

## **Telling stories, writing bilingual picture books, and more adventures with the Book Pirates**

*An interview with the charity Book Pirates, Lübeck, Germany*

*by Mareen Pascall, June 11, 2021*

*The projects of the Book Pirates aim at enabling children and young people to experience literature creatively and independently. One of their numerous projects consists of the creation of a database for bilingual picture books written by children and for children. Children and young people across four continents have helped to create the books. There are also books for very young children. Read more about the Book Pirates exciting literacy projects in this interview.*

**Ms Sturm, Mr Gries, the house of the [Book Pirates](#) is located in Lübeck on the Baltic Sea coast - and its name sounds like an adventure: book pirates. What kind of adventures can children and young people experience when they come to your charity's house?**

Martin Gries (MG): Children and young people can find their own space for stories. The [Book Pirates Children's Literature House](#) is a place where they can fantasize, discover stories, but also find their own voice over the years, and carry their own stories into the world.

**Why are stories so instrumental for children and young people?**

MG: People think in stories: we organize our thinking in causal chains, and that's basically thinking in stories. If I only know one story, then I will only think in terms of one story, like for example in the Middle Ages: if your father is a miller, you too will be a miller and will marry a miller's daughter, and this across generations. Only when I'm able to think in many different stories and have a treasure trove full of stories can I organize my life in such a way that I make the best possible decisions. The more confident I am in thinking about and telling stories, the more open-minded I will be and the more options I have. It's a bit like vocabulary - if I know very few words my world is limited - it's better to have a rich and well-filled vocabulary.

**What offers for "collecting" stories do you have for younger children who are not yet able to read themselves?**

MG: For younger children we have projects in the city, in the entire region, and one project is even global. One of our favorite city projects is called "Every Child Needs Books". We use a big cargo bike that we call [BücherpiRAD](#) (an invented word merging the German words for books, pirate, and bike). The cargo bike is full of books. We ride to daycare centers and socially disadvantaged areas, to children whose families cannot afford picture books. Picture books are in fact an expensive pleasure: if you want to regularly buy age appropriate books it costs a pretty penny. During our visits, the children can rummage through the BücherpiRAD to find books they like. Children can take a book that they themselves chose home with them. It's not borrowed but really their own. This way they can build up their own little bookshelf over the course of our visits. We also have reading sessions with a kamishibai that's hidden inside the BücherpiRAD. That's a sort of paper theater through which you can show story cards that you describe.

Another project for both younger and older children is "[The Miraculous Reading Club](#)". Children between the ages of 8 and 10 meet at the Book Pirates house every week and practice reading a picture book. When they say they are ready - usually after five to six weeks - they arrange a reading event for younger children under five or six. During the event, the pictures in the books are projected on the wall and the older children stage a sort of theatrical reading - with allocated roles, noises and whatever else occurs to them.

#### **And what's the younger children's reaction?**

MG: They don't leave the older children's side! They really enjoy the fact that an older child - but still clearly a child - has time for them, for example, when after the reading they paint pictures together to further illustrate the story. The atmosphere in the room also has something magical about it, because adults do not play a decisive role. It is the children themselves who carry out the reading and organize the whole afternoon.

#### **That sounds wonderful. Which Book Pirates project is there beyond Lübeck?**

MG: We have "[The Story Hunters](#)" project. So far it has been carried out in over 300 daycare centers. Daycare centers and other supporters of the story hunters can choose from four topics when they order the project package: the sea, inventions, music and the forest. In the story about the sea, for example, the children "accidentally" find a message in a bottle. The letter written to the children states that the captain has to have his ship repaired and is looking for a place to store his chests. Would the children help him? The children say yes, of course, and then a messenger actually comes and brings a "90-year-old sea chest" with books and props.

The children then plunge into the history of the captain's logbook for several weeks. In the process, they stumble across puzzles and questions and begin to investigate and to find answers. My favorite example with a group was about the sighting of a sunfish that the captain noted in the ship's log. The children laughed and did not believe that there is such a thing as a sunfish. But then they found out a lot about sunfish... only one question remained unanswered: Do sunfish (called moonfish in German) shine in the dark? Fortunately, the chest also contains the captain's address book with real addresses, e.g., of a marine biologist. This way the children also found an answer to that question.

#### **So story hunters are a bit like treasure hunters, as the name suggests ...**

MG: Exactly, the children go on a journey of discovery, because the interactive reading journeys raise questions and the treasures that the children find represent new stories and bits of knowledge. They learn at a young age that being able to read allows them to learn about the world.

#### **You mentioned a project that you are carrying out worldwide ...?**

Christina Sturm (CS): This is the picture book project [1001 Languages](#). In essence, the website is a database of bilingual picture book stories written and designed by children and teenagers. Volunteer translators translate the texts into as many languages as possible. Some are also recorded as audio books. Anyone - readers, families, educators, children - can download a finished bilingual book.

#### **How many books and languages are there so far?**

CS: We currently have a total of 29 picture books on the website, written by children from four continents. Many stories are created by the Book Pirates themselves, but books have also been sent to us. Book writing workshops have sprung up in different places as far afield as Austria or Spain. There are now 73 languages to choose from. Our goal is to get to at least 1001!

#### **How long does it take from the idea for a book until its production?**

CS: Some books are created in five day intensive summer workshops during which a group of volunteers discusses possible genres and illustration techniques for a particular book. At the end of the workshop a book is produced. Other books are written in a school class over a period of six months, for instance, in German classes or in art classes. It all depends on the framework and context. Our goal is to create a database that readers across the globe can use and expand on.

**This project where books are artistically designed, produced in two languages and in different formats - that seems to me to be unique. How did you come up with the idea for the bilingual picture books?**

MG: The idea came up at an IBBY congress. IBBY stands for the [International Board on Books for Young People](#), an association of people who want to promote children's reading. Its congresses have participants from over 60 nations. A colleague from Ghana said that five languages were spoken in her community - but that she only has books in English. At that time I was conducting training courses with Russian-, Kurdish- and Turkish-speaking mothers in Germany - and my suitcase contained only books in German instead of also books in the respective family languages.

The problem with a sole focus on languages that children do not hear at home is that children's first contact with books in those unfamiliar languages may not be a positive experience. Children sense the distance, insecurity or discomfort in their parents when they read books in a language they are not very familiar with. And then the message is: books - they're kind of good, but difficult and they make you feel uneasy.

A book in a familiar language, on the other hand, can be a home for parents and child, something that's emotionally close and therefore safe and beautiful. Children learn that the medium of the book is something that has positive emotional value, that is familiar, and something that has been positively experienced together with their parents. At the same time, the familiar language can also act as a bridge to a less familiar language. Parents who have different first languages can read the story with the child in their own respective language.

**So true. How did you come up with the idea of offering the books on a website?**

MG: We talked a lot with publishers and the answer always was that the same number of copies would need to be sold for every language or language combination. That is of course impossible. We decided that the project should be non-profit and should work even for just a single copy. We therefore developed the website and the associated software in such a way that languages can now be freely selected and combined.

Recently someone downloaded a book in the language combination Frisian - Dari. We don't know that person's background, but if it can help a family from Afghanistan, for example, to feel good in northern Germany, we're happy. We also get feedback from educators in multilingual groups that they are happy to be able to use the audio versions of the languages that they do not speak themselves.

**The [bilingual-picturebooks.org](#) website represents a participatory project. How can interested people get involved, and what is particularly needed at the moment?**

CS: We have enough translators for the major languages - English, French and Spanish -, but we are always looking for translators and proofreaders for other languages and additional languages that are not yet represented. We need proofreaders because all translated texts are checked by another native speaker. Also we are always looking for volunteers to read the audio versions.

The books themselves are created as "a gift to the world" - that's how we communicate it in our workshops. Everyone who works with groups of children and young people is invited to send in a story. But it is important to us that the content, ideas, and conceptions come from children themselves. Adults only help with the implementation. In terms of design, the groups are completely free - whether to use a collage or potato print, whether pictures are drawn in the sand or in a shadow theater ...

**You can see this creativity when you look at the books that have already been published on the website. The books differ a lot from each other as far as the complexity of the story and the illustration techniques are concerned. And for a book project entitled "[The Flaming Fox](#)", the Book Pirates even received the state of Schleswig-Holstein's 2020 digitalization award...**

MG: One of the youth groups here in the charity's house spent six months immersing themselves in the fairy tale genre and creating a story with text, images and music. While researching, composing, crafting and writing, they danced back and forth between analog and digital media. For example, the

group created a paper theater that was completely analog: there was carving, hammering, drilling and printing. The resulting scenery was then photographed and digitally processed. Texts, music and sound tracks were of course organized via clouds. The state [award](#) was for this work and the final book.

**Congratulations! Now there are 16 children and youth groups in the Book Pirates Children's Literature House, numerous regional and supraregional projects and several permanent employees - how does the association finance this multitude of activities?**

CS: We finance ourselves purely through donations, without public funding. On the one hand, these are donations from foundations for larger projects or project phases, e.g., for the development of the website, the implementation of workshops, or for further training. The running costs on the other hand are covered by private donations, so we are always looking for people who might say: "Sure, I can afford five euros a month to keep the projects going". All the volunteers donate time by being out and about with the BücherpiRAD, for instance, or by helping out in the charity bookstore. And finally, people donate children's books in good condition, which we then sell in the shop. The proceeds go to the Book Pirates.

**What would you like to see in the near future?**

CS: Above all, I would like the 1001 Languages bilingual picture books project to become even more international. It would be great if reading enthusiasts from all over the world use it and enrich it with new stories, translations and audio versions.

MG: I would be especially happy if books from other cultures could be added as well. And of course we'd like have group meetings here on site again as soon as it is possible again. After all, children and young people have a space here that they can shape and design themselves. For many, the house is like a second home.

**We share your hopes for all Book Pirates, big and small! Ms. Sturm, Mr. Gries, all the best for the Book Pirates and thank you very much for this inspiring conversation!**

## **About**

Book Pirates is a charitable organization based in Lübeck, Germany. Its goal is to enable children and young people everywhere to experience books in a creative and independent way. The manifold projects include literature festivals, reading, writing and acting groups, the 1001 languages: bilingual picture books project, and the story hunter project. The Book Pirates are for children and young people between the ages of 3 and 19, and operate both regionally and internationally.

## **Thank You!**

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