

A Good Book Is Universal

In *Odd Dog* (2012), written and illustrated by Claudia Boldt, two dogs live next door to one another (see Figure 1). One jealously guards his apple tree and is just waiting for a delicious apple to ripen. When it finally drops to the ground, it's on the other side of the fence. The dogs are named Helmut and Igor. The author-illustrator is German, living in London. (NorthSouth Books bought the book from Random House UK, where it was originally published.) At NorthSouth, we thought Helmut and Igor were a bit unusual for dog names, so with the author's permission, we changed the names to the more American Milo and Peanut, which we thought were very cute. Later in the process, we learned that Helmut and Igor were meant to poke fun at a strained relationship between Germany and Russia—two countries historically prone to thinking that the other is always getting the better deal. All this, in a funny little book about dogs in their backyards.



Figure 1.

In the end, we still decided to change the dogs' names. The cultural context is fascinating, and in hindsight, perhaps we should have included the backstory as a note somewhere in the endpapers. However, I wonder how much it would matter to most children and parents who are, as they should be, simply looking for a great book to read before bed? Would it matter more today than it did in 2011, when we published *Odd Dog*?

Since coming to NorthSouth Books in 2008, I have noticed a wonderful opening of minds when it comes to supporting books in translation and international publishing. In 2008, after years of hearing that our books were “too European” or simply *too weird* for the US market, we decided to try to embrace our international identity instead of obscuring it. Yes, we still change cover images and fonts to make them as appealing as possible to American readers, and we might still tinker with names and Americanize spellings, but we simplified our mission down to bringing

the best in international picturebooks to the US. And with that came wonderful new relationships, absolutely gorgeous books, and a clearer identity and purpose.

The Value of Relationships

How do you bring the best in international publishing to the US? The first step is having relationships with some of the best publishers around the world. Due to NorthSouth having a parent company in Zurich, Switzer-

land, we are in a unique position to interact with the German market and observe what is bubbling to the top as far as awards and sales. Then we bring those projects to the US.

Many German publishers rely on rights sales to share their picturebooks with US readers. Having warm relationships with quality German and Austrian publishers has enabled NorthSouth to publish

author-illustrator Sebastian Meschenmoser, who was recently nominated for the German Children's Literature Award, or Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis. Meschenmoser's work has been very warmly received here in the US, despite the fact that his books are often very European and very wonderfully weird.

Many relationships with publishers and

author-illustrators are forged at the large book fairs in Frankfurt, Germany, and Bologna, Italy. And one of the hottest places to hunt for talent is the Nami Island Concours, which provides an incredible opportunity to see some of the work of talented illustrators from countries all over the world. The challenge is that the farther afield you go geographically and the farther you reach outside your comfort zone, the longer everything takes.

I am very often asked why we don't publish more books from the Middle Eastern countries or from Africa. It's not a lack of interest. As a publisher, I think it has more to do with the complexity of negotiating contracts in those languages and coming to an understanding of what each country thinks of as standard. In addition, since many books in translation don't hew to US norms, it's not uncommon for international picturebooks to have lexile levels that teachers are more used to seeing for far more advanced readers.

Also, the concept of a book differs all over the world. We're fairly rigid here in the US about what we accept as a picturebook. We want 32 pages, with a spine and a jacket. At some country pavilions in Bologna or Frankfurt, I have seen beautiful illustrations, but they are held in a staple-bound book of very few pages. The layout is often vastly different than what

we expect. At a certain point, you take a photo of the book cover with your iPhone and say you will remind yourself to contact that artist and perhaps commission something fresh instead of translating and re-engineering what exists. Still, we do find books that are wonderful while being outside the norm of US trade publishing. *My Little Book of Chinese Words* (Louis, Bo, & Bradley, 2008), a 200-page paperback in small trim with French flaps and priced at \$17.95, became a surprise hit for us, reprinting many times.

The Challenges of Publishing International Titles

Fitting American Cultural Norms

Children's publishing in the US has a deserved reputation for prudishness. We don't like bare breasts! Or jokes about urinating. NorthSouth has published several books where we've decided to add a cami-sole to topless ladies. I can offer a rationale beyond being Puritanical. As someone who has led many story hours at my local school library, nothing brings on children's giggles like topless ladies. While both books that I am thinking of, *Coco and the Little Black Dress* (Van Haeringen, 2015) and *The Queen of Colors* (Bauer, 2014), featured warm, joyful, respectful art, in the US, including that original artwork changes how the book is perceived and thus affects the way it could be enjoyed here.

NorthSouth makes other minor changes to make international texts acceptable to readers in the United States. Our US editor, Beth Terrill, sees more allowance for children doing things at their own risk in books from other cultures versus the US, where she sees books that tend to be more measured. For example, in the Japanese import, *Seven Little Mice Go to the Beach* (Iwamura & Yamashita, 2012), seven young mice and their parents go to a little inlet away from the crowd (and the lifeguard); Beth addressed the US's more protective stance by adding details to the text demonstrating that the baby mice in this story are proficient swimmers and are wearing life jackets.

We also see humor that differs from ours, sometimes in shocking ways. In Sebastian Meschenmoser's (2015) *Mr. Squirrel and the Moon*, a squirrel finds a wheel of cheese outside his home. He thinks it's the moon. Mr. Squirrel worries that he'll be accused of stealing the moon and sent to jail, which leads to a

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Figure 2.

black-and-white spread of Mr. Squirrel, in a jail cell, sitting on a bed with a hardened convict next to him, and a teeny, tiny urinal in the bottom right corner of the page (see Figure 2).

Meschenmoser visited the US, and I attended a story hour where he read the book to an audience of children at McNally-Jackson Books in NYC. The mom sitting next to me had deposited her children in the front row and then come around to the back to sip her coffee and read her phone messages. By chance, she looked up when Meschenmoser reached the jail spread, and she visibly started and looked at me, confused. Taken out of context, it's very different from what you see in most picturebooks! However, the children at the story hour loved it. "Mr. Squirrel worries he will go to jail for stealing the moon," Meschenmoser intoned, with his very deep voice and slight German accent. But the kids squealed in delight, yelling back, "It's cheese, Mr. Squirrel! It's CHEESE!" Afterwards, Meschenmoser said that he thinks children love the story because they know more than Mr. Squirrel knows.

While the children at this store loved the book, and many reviewers gave it high praise, we knew the humor would be challenging for some, so we weren't completely blindsided by the *School Library Journal's* (Simpson, 2014) review: "The book's droll sense of humor is marred, however, by three spreads that presumably come from the worried squirrel's imagination. These dark pictures of a man in jail are downright creepy and ruin the playful tone of the story. Readers should use their judgment when sharing this book with children." However, *Booklist* (Weisman, 2015) softened the blow with their verdict: "This makes a good choice for story hours or one-on-one sharing."

Meschenmoser's illustrations don't pull punches—his jail scene is dark and humorous at the same time. In person, he casually mentioned that the scene was inspired by Charlie Chaplin's *Little Tramp*, and the humor then became even more obvious. But I needed a conversation with him to discover this. It wasn't a detail that came across in emails prior to publication.

Discovering International Titles

The deeper understanding that face-to-face contact with an author can bring to a publication leads me to the issue of discoverability and the challenges of not having authors here "on the ground" in the United States. Most books and careers are built in the school market. Unless you're a celebrity, it's the first pillar of support. NorthSouth has a commitment to bringing authors and illustrators to the US, and in the last several years, we've been lucky to host Ute Krause, Torben Kuhlmann, Lisbeth Zwerger, and Sebastian Meschenmoser for events in the US, ranging from meetings of the Book Expo of America (BEA) and the American Library Association (ALA) to the United States Board on Books for Youth (USBBY).

The annual USBBY list of Outstanding International Books is one path to discoverability. The Batchelder Award also offers tremendous visibility in the library community. Outside of the library community, though, the interest in books in translation is not great. And that is the challenge—to give educators and librarians the information and context they need, but also to create a book that stands on its own feet as simply a great book, regardless of where it was originally published.

While there has been a rash of articles about the dearth of translated books available, I notice many of them seem to focus solely on the Big 5 publishers, possibly because the writers don't realize there are smaller publishers that are actively pursuing these titles. In fact, statistics about books in translation are hard to find, and when I dig deeper, I often discover that these writers have only surveyed the Big 5. There are also books in translation that the public does not always recognize as being translations, like Manga (a huge trend), Taro Gomi's board books, and clas-

sics like *The Rainbow Fish* (Pfister & James, 1999); I submit that is true, at least in part, because they are so well done.

Translation and International Titles

Of course, publishing international titles would be impossible without translators. Our translators are very skilled and offer a bridge that online tools like Google Translate can't touch. No offense to the online translator (which can, in a pinch, be great for an email), but when nuance and context are key, you must rely on a quality *human* translator. David Henry Wilson, a translator who handles many NorthSouth picture-book translations, offers this observation about names, which brings us full circle to *Odd Dog* and

Helmut and Igor:

I think names are important, especially in books for younger children. It would be hard for an American child to identify with a pig called Gottfried, especially as the name is pronounced Gotfreet, and the author certainly wouldn't have intended her pig to get fried. But Percy Pig immediately brings a little smile to your face. And so, if the author doesn't mind, it's well worth making such changes. And you can often do the same in the text itself: if there is a pun or a bit of alliteration that you can't translate in one sentence, maybe you can use the device in another; you don't change the content, but you do try to emulate the style, which is just as important.

Universality in Story

All the changes we initiate in our books that have been translated from other languages are aimed at making them accessible to a wide audience without diminishing their unique qualities and nuances. We select books based on the universal merits of story,

characterization, and engaging artwork and innovation. Where the book comes from and what language it was originally written in are intriguing and informing, but ultimately not relevant to most readers.

Overall, more than differences, I'm impressed by the universality that exists across all cultures. What are some of these universalities? As NorthSouth editor Beth Terrill says:

Love of our children, families, friends, pets, neighbors, environment, and world; humor—often thought to be very culture-specific—but can't most of us laugh at the little dung beetle mistaking a golf ball for an egg as seen in *Babak the Beetle* (Paranuzzi & Prigent, 2016), originally published in France, or hearing 999 tadpoles ask "Are we there yet?" as seen in *999 Tadpoles* (Kimura & Murakami, 2011), originally published in Japan; and those daily challenges—getting our children to go to bed, eat their vegetables, share, be open minded and accepting of others who are different.

I couldn't agree more.

Heather Lennon is the Managing Director at NorthSouth Books, a small publisher devoted to publishing beautiful picturebooks from an array of artists and authors from around the world.

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