

## **International Appeal: how to write for it**

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/international-appeal-write/>

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*If you want your work to be internationally available, there are things about the international book market you need to know - so that your work will have international appeal.*

**This is about publishing translations and the business of creating culturally specific books that appeal internationally.**

**One of the mistakes I see some writers do with their main character is creating a protagonist who could be... absolutely anybody - or any piece of toast, really. If a character has no skin color at all, no particular way of speaking, no bad habits and no traditions, there is no way for us to connect with that character.**

When I ask my students about that, the answer I very often get is that they didn't want to come off as racial or prejudiced or exclusive. That, or they were trying to be *as appealing as possible to as many people as possible*.

I get this, but it's the wrong way to go. I'll tell you why.

## **Birds of a Feather? Meh.**

Readers do not need to be like the [protagonist](#) in order to fall in love with them. Are you a cocaine-addled super detective living in 1887? No. Are you a little girl in a New York orphanage? No. Are you a curious monkey? No.

We don't love these characters because they're exactly like us. We love them because even though they're quite unique, we see parts of who we are in them.

*But what about market viability?* Surely there's plenty of proof that the market leans towards white-ness.

Yes, that's true. Most books with children in the US have only white children in them. But not all. What's more, **there are many professionals who are looking specifically for culturally diverse stories and just aren't finding any strong enough to publish.**

So I'd like to talk about what the pros say they want and then talk about what's actually on the market. Let's see if there's a match – or not.

## **What the pros want.**

While at the [Bologna Children's Book Festival](#) (April 2016 – which showcases everything from baby books to YA novels), one of the major themes across several talks and Q&A panels was the importance of publishing stories that do well outside of their origin country.

**Here's what I was able to glean from those many discussions. What's *most important* in a book with cultural appeal:**

### **Diversity.**

Contrary to what you might have read online, literary agents and publishers are indeed looking for culturally diverse stories. You just have to find the right person to champion your work – as with any kind of story.

What matters a great deal here is detail. If you want to write a culturally specific story, it has to be rich with specifics. Dig deep for those smells, sounds and (of course) the foods.

## **Color Aware.**

Don't try to be colorblind when it comes to skin color. Attempting to ignore basic physical differences isn't only impossible - it's counterproductive. Let me put it this way: has ignoring anything at all been a good way of dealing with it? Of course not.

The only thing to do is to embrace our color differences, our cultural differences, our religious differences. Race – or any other kind of simple difference between people – should not be treated as a thing of Consistency. I don't need to pretend that someone has my skin color in order to treat them with decency.

It's a matter of Awareness, Acceptance. Sympathy or at least Empathy. So these are the themes we can put into our stories. Just some of them. There are many, many more.

## **Social Awareness.**

If you create a protagonist who is from Syria, you need a firm grasp of the political situation there and around the world - in terms of refugees and what they experience. You cannot write a shallow account of such a pivotal time in human history, especially if your book is for kids – for the kids who meet and possibly live with refugees as well as those refugee children who have lost their home, their country and their birthright.

If you're wondering, there are several books about refugees in Europe. Can there be more? You bet. There can never be enough great stories. That's the sentiment I heard from editors and publishers at the [Bologna Book Fair](#), and they clearly stated that books of this nature, books about the tough topics, are both socially necessary and financially successful.

People want to read about people who are not anything like them. As I like to say, “Curiosity killed the cat, so don't *duck* the situation.” (I know; I'm pure cheese-ball.) In the best stories, we read the details of what we are not like and in them we discover ourselves. We understand who we are better, more deeply.

Be detailed.

## **International Trends in Books**

In a pleasant conversation with a couple of [Art Directors](#) from different publishing houses, I was asked for my opinion about what's on the market right now. Of the three of us, I had been able to do the most research (aka looking very closely all around the fair). They had to work their book stands much of the time, whereas I only had a few appointments to meet.

They were shocked to hear my answer.

The best, most intriguing, beautiful and risky-but-necessary books are not coming from America or the UK. They're coming from China and Germany. That isn't to say (not at all) that the US and UK do not produce quality stories. Quite the opposite!

But while there are some really terrific books being brought to the UK and US markets, there is a certain sense of predictability.

## **Thinking Broadly about Book Styles**

If I say Rococo, you think Italian and you probably have an image in your mind about what that means. If I say Art Nouveau, you probably think French Jugendstil... or just, "cool stuff." You might even think 1920s Hollywood. But you have an idea of what that looks like.

You don't have to be an expert on Art Appreciation or anything. You just know it when you see it.

The same can be said of illustrated storybooks, when you look at them from country to country. Very often, you can tell that a book is from Germany (or illustrated by a German artist) because of the visual style and the story content.

This is also true of Chinese books, Russian books, Spanish books – etc. The countries are distinct and so is the general style of books they produce and bring to the international book market.

UK books tend to be more adorable, and matte. US books tend to be glossier. Either of these can be spotted from a good distance, based only on their color palette and shine. I don't mean that all of the books are the same, but they are undoubtedly trending in a certain artistic direction.

## **Culture and Book Themes**

Themes are also culturally predictable. Friendship, Magic, Family and Courage are the Big Four. So there is a sort of certain expectedness to what they are bringing to kids and the adults who read to them.

The most thematically courageous books are coming from China. Concepts are highly sensitive and difficult to discuss with kids: Death, Creativity, Loyalty and Honor. You also find themes like Family, Friendship, Magic and Courage, but they are treated as a given. They're not the primary message; they're just there, supporting the primary point of the story.

I wondered if this had always been the case about Chinese literature for kids. In attending a special presentation, I discovered that this is new. Artists and storytellers in China appear to be experiencing an artistic revolution.

URGH Message: I took several photographs of examples but the images didn't pan out. All the glass frames reflected so much light that only about half of the image shows in the picture. I can't post any of it here, but I can point you in the right direction:

**Go to the [CCPPG](#) (Chinese Children's Press and Publication Group) and [download their catalogues](#).**

In studying illustrated storybooks [while at the fair](#), I was captivated by the deceptively simple way very complex ideas were being captured on the pages of Chinese books. That, coupled with beautiful artwork, just made me think, “wow.”

German books for kids show a great deal of Nature. Books with songs and rhymes and silly but nevertheless clever anthropomorphic animals are also common. These aren't the types of characters you typically find in a Disney story though. It's just different. It's hard for me to pin down exactly what, but I want to say *grittier*. Certainly more European (vague, I know – but true).

Russian books are just depressing and bizarre to me. It's no wonder that outside of Russia, they only appeal to people who wear black turtlenecks.

French books are moody. They're very French somehow. Beautiful and pouty.

There are some amazing books available from Spain, Italy and Poland. I am really rooting for some of these to be translated and published around the world, **but I know that most won't make the cut because of several specific business-related reasons.**

### **Why books don't get translated even when they're great.**

If you want to track down whether a book you know has been translated into other languages or not, visit [World Catalogue](#). It's the librarian's resource to see any and all editions of any title ever published. It's pretty awesome.

#### **Artwork.**

Visually, the artwork may be thought to be too different to appeal to readers of other nations. For example, US chapter books and novels have often a very American art style; so the artwork is often redone for a UK release, to make the artwork more visually appealing. For stories that are fully illustrated, this doesn't happen all that often - but it does happen.

#### **Humor.**

What's funny in one country is often offensive or just strange in another country. As an American living in Germany (since 2002), it's very easy for me to spot which German-language books will not make it in the US because of cultural differences in humor.

It is possible to be at once “adorably funny” in one country while being “[inappropriate](#)” in another.

#### **Rhymes.**

When a book rhymes, that is the best thing you can provide young readers. Many studies have shown that it helps support language development and memorization skills. But publishers shy from this. WHY? International deals. If the [story rhymes](#), it is almost impossible to translate into another language. If the book is also illustrated, that usually means that some images need to be redone for the translation.

One of the most fascinating talks at the Bologna Fair was one where [Nadia Budde](#) talked about the process of translating and re-illustrating her highly successful book, “1, 2, 3, Tier” (meaning, “1, 2, 3, Animal”). Her English skills are so excellent, she was asked to also do the English (US) translation. Consequently, she needed to also create new images for that version, which is “1, 2, 3, Me.”

Budde’s book has since been translated into several other languages (by other people). So how were those other cultural differences handled? I’ll tell you... *but you may not believe it!*

### **Eastern Books from the West**

In translations for China, stories often include footnotes that explain what has been lost in translation. I cannot imagine trying to keep a 4-year old engaged with footnotes that explain why it is cute or funny!

So it isn’t just a matter of hiring a translator (though that is an added expense), and it also isn’t just the possibility of needing to create new artwork (though that is also an added expense). Rhyming stories, as marvelous as they are in the original voice, simply lose their glory in a translation. It’s that simple.

### **Theme.**

While I kind of hate to admit it, I do think that there are some themes that are culturally sensitive, perhaps too culturally sensitive to do well in different parts of the world. I’m not talking about reasons for a book to be censored - that’s something quite different. I mean reasons to not be translated.

Death is a theme you have to really look hard to find on the US market. Outside of a [religion bookstore](#), good luck. But in the Chinese selection of big releases for 2016, I found three storybooks about death on just one bookcase. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

American publishers do take risks, but they are few and far between. Honestly, I don’t know how that can possibly be. They have the largest portion of the world’s book sales.

### **Mystery Sauce.**

There has got to be some other reason. I just don’t know what it is. (If you’ve got an idea, let me know!)

### **Be Authentically You.**

Know thyself. Write what you know. These are sentiments we’ve heard often enough.

**Can we and should we write beyond our own culture?** Sure. Why not, if you know and understand something about the culture worth sharing. I would suggest it’s something every writer *should* do.

Does a paleontologist need to be a dinosaur in order to dig them up? No. You don’t have to be a refugee to tell a great, touching story about a refugee (or to justify telling such a story).

You just need to be a writer.

You *are* the little black orphan girl in New York. You *are* the curious monkey. You *are* the cocaine-addled brilliant detective in the 1880s. **Not for the specifics, but for the humanity in those stories.**

Expand our borders!

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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