



Publishing Warm Books from Warm Countries, in particular Picture Books

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Abstract: On publishing children's books, especially picture books, from Africa, Asia and Latin America in Scandinavia: motives, criterias and experiences.

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For convenience sake, I don't mind the normal expressions: developing countries, the Third World, the South – though I do wonder whether the saying “A beloved child has many names” really applies in this case... However, whatever the label is, they put all these countries into one hat, as if they are all alike – and though it may be generally so, or used to be generally so, in terms of economics and politics, and in their relations to the rich countries, it has never been so in terms of culture.

Furthermore, those common labels are associated with misery and hopelessness, with endless numbers of people that are not much more than figures in statistics, or unknown faces in a photo. Looking for a label with positive connotations, I remembered that in my childhood sailors would say that they went to or came from “the warm countries”. So that's what I have been calling them for more than 20 years. So that's what I have been calling them for more than 20 years, although not all of them have a warm climate all year round. I am pleased to see the expression being used by others more and more often, and in particular that people in the warm countries also approve of it...

Anyhow, why publish books from the warm countries, or – in other words – books with stories and pictures from non-European cultures anywhere in the world?

Because they are stories which are full of events, situations, pictures, experiences that are different from those we know so well from the Nordic and Western literature. In these books you will meet other scenarios, environments and cultures, and – not the least – individual personalities of blood and flesh, instead of those seen on tv-monitors and newspaper-photos: the anonymous and pitiful, nameless victims of the unjust economics and politics of the world. Also a picture book and a folk tale may give our children positive



images to counter the dominant perception of hopelessness and inferiority, and make them feel respect and admiration.

Once in the mid-80es, I participated in a seminar in Stockholm with Swedish and Latin American personalities in children's literature. The Swedish thought that the Latin Americans would love to get Swedish children's books with social-realistic stories from Latin America translated and published in their countries. To their great surprise, the Latin Americans said “no, thank you”, and they explained: Our children know very well how the situation is. What *they* need are stories that show a way out, how to cooperate to improve their livelihood; and they mentioned as an example a picture book from Venezuela about a group of slum children who manage to get a library. Actually, this book, *La calle es libre*, had been published with success in Scandinavia, and elsewhere in Europe! I would have loved to publish that book myself, exactly because it tells about struggle, aspirations and strength. By the way, later, another picture book of the same origin failed here because a donkey was maltreated: Apparently, this kind or degree of realism was not found proper for our children! Another example is the award-winning Sosu's Call from Ghana, about a crippled boy who saves his village from a flood. Adults in Scandinavia may consider a story like this trivial and sentimental, but my 5-year old grandson told me: “Grandpa, this is the best book you have ever published.”

It IS difficult to feel that much-sought-after solidarity and personal concern for people we don't know individually and recognize as fellow-beings. Such an acknowledgement and appreciation requires, I think, that the general perception “we/them“ is transformed into “us”... In this respect, this is what makes stories so important, because they ever so often tell us about individual fellow children, women and men with dignity, and with strength that enable them not only to survive, but even to struggle for a better living, in spite of conditions which probably none of us, who are economically privileged, would want – or perhaps may even wonder whether or how we would manage to survive... Needless to say, it is not hardship all of it; there's also joy, laughter and singing – and thus amusing stories which are as important to give a fuller picture. When I told a teacher from Sri Lanka, whom I had invited to talk at a seminar I organized in Copenhagen 1988, on his



way to the congress in Oslo, that I intended to publish *The Umbrella Thief* by Sybil Wettasinghe, he said: Please, don't. People will think we are all silly in Sri Lanka! But I was happy to publish a funny, unpretentious story, and assured him that both children and adults would know enough from other sources not to think like that.

The books I choose to publish, must present or represent peoples of non-European cultures and countries with respect and dignity, whether the stories are serious or humourous. The books may have stories of everyday life; in fact, they are the kind I am looking mostly for. However, they may also be folktales because so often they reflect universal human values, basic concepts of good and evil, indicating that cultural – even religious – differences are so very often rather like different dresses; underneath we are all human beings of the same species. If they didn't, then how come the tales travel so far, both in place and time?

I would like to mention still another concern that has become rather important now, since there are so many children from other cultures and with other skin colours and other names in Europe: visibility. That children are able to recognize themselves in the books they find in libraries and bookstores, in the homes of family and friends, and in the stories they hear and read in class.

A British publisher of Caribbean origin, Verna Wilkins, established her publishing house, Tamarind, when she realized the lack of books in which her children could mirror themselves. Actually, she discovered first her own invisibility when she got a job as a teacher in a high school: When she entered a class the first time, she would sit down at the desk or, in any case, behave like any teacher would do... and, yet, the students would ask, when is our teacher coming? That she – a black woman – might be their teacher didn't occur to them!

Verna began also to visit schools to read from her books. One time, when a big group of young children were gathered in the hall and she had read a story about a girl called Akoss, she saw a small girl in the back get up and quietly walk up to her, and there she stopped and just gazed at her. Verna looked back at the girl and said: "I think your name is Akoss?" The girl nodded. It was the first time ever that she had heard a story about a girl



with the same name as hers.

Actually, it is more than twenty years ago that a British publisher told me, when I showed him a picture book with a story from Africa: Rather than publishing books with children in Africa or Asia, we should publish books with the many African and Asian children in Britain. In the meantime, I have indeed seen many British children's books that depict children of various colours, thus reflecting fairly the racial composition of the population, but I have seen few in which a non-white child is the main character, except those published by Tamarind. These picture books, that tell about black children in everyday situations, have become quite a success, and white children like them, too, because they experience the same situations and events in their everyday life. I would claim that this applies also to many of the picture books I have published from non-European countries, for example the series about *Jamela* by Niki Daly from South Africa, and several of his other books, as well.

I have been publishing books from the warm countries since 1976. I am going to tell you some of my experiences of how the market has responded. Some of them date back to the much politized 80s, and may be less pronounced today; that I will leave to your judgment. As a whole they are marked by the sad fact that, although the books are for children, I must sell them to adults. Indeed, the greatest difficulty arises from adults' very limited, preconceived ideas of what children can understand and appreciate.

The first books I published were six picture books of the *Moongate Collection*, from Singapore, each with a folktale from a country in Asia. The books were such a success that I contacted publishers in Norway and Sweden, and suggested them to join me in a coproduction of these and similar books.

I liked those books because the illustrator, Kwan Shan Mei, had been very careful to depict the local architecture, dresses etc. with great accuracy, even adopting the traditional way of painting to the extent that you would not think all books were illustrated by the same artist! Yet, one of the Norwegian editors told me that she found it impossible that an outsider could depict these different cultures in a genuine, authentic way. Each country should rather be presented by a person from *that* country. I was truly amazed because I was



sure that the editor would not hesitate to publish a picture book by a Norwegian artist – or for that matter by a Danish – no matter the country the story took place in. So I concluded that, in her view, a book must be written and/or illustrated by either, and preferably, a Scandinavian, or at least a West-European – or by a national from the country of the story – but *not* by persons who belong to a third country or culture, such as a Chinese writer and illustrator in Singapore doing stories from other Asian countries! This was the 1st “guideline” I encountered about the criterias that may be applied. Later I learned that the issue can be even more tricky: May Whites write about or depict Blacks? Not according to a number of Afro-American academics who insist that Whites cannot identify properly. So what about men writing about women, and vice versa – not to say a White man depicting a Black girl and her family of only women, like Niki Daly dares to do?!

The difficulty in finding copublishers in Norway and Sweden made me decide to be my own copublisher. Thus in 1980, I published two collections of folk tales from Asia as well as a booklet with childrens' games, also from Asia, in all three countries. The collections of tales were also published in the Faroe Islands. I had selected them from collections published in the Asian Co-publication Programme of the Asian Cultural Centre for Unesco, a private institution in Japan.

Another collection from ACCU had stories about festivals. Like in the case of the folk tales, they were written and illustrated by persons from each particular country, so they would meet that first guideline! Yet, I dared not publish these stories because all of them took place in relatively well-off families! You see, we all know that by far most people in India, Pakistan, Indonesia and most other Asian countries live in poverty, right? So I was afraid that these stories with their pictures of obviously relatively affluent families would be criticized for lack of another kind of authenticity: misrepresentation! Because this is “guideline” number 2: Too many of us prefer to have our preconceived ideas confirmed.

The time of explicit didactic children's literature is long behind us in Scandinavia, but that certainly does not mean that we have become less selective when it comes to what we want our children to see, read or hear – or what we *think* they are interested in, and capable of appreciating... The issue of preconceived ideas concerns not only how other



people live and think, but – mind you – also how the story is told, the style of the artwork, and how things look, for example colours and landscapes. Thus, as an example, I was once advised by a consultant against publishing a picture book from South Africa because the savannah depicted had very soft colours, but such an African landscape should have very strong colours, right!?

Yet, coming to the 3rd “guideline”, the issue of so-called political correctness is a more serious type of judgmental criteria that may be applied, also when it comes to how persons of another race may be depicted, especially whether it is proper to emphasise, not to say caricaturing, certain features. And not just that: When I published the collection of Asian games, a Swedish teacher expressed concern that in some of the games children would behave like a blind or a person with a paralysed leg. Having a blind mother myself, I was totally baffled, and so was she. Also in Sweden, some librarians put a book about child labour in the depot because it had drawings of Africans with big lips, ignoring that the Europeans had the same big lips. It goes without saying that I wouldn’t propagate stereotypes like all Finns wear knives, or all Germans want law and order, or whatever. But I do trust that also children are able to distinguish between innocent play and mean scorn, and to see when some facial features are exaggerated for the sake of ridicule or to lighten up a serious topic; or for the sake of cuteness, like the African girl Makwelane who has a round head like the sun and a mouth like the reclining new moon in the evening glow, as drawn by Piet Grobler in *Makwelane and the Crocodile*. Why is it that I cannot make myself publish an African version of *The Emperor’s New Clothes* with a huge fat emperor, whereas it would be absolutely okay in the case of a European emperor?

Teachers and librarians will tell me, again and again, that... “yes, we do need authentic books from other cultures”, but when I show them the most genuine, authentic ones, they will say: “Oh, sorry, this is too different, too difficult!”. They will praise me for doing the work I do, assuring me how important it is, and how impressed they are that I keep going on, but when it comes to buying... No, sorry, too difficult! Thus, this contradiction forms guideline no. 4: Publish books that are “authentic”, but not SO authentic that they are difficult!



Guideline no. 5 concerns identification: It is a very normal perception that for our children to appreciate a story from a different country, the leading character must be one of their own in order for them to be able to identify; *and* preferably written by a writer of our own because only *they* will know the background and taste of *our* children. Thus, Danish librarians bought 600 copies of a book by a Danish author about a Danish girl in a village in India, and – in the same year – less than 200 copies of an award-winning book, *Kariuki*, by Meji Mwangi, a leading Kenyan author, about two boys in Kenya, though one of them is from England.

Well, maybe too much authenticity makes stories difficult for the adults, but all experiences and studies show that they are *not* necessarily difficult for the *children*, because children have not yet developed the stereotypes and biases of adults! For children, the gap is not between them and children of other races and cultures... No, the gap is between the world of children and the world of adults! – Let me illustrate this general mistake concerning what children may like and understand with one example:

I published once a story by Ana Maria Machado, *De olho nas penas*, about a boy who had been living in exile with his parents. Back in Brazil, he had got a stepfather, and didn't feel sure where he belonged. A popular Danish author of children's books wrote a review which was clearly positive to the book itself, yet warned that Danish children wouldn't be able to identify with this boy. Meanwhile my late wife had read it in her 7th grade class of immigrant children and Danish children of divorced, unemployed mothers. For the first time ever, everybody was listening so attentively that you could have heard a needle fall on the floor.

So I want to repeat this extremely important lesson: The world which is really mystifying to children is *not* that of other children, where-ever they may be in the world, but it is the world of the *adults!*

To finish on a positive note, let me formulate a "guideline" no. 6 to counter or complement the previous five: I assume that when you have read a book you like, then you will recommend it to other people; you want them to have the same experience, so you can share your pleasure with others... This urge still drives me, and it gives me a great joy in



publishing books like those I publish... The Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo once said: The nice thing about you Europeans is that you let us keep all the good stories to ourselves. There was a challenge in her sarcasm, and I encourage that we take it on... If for no other reason, to enrich ourselves!

