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Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth
Other speakers: Bessora (Author)
Sarah Ardizzone (Translator)

JF Hello there, I'm Janice Forsyth, a huge, warm welcome to Authors Live, so great to have your company, thank you very much for joining us. Here in the studio with me this morning are people from three schools, Gryffe High School, Renfrew High School, and St Andrew's Academy in Renfrewshire. And today, well, you know something, we're exploring something just a little bit different for Authors Live, really fascinating stuff, because recently this beautiful and very striking graphic novel, Alpha, was translated from French for English publication. It's quite a story; it's a story of one man's journey from Abidjan on the Ivory Coast to Paris in France where he is hoping to be reunited with his family. On the way, as you can imagine, he encounters all sorts of really frightening events and frightening people, people traffickers, refugee camps, and overcrowded boats. And I know that just saying those things, you immediately think of images that you've seen of the many, many news reports over the last few months – and indeed years – about the refugee crisis. So today we'll hear how this story came about, and indeed the fascinating process, how do you do it, how do you translate a story, a complex story, a very emotional story, from one language into another? So please join me, our pupils here and wherever you're watching, give a huge Authors Live welcome to the author, Bessora, and the translator, Sarah Ardizzone. [Applause]. And also just to remind you, it would be lovely to hear from you, so if you have a class or a school Twitter feed, you can have any questions that you want me to relay to Sarah and to Bessora by using #BBCAuthorsLive. So huge congratulations on this wonderful book, it's quite an achievement. Bessora, can you tell us how Alpha came about and a little bit about Barroux, who's so important, who illustrated the story.

B Yes, Barroux illustrated this story and I met him at a book fair in France a few years ago, and he had this project of a book which would be about migration, but migration is a very wide topic, so I had to think about it, because he needed

someone to write the story because he doesn't write, he draws. And I was a little bit afraid because when it comes to migration, it's often very anonymous and very cold, so I wanted to tell the story of somebody. So this somebody had to have a name, that was Alpha, and I had to build him flesh and bone and to build his background and to tell his story from his point of view. So it was this book that is written like a diary.

JF And it's absolutely packed with content, we realise I think the contrast between what we see on television where there are almost like faceless, nameless people – here there's so much happening to this person. So you have the job, Sarah, of translating into English.

SA That's right.

JF At what point do you get involved in that process then, did you know about Barroux's work?

SA So Alpha was a very special book for me. I've worked with Barroux on two books before, a children's book called Mr Leon's Paris, and then another diary, interestingly enough, but that was the found diary of a real soldier from the First World War, and that's called Line of Fire, so that's a diary that Barroux found. In this case, Barroux found Bessora, and Bessora was going to create this character of Alpha, and when I saw the book, I can honestly say in my career as a translator, it's the one book I was adamant had to be published, and I was very proactive in going to publishers and saying, we have to publish this book, we have to get it out there. And wonderfully, Barrington Stoke, an Edinburgh-based publisher, took it on, and here we are today with it in English language publication.

JF How wonderful. It's the old alliance, Scotland and France, I'm glad to hear that. And tell us a little bit about Barroux, because did you actually go to meet him in his studio?

B Yeah. I first wrote the text, a very short text, and I left him space for his images and for silences, and I went to his workshop after I gave him the text, and he was doing sketches and he was hesitating, and I told him that's wonderful, you do the job the way you like, the way you think you have to do it. And as I wrote the text like a diary, like if Alpha wrote it, he drew the same way, because when you look at the images, it seemed that Alpha drew the images with primary colours and children's pen, and that gives this authentic result.

SA And that's the way Barroux creates his work, so whatever book he's working on, he sets himself a challenge to really get inside the world of that book. So with the

First World War diary, he used a butcher's pencil that's 6B, it's like the softest pencil you could have, it's quite waxy, and he sprayed the drawing with wood varnish so it had a sepia look, so you got that 1914 quality to the way it looks. In this case, he wanted it to be somebody travelling from Ivory Coast with very simple means who maybe picks up an exercise book in a corner shop, and that's what they're going to write their diary in, and all they have are a few felt-tip pens that he had on him anyway or again he picks up in the shop. And there's that contrast within the book of quite a lot of black and white, as if he's doing some of it just with a black pen or pencil, and then the colour where he wants to bring that in and make a point as if it's being done by Alpha colouring in.

JF How interesting.

B Yeah. And in the end you have this feeling that the drawing and the writing is the question of life or death, he needs to draw and write.

JF Yeah. It's a fascinating insight into it – well, let's have a little look, there's the cover which is very striking itself, Alpha, even just the lettering is very striking, and there he is, this central character. And if we have a look at some of the other images here. So tell us a little bit about this, because this is really, really striking, very colourful.

B Well, this is Alpha, he's in Gao in Mali, and he began his travel five months ago, and he needs a lot of money to go on to pay the rest of his travel. So he's doing a lot of jobs, he's a rubbish collector, he's a shop assistant, and he needs to earn money, so here he's working in Gao in Mali.

JF You see, I think this is one of the really fascinating aspects of this book for readers of all ages, it's an insight into this long process for somebody wanting to make this journey across Europe and the sheer hard work involved.

SA That's right, and I think that's one of the very powerful things about the book, the point that Bessora makes – this is a journey that if you've got the money together, you could make this journey in six hours, from Abidjan to Paris takes you six hours, and it takes this man 18 months. And Bessora flew in from Paris yesterday to be with us, so again it's a quick journey because she has the right passport and the right availability.

JF Yeah. Did you find out so much that you didn't know before about the sheer complication and all the barriers that are put up to people wanting to make that journey, because I didn't know half of this until I read the book.

- B Yeah, of course, because I had to document myself. For me, it's just six hours from Paris to Ivory Coast, but for Alpha and people like Alpha, if you want a visa, you have to give a huge list of documents and it's not possible to give this list of documents. And for Alpha, he has the obligation to leave, he has no choice, so he leaves his country and it takes 18 months, and it's very, very, very expensive, it's much more expensive than buying a plane ticket.
- JF Yeah. So here we have this picture, and very, very colourful. Let's look at the next one.
- SA So this is a really interesting point in the story, because up until now, Alpha has travelled with other people, and he's got stuck in Gao in Mali and he can't move and he keeps getting rubbish jobs that earn him very little, and they're literally rubbish jobs because he's sometimes collecting rubbish, and he can't kind of move things on. And so this is the point where he decides that he's going to become a people smuggler himself, and I remember when I read the book, I felt devastated, because I was really gunning for this character and he seems to be such an upright and honest and kind character, and you're thinking, no, don't get involved in that stuff. But he tries to do it as an honest people smuggler, so he's taking peoples' money, but he really is going to transport them. A lot of the guys that we've read about take your money and they disappear into thin air, and in this case he's bought an old Volkswagen minibus off a fisherman, he wanted just to rent it but the fisherman kind of said, I'm really ancient, I'll be dead by the time you've finished your journey, you've got to buy it from me but very cheaply. And so this is them packing up. So Alpha is now in the driving seat and he's heading off, and he is going to try and smuggle these people on to Kidal and then on to Morocco, trying to...
- B Yeah, and believe us, it's a very, very old bus, even as old as the fisherman who is a very, very old man.
- JF Yes. And so Sarah felt a jolt when we get to that bit of the story fairly early on, as did I, as I'm sure will all the readers, it's like, no, Alpha, don't do this. Why was it important for you that Alpha had to make this decision?
- B Yeah. What was important is that Alpha is not a simple person, he's a complex person, and this is a complex story, and when you get in that kind of journey, you don't know what will be tomorrow, and every day you have to make a choice, and as it is a question of survival, you have to make a choice, but to stay the most honest you can with yourself and with people. And his objective, he wants to get to Europe, but he doesn't want to become a bandit or a killer or a bad person. There are a lot of bad people among smugglers. He tried to be honest, but he

has to make a choice, and being a smuggler is one of his choices, but he will be honest.

SA It's almost as if the boundaries are very concrete, you know, there's the boundary with Morocco, there's the boundary into Europe – those stay the same, but on your journey, every day you're having to shift the little boundaries of your life to work out how to survive and what's kind of acceptable and feasible in a given situation.

JF And it's so real I think, we as the readers, that's what's so important, isn't it, Bessora, we can identify with Alpha, and we can imagine having to make those decisions that we would never have thought we would have made.

B No, that is the purpose, because when you look at television and you hear about migrants or refugees, they are anonymous, they don't have any name, they are nobodies. But through a book, through a fiction, suddenly they become flesh and bones, they become a friend or even family, and you can't pity them and you no longer look at them the same way because they are real, it's real life.

JF Yeah. And that's so interesting, actually, for the pair of you, because you're talking there in a fiction, because you might think, well, fiction isn't real, so you could have chosen not to do this as a graphic novel or do it in some other way, but actually what you're saying is through fiction we can really get to the truth of a situation that maybe we can't through news reports.

B Yeah. I think that fiction is a lie, but it's a lie that is telling the truth, because you get in the characters' shoes. When you are looking at TV, it's flat, it's 2D, and it's like forensic, you know, it's not real life, it's a kind of analysis or a social analysis, and it's very short so you don't have the time to get in the peoples' shoes, and you have it through fiction.

SA And I think that's at the heart of what this is about, is about empathy, it's about your ability to imagine yourself into the shoes of someone who lives an impossibly different life from you and doesn't have any shared experiences at some level with you, but getting yourself into those shoes, and that's what translators have to do. Luckily I have very small feet [laughter] so I fit into most peoples' shoes, I'm a size three. But yeah, we were talking about that earlier, this business of being able to imagine yourself into someone else's shoes.

JF Yeah. And it's the lovely thing of the best books, isn't it, because you're in a world, sometimes this is a world you might not want to be particularly spending time in, but you're in that world in a way that watching a news report it's easy just to say, I can't take this, and flick over to another channel. So this is really visually

a contrast to the first picture we saw which was so colourful, this is fairly monochromatic, so let's look at the next image. Tell us about this character, Bessora.

B So we are still in Gao and this is Abebi, she's from Nigeria, and she's been in Gao for two years already, and when you are a woman in this kind of story, either you take care of the children, either you take care of the husbands, but taking care of the husbands, you make more money, so she chose the husbands. That means she is a prostitute, and as you can imagine, she's not well-treated, and she meets Alpha at Gao and she will ask to go with him forward on the rest of the travel, and she will tell him that she met his son and his...

SA Wife.

B ...wife, which is a lie, but she needs to lie to go on.

JF In terms of the translation, you're outlining the story there so simply, but each story for each character is so devastating. For you as a translator, there is a simplicity about the pictures and about the words too. Is it easy or difficult for you actually translating that?

SA It's the most difficult thing to translate, and Bessora kind of used that term earlier when she was talking about deceptively simple, because it's very, very spare and bare bones and stripped back, the way that he writes, and it's this idea of a man who's very bright, who's very engaged in the world, who is able to express what he sees, but doesn't necessarily have huge levels of education at the same time. And it's getting that voice out. Yeah, as a translator, it's like I'm obeying different masters, I want the voice of Alpha and I want that to feel real – I look nothing like Alpha so that's a big act of imagination to get myself into his shoes, and I'm obeying the words and the pictures, because they're in a relationship, and the way I translate it needs to work against those pictures. If the text really clashed with the pictures, then I wouldn't have done my job. So a big thing with translators is reading your work out loud, and thinking about this as quite a spoken voice, because the way we write in diaries, it's not necessarily a literary style, it's not trying to be a big long novel, it's the thoughts from your head put down on the page, so reading it out loud is a good way to find out if it's ringing false or ringing true, and then sort of rewording it accordingly.

JF Oh. And Bessora, did you do that when you were just writing the book?

B Yeah, because Alpha is not a complicated person in his mind, he's very clever but he's not complicated, and it had to be written like it would have been spoken. It's a spoken language. And I didn't read it out loud, I usually do with my other

novels, but in this case I didn't. But when I was writing, I heard him, I heard him speaking, and I was with him, I was holding his hand.

JF [Sighs]. Let's look at the next image.

SA So...

JF [Sighs].

SA ...we've been talking a little bit about the lies that people tell each other. Abebi tells this lie that she's met Alpha's wife and son, he must take her on the journey and then she'll tell him a bit more about it. In this case, you have a little girl who's called Augusta, and what you can't see in the picture yet – we will do – is her very small brother called Augustan. And at the back there is the ghost really of the mother, the mother's a market trader and she's been put in prison, probably for selling without a licence, some kind of petty thing. So the kids are orphans basically at the moment. But the mother's worked hard and they've gathered together money, and the mother and daughter have decided that the best hope for that family is to give away the son. So this is a little boy, Augustan, who is perhaps seven, eight, nine years old, really little, and the best hope for some member of their family to get a better future is to give him away, which is the most devastating moment really in the book, this idea of giving a child away. And they're giving him to a stranger, and luckily for us that stranger is Alpha and we know that he's a good man. But Alpha has to tell a lie in turn, because the only thing that will persuade this little boy, Augustan, to go with Alpha, is the hope of being reconnected with his mother. And though Alpha knows the mother's in prison, she's unlikely to get out, they're unlikely ever to meet again, he has to say to the little boy, let's keep going, at the next stop your mother might be there to meet us, and that's the bitter pill that he has to sugar to keep this boy going on the journey with him.

JF And that's reminding me of you, Bessora, talking about the fiction, it's a lie but it's a lie that gets us to the truth, and here we have people having to tell lies because they're good people, to make the process bearable.

B Yeah. And here the lies are getting to life. When you write a fiction, it is a lie that is telling the truth, but here lying is necessary to go on living. And children are involved in this kind of trouble, but when you are children, even if you are six or seven years old, you suddenly have to become an adult, you lose your illusion. You want to believe what we tell you, but you won't believe it for long, because in the end, you will understand that, oh, no, it wasn't true, eventually life is hard, and adults are lying, and why is the world so cruel, and why is my mother in prison,

why did they put her in prison, what did she do, why can't we be reunited. Even if you are children or an adult, you have to improvise, you have to build your future, every minute, you have to build your destiny, you are not sure of anything.

JF Yeah. And we see that really poignantly with little Augustan, even though he's too young to know what's going on, like all children, you just soak up the atmosphere, the feeling and the tension. But what's lovely, we talk about the dark side, is all the way through this story, everyone's clinging on to hope, they have to.

SA And humour, humour has to cut through.

JF And humour, yeah.

B And solidarity too, they are very close, they are very close and they are friends and they are supporting each other, because it's important, it's a kind of small society that is rebuilding.

JF Yeah. And there's that feeling of, yeah, absolute humanity in the worst of situations.

SA Yeah. So there's a wonderful character, Antoine, who sort of becomes Alpha's sidekick and best friend, and he wants to play for Barcelona, and he wears his football boots [laughter] most of the time and he gets up really early in the desert and starts training, and in crazy situations he's holding on to that dream and he's trying to make sure it can come true.

B Yeah, and he has to succeed because his family paid a lot of money for him to travel because his family really wants him to become a star at FC Barcelona, because it's a way to gain your dignity. It's oppression for Antoine because he has to succeed, even if it's impossible.

JF And it's also important I guess for you as a writer because you're inspired by real life, but the idea of football being a passion, that's something we can all identify with, especially in Scotland, but it's like an international passion, and again it makes people who perhaps on the news are anonymous and maybe alien to us real human beings that are just like us.

B Yeah, the same dream, we share the same dream.

JF Yeah, yeah. Okay, let's look at our next image.

B So this is Augustan, the little brother, Augusta's little brother. And here we are close to Algeria, and it's night, and it's very, very cold, and you know he's sucking

his fingers because it makes him feel secure, because he's starting to understand that something is wrong, so he's wondering. And what's beautiful on this image is all the space around him that seems empty, so it's very heavy, it's very difficult, but at the same time you've got stars in the sky, like if it was hope. So even if Augustan, it's very difficult to him, maybe there are reasons to hope. I find this image very, very moving.

JF It is. And you're going to read us a little bit from...

SA Little bit of text to go with it. 'Augustan snuggles against me. My lie has restored his trust. It breaks my heart. The sound of his breathing reminds me of my son, and so does his smell. Augustan tells me he misses his sister and his mother, but he's glad he'll be seeing them soon.'

JF Thank you very much, it is so moving. And we talked about how the images are deceptively simple but there's so much within each one. And of course it's the same with your writing, because you're getting in the head of this lovely man, Alpha, who's in the worst of situations. Can you give us a little insight into just how long it took to write this book, and absolutely you got inside his head, I'm sure he didn't leave you for quite a long time, you were really thinking about these characters.

B Yeah, I had to do research before writing the book, because I'm not Alpha, I never walked 18 months in Africa to get to Europe, I always take the plane. So I could have met a refugee, but I didn't because I didn't want to speak on their behalf, and I didn't want to steal anyone's life, so I had to build this fictional character. So what I did is I made myself a vigilant sponge, I read books, I saw documentaries, I read testimonies, I heard from non-profit organisations, and when I had his name and his background and I knew the story I wanted to tell, I started to write. And as it was as if Alpha wrote, it took me a few months, and it was like traveling with him. It didn't take me 18 months of course, but maybe six or seven months to write, and after I gave it to Barroux who was very pleased, very happy, and he started to draw.

JF Yeah. And when you see those illustrations initially, I mean, how did it work, did he do a whole bunch of them and then you go and have a look, or did you just see the finished work, or...?

B No, no, no, I saw when he was sketching and he was doing some of them and he was thinking, how will I do that, and he was collecting images from magazines too, and...

SA A bit of a collage aspect, cutting out and sticking in pictures sometimes.

- B Yeah. He sometimes makes the images with some pictures from magazines.
- JF Yeah. Let's have a wee look at Barroux actually himself, there he is.
- SA There he is.
- JF Presumably not about to put graffiti on the wall, but who knows...
- SA [Laughs].
- JF ...he's an artist, it's allowed. And he uses various different techniques in this book, doesn't he, and different materials. But he looks like a very affable person, easy to get on with? [Laughs].
- B Yeah, he is, he is, and he's never sure of his work...
- JF [Laughs].
- B ...he's always thinking, oh, it's not good enough, I have to do my best. But still it's wonderful...
- SA I think it's part of this thing we're talking about imagining yourself into someone else's shoes, he's very imaginative, he's very inventive, he's very innovative, and he stays fresh, he's not a spring chicken, but he keeps reinventing himself, finding new projects, looking for new collaborators, so he's very open.
- B Yeah, because what he did here is very different from his previous books, so he can go really in anybody's shoes.
- JF And is this your first graphic novel?
- B Yeah, because usually I write novels without images, just words whispering in your ears...
- JF [Laughs].
- B ...and that's nice too because when there is only words, you have to build the image yourself and they come out of your imagination, and that's nice too.
- JF Had you been a fan of graphic novels yourself as a reader?
- B Yeah, I like graphic novels, asterix, any kind of graphic novels, comic books too.
- JF Yes. Because you've described the whole challenge of inhabiting the personalities and the characters of these people, but actually it's a different way of writing a story, isn't it?

- B Yeah, as a writer I had to make a very short story and to think that I had to leave some space for the images that Barroux drew, but I had to leave also some space for the silences. Silences are very important in storytelling.
- SA There's a funny term that's used in publishing for that space around the pictures or around the words, and it's called air, so it's just a blank and you need enough air according to how you want a page to look, but that air, it's like it lets it breathe, and with the translation, with the images, with the original, all of that needs air, you need everybody to give each other enough room.
- JF Yeah. So give us an insight into the challenge for you translating this, on one hand it's such a heavy story, none of us would like to be in the situation, the other hand we want to know, as you mentioned there's light and shade – literally – there's humour, all of that. How demanding was this for you, Sarah?
- SA [Laughs]. It's pretty demanding. I mean, it's interesting hearing Bessora saying, so about six months you think in total. Actually the hard graft of translating the words, because this is a relatively short piece of writing, it's about a fifth of the length of a normal novel, so a normal novel would take me about six months to get out a really good draft and it would be a year to a year and a half in the whole cycle of reworking it, editing it, getting it ready for publication, but the brute work about six months. The brute work on this is probably about six weeks to two months, so it's much shorter, but it's that business that there's not very many words, but every single one of them counts, and you've just got to keep kind of polishing it and drafting it and redrafting it until it sounds right. It's kind of that thing where you, I don't know, you rinse rice...
- JF [Laughs].
- SA ...or you rinse vegetables and you keep going until the water runs clear, you know, and that's the point that you've got to get to with this. So really good translators will produce nine drafts...
- JF Wow.
- SA ...of a book, and every one you need to walk away, let it sit for a little bit, preferably a couple of days, you know, and then come back and come back with a kind of editing head on. So there's constant redrafting of your own work to make the water run clear.
- B Yeah, it's like the sitting you are talking about, when you finish a text, you have to leave it for some moments, to forget it, and to take it back when you've forgotten it, and it to reread it as if it wasn't you who wrote it.

- SA And then there's very interesting ideas to take on board, so one of those ideas will be target audience, who's going to read this book, so you are the ideal target audience for us, you're exactly the young people that we particularly wanted to read this book, and it's published by Barrington Stoke, as we've mentioned. What's interesting, if you look at the difference, here's the French version, and – sorry, I'm throwing leaflets around – [laughter] here's the English version, and you'll see that the English version has a typeface, okay, it's printed fonts, and the French version is handwritten by Barroux. And it looks beautiful when it's handwritten, but for the particular publisher that we're working with, accessibility is a really important issue, and we felt that this was a story that needs to get out to all people of all ages, but particularly young people, and particularly young people of varying reading levels. And if you've got this handwritten font, it can be more difficult to read, particularly just because between French handwriting and English handwriting it's quite difficult. So I'm thinking about target audience, that makes me think about my choice of words, whether a certain word is just going to be slightly too inaccessible, so all that is kind of at play when I'm translating. I'm in my world, I'm reading it out loud, I'm trying to be Bessora, Alpha and Barroux, [laughter] but I'm also trying to think, who's reading this, what are they getting from it, what's the clearest way of enabling them to catch hold of this story.
- JF Yeah. So you had it easy, Bessora, she has the much more difficult task. [Laughter].
- B Yeah, absolutely...
- SA I didn't have to invent anything.
- B ...I didn't think about the target, I just thought about Alpha, how would he speak, and as he's simple, he speaks to anybody, young or whatever your age is.
- JF Is that why you gave him that name as well, Alpha?
- B Alpha, I gave him this name because it's a very famous name in Ivory Coast, and there is a singer whose name is Alpha Blondy, and it is also the first letter of the Greek alphabet, alpha, and it was good as a start.
- JF Yeah, it's great.
- SA But that's an interesting point, you see, because this reference to Alpha Blondy the singer crops up right at the beginning of the book, and I translated it very happily and I was YouTubing and listening to Alpha Blondy, but it was felt at an editorial level, this happens really early in the book, and for a young reader trying to get in and you're being told he's called Alpha like Alpha Blondy and you're

going, who? That would be kind of an unnecessary trip, so that was something that you could say is lost in translation, that's not in the English edition currently.

JF Gosh, it's so fascinating, because we know that there are lots of people here and also watching across the country who are modern language students, and I love the idea of you as the author and you as the translator taking a while to let it all settle in like rinsing the rice and all the rest of it, and then imagining our school students saying that to their teachers, I'm taking a wee while to return this translation, it just needs to settle in for a few days...

SA [Laughter].

JF ...teacher's going, no, got to get it in tomorrow. But actually for people thinking ahead to maybe pursuing foreign languages and translating, and we need more people to be doing it...

SA Yeah, we do.

JF ...in this country, that's for sure, and it's such a joyous thing to do, have you got any sort of tips?

SA Yeah, yeah.

JF Great.

SA Okay. So the top tip is that when you're writing a translation, it's a creative act of writing, it is like starting again, your writing has to stand up on its own two feet and be utterly compelling for a new readership. And to do that it has to have a voice, and that voice really has to work. So why should we use human beings and not Google Translate or Babelfish or any of the other computer programs out there? A child told me last year when I was running some workshops – and she would have been P7 in the Scottish system, so 10-11 – and she said, well, the thing is, Sarah, she said, Google Translate can't do flair and it can't do voice, which was a really good way of putting this fact that computers don't have a sense of humour, computers can't make common sense judgements about stuff. What computers do is they have programs that are built on data and probability, so they look at a set of words and they say, you know what, in this situation, 99.9 per cent of the time we translate that as meanwhile, so let's translate it as meanwhile because that will be the logical thing to do. But when we're writing as original voices, we are that .01 per cent that's trying to be different, we're trying to bend and wonk and flex the language and use it in a different way, and the computer can't predict that. So human beings need the humour and the voice and the unpredictability and the originality to create something new.

So what am I saying if you want to become a translator? I'm saying you need to think about everything you've got to do to get a voice working in the English language, you translate out of the target language into your mother tongue, which for most of the audience looking today would be English speaking, or Gaelic speaking if you're translating into Gaelic. So you've got to get hold of that voice. As well as being a brilliant linguist for all the modern foreign languages students out there, you need to be kind of bicultural, you need to know how the country works that you're translating from, you need to live there, you need to spend time there, you need to watch their television programmes, listen to their radio programmes, read their newspapers. So it's not just about your grammar, your grammar's the least of things, [laughter] you need to soak up that culture, and you need to read tons in that language, but you need most of all to read tons in English, you need to read other writers and see how they do it and try it out. When I translate young writers who use a lot of slang, I sit on the tops of buses for a long time...

JF [Laughter].

SA ...and just my ears go like that and I'm noting down how people are talking.

JF Good tips.

SA So you've got to listen, you've got to read, you've got to live in that culture, so there's a lot more than just being a modern foreign language student.

JF Fantastic, I hadn't thought of half of that, thank you so much, Sarah, I know that lots of people listening will be really interested in all of that, and we've actually got some questions from our audience here, so let's have our first question. Hello, what's your name and what's your question?

Girl I'm Talia. And, Sarah, did the illustrations themselves impact your translations of the book?

SA So just as with Bessora's writing, it's quite stark and quite deceptively simple and spare, so I couldn't have any flab in the way I was translating it, and the pictures work the same way. And I think what's particularly striking about how Barroux did it is you've got a lot of black and white pictures, so quite dark, quite monochrome, sometimes quite bleak, and then you've got these sudden blasts of colour, but they're all done in quite a simple way, like a school child could do in an exercise book. So my choice of language had to reflect that. And sometimes just the way the word looks on the page next to the picture, you'll go, mm, it just doesn't look right. It's not that it sounds wrong, it's not that the sense is wrong, but it just visually doesn't look right next to that picture. So sometimes when I'm

working on books that are illustrated, I will change a word choice purely because of the visuals, purely because of how it looks.

- JF Thank you, great question, Talia, thank you very much. And our next question please, hello.
- Girl Bessora, do you think that by writing a graphic novel about asylum seekers that more young people will be aware and do more to stand up against inequality?
- B Well, I usually do not distinguish between young people or adult people, but what I wanted writing this book is that you give time to Alpha, because when you're looking at TV or reading newspapers, you usually don't give time, and when you don't give time, you cannot become aware that you are dealing with somebody, because a refugee or an asylum seeker or a migrant isn't a nobody, he is a somebody. By reading this book, you understand that it is a somebody like you, that you could have been at his place, let's say if we were at the 17th century, you could have become indentured slave in America. It's a permanent story, it's just a nowadays crisis, it's the humanity story. And if you become aware of that after reading the book, for me it's okay, because Alpha regains its humanity through his diary. And when somebody regains its humanity, you cannot just watch him drown, because he's your brother, he's family, he's not a thing or an animal, and it could have been you.
- JF Yeah.
- SA So you're asking the audience in a sense, the readers to hold his hand in the way that you're holding his hand when you're writing.
- B Yeah, yeah. So becoming aware is very important. After that, you can do something if you feel comfortable with doing something, but people, usually they don't feel comfortable doing something – it doesn't matter. What is really important is to hold his hand and to see his humanity.
- JF Thank you very much. We just have time for that final question from the audience, thank you.
- Girl Hi, Sarah. What story would you love to translate?
- SA Hello. Well, I'm glad you've asked me that because, conveniently, I have here something I'm just reading, and this is Bessora's next novel, [laughter] and it's just, just, just been published in France, and it's called something like the Will and Last Testament of Nicolas, and he's like the dark half-brother of Alpha. He's much younger, he lives in France, his mum's Jewish, his dad's White-French, and he feels very alienated from the kind of inner city suburbs that he lives in,

and he converts to Islam, and then he starts getting inculcated, and long story short he wants to take himself to Syria to fight the cause of Jihad over there. And as he goes on his journey, he meets the refugees like Alpha who are heading in the opposite direction, these people who are trying to get to Europe, and this young man – about your age, about 16 – is trying to flee Europe for a different kind of life. And I'm halfway through, you can see my post-it, [laughter] and I can't put it down. So it feels to me like this is almost a pairing with the Alpha novel, this is the other big story of our times, the flipside of what's going on, so that's what I'm into at the moment.

JF Thank you very much for your question, thank you very much for all those, and thank you for watching. I'm sure you'll agree, an absolutely fantastic session from you two, Bessora and Sarah, thank you very much indeed...

Aud Thank you.

JF ...the time has flown. The great news is you'll be able to watch this again or tell other people you know who may have missed it to watch this, as with all the other Authors Live sessions, they're available to watch online at the website which is www.scottishbooktrust.com/authorslive. You can also sign up if you go to the Book Trust site to watch those events and also sign up for future ones too. We'll be back very soon with another Authors Live, but right now, wherever you are, and here, please join me in a huge round of applause for Sarah and Bessora please, thank you. [Applause].