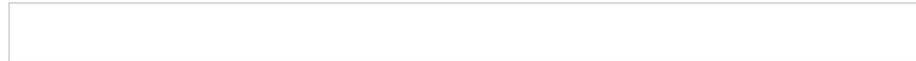




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Bologna 2017: Busy? Quiet? Both? Fair Attendees Leave Satisfied, Regardless

By John A. Sellers and Diane Roback, with reporting by Ed Nawotka | Apr 13, 2017

Forget a “book of the fair”—agents, publishers, and editors at the 2017 Bologna Children’s Book Fair didn’t really come to a consensus on whether this year’s fair was bustling or tempered, a reminder that publishing isn’t one size fits all, and that tastes, needs, and perspectives vary widely. “I had the feeling that I was swimming upstream whenever I wandered the aisles,” said Brooke O’Donnell, managing director of Trafalgar Square Publishing. “Since waning attendance seems to be a perennial topic, it was great to see the aisles so full.” The fair itself [reported an overall increase in attendance](#) over the 2016 show.

“I had a very good Bologna—definitely a case of ‘the right book at the right time,’ ” said agent Fiona Kenshole of Transatlantic Literary. “Editors—and film people—were asking for ‘feel-good’ stories: happy endings, a smattering of romance. Perhaps a pushback at all the other stuff going on in the world?” Kenshole was finding success with a YA title, *36 Questions That Changed My Mind About You* by Vicki Grant (Running Press, Oct.), which asks if love can be engineered. “Between [London] and Bologna it sold at auction in Korea and Indonesia, and to Mondadori in Italy on a good pre-empt,” said Kenshole, who received multiple offers from France, Germany, and Spain at Bologna, “with strong interest from other territories,” as well as film agents.

Cecily Kaiser, publishing director for children’s books at Phaidon, was at the show looking to acquire and finding plenty. “Even if I had to leave after the first day, the trip would’ve felt worth it.” Kaiser said she was gravitating toward concept books, partly because they tend to work well across markets. “Storybooks can have lots of cultural norms that don’t travel well.”

Bent Agency founder Jenny Bent described it as “a quiet fair overall,” adding that it “didn’t seem like there was one big project everyone was talking about. We had a lot of requests for middle grade, which was heartening, and it seemed like people were looking for the next big thing in YA, but no one was exactly sure what that was.”

“I thought it was a great fair,” said Daniel Ehrenhaft, editorial director of Soho Teen. “A little more subdued than in years past, which frankly was a relief. I felt—just speaking for me, as a seller of rights at an indie—that my meetings were more meaningful and focused because nobody was chasing ‘the big book.’ ” Ehrenhaft also reported that foreign publishers seemed excited about YA titles that defy easy categorization. “And of course it’s great to see that the inspiration of #WeNeedDiverseBooks has gone international.”

To that end, one YA title that came up repeatedly in conversations was Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone*, a West African-inspired fantasy that sold to Henry Holt in a seven-figure preempt just before the fair. To date, British, Bulgarian, Danish, Dutch, French, Hebrew, Italian, and Spanish rights have sold, with auctions underway and offers under consideration in more than half a dozen other countries.

“With our upcoming YA titles, there was a lot of interest in anything with a really fresh premise, distinct structures or points of view, and a new openness to interior illustration in books for older readers,” said Sarah Davies of Greenhouse Literary. “This was also apparent with U.K. editors, who are seeking to stand out with beautifully designed and packaged books—everyone was sighing over *The Boy, the Bird and the Coffin Maker* by Matilda Woods (Scholastic U.K.), which takes middle grade to new levels of gorgeousness.” Davies added that American and British



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editors were seeking out contemporary and fantasy middle grade, as well as an uptick in nonfiction, and that international publishers “were looking for good, commercial series, often with a feel-good factor.”

Hannerlie Modderman, commissioning editor for children’s and YA at Dutch publisher Uitgeverij Luitingh-Sijthoff, cited a “positive” atmosphere overall. “That was a big difference with the previous years when the financial crises was hanging above all of us,” she said. “If I have to pinpoint a trend, it was books about girl power and feminism.”

Around the Fair and Around the Globe

“I literally never left our stand, except to queue up for a coffee or the loo. But that says something too, doesn’t it?” said Gita Wolf, publisher of India’s Tara Books, a former winner of the BOP Prize at Bologna. “It was an incredibly busy fair, we had a record number of visitors, sold tons of books, and had several good meetings for rights sales. What struck me was that the Spanish market was reviving strongly, and Japan was a big partner for us.”

For Canada’s Groundwood Books, Anne Fleming’s *The Goat* was something of a breakout in terms of publisher interest, with multiple houses interested in in Germany and France. Back on the home front, the book, which published in March, has already gone through its initial 5,000-copy print run and Groundwood went back for another 5,000. “For a debut middle grade from an author [new to children’s books], I think it’s pretty spectacular,” said v-p of sales and licensing Barbara Howson.

At least two houses were launching YA lists at the fair: Kids Can Press in Toronto, whose KCP Loft list begins this spring, and Charlesbridge in the U.S., whose Charlesbridge Teen line arrives in the fall. “It’s been delightful to bring that to the worldwide market,” said Charlesbridge senior director of sales Megan Quinn. “We can finally say that we’re for all ages now, zero through adult.” Kids Can rights director Adrienne Tang echoed Quinn’s sentiments, noting, “It’s been great for us to sell a different kind of book,” since Kids Can’s list had also focused on younger readers. One of the four titles on KCP Loft’s launch list, the Wattpad-sourced *Textrovert* by Lindsey Summers, had already sold into four territories before the fair.

Italian publisher Il Castoro was coming off a good day on Wednesday with *Muschio* by David Cirici winning the second annual Strega Ragazze e Ragazzi award in the age 6–10 category; the award comes with a €5,000 prize for both the author and its translator, Francesco Ferrucci. Although the fair held few surprises for Floridi in terms of new acquisitions, she felt it was good, busy, and an important part of the company’s overall rights business; in 2016, Il Castoro’s sales of its own titles into other markets were up 72% over the previous year.

On the sales side, one breakout title for Il Castoro has been Pierdomenico Baccalario’s *Il manual delle 50 avventure da vivere prima dei 13 anni*, a guide to adventures children ought to have before turning 13. Domestically, Il Castoro is already on its third printing of the book in less than a year, and it has sold into 12 languages, including a forthcoming American edition from Sourcebooks Jabberwocky. A spy-themed follow-up has already sold into three languages and rights manager Andreina Speciale expected that many of the first book’s publishers would pick up this one, as well. The Italian publisher also took part in Jeff Kinney’s trip to Italy before and during the fair, including a visit to Amatrice—which was devastated by a powerful earthquake last August—where he spent time with schoolchildren, signing books and doing drawing demonstrations. “The fantastic thing about Jeff is that fame hasn’t changed him,” said Floridi. “He’s still the same person, and very kind to children.” Il Castoro’s sales of Kinney’s books (including a Latin translation of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*) have topped 3.5 million copies.

Etana Editions, a two-year-old children’s publisher based in Helsinki, was at Bologna for the second time, but this was the first time the publisher had its own booth. “It makes a huge difference, being present here with our books,” said owner Réka Király. “It’s more tactile, everyone can see and touch them.” Király had set up many appointments before the show, but had five or six foreign publishers drop by on the first day alone. Etana focuses on books for younger readers, often with bold, graphic artwork and an emphasis on social themes; the Mini Etana series explores emotions and first steps in a child’s life, and Etana also publishes storybooks, such as Juha Virta and Marika Majjala’s *Piano Karkaa*, about friendship and music, which has sold in Sweden and South Korea.

The show has been “better than last year” in terms of selling, said José Díaz, editorial director of Barcelona-based Thule Ediciones. Thule has been coming to the fair for around a decade; the house primarily publishes picture books and comics, as well as picture book–style titles for a YA audience; one such book, *Enigma* by Martín Vidal, offers dark interpretations of fairy tales, almost taking an art book approach. “Even as a little publisher, you have to be international,” said Díaz. “If you’re not international you’re dead.” Thule currently distributes Spanish-language editions of

its books in the U.S. through IPG, and its top titles include *Recetas de lluvia y azúcar* by Eva Manzano and illustrated by Mónica Gutiérrez Serna, a book about emotions, and *¿Hay algo más aburrido que ser una princesa rosa?*, which translates to “Is there anything more boring than a pink princess?”

Richa Jha, founder of Delhi-based Pickle Yolk Books, was at the show looking to sell translation rights and get into new markets. The press initially started as a self-publisher two years ago but has grown to take on other authors, with five books currently available and three more on the way. “India is an extremely tiny market, but in the last three or four years parents have been more willing to pick up [picture] books,” said Jha. “It’s a great time to be in the picture book industry in India.”

Philip Meitiner, international program manager of Micro:Bit, a BBC affiliated ed-tech company that produces a mini-computer to teach children about computer programming, attended the fair for the first time. “When I was sold the idea of coming to Bologna, it was to help us reach out to all kinds of potential partners,” he said. “Increasingly, we know that computational thinking is key to the success of children and adults in the world, and our aim is to get out to as many people as possible with Micro:Bit.” The company has given away nearly a million units in the U.K. and distributed 10,000 Micro:bits to an additional 43 countries. “Our aim is to reach 100 million people,” Meitiner said.

Bruna Vettori, an illustrator from Brazil, made a detour to come to Bologna on her return leg from a trip to India. “Bologna is the heart of children’s publishing, and it’s a great honor to be here among all these other fabulous illustrators.” Vettori, who operates under the brand name Rotina & Rabisco, has worked for a variety of Brazilian and international publishers, including HarperCollins, and was using the occasion to post selfies and expand her network. “This is how we do it now—as artists in the digital world, we can be both creative and nomadic, and each feeds each other.”

Bologna-based publishing consultant Valentina Manchia, a specialist in expressive typography, noted that the fair has extended far beyond the confines of the exhibition halls and that its presence was felt throughout the town. “It’s very much a part of the fabric of our city year-round now.”

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