

Children's Books in Translation; Why is there a British problem?



Nicholas Tucker

Publishers have to make money, and those in Britain who have tried translating children's books from abroad have often lost more than they have gained. This is not an invariable rule: think of the profits that must have accrued from *Heidi*, *Pippi Longstocking* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. But in general, a picture book from a foreign illustrator or, even more problematic, a teenage novel from somewhere in Europe both still have less chance of commercial success over here. Why?

One reason must be that there has for many years been an abundance of good books coming on to the market, making it less likely that publishers will look abroad while so much is going on at home. With their authors and illustrators on hand for publicity jaunts and school visits, these British books already have a built-in advantage in a country long unused anyway to looking abroad for inspiration. It would be different if the British spoke only a minority language or felt that their own culture was cutting them off from more interesting developments elsewhere. But buoyed up by centuries of uninvaded independence, the British have long been prone to think that foreigners are more likely to learn something from them rather than the other way round.

The experience of two World Wars also meant that many other European countries were either demonised, patronised or just laughed at during propaganda campaigns at the time and this applied to contemporary children's literature and lasted long after each war came to an end. Such vestigial distrust of abroad is still perceptible in those weary jokes about krauts and wops of the type that used once to amuse young readers of the war-time *Beano* and *Dandy* comics. This attitude also owes something to a centuries old Protestant distrust of Europe's Roman Catholic mainland. Or as geography book published for children in 1818 put it,

Q. Would not God be ang-r-y that I-tal-ians wor-ship i-dols and a piece of bread?

A. God is ang-ry.

Yet children themselves, before they have had time to absorb some of these noxious attitudes, are open to all sorts of literature coming their way. For them, especially when they are small, the whole world can seem like a foreign country where people are apt to do or say unaccountable things. Small children like returning to various favourite books to find some sense of order in what the psychologist William James, brother to the more famous Henry, termed 'the great blooming, buzzing confusion' typical of an infant's first impressions of the world. Nationality is the least of their problems when it comes to understanding others at a time when even their own uncle can on occasions seem seriously unpredictable.

It is no surprise, therefore, to find that popular nursery rhymes and fairy tales convey little or no sense of nationality. Cinderella comes over first and foremost as someone infants like and understand; which country she lives in is an irrelevance. Hansel and

Gretel obviously sound foreign, but their war against the witch is universal. Animal characters tend to be equally stateless, living in their own anthropomorphic world. The fact that all fairy tale or picture book characters, foreign or otherwise, are invariably portrayed speaking English also makes them easy to assimilate. When infants encounter foreigners who only speak their own language, their response is to continue talking to them in English, but more loudly. The idea that anyone cannot understand a language that infants themselves can speak is for some time simply too difficult for them to contemplate.

Eventually children realise that other countries exist where things are sometimes done differently, and all the more interesting for that. Babar the Elephant, with his stylish city clothes and dinky car, is extra fascinating because he lives in two environments both so different from a British child's experience: the deep jungle and inter-war metropolitan France. And it is at this point, when child readers are ready for more advanced picture books, that Britain could be more so much more adventurous in primary school book provision. One long-term way of encouraging a suspicious electorate to take a more benign view of their partners in the EU could be to make sure that its children come across more picture books set in the other countries now linked together. If this sort of provision was deemed to need extra financial aid from a body like Ariane, the EU translation committee, so be it. Spending a tiny part of the EU budget on translating picture books from every member country and then making sure they were distributed across the board would surely make more sense than yet one more food subsidy.

Inadequately sampling a foreign culture can at times be even more misleading than knowing nothing about it at all. Brought up myself on Lucy Fitch Perkins' famous *Twins* series, I believed for some years that the Chinese wore pigtailed and still bound children's feet and that all Dutch children wore clogs. But a translation of Erich Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives* proved more fruitful, at a time when British bombers were droning overhead night after night on their way to yet another saturation bombing exercise. What, I used sometimes to wonder, might be happening to boys like Emil, let alone his mother, his grandmother and all his friends? Simply realising that people abroad were still recognisably human was important when British newspapers carried slogans like 'The only good German is a dead German.' Erich Kästner, banned in his own country, was an important figure for many children in war-time Britain, particularly when it came to forming attitudes to post-1945 Germany. Years later, Philip Pullman claimed the same novel as one of his inspirations for his great trilogy, *His Dark Materials*.

Modern picture books and stories from the rest of Europe often take a bleaker view of world politics than is usual over here. Examples include Georges Lemoine's *La petite marchande d'allumettes*, Pef's *Une si jolie poupée* and Roberto Innocenti's *Rose Blanche*. This last title, appearing in Britain in 1985 with a text by Ian McEwan based on a story by Christophe Gallaz, is about a small child discovering the secret existence of a concentration camp outside her small town in Germany. Ending in one more tragedy, this beautiful and moving book has been universally well received by British teachers and critics. The two other titles I refer to, by Georges Lemoine and the self-styled Pef, both unforgettably allude to the recent war in Bosnia. Children who have the chance to read such books can only come away feeling wiser if a little sadder.

Abroad is not just about politics; it is also about different ways of seeing, feeling and behaving. Continental illustrators like Michael Sowya and Quint Buchholz carry with them an exciting whiff of subversion for readers used only to how things are at home. Authors like Gudrun Pausewang, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Daniel Pennac and

Ted van Lieshout, who are translated, do the same thing in print. *Vive la difference!* indeed, but how typical it is that this resounding phrase still as yet has no British equivalent!

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