

World of stories

Aletta Stevens reveals how a paucity of translated books means English-speaking children are missing out on a rich variety of literature from around the world



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There is not enough translated literature for young people published in the UK.' This statement on the Bath Children's Literature Festival website was the opening line of an invitation to meet three Continental children's writers whose work has been translated into English. The rallying cry came from Daniel Hahn, National Programme Director of the British Centre for Literary Translation. His indefatigable efforts to organise translation events at Britain's literary festivals over the past few years have not gone unnoticed. Nor have his translations from French, Spanish and Portuguese: in 2007 Hahn won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for his translation of *O Vendedor de Passados* (*The Book of Chameleons*) by José Eduardo Agualusa. The ITI Western Regional Group witnessed Hahn's meeting with the Angolan novelist as part of the Bath Literary Festival in March 2009, and in October 2013 our members were at the Guildhall in Bath again.

This time Daniel Hahn was joined by Kim Fupz Aakeson and Janne Teller from Denmark, and Bart Moeyaert from Dutch-speaking Belgium, established children's writers with a considerable body of work and numerous prizes behind them – hence the support from the Danish Arts Council, the Danish Cultural Institute and the Flemish Literature Fund.

On the British side, the event was supported by the British Centre for Literary Translation and by Pushkin Press, which recently launched a children's books imprint. Being no stranger to children's literature

himself – the first volume of his co-edited *The Ultimate Book Guide* (a series of reading guides for children and teenagers) won the Blue Peter Book Award, and his translation in poetry for the picture book *Happiness Is a Watermelon on Your Head* was published by Phoenix Yard Books in 2012 – Daniel Hahn was the ideal host to introduce these authors.

Authors pushing boundaries

Having started out as an illustrator, Kim Fupz Aakeson now has some 80 books for children and adults to his name, as well as a large number

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of screenplays. He does not shy away from major themes, such as death and illness, and looks at how children deal with these. The first five titles of his *Vitello* series of books for children aged 5+ have been translated into English by Ruth Garde and were published by Pushkin Children's Books in 2013. The stories are about a mischievous boy called Vitello, who gets into all kinds of scrapes. Daniel raised the interesting question as to whether one of the titles, *Vitello carries a knife*, travelled or not, but unfortunately time constraints prevented us from discussing this.

But what is it that film scripts, books for very young children and novels for teenagers have in common? Kim replied: 'There is space in writing for kids; it is a free country.' As someone who also has written for adults, Janne Teller agreed: 'Young people are more open-minded; they ask questions. It was fun to write for them; it felt free.'

Born in Denmark into an Austrian-German family, Janne currently lives in New York and Berlin. After training as a macroeconomist, she acted as an adviser to the European Union and the United Nations in conflict resolution and humanitarian issues. She is now a full-time writer and, having lived in eleven different countries, has found that children everywhere around the globe ask the same questions about the big things in life. Her work has been translated into a dozen or more languages, with Martin Aitken's English translation of her novel *Intet* (*Nothing*, 2011) receiving several awards. This story about a boy who thinks life is meaningless caused huge controversy in Denmark – where it was initially banned – as well as in literary circles in other countries.

Bart Moeyaert from Flanders had his first book published at 19. After completing an art degree and a teaching qualification in Dutch, German and history, he wrote widely, including film scripts, theatre plays and musicals, and edited several children's magazines. Teaching creative writing at the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp led to his appointment as the city's official poet. One of his best known books, *Blote handen*, was translated by David Colmer (*Bare Hands*, 1998). Bart's work has been translated into many languages, but he has translated stories from English, French and German himself, making him particularly understanding of the translation process.

His writing style is intuitive, he told us: 'There is a lot of mystery; you can read much between the lines. It's about sensations for me.' Bart remarked that he, too, had one of his books censored – in Belgium – for mentioning a male part of the body. Asked if he values contact with the translators of his books, Bart affirmed that he is much in

favour of this, although the translator may not sense the language in the same way as he does, since it is the publisher who chooses the translator, not the author.

Tiny proportion

What these writers have in common is that they have been pushing the boundaries of children's literature, and this has stimulated debate on what can and cannot be included. In that sense their work is groundbreaking and is furthering the genre in a refreshing way. Many readers on the Continent have been able to experience these stories in their own language, as well as generally enjoy books translated from English.

Janne believes that English children's books are particularly well translated, because the culture is known from film and television, and therefore better captured. So children's book translation seems to be alive and well on the Continent. But what about the other way round: how much children's literature reaches British shores? Only about 3% of the books in the UK market are translations, compared with about 23% in France, as Philip Pullman points out in his foreword to *Outside In: Children's Books in Translation*.¹ So the percentage that represents translated children's books is even smaller.

The issue is not that the British have been completely deprived of children's books in translation. Who is not familiar with – or at least aware of – classics such as Aesop's *Fables*, Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*, Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* and, not to forget, *Astérix* and *Tintin*? Puffin brought us Tove Jansson's *Moomin* and, more recently, British pre-school children were introduced to Miffy, the creation of Dutch illustrator Dick Bruna, and teenagers to Cornelia Funke's *Inkworld* trilogy.

In many cases, the names of the translators who enabled us to access these treasures are forgotten, and are sometimes substituted with the names of retranslators. While the above list represents more than a century of translation from a good number of languages – Latin, Danish, Italian,

German, Swedish, Dutch, French – it is only a very small selection.

Rich diversity

Most of these stories have become so much a part of world literature – reinforced by television and film adaptations – that we may not even think of them as translations any more. In fact, after a period of time the perceived foreignness of the characters has worn off and we are more ready to accept them. On that basis, just imagine what riches would lie in store for British children if we were to tap into the new canon of children's literature around the world. We simply must continue to explore and find new stories that

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can become part of our lives.

But why does the UK seem less eager to publish translations than other countries? A rich heritage of indigenous literature, both for adults and children, may be one reason. Another is the UK's geographical location as an island, which has brought about a certain detachment and self-sufficiency, and thirdly we can cite the powerful, global status of the English language.

As Daniel Hahn pointed out, the problem here in the UK is also that there are no commissioning editors at publishing houses who read, for example, Danish, a language spoken by only five million people. By contrast, the European country with the highest population – Germany – is particularly important to all publishers, whether in the UK, the US or on the Continent. And the Frankfurt Book Fair is a focal point for publishers, authors and translators alike. At this international event translators can put forward ideas for book translations. In addition, it showcases a different country each year.


Janne believes that translations

are more highly valued in Germany and that translators are more respected, as is evident from the translation prizes awarded there. However, with plenty of translation awards in the UK, too, we may wonder what is holding back the UK market from publishing translated work. It is fair to say that the children's divisions of the better-known English-language publishing houses, ie Orion, Walker, Penguin, Harper Collins, Bloomsbury, Macmillan and Hodder, have all published translations, but it is not enough.

Exploring other cultures

David Almond, the Carnegie Medal-winning author of *Skellig*, said: 'Children need to read the best books by the best writers from all parts of the world. Of course they do. But the plain fact is that there is very little translated children's fiction published in the UK, and our children are missing out.'

Now that the UK is as multicultural as some of its Continental neighbours – and will become even more so in the near future – there is no reason why British children should not read translated books as part of their cultural diet. It would be foolish and ungenerous, to say the least, to deny British children this knowledge and understanding. In fact, we need to go further than that. Since Britain is part of the global economy and will become more outward-looking, while at the same time acknowledging the cultural differences within its own borders, it is vital that its children gain an understanding of diversity around the world. One of the ways to achieve that is for them to read about children in other cultures – and not just Western European ones.

Naturally, language learning should be part of their education, but no one can learn all the languages in the world. Parents can start reading translated stories as soon as their children are born, and an interest in the languages and cultures depicted in those stories may well follow. If we allow British children to share in the wealth of stories from outside the UK, they could create a better world, with greater understanding. 

'Edited by Deborah Hallford and Edgardo Zaghini (Milet Publishing, Chicago, 2005).