



# *Seminar for mediators*

## *A Transbook event*

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Europäische Kinder - und Jugendbuchmesse  
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### MIGRATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

# Writing between different worlds

The mediator seminar brought together the diverse but complementary viewpoints of authors/illustrators, academics, book industry professionals and publishers to address the much-discussed subject of migration. How do authors and illustrators of fiction interpret geopolitical, social and cultural realities and incorporate them into literary works? How can children's literature help young people understand migration and intercultural dialogue, and how can digital innovation facilitate cultural exchange?

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**Dr. Ottmar Ette** Professor of romantic literature, University of Potsdam **GERMANY**

**Nicolas Ehler** Director, Goethe Institut, Nancy **GERMANY**

**Nicola Bardola** Author, journalist, translator **SUISSE**

**Claude Dubois** Illustrator **BELGIUM**

**Christiane Burkhardt** Author, translator, producer **GERMANY**

**Mehrnousch Zaeri-Esfahani** Author **GERMANY**

**Dr. Soenke Zelhe** Lecturer, Saarland University of Fine Arts **GERMANY**

**Christiane Frohmann** Publisher, journalist, author **GERMANY**

**Dr. Fayçal Hamouda** Publisher, Edition Hamouda **GERMANY**

**Gerhard Jäger** Artistic Director, ABC – Art Basics for Children **BELGIUM**



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**Transbook**

children's literature on the move



## LITERATURE AS CULTURAL MEDIATION

Europe has forever been a continent of migration. In fact, recalled Ottmar Ette, its founding myth is a story of deportation – the transformation of Zeus into a white bull and his seduction and kidnapping of Europe. Furthermore, mythology and literature delved into the complexities of migration long before the recent waves of migration.

Literature, as well as European culture, has been enriched by migratory trends. In turn, literature also best reflects the movement of populations, the passage from one world to another, and the necessary compromises, adjustments and influences between different cultures, according to Mr Ette. Literature is a lab in which to study globalization – not as a purely economic process but a cultural and social one too.

To illustrate his point, Mr Ette quoted Amin Maalouf, author of “*Dérèglement du monde*” (not translated in English). The Lebanese-born essayist, who lives in France, is the perfect example of a cultural mediator. In Mr Ette’s opinion, migrants also play this role, as do literature and children’s literature.

## MIGRATION IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Three children’s titles were presented at the seminar. Christiane Burkhardt, who translates Italian author Fabio Geda, told the story behind the acclaimed book *In The Sea There Are Crocodiles*, the true story of Enaiatollah, a ten year-old boy who flees Pakistan and arrives in Italy after an eight-year journey. Author Mehrnouch Zaeri-Esfahani also presented her work. She and her parents fled Iran and settled in Germany. Zaeri-Esfahani later worked with migrants, and turned to writing to tell her story and those of other refugees. Claude K. Dubois wrote and illustrated *Akim court* (not translated in English), the story of a terrified young boy who escapes the battles taking place in his village.

These children’s stories take three different approaches to recounting the trauma of exile. Fabio Geda adopted Enaiatollah’s narrative style in the telling of his tragic and extraordinary adventures, while Claude K. Dubois combined neutral, fact-based writing with sketches to express his characters’ suffering and anxiety. In the album presented, images do not just illustrate the text; they express what the text cannot.

Imagery is a universal language that transcends words and borders. Soenke Zehle presented a series of graphic novels about migration and cultural exchange, including Finnish author and illustrator Ville Tietäväinen’s *Invisible Hands*. Tietäväinen, who has an avid interest in social issues, conducted in-depth investigative work on illegal immi-

gration for his novel, a documentary-like story and detailed study in which fiction is more powerful than reality. The strength of the graphic novel and of images in general is their ability to express the inef-fable and let traditionally left-out voices be heard.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIATION

Pictures and words in children’s literature are fascinating to children and can help them think about difficult and complex topics like migration. Amnesty International used *Akim court* as a mediation tool in refugee camps in France and Germany. The mediation tools developed by Art Basics for Children (ABC), presented by the organization’s founder Gerhard Jäger, have been equally successful when used with second-generation immigrant children. One such tool is Kamishibai, a traditional Japanese storytelling method involving illustrated boards in a small, wooden stage. Children love the spoken word and pictures, which are a powerful invitation to dream and reflect, and paradoxically, allow them to develop a new take on things happening around them.

## SHARING VIEWS: THE ROLE OF PUBLISHING

Publishing and publishers play a key role in cultural dialogue, and Fayçal Hamouda is a good example. Born in Tunisia, he moved to Leipzig (Germany) where he created Edition Hamouda, a publishing house specialised in literature, cultural history and the humanities. Naturally, their catalogue includes many titles which explore the topic of intercultural dialogue.

Digital publishing can also contribute, no doubt, by making it easier for traditionally left-out voices to speak and by establishing dialogue between cultures. Publisher Christiane Frohmann’s work is exemplary: using social media, she launched the #1000Tode project and collected and published one thousand stories about death in an e-book written by volunteers who wanted to share their experiences on the subject. Digital technology facilitates crowd writing and a sense of immediacy that traditional publishing cannot. Debate is enriched by the multiplication of viewpoints; the traditional vertical flow of information is replaced by a horizontal sharing of experience.



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