

# NYRB and the Classics: In Conversation with Edwin Frank

EDWIN FRANK, CATERINA DOMENEGHINI

In the fall of 2024, NYRB Classics celebrated its 25th anniversary. Since its launch on September 30, 1999, the series has published over 500 titles of world literature in modern and accessible translations, ranging from Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* to Oğuz Atay's *Waiting for the Fear*, as well as all-time masterpieces like Balzac's *Human Comedy*, Gogol's *Dead Souls*, and Dante's *Inferno*. But what exactly does an American publisher do to, and for, the "classics"? This past summer, I corresponded with Edwin Frank to learn more about his commitment to a more diverse canon and the processes that bring international literature to our domestic bookshelves. Frank defines a "classic" as a work that has some relation to history, a book with "recognizable authority, originality, individuality, and truth to experience, one that attests to the circumstances...out of which it arises, while also rising above them enough to suggest something else, beyond or within" (*The Red Thread*, xv). He is himself something of a living library, for many of the books included in the series are those he himself rediscovered at various points in his life. For instance, while freelancing for an outlet called Reader's Catalog in the late '90s, he found out that much of the great literature he admired was not in print.

Having just completed a doctorate on another famous 20th-century series of world classics in English, J. M. Dent's Everyman's Library, I was eager to hear more about the role of publishers and translators as vectors of modern literary tastes and to be taken on a journey behind the scenes of an institution that, through its eclectic cosmopolitan selections, provides an antidote against the cultural narcissism of our times.

Caterina Domeneghini

**CD:** Thank you so much for agreeing to have a chat with us at NASJ, Edwin. I would like to start our conversation with a famous essay by Italo Calvino, “Why Read the Classics?” which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in October 1986, a decade or so before the launch of NYRB Classics. Calvino gives a few definitions of the elusive notion of “classic” in the essay, two of which are especially interesting to me:

The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: “I am rereading...” and never “I am reading...”

and

A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.

Does either of these definitions resonate with your own motivations for starting the series?

**EF:** Well, really the series was started to give people a chance to read books that they couldn’t read, either because they’d been put out of print or never translated. And yes, some of those books were books that I thought should be out there for people to read and read again, but they were for all that little-known. So it’s a rather different situation.

**CD:** What were the books that you found yourself “rereading” in 1999? And what are the titles to which your readers keep coming back today?

**EF:** I can’t say I recall just what I was rereading in 1999, though it was around then that I returned to the *Mayor of Casterbridge* for the first time since high school. Hardy is for some reason always rather different—bleaker even than I remembered?—on rereading. There are poets I’ve read and reread throughout my life: Eliot, Herbert, Hopkins, Dickinson, Stevens, Yeats, Hardy. The books our readers come back to today are a little hard to say beyond the ones they buy in quantity, which is more an index of spreading reputation than of repeat reading.

**CD:** In addressing the age-old question of the “classic,” Calvino was one of the first twentieth-century writers who adopted a transnational perspective. He wrote that “Italian classics are indispensable to us Italians in order

to compare them with foreign classics, and foreign classics are equally indispensable so that we can measure them against Italian classics.” We will return to the issues of translation and world literature later, but I wonder what this comparatist approach means to you.

**EF:** Starting at the beginning, really, after it split off from scripture, at least, literature has been constituted across languages: from Homer to Virgil, from Virgil to Dante, from Petrarch to Wyatt, from Shakespeare....and so it goes on. At the same time, literature becomes a way of framing national memory and identity.

**CD:** There is a short story by Leonardo Sciascia, from the collection *The Wine-Dark Sea* which NYRB Classics included in 2000, that I think encapsulates well this urgency to venture beyond one’s national borders. In “The Long Crossing,” a group of Sicilian peasants boards a ship between Gela and Licata in the hope to start a new life in New Jersey; yet when they land ashore twelve nights later, they realize they have only been taken to the other end of Sicily. “To get to America was certainly the most important thing; how and when were minor details,” Sciascia writes.

One can see a certain irony in this statement, but the mirage of America also offers the unprecedented opportunity to look at one’s own country with different eyes...Do NYRB international “classics” help illuminate certain aspects of American culture?

**EF:** Yes, very much so, both in the contrasting experiences they relate and the contrasting ways in which they relate them, they offer a foil to our ways of seeing and doing things.

**CD:** In a recent conversation for the podcast *Unburied Books*, you said you were reluctant to use the word “classics,” and you’d rather have named the series the “NYRB Project.” The “classic” label is now commonly used to describe popular commercial trends, from cars to Coca Cola. Is there a way to “consume” great books responsibly?

**EF:** Book Project, I think, was the preferred handle, a pretty shopworn construct (Constructivist style) by now itself. As for consuming great books, the responsible thing to do is to shun the simulacra and cherish the real stuff.

**CD:** Another great point Calvino makes in his essay, which speaks to our capitalist moment, is that

A classic is something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the status of background noise, but at the same time this background noise is something we cannot do without.

You have described some of these background noises in the foreword to *The Red Thread*, the anthology you curated in 2019 to celebrate twenty years of NYRB Classics: “Economism, triumphalism, provincialism, and presentism,” all of which accompanied the launch of the series in 1999. What are the new interferences that good literature is facing in the new year?

**EF:** Hmm. Well, social media is the inevitable answer but not so much as such but as it has changed the way people write: hyperbole proliferates in places like the *New Yorker*, as if they feared to lose eyeballs at the flick of a page, and the tendency of writers to use the first person, whether plural or singular, the “we’s” to whom it’s assumed the reader is party, the “I thinks” which always bring the subject of a piece back to the writer of the piece—that is also pretty marked.

**CD:** You also said that you wanted to avoid the immediate association of “Classics” with Greco-Roman antiquity. Yet you mentioned that the very first book you read as a six-year-old boy was an edition of the Homeric epics. Did this early encounter with classical antiquity influence your understanding of literary value as you grew older?

**EF:** I don’t have a classical formation, more an old-fashioned humanist one, in which the ancients figure prominently but aren’t fetishized. What I learned from the *Iliad* was that the losers—Hector as opposed to Achilles—were morally the winners. That may influence my care for overlooked books.

**CD:** Let's stick with the ancients for just a little longer...In *The Red Thread*, you used the metaphor of the "gathering of ghosts" to visualize the "lost books" in the series. This of course reminded me of Odysseus's encounters with his dead ancestors in the underworld. As a reader and a publisher, do you see in literature an opportunity to come to terms with the ghosts of our pasts, fraught with nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism?

**EF:** They are there to be encountered—along with other things.

**CD:** You said you had no "canonizing" ambitions in launching the series. And yet some of the English-language books and translations you have included have inevitably achieved canonical status. What are the factors that can consecrate a book as "classic," from a publisher's point of view? And can you tell us which of the "lost books" you have included have had the greatest resonance among readers so far?

**EF:** *Stoner* is a book that has gone from being altogether neglected to being an international success and a book people will say means a great deal to them personally but also as an exemplary novel. Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* has, I think, changed in readers' estimates from being seen as an important document to being seen as a great book. I am pleased to have gained Eileen Chang, canonical in the Chinese diaspora, a hearing in English.

My own sense of a classic is that it sets an example for people to emulate and also question. It is as much a thorn in the side as a treasure.

**CD:** Something that I appreciate so much about your selections is that they defy our preconceived ideas of what a "classic" is or does at a given historical moment. For example, one of the translators you commissioned, Lawrence Venuti, restores the historical dimensions of Dino Buzzati's classic novel, *Il deserto dei Tartari*, which he renamed *The Stronghold*. Venuti's new translation resists the universalist interpretation that his predecessor, Stuart Hood, gave in 1952.

**EF:** “Men make their own history but they do not do it just as they please,” as Marx said, and what’s the rest: “the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” Funny thought that one should be able to imagine history entirely to one’s own liking. The old books bring back the old problems of history, and isn’t that rootedness in history one of the intrinsic qualities by which they endure?

**CD:** Indeed! Speaking of “the old problems of history,” if I were to identify a red thread connecting *The Stronghold* to another masterpiece in the series, I would probably pick the American writer of short stories, David R. Bunch, and his *Moderan*. Buzzati and Bunch share many themes in common—in both, for example, war (imaginary or real) becomes everyone’s *raison d’être*, the one activity around which life is organized. *Moderan*, too, is populated by “Strongholds,” in a land devastated by nuclear bombs and covered in plastic. What is the significance of picking up these books again in our precarious times?

**EF:** Interesting juxtaposition. I am interested in the possibility of discovering that unlikely family resonance, among other things. The way Bunch and Buzzati talk to each other through readers. That underground river is a resource in bad times and good.

**CD:** Another book that challenges our notions of canonicity and the divide between “high” and “low” literature is *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*. Its irreverent editors, D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, write:

Bad Verse has its canons, like Good Verse. There is bad Bad Verse and good Bad Verse.

Why did you decide to reprint this anthology?

**EF:** Because it’s full of wonderful poetry and good and bad are close kin!

**CD:** In an article for *The Threepenny Review* (2008), you also said that one criterion for making your selections is that each individual book should contribute in some way to the “seriesness of the series,” by means of continuity or rupture with previous titles. I am fascinated by this idea, and the

implications that serial buying has for the construction of the individual and social identities of readers. What do you think NYRB Classics reveal about the modern readers who collect them on their shelves?

**EF:** Well, for a number of things, a community of readers and readers reading unpredictably but out of a shared sense of curiosity and a common idea of quality, however they might contest judgments of individual works of art. That I suppose would be the main thing: an idea of art as having its own prerogatives even as of course it is not to be separated from the world at large.

**CD:** There are two key threads that make the “seriesness of the series” visible, in my view. One is the tension between old and new books. In his *Journal* (1837–61), Thoreau beautifully stated that “old books” provide “a humus for new literatures to spring in” after a visit to Harvard, anticipating T. S. Eliot’s thesis in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). How does your series navigate such slippery terms, the old and the new?

**EF:** By doing our best to juxtapose the chronologically near and far the better to revise just such perspectives.

**CD:** The other thread is the dialogue between the “nation” and the “world” that we have seen at the start with Calvino. There is a short story that whimsically captures this, from the collection *Once and Forever* by Japanese writer Kenji Miyazawa. “The Earthgod and the Fox” is, above all, a tale that cautions against the dangers of adopting Western aesthetic standards at the expense of local traditions. What other threads are you keen to pursue through your editorial choices?

**EF:** I would like to expand our offerings of Asian, South Asian, and Arabic literature, which will depend a good deal on the initiative of translators. We’ll be bringing out, reissuing, Ian Hideo Levy’s great rendering of the *Manyōshū*, Japanese poems of the medieval era, in 2025, and I continue to believe that the older stranger voices in the air, the ancient songs, have as much to say to us as the eleven books the *New York Times* encourages us to read “right now.”

**CD:** Miyazawa's short story also contains an interesting comment about the practice of translation. In lending a book on Heine's poetry to the birch tree, the fox says: "It's only a translation, of course, but it's not at all bad." In fact, you have shown that *good* translation, far from being an ancillary activity, can play a key role in consecrating certain books as "classics." Can you describe your relationship with translators, and how the selection and editing process works when you are not familiar with the source language?

**EF:** I depend on the translator to make a case for an unfamiliar work in an unfamiliar language, which can involve a mutual hunting around for common referents, on a subtler and more historical level, I hope, than saying so and so from Kazakhstan is either the Kazakh Homer or the Kazakh Ferrante. How does it sound its own note, the question is, and is that a note readers here and now have ears to hear, and when it comes to that how the translator sounds the note in turn can make all the difference. Sometimes, inevitably, there are books whose interest, even at an aesthetic level, seems specialized or historical. They matter a lot, or they matter, in the world they come from but perhaps not so much elsewhere. Like, say, Philip Freneau.

From the point of view of editing an actual translation, I try to be the first reader in English, and to bring to the translator the sort of questions that reader would have. Questions of voice, style, questions sometimes attached to the grammatical underpinnings and conventional rhetorics of the original, raising the further question of which of those things can be successfully carried over into English. Success can mean that the text possesses the same ease and fluency in the target language as in the original, or is as recognizably strange. The translation needs to preserve some major aspect of the active individuality of the original.

**CD:** Among the many literatures represented in the series, you have often been commended for the inclusion of Hungarian, a language that has been neglected by most publishing firms. You served in the committee of the Man Booker International Prize in 2015, which saw the triumph of László Krasznahorkai as the first Hungarian writer to receive this award. What was your experience as a judge back then, and in what ways does the institution of



prizes of this kind contribute to the “worlding” of vernacular and peripheral writers?

**EF:** Well, when I was on the Booker jury the prize was still a lifetime achievement award, so we were uncomfortably at the mercy of who had been translated and published. It’s funny that Hungarian is so unusual a language that the Hungarians have gone out of their way to cultivate translation, even in the Soviet era, and on quite a high level. Of course Marxism and even State Communism were invested in a good old fashioned bourgeois way in the propagation of literature. That was the flip side of the suppression of dangerous writers.

**CD:** Two final questions on the future of NYRB Classics and your current literary endeavors. You are working on *Stranger Than Fiction* [released 21 November 2024], a book on the lives of the twentieth-century novel, which covers a great number of writers from different generations and geographical areas: from Dostoevsky to Elsa Morante, from Anna Banti to the legendary editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series, Chinua Achebe. Many of these authors have already appeared as NYRB Books. What binds these novelists together, in your view? And does it make sense to speak of them as modern “classics”?

**EF:** The book is making its way into the world as we speak. It tells a story about the twentieth century, familiar enough, and the formal inventions by which a range of novelists responded to the changes the century brought. It’ll be up to others to say how my story holds together. One premise I worked on was that as the century went by (progressed seems the wrong verb) translation spread and the sense of the literary was more and more shaped by literature in translation and the possibility of translation. That was one of the things that contributed to the change in how literature looked over the century brought with it.

**CD:** More volumes will be added to the “seriesness” of NYRB Classics in the forthcoming seasons. *The Suicides*, for example, a novel by Argentinian writer and journalist Antonio Di Benedetto, will be out from January 2025 to

complete his “Trilogy of Expectation,” which includes *Zama* and *The Silentiary*. What other exciting projects should NYRB readers look forward to?

**EF:** Gabrielle Tergit’s family novel *Effingers*, translated by Sofie Duvernoy, is a book I am eager to read. Mujic Lainez’s baroque historical novel, *Bomarzo*. David Black’s *Paradiso* should be a revelation. After all, Dante takes the cake.

*The interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

## About the authors

Born in Boulder, Colorado, Edwin Frank is the founder and editorial director of NYRB Classics. He studied at Harvard College and Columbia University before venturing into publishing. He is a member of the New York Institute for the Humanities and the recipient of a lifetime award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his distinguished service to the arts. His first poetry collection, *Snake Train*, was published in 2015. His latest project, an editor’s account of the lives and transformations of the 20th-century novel, *Stranger Than Fiction*—moving from Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* to W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*—was released by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in November 2024.

Caterina Domeneghini recently completed her DPhil in English at the University of Oxford, where she was co-supervised by Professor Stefano Evangelista (English) and Professor Fiona Macintosh (Classics). Her doctoral thesis, supported by the Wolfson Foundation and a Rare Book Collection Fellowship at UNC Chapel Hill, examines the questions “what is a classic?” and “what is world literature?” through the lens of the Victorian autodidact and working-class publisher J. M. Dent and his mass-market series, the *Everyman’s Library* (1906–1956). She has published two peer-reviewed articles on this subject in *Classical Receptions Journal* and *Literary Imagination* (OUP). Caterina also enjoys writing for English and Italian literary magazines. Her reviews have appeared in outlets such as the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Asymptote* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.