. In addition to these advances in technology and community, the advent of self-branding—a personal marketing technique that involves carefully molding a persona for blogs or social media profiles—flooded marketing in the early 2000s, changing the way that people act online and giving authors another outlet through which to market themselves. Self-branding has long influenced the way in which authors have been taught to market themselves online.

Of the myriad ways in which a translated author can take advantage of or benefit from social media, self-branding and utilizing the online community are two of the most prominent. Both have varying degrees of effectiveness, and I outline below how these two digital techniques changed the way authors comport themselves and the way readers view and understand authors.

Self-Branding and the Third Self
Self-branding is a controversial technique in the publishing world, and it has varying success with readers. For example, a study done by Audrey Laing in *Publishing Research Quarterly* analyzed author activity on various social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest. Seventy-four percent of the authors surveyed used Twitter, most of them choosing to do so by “sharing thoughts and opinions, interacting with readers and fans and marketing and publicity,” including the sharing of personal information, political opinions, and/or upcoming book releases and appearances (Laing 2017: 259).
According to Laing, “Social media acts as a conduit in order to ‘reveal’ and enable the contact between author and reader” (2017: 261). Without social media, readers only have contact with the author through their writing, meeting the author’s “second self” that Booth cites in his analysis. The connection that authors and readers are able to use via online resources allows the reader to surpass this barrier and get their questions about the author answered, whether they are specific questions about the book or about the author’s personal life. Readers perceive the author’s actions on social media to be that of the “real author,” unfiltered by narrative. Laing found, however, that authors present an additional self online, one author claiming that “My online persona is a professional front. It shifts with time and is sometimes closer to the ‘real’ me but is generally sillier, more adventurous, and more idle” (Laing 2017: 262).

This approach is what I name above as “self-branding,” a widely used social media technique that Alice Marwick in “Status Update,” suggests is often overvalued by anyone from book marketers to tech entrepreneurs. Marwick defines online self-branding as “the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others” (2013: 166). She adds that the rise of self-branding and widespread free access to the internet are intrinsically linked. Marwick analyzes the approach that self-branding “experts” take when giving advice, claiming that “even while trumpeting authenticity, Web 2.0 [social media] enthusiasts generally accept the idea that one should self-censor online” (Marwick 2013: 199). The idea of authenticity online is an inauthentic one—which does not mean that the act of self-branding is inherently bad. It neglects to display, however, Booth’s idea of the “real author,” which readers tend to believe they are witnessing when interacting with authors online. These authors are instead merely generating a “third self,” as it were, a persona that differs from the author’s narrative voice but does not reveal their real voice, even if it brings the reader closer to their reality. The author’s “third self” may
align closer to their personality and life than their stories reveal, but for the successful self-brander, it is also carefully curated to fit into the image that the author advertises of him or herself. Whether that is a person who cares primarily about family, a political activist, or merely a book lover supporting other book lovers, anything that does not fit inside of this image is carefully pruned out of their social media posts.

An author’s goal in self-branding, essentially, is to get more followers and therefore more readers, and further, to maintain those that they already have. This is accomplished by adhering to the readers’ expectations of them. For example, one reader was disillusioned with an author when she experienced a wildly different “self” online than on the page. In a Huffington Post article, reader Maddie Crum explains her aversion to Joyce Carol Oates’ lack of eloquence in her social media posts, describing Oates’ online persona as “everyone’s most condescending friend” (Crum 2015). Crum observes that the writing to which she is accustomed to reading from Oates is created through an artistic filter and reading her “dogmatic” posts creates a dissonance in Crum’s mind between the author’s narrative self and her social media self. In the end, Crum claims that this colored her perception and resulting indifference to the author’s following work. If an author neglects to create or mismanages his or her brand, presenting their image to the public on social media may be more detrimental than anything else. The image that the author presents to the world must adhere to some extent to the readers’ expectation of them if they are to utilize social media as a means of effectively marketing themselves. Readers and the authors with whom they communicate, however, can still feel more closely connected and enriched by their communication and sometimes friendship even if this friendship is not necessarily with the “real author.”
Through this curation of their “third self,” the author can acquire and maintain new fans and readers, generating “fan labor” from their followers which includes “tagging Facebook photographs, posting status updates on Twitter, and contributing to Wikipedia,” and overall accumulating word-of-mouth mentions (Marwick 2013: 195). The readers that authors interact with directly through their social media feeds and indirectly through their novels—or their third and second selves—widen the author’s reach, either through retweeting the author to followers that do not have a direct connection or through physical word-of-mouth recommendation. Self-branding in the case of authorial marketing techniques is widely encouraged by marketing departments at publishing houses, and hundreds of articles online give advice to authors just starting out on how to brand themselves, making most new authors assume that it is an invaluable skill. Other professionals disparage the idea of self-branding, either viewing it as beneath them or recommending that the author spend their time writing rather than marketing themselves on social media, such as Stephanie Bane in her commentary on author platforms, where she states that “if you’re a bestselling author…it’s worth it to spend real time and money creating and promoting content on Facebook. But for the rest of us, it’s not” (Bane 2014). Indeed, many of the authors interviewed by Laing in her study wondered if their time spent online promoting themselves or their novels was time wasted. The reality is a bit disappointing, but rather predictable: it depends.

Some authors excel in promoting themselves, such as Amanda Hocking and E.L. James, both of whom I refer to in Chapter 1. These authors utilized their personal blogs and fan fiction pages as resources as well as Twitter and other social media platforms. Others, such as Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian author of “The Alchemist,” whose work has been translated into English many times, did not use social media to begin their career but cite it as an essential and enjoyable
part of communicating with readers. Coelho claims that “my bonds with my audience have never
been stronger. Now I can really interact with readers,” due to the access provided by social
media and the internet (Crum 2015). I also discuss more fully Fredrik Backman—a Swedish
author who found his start in blogging and is now a devoted Twitter and Facebook poster—in the
following chapter. The authors who are inexperienced or apathetic to social media, however,
have an extremely small chance of building a large enough following to produce book sales. To
break this down one must imagine an author who has never had a social media account, or if they
have had one or two, have never been active on said accounts. One would have to assume that
they also do not have a large base of followers, and so would have to build their platform from
the ground up, having no knowledge of how to do this despite basic advice from their publisher’s
marketing department and the previously cited plethora of internet articles. They would have to
spend copious amounts of time learning how to do this, and therefore lose the time that could
have been spent writing. For a self-published author, maybe this would be worth it, having few
alternative avenues for cheap marketing. For traditionally published authors, however, including
and even especially those who do not speak the language or know the culture of their intended
audience, this might well be the waste of time that Laing’s subjects experienced. As Marwick
aptly states, “The problem is that self-branding, as a practical technique, is limited and will only
be successful for a slim sliver of the population, yet it is being advocated as a universal
solution…that can be adopted by anyone” (Marwick 2013: 203).

Self-branding can be a helpful, extremely productive technique for certain authors,
translated or otherwise, and for others it might turn out as an exhaustive and ultimately failed
experiment. So why is social media a main element in how I intend to break down my argument?
Because it is not merely utilized for marketing by way of self-branding or even for initiating
contact between reader and writer. Social media’s role, not just in improving the opportunities available to a translated author but in increasing their visibility and therefore their popularity, lies in the community that social media fosters—both between authors and between readers.

**Online Literary Community**
Translated authors’ access to social media and the internet—where many authors create their own websites—not only gives them an outlet to publish but allows them to market themselves and to connect with the reader. In addition, having a connection to the author on social media has allowed American readers to feel as though they know the translated author, if not to the same extent as an American author. Even if an author is not successful in branding themselves online, however, there is an undeniable benefit to the phenomenon of literary self-branding: authors have become commonplace on social media platforms, increasing their access to other authors and readers.

Online literary communities make the sharing of books and reviews a globalized process, as those who recommend or review books spread not only the author’s identity but the authors’ work and their opinions about this work. The voices reviewing novels are no longer restricted to literary critics or major newspapers and magazines—anyone and everyone can recommend a book to people across the world. Nancy Foasberg’s study on online reading communities portrays this when she claims that the internet “provides opportunities for many (although certainly not all) readers to connect with one another regardless of factors such as cultural or socioeconomic background, gender, reading level or geography” (2012: 34). By leveling the playing field, social media also makes it possible for authors of all levels and popularity to interact. A foreign author creating a relationship with a popular author, or merely a published American author, can mean a public recommendation or even a reference to an agent or
publishing house. In this way, both readers and authors create a community of sharing and recommendation, communicating across barriers and creating opportunities for lesser-known authors. Connections between readers and authors online are fostered on platforms such as Goodreads, Twitter, and Facebook. These platforms host author Q&As, giveaways, and announce appearances. Most importantly, however, they allow readers and authors to communicate with each other and practice the literary world’s most treasured form of marketing: word of mouth.

**Twitter and Facebook**
Social media, especially Twitter, connects professionals in the publishing industry to each other, offering a community online through which they can get advice and support. The previously mentioned study by Audrey Laing found that, out of all of the ways in which her subjects utilized social media, the most beneficial in their minds was their connection to other authors, as the online author community “developed as a byproduct of their marketing activities and interaction with readers on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter” (2017: 263).

Connecting with other authors is a way in which writers can gather advice on the process one must go through to get published, including how to deal with the press, readers, and other opportunities. From the interviews I conducted with a variety of editors, translators, and marketers from both translated and non-profit houses, I learned that publishing professionals do not look for potential fiction authors through social media. Instead, the endlessly interconnected nature of the publishing industry focuses on personal recommendations. The author community online encourages these recommendations in a way that disregards any sense of distant geography by bringing together authors who may never have met. According to testimonials from various authors including Amy Poeppel and Elyssa Friedland, the way agents find authors
is often through a recommendation from a friend, and the friends that one has and could have are widened considerably by the reach of the internet (Elliot 2018). And the majority of publishers, of course, only deal with agents, the exception being some Amazon imprints. The online author community will not get someone’s book published or translated, but it will allow them to make connections outside of America’s publishing hub of New York City. The word of mouth process that the literary world prizes is not just for readers but for everyone and everything, and the internet and social media bridge the disadvantage of distance.

One important thing to note is a potential change in this dynamic. In a *New York Times* interview with Ken Liu, translator of *The Three-Body Problem*, a Chinese science fiction novel by author Liu Cixin that I discuss in the following chapter, Liu suggests that the categorical denial of publishers and translators finding potential novelists online might change. Liu stated that the censorship of the Chinese government prevents many science fiction works from publication, which encourages him to search the “internet forums and social-media messaging sites like Weibo, WeChat and the self-publishing platform Douban” to find potential authors to translate (Douban is a literary social network, similar to Goodreads) (Alter 2019). Liu Cixin’s success has allowed Ken Liu to have a certain amount of power, and he has used that to utilize reader feedback as a source for translations. The publishers and translators with whom I spoke for this thesis denied and at times looked down upon the idea of finding authors online—Heather Cleary, Spanish to English translator of *Don’t Send Flowers* by Martin Solares and *Comemadre* by Roque Larraquy, among others, explained that when it comes to authors gathering a following online, “some writers have a big following and are also brilliant and some only have the followers,” implying that authors who are popular on social media are not always those who also write quality books. Ken Liu suggests, however, that there are some translators who do not agree
with this idea, and the appearance and popularity of authors on social media could increase in importance in the following years, including or even especially for translated authors.

For now, at least, the online reading community is a more reliable resource for translated authors than having translators find them online. Connections and support between authors do not need to be direct. So-called “Book Twitter,” an interactive subset of Twitter where authors of all genres, races, and genders communicate, give advice, and support each other, is full of recommendations from authors with long follower lists. These authors often support the books that have caught their attention even if they do not know the author. Stephen King, who has 5.7 million followers on Twitter, is known for this, having often supported lesser known authors on Book Twitter. Since he joined Twitter in 2013, he has provided a long string of recommendations to his followers, the majority of which relate to King’s own genre, mystery thrillers. King’s approval of these books and advertisement of them to the consumers who are assumedly already interested in the subject follows Book Twitter’s goal of authors supporting other authors.

As social media platforms are dominated by those who boast millions of followers, getting a retweet from someone like King can mean widespread—if temporary—fame. For example, a retweet from renowned author Neil Gaiman, who has 2.7 million followers, of the Petersfield Bookshop’s tweet about an empty bookstore resulted in the same bookstore receiving a large increase in attention and revenue. The bookstore later tweeted “What a night! We have been completely overwhelmed in a good way. We have 1,100 new followers. We have loads of online book orders. We have over 300 messages, many asking after books” (Steven Morris 2020).
In this case, a tweet from a single popular personality led to hundreds of sales and further visibility to potential customers. Having an author or celebrity “find” you, your business, or your book on Twitter and retweeting a post or tagging you is viewed as finding the proverbial pot of gold. It is the equivalent of doing all the work required to build a following and an image in a millisecond. For someone like Neil Gaiman or Stephen King, whose 2.7 million and 5.7 million followers respectively are primarily book lovers, to repost an author or series who might have a following of less than 1,000 will dramatically change that author’s standing. As authors interact online, meeting and connecting with each other through mutual followers or friends, the option and opportunity for their work to be discovered by more prominent figures such as King and Gaiman increases. This reveals the necessity of self-branding as false—it is a useful tool for those who know how to use it and can certainly increase sales by creating a connection between author and audience, but it is not essential. Even for authors who do not exist on social media, the process of book recommendations on Twitter and Facebook allows for authors to accumulate “to be read” piles more diverse than they might if their publisher was handing them over for back cover blurbs, and forward these recommendations to their audience. As I analyze in the case study regarding *The Third-Body Problem*, not only popular authors but celebrities, influencers, and book reviewers of various backgrounds attribute to the proliferation of word of mouth that social media allows.

Reader to reader recommendations also exist on Twitter and Facebook, however Goodreads.com and other book review sites offer an alternative platform that focuses almost exclusively on the reader experience.
Goodreads and Other Book Review Sites
Goodreads.com is one of the only currently existing social platforms that focuses exclusively on books and reading. Although alternative platforms exist such as LibraryThing, Booklikes, Bookstr, and others, Goodreads, at 90 million users, is one of the oldest and most populous websites of its kind. Because of this, it is an important place for authors to go when searching for visibility, and an essential element in digital word of mouth. Established in 2007, Goodreads acquired around 650,000 users during its first year and grew quickly in the following years until Amazon acquired the site in 2013 (Arrington 2007). Otis Chandler, co-founder of Goodreads, observed that even though the majority of the site’s members were friends of friends when he first released Goodreads, as it began to gain traction a large amount of its newly acquired members were book bloggers. These bloggers, who had accumulated their own following through their personal websites, did not have the means to connect with other readers and build a wider community. According to Chandler, “Goodreads was just a better way of doing what they already wanted to do, and they adopted us in droves” (Nerula 2014).

The inherent power of Goodreads lies in its recommendation database. According to Foasberg’s study—published around the time of Goodreads’ high point in 2012—reading blogs were a replacement and/or an addition to physical book clubs for many users. In Chapter 1, I describe how book blogs appeared on the internet, contributing to the decline of magazines and digitally connecting book lovers before Goodreads appeared on the scene. Like book clubs, these blogs allowed readers to recommend and review books as well as build personal relationships with authors, who often had their own blogs. According to Foasberg, these blogs became a kind of “virtual book club” which fulfilled some of the same functions as physical book clubs “but may focus more on the books than they do on the social relationships” (2012: 33). When many of these bloggers moved to Goodreads, they were able to reach a larger audience and expand their
community, both locally and globally. Goodreads has upwards of 10,000 groups, or book clubs, on its website, 66 of which are tagged as “International.” “The International Reading Club,” which emphasizes reading books that were originally published in a non-English language, and “Star Readers,” a bilingual book club originating in Ecuador are notable because they display the international reach of Goodreads and encourage members to read translated literature. Although book blogs certainly still exist, there was a shift during this time from physical book clubs to book blogs and from book blogs to social networking, which allowed readers to participate in groups that focused on books and centered around a subject in which they were personally interested. It also opened up the range of a book club, making it possible for one’s book club members to be international.

Like Twitter and Facebook, Goodreads has literary influencers that can further expand one’s literary interests and lead readers toward books. One becomes a popular Goodreads blogger mostly through number of reviews—the most popular reviewers on Goodreads have written upwards of 1,000 books each—as well as interaction with followers. Personal connections allow increased trust in recommendations and reviews. For example, in a Goodreads interview with the most popular Goodreads reviewer in 2017, Emily May, who, as of 2020, has more than 228,000 followers, claimed that when she first made an account with Goodreads, she built followers by making “friends all across the globe” and putting likes and comments on each other’s posts (“An Interview with the Most Popular Reviewer on Goodreads” 2017). May became popular through making personal connections with followers and building their confidence in her opinions. Having a central network such as Goodreads that gathers a large and international group of people gives readers the opportunity to share their book recommendations
and discuss their favorite books without having to create their own site or search the web for a blogger that coincides with their interests.

The idea of the global reach of Goodreads that May highlights is supported by the international book clubs I mention above as well as by Elizabeth Chandler, co-founder of Goodreads. Chandler comments that even in the early months of Goodreads, a friend of hers in Switzerland followed the reviews of and connected with a person in Brooklyn on Goodreads whom they had never met in real life (Nerula 2014). People from around the world can communicate and share book recommendations across borders on the site, and therefore a popular Goodreads blogger can have a foreign work recommended to them by one of these global contacts. This is especially true in our globalized world, in which translation technology and the commonality of the English language simplifies communication between people online. The influence of popular reviewers on the reading choices of their followers adds to the effect of Goodreads’ global reach. One of May’s reviewers commented on the above article, “anytime my husband buys me a book as a gift he first goes to Emily’s Goodreads to see what she thought of it because he knows it’s important to me” (“An Interview with the Most Popular Reviewer on Goodreads” 2017). Goodreads is a site that gives readers power to communicate with each other and recommend books on a global level. By cutting out the necessity of literary critics, non-professional reviewers are able to widen the reach of word of mouth and increase the popularity of a novel. Now, this is even more true as many Goodreads reviews “get syndicated and appear on Google books, USA Today, the Los Angeles Public Library, WorldCat, Better World Books and other locations” (Verrillo 2018).

Authors can take advantage of this worldwide network in various ways. For one, there is a way to create an author account that is connected to the author’s novels. In this case, when a
reader searches for a novel on Goodreads, they can also click on a link that leads to the author’s Goodreads account, which often has links to the author’s website and other social media accounts. A Goodreads author can also link their blog or website to their account, in which case any blog post will simultaneously be posted on Goodreads. In addition, authors can write reviews for other books. This feature makes the site similar to Twitter and Facebook because authors often promote and make connections with each other in this way on all social media platforms. Goodreads differs from other social media platforms in the realm of author communities, however, because writing a review not only supports another author but makes the reviewer more visible, which can entice authors to support each other. Other author functions on Goodreads include Q&A Groups, Book Giveaways, Live Author Chats, and Ask the Author sessions. One noted success was self-published novel *Bared to You* by Sylvia Day, which, two months after a Goodreads giveaway in March of 2012, was picked up by Berkley Books, which cited the books’ 2,500 Goodreads reviews as a major reason for picking up the book. Goodreads also offers cheap advertisements that are seen primarily by avid readers, which is helpful both for publishers and self-published authors. A case study conducted by Senior Marketing Manager at Harper Perennial found that even though less people viewed an ad for a book on Goodreads than the more popular site, People.com, 31 percent more people actually clicked on the ad. This is attributed to the fact that Goodreads has a narrower target market than other social media sites.

Although these Goodreads functions can be helpful to both readers and authors, some critics have stated that Goodreads has declined since its purchase by Amazon in 2013. For example, the Book Giveaway function was altered in January 2018, requiring both publishers and authors to pay $119 to giveaway their own books, and $599 to appear on the premium giveaway page. According to Angela Lashbrook in a 2019 article, several publishers with whom
she discussed Goodreads saw this change as something that made promotion on Goodreads “difficult-to-understand and expensive…which privileges large publishers with huge budgets and makes it harder for indie authors and publishing houses to break through the noise” (Lashbrook 2019). With this change a once-popular promotion activity became exponentially less profitable and discouraged publishers and authors from using Goodreads for promoting their books.

Lashbrook also points out the problem of scam reviews, with negative reviews sometimes originating from “trolls” who have not read the book but might dislike the author for some reason—one author told Lashbrook that he knew the reviewers hadn’t read his book because it hadn’t even been released yet when the negative reviews began. On the other hand, positive reviews can also be fake, with services like AppSally, which “promises ‘real, legit and non-incentivized’ reviews for the low price of $40 for 20 reviews” (Lashbrook 2019). Lashbrook writes that users are overall disappointed by Goodreads’ lack of improvement in the years since its inception particularly its “ugly design and poor functionality” (Lashbrook 2019). Goodreads’ apparent monopoly has allowed it to stagnate in the last few years, making the site less of a useful resource for readers and authors. Improvements such as a filtration system for fake reviews and a redesign of the site’s appearance could boost its reputation and make it a better resource for its users.

Other websites, such as Book Marks, a similar site to Goodreads sponsored by Literary Hub, as well as the websites mentioned at the beginning of this section, have tried to break Goodreads’ monopoly to limited success. Book Marks, which has a cleaner-looking site and improved search function, is more similar to sites like the movie review engine Rotten Tomatoes than to Goodreads. This is because it pulls its reviews from reputable magazines rather than users, making it less of a social networking platform and more of a secondary review site. A potential
competitor in the market, Bookshop, was released in January 2020. Like Book Marks, this site will be less social networking-based—in fact, Bookshop intends to link to Book Marks for its reviews—but it portends to exist as a support to local bookstores and independent publishers and therefore the reigning competitor against Amazon, Goodreads’ owner. Going even further to combat the idea that Bookshop would be acquired by or connected to Amazon in any way in the future, “the company’s corporate documents state that it will never sell Bookshop to Amazon or any top U.S. retailer” (Rosen 2019). Bookshop acts as a middleman between small bookstores and readers, as store owners can create accounts and sell and ship books from their store through online purchases. Similar to Goodreads, authors can create accounts and link to their novels on Bookshop as well as their social media accounts. Unlike Goodreads, authors on Bookshop “can earn a 10% commission on sales made” through click-throughs on their Bookshop account or social media page, according to the website’s author instruction manual. Although Bookshop does not fill the same needs as Goodreads since it lacks the user review function, it does allow recommendation lists for any user, attributing to word-of-mouth marketing, and is apparently “working to build a network of publishers, authors, bookstagrammers, celebrity book clubs, and other media sites to target socially-conscious online consumers who are not yet buying their books online,” according to its website.

Bookshop can benefit translated literature because small bookstores are more likely to sell and promote translated literature. In fact, Fredrik Backman’s bestseller, A Man Called Ove, which I discuss in the following chapter, was heavily promoted by small bookstores which are partly credited for the Swedish novel’s success (Alter 2016). In addition, both Book Marks, the review site to which Bookshop novels will be linked, and Bookshop’s own site, feature the translated
books section prominently, making both sites promising resources for translated authors and publishers in the future.

One of the reasons why Goodreads has become such a large and international community, connecting people across the world, is because of its first-mover advantage, having been one of the first of its kind to appear on the market back in 2007. Regardless of its issues, Goodreads has built up its network over 13 years, an impressive figure when considering Facebooks’ mere two-year lead on it. With Bookshop’s youth, it remains to be seen whether it will become a valuable resource for both the visibility of authors and the interaction of readers across the world.

In comparison to book blogs and physical book clubs, online reading communities such as Goodreads and the seeming goal of Bookshop give readers a central website through which they are able to connect to people across the world and get deeper insight into books they love and more recommendations for books they want to read. These websites also give authors a platform through which they can connect directly to their target market. With this in mind, I will describe in the following chapter the ways in which translated authors and the literary influencers or translators that have promoted them navigated the American publishing landscape.
CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDIES
In the last decade translated novels by authors such as Elena Ferrante, Stieg Larsson, Liu Cixin, and Fredrik Backman have appeared on the literary scene, changing the makeup of translated fiction in America. In this chapter, I will look at what the books have in common, analyzing who the authors are, readers’ perception of these authors, and the way they choose to define themselves online. By presenting this information I will display how these works, which seem different on the surface in their origin and marketing, achieved their success. In addition, I will research what the reader searches for when he or she attempts to make contact with the author, and what happens when they are unable to achieve this contact. The continued invisibility of the author is created by the reader—if the reader does not make the effort to discover the author’s identity and intention then they become irrelevant to the reader’s interpretation of story, or as Barthes suggests, they “die.” The reader’s actions when he or she searches for the author are an attempt to combat that invisibility, and a representation of the author’s importance to the reading and interpretation of the book. I chose these specific works to study because they provide a glimpse into the variety of ways in which an author can gain visibility and popularity despite or because of how the original cultures impacted the author’s success.

The Neapolitan Novels
Elena Ferrante

Elena Ferrante is, by all accounts, an unusual case. First of all, she (assuming she is a woman) rose to fame after her translation into English and her American book release, while most translated authors first gain popularity and fame in their own countries and/or win multiple awards before they find their way to American best-selling shelves, if at all. Second, throughout her work as a novelist, she has remained completely anonymous—not only in her image but in her identity, as “Elena Ferrante” is a pen name. When it comes to the invisibility of the author,
Ferrante has purposefully shielded herself from the eyes of the public. Apart from her identity as a native of Naples, Italy and as a mother, no information has been shared about her life.

Ferrante’s first novel, *Troubling Love*, was published in Italian in 1992, but was not translated until after her sequential novel, *The Days of Abandonment* (Original: 2002, English: 2005), was made into a movie in 2005. The Neapolitan tetralogy, her most popular series of novels, was originally published in 2011, and translated in 2012. The quick translation was largely due to her already established connections in American publishing. Ferrante was only moderately well-known in her native country, Italy, when her tetralogy was first translated into English. Despite her long bibliography of titles in both Italian and English, Ferrante did not win any awards for the Neapolitan tetralogy in Italy and has not won a literary award in the country since 1993. Her first American literary award, the Best Translated Book Award, was awarded in 2014 for *Story of a New Name*, the second novel in her Neapolitan tetralogy. The Best Translated Book Award is moderated by *Three Percent*, the online literary magazine of Open Letter Books, funded by the University of Rochester.

Multiple sources have suggested that the misogyny ingrained in Italian literary culture caused Ferrante’s lack of recognition in her native country, both in the general popularity in her home country and the aforementioned absence of Italian literary awards. In a *New York Times* article about “The Ferrante Effect,” Anna Momigliano details Italy’s literary misogynistic tilt by interviewing female novelists in Italy about the changes they have seen in the literary world since the explosion of Ferrante’s work (Momigliano 2019). Momigliano starts by revealing that “literary fiction has long been considered a man’s game” in Italy, demonstrated by women’s lack of representation in Italy’s literary awards. Only 11 women (15 percent) have won the Strega Prize, Italy’s most prestigious literary award, in 73 years—an award for which
Ferrante has been nominated twice but never won. For comparison, the winners of the Man Booker prize and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, which can be considered the Strega’s equivalents in the U.S., have been around 40 percent and 32 percent female, respectively—certainly not equal, but a notable improvement in comparison to the Strega.

Ferrante’s shortage of recognition before her popularity in the U.S. further supports Momigliano’s claim. Before the rise of so-called “Ferrante Fever” in America, Ferrante was, though not completely unknown, far from a literary sensation. In an interview with Sophia Seymour, a British writer based in Naples, Seymour observed that most natives of Rione Luzatti, the Naples neighborhood in which the Neapolitan tetralogy is set, had not heard of Ferrante or any of her novels until after 2015—which was after the rise of “Ferrante Fever” in the U.S.—when HBO adapted the Neapolitan series into a TV show. This implies that “Ferrante’s books did not become a sensation in Italy as they did in the United States” until after the TV show publicized it (Momigliano 2019). Although Ferrante was already recognizable to Italians involved in the literary scene, and often disparaged by some, her books did not reach their current popularity until after the release of this show—as well as the influx of literary “tourists,” foreigners visiting the town to see where the series is set (Montesi and Aragoneses 2014). This is not surprising, as on screen adaptations of books are often “more attached to commercial interests” and tend to increase the reading of a book leading up to its release (Caselli 2019). However, the Neapolitan tetralogy’s popularity in the U.S. implies that the novels were capable of becoming successful on their own merit, and therefore additional factors contributed to her lower recognition in Italy—namely, discrimination based on gender, and lack of a face and voice to act as a stand-in for the author.
Momigliano’s subjects claim that times are changing as women rise in the genre, however, and many of them attribute this success to Ferrante’s paving the way. Before Ferrante’s popularity it was difficult for women to gain mainstream recognition in Italian markets. The number of women on Italy’s bestseller list has doubled since 2017 and female writers now feel more comfortable writing about “women’s stuff… storytelling, emotional resonance and issues like sexism or gender roles.” Ferrante’s foray into international markets allowed her to escape the barriers she faced in Italy and gain widespread success, including in her own country, opening the door for other women as well. One other reason why Ferrante may not have been able to gain the level of fame in Italy as she has in the U.S. until after her story was represented by a television show is her lack of any kind of image in Italy. I will address below how Ferrante’s resistance to fall into the modern paradigm of utilizing the internet and her choice to maintain her anonymity has prompted some Italians to attempt to find the “real author” behind the text, initiating a widespread search for her identity. The level of success that Ferrante has achieved in the U.S. can partly be attributed to her American cultural representative, Ferrante’s translator, Ann Goldstein, who assisted in the promotion of the tetralogy in the U.S. Her presence, apart from the Italian literary misogyny outlined above, is a notable variation from the series’ release and subsequent audience reaction in Italy, and may represent one of the major differences that caused Ferrante to become so much more popular in America than she was in her native country.

The various “investigators” who have invested notable amounts of time and money into discovering her identity are examples of Italians who have attempted to find the “real author” behind the text. One such “investigator” is Italian journalist Claudio Gatti, who theorized that Ferrante was Anita Raja, an Italian translator and editor, after investigating Raja’s financials and
movements (Gatti 2016). In the New Yorker article, “The Unmasking of Elena Ferrante,” Alexandra Schwartz claims that this obsession with discovering her true identity is misguided at best and damaging at worst, stating that “there are so few avenues left, in our all-seeing, all-revealing digital world, for artistic mystery of the true kind—mystery that isn’t concocted as a publicity play but that finds its origins in the writer’s soul as a prerogative of his or her ability to create” (Schwartz 2016). This idea that book marketing based around the promotion of the author, namely online, is nothing more than a gimmick, or a “publicity play,” and should not influence the success of the book is common among literary critics, editors, publishers, and translators. Ferrante herself has a disgust with what she called in an anonymous email interview “the incessant self-promotion and banal chatter required of authors” online (Ferri and Ferri 2015).

There is a notable dichotomy in the literary world between those who reject self-branding marketing as gimmicks and those who treat it as necessary to promote a book. Those on the side of Ferrante and Heather Cleary, whom I introduce in Chapter 3, sometimes view Ferrante’s lack of online identity as authentic. According to author and editor Carol DeSanti, Ferrante is “writing away from the cult of self-publicity and onto a new and interesting path to authenticity” (“Why Readers Love Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels” 2017). DeSanti suggests that Ferrante is authentic because she remains anonymous; that standing by her choice to be anonymous to readers is part of her authenticity. Curiously, the root of the word “authenticity” comes from the word “author,” meaning, simply, “coming from the author.” Technically, anything that comes from the author is authentic in and of itself. As I outline in the previous chapter on self-branding, however, authenticity is a broad term that changes depending on the viewer. Some, such as DeSanti, might view Ferrante’s choice to remain anonymous as authentic because it came from
her, and it was what she deemed best for herself. Others, such as Claudio Gatti, claim that she is tricking her readers by hiding her identity and is therefore inauthentic. It seems as though even without an online brand, there remains a dichotomy of opinions between the authentic and the inauthentic.

Ferrante, of course, has every right to remain anonymous, and Schwartz’s break down of the inanity and inappropriateness of Gatti’s investigation and publication was, if harsh, deserved to some extent. However, whichever side of this dichotomy one falls on, it is evident to me that readers’ curiosity and need to recognize and know an author is inherent in the reading experience. The widespread need to know Ferrante’s identity is part of that need and desire, along with the notable interest in the author’s English-language translator, Ann Goldstein, who has served as an editor at The New Yorker since 1974. Goldstein’s foray into Italian translation began in the 1980s when, after taking a few classes in the language, she visited Italy and fell deeper in love with the language and the culture. After her first published translation of the short story “Chekov in Sondrio” by Aldo Buzzi in 1992 in The New Yorker, Goldstein continued to translate magazine articles and books until she began translating Ferrante’s works in 2004 (Maloney 2016). Since then, Goldstein has become something of a stand-in for Ferrante.

In The Translator’s Invisibility Lawrence Venuti claims that “the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (2004: 2). In other words, the translator’s job is to be invisible, to bring the author to the front and remain in the background. With Ferrante, however, as there is no author to take their place in the foreground, Goldstein has come forward. Goldstein has somehow been able to “achieve celebrity status” through her work translating Ferrante’s novels (Maloney 2016). Instead of the translator’s name appearing only inside the book, books
translated by Goldstein have her name on the front cover, a name which, according to Robert Weil, “is now gold” when accompanying a translated title (Maloney 2016). In addition, when searching for “Elena Ferrante” on Google, the face of Goldstein pops up, further cementing that “Elena Ferrante’s face in the Anglophone world today is that of her translator, Ann Goldstein” (“Ann Goldstein Wanted (Really, Really Wanted) to Bring Elena Ferrante to America” n.d.). Questions from readers go to Goldstein, not the author, and readers ask her to sign their books. This example portrays how Venuti’s definition of the translator changes when the author is not a visible to the reader.

This is important when considering authorial visibility because visibility is a two-way street: the reader plays as much as if not more of a role than the author. When the author is not visible, the reader goes somewhere else to find the image behind the text. The example of Ferrante and Goldstein is even more relevant when considering Steven T. Murray (who goes by the pseudonym Reg Keeland), the translator of the *Millennium* series by Stieg Larsson. Murray has experienced little in the way of media coverage since the books rose to popularity in the late 2000s. Objectively, *Millennium* has been more popular in the U.S. than the Neapolitan tetralogy—as of May 2018, Ferrante’s tetralogy had sold more than 2 million copies in the U.S., while as of March 31, 2015, the *Millennium* series had sold more than 25 million copies in the U.S. (“In a Rare Interview, Elena Ferrante Describes the Writing Process behind the Neapolitan Novels” 2018), (Begley 2015). One would assume that the most popular series would result in increased popularity for the translator, yet Larsson’s translator is barely recognized.

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2 Despite claims that this lack of coverage stems from Murray’s embarrassment of his work—reportedly using a penname because he “was so upset by MacLehose’s [the editor’s] tinkering that he asked that his name be removed and a pseudonym be used instead”—the fact that the translator runs a blog he has named “Stieg Larsson’s English Translator” makes me doubt the verity of his attempt to stay out of the limelight.
Goldstein has achieved a higher status as a translator not because the books she translated were more popular than any other translated novels in that timeframe, but because readers wanted to put a face and a history to a story that had none. Even though, theoretically, Larsson is even more difficult to connect with than Ferrante, having passed away in 2004 before his books were published in any country while Ferrante has done multiple interviews through email, Larsson has a face, a name, and a history. Therefore, readers can utilize what they know about Larsson’s life, which has been widely publicized, to analyze his work or, as Booth suggests, to “admire the creations even more than previously” (Booth 2005: 86). Without this access, Ferrante’s readers have attempted to do the same with Goldstein; lacking a face for a loved book has driven readers to find another.

So, do readers need a face to love a book, or are they satisfied with Schwartz’s take, that Ferrante’s anonymity allows writer and reader to “meet on an imaginative neutral ground, open to all,” not separating the writer from the reader but indeed bringing them closer together to reach a different realm of mutual comprehension? (Schwartz 2016). One might use the case of Ferrante’s anonymity and simultaneous popularity to prove Schwartz’ beliefs. However, select readers’ rejection of this anonymity and attachment to discovering her identity and/or attaching themselves to her translator present the possibility that an image—not necessarily that of an author—representing a novel is necessary for its success. Even if this idea is not true in every case, it is still an important element in the business of selling books. It is possible that Ferrante is merely an interesting exceptional case, an author without self-publicity who rose to fame despite her lack of promotion of her own work. The variety of responses to Ferrante’s popularity, however, indicate that there are many elements that contributed to the success of her novels,
including the presence of Ann Goldstein, who provided a face and background for readers who had none.

**The Three-Body Problem**  
**Liu Cixin**

*The Three-Body Problem*, written by Chinese author Liu Cixin, was first published in China in 2008 but was not translated into English by Ken Liu until 2014. Notably, *The Three-Body Problem* was the first translated novel to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015. As I outlined in [Chapter 1](#), literary magazines are a common steppingstone that authors utilize to build their bibliography and at times begin longer novels. This was the case with Liu Cixin, as *The Three-Body Problem* itself was first published in *Science Fiction World*, a popular Chinese science fiction magazine, in 2006, and was subsequently published as a full-length novel two years later.

China has been more successful than the U.S. in maintaining literature in its general interest magazines and literary magazines, as largely distributed magazines such as *Duzhe* and *Qingnian Wenzhai* continue to publish fiction at the same or an increased amount. However, the Chinese magazine industry is currently struggling; “as people’s lifestyles have become more diverse… [literature and art magazines] face a decline in circulation” (“Magazine Publishing in the Chinese Mainland | Encyclopedia.Com” 2020). Like the U.S., Chinese authors looking to be picked up by publishers are moving online from physical magazines. In fact, the largest online Chinese literature website, China Literature, made $1.2 billion in revenues in 2019. According to Post Magazine, “Chinese entertainment companies scour online literature platforms for the next *Game of Thrones* or *Langya Bang*” (China Literature Limited 2019). Although *The Three-Body Problem* was picked up after its publication and following popularity in a physical
magazine due to its early creation in 2006, the attitude toward online literary content is important
to mention in light of Ken Liu’s activity online, which I mention in Chapter 3.

*The Three-Body Problem* was published in English only two years after the first of the
Neapolitan novels hit American bookshelves. The two authors have approached visibility
differently, as Liu Cixin has seemingly not hid anything about his life from his readers while
Elena Ferrante has revealed little. However, Liu Cixin is not active online, possibly due to his
residence in China, as China restricts its citizens from accessing foreign social network sites such
as Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads, that are otherwise popular among authors and readers in
the U.S. and around the world. In fact, the influence of the communist government is relevant to
Chinese fiction in more ways than merely the author’s access to online platforms; the
government often censors the writing of Chinese authors to prevent any content that defies the
government. According to the American Library Association, the Chinese government’s General
Administration of Press and Publication takes interest in and has the ability to censor any books
that deal with:

- works and literature concerning any former or current leaders of the party or the nation,
  and selections concerning the circumstances of their lives or work;
- topics which deal with the “Cultural Revolution”; and
- topics which deal with any significant historical matters or important historical figures in
  the history of the Chinese Communist Party (Torrance 2018)

Liu Cixin faced this censorship when his editors suggested that he move a pivotal scene
in the novel—that of the Cultural Revolution—and bury it in the middle of the book rather than
putting it in the introduction to avoid attention from censorship officials and downplay its
importance in the novel. In the English version of *The Three-Body Problem*, however, Ken Liu noticed the anachronism of the Cultural Revolution scene in the middle of the book, and recommended moving it to the beginning for clarity, saying that he felt the scene was the story’s “natural beginning” (Alter 2019). According to Alexandra Alter in her *New York Times* article, when Ken Liu suggested this change to Liu Cixin, the author immediately agreed, saying that he originally intended for it to be in that order. Like Ferrante, who fought against Italian misogyny to find fame abroad, Liu Cixin succeeded despite hardships such as government censorship in his country (Alter 2019). Although unlike Ferrante’s series, Liu Cixin was wildly successful in China far before his entrance into American markets, the variation between the Chinese version of *The Three-Body Problem* and the American version displays how the original government under which it was published affected readers’ perception.

One might wonder why science fiction has been allowed to flourish in China despite the often-controversial subjects that authors include in their novels. In fact, the rise of science fiction in China has been largely encouraged by the Chinese government as it has been connected to technological innovation in the real world. In Neil Gaiman’s nonfiction essay collection, *The View from the Cheap Seats*, he recounts a conversation he had with an official from the communist party in 2007 (one year before the Chinese publication of *The Three-Body Problem*) about the change in the government’s attitude toward science fiction. Apparently, on a tour of all the major American technology companies, the employees told the Chinese officials on the tour that they all read science fiction, making these officials assume that there was a connection between the genre and technological innovation (Gaiman 2016). Therefore, increased support for the genre has steadily grown in the country.
Chinese science fiction became popular in the U.S. in part due to how Liu Cixin’s success “opened the floodgates for new translations of Chinese science fiction” (Alter 2019). Liu Cixin’s part in its popularity was reinforced by international attention toward the exponential growth in China’s economic and technological advances. The communist party’s censorship and restrictions of Chinese contact with the outside world only served to increase interest in the country and the culture. This boom in Chinese science fiction spread to the U.S. not only due to the success of *The Three-Body Problem* and recommendations from celebrities, which I will discuss below, but also due to an already existing interest in the largely hidden culture and history of China. As European translations increased during WWII and Russian translations boomed during the Cold War, the U.S.’ fraught relationship with China and the rising superpower’s influence over the world’s technological progress has ushered the popularity of Chinese science fiction into the U.S.

The opening of the floodgates that Alter mentions can of course be attributed to the merit of the author, however recommendations from various celebrities were also an essential element in the novel’s success and its subsequent influence on the rise of Chinese science fiction in America. Although *The Three-Body Problem* was only mildly successful in the U.S. when it was first translated, in October 2015, Mark Zuckerberg picked the book for his “Year of Books,” followed by Barack Obama endorsing the novel in *The New York Times* (*The New York Times* 2017). Both men typically endorse nonfiction and memoir, however *The Three-Body Problem* caught the attention of both. This brings us to the subject of celebrity recommendations and how these celebrities can become a representation of the novel as Goldstein was for the Neapolitan tetralogy. We see in Zuckerberg and Obama’s endorsements the power of celebrities and the speed with which an online recommendation from a celebrity can rocket a book to the top of the
charts with very little effort. As I previously mentioned, word of mouth is the bread and butter of the budget-short book marketer, and online word of mouth, especially from a person with a certain amount of reach, is tantamount to mainstream literary success.

A Nielsen Books & Consumers study from 2015 shows that around 5 percent of readers discover books mostly through online recommendations, accounting for around 33.8 million books based on current statistics of books sold in the U.S. per year (Nielsen BookScan 2016). Although the study does not differentiate between celebrity recommendations and other online recommendations, it is evident that many readers do find book recommendations online, and Obama and Zuckerberg represent a sector of online recommendations that proliferate book fans more quickly than any publisher advertisement. Their reach, on Facebook particularly, is wide: as of February 2020, five years after the end of Zuckerberg’s “Year of Books,” the Facebook page still has more than 671,000 followers, while Zuckerberg himself is followed by more than 116 million people. Going solely by Facebook numbers, Obama has more than 53 million followers. According to BookScan, a book promoted by a well-known celebrity can overperform by at least 700 percent. Obama alone caused a 2,300 percent increase in A House for Mr. Biswas in 2019 when he posted his Summer Reading List on Facebook (the percentage change of sales for the Three-Body Problem after his endorsement are unknown) (“Celebrity Book Clubs Spurring Book Sales, The NPD Group Says | Markets Insider” 2019).

One Buzzfeed article claims that, due to the decrease in newspaper and magazine readership, readers no longer have easy access to book reviews or book recommendations; as “people simply don’t know what to read anymore…they don’t actively seek out books when there are options like television and the internet” (Donnelly 2019). As authors utilize the internet to reach readers who no longer subscribe to magazines, readers’ lack of magazine reviews and
recommendations cause them to flock to celebrity book recommendations. For this reason, celebrity book clubs are the gold mine of the book publisher. The celebrity book club utilizes the prized word of mouth valued even by those who look down upon most book marketing and it is a relatively cheap way to reach an extremely large number of readers.

Just as Elena Ferrante was difficult for readers to connect with, the Chinese government made it difficult for *Three-Body Problem* fans to connect with Liu Cixin. Although the image and personality of the book’s author was not essential to the popularity of the book, the actions of the celebrities who promoted the book provided its readers with spokespeople. Zuckerberg and Obama, like Goldstein in the case of Ferrante’s tetralogy, were able to act as stand-ins for the author and to give readers a stronger connection to the book and a trusted voice of recommendation. Thus, the existence of celebrities playing what was previously the role of the magazine, telling their thousands or millions of “subscribers” who to read, made the anonymity of the author irrelevant to the sales of the novel. The readers maintained their need for a face to attach to the novel, however in this case that face was a highly recognizable one that served as the ultimate word-of-mouth marketing. In addition, the trend of American interest in Chinese technological advances and veiled cultural practices made it more possible for *The Three-Body Problem* to become successful.

**A Man Called Ove**

**Fredrik Backman**

Like Liu Cixin, Swedish author Fredrik Backman started his debut novel, *A Man Called Ove*, translated by Henning Koch, as a series of short stories, or more accurately, blog posts. Also, similar to *The Three-Body Problem*’s translator, Koch lacks attention, despite being an author himself. There are no interviews available by Koch concerning *A Man Called Ove*, however
Backman has given several interviews to various websites including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The story of Backman’s first and, so far, most successful novel started when Backman’s wife commented on one of his colleagues’ blog posts when he worked as a freelancer at *Café*, a Swedish magazine. The post described the outburst of a man called Ove at an art museum ticket booth, which only ended when the man’s wife calmed him down. Backman’s wife compared the author to this man, highlighting Backman’s temper and outbursts. Backman then started writing for *Café* about his life as “Ove.” As the posts got more popular and readers encouraged him to turn his writing into a full-length novel, Backman eventually came up with his novel, *A Man Called Ove*, which was rejected by numerous publishers in Sweden. Backman finally sold *A Man Called Ove* to Forum, a Swedish publisher (Alter 2016).

Although *A Man Called Ove*, being a single novel rather than part of a series, has not sold nearly as many copies as the *Millennium* series or the Neapolitan tetralogy, according to BookScan it has sold approximately 2.8 million copies worldwide and more than 700,000 in the U.S. as of 2016, when it became the fifth biggest seller in the U.S. (Maher 2017). Backman is also the only author on this list with a notable presence online including more than 35K followers on Instagram, 34K on Twitter, and 25K on Goodreads. He does speak English, though his social media posts are a mix of English and Swedish. Backman’s social media as well as his website are spaces for him to share his life and experiences. Although he does share his appearances and upcoming books, a lot of his content, especially on Instagram where he holds the most of his followers, is focused on his family and his life, including parenting moments and preferred sports teams. Many of these posts are accompanied by reader’s comments, which vary between comments relating his Instagram posts to his writing and readers expressing their enjoyment in hearing about his life:
These comments display how readers perceive Backman’s posts as additions to his novels, as if he were giving them more of his writing, relating Backman’s “third self”—the representation of the “real author” that authors create for online platforms—to his “second self,” melding them together.

In particular, the user in the third example equates Backman’s Instagram posts to journal entries, which are generally thought of as an incredibly personal kind of writing. Not only does this user appreciate the posts, but he or she believes in its authenticity—that his “third self” represents what Booth calls the “real author.” In an interview with Joanna Demkiewitz, marketing director for Milkweed, she states that for authors, “social media is a space for performance, so authenticity is sometimes questioned, so when an author can show or perform authenticity, it is desirable to readers.” As I have reiterated throughout the previous chapters, authenticity is a subjective trait, on which many people disagree. If an author’s followers perceive him or her as authentic, however, readers feel as though they have reached the “real
author.” Readers are invested in authors’ lives, especially in how it relates to their works. Whether or not Backman’s social media is truly authentic is subjective, however, it is beneficial for him if his readers perceive it as such. The success of Backman’s debut novel is attributed mostly to word of mouth, but the origin and the continued success of his book and his writing stems from his writing online and his correspondence with fans and reviewers. This has influenced how he acts as a writer online and how he presents himself to his fans, allowing his image on his personal social media pages to define himself in the eyes of the reader.

From studying popular translated fiction in the last decade originating from various countries and cultures, I have created a picture of the successful translated author as one who, in some way, has created buzz in the U.S. Each one of these books and/or series, regardless of the author’s participation in its marketing, has had a spokesperson to represent it online. Even though self-branding is not necessary to sell a book, having a person for the reader to connect with, whether it be translator, celebrity, or author, is incredibly important to build reader interest. I attribute this to the novel’s traditional approach to marketing: word of mouth. Readers trust the words and opinions of others for the books they read, and in the technology era, where images are a constant presence and influencers online attract millions of eyes and attention, consumers often need an influencer—a maker of popularity—attached to a product in order to buy it. Without a face, such as in the case of Ferrante, readers are pushed to not only investigate the person behind the book but to replace that face with another: the translator. For Liu Cixin, Obama and Zuckerberg became the face of The Three-Body Problem, using their influence to spread the book through American shelves. Backman created his own image through his activity online, and his connection to and identification with the main character of his most popular novel made readers recognize him within his writing.
These case studies also present some of the reasons why translated literature is essential in every country. First, it allows novels and authors censored or otherwise disadvantaged in their native countries to be read and appreciated in the way they were meant, both by readers and by literary critics. Ferrante and Liu Cixin are only two examples of many authors who have faced criticism or censorship in their own countries and found success in others. Second, it gives the ethno- and lingui-centric American literary consumers and publishers insight into the culture, history, and lives of people across the world, allowing diverse perspectives on the same work and increasing cultural understanding. The case of Liu Cixin is important for publishers to consider because it presents how public interest in a culture favors translated literature from that culture. Although translated literature from all cultures and languages is valuable, profit-centered publishing houses can further guarantee a profitable venture if they focus on translations from countries that are in the public consciousness. This, in addition to the author’s and marketing department’s focus on author visibility, can help return the publisher’s investment. Elizabeth DeNoma, editor at Amazon Crossing, claims that the ease of communication provided by the internet makes it possible for publishers to build buzz more quickly and easily than ever before. With this ability, both publishers of translated authors and the authors themselves, who once existed outside of the possibility of contact or knowledge, can connect directly with readers as they never have before. This connection can be through an online presence or through American stand-ins such as Ann Goldstein and Barack Obama, who help authors connect with readers, bridging the cultural as well as the geographical and lingual distances.

Although the experiences of the previously mentioned authors and their writings are partly based on chance, new technological developments in social media translation and a growing base of authors utilizing social media, as well as a growing base of celebrity and online
book clubs, are creating a variety of resources for foreign authors and translation publishers. The online element has made it so that word of mouth is an international, online process rather than something only proliferated among friends and in-person.
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION
In the essay following his controversial work, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?” Wayne C. Booth calls Barthes’ idea of the death of the author an “assassination attempt,” writing, “How could anyone ever believe that the author’s intentions about a work are irrelevant to how we read it?” (W. C. Booth 2005: 75). According to Booth, knowing an author, including who they are and what they meant when writing a book, allows the reader to get a deeper understanding not only of the author but of the work. To Booth, the idea of the purity of the “objective” author is damaging to literary theory because it leads to readers misreading the text as literal instead of considering the intention of the author. Although the author is inherently invisible to their reader during the reading process, the emergence of social media and other digital communication services reveals the creator of a novel to their readers via the authors’ profiles, making this authorial objectivity—or invisibility—that Booth derides near impossible. The translated author, however, is more invisible than any other as their access to readers online is limited, and even with an online presence they can fail to reach visibility. I have presented through my research the various ways in which readers search for the “real author” when dealing with translated authors that lack digital representation, and the many equivalents of this seemingly fictional character that exist in the literary world, displaying how many in the literary world share Booth’s rejection of author invisibility.

This is evident in how Ann Goldstein took the place of Elena Ferrante when communicating with readers. The audience tends to look for a connection to the “real author,” even when none exists. This desire for connection is further demonstrated in the comments on Fredrik Backman’s posts, which imply that readers view his personal words on Instagram and other social media platform as extensions of his writing. Readers search for intertextuality between an author’s work and online posts, trying to discover the “real author” by combining
their second and third selves. Although not every foreign author has an online presence to rival Backman’s, there are a number of authors, both domestic and foreign, who have utilized similar tactics.

Many other writers may not be active online themselves but have accumulated stand-ins to provide readers with a personal connection to the novel. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, or Barack Obama have become these stand-ins for some authors, while for others a literary influencer takes this place of literary interlocutor or “recommender”—a place which once fell to magazines such as The New Yorker. Now, however, as the ubiquity of the internet lends higher relevance to those who have gained popularity online, both celebrities and digital “influencers” like Emily May, a prolific Goodreads reviewer introduced in Chapter 3, have become part of the book recommendation process. As with The Three-Body Problem, one recommendation with millions of witnesses can do more than a thousand individuals using word of mouth. This is leads to great success for an author when utilized by celebrities respected for literary choice and, to a lesser extent, by social media influencers. These influencers can also be ambassadors of culture and language, crossing the barriers that foreign authors face. In addition, the online reading community in which literary influencers are active also fosters online book forums and clubs that allow readers from across the world to communicate and share their interests, causing word of mouth to cross state and country borders.

Despite the connections that have been made, both between authors and readers and between various authors, the culture of the publishing industry does not always accept the value of the author’s visibility. When considering the author’s visibility as a factor of the reading process and the popularity of certain novels, the publisher’s attitude toward this visibility affects both the success of the author and that of the publishing house. Literary culture’s current attitude
toward author visibility began during the shift in the ’80s and ’90s of large publishing houses valuing profitability over literary quality. This change made corporate censorship an everyday fact of publishing and dramatically split corporate houses from independent book publishers in their literary missions. Corporate censorship was and remains a large factor in the static growth of translated fiction in the U.S. as costs of subsidiary rights, translations, and other peripheral costs of publishing a translated book make the requirement of profitability almost impossible to guarantee for large publishing houses. Corporate censorship drove many editors to smaller houses or drove them to create their own independent companies to free them from corporate influence, allowing them to publish books that may deserve a voice but are not guaranteed a profit. This is undoubtedly a valuable and important element of the publishing world, however, the funds that these publishers receive are often too low to finance the breadth of novels that deserve translation and too low to finance a sufficient marketing budget.

Corporate censorship had a large part in the creation of current independent publishers, at the same time creating a culture with an indifference and, at times, antipathy toward marketing and advertising tactics, which in recent years has been directed toward social media marketing. Although independent publishers have marketing directors and encourage authors to make their own social media accounts and websites, there are those who criticize advertising the author’s identity and personal information. For example, Simon and McCarthy claim that “the older way entails a passionate sense of responsibility, which builds a bridge of trust between writers and readers,” while the so-called “marketing model” causes “a profound distrust for that very kind of relationship between a book’s creators, or between them and its readers” (2009: 219). In place of relying on social media marketing, many publishers, particularly small independent publishers,
value word of mouth over other strategies, believing in Elena Ferrante’s claim that “if the book is worth something, it should be enough” (Europa Editions).

As translated authors almost exclusively publish with independent publishers that lack the will or budget for marketing, they often lose the opportunity to connect with readers, which can result in lower sales. This creates a cycle of translated books not selling well because independent publishers do not have the budget for and/or do not view online marketing as particularly valuable, leading to larger houses not picking up translated books because they don’t sell—leading directly to authors and their agents going to independent houses. I am not criticizing or valuing one type of publisher over the other; as I have previously stated, both offer opportunities and obstacles, and both are complicit in this cycle that causes translated fiction to remain at the bottom of the pile when it comes to books that are actually being sold. And, of course, there are dozens of other reasons why translation was pushed to the bottom of this pile—most of which have to do with English becoming the lingua franca of the late 20th and 21st century and America’s ethnocentrism. These are facts of our current world, and not something that the American publishing industry is in any position to drastically change; the marketing and promotion of authors, however, is more within their reach.

Ultimately, the author’s decision to remain invisible or reveal themselves to the audience is their own. But a decision to remain invisible often leads to the reader searching for ways to shed light on the source of their fictional world. Were publishers to consider authorial visibility in regard to translated work, they may be able to better comprehend some of the ways in which they can support and promote translated authors. This means lending more support to translated authors in their marketing endeavors and preventing marketing from being the first thing to be
cut out of the budget. It also means that the “indie” literary culture of looking down upon social media marketing as a cheapening of the literary process must stop.

These findings are not universal; there will always be exceptions and books, translated or otherwise, can and have become famous without the help of author involvement or involvement from any other outside player. This is possible because not all readers have an inclination to know the author or have a particular connection to the novel apart from its story, Alexandra Schwartz exemplifies this in her *The New Yorker* article, which suggests that the invisibility of the author creates an “artistic mystery” (Schwartz 2016). In addition, even though authors and publishers can utilize social media platforms to benefit them through self-branding, the effectiveness of this is heavily debated and largely depends on the author or influencer and the image they project. Although these same influencers have mostly taken the place of general interest magazines that readers once trusted for book recommendations, an influencer’s recommendation is almost impossible to ensure, barring personal or publisher connections.

These findings remain relevant, however, as many readers and authors have stated that they have found value in social media’s ability to create a community out of the reading world in a globalized way, and translated authors have benefited from the closeness that one enjoys in a small world.

There is much research to be done on translated works published in the U.S. The case studies that I have presented are by no means all-encompassing, and many more deserve this level of analysis. The notable lack of attention in the U.S. for translated works has prevented this further research from being conducted. Multiple articles and reports in the last decade have been conducted in Britain and other European countries on or including research on books translated into English and released in the U.K., including the 2018 Diversity Report: Trends in Literary
Translation in Europe, and a 2017 report from Literature Across Frontiers (LAF). This report revealed statistics close to the oft-quoted 3 percent in overall publications translated into English, however the amount of translations for literary publications had increased to around 5 percent. But these sources refer to books published in the U.K., not in the U.S., and therefore are not accurate portrayals of the American publishing landscape.

American resources, such as Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility*, first published in 1985, are decades old, though an updated version of *The Translator’s Invisibility* was released in 2004 and 2008. There are important and useful resources for researchers to mine such as Open Letter Book’s translation database, which records a wealth of data on literary translations in America, including most translated novels since 2008, their author, translator, publisher, price, and language/country of origin. This, along with the Three Percent website run by Open Letter editors are, without doubt, great resources, and the work of Chad Post, its founder and director, has shed an incredible amount of light on translation in the U.S. However, publicly available and well-funded reports on this subject are few and far between.

For translated authors and foreign literary agents to understand and take advantage of online platforms in the U.S., there must be a basis of contemporary research from which they can draw. Although the compilation of academic research on author visibility and presence on social media is much larger and more comprehensive, there is room for improvement on primary research consulting directly with translated authors and readers to analyze their relationships. Interviews with prominent authors as well as emerging authors active in online writing communities in addition to surveys and studies on reader’s interpretations and interactions with writers would be an extremely useful resource for further study in this field.
As I outlined in the introduction, literary translation helps share cultural capital and create cultural understanding and acceptance between nations. The noted lack of translation in the U.S. detracts from the nation’s cultural capital by decreasing its literary diversity, encouraging ethnocentric ideas about academic and creative works. This thesis studies how the globalization brought on by the internet in the past two decades has affected and how it potentially could affect the publishing world and literary translation in America, and how author visibility online can cross that cultural barrier and reach people on the other side of the world. Further research on this subject is relevant in the long run because it will allow non-English speaking authors to amplify their presence and “translatability” via social media, helping to decrease the literary ethnocentrism of American readers and publishers.
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