



THIS LITTLE ART

2017, journalism/essays, non fiction, essays
400 pages (75,000 words)

by [Kate Briggs](#)

A witty, refreshing and demystifying book for anyone interested in translation, writing, language and expression.

An essay with the reach and momentum of a novel, Kate Briggs's *THIS LITTLE ART* is a genre-bending song for the practice of literary translation, offering fresh, fierce and timely thinking on reading, writing and living with the works of others. Taking her own experience of translating Roland Barthes's lecture notes as a starting point, the author threads various stories together to give us this portrait of translation as a compelling, complex and intensely relational activity. She recounts the story of Helen Lowe-Porter's translations of Thomas Mann, and their posthumous vilification. She writes about the loving relationship between André Gide and his translator Dorothy Bussy. She recalls how Robinson Crusoe laboriously made a table, for him for the first time, on an undeserted island. With *THIS LITTLE ART*, a beautifully layered account of a subjective translating experience, Kate Briggs emerges as a truly remarkable writer: distinctive, wise, frank, funny and utterly original.

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

This Little Art
English, Fitzcarraldo Editions

AVAILABLE MATERIAL

English pdf

REVIEWS

"A philosophical meditation on the perils and pleasures of her vocation, one she compares to Robinson Crusoe's efforts to fashion a table – an act of 'laboriously remaking an existing thing!'"

New York Times

"Her engaging memoir unfolds in unnumbered, untitled, unstructured short chapters: a pillow book on the translator's love affair with words and writers. ... Briggs can sound like a visionary."

Marina Warner, London Review of Books

"This beautiful book, part memoir, part love letter, gives a glimpse of the art of translation, as Briggs recounts her struggle to render into English Roland Barthes's late lecture courses, *La Préparation du roman* and *Comment vivre ensemble*. ... Lucid and engaging, Briggs's book is essential, not just for translators, but anyone who has felt the magic of reading."

Publishers' Weekly, starred review

"Precise, perceptive thinking on the essential yet alarmingly under-discussed issue of literary translation. Briggs, translator of two volumes of Roland Barthes' lecture notes, inquires into the practice of translation as a personal pursuit, as a business, as a philosophical problem, and - above all - as an art. The best essays transform one's sense of their subject; I can't imagine leaving the pages of *THIS LITTLE ART* unchanged."

Nathan Goldman, Literary Hub

"Kate Briggs's THIS LITTLE ART shares some wonderful qualities with Barthes's own work – the wit, thoughtfulness, invitation to converse, and especially the attention to the ordinary and everyday in the context of meticulously examined theoretical and scholarly questions. This is a highly enjoyable read: informative and stimulating for anyone interested in translation, writing, language, and expression."

Lydia Davis, author of 'Can't and Won't'

"In THIS LITTLE ART, a digressive, scholarly, absorbing 350-page essay, Kate Briggs roams across the vast terrain – practical, theoretical, historical, philosophical – of translation. Briggs's writing is erudite and assured, while maintaining a tone that is modest and speculative; this paradox encapsulates something of the essence of translation, which is always contingent (no translation is ever definitive) yet also – for its time at least – authoritative. ... There have been many books written about translation, but few as engaging, intriguing or exciting as Kate Briggs's exploration, with its digressive forays, infinite self-questioning, curiosity, modesty and devotion to the concrete – the very qualities, as it happens, that distinguish the translator's labour."

Natasha Lehrer, Times Literary Supplement

"Kate Briggs barreled through my life. Briggs doesn't reduce, doesn't crush or skirt any aspect of the art of translation. THIS LITTLE ART is both a perfect introduction and an astonishing meditation."

Harvard Book Store

"I like Kate Briggs' definition, in her marvellous essay THIS LITTLE ART, of translation as a way of "attending to what is delicate and particular"."

Clare Pollard, Modern Poetry In Translation

"THIS LITTLE ART is generous, sentimental and needle-sharp, fierce and hesitant, flawed and perfect. All of it, all at once. This, in the end, is Briggs' dazzling conceit: This Little Art enacts what it is describing, the way it is written echoing what is written. We walk through her mind, we see her hover over thoughts, question herself, stop, start again. What could be read as misplaced self-effacement (Is this what I mean?, she wonders) is actually bold and brilliant: the gloriously digressive, curious, self-questioning, unapologetically subjective act of translation. In Briggs' pauses, negotiations, vacillations, queries and many varied answers we see a translator at work – a writer at work – deliberating, deciding, stopping the run, making art."

Bella Bosworth, Litro

"Not so much a demystification as a re-enchantment of the practice of literary translation, that maddening, intoxicating 'little' art which yokes humility and hubris, constraint and creativity – in Briggs's passionate telling, you can practically see the sparks fly."

Deborah Smith, translator of Han Kang and winner of the Man Booker International Prize in 2016

"A sympathetic and enchanting guide to the art of translation."

Digressions & Impressions

"For Briggs, translation means a great deal: communication, desire, restorative justice, a basic act of caring. [...] she writes in cubistic, subject-changing bursts and leaves rhetorical questions hanging open for unnerving lengths. [...] Briggs is adjusting a power relationship [...]. She is using novelistic means - what many would consider the big art - to give an interior life to Bussy and all others who practice the so-called little one, including, obviously, herself."

Ben Ratiff, 4Columns

"THIS LITTLE ART is a generous and wonderfully subversive re-orientation of a discourse often limited to notions of fidelity and failure, but also a celebration of translation's embeddedness in life ... The stories of two women translators –

Helen Lowe-Porter, who first brought Thomas Mann into English and made his reputation abroad, only to later be maligned by a new generation of critics, and Dorothy Bussy, André Gide's devoted friend, translator, and correspondent for over thirty years – endow the book with a passion and depth of character to rival a novel."

Madeleine LaRue, Music & Literature

"There is no other book on translation quite like THIS LITTLE ART. It is a triumph and a joy; an ever-shifting kaleidoscope trained on a process which is too often invisible; and a reminder that choosing between one word and another is the basis not only of translation, but of working out what we think about the world."

Review 31

"[A] wonderful book ... deeply, velvety rich and utterly life-affirming."

Manchester Review of Books

"THIS LITTLE ART reads like a jubilant tribute to that vital impulse that marks the reader's attempt to engage with the pleasure of the text at the very basic level of language, a delight that derives from the minutiae of writing's unfolding, the joy of seeing both how contingent language is and yet how absolutely necessary it appears in the works of writers and their translators ... Briggs has written a testimony about the possibility of reading a text so intensely that one feels tempted to recreate it."

Carlos Fonseca, BOMB Magazine

"An awareness of the linguistic layers between character and narrator, writer and reader, writer and reader and translator, signals the adventure promised in Briggs's text ... [Briggs's] playfulness includes riddles ('What rhymes with Barthes?'), everyday epiphanies, and a game of word 'tag' as chapter titles are carried over. We may find Briggs sitting comfortably alongside contemporary writers exploring the boundaries of non-fiction: Maggie Nelson, Mary Ruefle, Rebecca Solnit."

Sohini Basak, MAP Magazine

"THIS LITTLE ART maps the current landscape and disputed territories of literary translation with exquisite precision. With xenophobia on the rise across the western world, the complex art of translation has achieved a new level of relevance for English-language readers and Briggs has crafted an excellent exploration of the reasons why."

Idra Novey, author of 'Ways to Disappear' and translator of Clarice Lispector

"Just as there is something intimate about the act of translation – the translator is inhabiting the text being translated, reading it as closely as possible – there is an intimacy to THIS LITTLE ART, Kate Briggs's wonderfully evocative essay on translation. We feel the author is talking to us from across the table about the most important things – novels, language, beauty, art – but in a confidential, friendly way, in a way that makes us listen more closely. Translation, Briggs shows us, is a conversation – between the author and translator, between the translator and reader – and it is this conversation that keeps literature alive. I hope this book will produce not only more readers appreciative of the art of translation, but also more translators willing to engage in the courageous and daunting task of true close reading, that most intimate act we call translation."

Charlotte Mandell, translator of Maurice Blanchot, Jonathan Littell and Mathias Enard

"THIS LITTLE ART is rich, full of insightful anecdote and surprising analysis. But what sticks with me, what I have learned and retained from this teacher who was never my teacher, from this book that was never a textbook, is a vivid sense of how often the normal moves of translation critique miss almost everything that is worth noting about the "little art" they seek to elucidate, especially when they forget the importance of pace, when they disregard the fact that the writing-again that is translation is also a writing-*anew*, and when they ignore the motivations, affect, and singularity of individual translators."

"Briggs does a compelling job of demystifying this world [of translation], hidden to most and often unsung ... THIS LITTLE ART is curiously structured ... this informality lends it added warmth."

Buzz Magazine

"In THIS LITTLE ART, Kate Briggs looks at the "everyday, peculiar thing" that is translation, testing it out, worrying at its questions. She deftly weaves her recurring threads (Roland Barthes, Crusoe's table, 'The Magic Mountain', aerobic dance classes) into something fascinatingly elastic and expansive, an essay - meditation? call to arms? - that is full of surprises both erudite and intimate, and rich in challenges to the ways we think about translation. And so, inevitably, to the ways we think about writing, reading, artistry and creativity, too. As a translator, I'm regularly disappointed by what I read about translation - it feels self-indulgent, irrelevant in its over-abstraction - but THIS LITTLE ART is altogether different. It comes to its revelations through practicality, curiosity, devotion, optimism, an intense and questioning scrutiny, as the work of a great translator so often does."

Daniel Hahn, translator of José Eduardo Agualusa and winner of the International Dublin Literary Award in 2017

"Though it does not present itself as a memoir, a how-to guide, or a scholarly monograph, THIS LITTLE ART derives its magic precisely from being all of these and more: gifting us not only with a genre-bending work of imaginative criticism, but also a fitting metaphor for all that the work of translation is, and can be."

Theophilus Kwek, Asymptote

"Briggs interrogates and celebrates the art of translation. She wears her erudition lightly in this highly readable essay that makes intriguing connections and raises more questions than it answers. Urgent and pertinent questions that challenge us as readers, writers and translators and offer much food for thought."

Ros Schwartz, translator of Tahar Ben Jelloun, Georges Simenon and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

"A compelling, philosophical exploration of the art and experience of working with and between languages."

Words Without Borders



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KATE BRIGGS

Kate Briggs is the translator of two volumes of Roland Barthes's lecture and seminar notes at the Collège of France: *THE PREPARATION OF THE NOVEL* and *HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER*, both published by Columbia University Press. She teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam.