



“IT’S ALL ABOUT APPRECIATION.”

An Interview with Bilingual Authors and Scholars Emer O’Sullivan and Dietmar Rösler

Marion Rana

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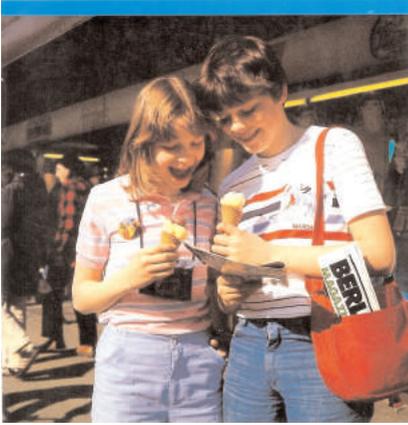
Marion Rana

Emer and Dietmar, many interjuli-readers will know you not only as scholars but also as the authors of I like you – und du?, a bilingual German and English children’s novel first published in 1983. Would you tell us a little bit about the media landscape for multi-lingual children’s literature in the early 1980s?

Dietmar: The situation was dire, there were so few bilingual children’s books around, and publishers were doubtful that there was much of a market. Our first pitch was rejected by five or six publishers on the grounds that booksellers would not know whether to place the book with German or with foreign language publications, and that there would be no readership for this kind of novel. But young and naïve as we were, we continued to pitch the idea until finally Rowohlt rotfuchs’s Gisela Krahl was mad enough to say: “It sounds weird and I’ve never seen anything like it, so let’s try it out!” If it hadn’t been for this brave individual decision, the book wouldn’t have happened. And today, 33 years later, it’s still going strong.

Emer: And it has sold, what, about 300,000 copies? *Dietmar nods.* It started a tradition, too. Rowohlt rotfuchs was very keen for us to continue writing but since we also had “day jobs”, we couldn’t supply as many novels as they had in mind, so other authors continued with the same style of writing, which was great.

If this kind of book didn’t exist before, what inspired you to start writing such a novel?
E: Playfulness! *Both laugh.* Flying to the US one time, we decided to start writing a story by passing it backwards and forwards: One of us would write a line in one language, fold the page, and then pass it to the other one to write a sentence in the other language. It was great fun and we decided to try it with a “real” story. We were also very aware of the fact that in many narratives, both film and



Ill. 1: Starting a tradition: *I like you – und du?*
from 1983

the story down. And before you ask: It wasn't that Emer wrote the English parts and I wrote the German ones! Apart from one passage which Emer wrote, we don't have any recollection of who wrote what: It was such a collaborative process. One of us would start a sentence, and the other would continue it. During the editing process, Emer would sometimes say, "This doesn't sound right for Paddy", or I would say "Karin wouldn't use this expression", but apart from that we were very much both writing in both languages.

Playing with languages is part of everyday life."

E: Thinking that something didn't sound right for a particular character wasn't necessarily linked to the language. When you're writing a book together and characters are coming to life, you sometimes have different ideas about them. So we'd have discussions because I thought that *my* Karin would never have said anything like that or Dietmar would say the same about one of the other characters. *They laugh.* There is a lot of revision involved in writing together, in any language.

literature, as soon as someone enters a different country, they can automatically communicate with other people – the inauthenticity with which the linguistic reality of cross-cultural encounters is frequently depicted is extraordinary and quite shocking. That was something we noticed, and we wondered whether we could make these encounters work differently.

D: Our main place to get the project started was Grunewaldsee in Berlin, where we lived at the time. Walking around the lake, we developed a story line and the characters of the story. So it was a very "moving" process and only once we had these basic ideas figured out did we start to actually write

D: And it was fun! In a way, playing with languages is part of everyday life. But to make sure that these characters, even though they switch between languages, stay true to themselves, was quite a challenge. The two protagonists come together because their parents do, not because they themselves chose to. They have both learned the other's language at school and for them to decide that each will continue to speak in their own language is a reasonably realistic scenario. So once we had the idea and the structure of the story figured out, putting it onto the page wasn't daunting.

E: It's actually amazing the number of people we've met since the book was published who said that they act in exactly the same way as Paddy and Karin: they always speak to each other in their own, different, mother tongues. It was very interesting to hear that many people actually do communicate like that.

Would you say that writing in two languages holds any particular difficulties or benefits?

D: I think the main challenges aren't so much connected to writing in two languages as to the collaboration between two writers. Writing together is a joy in the sense that one of you comes up with an idea and the other develops it further. But of course this can also be a challenge. In certain situations we disagreed about what *my* Karin would say or *my* Paddy would do and we'd encounter some problems then.

E: You have this very clear image of *your* Karin or *your* Paddy in your head, and suddenly you realise that your partner thinks of them in an altogether different way. That can be quite disconcerting! But this is more to do with cooperative creativity, you might say, and not with writing in two languages. And I think we did reasonably well!

You're here together today.

D: Indeed we are, and we continued writing together, too! So it must have been more fun than frustration. We were quite lucky, I think, in the sense that the same things would help us be creative, walking around a lake for instance.

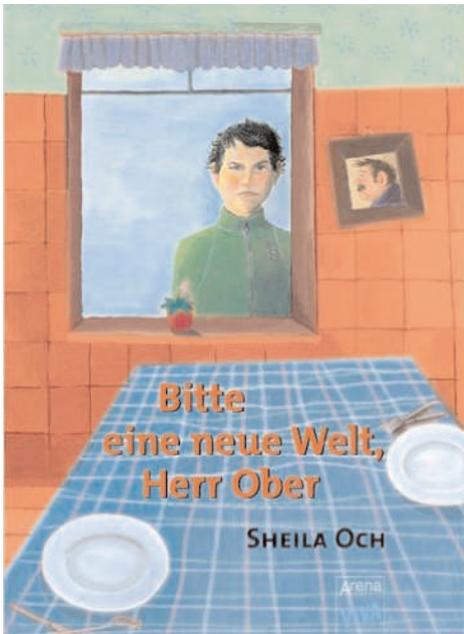
You found a creative happy state.

D: Yes, and a healthy one, too. It's probably tricky if one of you needs to sit in a dark room to get ideas and the other needs to be out in the sunshine. But we were quite in tune, which was great.

We're still waiting for the advent of bilingual literature featuring language associated with migration."

You already said that the situation for multilingual children's literature in the 1980s was dire. Today, there is a larger quantity of children's literature featuring more than one language. But has the quality of these books been able to keep pace, too?

D: The fact that there are more bilingual books is brilliant. When we first published *I like you*, we expected to see the advent of bilingual literature featuring languages associated with immigration – Turkish or Italian, for instance. Very few of these types of books came out, though, and we were – still are – surprised about that. Children growing up with German and Turkish, or German and Greek are so common, and it's strange that this hasn't been reflected more in children's literature. I'm a little reluctant to talk about the quality of fellow colleagues' work but I think, quite generally, what bilingual literature needs is a story, and the reason that these two or more languages appear needs to be necessitated by the storyline. There are still a lot of books around which are very didactic in their use of different languages – the text appears in one language on one side, and the same text is printed in another language on the other side.



Ill. 2: Sheila Och's *Bitte eine neue Welt, Herr Ober* (Arena, 1998)

E: In most cases, what is called bilingual children's literature is in fact dual-language. Rather than the languages interacting in any meaningful way you have parallel texts, which is fine in itself. But if you're looking for books in which languages actually interact rather than simply having been placed next to one another, they're difficult to find.

Language is translated rather than narratively used as interacting with another language.

D: Exactly. But we have to keep in mind that there are other ways of showing appreciation for another language and culture, too. For

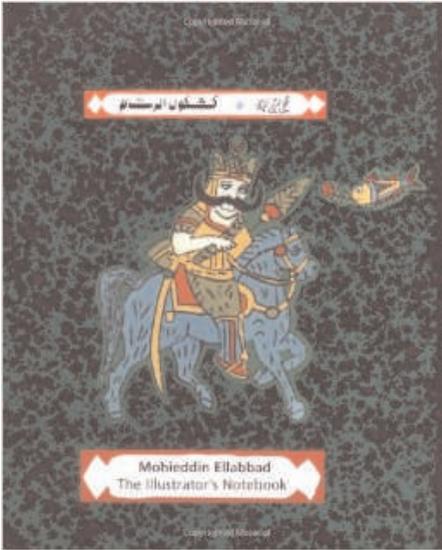
instance, there are some very interesting books which are monolingual but bicultural. I remember an interesting novel from the 1990s, *Bitte eine neue Welt, Herr Ober* by Sheila Och, in which a Czech boy moves to Germany and tries to become a hypercorrect German. Even though it's monolingual, to me, the book is one of the most enjoyable bicultural publications: It's a great reflection on two different cultures, and it's full of humour. I do think it is a shame that there are no Czech passages in it – they would have really worked from a narrative point of view. But I guess, from a sales point of view, making it bilingual would have been a difficult move because so few people in Germany speak Czech.

Ideally the language and the writing are so steeped in their culture that they enable readers to immerse themselves in it.”

E: The bicultural aspect is so important. Many books that are not bilingual nevertheless do a great job of showing the difficulties associated with suddenly living in a different culture and with a different language. A very good recent example is Sarah Crossan's *The Weight of Water* about a Polish immigrant, written in verse form – a wonderful way of distancing from the way you normally read. Foreign language isn't made thematic to a great degree, but the “foreignness” of the situation comes across very well.

In this issue of interjuli, Jana Mikota argues that multilingual children's literature is capable of not just taking children into new worlds, but that it also acquaints them with different narrative structures and traditions of storytelling. Do you agree?

E: I would say yes, to the degree to which this is possible for young readers who are still “learning” literature. It's probably expecting too much to think they'll become familiar with different forms of narrative. But there are some great examples where the language and the writing are so steeped in their culture that they enable readers to immerse themselves in it. One of these is *The Illustrator's Notebook* by Mohieddine Ellabbad, a wonderful book that, among other things, plays with the reading direction: There is a great illustration that shows Superman flying from left to right, and underneath him is an Arabic horseman riding from right to left to show the different directions of heroism in the different cultures. The Arabic language and calligraphy are integrated beautifully in the book, so it's an example of a genuinely bicultural



Ill. 3: "Truly bicultural": Mohieddin Ellabbad's
The Illustrator's Notebook

book steeped in the visual culture as well as making language perception thematic.

For many middle class families, reading multilingual books with their children is more of an additional interest than a real necessity. For other families, a multilingual book becomes a highly relevant and necessary tool to connect to a culture that one or both parents feel at home in. Which added benefits can multilingual literature offer to families and child readers with ties to different cultures and languages?

D: Printed work still has such a prestige, so I think the mere fact that these books exist shows appreciation of these

languages – which, given the monolingual habitus that characterised the German school system throughout early immigration history, is a massive step forward. Children can now hold a book in their hands which reflects their lives, featuring characters just like them, and hopefully helping them realise: My language is just as important as any other. This is particularly valuable for languages with less social prestige and which, from the point of view of language learning within the family, sometimes invoke different mechanisms of rejection that can go hand in hand with a low social appreciation – from the children not wanting to speak the language to them not wanting to be addressed in it. Bilingual literature can be a small, but nevertheless important support for families in which these issues crop up. If it's done properly, of course.

E: Elevating the status of languages through their use in print is essential. And not just for families with a different linguistic background, even though they're probably the ones who'd buy the books. I think even in monolingual families it's important and helpful for children to realise at an early stage that there is more than one language in the world. It's a bit of a utopian idea, maybe, but it would be great if monolingual families also read bilingual books, to make them aware that other languages and cultures exist, and that they are appreciated in

the same way that their language and culture are – even if parents cannot then answer all the questions that might arise from exposure to a different language or culture. Exposing child readers to other languages and cultures is all about awareness, tolerance, and appreciation.

D: The idea of international understanding is a decisive and foundational concern in the more recent history of children’s literature in the tradition of Jella Lepman, for instance. And this is right: Books are certainly one of the agents of getting to know the world, for developing value systems. But at the same time, we mustn’t expect too much of literature. Books can’t change the world on their own.

There are a lot of fantastic books out there!”

Looking into the future of multilingual children’s media, what would you like to see?

D: I think that the possibilities of other media are begging to be explored and used further. Film, for instance, provides such great options – you can subtitle a film partially or completely, you can include language support, optional summaries every ten minutes; there are all sorts of fantastic options. Because of their technical potential, audiovisual and digital media have such an important edge over printed material – language support can be selected depending

on each viewer’s individual needs, and that of course offers great flexibility and didactic as well as narrative possibilities – and I think we will really see a development in terms of multilingualism there.

I’d also love to see multilingualism incorporated into “normal” literature, for general children’s literature to reflect multilingual reality and other languages to crop up in the narrative, in the same way that they crop up in real life.



Ill. 4: A wonderful dual language book: Lee Tae Jun and Kim Dong Seong’s *Wann kommt Mama?*

Would you say you have a favourite multilingual book?

E: That's a challenge! But I think one of the loveliest multilingual books is *Wann kommt Mama?*, a dual-language book by Korean author Lee Tae-Jun and illustrator Kim Dong-Seong, published by Baobab. It portrays a child waiting for its mother to come home on the tram, and the illustrations are reminiscent of Seoul in the 1920s or 1930s, they have a really old-fashioned feel to them. The illustrations are accompanied first by a Korean, than a German text line. It's aesthetically beautiful and the different alphabets alone must make every child wonder about the principles of how the language works.

There are a lot of fantastic books out there, though, and Baobab in particular does a great job of choosing them and making them available on the German market. All that's left to do now is to go out and read them!



Emer O'Sullivan is professor of English Literature at Leuphana University, Lüneburg. Dietmar Rösler is professor of German as a Foreign Language at Justus Liebig University, Gießen. Amongst other publications, they have co-authored eight bilingual children's and Young Adult novels in German and English: I like you - und du? (1983), It could be worse - oder? (1984), Mensch, be careful! (1986), Butler & Graf (1988), Butler, Graf & Friends: Nur ein Spiel? (1990), Butler, Graf & Friends: Umwege (1993), Watch out – da sind sie (2005), and Switch – wer ist hier wer? (2008).

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"Wir sind immer alle noch
am kindlichen Spiel"

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