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Institute Seeks to Bring International Writers to Wider Audience

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The International Institute of Modern Letters is bringing the works of contemporary writers, including political dissidents, to a wider audience. The project is an effort to expand the diversity of voices in the world of literature.

Longtime writer and editor Eric Olsen sometimes hears the complaint that American publishers avoid international writers, except the best known, whose works are likely to sell. He heard that criticism at a literary conference. "One of the chaps there announced that there aren't many translations published in this country because we are a parochial, provincial nation. Well, I think it's more economic, actually. I mean, the cost of translation tends to eat up any potential profit," he said.

That is where his institute comes in. With offices in Las Vegas and Wellington, New Zealand, the International Institute of Modern Letters was started five years ago by hotel and casino executive Glenn Schaeffer. It subsidizes the translation of foreign-language books, which allows US publishers to put them out and still earn a profit.

The project will eventually issue six to eight books a year under the name Rainmaker Translations, in conjunction with four publishing companies.

Two books have just been released. One, called *Midnight's Gate*, is a collection of essays by dissident Chinese poet Bei Dao. The other is a novel by Russian writer Yuri Rytkeu called *A Dream in Polar Fog*. The author is a member of the Chukchi peoples of the Russian Arctic.

Mr. Olsen says that work, already well known to readers in parts of Europe, examines a theme that is relevant to his institute's mission. "The novel takes place in early 20th century Siberia, and it involves kind of a cultural clash between the Chukchi and some Canadian whalers. It involves a clash and a reconciliation, and that's sort of what we're trying to get at in the grander scheme, is get a little cross-cultural fertilization and dialogue going, and this seemed to fit into that perfectly," he said.

Among future projects, the International Institute of Modern Letters will publish a memoir by Chinese dissident artist and writer Er Tai Gao, who now lives in Las Vegas as a writer-in-residence with the Cities of Asylum project. The project brings persecuted authors to cities around the world, where they receive a stipend and living quarters, and can freely pursue their writing. The International Institute of Modern Letters runs the Las Vegas branch of the program.

The institute is currently planning a translation of a work by the Hungarian-born German writer Terezia Mora. Mr. Olsen says it will also translate the works of contemporary American writers, such as the poet Robert Creeley, for distribution in Chinese. This will be done under the project title *Art Both Ways*.

He says the goal of all these activities is to foster a dialogue between the world's readers and writers, and overcome the language barriers that divide them.