

First Opinions—Second Reactions

Volume 1, Issue 1

2008

Article 5

Eating McDonald's in China

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EATING McDONALD'S IN CHINA

Eve Tal

Eve Tal holds a Bachelor of Arts cum laude in Literature from Oberlin College, a master's degree in education and a second master's degree in children's literature from Hollins University. She is a children's author and independent scholar whose papers on children's literature have appeared in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Bookbird*, and *The Looking Glass*. Eve contributed several articles on Israeli children's literature to the new *Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* and has presented papers at international conferences in the U.S. and in Israel, where she lives. In addition, Eve has published four picture books in Israel. Her young adult novel, *Double Crossing*, won the 2006 Paterson Prize for Books for Young People, and was a runner-up for the Children's Literature Award of the National Jewish Book Awards. It was chosen for a 2006 Skipping Stones Honor Award in the category of Multicultural and International Awareness Books. "I live in two cultures simultaneously," writes Eve. "This gives me a unique insight into both North American children's literature and international children's literature." Website: <<http://www.eve-tal.com>>.

I write for children in two different languages. When I sit down to write, the subject I choose, language I write in, and child audience I consciously or unconsciously reference determine the final story. I never write for the international child, because there is no such child.

In fact, I contend that international children's literature is an American invention. Anything not written in America is automatically classified as international literature by the American audience¹ even though the author writing in German in Germany for German children is writing German children's literature, as are authors writing in French, Russian, Swedish, Chinese, etc.

Although my premise that international literature is an American invention may be debatable, no one can dispute that very few books written in other countries see publication in the U.S., and the majority that do were originally written in English. Nina Lindsay writes in the *School Library Journal*:

There seems to be an unspoken quota system for imported books in the U.S. children's publishing market. Especially for translated books. Though statistics are challenging to gather, Carl Tomlinson points out in the introduction to his *Children's Books from Other Countries* that not much more than 1 percent of children's books published in the U.S. are translations. Compare this to the 30-60 percent published in the early 1990s in Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, and Sweden. (36)

These statistics may sound surprising, given the emphasis on multicultural literature among American publishers, but do books written abroad actually have much in common with multicultural literature? "[T]he vast majority of these books [deal with the inclusion, if not assimilation, of other cultures into our American one]," writes Stephen Roxburgh, publisher of Front Street Books. "At its best, multicultural education acknowledges and celebrates diversity in our culture. But it falls way short of the mark in acknowledging and celebrating the integrity of other cultures" (48). Multicultural books tend to reflect the majority culture, providing the

reader with a sense of familiarity: “hey, they’re really just like us.” Books written in other countries have no such objective. Unconcerned with questions of cultural authenticity or who has the right to tell a story, their intrinsic value grows out of deep historical roots in their home culture.

Because human lives differ so widely throughout the world, reading books from other cultures opens a window for children, giving them the opportunity to stretch their personal boundaries. These books push them to ask questions about other cultures which in turn ricochet back upon their own lives. Books from other cultures can be provocative, stimulating, and subversive.

But they can also be the opposite. In their longitudinal study of translated books between 1990 and 2000, Maureen White and Ruth E. Cox found, “[g]enres and types of translated children’s books are similar to those initially published in the US. [sic] In rank order, Realistic Fiction, Information, and Animal Personification books were the primary genres of translated children’s books” (28). According to White and Cox, picture books are 60% of the titles translated. They argue, “Publishers of translated titles appear to be aware that children want books with familiar subjects. Common subjects in translated books for younger children mirror those found in many US books [...]” (28). Even when publishing books written in other countries, publishers select books with which they believe American children will identify: books that deviate little from the books they print by American writers.²

On the one hand, it is difficult to fault them. Publishing, after all, is a commercial enterprise. The difficulties of translation coupled with high publication costs and the fact that these books (*Harry Potter* excepted) do not earn as well as locally written books make their publication risky (Biamonte 26). They are exempt from consideration for the most prestigious children’s book awards like the Newbery and Caldecott, which are limited to American authors. How many people outside the children’s book field have even heard of the Mildred L. Batchelder Award?

Perhaps just as disturbing is the trend towards the internationalism, or more bluntly, the Americanization of children’s books:

The range of alterations made under the umbrella of Americanization is vast. Titles, setting, character names, and culturally specific allusions may all be changed in addition to spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and idiom. In effect, books are re-edited according to a different set of conventions. (Whitehead 688)

Jane Whitehead is describing the changes made by American editors in children’s books originally published in Britain, but the process is doubly acute when a manuscript passes through the filter of both translator and editor. Even more critical is Whitehead’s revelation of the censorship that occurs when publishers push authors to gear the story to selling to the American market, changing characters, occupations, or other literary elements before the book is even published.³ Books written with American foreign rights sales in mind sacrifice the authenticity that constitutes their uniqueness.

Recently, I traveled in China where I looked askance at my fellow travelers who rejected the adventure of tasting local cuisines and sought out American chain restaurants like the ubiquitous McDonald’s™. Hopefully, children’s books will remain a refuge from this tsunami of

Americanization. Children should be encouraged to read books that provide an experience of other cultures, lest they too wind up eating Big Macs™ in China.

Notes

- ¹ Zeece and Hayes, for example, write that “[i]nternational books may be written in English and published in a country other than the United States; written in a language other than English and translated and published in the United States; or written in another language and published in another country and subsequently published in the United States in the original language” (191).
- ² For further discussion, see my article “Beneath the Surface.”
- ³ Whitehead mentions the rejection of a hedgehog as protagonist and changing a key character in a novel from milkman to paperboy (27).

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