

## Article **De Leeswelp 2010, nr.2/maart**

### Bologna: a place for fascinating encounters

The Flemish Literature Fund (FLF) has actively promoted Flemish books for children and young adults to foreign markets since October 2006. That is the year I started working at the FLF as ‘grants manager’ for children’s and YA books. My fourth visit to Bologna is approaching and, as in previous years, it’s really something to look forward to. People sometimes refer to the International Children’s Book Fair as the ‘Mecca of the children’s book world’. And it most definitely is. You come across all kinds of illustrators with international ambitions at the fair. Children’s and YA publishers who want to gain a place in the international literary scene all go to Bologna. You meet people there who have an open mind about the rest of the world and a soft spot for good stories and beautiful books.

For me, Bologna is primarily a place for fascinating encounters. The FLF has its own stand at the fair, amongst the Flemish publishers, where over the course of three days I meet about fifty foreign publishers, editors, translators from Dutch and festival organisers. Every meeting lasts around half an hour. That’s not long, but it’s standard at international trade fairs, and it’s just long enough to catch up on translation plans, to show new and interesting work by our authors and illustrators, to give advice about translators, for example, and to answer practical questions, which are often about subsidies.

Foreign publishers who wish to bring out Flemish literary works in translation can request a subsidy from the FLF. A translation subsidy is available for fiction and we have a special subsidy for illustrated books. The next step in the process might involve a promotion subsidy for the author. If an author’s work is translated and a festival organiser or the publishers invite the author to come and promote the book, the FLF can pay part of the travel costs.

In 2006, the FLF presented its illustrator exhibition *Buiten de lijntjes gekleurd / Colouring Outside the Lines* during the book fair in Bologna. This exhibition capitalised on the success of a number of Flemish illustrators who were starting to make a name for themselves internationally, such as Carll Cneut, Ingrid Godon and Guido Van Genechten. But it was also the ideal way to show the rest of the world that Flanders is bursting with talent. The exhibition of work by 17 Flemish illustrators travelled on from Bologna to Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary, the United States, France and Italy, accompanied by a beautiful catalogue. *Buiten de lijntjes gekleurd. Uitgelezen Vlaamse illustratoren in de kijker / Colouring Outside the Lines: Flemish illustrators making their mark* (Lannoo) is a book with lots of illustrations to look at, combined with fascinating analysis by Marita Vermeulen. For the FLF, the exhibition was a perfect introduction to foreign publishers, at festivals, and in the media. For Flanders, it was the most beautiful calling card you could wish for.

And yes, the concept of the ‘Flemish illustrator’ has rapidly been gaining ground. It’s a ‘brand’ that stands for quality, for telling your own story in pictures, often in a daring, experimental style, against the backdrop of the rich history of Flemish art. It’s a ‘label’ that illustrators from other countries might envy—because in Flanders so much is possible.

Is it really true that so much more is possible in Flanders than elsewhere? Yes—and this is partly thanks to Flemish and Dutch publishers, who in recent years have taken rather a lot of risks by publishing artistically adventurous picture books and allowing illustrators the opportunity to mature. Publishing any kind of book is always a risky investment in a small linguistic area like ours. The average print run of a literary picture book does not exceed

2,000 copies. So in the Low Countries we also give our picture books a luxurious finish, with a hard cover, which is not the case in many foreign countries.

Flemish publishers are taking an increasingly professional approach, paying more attention to foreign markets, and they are now welcome participants at book fairs all over the world. Many of their books have been translated into several languages, with co-productions often arranged for picture books. They have also produced versions of certain books in different languages simultaneously, in order to reduce the costs for all those involved.

The FLF played a part in developing the high-quality label that has been assigned to our authors by publishers and readers abroad. Since it was founded in 2000, the organisation has always embraced picture-book makers, and this approach is unique. Few foreign literary foundations consider illustrated books to be literature. But this has never been an issue for discussion at the FLF; illustrators are authors, who tell a story with pictures. Like their writing counterparts, they can request grants that allow them time to produce creative, artistic work. Without this subsidy system, many illustrators might have to concentrate primarily on commercial work, even if only to survive.

But of course the biggest pat on the back has to go to the illustrators themselves. Many of these Flemish illustrators have scooped prestigious prizes abroad and have been frequently translated. They stamp their own mark on the picture books that they illustrate, each of them with their own very personal, individual style. Neither should we forget the art schools, which train each new generation to become skilled illustrators. Our illustrators are constantly finding new, original ways to put a story into pictures. Their work is never simply about matching words and pictures, but adds an extra dimension to the text. As a result, their illustrations often grace the walls of exhibitions beyond our national borders and international juries appreciate their work, awarding them nominations and prizes.

The FLF has also encouraged young illustrators to visit the book fair in Bologna for a number of years now. Promoting existing work by well-known illustrators is one thing, but making young talented artists enthusiastic about books and giving them the opportunity to expand their horizons is at least as important. For this reason, the FLF always gives two or three illustrators a travel grant to visit the Bologna Book Fair. Until last year, there were no obligations attached to this visit: the illustrators were free to decide how they wanted to spend their time. Depending on their personalities, the emphasis might be on looking around, feasting their eyes and enjoying the work on display, while another illustrator might take a more practical approach, making appointments in advance with publishers and actively and energetically seeking out new contacts and sometimes even contracts.

This year the FLF has decided to try out a new formula. We awarded two grants: one to a young talented artist, Kaatje Vermeire, and one to an established and respected illustrator, Carll Cneut. They are going as a team of two and will explore the book fair together. Cneut's work has already been translated into around twenty languages. He has a great network of international publishers, which he maintains and fosters. Cneut recently proved that literary, artistic picture books can also be commercially successful with his *Het geheim van de keel van de nachtegaal* (The Secret of the Nightingale's Throat, words by Peter Verhelst, published by De Eenhoorn), which has sold 27,000 copies in our country and the Netherlands alone. The book has been published in another seven countries, which brings the total to 47,000 copies. Vermeire also had a great success with her debut at De Eenhoorn, *De vrouw en het jongetje* (The Woman and the Little Boy, words by Geert De Kockere), which was immediately translated into Spanish and will soon be on the shelves in French bookshops too. This is an

excellent opportunity for Kaatje to explore the book fair in Bologna with Carll as a guide and to be introduced to a few of his international publishers.

The idea behind sending a team of two is so that the international experience gained by the illustrators—and the FLF and publishers—will not be lost. On the contrary: our young illustrators must be able to learn and profit from this experience as much as possible. The FLF views it as a responsibility to help young people develop their professionalism; working with publishers abroad is vital to this development. The Dutch-speaking region alone is too small for illustrators to make a decent living, so translations for the foreign market are an obvious part of the process. Getting to know the foreign markets, presenting and selling yourself—all of this makes young illustrators more aware of the commercial aspects of the job and in the long term may help them to turn their work into a full-time career. And who is in a better position to advise young artists than an illustrator who already knows the tricks of the trade?

The FLF is constantly looking for even more new ways to keep Flemish literature on the world map. Every genre requires a specific approach, which can be adjusted where necessary. Introducing a new formula is always a bit of a tense moment, of course. But we have complete confidence that the first Flemish duo of illustrators will be a success story. At any rate, it will certainly be a fascinating learning experience—not only for Cneut and Vermeire, but also for the FLF.

For further information, please visit [www.flemishliterature.be](http://www.flemishliterature.be) .