What Is International Youth Literature? Why Does It Matter?

International youth literature—translated books and English-language imports first published outside of the United States—can be the missing link in diversifying collections. Our diversity discussions tend to focus on multicultural literature that is originally published in the United States. At first glance diverse books from here and abroad can seem indistinguishable since they may have a similar focus or setting—that is, by race, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status, etc.—so it is not surprising that international books are often mistaken for multicultural books. Sometimes only a close look will reveal that a book has been translated or was first published in English abroad. Reading international youth literature moves us to the margins for a change and is an opportunity to see what the rest of the world thinks. By paying attention to this literature, we broaden our perspectives and validate international voices.

Baseline Data, Overviews, and Trends

When considering research on international youth literature, it is useful to start with baseline data. What are the titles? Where are they published? If a translation, what is the language of the original? Collectively, the Bridges to Understanding book series of five annotated bibliographies, sponsored by USBBY (the US chapter of IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People—see Resources sidebar), answer these questions. In order of publication, they are Carl Tomlinson’s Children’s Books from Other Countries (covers imprints 1950–96); Susan Stan’s The World through Children’s Books (1996–2000); Doris Gebel’s Crossing Boundaries with Children’s Books (2000–2004); Linda Pavonetti’s Bridges to Understanding: Envisioning the World through Children’s Books (2005–9); and Annette Y. Goldsmith, Theo Heras, and Susan Corapi’s Reading the World’s Stories: An Annotated Bibliography of International Youth Literature (2010–14).

Each book also contains a selected list of resources such as awards and organizations as well as several essays about international children’s literature. Essay topics include Tomlinson’s historical introduction to international youth literature; Stan’s advice on using international books with children; information on publishing markets and mores from Stephen Roxburgh, Jeffrey Garrett, and Simon Boughton; Andrea Cheng’s personal look at worldwide influences on her work along with Barbara Lehman’s discussion of pairing international books with US titles; and variations from Anne Pfallowski, Beverley Naidoo, Marianne Martens, and the three editors on the theme of connecting children with international books through the power of story in spite of the challenges facing publishers.

To keep on top of trends in international children’s publishing, follow the Publishers Weekly “Children’s Bookshelf” e-newsletter reports from the
Research Roundup

Bologna Children’s Book Fair at www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/. In this interview with US editors, a heightened interest overall in diversity is noted.11

Awards and Honors

Our major international youth literature awards are the Batchelder Award for translations (www.ala.org/alsc/...
awards/grants/bookmedia/batchelderaward); the USBBY Outstanding International Books list, an annual list of about 40 translations and English-language imports (www.usbbby.org/list_oibl.html); the Hans Christian Andersen Medal for world authors and illustrators (www.ibby.org/254.0.html); and the IBBY Honour List for outstanding recent books from member countries (www.ibby.org/1562.0.html). The International Youth Library's White Ravens (www.ijb.de/spezialbibliothek/white-ravens-2015.html) list of books deemed worthy of translation is also important.

Of all these awards, it is the Batchelder that gets the most attention from researchers. Kasey Garrison and Sue Kimmel's "Trends in Translations: The Mildred L. Batchelder Award from 1997–2013" analyzed characteristics of Batchelder titles in terms of format, genre, topic, sex of protagonists, original language, and settings.12 They found that the languages and settings are mostly Western European, and that fiction dealing with a serious subject predominates. In this they are largely in agreement with trends identified by earlier researchers, and urge further investigation of children's publishing in Asia, Africa, and South America, continents that are currently underrepresented by the award. They also urge librarians to read and use the Batchelder winners and honor books despite the limitations identified, and we heartily concur!

The quarterly Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature (www.ibby.org/index.php?id=1035), the journal of IBBY, devotes a special issue to the biennial Andersen Award nominees. Vol. 54, no. 2 features the 2016 nominees.13 These one-page profiles with selected bibliography provide an excellent introduction to the world's best writers and illustrators.

Bookbird also does theme issues on the literature of different countries. The latest, vol. 54, no. 3, focused on New Zealand, Australia, and Oceania to coincide with the IBBY Congress held in Auckland, August 18–21, 2016.14

If you aren't already familiar with international youth literature, use these resources to diversify your collection!

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