



Switzerland as Guest of Honour at the Bologna International Children's Book Fair

An overview of Swiss publishing for children

The children's book market in Switzerland is special in that it thinks in four languages and looks out in four directions: from the French-speaking Romandie to France, from the Italian-speaking Ticino to Italy, from German-speaking Switzerland to Germany and Austria, and from Romansch-speaking Graubünden into all the old valleys and secretive corners of the Alps. There are over **30 Swiss imprints publishing children's books, a dozen of which exclusively focused on the children's book market**. Picture books outnumber first-readers and young people's books. Together they form a children's book landscape that is blossoming and flourishing: Almost every fourth children's book bought in Switzerland originates in a Swiss publishing house (1).

The world of the mountains, as a symbol of nostalgia is the classic element in Swiss children's books. The most famous children's book character from Switzerland is Heidi. She was created in 1880 by the Zurich author Johanna Spyri and almost personifies Switzerland – small on the map but with an international spirit. The total worldwide sales of the many editions of *Heidi* are estimated at around 50 million.

The second best known children's book character from Switzerland also lives in the mountains of Graubünden and is a farmer's child: Ursli, a young boy who is the main character in the 1945 book *A Bell for Ursli*. In 1966 Ursli's creator Alois Carigiet became the first illustrator ever to win the Hans Christian Andersen medal.

Anita Müller, director of the Swiss Institute for Children's and Young People's Media, states that *"In public perception and state support, children's books in Switzerland don't have the same status as, for example, in the Scandinavian countries; children's books are hardly ever discussed in the literary supplements of newspapers. Nevertheless, over the past two decades there has been a real blossoming in Switzerland, especially in the field of picture books."*

The three largest Swiss children's book presses each publish between 30 and 45 children's books every year. Zurich's **NordSüd** Press, which boasts the highest sales volume, counts among its most famous books *The Rainbow Fish* (with over 30 million copies sold worldwide) and *The Little Polar Bear* (around 8 million), and recently Torben Kuhlmann's books about a clever mouse (*Lindbergh* and *Edison*). The other large publishing house in Zurich, **Orell Füssli**, is home to several children's book programmes, among them **Atlantis**, an imprint with an almost 90-year-long tradition. Atlantis has kept its name, and is home to, among others, the duo Kathrin Schärer and Lorenz Pauli. **Globi** press publishes new illustrated stories every year featuring Globi, a character created in 1932 with a yellow beak, a beret and chequered trousers. "Globi" is a truly Swiss phenomenon – over 12 million Globi books and products have been sold, 95 percent of them in German-speaking Switzerland.

Among the best known publishing houses is **La Joie de lire** in Geneva. It was founded by a children's bookseller 30 years ago, and publishes the famous illustrators Albertine and Adrienne Barman.

NordSüd and La Joie de Lire earn some 20 percent of their children's book revenues in Switzerland and the rest in the German-speaking world and France (2). Orell Füssli/Atlantis sells 30 percent of its picture books in Switzerland, and 70 percent in the German-speaking world (3). These domestic figures are achieved with titles directed at Swiss readers and with an attention to classics. "The relatively high shop prices in Switzerland and the wide range of international bestsellers and national long-sellers make the Swiss children's book market very robust," says Herwig Bitsche, publisher at NordSüd press. It is a balancing act: on the one hand the high-priced island of Switzerland with its strong Franc and free market prices, and abroad, a much larger market with a weaker Euro and fixed book prices.

When less emphasis is paid to Swiss titles, the sales in the domestic market look different, as the example of **Diogenes** illustrates. Diogenes, the largest Swiss publisher of fiction, has long put out picture books, but usually without a particular connection to Switzerland. In its children's book programme (which makes up 6.4 percent of its total programme) Diogenes generates only 3.7 percent of its revenues in Switzerland (orders by Swiss booksellers from German wholesalers not included) (4).

In the Alpine region of Romansch Switzerland there is only one publishing house, the Chasa Editura Rumantscha. It publishes children's books in the five idioms of the Romansch language. The programme emphasises local fairy tales. "In Graubünden there are about 500 fairy tales. Oral culture survived for a long time in the 150 valleys of our canton," says publisher Anita Capaul.

Leaving behind alpine stories, we come to the **Baobab** publishing house in Basel, a children's book imprint founded in 1990 that brings picture and story books from Asia, Africa and Latin America to a German-speaking readership. Its foundational idea is to publish picture books that not only tell children about other countries, but originate directly in those countries. Today about half of the catalogue consists of first publications, and numerous illustrators from Tanzania, Iran and Georgia have been invited to Switzerland to talk directly with children and introduce their books. "Picture books present extraordinary opportunities for opening doors to other cultures," says press director Sonja Matheson. "And this pertains not only to traditions, but also to modern and contemporary imagery. If there's anything our society needs, it is definitely knowledge about what connects us."

Besides NordSüd, Orell Füssli/Atlantis and Diogenes, smaller publishing houses with children's book programs like **Aricari** and **Midas** also hold their own in Zurich. Here we also come across a publishing particularity that could only exist in Switzerland: the SJW (Schweizerische Jugendschriftenwerk—Swiss Youth Writing Works). All 30 of the annual publications of this publishing house, which was founded in 1931, are by Swiss authors; the illustrations by Swiss artists, and many up-and-coming talents find a platform here. The booklets, which are produced exclusively in Switzerland, are chosen and bought by children themselves: "Because the SJW promotes self-directed learning, the choice of attractive titles must be huge, the price manageable for children, the text lengths reasonable and supported by illustrations," says press director Regula Malin. In Switzerland the SJW booklets are a tradition, and every child is acquainted with them.

For a long time French-speaking Switzerland stood in the shadow of its larger neighbour, France. This has fundamentally changed in the last few years. Besides the already mentioned La Joie de lire in Geneva, there are also the smaller publishing houses **Editions Limonade** and **Helvetiq**, the latter of which developed out of a company that produced games.

Finally we come to Italian Switzerland: here, in 2018, the bookseller Francesca Martella founded Maraméo press, the first specialised children's book publisher in southern Switzerland. Francesca Martella would like to promote picture books for the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland that are popular in Switzerland but not carried by Italian publishing houses. At the same time she would like to create a niche for Swiss books in Italy. This too is a story of crossing borders: 350,000 people live in Italian-speaking Switzerland, 60 million in Italy. "The greatest challenge will be to find our place between two poles: our home country, Switzerland, on the one hand, and on the other Italy, with which we share a language and a culture."

- 1) Source: projection furnished by Buchzentrum
- 2) Source: NordSüd, La Joie de Lire
- 3) Source: Orell Füssli/Atlantis
- 4) Source: Diogenes.