

More Than Words: Translating a Path to Global Awareness

BY SERAH-MARIE MCMAHON

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There is an Italian adage, *traduttore traditore*, which means something close to *translator is traitor*. It's funny because, aside from the questions it raises about the fidelity of translation, it puns on the similarity of the words. Translated to English, of course, the pun disappears. On the other hand, it becomes an *autology* — a perfect example of itself.

You can learn a lot about a culture by how they tell a story. However traitorous it may be, translation offers a glimpse into cultures and viewpoints that would otherwise remain unavailable. If we in Canada truly value diversity and inclusivity, books (and particularly those for children) must be important early exposures to the spectrum of cultures, values and storytelling.

To find out more about contemporary considerations of picture book translation, *Canadian Children's Book News* spoke with the following publishers, rights directors, editors and translators. We discussed books translated for the Canadian market (buy-ins), Canadian books translated abroad (selling rights) and what it takes to be a great book in translation (that can travel).

Sheila Barry (**SB**) is the publisher at Groundwood Books.

Karen Boersma (**KB**) is the publisher at Owlkids Books.

Yvette Ghione (**YG**) is the editorial director at Kids Can Press.

Barbara Howson (**BH**) is Vice President of Sales and Licensing at House of Anansi and Groundwood Books.

Chantale Lalonde (**CL**) is Vice President of the French Division at Scholastic Canada.

Susan Ouriou's (**SO**) translations for children and young adults have won numerous awards.

Adrienne Tang (**AT**) is the Rights Director at Kids Can Press.

What changes has the translation market seen recently?

CL: For a long time, Scholastic was the only publisher in Canada translating books into French, but a few years ago the government created a translation-specific grant and heaps of books have since entered the market. Many are... not the best. Their sales are not terrific. Because of this, when we present our books in Quebec we hear complaints that translations don't sell, but our numbers tell a different story. However, when a book is good, it needs to be broadcast around the world. How many languages is *Harry Potter* in? Translation from another language is not a valuation of quality.

YG: We've increased translation buy-ins in the last seven years, certainly. I think the market is more receptive to voices from away, "own voices," stories that are not typical of what we've previously seen in the North American landscape, different illustration styles. I don't know if that's down to the tastes of the few loudest voices, the bigger blogs in the States. I don't know that we can call them tastemakers, but certainly they're highlighting creators who may not have received the same attention. I honestly don't know if amazing authors like Aikiko Miyokoshi had been published in North America 10 years ago, if people would have responded. I hope so. There's nothing too radical about her illustration style. But there is sort of an other-worldliness about it.

SO: There seems to be a willingness to tackle darker subjects. I see it as a way of acknowledging the challenges that children in modern society are often forced to face, whether it be mental illness, a family's break-up, a parent losing a job, physical and cyber bullying, less contact with the great outdoors or technology's invasion of time for play. Not to mention young people's exposure to news of major stressors in the larger world — climate change, international tension and wars, inequality, poverty, the truth about Canada's treatment of First Peoples... the list goes on. Children need literature to feel less alone, to find their own path through it all.

KB: Technology has changed. We can send samples by PDF, everything moves quicker. It's easier to reach a wide variety of people, to find a publisher I might not otherwise have found, or one I would not have expected to be interested in that particular book, in that particular territory. It works both ways; we've had publishers find us who might not have before.

When you acquire a new book, how much do you consider its potential to be translated elsewhere?

BH: Greenwood is a bit of an anomaly, because our publisher is very strong-willed and gets to do whatever she wants! [laughs] However, when I worked for other presses we were consulted a lot, because so much of the income would come from foreign rights. Selling in Canada is very small. We would publish more for an international market. Greenwood doesn't do that, the sales team doesn't have much input.

SB: The argument I would use, and Barb would agree, is that it's best if you have a house with a strong vision of the kinds of books you do. Do the best books of that type, and you will find a market internationally. Or you won't, international sales are not for every book. Some books will not travel, maybe because of the illustrations, even if the universal story is there.

Who is the most interested in translating Canadian books right now?

BH: We've had more success in France than we've had in a while, though that probably has less to do with aesthetics than finding like-minded small publishers who, in a few cases, took books I'd never dreamed they would have taken.

KB: China is very strong at the moment; we've seen significant growth in the last couple of years. We do a lot with the UK, especially non-fiction picture books. Korea is still strong, probably not as strong as it was four years ago. They've had a tumultuous year politically, and you see that when you're selling rights. But it's still a good market.

AT: Turkey is hot. China is really hot. China just has a huge appetite for foreign books. Though we've been notified by the Association for Canadian Publishers that the Chinese government is concerned that there are too many foreign books in China, and they will be limiting how many they will allow in.

Do you think China scaling back will affect Canadian books?

KB: I'm sure they are looking at how many books they're bringing in, but I think it's too soon to tell what the effect will be. I don't think it's for the kind of books that we are doing, not for good-quality trade books. Our Chinese agents are not overly concerned. But, it's a big market, a complicated market. It's one of the only ones where we work with an agent, because it's so complicated. But it will probably still be good. I'm not particularly worried.

AT: It's still being sorted out. We've talked to our Chinese agents on the ground and they don't think it's going to affect us, for the time being. What they are really concerned about is having a lot of books that are not high quality, that are not strong stories and that are not illustrated very well. Mostly it's the very commercial stuff they are looking to limit now.

There has been a lot of recent attention paid to diversity in North American publishing. How does that affect books in translation?

YG: Cultural sensitivities are something we keep a watchful eye on. So often I'll be flipping through a book... and everybody's white. That's not really going to fly. We have, in a few cases, gone back to publishers and asked that, if it doesn't affect the story in any way, could the illustrator introduce more diversity? We have done that. Some things just don't occur to the originating publisher. Whether that's because of the country, or society, or culture, I can't tell you.

CL: There has been big change, good change. For so long, it was just pages filled with these little white faces. No. At Scholastic I can say very honestly say the French division pushed other divisions. We needed more representation. We sell a lot of books to English Canada, to the immersion market. They're not just white, they're from all over the world. I remember years ago, when we did the *Franklin* books, we couldn't call him Franklin. It's not a French name. The translator suggested Benjamin, and the team went for it. Today there is no way I would change his name. We used to say that the French Canadian market won't know a name like Amal, they won't be able to pronounce it. But kids figure it out, and they are better for it. Multi-ethnicity and diversity is extremely important.

AT: In the past, most international publishers would say absolutely not if there was a Black character on the cover. I couldn't sell it. It's partly the publisher — they have to pave the way — but it's an economical decision, too. If they don't think they can sell the book, they can't make money. Asian territories like Asian characters, but they are very wary of stereotypes. The story can include Asian characters, but not be a story about being Asian. Those stories don't always make sense — being Asian in North America is very different than being Asian in China.

BH: Five years ago, publisher after publisher would tell me that they didn't have people of colour in their country, so they couldn't have multicultural books. Now, they are much more

open to it. They are interested in difficult subjects. Take *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* — I would never have thought it could be sold in Turkey, but we did (sell it). You can't look at books from too much of a political viewpoint, you have to keep an open mind. In any country, even many conservative countries, there are progressive publishers. Finding those like-minded publishers is part of my job. You can go to book fairs like Bologna and you'll have Northern Europeans telling you they only have blond children. It can feel as though that's what every publisher is saying to you. But on some level it means you're not trying hard enough.

Is diversity something your market is specifically asking for?

CL: Yes. Canadian schools, libraries, bookstores and parents are all asking for it. Our French division does about five or six original titles a year, and the rest are all translations we buy from other publishers. Diversity can be hard to find. Right now, for example, I am looking for an amazing picture book about being autistic. Or about a child who knows they are gay from a very early age. There are some books that touch on these topics, but none that are quite right for us, like *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*. It's a truly great book, but the ending was too vague for our market.

AT: Foreign markets are not asking for diversity. No territories, no general publishing from around the world, are asking for it; this is not something we are being asked for. Even still, we are striving to be more diverse all the time. There are organizations that we work with that are encouraging us. Canada is quite progressive, but everywhere else is taking a bit more time to catch up. Eventually I think they will get there. The fact that they no longer voice objections to me I see as progress. They used to just say no, the colour of that person is just not going to work for them. Now they don't say anything. But they are not asking for it.

How does a book change when it is translated?

YG: In *The Way Home in the Night*, we follow a little bunny and his mom, and there are scenes in the windows of certain things that he doesn't actually see, but he's hearing or smelling, for example, of someone baking. It's not in the text. Later in bed he's recalling memories of his walk home, things that he's observed. We made the suggestion to specify in the text that he's remembering scent, "*Mmmm... something smells good.*" To remind the reader that it wasn't all about things he was seeing, but also smelling and hearing, so kids can make the connection a little more easily. We made our case to the original publisher and the author, and they were open to it. Sometimes it works, it's well received. Other times it takes a little time, a little back-and-forth before we hit on what will work for both of us.

SO: I never rewrite text. Most of what I do is to try to understand the original author, what their intention was, what emotions they meant to evoke. Appropriate language is important. Nothing that becomes too difficult for children to follow, while also realizing that they like to be challenged. They are often able to understand much more than you would think at first. You want to speak to their emotions and use language as play. Because, of course, language offers wonderful opportunities for play. More or less, we want the reader to have the same experience in both languages. If there's a cultural reference that doesn't need to be spelled out in the original, because it's something that everyone in that culture knows, often just a word or two will make a reader who isn't from that culture understand what the special significance is. I

don't see it as an addition, because it's information that was already there for anyone who knows the original language and culture. So it should be found in the translation.

What makes something ideal to translate for the Canadian market?

YG: We're looking at the same things generally as we are when we're acquiring an original manuscript. We need to feel confident it will appeal to our market and makes sense with our list. There are glorious books out there, different, humorous books, but they may not have quite the right sensibility. It has to be the perfect package. With non-fiction, there's a little more... I'll say leeway. If the topic is really interesting, really well-handled, but maybe the amount of text is a little more than what our North American audience's threshold might be, we might look at redesigning it. We would have to feel very strongly, though; ideally buy-ins are nice little parachuted-in projects. We're looking to make as few changes to the original as possible.

CL: We publish three catalogues per year, and we have what I call 'the grid' to be filled. We know we need seasonal titles, like back to school, Christmas, Halloween, that kind of thing. We know we need books that are universal stories, like going to the farm, or about being afraid of the dark. A bestseller like the Chris Hadfield book *Plus Noir Que La Nuit* was a no-brainer, it fills that slot. And then we have themes that are popular. Emotion is a big theme right now. Diversity, especially First Nations. We also have to make sure we have a balance of genders. In the end, a parent will look at our list for the month of September, and they'll find something they like.

SB: I'm generally not looking for universal stories, I'm more likely to be interested in something very specific to a time, to a place, to an event, to a particular experience, even if it's quite regional. Because that's what our whole list looks like. I feel it makes for stronger books. We're not homogenized. We would never take out a place reference to make it more generic. That's the opposite of what we do.

Serah-Marie McMahon founded WORN Fashion Journal and edited *The WORN Archive*, published by Drawn Quarterly. She sells and writes about children's books in Toronto. She once yelled the French word for "seal" in front of Hervé Tullet. He thought it was funny.