

International Children's Literature and Subversive Cultural Exchange

by

Marianne Martens, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Kent State University  
School of Library and Information Science  
P.O. Box 5190  
314 University Library  
Kent, OH 44242  
mmarten3@kent.edu

## Introduction

According to Barbara Bader, around the turn of the 20th century, Americans “were accustomed . . . to looking abroad for the best literature, the best music, the best art” (Bader, 1976, 6). But the climate is distinctly different now. Encouraging children to read diverse literature, including that from other countries promotes international understanding and encourages multiple perspectives and view points. “Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community: not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others”(Rockman 1993, 19).

Summer 2014's #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign, and ensuing award and grants, was inspired by Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers's March 2014 Op-Ed pieces in the *New York Times*, in which they criticized the publishing industry for a lack of diversity in children's literature (“We need Diverse Books” 2015). This grassroots campaign might be the right impetus we need in order to not only promote diverse books (including international ones), but also to build a market for such books. But while there are plenty of reasons why we need to focus on bringing international children's literature to the United States, doing so is more difficult than ever. For a variety of reasons, very few international books make it over American borders each year.

## Historical Perspectives

Historically, bridge building via books has a long history. Ever since books were first printed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they have been translated and shared. According to Sutherland, Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère L'Oye* (1697) was an early example of a foreign rights transaction, when it was translated into English as *Mother Goose* in 1729,

and published by John Newbery (Sutherland 1997). Fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen, originally published in the mid-1800s, are other titles with international success, which continues today.

A major push for cultural exchange via children's books was launched by Jella Lepman after World War II, as described in her autobiography (Lepman 2002). After spending much of the war as a refugee in England, Lepman understood the need for peaceful cultural exchange. After the war, despite her own personal reservations about returning, Lepman went back to Germany as an Adviser on the Cultural and Educational Needs of Women and Children.

Ironically, the period from 1933-1945 had been a boom-time for children's librarianship in Germany. Before 1933, German libraries were subscription libraries, largely funded by members. The Nazis changed this by building tax-funded public libraries, which were free and open to all. However, the content of those libraries was directly related to the goals of National Socialism, housing propaganda that venerated Aryan youth, and promoted hero tales, myths, sagas, legends, German nature—and anything that glorified Adolf Hitler.

Books that didn't fit with Nazi beliefs were systematically discouraged, censored, or destroyed. According to Stieg Max Mezger's *Monika fährt nach Madagaskar* (*Monika travels to Madagascar*) was enormously popular with young German girls. But this title was removed from recommended reading lists because "Monika, a German Nancy Drew, and her father committed the sin of staying with Sally Mendel, a Jew" (Stieg 1986, 52). While food, clothing, and shelter were priorities in post-war Germany, Lepman also advocated for books ". . . that were from the free world and banned to [German children]

for twelve years. . . ” (Lepman 2002, 26-27). By soliciting donations of books from twenty countries, Lepman was able to start the International Youth Library in Munich in 1949, Publishers from around the world were eager to participate in her mission. There was an economic interest as well, as German publishers, eager to re-establish their businesses in the post-war years could come and shop for foreign rights to these books. Lepman reached out beyond the library, lecturing internationally on the benefits of using children's books to build bridges between cultures and promote peace.

### The Book Fairs

The cultural exchanges that Lepman so profoundly believed in, occur at international book fairs each year, many of which have existed for centuries. The first was the Frankfurt Book Fair, which was first held during the Middle Ages. Taking place every October, it is now the world's biggest book fair. The Bologna Book Fair, which specializes in children's books, has been held each spring since 1963. Other influential book fairs include the Taipei Book Fair, the London Book Fair, Paris's Salon du Livre, and the Guadalajara Book Fair. Editors attending fairs are able to build and maintain international publishing network.

Margaret McElderry was one of the first children's book editors in the United States, and an early advocate for international books. According to Hearne (1996), McElderry made regular trips to Europe to meet publishers, authors, and illustrators, building a co-publishing network. She was active in both the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and the United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY). McElderry published the first children's book from wartime Germany to be published in the United States, Margot Benary-Isbert's *The Ark*. This was a book

that was “a story of post-war Germany, filled with starving, homeless people trying to stay alive amidst the rubble. It gives an honest, realistic picture of the terrible aftermath of war in a defeated country” (Hearne 1996, 761). McElderry’s commitment to international books led to her publishing books by Japanese authors and illustrators such the Japanese poet Michio Mado, Misumasa Anno (winner of the 1984 Hans Christian Andersen award for illustration), and difficult but important stories by Yoshiko Ushida, “about her family’s experiences in US detention camps” (Hearne 1996, 760).

### **Where are we now?**

Despite all the opportunities for cultural exchanges via foreign rights deals, for most American publishers, such exchanges are one-way. Many of the books published for young people in the United States each year are exported to other countries where they are translated and published locally. But only a tiny percentage of books from other countries are imported and translated in the United States each year. In 2002, Susan Stan wrote that only about 5% of books published annually in the United States came from other countries, and of those, only about 1-2 % were translations. According to an email exchange with K.T. Horning of the Children’s Cooperative Book Center (CCBC) on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, in terms of translated books, of the 3,500 books received at the CCBC in 2014, 60 books were translations from other languages, which means that in 2014, 1.71% of books published for young people in the United States were translations. Other imports, not counted here, were already in English, including those from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Table 1 below presents a snapshot of the countries and languages represented.

**Table 1: Countries and languages represented by 2014 translations. (Books counted were those received by the CCBC).**

<b>Countries of Origin</b>	<b>Original Language</b>	<b>Number of Books from Respective Country</b>
Austria	German	1
France	French	31
Germany	German	11
Iceland	Icelandic	1
Israel	Hebrew	1
Italy	Italian	3
Japan	Japanese	1
Mexico	Spanish	1
Netherlands	Dutch	3
Norway	Norwegian	1
Poland	Polish	2
Spain	Spanish	2
Sweden	Swedish	1
Switzerland	German	1

Source: K.T. Horning, CCBC (personal correspondence, February 20, 2015).

Table 1 demonstrates that more than half of all books translated and published in the US during 2014 were originally published in French. German is the other significant language. German and French are languages widely taught in US high schools, which could mean that more editors have at least a reading ability in either.

**Table 2: US publishers' translations in 2014. (Books counted were those received by CCBC).**

<b>US Publishers Publishing Translations in 2014</b>	<b>Number of Translations per Publisher</b>
Abrams	4
Albert Whitman	1
Candlewick Press	5
Chronicle Books	16
Clarion/Houghton Mifflin	1
Eerdmans	9
Enchanted Lion	8
Graphic Universe	1
HarperCollins (Balzer + Bray)	1
Holiday House	4
Little, Brown	1
NorthSouth Books	4
Random House	2
Scholastic (Arthur A. Levine)	2

Source: K.T. Horning, CCBC (personal correspondence, February 20, 2015).

In 2014, with sixteen books, Chronicle Books was a leader in translations, followed by Eerdmans (9) and Enchanted Lion (8), but otherwise, very few publishers published books in translation. As K.T. Horning pointed out, of all translations published in 2014, only three books were published by one of the five top publishing companies (which include Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster). Together, Table 1 and Table 2 demonstrate that the state of children's literature in the US has not progressed beyond Susan Stan's 2002 analysis.

Compared to America's limited importing habits, countries like Germany, France and Japan import a huge number of foreign titles every year. Germany is a robust market

for American books, and translations from English dominate their annual lists of imports. Yet the United States ranks as a mediocre market for German publishers.

### **Books from Germany**

Success stories from other countries temporarily open the door to other books. Cornelia Funke's books *The Thief Lord*, *Dragon Rider* and *Ink Heart*, helped create American interest in other German authors. The German government actively markets German books via the German Book Office (GBO). In addition to maintaining a website featuring titles available for translation and a list of German language readers and translators, the GBO also organizes an annual exchange trip for American editors to go to Germany to meet with local editors.

Emailing on June 6, 2005, Riky Stock of the GBO said that despite the fact that Germany imports many American books each year, the United States represents both the most coveted and the toughest market for German authors, editors, and rights directors to enter. For German authors, getting an US publisher is often their only chance for a lucrative movie deal. And while American editors insist on evaluating material in English translation, German publishers are reluctant to spend money on sample translations because the chance of actually signing a contract as result is small.

### **Challenge #1: Evaluating Books in Other Languages**

Serving on the Hans Christian Andersen Jury, I experienced firsthand some of the inherent difficulties faced by editors in evaluating international material. For example, in order to evaluate the work of Qin Wenjun, the 2002 Chinese candidate for the Andersen Medal, and Cao Wenxuan, the 2004 candidate, jurors received an author dossier and a few roughly translated chapters in English. All other material arrived in Chinese, which I

was unable to read. At the time, I was lucky to work with a Chinese colleague who helped me review the books. According to my colleague, both authors were enormously successful at home, but this success did not translate across the material presented for evaluation, and gave me new perspectives on how many US editors must feel when evaluating books in languages they cannot read. The fact that translations are usually bought on the basis of a synopsis and a sample translation, means that editors (and publishers) must act on a leap of faith. Editors need to have trusted relationships with readers and translators who can help make judgment calls on books.

American publishers do look overseas if they want something different on the list—such as a novel that will push the envelope of what's been published in the United States. One such example is *Nothing* by Janne Teller, the 2013 Batchelder and Printz Honor Book from Denmark. A review in *School Library Journal* calls it “. . .horrificing, and draws obvious comparison to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954)” (Review by SLJ 2013).

### **Challenge #2: Culture Clash**

Besides challenges in evaluating materials, or content that is overly-sophisticated content by American standards, there are other content issues that clash between countries. In the United States, as far as picture books are concerned, nudity, cigarettes, bottles of wine on a dinner table, children riding in cars without seatbelts, or on bikes without helmets are all discouraged. As Yoo-Lee et al. (2014) stress, the best imported books are culturally authentic, and this is a quality that is important to US editors. Years ago, after considering advance materials for a book about a Native American boy, staff at North-South Books declined to translate and publish this title. The author had created a

story about a fictitious Native American tribe, which was neither authentic, nor carefully-researched.

Cultural mores vary from country to country, and a good editor can work with challenges, so that books can travel. If making simple changes that do not alter the meaning or the content of a book, such as airbrushing out a cigarette, or photo-shopping a seatbelt on a child in a car means that a book will find a market, arguably, that could be supported. But deleting regional and cultural references from a book because an American child would perceive such references to be foreign or alien, is going too far. Junko Yokota, Professor Emeritus of Reading and Language at National Louis University, argues that American readers should be elevated, and that the integrity of the original culture should be upheld. In cases where the content is different from what American readers are used to, Yokota recommends that publishers include an introductory note providing context for readers.

Publishing is perceived as an altruistic business, but it is first and foremost a business. The loss of many independent bookstores, and a subsequent move to chains from Barnes & Noble to Amazon, means that book purchasing decisions have become centralized. Purchasing decisions for Barnes & Noble's children's books are largely made from a buyer in New York City. If a buyer raises concerns about a manuscript, publishers must consider making changes to ensure that a book will sell.

Given the challenges, why should American editors bother to buy books from other countries, and why should anyone in the US bother to read them? After all, an incredibly rich selection of brand new titles is published in the US every year, and the challenges with importing literature are substantial, including the challenge of added

expense. Translation costs are expensive, and American editors have to pay readers to write reports of books in languages they themselves cannot read. Editors have to be risk takers, willing to acquire a novel based on a reader's report and a short sample translation. And once a book is published, if readers perceive it to be foreign, and therefore about something they cannot relate to, the book will not sell.

Several editors are continuing in the McElderry tradition. Arthur Levine is one New York editor who has published many Batchelder winners at his eponymous imprint, Arthur A. Levine Books at Scholastic, including *Samir and Yonatan* by Daniella Carmi and Yael Lotan, as well as books by Cornelia Funke, and books by J.K. Rowling. Arthur A. Levine Books is also the publisher of books in the Moribito series, including the 2009 Batchelder winner, *Moribito: Guardian of the Spirit* by Nahoko Uehashi.

Levine's success with international books is partially a result of his work in getting to understand the system and maintaining a network of international authors, rights directors, and editors. Instead of relying on rough translations, he arranges initially for a reader's report, and subsequently, if a report is favorable, a sample translation. Reader's reports and sample translations require a research and development budget, but savvy editors know about translation grants offered by different governments that can often result in free or low-cost translations for American publishers. The Frankfurt Book Fair's site maintains such a list (Frankfurter Buchmesse 2015).

In addition to the major publishers who occasionally buy translation rights to books, several publishers in North America specialize in bringing international books to American readers such as Groundwood Books, NorthSouth Books, Eerdmans, and Kane/Miller Books.

### **Subversive Users Creating a Market**

Educators and librarians can help to create a demand for international books in the marketplace by teaming up with key publishers who are deeply committed to international books. Former USBBY President, Dr. Susan Stan, taught a class in International Children's Literature at the University of Central Michigan. Sylvia Vardell, Professor at Texas Woman's University, has taught multicultural children's literature and international children's literature. I teach International Children's Literature and Librarianship at Kent State University, and part of the class takes place in Denmark. Libraries can have a role too, by helping to create a demand for these books.

### **Beyond the Western Frontier**

There are many countries whose publishing programs are unfairly excluded from the global arena. Stan (1999) argues that whether or not a country produces children's literature, and the quality of such literature, is dependent upon how such country is doing economically, politically, and culturally. In addition, such country must have schools that teach literacy, libraries that house books, and a culture that supports reading—for educational reasons as well as for entertainment. Via IBBY, there have been several efforts in Africa to support local publishing projects. Although IBBY isn't able to fund projects directly, it does offer know-how and expertise. Specialists have been recommended for IBBY workshops and seminars over the years—depending on the availability of possible funding partners. Such partners have included UNESCO, UNICEF, ACCU, CERLALC, IRA, IFLA, CODE. Working with these funding partners, IBBY sponsors workshops in Africa, with African trainers, to help local efforts. IBBY's

Africa efforts are duplicated in other developing nations including India, and Latin American countries.

### **Conclusion**

Children's books can build bridges and they can break down barriers, but they can only do so if they reach an audience. Librarians and teachers can help create the demand for global literature by including them in collection development policies, making them part of programming, and including them in lesson planning. For editors, a mildly subversive attitude is very useful for incorporating international books at an imprint, but they also need to have the freedom from their publishers to select manuscripts from a wide range of sources.

In her book *Against Borders*, Hazel Rochman writes: "The best books break down borders. They surprise us—whether they are set close to home or abroad. They change our view of ourselves; they extend that phrase "like me" to include what we thought was foreign and strange." (Rochman 1993, 9). More than ever, it is time that American publishers once again begin to look abroad, to subversively influence American's understanding of other people and other cultures—starting with the very youngest readers.

### **Acknowledgments:**

Many thanks are due to Dr. Betsy Hearne, Mimi Kayden, K.T. Horning, Annette Goldsmith, Michelle Baldini, and Psyche Castro for their contributions to this project.

## References

Bader, Barbara. *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*. New York: Macmillan, 1976.

"Translation Funding." *Frankfurter Buchmesse*. Accessed February 25, 2015.

[http://www.buchmesse.de/en/Focus\\_on/more\\_topics/exchange/translation\\_funding/](http://www.buchmesse.de/en/Focus_on/more_topics/exchange/translation_funding/)

Garrison, Kasey L, Danielle E. Forest, and Sue C. Kimmel. "Curation in Translation: Promoting Global Citizenship Through Literature." *School Libraries Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (2014): 70-96.

"Hans Christian Andersen Awards." IBBY. Accessed February 25, 2015.

<http://www.ibby.org/273.0.html>

Hearne, Betsy. "Margaret K. McElderry and the Professional Matriarchy of Children's Books." *Library Trends*, 44, no. 4 (1996): 755-75.

Hunter, Sarah. "Promoting Diversity at Your Library." *Booklist* 111 no. 11 (2015): 43.

Lepman, Jella. *A Bridge of Children's Books*. Dublin: O'Brien Press in association with IBBY Ireland and USBBY, 2002.

Myers, Christopher. "The Apartheid of Children's Literature." *The New York Times* (2014). Accessed February 25, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>

Myers, Walter D. "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books." *The New York Times*, (2014). Accessed February 25, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html>

"Notable Books for a Global Society." *Children's Literature & Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association*. Accessed February 25, 2015.

<http://clrsig.org/nbgs.php>

Review of *Nothing*, by Janne Teller. "Editorial Reviews." *School Library Journal*, (2010). Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.amazon.com/Nothing-Janne-Teller/dp/144244116X>

Rochman, Hazel. *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1993.

Stan, Susan. "Going Global: World Literature for American Children." *Theory into Practice*, no. 3 (1999): 168.

Stan, Susan. *The World Through Children's Books*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

Stieg, Margret F. The Nazi Public Library and the Young Adult. *Top of the News*, 43 (1986): 45-57.

Sutherland, Zena. *Children & Books*. New York: Longman, 1997.

“USBBY Outstanding International Books List” *USBBY*. Accessed February 25, 2015.

[http://www.usbby.org/list\\_oibl.html](http://www.usbby.org/list_oibl.html)

Yoo-Lee, E. Y., Fowler, L., Adkins, D., Kim, K. S., & Davis, H. N. “Evaluating Cultural Authenticity in Multicultural Picture Books: A Collaborative Analysis for Diversity Education.” *Library Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2014): 324-347.

“We Need Diverse Books: Official Campaign Site.” *We Need Diverse Books*. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://weneeddiversebooks.org/>

“Welcome to IBBY.” *International Board of Books for Youth*. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.ibby.org>

“Welcome to the Mildred L. Batchelder Award home page.” *ALSC*. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/batchelderaward>

### **Resources in US for finding international books**

How can you contribute to building a market for international books? There are a number of excellent resources available.

#### The United States Board on Books for Young People (USBBY)

USBBY maintains an annual list of Outstanding International Books (2015). The 2015 List marks the tenth anniversary of this list, and paired with an annual article in *School Library Journal*, and presentations at ALA's Midwinter and Annual conferences, the list does much to promote the best international books published in North America each year.

#### The Association for Library Service to Children's (ALSC) Mildred L. Batchelder Award

ALSC's list of Batchelder Award Winners and Notable Books is another excellent, but limited, source of quality international books available in North America ("Welcome to the Mildred L. Batchelder Award" 2015). Unlike a notables list, the award is limited in scope to an annual winner and honor books. Kasey L. Garrison, Danielle E. Forest, and Sue C. Kimmel's (2014) article on promoting global citizenship through literature, found that most Batchelder winners come from European languages such as "French, German, and Dutch," (72), and that ". . . a composite Batchelder Award winner or honor from the years 1997-2013 would be a realistic fiction novel set in Western

Europe featuring a male protagonist and dealing with a serious topic like World War II” (72).

#### International Reading Association (IRA)’s Notable Books for a Global Society

Since 1995, IRA has published an annual list of Notable Books for a Global Society, and the current list is available here: While not always international, the committee chooses 25 outstanding books that promote global, intercultural understanding.

#### International Board on Books for Young People: The Hans Christian Andersen Medal

The Hans Christian Andersen Medal (IBBY, 2014) is given every other year to an author and an illustrator, but like the Batchelder Award, this list is limited to an author and an illustrator, plus honor books every other year. The books are not always available in the United States.

The 2014 author winner from Japan, Naoko Uehashi, is the author of the *Moribito* series, published by Arthur A. Levine books, but the books of Brazilian illustrator Roger Mello, winner of the 2014 picture book award and illustrator of over 100 books, are not available in North America as of this writing.

#### “We Need Diverse Books”

A new campaign, started on Twitter in 2014 to raise awareness around diverse books, may be changing the landscape. “We Need Diverse Books” (“We Need”, 2014) is a

newly founded, grass roots organization, with a Children's Literature Diversity Festival (first one will be held in Washington, D.C. in 2016), a short-story contest, grants, and awards, initially focusing on young adult literature.