

Personal and political

Maureen Freely's work translating Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk's novels has taken her on an eventful and life-changing journey. Aletta Stevens reports



Aletta Stevens is a freelance Dutch translator and proofreader. She writes articles in Dutch and English, and has a passion for literature.

How rare is it for a translator to have attended the same school as the author whose work she is translating? Maureen Freely did not know Orhan Pamuk when she was a pupil at Robert College in Istanbul, although she was born in the same year, 1952, and confesses to dating his brother. Neither they nor their contemporaries could have known then that Pamuk would be the first Turkish citizen to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006 and that Freely would become the best-known English translator of his work, as well as his loyal friend and campaigner in the West. The whirlwind decade in which this took place meant a huge upheaval in Freely's life, and represented a life-changing experience, which she is still trying to process.

It began when Maureen was eight and her father, the US physicist and author John Freely, was offered a teaching post in Istanbul at a time when America was Turkey's most loyal ally. Maureen attended the lyc e connected with the Western-style Robert College, an elite school for both Muslims and non-Muslims, founded in 1863 by the wealthy American Christopher Robert and the philanthropist Cyrus Hamlin. Pamuk, by contrast, was born in the capital, the son of a bourgeois Turkish family. He went on to study architecture at Istanbul Technical University, but left early to devote himself to writing. After graduating from the Institute of Journalism at the University of Istanbul in 1976, his first novel was published in 1979. He has since won numerous literary prizes, and



Freely approached Pamuk in the 90s

some of his books have caused considerable controversy. It was with his 1990 novel *The Black Book*, however, that his reputation in Turkey and the West was consolidated.

A collaborative relationship

It was also *The Black Book* which set Freely thinking that she might be able to improve on the English translation, which she did not find fluid enough. Building on her childhood exposure and the compulsory Turkish lessons at Robert College, she eventually mastered the language, guided by her familiarity with native music and

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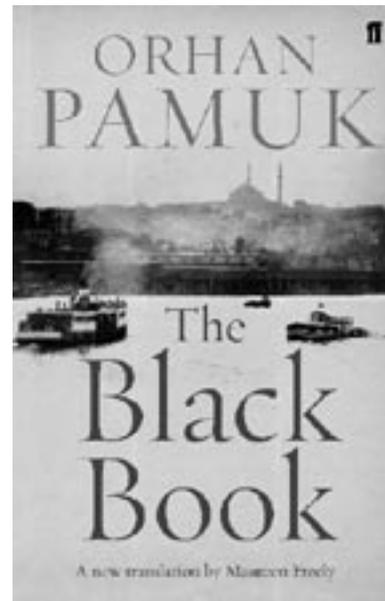
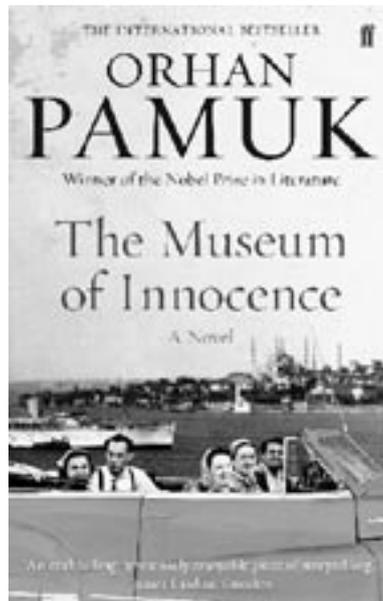
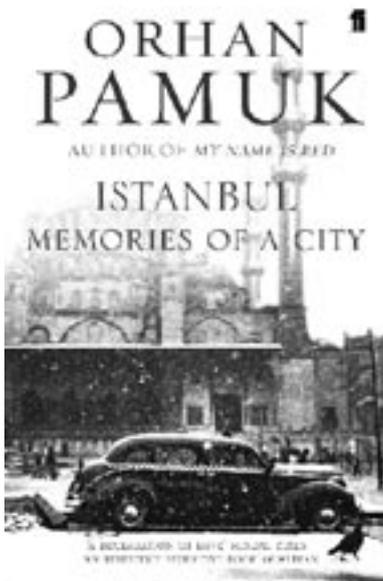
song. She claims to this day to translate more by ear than by eye.

By the 1990s, Freely was an established novelist, and in this capacity felt she would be able to recreate the so-called 'narrative trance' which makes Pamuk's novels so hypnotic. This required an awareness of the characteristics of the language, so different from English. For example, Turkish has one word for he, she and it; a preference for the passive voice over the active voice; no verb to be or to have; an abundance of verbal nouns ('the having-been done unto'); a different word order (the end of a Turkish sentence has to go to the front in English); and strings of word clusters, which can read as rather disjointed when translated literally. Finally, Turkish has undergone a language revolution since 1928 when Atat rk, the founder of modern Turkey, made language reform an important part of the nationalist programme, purging Turkish of words of Arabic and Persian origin (at the time 60% of the vocabulary), causing a shortage of root nouns.

Boldly, Freely sent a draft translation to Pamuk for comment. They met and went through the draft, sentence by sentence, each arguing their case. They often had heated debates, but always overcame their differences for the good of the translation. Thus began a long collaborative relationship, as a result of which translations into other languages have often been based on the English translation.

Political controversy

Meanwhile, Turkey was slowly changing from the closed country in which Freely had grown up – with its state-controlled broadcasting and lack of tourism – through the military coups of 1971 and 1980, to a country which made a bid to become a member of the European Union. As Pamuk's international reputation grew, he began to comment on Turkish



Orhan Pamuk's novels have won a worldwide audience

politics in foreign newspapers and to speak out for the Turkish minorities. When provoked by a Swiss journalist in 2005, he is reported to have said: 'Thirty thousand Kurds have been killed here, and a million Armenians. And almost nobody dares to mention that. So I do.' By referring to the 1915 mass killings in this way, he broke a longstanding taboo. As a result a complaint was filed by a lawyer belonging to a group of ultra-nationalists vehemently opposed

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to Pamuk's ideas regarding freedom of expression.

Freely, now a secretary for Amnesty International and a member of English PEN, had been closely following the political situation over a number of years. She had started to go back and as a journalist had written articles about the country. When the news broke that Pamuk was to be prosecuted for insulting Turkishness and summoned to attend a criminal trial, Freely went to Istanbul as one of his supporters. Her vivid description of the scenes inside and

outside the courtroom gave us an impression of the horror and emotion of this momentous event.

Targets for harassment

Fortunately, the charges were dropped, but Freely now began to make Pamuk's story known through her newspaper columns. She also helped him to establish himself in Western literary circles and actively put his name forward for the Nobel Prize. In taking this stance, she was subjected to harassment, and her parents received threatening calls. Over the years, writers, academics

and journalists have been assassinated in Turkey by the far right, for political or religious reasons. Some 100 intellectuals have been brought before the courts for voicing their critical opinions, according to statistics compiled by the Turkish Human Rights Foundation. Freely and her friends were particularly shocked when in 2007 Hrant Dink, the Armenian-Turkish Editor-in-Chief of the bilingual Turkish-Armenian newspaper *Agos*, was shot dead outside his office.

Pamuk decided to leave the country, taking up a teaching post at Columbia University, lecturing in Comparative Literature and Writing. Against his will, he was now labelled a dissident. The pressure from being an exile and the desire to be loved by his country became too great and he decided to return. The case against him was reopened: on 27 March 2011 he was found guilty and ordered to pay 6,000 liras in compensation. Considered a death target, he was placed under 24-hour guard by the Islamic Government.

Pamuk still lives in Turkey. He is the country's best-selling writer, with over seven million copies of his books sold in more than 50 languages.

FURTHER READING

The following Orhan Pamuk novels are available in translation by Maureen Freely:
Snow (2004)
Istanbul: Memories and the City (2005)
The Black Book (2006)
Other Colours: Essays and a Story (2007)
The Museum of Innocence (2009)
 Freely also translated and wrote an introduction to a true story about the Armenian massacres: *My Grandmother: A Memoir* (2008) by Fethiye Çetin, the Turkish lawyer acting for Hrant Dink and his family, and a member of the Committee to Promote Human Rights. Turkey features in a number of her novels, including *Enlightenment* (2008).

This article is based on a talk entitled 'Orhan Pamuk: Art, Politics and Translation' given on 20 September at the British Royal Literary and Scientific Institution in Bath. The speaker was Maureen Freely, Bath-based author, translator and Professor of English in the University of Warwick Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies.