

The effect of the international children's book industry on Canadian publishing endeavours for children and young people

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Canadian books for children in the mid-1980's have attained a high level of recognition and respect in the international world of publishing. This has been due to the dramatic improvement in the literary and artistic quality of the books. At the same time, the number of titles being produced has increased tremendously in the last ten years. The quantity of books published in Canada for children and young people has multiplied from a mere 38 titles in 1976 to over 300 titles in 1986. Why has this phenomenon occurred? What are some of the major international factors influencing this rise in publishing for children in Canada? What directions will these influences give publishers in the future?

While some of the remarkable growth and improvement in Canadian children's publishing no doubt can be attributed to the Canada Council and its programs of financial assistance to publishers, it is evident that two international influences have also directly affected the Canadian publishing industry. Firstly, participation by Canadian publishers, editors, writers, and illustrators in international bookfairs, such as the Bologna Bookfair, cannot be underestimated because it has a direct effect on improving the quality and quantity of children's books in the Canadian market. Secondly, co-operative endeavours in co-productions of children's books have proved to be of overwhelming significance, not only to Canadian publishers, but to publishers in many countries.

For the past twenty-two years, the Fiera del Libro per Ragazzi, which is held each spring in the Italian city of Bologna, is exclusively devoted to the world of publishing for children and young people. Its mandate is the selling and buying of foreign rights to books. Although smaller and more specialized than the massive Frankfurt Buchmesse, its importance to the children's publishing world is realized by the 1,000 publishers who attend. Italian publishers account for the largest contingent, followed by British, American and French firms. The impact of this fair on the international publishing of books for young people continues to increase each year.

Canadian publishers have only realized in the last few years the value of participating in the Bologna Bookfair. The first large representation, assisted by the Department of External Affairs, went in 1978. Prior to that only a couple of insightful publishers — May Cutler from Tundra Books

and Anne Millyard of Annick Press — realized the importance of having their books represented. By 1986 forty-seven Canadian publishers were participating. The Bologna Bookfair has had a direct effect on Canadian publishers in several ways.

Initially, publishers attending the Bologna Bookfair learn a tremendous amount by having their wares put on the line and considered in an international context. Unique at the Bologna fair is the spirit of comradeship amongst the participants; foreign editors and publishers are supportive and very generous with their tutelage. They spend time examining Canadian productions and frequently explain why they are not prepared to buy the rights to a certain book. Canadian publishers quickly learn that when they present a final work in a “press-proof” format they will usually receive only a yes/no response, but if they present an unfinished work in the planning stages they will receive a multitude of comments. There is considerable merit in being exposed to the best books and in becoming aware of the levels of artistic and literary achievement in European books. By seeing and examining quality books, Canadian publishers can attain a higher standard of production.

The establishment of professional contacts with foreign editors and publishers is a major contribution of international bookfairs. Time spent at the fair is an opportunity to establish levels of mutual confidence with them. The importance of this cannot be underestimated as it creates an important link in the potential sales of Canadian books overseas. Once the channels of communication are open, foreign publishers commence to monitor the newest projects being undertaken by Canadian publishers such as Valerie Hussey (Kids Can Press), Rick Wilks (Annick) and David Kilgour (Penguin). This expression of interest and personal confidence is the initial step in the process of exporting titles.

However, attractive as foreign sales may appear, there is actually not much money to be made by the publisher from selling direct foreign rights. This is because expenses such as long distance telephone calls and larger author royalties account for much of the sale price. Why then try to sell foreign rights? There are two main reasons. The first is to give the author added prestige, and the second is to heighten the awareness in the international community of the work of both the author and the publisher. Camilla Gryski's *Cat's Cradle*, for example, has been sold to eight countries including Australia, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, and the United States.

A further effect is the result of increased endeavours by Canadian publishers to buy rights to foreign titles to augment their own lists. These books are no less expensive, because the publisher must pay the manufacturing, author royalty and packager's fee; but there are no editing or design costs — a tremendous saving in time, effort and price. This trend is

particularly evident in the current boom in baby-books where, with \$4.95 as the perceived maximum price, most Canadian publishers cannot economically develop their own titles. The inclusion of foreign products in basic lists reflects a growing sophistication on the part of small publishers. They realize that only so much can be done with their limited human resources, yet to be able to afford the requisite increase of staff to expedite the next step of growth they must achieve more capital through sales. Kids Can Press directly benefits by its successful importation of a Halloween title, *The make your own creepy spooky horrors book* selling over 2,500 copies each fall.

Thus, publisher participation in an international bookfair has made a direct impact on the Canadian publishing industry. It has provided exemplary models of books, established valuable foreign contacts, and given opportunities to expand lists by the importation of foreign titles.

The second major international influence which has had an important effect on the publishing industry for children in Canada is in actuality the most significant trend in the last ten years in the international children's publishing scene. This is the dramatic concept of the co-production of books. Because the size of print-runs keeps production costs low, increasing the size of the initial print-run decreases the per unit price of the book. Thus, European publishers have co-operated for years in order to be able to print picture books of high quality. It is now possible, with the use of photographic colour separation techniques, to print all the colour plates at one printing and merely make changes for the appropriate black-and-white language texts.

Co-productions may be undertaken either before the initial print run or immediately following it. Several Canadian publishers have undertaken initial co-productions, but there is an element of risk involved. If a larger partner such as an American or British company reverses its decision at the last moment, the entire proposition could fail. The usual Canadian practice is to negotiate a co-production after the first Canadian printing. The real benefit accrues when a large reprinting is done in conjunction with foreign publishers, allowing the original publisher to get its own books much cheaper. For instance, if the original cost of a book was \$2.08, a reprint in quantity of 40,000 might decrease this cost to 65 cents — a major benefit! Annick Press has had success in co-editions with Kathy Stinson's *Red is best*, undertaken with Danish, Finish, Swedish, German and Venezuelan publishers. Their *Murmel, Murmel, Murmel* by Robert Munsch has been sold to Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands.

Accompanying this trend is the rise of international packagers, companies which specialize in selling books as complete products but which rely on strong international co-operation to facilitate impressively large print runs. Some, like Walker Books of England, use talented illustrators such

as Shirley Hughes (*Colours*, Douglas & McIntyre 1986) and Helen Oxenbury to create their books, but many others do not have the same artistic standards. The focus, however, remains the same: high volume, low costs and high profit. The effect of the purchase of these "packaged" titles by Canadian publishers has been more impressive lists and increased revenues for both survival and growth.

The increase in the co-production of editions does raise some questions, particularly relating to distinctive cultural concerns. Are cultural aspects being diluted or bleached out from these editions? Is it true that to be acceptable to many countries only the non-cultural aspects can remain? These concerns are justified when you consider the vast size of the international junk book trade, itself a highly profitable market—a truly multi-lingual concept! Cute books are produced in a multitude of languages. Michele Landsberg's *Guide to children's books* refers to such cuteness as "...the Bubonic plague of children's publishing."

Co-productions do give credibility to Marshall McLuhan's concept of a global village. Several illustrators and authors have followings in all parts of the world and are considered as true "internationals". They include such people as Mitsumasa Anno, Peter Spier, Leo Lionni, Astrid Lindgren and E.B. White. Nonetheless cultural tones of a work remain important; the works of Elizabeth Cleaver were never translated into foreign editions (much to her disappointment) because they were deemed too North American for European publishers. What then is the value and effect of co-productions on the Canadian publishing scene?

A major effect of co-productions on Canadian literature for children and young people is that many magnificent books would not otherwise have been able to have been published. The sharing of resources was essential. This has certainly been true for many of Tundra's splendid publications. President May Cutler, determined to overcome the high costs of publishing children's books as art, worked with discerning European publishers. She successfully published the work of William Kurelek, particularly *A prairie boy's winter*, *A prairie boy's summer*, *Lumberjack* and *They sought a new world — The story of European immigration to North America* (with extra text by Margaret Engelbart).

The direct interest of American publishers has had a dramatic effect on the quality of Canadian picture books. With guaranteed American participation, both financial and editorial, in a project, Canadian publishers have been willing to undertake more significant yet expensive books. An outstanding example is Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* (Groundwood, 1984), a book which was six years in preparation. It was only after Margaret McElderry of Atheneum expressed an interest in co-publishing with Patsy Aldana of Groundwood that the full artistic concept of the book was able to be achieved. The editorial duo successfully unified the

textual concept with the impressive and detailed illustrations. This is evident again in powerful illustrations for Jan Andrew's *Very last first time* (Groundwood, 1985).

A further effect of American co-productions with Canadian publishers has been the increased promotion given to individual titles. Canadian publishers, working on traditional British reserve, are gradually overcoming their reluctance to commit funds for book promotion. Oxford University Press in a co-operative endeavour with Atheneum produced a poster for Elizabeth Cleaver's *ABC* in sufficient quantities for both countries. These books were also specially marketed in a distinctive small box, containing many copies of the book, for ease of display next to cash registers. Posters for Canadian children's books, elegant statements in themselves, have become not only successful promotion tools but collector's items. Vibrant examples include two from Kids Can Press, *The cremation of Sam McGee* (Ted Harrison) and *The sorcerer's apprentice* (Robin Muller). These successful promotional endeavours are proving to have increased positive effects on awareness and sales.

The effects of the international children's book industry on current publishing endeavours in our country suggest the direction for the future. Continued outreach to international markets by Canadian book publishers should be encouraged but not at the sacrifice of losing those cultural qualities deemed as uniquely "Canadian". Continued efforts should strive for improvement in quality of literary style and artistic interpretation to complement the stronger insistence for high standards of production. It is critical that Canadian publishers seek to sell foreign rights and actively participate in international co-productions in order to be considered worthy members of the international book community.

The story of Canadian publishing for children and young people is one of ever-increasing success. Astute awareness of the trends in the international publishing industry and intuitive capitalizing on them has had a remarkable effect on the publishing endeavours for children in our country. The effect of these international influences has resulted not only in the dramatic improvement of artistic style, both in writing and illustration, but in the conceptualizing of Canadian books for the international marketplace. The time has come when Canadian publishers can be equally successful in either the Canadian or the international spheres of publishing for children.

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