

Publishing Books in Translation

by Emma Lidbury, Commissioning Editor at Walker Books

The exciting thing about publishing books in translation is that you have a world of literature to mine. The downside, however, is that . . . you have a world of literature to mine! Where to begin?

At Walker we publish one or two translated fiction titles per year, and what these books have in common is that they have all caught the attention of the acquiring editor. Sometimes it is the subject matter that piques our interest, sometimes it is the profile of the book or the writer, and sometimes it is initially just the language – perhaps the editor has a connection to the originating country or a special interest in its literature. No matter how successful a book might have been in other languages/territories, a publisher has to feel sufficiently excited about publishing it in theirs to take it all the way through the publication process.

Unless a publisher has a specialism in translated fiction, however, it's much more likely that books they publish in translation have been brought to their attention – usually through an existing industry relationship: perhaps a foreign publisher who publishes some of our books, or a literary agent who carries some foreign titles. Alternatively, international awards or initiatives such as the White Ravens list take a lot of the preliminary work out of finding something that's really worth publishing.

Working with Cultural Institutes

If you're interested in publishing a book from a particular country/language, it's hugely helpful if that country has a national cultural centre or literary society, especially if they have a presence at book fairs – they are usually staffed by passionate, knowledgeable publishing professionals who speak excellent English and will go out of their way to help you. And once you have acquired the book, they can potentially award translation grants – or help you find out who can – and even provide you with lists of translators and other useful contacts. We have had brilliant experience working with NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad) on Maria Parr's titles, and although we have yet to publish a Finnish translation at Walker, we have an excellent relationship with FILI (Finnish Literature Exchange) and are keen to partner with them in the future.

What to Look for When Acquiring

When considering publishing a foreign title, I would always look at the profile of the author in their home territory together with the popularity of the book. Is the author well-regarded? Has the book been widely reviewed, or won prizes? Is the book read in schools? Sometimes commercial children's fiction doesn't translate so well culturally, especially for younger children, so I am usually drawn towards something more classic/timeless and literary.

If the original language isn't from Western Europe, this immediately makes the acquisition more interesting for a publisher, and potentially gives the sales team a unique angle. When we acquired **Bronze and Sunflower**, my colleagues sat up because there are so few Chinese books published in English, especially middle grade fiction. And when we discovered the book had sold over three million copies in the original language, we imagined it was pretty good! But it was also quite long, and none of us at Walker speaks Mandarin. A UK literary agent had already done some of the groundwork for us, and the acquisition was then made possible by the fact that the book had been published in France, so we were able to review it in a language more accessible to us before going through the process of engaging a Chinese translator. All this took some time, but the thing about timeless classics is that there is no bandwagon: you can publish them in a leisurely fashion! And it was truly worth it. **Bronze and Sunflower** received great critical acclaim in both the UK and the US, with the translator, Helen Wang, winning the Marsh Award for Children's Literature in Translation, and the author Cao Wenxuan won the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award in 2016. We are publishing a second novel by him in 2020, **Dragonfly Eyes**, and we couldn't be more proud.

How to Find the Right Book

To an editor looking to dip their toe into the world of translation, I would say that there's no wrong place to look. If you're unable to go to Bologna or Frankfurt, then visit foreign publishers' stands at London Book Fair. Take away rights lists and catalogues and see if anything catches your attention. Visit the stands of cultural institutes and ask them which are their biggest titles/series of the year, or which have attracted the most prizes. Or do the same online. Ask your international rights or export colleagues what seems to be hot in their territories, or have a look yourself when you're on holiday. Talk to people! And if anything looks interesting, see if a translated sample is available, or if a colleague or contact can do an informal initial read for you.

Depending on your acquisition process, you may need to pay for a sample translation and/or reader's report before you can commit to a full translation. However, once you've found something you're excited about and you have been permitted to acquire it, the process is not so different from acquiring books in your own language.

There are plenty of organisations to help you find a good translator, and once the translation is in you can treat it like a first draft. Your translator then becomes your “author”, especially if you’re unable to communicate with the author. They will work with you to refine the text, and you can decide together what tweaks may be needed to help the book fit your market. If they live in this country they may even be willing to promote the book, too. If it’s part of a series, your hope would be to continue working with the same translator and building the series with them. And if they spot something else interesting going forward, you may just be the editor they tell.



Emma Lidbury started out as a children’s bookseller, then had a brief stint in law publishing before finding her place at Walker Books, where she is now Commissioning Editor. She has the privilege of working with a host of talented authors and illustrators and enjoys the variety of a job in which she can find herself at one moment editing an illustrated slapstick comedy for six-year-olds and the next a YA short story anthology about human rights. Emma is a fan of good storytelling in all forms and is currently editing her second translation from Chinese – **Dragonfly Eyes**, by Hans Christian Andersen Award-winner Cao Wenxuan.

Additional information

Organisations and prizes that highlight great international children’s books:

- Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA): <http://www.alma.se/en/>
- Hans Christian Andersen Award: <http://www.ibby.org/awards-activities/awards/hans-christian-andersen-awards/>
- The International Board of Books for Young People (IBBY): <http://www.ibby.org/>
- The White Ravens: <https://www.ijb.de/en/reference-library/white-ravens-online.html>

Other things to consider when acquiring English language rights:

- When you’ve found a great book you want to translate, it’s possible there will be English language publishers in other territories interested in it as well. If you’re a UK publisher with a good relationship with a US publisher and you both want to acquire the book, you might be able to share the cost of translation.
- Look for a cultural institute in the country/region where the book originates. You may be able to secure grants for translation, author travel or other publication support from the organisation.

Note: all links are correct as of March 2019.
