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Blanche and Alfred Knopf: Circulating Transatlantic Literature

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In 1915, the Knopfs founded a publishing company focusing on translations of contemporary European literature. Later, they opened their catalogue up to Latin American writers. Their story offers a glimpse into the networks and forms of sociability that drove the transnational cultural dynamics of books.

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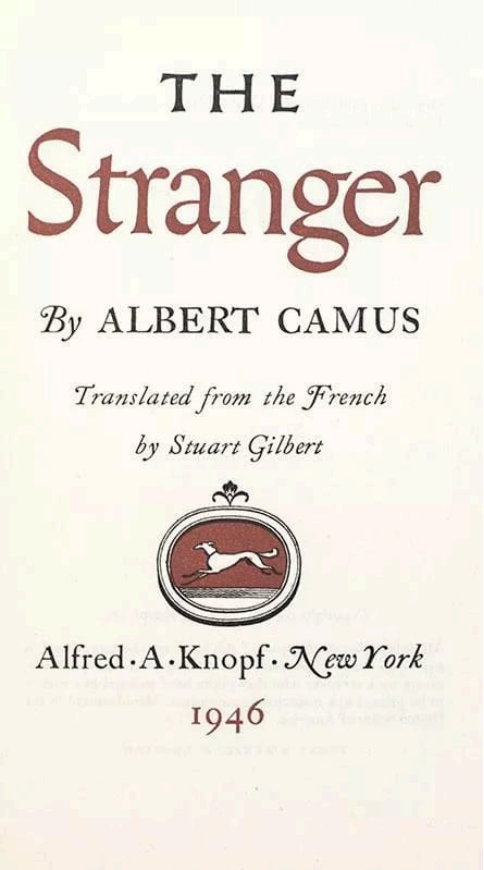
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In 1915, Alfred and Blanche Knopf founded a New York publishing house whose prestige was based on its 26-Nobel Prize winners for literature, including Thomas Mann (1929), André Gide (1947), Albert Camus (1957), Jean-Paul Sartre (1964) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982). These names reflect the choices they made to promote foreign literature in the United States. Known from 1918 on as Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., the firm focused on interwar European literature before opening its catalogue up to Latin American writers in the 1940s. The Knopf archives, held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, document the publishers' transatlantic trajectories and the books they contributed to having translated, circulated and introduced outside their national borders.

The Knopfs and European literature

The Atlantic space between France and the United States was the starting point of Knopf's history. In 1915, the company, which adopted the borzoi, or Russian wolfhound, that appears on each book cover as its trademark, published its first work, a collection of plays by French dramaturge Émile Augier (1820–1889) translated by Barrett H. Clark. In the 1920s, Blanche Knopf's love for France was expressed with the publication in English of classic novels, such as *Madame Bovary* and *Manon Lescaut*, and *Contemporary French Literature* (1924), an anthology edited in France by René Lalou and translated into English by literary agent William Bradley. These titles illustrate the couple's close relationship with France, but they were also interested in other European writers. In 1916, its first full year of operation, Knopf published 29 books, including 12 translated from Russian, two from German, six bought in England and only nine by United States authors. Bradley, who with his wife Jenny Serruys Bradley founded France's first literary agency in 1923, became a key mediator in transatlantic publishing and helped to forge a special connection between Gallimard and Knopf, which published many of each other's works. During the Knopfs' annual visits to Europe, the Bradleys introduced them to authors whom they would go on to publish in English, including Jules Romains, André Gide, André Malraux, Paul Morand, Anatole France and, after the war, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. The abundant correspondence between the Franco-American literary agents and the American publishers sheds light on the process of transnational circulation. Two examples are especially noteworthy. Blanche Knopf was particularly devoted to Albert Camus and used her interpersonal skills to overcome the company's initial reluctance to publish him: *The Stranger* came out in 1946 and *The Plague* in 1948, both translated by Stuart Gilbert (the translator of Tocqueville, Malraux, Sartre and others, he also collaborated on the translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*). Then she exerted her influence to introduce Camus and promote his work to the Swedish Academy. She succeeded, posing beside him in Stockholm when he was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize for literature, which helped to transform the French author into an international figure.



The Stranger, Albert Camus

The correspondence held in the Harry Ransom Center's Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. archives also provides information on Howard M. Parshley's translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Published by in 1953, it was criticized in the 1980s for the cuts that were made to the foundational text of feminism. Indeed, the publishers relentlessly pressured Parshley to summarize the philosopher's thought, simplify her style and quite simply abridge the 1,000-odd pages of *The Second Sex* to meet what they felt were the US market's demands. The Knopf archives offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse into a trade and the negotiations that governed the transfer of literature and ideas through books.

The Knopfs and Latin America

Exchanges of the same nature between various mediators such as literary agents, publishers, translators and the authors themselves also drove the inter-American circulation of books. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. first began publishing Latin American writers after Blanche visited Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil in 1942, signing contracts with Eduardo Mallea and William Henry Hudson in Argentina, Germán Arciniegas in Colombia and Jorge Amado and Gilberto Freyre in Brazil. In 1944, the company published a work of reference similar to Lalou's 1924 survey of French literature: *The Green Continent, a Comprehensive View of Latin America by Its Leading Writers*, an anthology edited by Germán Arciniegas and translated into English by Harriet de Onís, among others. The following year, Knopf released Amado's *Terras do sem-fim* (1943) as *The Violent Land* (1946) and Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1933) as *Masters and Slaves* (1946). The translator, Samuel Putnam, was a major figure among American expatriates in Paris between the wars. [1]



Latin American literature published by Knopf

Source: "A Glutton for Books", Ransom Center Magazine, November 21, 2017 - Victoria Livingston

In the space of a decade, Knopf became the leading US publisher of Latin American literature as other mediating figures began emerging, such as Harriet de Onís. Richard Candida-Smith has documented the company's clear lead. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, it published 42 books by Latin American writers, compared to Macmillan's 19 and Farrar Straus and Giroux's 14. [7] The Knopf story sheds light not only on Pan-American history, but also transatlantic circulation patterns.

Transatlantic networks and forms of sociability

The Knopfs' yearly trips to Europe, transatlantic networks and forms of sociability, ranging from high society receptions to close friendships, allowed them to carve out a place on the US book market. Blanche would host cocktail parties on transatlantic liners as soon as they steamed out of New York, one of her biographers wrote. Business and pleasure were combined during the crossing. In France, she entertained at the Ritz and often stayed on the Côte d'Azur with the Bradleys, while her correspondence mixed editorial advice and purchase orders with personal news. This *modus operandi* was repeated in Brazil, where the couple stayed with Jorge Amado, Zélia Gattai and Gilberto Freyre and became friends with the authors they published. They were even the godparents of Freyre's first granddaughter. The Knopfs traveled to Brazil every year or two and the couples exchanged letters between trips. The Knopfs were at the heart of a transatlantic circulation network of books in which France led the way in the publication of Latin American authors. They relied, recalls Richard Candida-Smith, on Roger Caillois' choices for Gallimard's Croix du Sud collection, which published Borges, Cortázar and Vargas Llosa, among others, and on the success in France of authors such as Cuba's Alejo Carpentier. In this sense, Knopf followed France's lead and, after Gallimard, had Carpentier's *Los Pasos Perditas* (1953) translated by Harriet de

Onís as *The Lost Steps* (1956) and Amado's *Gabriela, Cravo e Canela* (1958) as *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (1962), which wasselected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. The books' trajectories seem to have followed those of their authors. Carpentier lived in Paris before the war, Amado and Gattai in the late 1940s. But these trajectories are best understood within the Knopf circulation network. The Knopf archives document the emergence of a publishing house that basked in the glow of prestigious foreign literature and built its model on three continents. They shed light on networks, forms of sociability and, through them, the transnational cultural dynamics that operated in a triangular Atlantic space between Europe, North America and Latin America.

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NOTES

1 Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1947). [^2]: Richard Cándida-Smith, *Improvised Continent: Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 278.