



# Beyond Our Shores

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**Michael Morpurgo** on the need for books in translation.

Despite the shift in emphasis in adult publishing from the transmission of national traditions to more transnational narratives, there is little equivalent publishing for children. Very few children's books by foreign writers and illustrators are published in Britain. Why is this? Author **Michael Morpurgo** explores the issues. <!--break-->

Four years ago I was in Nantes talking in my garbled French to a class of fourteen year olds in a college. As is usually the case in France the students were well prepared, had read a great deal and were interested. They were full of questions. One of the boys asked me what I was writing now. The story of Joan of Arc, I replied. They were surprised at this. One of them said,

‘But you’re English.’

‘Correct,’ I said. ‘What of it?’

‘Well,’ (and the boy hesitated here, a little nervously), ‘Well you burnt her.’

‘Me?’

‘Oui, les Anglais. Vous.’

At this I confess I became a little riled, and decided to give them a short sharp history lesson.

‘And who are the English?’ I asked them. ‘Where did they come from?’

They looked puzzled at this, lots of gallic shrugs.

‘Have you heard of William the Conqueror?’

More shrugs ? interesting that ? a big fish in our history, a minnow in theirs. So I explained all about how the French/Normans/Vikings (whatever you choose to call them) invaded England in 1066.

‘We didn’t have a Joan of Arc to save us and made the fatal mistake of looking up at all those eye-catching arrows, so we lost. England became effectively a Norman kingdom, French. So by the time three centuries later when William’s descendants invaded and occupied large swathes of France, the English had become French, if you see what I’m saying.’

It took them a while to see it.

?So,? I finished, ?You could say couldn't you, that after all it was the French who invaded France and burnt Joan of Arc??

Silence.

A year later I was in a comprehensive school in Devon. They were not so well prepared, so I had to do a bit of a talk to get them in the mood. I was telling them about the book I had just finished, ?Joan of Arc of Domremy?. There were a lot of very blank faces. So I asked them

?What do you know of Joan of Arc??

English shrugs this time ? How I hate shrugging! A hand went up.

?Wasn't she burnt at the stake??

?What for?? I asked.

Another hand went up.

?Because she was a witch.?

?And was she a witch??

?Yes.?

So, over five hundred years after her death the propaganda lives on ? until I put it right. It is no exaggeration to say that such misunderstandings as these cause wars ? look no further than Ireland or the Balkans. And what are these misunderstandings? Partly sheer ignorance, partly propaganda, and the more ignorance there is, of course, the more propaganda flourishes. We all know that. Yet ignorance of our own history is widespread, and ignorance of the history of others seemingly endemic. It is of course understandable and natural that history should begin at home and radiate outwards. But there is little sense of even that kind of history among young people ? they ?do? the Victorians ? what there is radiates outwards hardly at all. We may know about Henry V and the victory at Agincourt (Shakespeare was a fairly effective propagandist), but do we know about Joan of Arc and the defeat at Patay? Probably not. And in a way I suppose we should not expect any detailed knowledge of the history and culture of other peoples. I am fairly average in this regard I expect. I know a bit about France, about America, a little about Holland, practically nothing about Bulgaria, Botswana or Belgium. That's a pity but not disastrous. What we have to do surely in this ever shrinking ever more interdependent world is to keep learning, keep our hearts open, and our ability to empathise alive so that understanding between peoples and cultures can grow. How is this to be done?

For me, and I know it is unfashionable and I don't care, the greatest interactive medium is the book ? something that is inclined to be forgotten. To make a book live, a writer needs a reader. The reader makes of the tale what she will. So much is left to her. Reading a book is an effort of understanding and empathy. We live with the characters as they unfold the story. We see the world as they see it. Without the reader's imaginative input the characters simply cannot do it. It is because of that complex relationship that book reading is such an intensely involving experience, which is why it is through literature that we learn so many of the great lessons, that our eyes can be opened, that arrogance and complacency and prejudice and propaganda can be peeled away.

### **A One-Eyed View of the World**

Imagine if you will a people who are reluctant to learn other languages, reluctant to show films in other languages, reluctant to publish books in other languages. The children in this society would have a fairly one eyed view of the world. They would not learn how other young people from other countries live and have their being, how their histories and cultures had formed them. Such children would grow into adults who would care little about what happens beyond their borders, and would simply continue to rely on the offered stereotypes, would continue to soak themselves in the

learned propaganda. They would, would they not, be in danger of becoming an ignorant people, indifferent, isolationist and arrogant. Are we in danger of becoming such a people? I hope not, but I fear we may be drifting that way.

In this country our children can read fewer books by foreign writers (by this I mean here writers in other languages) than in any country in Europe. Why is this? Because there are very few published here. Why is this? Because of the predominance of the English language, and because translation costs money, because finding the best of foreign writers is difficult in a country not renowned for familiarity with other tongues.

Familiarity with tongues. It's all part of the same problem. In Holland when the children watch television from the UK, from Italy, from Germany they hear it in the original language, it is subtitled not dubbed. Their ear is open, receptive, their mind stays open, receptive. Stay in Holland? yes they read their own authors avidly but English and American books in translation are everywhere. Go to France (like ourselves, not renowned for speaking the language of others)? something like 50% of the Gallimard Folio Junior, Folio Cadet list are from foreign writers? though they clearly don't yet have enough good books on Joan of Arc! So the Dutch and the French (and many others) can read stories that take place in contemporary urban Glasgow, or rural Devon a century ago, or in Ireland during the potato famine. They learn as they read, intrigued by the differences, surprised perhaps by the similarities, growing in understanding, in empathy all the while.

### **Books in translation**

Many of our major children's publishers have less than 5% of their lists from non English speaking countries. Of course there are good reasons for this. The UK and Ireland, the US and Australia and New Zealand and Canada are between them a most wonderfully rich and convenient source of authors and illustrators, who write about cultures more or less familiar to us, who sell well. There are obvious commercial advantages in building an author across the entire English speaking world. Perhaps our publishers don't need to look elsewhere, but they must, and to be fair many already are. Certainly if they seek they will find. Someone first found and translated Hans Andersen, Grimm, Perrault, Aesop, Tin Tin, Babar, Asterix, Dumas, Jules Verne, Ann Holm and a few others besides. They've sold a few copies over the years! At least one publisher, Egmont Children's Books, is now committed to increasing substantially over the next 18 months their list of foreign sourced books. And when they do, and others do, I hope the reviewers and bookshops will be supportive. Without them nothing will change.

I recall not too long ago a wonderful French book, **The Last Giants** by François Place? winner of every conceivable prize in France? translated and published here by Pavilion (and beautifully produced too), but rarely seen in bookshops. Possible reasons? strange looking illustrations, strange shape, strange story. For strange we should perhaps read 'étranger', read foreign. Something can only become unstrange when it becomes familiar. Chicken and egg. And we must invite foreign writers over here at our festivals. We must have them talking to our children. It happens the other way. Many of our writers and illustrators, Quentin Blake, Anne Fine, Anthony Horowitz, and many others are invited to Europe, into schools and conferences and town halls.

For the many children I speak to in France or Holland or elsewhere I am often the first English person they have ever known, and they do *know* me through my books, and so they know England a little more. Their understanding is widened, deepened? and so is mine.

This article is the text of a talk that was first delivered at the presentation of the 1999 Marsh Award for books in translation.

Michael Morpurgo's **Joan of Arc** (discussed in **BfK 114**) is published by Pavilion. His latest book is **Kensuke's Kingdom** (Heinemann/Mammoth).

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