

# What are my prospects for foreign sales?

Q: I'd like to know more about selling my books overseas. What kinds of books do foreign publishers look to buy from the U.S.?

Donne Forrest, director of subsidiary rights for Dutton and Dial, advises children's book authors and illustrators to "write and illustrate for the U.S. market first. This is the biggest market and foreign sales, while glamorous, generally don't amount to a lot of money." [When talking about foreign rights and sales, it's important to note that Canadian rights tend to be paired with U.S. rights when initial book purchases are made, so that market is different than others described here.]

When considering sales to other countries, you need to decide who should handle these rights for your book. This generally means deciding whether your literary agent or publisher should handle foreign sales. Forrest feels that, "if your agent is not very strong in foreign rights, it's best to let your publisher handle them." The Bologna Book Fair, which is the main selling fair for children's books, and the Frankfurt Book Fair are the two main shows for buying and selling international rights. At these shows publishers feature both front and backlist books prominently. "We bring a huge amount of backlist to these shows," says Forrest. "Buyers will come into our booth looking for a specific story or art style, and we want to have as many books as possible there to show them one that fits their needs. If we don't have a specific title with us that we think they'd like, we'll send a copy of the book to them as soon as we return home from the show."

While authors and illustrators shouldn't change their writing or art just to appeal to foreign markets, it is good to be aware of what might help or hurt your books overseas. "In picture books, buyers look for a universal theme such as sibling rivalry or friendship stories," says Forrest. "However, stories set in schools don't sell well because there are too many differences between their schools and ours. They also tend to view picture books as for a younger audience (up to age 6), so our older picture books won't sell. Young adult books are quite popular overseas, much more so than in our country. Series books and contemporary books also do well, as does humor, which is always appreciated if the story is generic enough."

There are also regional patterns. For example, the Germans, Scandinavians and Dutch are very interested in Native American books. The Japanese, contrary to most other countries, are particularly interested in books depicting American customs and situations. The U.K., for example, will turn down a book if it looks too American. Sometimes we can make changes, such as moving a car's steering wheel to the other side, or changing 'elevator' to 'lift', other times we can't." Australia, according to Forrest, is currently the market most receptive to U.S. books.

To find out more about the kinds of books foreign publishers are looking for, Forrest suggests authors and illustrators use the Internet to browse the children's book listings in stores like Waterstones, a big chain in the U.K, or check the Candlewick Press catalog, which features a lot of titles from the U.K. Another very good company to know about is Kane Miller Book Publishers, which specializes in publishing foreign books in the U.S. 11:12/98

