



Being at Bologna

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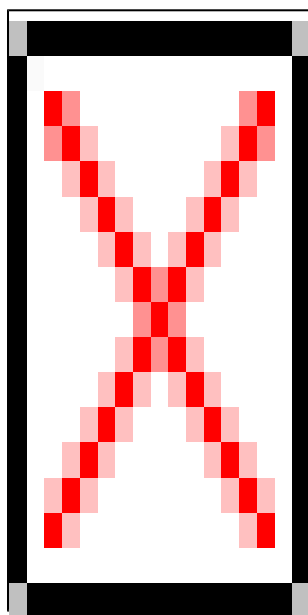
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Clive Barnes visits the international rights fair for **Books for Keeps**



The Bologna Children's Book Fair is the most important international event dedicated to trading rights in the children's publishing and multimedia industry. For almost 50 years publishers, authors, illustrators, literary agents, licensors and licensees, packagers, distributors, printers, booksellers, and librarians from (in 2012) 66 countries meet to sell and buy copyright and find the very best of children's publishing and multimedia production **Clive Barnes** reports.

The Bologna Children's Book Fair is extraordinary: the kind of place that when you're in it, everywhere else ceases to exist and when you've left it, it's as if it has never been - unless, I suppose, you still have deals to tie up and contracts to sign.

Not being a publisher or an agent with a diary crammed with appointments, I was, to an extent, free to wander about through Bologna's Fiera, a complex of enormous futuristic hangars, built to house a succession of trade fairs and which, each March, hosts the largest children's book fair on the planet. Here, in the digital age, selling and buying is still done face to face, just as Renaissance merchants did it in the old city; and, in the space of a couple of hours, if you don't linger too long anywhere, you can travel from Europe to Asia and across to the United States and South America, without jet lag or getting your feet wet, and see just about everything the world has to offer in the way of children's books.

International Awards

It was the international aspect of the Fair that had brought me here. I chair the UK section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and, along with a number of keen UK members, I was promoting our international

Congress, which takes place in London in August this year.

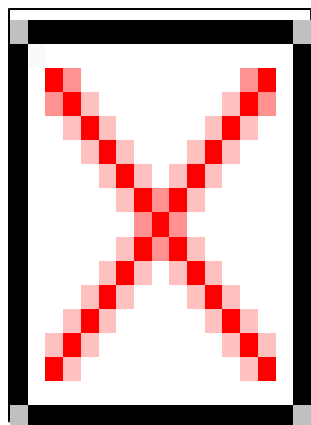
As an organisation, IBBY has long had a presence at Bologna, and it's here that the winners of our Hans Christian Andersen Awards are announced every two years – the most significant international awards for an author's and illustrator's whole body of work. This year, the winning author was Maria Teresa Andruetto from Argentina and the winning illustrator, Peter Sis from Czechoslovakia.

Bologna has become the place to announce international awards. A day after the announcement of the Andersen Awards came the Astrid Lindgren. The Astrid Lindgren Award has only just reached the end of its first decade. It has some attractive features. It is awarded every year, can be given to a person or an organisation for the promotion of reading as well as an author and illustrator, and offers the staggering prize money of over 500,000 Euros. The winner this year was the Dutch author Guus Kuijer.

As you walk around the Fair, you get a pretty good impression of the size and pulling power of children's publishing in each country, not only from the number of publishers present but from the size of their stands and whether they come as a small on-site unit or, like many of the British publishers, as a custom built import: a portable corporate stage set delivered by truck to Bologna, then dismantled afterwards and packed away to reappear at the next international book fair.

Promoting IBBY

The IBBY stand (a larger standard one) was tucked away in a hall which had smaller publishers from countries in Asia, South America and Europe and where custom built stands were the exception, although the Korean stand round the corner was impressive; and there was always something happening across the way with the Malaysians. Next door to us was another international organisation, even older than IBBY, the International Youth Library, based in Munich. This was begun in 1949 by Jella Lepman, who, three years later, was one of IBBY's founding members (along with Astrid Lindgren, among others). Every year, the International Youth Library publishes **The White Ravens**, a catalogue of selected newly published children's books from around the world.



Before Bologna, I am ashamed to say, I had never heard of **The White Ravens**. And I should have, because they've been going since 1997 and each year they list books selected for both their artistic innovation and their contribution to international understanding. Two books which I found particularly intriguing, out of the 250 titles from over 40 countries featured this year, were **Migrar**, a book from Mexico which traces the fate of a family of migrants to the U.S.A. in a single 1.5 metre high fold-out black and white illustration; and, from India, **Bhimayana, Experiences of Untouchability, incidents in the life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar**, a graphic novel with a difference. Both books blend the traditional and the modern and the indigenous and the international. They tell stories with social and emotional impact; and they are arresting works of art.

Even within the relatively small space of the International Youth Library, it was still possible to browse the shelves. Over in the hall with the biggest British publishers, this isn't really the name of the game. Although there are books on the shelves, every available floor space in the stand is taken up with tables and earnest negotiations, and there are reception desks to field those waiting for appointments. Courtesy of **Books for Keeps**, I was able to visit a few stands, and, welcoming though the publishers were to someone who wasn't actually buying or selling anything, it wasn't

unusual to be moved from one table to another as the tide of appointments rose and fell.

Selling rights

Of course, it's not books themselves that are on sale here, but publishing rights, and it's an occasion for publishers to show off the best of their forthcoming lists. And this they do with enthusiasm and not a little panache. At Chicken House, Elinor Bagenal treated me – and it was a real treat – to a performance of the story of Cathryn Constable's **Wolf Princess**, a first novel out in September, complete with Russian hat and globe snowstorm, an experience which could have been made more real only by the arrival of her heroine in a troika, wrapped in a fur blanket, and an unseasonal blizzard.

At Walker, the draw was a new picture book from Jon Klassen, revealed for the first time here, accompanied by the author himself. Klassen is a young slim, laid back, articulate Canadian, now based in Los Angeles, where he had worked as an illustrator for Dreamworks before making a big break into the picture book world when his first book **I Want My Hat Back** became an international bestseller. His latest book, **This is Not My Hat** (October 2012) once more features not only the same item of headgear in the title but the same deadpan humour based on the sly relationship of text and illustration. Taking place entirely below the water line and featuring two main characters, a big fish and a little fish, it has even less text and some almost motionless illustrations that nevertheless draw the reader inexorably in.

Jon talks engagingly about the joy of creating a whole work himself, as against being part of the Dreamworks team. And he muses on how the space between what is told in the text and shown in the illustration can act as a powerful hook on the reader's mind and emotions, making the reader a part of the book. Surprisingly, when I ask him to name the illustrators that had an impact on him as a child, he comes up not with someone like Sendak (although you might trace some influence there) but P.D. Eastman (in the Dr Seuss series of Beginner Books) and Arnold Lobel of **Frog and Toad** (a favourite of mine too) for their ability to create big dramas in small spaces.

I walk away from Walker with another catalogue of forthcoming titles, helpfully marked by my host, Sarah Bennett, and note a new story by David Almond, **The Boy Who Swam with Piranhas**, due out in September and illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. Over at Templar, they have a big name book on their list too: a book of poetry chosen by Michael and Clare Morpurgo and illustrated by Olivia Gill. **Wherever My Wellies Take Me** (May 2012) started out as a straightforward anthology but, as Helen Boyle of Templar tells me, "Michael can't resist an opportunity to tell a story". So it's turned into something a little different, mixing fiction and poetry and with a handsome production that lives up to Helen's aspiration to "in this digital age, produce books that are desirable objects in themselves". Not that I was able to savour all of this desirable object, since it came as a "dummy": a book with half its pages blank that lets you see how it might look and how the beginning of the story goes; and, if it works, leaves you wanting more.

Two of the other dummies that Helen shows me are evidence that talent and enterprise can sometimes be rewarded: **Oh Dear Geoffrey** by Gemma O'Neill (June 2012) and **Penguin in Peril** by Helen Hancocks (September 2012) were both picked up from their first-time author/illustrators, both graduates of illustration at University College, Falmouth, when they visited the stand at last year's Bologna.

Bologna is a mecca for illustrators. You can't be there long before you notice a lot of young people carrying illustrators' portfolios, doing the rounds of the stands looking for a publisher for their work. Some publishers advertise a set time when they will look at portfolios: and I notice quite a queue forming at the Korean stand one afternoon. The Book Fair has its own prize for illustration and a substantial exhibition of work on site, where you can see illustration students eagerly photographing work they like or admire. New illustrators do get noticed here, so much so, that, this year, for the first time, Anglia Ruskin University took a stand to show students' and graduates' work from its illustration course.

Books in translation

Walking around at Bologna, there is so much good work from so many countries (as well as a lot that is, well, market driven, to be polite), whether in text or illustration, that you wonder why more of it isn't represented in Britain. Take the

Andersen and Astrid Lindgren award winners for instance. Andruetto isn't published at all in English and only two of Guus Kuijer's over fifty titles have ever been translated. And this isn't just about translation, because there's a lot from other countries that publish in English that doesn't reach us.

There is a sense in which we are the victims of our own success. Why would you go looking around the world when the world is clammering to buy what you have at home? But there are other considerations, as Emma Langley from Phoenix Yard explained to me.

Phoenix Yard do publish work in translation, and Emma was in Bologna looking for likely titles. While a publisher who buys foreign rights to a book doesn't have the costs associated with developing the book in the first place, they don't benefit from having any rights of their own to sell. And there are other costs. They need readers with the necessary language skills to assess the books as well as translators who do the work when a book is chosen. Sometimes translation can turn into something more. Stella Dreis's **Happiness is a Watermelon On Your Head**, a picture book published to great reviews earlier this year, couldn't be more international. Dreis is a Bulgarian illustrator working in Germany, her book was published first in Brazil in Portuguese, and when Daniel Hahn came to translate it, he re-worked the text into a rhyme in English whose exuberance matches the colour and excitement of the illustrations. Yet **Happiness is a Watermelon?** is itself an odd one out, in terms of origin if not quality, in the Phoenix Yard list, which, as Emma explains, mainly derives from France and French language books: this common origin helping to provide the list with some consistency in style.

To be at Bologna, then, is to be astonished both by what is published for children internationally, how little of this we see in Britain, and yet how large a presence British children's books have worldwide. But my most abiding impression, from talking to publishers and to people passing by on the IBBY stand, was of the continuing commitment and enthusiasm that people have for bringing books and children together. I came away from Bologna with a pocketful of business cards from authors, illustrators and publishers. I remember, in particular, the young Japanese animator who showed me her animations on her mobile phone, even though she realised I was not in the publishing industry, just to get my reaction to them; and the Danish illustrator who came to the IBBY stand to see if there was any way that IBBY could use her experience of running illustrator's workshops in developing countries. Just two of all those at Bologna for whom, in this most business-like of places, children's books are more than just business.

Clive Barnes, formerly Principal Children's Librarian, Southampton City is a freelance researcher and writer and chair of the UK section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY).

The 33rd IBBY International Congress will be held in London in August 2012.

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