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## **Nicole Witt**

**A literary agent who makes the works of the writers she represents travel the world. By making the journey to them, she often discovers what literature is really about.**



It doesn't set airport alarms off, doesn't weigh a gram, doesn't take up any physical space and can't be seen with the naked eye. Yet the baggage that she carries around contains a living heritage: thousands of plots, scenes and characters that she talks about and promotes on an exhausting circuit of fairs and meetings around the world. Nicole Witt, one of the most important literary agents in the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world, promotes the works of writers such as José Saramago (Nobel Prize for Literature 1998), Gonçalo M. Tavares, Lídia Jorge, Mario Delgado Aparain, Manuel Rivas, Luís Sepulveda, Rachel de Queiroz, Moacyr Scliar, Paulo Lins and Adriana Lisboa. It is for

them and with them and their words that this German woman of 44, with degrees in Romance Philology from the University of Münster and the University of Seville, has been director of the Mertin-Litag agency (based in Frankfurt) since 2007, succeeding the legendary professor and translator Ray-Güde Mertin (who died in January 2007). From the 1990s, Ray-Güde had broken down prejudices and changed the understanding of the editorial market and international bookselling with regards to literature written by the Portuguese, Brazilians, Lusophone Africans and Hispanic Americans. Nicole Witt follows their progress and develops a network of contacts which translates into millions of books scattered across the globe.

### **The work trail**

In Rio de Janeiro, she always has a coconut water on Ipanema beach, close to where she always stays at the house of her friend, the Brazilian literary agent Lúcia Riff. In Lisbon, however full her agenda, she never fails to go out for a custard tart, to arrange meetings at the famous Café Nicola in Rossio square or have dinner with Portuguese friends who take her to try another of this country's culinary specialities where "the eyes also eat". And in Guadalajara, Mexico, where the book fair takes place every year in late November, she never passes up a trip to a small popular market where she buys local handicrafts to offer the family and the agency team in Natal later. She is methodical in her packing, loves travelling light and has become expert in choosing her wardrobe according to the climate and the protocol of the meetings she has arranged. On long-distance flights, she exhausts herself the day before and catches a night flight to get some sleep during the journey and wake up in a different country ready to start the day's work. Like any professional traveller, Nicole Witt has well-worn routes and itineraries which make up for the physical burn-out and frequent jet lag.

Travelling is, above all, work; an annual map of obligatory presences at the main book fairs and meetings for Europe (Frankfurt, London, the Salon du Livre in Paris, Turin or Gothenburg), Latin-America (Guadalajara, Buenos Aires), Brazil (FLIP in Paraty, the Bienal do Livro in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro) and Portugal (Feira do Livro in Lisbon and Porto, Correntes d'Escritas in Póvoa do Varzim) and a series of other occasional literary events. "Book fairs have undergone great changes in recent years. Today, most business is done with modern communications technology (email and skype), but face-to-face meetings continue to be indispensable. In one-on-one encounters, issues and side information come up which very often turn out to be essential and make all the difference. In my case, contact with editors and particularly writers is a real privilege." In a not altogether professional way, the big compensation for her are the feelings motivated by the many words written or in the dialogue formed from each of her travels.

### **The trail of the emotions**

Nicole Witt speaks almost perfect Portuguese, punctuated with expressions that could be taken from one of the many books she promotes. She says that "a place can also be a person". She gives the example of the relationship between José Saramago (1922-2010) and Lanzarote, the island in the Canaries where the writer chose to live after 1993. "I visited the island aged 14 with my father, and immediately fell in love with the volcanic setting, which seemed hostile and different from anything else. Then, I went back there various times to stay with José and Pilar (Pilar del Río, the writer's wife), and Lanzarote became a literary place. For me, José, a great traveller, continues to climb one of those mountains as he always used to, right to the top. The house (today a museum) continues to be made out of words. The island remains apart from the world. Lanzarote is and always will be José." In Lisbon too, next to the olive tree planted in front of the José

Saramago Foundation, in the Casa dos Bicos, next to the River Tagus, Nicole reenounters "a mental space", another kind of island, but this time in the middle of the city, which also contains the memory of the writer.



Theory and common sense suggest one should always separate the biography and the personality of the author. Nicole Witt knows this only too well, but insists that accompanying writers on the international circuit or getting to know them in their usual and familiar space is a form of accessing "an additional interpretation of the work, impregnated with those particular experiences." This is also the stuff of a literary agent's travels. How better to understand the work, for example, of Brazilian writer Reginaldo Ferreira da Silva, popularly known as Ferréz, than to visit his house and family and come into contact with his various projects in the shantytown of Valo Velho, in one of the most violent neighbourhoods in Brazil, Capão Redondo, in southern São Paulo?

The writer and rap musician Ferréz became famous with the novel *Capão Pecado*, published in 2000, a kind of documentary in fictional form about daily life in the shanty, where he grew up, witnessed and heard about most of the stories told within. Ferréz, today 37 years old, is the driving force behind various initiatives which give a voice, a higher profile and greater dignity to life in the urban peripheries: a magazine *Literatura Marginal*, a brand of clothing 1DASUL, which is made solely in the neighbourhood, a publishers *Selo Povo*, a library *Exôdus* and cultural facilities *Interferência* and *Periferia Ativa*, all based in Capão Redondo. On one of her travels to São Paulo, Nicole Witt, his literary agent, was taken by him to see the day-to-day reality of his work: "Then I understood how faithful he is to his origins and how authentic what he does is. It changed my approach to reading his books and proved that, in fact, getting to know an author in his own environment very often gets you closer to the heart of the matter." This also happened when she visited the house where Argentinian writer Claudia Piñeiro lives with her three children, in a luxury condominium in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. "You have to show your passport to get inside. It's the kind of world that exists all over Latin America and was used by Claudia as the backdrop, for example, for her novel *Viúvas das Quintas-Feiras*, a strong critique of Argentine high society. The visit was an unforgettable experience, which was important for confirming the social complexity that, very often, lies behind a work and a writer."

**I am another**

Nicole Witt travelled frequently as a child and adolescent with her father, who was mad about travelling. "It was with him that I first understood the significance of this other way of looking at people and the world around us." When she studied in Seville, she found out that even our relationship with our own body can change en route. "In Germany, you cultivate a certain physical distance between people. First in Spain, and then in Portugal, Brazil and Latin America, I had to adapt to a different understanding of physical warmth. There are gestures that even today I don't understand, but I know that it is absolutely impossible to resist human contact there". She laughs and goes on: "I can't deny that it gave me a very different understanding of physical contact." Ultimately, travelling opens us up to the possibility of being a different person. "I have become much more open, more receptive to what is happening, to listening... I have discovered a different side to myself and to other people." Travelling turns us into characters in unexpected storylines. Or as the travels of Nicole Witt demonstrate, essentially travel is ultimately the sister of literature: "a way of getting to know the other which also exists inside ourselves".

by **Filipa Melo**