

Publishing Books from Small Countries in Translation

Isabel Kupski S. Fischer Verlag Frankfurt/Germany

When Samuel Fischer founded the S. Fischer Verlag in Berlin in 1886, he was more than aware that publishing literature is an act of economic insanity. Nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, he was successful with writers such as Thomas Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Stefan Zweig, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud and many more. He was successful with his theatrical publishing house, in which he brought out the work of Henrik Ibsen, and with the cultural journal *Neue Rundschau*, in which the then absolutely unknown Thomas Mann was first published within the S. Fischer Verlag, the short story “Der kleine Herr Friedemann”. Not only for Mann was this journal the first step into the literary world; a number of other writers have since taken the same path, translators have got a foot in the publishing doorway through it, and the *Neue Rundschau* is also significant for what we call the “small countries” – I will come back to this later. When Samuel Fischer died in 1934, his son-in-law Bermann Fischer took over the business. He left Germany under pressure from the Nazis in 1936, but never entertained the idea of stopping publishing. Bermann Fischer founded exile publishing houses in Vienna, New York and Stockholm and followed his father-in-law’s principle of devoting his personal and individual attention and care to every author and every text. During the war, Peter Suhrkamp ran the business in Germany. When Fischer returned home after the war they parted company and Berman Fischer settled in Frankfurt with the S. Fischer Verlag, while Peter Suhrkamp founded his own publishing house.

The S. Fischer Verlag has been part of the Georg von Holtzbrinck group since 1962, which includes the German houses Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Rowohlt and Droemer & Knaur, and also Macmillan Publishers.

Today, S. Fischer Verlage unites several publishing houses under one roof. Firstly, S. Fischer Verlag with editorial departments for German-language fiction, international fiction and non-fiction. Then there is Krüger Scherz Verlag with commercial fiction: women’s fiction, thrillers and crime novels plus popular non-fiction. In the past year the children’s book section has expanded a great deal, consisting of Fischer Kinder Jugendbuch as well as Sauerländer Verlag, Meyers and Duden Kinderbuch. The S. Fischer Verlage are also home to the Theater- und Medienverlag and our paperback section, publishing books from the hardcover houses S. Fischer and Krüger/Scherz as well as licensing titles from other houses.

The S. Fischer Verlag employs around 200 people, producing some 700 titles per year.

Since 2009, every book has also been produced in parallel as an e-book. However, to rescue all the titles published by Fischer over the past 125 years from oblivion, we've also decided to produce the most important of our old titles as e-books. We'd also like to adopt out-of-print and out-of-copyright titles from other publishers onto our lists. However, our e-book publishing house, which has in fact only been set up very recently, wants not only to reproduce titles but also to work on its own list, in other words publish e-book originals. We'll begin by concentrating on Fischer's own authors, for example perhaps offering shorter texts they've written for *Neue Rundschau* as anthologies in e-book format. In the medium term, however, we won't only be recycling, so to speak, but are considering also bringing out material never published in German as e-books. How often do we fish titles out of the wealth of manuscripts we receive from international sources, titles that we love but sadly can't publish in our current print lists, either because they don't fit or especially for financial reasons. They're often short texts, be they prose, essays or poetry, for which a print edition would not make economic sense, and they can also be special, experimental texts that aren't easy to explain or place and therefore have difficulties finding readers in the tide of other books. We have yet to find out whether it's true that e-books are not only cheaper to produce, but also and especially offer a chance to reach new readers via different channels, due to their format. For writers from other countries in particular, e-books could open up new opportunities.

To see why, let's look at our current situation. The market is shrinking, which means we have to make ever more turnover with ever fewer titles. The top titles, when we have them, have to sell more and more copies, because what we call the focus books and the B titles that come after them – every season's catalogue is choreographed not only in terms of content, but also according to our sales expectations – can no longer be relied on to sell print-runs of 12,000 to 20,000 copies, but often stop at 2,000 or 3,000, if not fewer. It makes little difference how many excellent reviews come out, because the influence of the press on a title's sales figures has become almost negligible. Booksellers can no longer afford to present the entire variety of each season's catalogue, with the result that readers simply never become aware of some titles' existence. I'm talking about general readers here, not the "trained readers" with their eye for the niches, who do still exist, thankfully. But these readers' ability to find out about the titles that aren't on display in bookstores is somewhat of an exception.

So the situation is that the classic sales channel via bookstores and the press no longer works sufficiently well, with the result, as I've already mentioned, that one title increasingly has to bear the weight of the others. Fischer is still what we call an authors' publishing house, a house that builds up writers even if they're not a success until their sixth book, but even if they don't arrive at

material success – anything else would have petered out decades ago; publishing only bestsellers is not a practical possibility. That means that we, as a house with around 200 employees, have to produce these bestsellers to survive. Smaller publishing houses have the advantage that they can make a success of the kind of books that would not work at Fischer, because they can aim at a specific readership and aren't mass-market publishers like us. But let's not shy away from the word "bestseller". As unpredictable as the book market has become – and perhaps always has been, or else Samuel Fischer wouldn't have spoken of financial insanity – it is just as unpredictable in a positive way. The fact that we've suddenly sold half a million books in six months by Alice Munroe, whose sales had been rather modest even after the sixth title – that's half a million only in the German-speaking region – is one of the miracles of our industry.

What has all this got to do with the subject of my presentation: Publishing Books from Small Countries in Translation? A great deal, because only realists can be optimists. It would be fatal not to look these circumstances square in the face.

But to begin with: which authors from small countries or small languages do we already publish at Fischer? And what are our selection criteria? Of course it's always the book that has to convince us first of all, the story, the language. We don't publish simply to represent a country; it would be foolish to publish an author from the book fair's guest of honour just to run with the crowd. Not every book is right for Fischer and Fischer is not right for every book; every publisher has its own profile, its own strengths. But nevertheless, we in the international fiction section, which is my team, try to scan continent for continent for titles. Our writers from small countries or small language communities include the Icelandic Sjon, the Hungarian László Krasznahorkai, the Swedish Sara Stridsberg, the Danish Torben Guldborg and the Catalan Pinol, who wrote all but his last novel in Catalan. In paperback, we have the Ukrainian Oksana Sabuschko, the Hungarian Serb László Végel, the Czech Milan Kundera, and the journal I mentioned earlier, *Neue Rundschau*, has run special issues on Serbia, featuring texts by contemporary Serbian writers, and a Scandinavian issue with prose, poetry and essays from all the Scandinavian countries. This autumn's *Neue Rundschau* will focus on Finnish prose writers and poets.

How can we help these particular authors to find a readership? We invite them on long reading tours, to the Samuel Fischer Professorship at the Freie Universität Berlin, where writers teach for between three and six months. We try to bring them together for panel discussions, like recently with Oksana Sabuschko and the Russian writer Sergey Lebedew, who are both staying in Austria for extended periods. We're currently devoting an entire issue of *Neue Rundschau* to László Krasznahorkai, coming out in June. What effect all this will have on their book sales remains to be seen, but for example we're very happy with a print-run of 3000 for Krasznahorkai's most recent

book, *Seiobo auf Erden* (published in English as *Seiobo There Below*). That's a success for a book of its particular type.

But we also have to find new paths for these books in particular. Last year we launched the online newsletter *114* (Fischer Verlag's house number), which also posts on Facebook. This newsletter enables us to share videos of readings, interviews with our authors, even their personal taste in music. We have to make use of social media as a way to draw attention to our writers and their books. We're just starting out in this area, but in future it will be an important added extra on top of working with the press and booksellers.

Our goal is to translate those writers who number among the most interesting representatives of their country, because they are outstanding voices of their country.

No matter which countries have profited from being guest of honour – not all of them, but some of them – in the end it has always been the books themselves that make the difference, and the way each country presents itself. For us at Fischer, what counts has always been the special thing about each story and the form in which this story is told, but also the enlightenment we get from these books. When I think of the work of Taiye Selasi, Kraszanhorkai, Lebedew, Richard Powers, Adichie, Kenzaburo Oe and so on, literature also always has a political brief, not lecturing or teaching us, not highlighting problems, but solely through the how and what of the stories. This remains our guiding principle for publishing; whether the books sell or not is another matter, but bestsellers also match up to this principle, to name Khaled Hosseini for example, whose most recent novel was also a major success.

As I said to begin with, we can't evade the financial discrepancy between large-turnover top titles and those books that are increasingly not meeting sales expectations. So we have to find these top sellers, on the one hand. On the other hand, and we all share this opinion in the international fiction section, if the "small" books are becoming more and more difficult to sell we want to become even more exclusive. A luxury that can only be good for a publishing list. As such, what I'm saying is not pessimistic, but actually optimistic because it's based on a realistic assessment. And if we're honest, the book business has always been economic insanity and changing times are a law of nature, as every businessman knows. But we're not only businesspeople; there's something else left in the book industry, and that's what presumably brought us all into it – a passion for stories. I think it's a privilege to work in a publishing house, a mission and a challenge. It's a privilege to be invited to countries like Georgia, whose literature is yet to be discovered around the world. We'll be amazed at what stories from this country end up translated into other languages.