

“Intercultural Book-Boxes” – in cooperation with Rotary eClub One

The Pill Mayer Foundation offers together with Rotary eClub One (rotaryeclubone.org) Intercultural Book-Boxes. These boxes are filled with handsome books which are sensitizing children and teenager to perceive our cultural diverse world full of opportunities.

Intercultural Children’s Books – Opening Doors to New Worlds

Good intercultural children’s literature awakens the joy in discovering cultural diversity and points out the opportunities of intercultural coexistence. It opens doors to cultures which may (still) seem strange to us and calls for an open encounter with people living in different environments.

There are signs of an encouraging trend in the book market: A growing number of intercultural books for children and young people are published. But standing in front of the increasingly bulging bookshelves, one wonders: What exactly is a good intercultural children’s book? What can be done to fuel adolescents’ curiosity about other cultures which they may initially perceive as foreign? What are the crucial prerequisites to ensure that children’s books contribute to a respectful, enriching encounter with people from different cultures? And which criteria are absolutely essential to evaluate the publications?

One thing is clear: Recommending literature for young people is no different than it is for adults. Literary preferences and suggestions are first and foremost something very personal indeed: Some of them like it, others don’t. Even pedagogical hints, no matter how targeted or well-intentioned they may be, are of no use. First of all, a book should be fun, arouse interest, attracting the reader with esthetically creative illustrations and high-end presentation.

Evaluating publications is complicated and the results obtained are not always entirely clear; maximum requirements are only rarely met. Some criteria should, however, be strictly kept in mind whenever you intend to buy a high-quality intercultural children’s book. Featuring an appreciative attitude is of particular importance: The aim is to show that other surroundings are equal and not to describe a culture as superior. Above all, what is important is the way of how situations of conflict are handled and resolved: With the emphasis on dialogue or the preference rather on dominance?

It is essential not to reduce the people portrayed to their origin and not to ignore their individuality with different needs, inclinations and skills. The focus should by no means lie on the differences, but rather on discovering the similarities and the feeling of belonging. Thus, it is worth debating when migrants and refugees are exclusively presented as such and only reduced to their migration biographies and not characterized by their uniqueness. The objection “But I’m not a refugee by profession” is entirely justified. Just as questionable are stories in books in which “foreign” children and adolescents must accomplish a “heroic deed” in order to be accepted within a group.

Books affect adolescents by creating their personal image of other people, of themselves and the world. Are the characters appearing simply fair-skinned people carrying German names? Are people depicted there assigned certain biased roles with regard to their occupation, social status or gender? Where are the persons with disabilities or those without a job? What matters are not only those things explicitly stated, but also things

remaining unmentioned: Children will draw their own conclusions from it.

One should take care when publications present stereotypes or even prejudices. Do the plots convey stereotyped and preconceived images about others and of their behavior? Are there any potential negative or even disrespectful judgements involved? Unfortunately, there are also lots of examples in literature published most recently: “In India, children are taught outdoors“ and “In Africa most children walk to school“ – as a matter of fact, those sentences are contained in a newly published children’s book of a well-known German publishing company. Anyway, in the case where “Africa“ is used in books to denote a country rather than a continent, one should better refrain from reading on or even buying. Real problems arise where everyday life in a modern big city of an African country features antique taxis with doors falling off during transportation and with ‘up to twelve passengers instead of three’, ‘chickens, goats or dogs running everywhere throughout the city and the huts’, and ‘no one does have any telephones’ – one should seriously consider whether children should be confronted with such an image. Contemporary publications would do well to convey real, differentiated images of African countries. Instead, in far too many cases, modern aspects are left out and merely truisms such as poverty, large families, savannah, wildlife, etc. are portrayed.

People with darker skin are still described as “coming from somewhere else” and often their German is also poor. “German“ almost exclusively means “white“ und everybody being “non-white“ is depicted as in need, exotic and not really belonging anywhere. The fact that there are Muslim or black Germans whose German is excellent, is ignored or, at best, taken into account. There will certainly be a long way ahead of us until “non-white“ or “non-Christian“ children and young people are commonly integrated and no longer people in need of defending themselves – just like any other adolescent.

Age recommendations assigned by publishers should always be interpreted with care, the age range indicated might be understated. And needless to mention: Multilingual publications are not by any means automatically good intercultural publications. However, a good intercultural children’s book edited multilingually may open additional doors: A child holding a book in its hands written in its first and second language, will certainly feel acknowledged and appreciated. Furthermore, good multilingual books are an ideal opportunity to familiarize oneself with the diversity of languages and the plurality of scriptural traditions.

While reading and afterwards, it is important to talk to the children. Especially intercultural literature often stimulates numerous intelligent questions which should be answered in a culturally appropriate way. Perhaps, there is the opportunity of involving the families of kindergarten children or school children: There should be the option of taking the books home and having a look at them again together with parents and siblings. And even if one or the other book may not be returned, it has nevertheless served its purpose: It seems to have met with approval!

Considering all these aspects, adolescents can enjoy reading and discovering new worlds and what may seem different at first or previously “unfamiliar“ can be transformed into familiar diversity.

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Completed the master’s program “Intercultural Competencies“ at the Danube University Krems and has earned her doctorate in history. She has many years of experience as an intercultural lecturer and trainer at universities in Germany and the Swiss Distance University of Applied Sciences.

In connection with her university teaching, she has been involved intensively for several years now with intercultural children’s literature and has initiated the project “Intercultural Book-Box“ for the Pill Mayer Foundation.

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