

Gained in Translation

Thoughts on the process of adapting a novel from Welsh to English

By Rebecca Roberts, author of *Y Defodau* and *The Rituals*

A product of English-speaking parents and the Welsh-medium education system, like many of my peers, from my earliest years I became adept at translation and translanguaging. If my A-Level results were any indication of ability then I showed a flair for translation from being a teenager – but it wasn't a role I coveted during my school days. I was going to be an author! Nonetheless, a shortage of textbooks written in Welsh meant that the ability to read a book in English and write an essay on the subject in Welsh became a skill we all acquired quite unthinkingly, perhaps effortlessly. The bilingual brain is an amazing thing.

“I spend six hours a day translating and proofreading, so you would be forgiven for thinking that translating my own fiction would be a bit of a busman's holiday”

After a decade spent working for various bilingual organisations and schools here in north east Wales, I realised that I had reached a point where I straddled the line between Anglo and Cymreig so easily that I was equally comfortable in both languages. I passed my translator's association exam, started freelancing and eventually took the plunge and began working as a translator for a national childcare organisation. My annual output is approximately half a million words. I spend six hours a day translating and proofreading, so you would be forgiven for thinking that translating my own fiction would be a bit of a

busman's holiday... yet *The Rituals* marks the publication of my third translated novel (or adapted novel, I should say – but more of that anon).

The process of translating your own work of fiction is rather different to the process of taking factual material and writing it in another language. In my day job the aim is to convey the message and tone of the source text clearly, while creating a document that doesn't read like a translation. (Those unfortunate enough to have waded through masses of text unlovingly churned out by Google or Bing Translate will understand what I mean by this.)

Translating fiction is a far more complicated, rewarding and enjoyable endeavour. Yet the same challenges remain – how to convey idiom, metaphor, song and rhyme in a language where a linguistic equivalent may not exist? How to take the rhythm and music of one language and rearrange the structure of the sentences so that prose flows equally naturally in the target language? But 'translation' is more than that, because embedded within a language are centuries of culture, history and tradition, and a large part of adapting *Y Defodau* into *The Rituals* was finding a way to tell the story for an English-speaking audience whilst retaining the things that make the story quintessentially Welsh. How to convey the loaded meaning of COFIWCH DRYWERYN as graffiti on a wall, or to explain that a Cylch Meithrin is more a community institution than a mere Welsh-language playgroup? How to convey the beauty of 'Daw eto haul ar fryn', which became an informal national moto during the pandemic? How to depict the experiences of bilingual individuals navigating a landscape where your choice of language can be a political act, a sign of community, a link to the past, a power, a weapon, a privilege, a burden or a door to another world?

“Taking a book written in a minority language and writing for an English-speaking audience meant more than an act of literal translation”

Language is a complex entity. Taking a book written in a minority language and writing for an English-speaking audience meant more than an act of literal translation – it meant re-interpreting and re-framing many aspects of the text for a new audience; which is why most translators call their books 'adaptations' rather than translations.

My first two adaptations of my YA novels, #Trouble and Rock on the Road (originally #helynt and Curiad Gwag) were fairly straightforward as they drew heavily upon the Anglo-American rock music scene, which an English-speaking reader would be familiar

with, and the pithy, angsty narratorial voices seemed to work equally well in both languages.

This is not always the case. I have three additional novels I have never been tempted to adapt for publication, despite writing large sections of two of these novels in both English and Welsh. Some characters just seem to convey themselves better through a particular language, and attempts to get them to change their mother tongue results in inauthentic-sounding prose. At least, it feels inauthentic to me, who knows the characters better than anyone else; and as I'm the one adapting the text it is important that the story and the way it is told feels 'right' to me. The old artistic ego – if my name is on the cover then I want it to be the best it possibly can be. I'm sure my editors give greater weight to things such as commercial viability and marketability when deciding whether or not to commission an adaptation; but for me the 'feel' of a book is justification enough for deciding not to proceed. I have several completed books that I've set aside for this very reason.

However, I had a hunch that the *Y Defodau* would work well in English, so thanks go to Jon Gower for suggesting it in his *Nation.Cymru* review and getting the ball rolling. Although it has been a more challenging process than my previous books, I am very glad that I undertook the work.

Adapting *Y Defodau* into *The Rituals* gave me the opportunity to see the story through a new lens. The tone of the text has shifted subtly, largely due to the perspective of a new editor and an invitation to stand back and examine *Y Defodau* six months after its publication.

As any author will know, writing a book is a long and exhausting process. By the time *Y Defodau's* release date rolled around I had absolutely no desire to sit and read the paperback from cover to cover, to experience the book as a reader rather than an author. I had already read it dozens of times as a Word document and a pdf and paper proof. I am proud of *Y Defodau*, but just as a surfeit of a favourite food can kill the desire for it, over-familiarity with a story can make it difficult to do more than a cursory skim read.

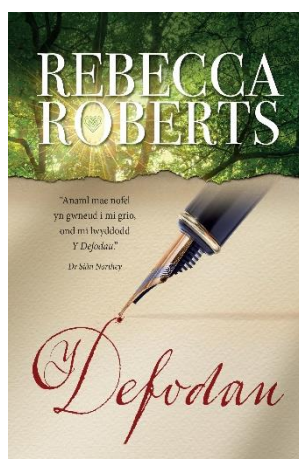
“A new language gave the text a freshness that allowed me to examine it critically and analytically”

The process of adapting *Y Defodau* into *The Rituals* required me to engage with the story once again, but doing so in a new language gave the text a freshness that allowed me to examine it critically and analytically, to see places where more exposition was required or where a character's motivations weren't sufficiently apparent.

Rebecca, Honno's editor (yes, our e-mail chains are confusing) encouraged me to ignore self-imposed restraints on length and detail and to go deeper into the story than ever before, interrogating my use of certain techniques, questioning my rationale and helping me to see the book through a reader's eyes. Rebecca's feedback was an invitation – one comment in the margin simply read 'more, more of this!', and it was liberating to be able to add extra scenes and chapters that shed further light on the characters, making their relationships feel more alive. Writing the extra scenes felt like a reunion with old friends.

I'm sure that every author re-reads their own work eventually and sees a missed opportunity or remembers a section or paragraph they regret deleting. Writing *The Rituals* gave me the chance to tell the story a second time, bringing more joy and light to the book.

I enjoyed revisiting Gwawr's story, and I hope readers will enjoy getting to know her as much as I did. I urge those who've read *Y Defodau* to give *The Rituals* a try – I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the adaptation.

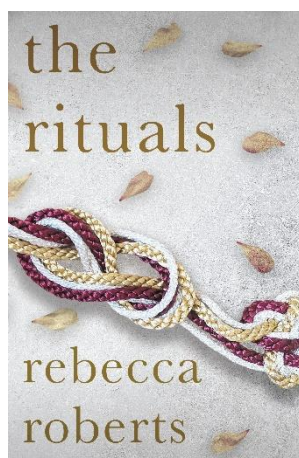


Y Defodau

Rebecca Roberts

Price £10.99
Publisher: Honno
Publish Date: 20 June 2022
Language: Welsh
Type: Paperback
ISBN: 9781912905645

Available from your local bookshop or [online](#)



The Rituals

Rebecca Roberts

Price £8.99
Publisher: Honno
Publish Date: 28 September 2023
Language: English
Type: Paperback
ISBN: 9781912905867

Available from your local bookshop or [online](#)



AUTHOR: Rebecca Roberts has worked as a teacher, development officer and translator. She grew up near the sea in Prestatyn and still lives there with her husband and two children. She writes in Welsh and English, and is the author of seven novels. She won the Children and Young People category in the Book of the Year Award 2021 and the Tir na n-Óg Award 2021 with her first novel for young people, #Helynt. *The Rituals* is her first English language novel with Honno Press.

Other Books by Rebecca Roberts:

Mudferwi (2019)
Eat.Sleep.Rage.Repeat (2020)
#Helynt (2020)
Chwerwfelys (2021)
Curiad Gwag (2022)
#Trouble (2022)
Mwy o Helynt (2023)

Find out more about Rebecca Roberts:
<https://rebeccarobertswriter.weebly.com>



Honno Welsh Women's Press was set up in 1986 by a group of women who felt strongly that women in Wales needed wider opportunities to see their writing in print and to become involved in the publishing process. Our aim is to develop the writing talents of women in Wales, give them new and exciting opportunities to see their work published and often to give them their first 'break' as a writer.

Honno is registered as a community co-operative. Any profit that Honno makes is invested in the publishing programme. Women from Wales and around the world have expressed their support for Honno. Each supporter has a vote at the Annual General Meeting.

For more information please visit our website www.honno.co.uk or email us on press@honno.co.uk.

Honno

D41, Hugh Owen Building, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 3DY

www.honno.co.uk