

For the love of it: publishing picture books in translation

In this podcast, Sophie Jones explores the UK market for picture books in translation and why so few mainstream publishers are engaged in this area of children's publishing. In an interview with Greet Pauwelijn of Book Island, she discovers the key role played by small, independent publishers in increasing access and bibliodiversity, and learns about the difficulties they face in bringing picture books from abroad into the UK market.

Links to organisations mentioned in this podcast:

Book Island: <https://www.bookisland.co.uk/>

Literature Across Frontiers: <https://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/>

Outside In World: <http://www.outsideinworld.org.uk>

PEN Translates: <https://www.englishpen.org/translation/pen-translates/>

Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators: <https://www.scbwi.org/>

WorldKidLit Blog: <https://worldkidlit.wordpress.com/>

Links to picture books mentioned in this podcast:

Francis, L. & Gaudesaboos, P. (2013), *Sammy & the Skyscraper Sandwich*, Bristol: Book Island. Available from: <https://www.bookisland.co.uk/products/sammy-and-the-skyscraper-sandwich>

Perkin, J. (2019), *Mum's Jumper*, Bristol: Book Island. Available from: <https://www.bookisland.co.uk/products/mums-jumper>

Plantel, E. & Casal, M., translated by Schimel, L. (2021) *This Is a Dictatorship*, Bristol: Book Island. Available from: <https://www.bookisland.co.uk/products/this-is-a-dictatorship>

Transcript

This podcast was recorded on 17th October 2021.

Hi, my name is Sophie Jones. For this podcast, I was lucky enough to interview Greet Paulwijn of Book Island, an independent publisher in Bristol that publishes picture books from abroad alongside its own titles. I asked Greet what had motivated her to start Book Island.

When you look around at the small publishing houses who focus on translation, you'll see that a lot of us are from abroad: we're often immigrants. I started Book Island when I was living in New Zealand. We had moved from Belgium with two small children, and I was desperate to find the picture books that I had been reading to them back home, which were often translations, but I couldn't find them there, and I just decided to do something about it.

It's not only in New Zealand that access to translated books is limited. Outside in World, an organisation that advocates for children's books in translation, suggests that these titles account for less than 1% of the children's books currently available in the UK (Outside in World, 2021a). The situation is particularly dire when it comes to children's books that originated from non-European

countries. Of the 1095 translated children's titles either published or distributed in the UK between 2005 and 2019, just 153 came from outside Europe (Outside in World, 2021b).¹

So why does this matter?

Claire Storey, a translator and founder member of the not-for-profit organisation World Kid Lit, identifies three key reasons for publishing children's books in translation (Storey, 2021). First, to improve children's **access** to the rich variety of world literature; second, to encourage **cultural exchange** by providing a window into other people's lives. And third, to promote **authentic representation** by empowering people from other countries to speak for and about themselves.

Given these powerful motivations for publishing translated titles for children, why don't more mainstream UK publishers do it? Let's hear from Greet again:

It's all about money. If you want to make money as a publisher, you need to commission new titles and sell the rights to those new titles to other countries – that's where the money is; that's a very risk-free approach. But if you acquire the rights to a foreign edition, you have to pay a high advance [sic]; you have your production costs. Your author and illustrator don't live in your country; they don't speak your language, so it's very difficult to engage them in your social media and marketing campaigns. So these are all hurdles that most British publishers find very difficult.

In the picture book market, where production costs are high but fierce competition keeps cover prices low, translation rights sales or foreign language co-editions may be the only means of ensuring that a book is financially viable. The global dominance of the English language gives UK and US publishers a huge advantage when it comes to selling translation rights to their titles, and it means they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Why invest heavily in publishing a translated book from abroad, when you have a guaranteed global market for your own English-language titles?

Unfortunately, such a risk-averse approach makes the UK market quite bland and predictable:

Very often they'll just produce the same kind of content as others are publishing, because they know it will sell and they will be able to sell it into, maybe, 20 countries. So, they won't touch topics like death, which is a very difficult one because it's culturally defined. There are lots of topics that are taboo.²

A perception that some subject matter is not suitable for picture books makes it difficult for titles from other publishing cultures to enter the UK market. And this gatekeeping takes place throughout the publishing supply chain. Greet has found that booksellers are unwilling to stock Book Island's latest picture book, *This Is a Dictatorship* (Plantel, E. and Casal, M., 2021), because of its political content.

What's more, the strict categorisation of the children's book market in the UK, into different ages and formats, means it struggles to accommodate the full range of books that are produced globally.

¹ The limited availability of children's books in translation is part of a wider and ongoing imbalance in global publishing that saw roughly ten times as many books translated *from* English as *into* English from other languages between 1979 and 2017 (UNESCO, 2017, cited in Clark and Phillips, 2020, p318).

² It is worth noting that Book Island's most successful book is *Mum's Jumper*, an English-language picture book about death and grief by Jayde Perkin (2019). Despite the 'sensitive' subject matter, Book Island sold 10,000 copies in the UK alone and was able to sell the rights to ten foreign publishers.

Those that don't fit into the rigid categories are less likely to get published and sold, because the publishing supply chain doesn't know what to do with them.

Just to give you a good example: our very first book, Sammy & the Skyscraper Sandwich, is a really big board book from Belgium. And when I showed that to my very first sales rep, he said, "But that's not for babies; board books are for babies. How are we going to get this book into the bookshops – they won't take it."

In such a difficult market, how can small independent presses afford to publish children's books in translation at all?

Many European governments provide funding to support the translation of their children's books into English.³ However, as Greet has found, these funds are not sufficient to compensate for the structural barriers built into the UK publishing industry.

I've been receiving a lot of money from foreign publishers: the Dutch, the Flemish, the Polish and the Portuguese literature funds are very generous – but it doesn't cover the costs. I've never really said this publicly, but I actually don't make a living from Book Island.

Until the market structures that govern UK children's publishing change, the availability of picture books in translation will remain unduly reliant on the dedication and passion of individual translators, publishers and booksellers working against the odds to supply fabulous global books to UK children.

References

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³ Grants are also available in the UK from PEN Translates. Details of funding opportunities are available on the World Kid Lit blog and the Outside In World website.

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