
INTERVIEW WITH JOCHEN WEBER

Entrevista com Jochen Weber

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The International Youth Library (Internationale Jugendbibliothek in German) is the world's largest library for international children's and juvenile/YA literature. Located at Blütenburg Castle in Munich, it is also a renowned scientific research institute that hosts scholars from around the world. With a collection that holds almost 630,000 titles in more than 200 languages, the library's most important publication is the annual "White Ravens", a catalog that reunites suggestions of books from different countries. Traditionally, it is published prior to the Frankfurt Book Fair and the books are put on display and introduced at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, the leading professional fair for children's books in the world. Below is an interview with Jochen Weber, responsible for the catalog's editorial work and Head of the library's Language Sections. Mr. Weber graduated with a magister artium degree from the University of Cologne (Germany) where he studied German literature and language, Spanish literature and language, and political science. From 2006 to 2012, he served as vice president of the Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur (German section of IBBY).

1. Thanks for taking the time to answer our questions, Mr. Weber. Can you please start by telling us first the origins of the catalog, and then about its changes and improvements throughout the years?

The International Youth Library introduced the (German) name "Weiße Raben" (White Ravens) in the 1960s to label outstanding

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books that it would recommend for translation to publishers. At that time, there was no regular printed publication yet and the reviews were written in German. After having been simple lists or brochures, in 1984 the “Weiße Raben” were published for the first time as a bound catalogue on the occasion of the International Children’s Book Fair in Bologna, presenting 226 children’s books from 40 countries. In 1986, the annual selection was published for the first time in English under the title “The White Ravens”, addressed to publishers as well as to librarians, teachers, booksellers and other professionals working with children’s literature. Until 2013, the catalogue continued to be published in spring for the Bologna Book Fair, where the books were displayed at the IYL’s booth, featuring short reviews of 250 new books. In 2014, some changes were made. Since then, the annual selection includes 200 titles. Along with that relaunch, the printed catalogue got a larger format and a more attractive design. It is printed in four colors and, along with the bibliographic information, the reviews, subject headings and indexes, it contains images of the book covers. Another change is that the catalogue is published in October now, prior to the Frankfurt International Book Fair. The following spring, the books are displayed as usual at the IYL’s booth in Bologna. Also since 2014, the White Ravens database (<https://whiteravens.ijb.de/list>) has been in service. It offers the data of all White Ravens from the 2012 edition onwards and can be browsed, for example, by person, language, country, or subject. Today, the annual “White Ravens” list presents books from more than 50 countries published in more than 30 languages. Since 2021, the “White Ravens” have also been on Instagram.

2. Jella Lepman, founder of the International Youth Library, believed in “international understanding through children’s books” (as she entitled the congress which led to the creation of the IBBY – International Board on Books for Young People) and worked for it. What’s the role of the library in promoting children’s literature in the 21st and how does the White Ravens Catalog help expand it?

Jella Lepman founded the International Youth Library in 1949, just a few years after World War II, with great conviction, determination, and enthusiasm. Her ideas and manifold work continue to be the fundament and guideline of the library’s work. After the horrors of war, the Holocaust, and the Nazi regime, Lepman, together with her

fellow campaigners, ventured a project in which literature and education, underpinned by principals such as democracy, freedom of art and speech, human and children's rights, played a key role and where children's books would act as bridge-builders among people, nations, cultures, and languages.

Over more than seven decades, things have changed: childhood, children's literature, the international book market, children's literature research, the promotion of and the work with books for young readers. This is reflected in today's profile of the library and in the IYL's activities. Nevertheless, the ideals and principles mentioned above continue to be part of the core identity of our institution. On the one hand, the task of the IYL is to collect, archive and make available children's books in many languages and from many countries. On the other hand, through its activities and programs, the library seeks to expand knowledge of international children's literature and invite people to discover the diversity of that literature in a variety of ways. The "White Ravens" catalog is an important element of this work. In addition, we organize exhibitions in the library. We later offer some of those as traveling exhibitions, which can be borrowed by libraries, schools and cultural institutions in Germany and abroad. We also organize programs and workshops for children and young adults to accompany the exhibitions and other activities. Another activity is the biennial White Ravens Festival for International Children's Literature, to which we invite about twelve authors and illustrators from different countries to Munich and Bavaria each time, where they hold about 90 events within five days. Since 2011, in cooperation with a German publishing house, we have edited the "Kinder Kalender" every year, a multilingual calendar featuring 53 children's poems in their respective original languages and with their original illustrations. From 2017 to 2021, we had a project on Arabic children's literature, including three catalogs, events with authors, and an exhibition of eight illustrators from Arabic-speaking countries.

The "White Ravens" catalog is a service to people who work in publishing, libraries, and education, or who are involved with children's literature for other reasons. Publishers can find information on new books they could include as translations in their programs. Librarians can find guidance for expanding their library's foreign-language holdings. There are, of course, numerous institutions and organizations around the world that also review book children's books. What makes the "White Ravens" special is its international focus which is not just on one language, one country

or one region, but showcases many facets of the immensely diverse international children's literature.

3. Scholars from many backgrounds compose the Languages Section of the library, and they are responsible for selecting books from different languages. Do staff adhere to a common understanding of what makes for a quality children's book? Or, is there a common set of criteria the staff look for or consider while selecting the books for the library? In other words: what are the characteristics that a book must have to be on the list?

There are no fixed criteria for the selection, but over the years we have developed traditions regarding the evaluation of children's literature. In the IYL team, we share information about new books and our reading experiences, as well as we discuss trends and the (international) discourse on children's literature. For the "White Ravens" selection, the quality of text and illustration are crucial. Other aspects, such as innovation, originality, new topics or book design, influence the selection, too.

We always point out that the "White Ravens" is a recommendation list, but not a literary award. A prize would require a jury which would be impossible to realize here. How could we create a jury whose members would jointly judge the quality of children's books in more than 30 languages? That is why we rely on the expertise and experience of each member of our team in their specific working fields.

4. IBBY has its own branch in Brazil, called Fundação Nacional do Livro infantil e Juvenil (FNLIJ). Can you tell us about the relationship between IYL and FNLIJ? Are there any collaborative projects?

The FNLIJ looks back on a long history and successful, manifold work. It has played an important role among the currently more than 80 national IBBY sections worldwide. The FNLIJ has been following and supporting the work of the IYL for many years. The information about the FNLIJ Children's Book Award or the annual book catalogs that the FNJL publishes on the occasion of the Bologna Children's Book Fair are highly valuable to get an overview of the Brazilian children's book production. It is a great

privilege that for many years the IYL has received as a donation the books that the FNLIJ exhibits at its booth in Bologna. Those books have been an important component in expanding the library's Brazilian children's book holdings over the past years. Unfortunately, this tradition has been interrupted by the COVID pandemic. The Bologna Book Fair had to be cancelled in 2020 and 2021. This year, fortunately, it was held again, but the FNLIJ, as many Latin American publishers and institutions, was not yet present at the fair again. In sum, the relation between the FNLIJ and the IYL one could characterize in this way: There is a friendship bond between the two, but no ongoing cooperation working in the form of concrete projects.

5. What is the objective of the White Ravens Catalog? Does it determine the choices of reading/literacy mediators? Is there any research on its effect in the social sphere?

The purpose of the catalog has already been outlined in the answer to question 3. We cannot make any valid statements about the possible impact and success of the "White Ravens". But we do know that catalog is a constant for many people worldwide working in and with children's literature – publishers, librarians, teachers, educators, booksellers, translators, journalists, and others – and is a reliable source and reference point. However, there has not yet been any scientific study having investigated the "White Ravens's" range and impact.

6. Did the Covid-19 pandemic situation change anything about the process of selecting and considering books for the catalog and its promotion?

In general, nothing has changed. The work is the same, the selection process is the same. However, one has to state that the pandemic has affected and even temporarily interrupted some channels, processes, contacts and other things.

It is important to know that the holdings of the International Youth Library – today about 630,000 books, to which about 10,000 new books are being added every year – have entirely been consisting of donations since the IYL's opening in 1949. Publishers, institutions, organizations, authors, and illustrators donate books in order to

expand the IYL's unique collection. That means: books we don't receive can't be selected for the "White Ravens" catalog. Only a book that is physically part of our collection can be a White Raven.

7. Throughout your extensive experience with child readers of the most varied nature, what would you like to emphasize about the role played by illustration in children's books? Is there a "dictatorship" of images in children's literature? Or without them, children's books don't have a good chance of finding their readers? Is the Harry Potter phenomenon an exception?

Illustrations have played a significant role in the history of children's and young adult literature from its very beginning. Picture books and illustrated stories are an important segment of children's book production. In recent years, genres such as the graphic novel made their appearance. In times, in which visual communication has gained an increasingly important role in all areas of life, it is not surprising that images play a significant role in media for young people. One can regret, but probably not change or reverse this trend.

Looking at the international book market, I don't see a "dictatorship of images", but a dominance and overabundance of mediocre, aesthetically poor images. Adults often have little confidence in the capacities of children and tend to "protect" them from more complex, artistically ambitious illustrations (and books in general). But there is no reason to fear overburdening children with "difficult", unconventional, perhaps unexpected images. We just have to give children time and the chance to approach and discover them in an open-minded way. It is not necessary to limit the amount of images, but to advocate for high-quality book illustration and to provide aesthetic education for children and young adults – a "visual school" where they learn to read images and to be receptive to the diversity of illustration.

"Harry Potter" has been a phenomenon. Anyhow, one can find countries where young adult fiction has had a long tradition and still plays an important role, although it is facing competing media. In those countries, the phenomenon of the voluminous non-illustrated young adult novel is not limited to "Harry Potter." Other "thick" novels find their readers, too. It is important that young people have access to those books: at home, in libraries, at school. And it is crucial to support, encourage and train them in the practice of

reading long texts.

8. Do stories help us make sense of the world? Especially in the current context of uncontrollable multicrisis (climate, pandemic, war, growth of dictatorships and totalitarian regimes around the world)?

One should not expect too much from children's books and not look at them in a utilitarian way, i. e. to see them as tools, helpers, or pedagogical instruments. The formula "Read this book to understand this topic or to deal with that problem" should be viewed critically, because it reduces literature to fulfilling a specific function. The work of authors and illustrators first and foremost consists in telling good, gripping stories. In my opinion, the question if a book conveys a certain message or achieves a specific goal is of minor importance. I do not want to say that books have no meaning, or that readers cannot find any message in them, or that books can help them understand things, feelings, experiences, and find ideas or means to deal with those. In this respect, children's literature has always provided something and continues to do so, even in these challenging times of our increasingly complex world. Good authors and illustrators will always find ways to depict and to reflect the reality of their time in texts and pictures, without giving "recipes" or instructions for action and explaining the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The interviewers would like to thank Dr. João Luís Ceccantini for his assistance. Guilherme Magri wishes to express his gratitude to the International Youth Library for providing this scholarship to him.

Data de recebimento: 10 jul. 2022

Data de aprovação: 10 set. 2022