

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS IN LATVIA

Books for children and young adults is one of the most significant and fast developing sectors in the publishing industry of Latvia, this is the field where the most innovation and success has taken place during the last decade. This is due to several factors – the role of Childrens' Literature Centre of Latvian National Library and International Board on Books for Young People Latvia in the reading promotion processes, the well-thought of and qualitative publishing programs that exists both in some specialized publishing houses as well as several general publishing houses with strong and well-planned lists for children, growth of new illustrators' generator within the Graphic department of Latvian Academy of Arts to name just a most important. Let's take a brief look at the scene of Latvian children's literature and illustration.

Strong roots and stable succession all though 20th century

Literature for children has been important segment of Latvian book market already since 20's and 30's of 20th century, when several Latvian publishers created beautiful editions for children commissioning the illustrations from significant and well-known Latvian artists of these decades, including Sigismunds Vidbergs, Niklāvs Strunke, Alberts Kronenbergs and others. At that time some very long standing traditions of illustration for children were established by then young artists Margarita Kovaļevska and Margarita Stāraste.

After World War II the previous tradition survived in the books for children written by authors who continued to work in exile (Germany, Sweden, United States of America) while in Latvia – then part of former Soviet Union – writing for children was certainly controlled and censored but it also provided some opportunities for more creativity and artistry, especially in the field of illustration where many interesting artists were working during sixties, seventies and eighties. The most popular writer for young people was Zenta Ērgle, while Margarita Stāraste – illustrator of Ērgle's story books for children – was time by time writing also some stories herself. The poetry for children was the best genre, where also famous poets Imanst Ziedonis and Ojārs Vācietis were contributing. In 1970's and 1980's Ziedonis also published several collections of contemporary literary fairy-tales – humorous, with some satirical angle, talking with children not only about the power of imagination but also about some untold truths of Soviet reality.

The possibilities to translate books popular in the West was rather limited, however, the most popular authors and their characters, like Winnie the Poo created by Alan Milne, Pippi Longstocking, Karlsson, Emil from Lenneberg and other characters from books of Astrid Lindgren, also Moomins created by Tove Jansson, all the most popular titles by Erik Kestner were translated and published in Latvian already since late 1950's onwards. These books were translated by talented poets and writers and became the common heritage of many generations, they are constantly on the backlist of our biggest publishers nowadays.

When Latvia gained independence in 1991, the new economics re-shaped remarkably also the publishing landscape, especially after modernization of the printing industry in mid-90's. The number of new titles increased, especially in the field of translations, while the average print-runs for children books sharply decreased from some 50000 copies per title in the early 90's to 10000 copies by 1996 and to 3000 copies in early 2000's. As the costs to produce the books with illustrations of local artists increased, most publishers were rather cautious and the number of such books declined as they were replaced by translations and co-editions. These were the years when rare achievements of local authors and illustrators were celebrated by "Zelta Ābele" awards for the best book design, while the popular commercial titles like adaptations of Disney movies and animation films and very popular children series from UK, US and Germany dominated the market published by Latvian branch of Egmont Group and the biggest publisher Zvaigzne ABC. Certainly, there were also publications of contemporary Estonian, Lithuanian, Scandinavian authors, published, e.g., by "Jānis Roze Publishers", "Vaga" and others, but not as complete and thorough publishing concepts, more like isolated events.

The role of specialized publishers, literary awards and reading promotion programs

The situation changed in early 2000's when Latvian Childrens' Literature Centre started the reading promotion program "Childrens' Jury" with focus on local authors and translations of high quality literature. In 2004, also the special prize to celebrate the best authorship for children – Jānis Baltvilks Award – was established, it was also the year when the publishing house "Liels un mazs" specializing in books for young readers was founded, and started to develop not only strong program of Latvian and translated books but also wider concept of family reading and searched for new ways to communicate about their books. A couple of years later the Graphic department of Latvian Academy of Arts decided to focus also on illustration. The number of new titles for children has stabilized around some 300 annually, the average print-run was bigger than for other categories of books, except school textbooks. But the economic crisis of 2008 and the following change of VAT on books and overall purchasing power had affected the number of new titles published between 2009 and 2012 as many publishers had to slow down their operations and freeze or cancel time/work/money consuming new projects. However, the average print-run for this category remained above 2000 copies per title.

The last decade starting from 2012 can be called a growth and development period. Since 2011, Latvia finally is represented with a national stand in Bologna International Bookfair. The participation in the book fair encouraged more publishers to establish contacts with foreign colleagues. As a result, both the sales of Latvian titles abroad started and also versatility of titles in translation in the domestic market has increased.

From 2012 till 2017 the 100+1 "Tiny Book" project had been realized by "Liels un mazs" – a unique series where each illustrator from several generations of book illustrators had been offered to choose a poem for children written by Latvian poet and to make a small paperback in a unified format. Thus the "whole picture" or "anthology" of contemporary illustration has been created. This has served a good basis to promote Latvian illustration

internationally: several seminars were organized in the framework of “The Baltic States as Market Focus in London International Book Fair” during period of 2017-2019, the series of books created by the pairs of Estonian-Latvian-Lithuanian authors/illustrators had been created in 2020 and translated into 11 languages. Due to constant and long lasting cooperation with international publishing community “Liels un mazs” was acknowledged as the European Childrens’ Publisher and received BOP 2022 Europe award, while their book “Laimēs bērni” and the author Luīze Pastore received “New Horizons” 2022 award.

Reading promotion program “Children’s, Young Adults’ and Parents’ Jury” is another big instrument to gain recognition for quality reading. Since its foundation in early 2000’s it has grown into the movement comprising five age groups: 5+, 9+, 11+, 15+ and adults and offers curated selection of 5-7 titles per group each year to encourage discussions and inclusion of contemporary literature into the focus of public libraries, families, schools. The collection includes both works of local authors and titles in translation.

Yet another tool to make books for children more visible is Jānis Baltvilks International Award for Children’s literature. It was created in 2004 to honor late poet and nature writer Baltvilks nominating the best annual achievements among writers and illustrators. Since 2008, also a translation of one foreign author is awarded, and the prize is shared between the author and the translator of the respective book. In 2017, the German writer Anette Mierswa and translator Inga Karlsberga were celebrated for the book “Samsons Reise”. The aim of the prize is to facilitate development of Latvian childrens’ literature, to increase the interest of writers and illustrators to create the books for children and to encourage parents and young readers to choose books of high quality.

The biggest publishers for children:

Liels un Mazs

Liels un Mazs is an independent, award-winning, family-owned publishing house founded in 2004 in Latvia. Liels un Mazs focuses on publishing contemporary picture books and quality fiction and is involved in international rights sales. In 2022, Liels un Mazs won the BOP prize for Europe. Local authors (some 70% of list), translations of fiction and comics for young readers (circa 30% of the list).

Zvaigzne ABC

The biggest general publisher with a wide selection of local authors and illustrators, good list of children’s classics, in contemporary literature – the publishers of Harry Potter, Whimpy Kid and several other successful series translated from English. Zvaigzne ABC Publishers Ltd. was founded in 1993 and today is the biggest publishing house in Latvia, including its own wholesale warehouse and a chain of bookstores. The content of publications combines new titles and imported materials from the best publishing houses around the world. Zvaigzne ABC publishes around 400 first publications per year, representing the majority of the world’s leading authors in fiction, nonfiction and children's literature.

Jānis Roze Publishers

One of the biggest general publishers with strong childrens' and YA list in translation from various languages (proportion of translated vs local authors 9:1) but also have several local bestsellers for kids. Their books have been awarded with the Jānis Baltvilks Award for the Best Translation in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022.

Jāņa Rozes apgāds (further referred to as JRA) is a well-known Latvian publishing house with a long history which dates back to 1919 and a successful business activity. Its mission is to provide Latvian consumers with high-quality literature on various subjects, selecting for its list the best and the most interesting titles of respectable and acclaimed authors as well as new upcoming talents from various countries and cultural backgrounds. The company publishes 35-45 new titles per year. JRA has long lasting cooperation with some of the best translators from English, German, French, Italian and Spanish into Latvian.

Latvijas Mediji

One of the biggest general publishers, has received several 1st prizes of "Childrens', YA and Parents' Jury" during recent years for books translated from Catalan, Ukrainian, Russian. One of their bestsellers is the wonderful book "A Boy Who Saw in the Darkness" by Latvian writer and playwright Rasa Bugavičūte-Pēce.

PUBLISHING HOUSE LATVIJAS MEDIJI is celebrating 25 years! We are a division of the larger JSC LATVIJAS MEDIJI, one of the leading media houses in Latvia also issuing the daily national newspaper Latvijas Avīze and several magazines. We aim to promote Latvian literature and leading titles from around the world. We love working with books that get people thinking and talking! We publish approx. 120 new titles per year.

Pētergailis

Pētergailis is among the oldest publishing houses in Latvia. Since 1990, we have been striving to provoke dialogue between generations and to challenge stereotypes. We focus on high quality children's and YA literature and engage our young readers in significant topics while never forgetting the joy of reading. Our authors and illustrators have been distinguished with numerous awards, including the International Baltic Sea Region Jānis Baltvilks Prize in Children Literature and Art and The National Book Art Contest Award 'Golden Apple Tree' and Latvian Children Jury Award. They have also been nominated for ALMA and the Hans Christian Andersen Award, our books have been included in the IBBY Honour List and the White Ravens Catalogue.

BALTAIS VALIS

BALTAIS VALIS is a publishing house in Latvia that specialises in children's magazines and books. Through various fairy-tale characters, our books guide children in learning new skills and knowledge and also provide practical ideas for creating. Our books and educational magazines help children grow up to become smart, creative and active adults.

AMINORI

Aminori was founded in 2017 and already with our first book we offered readers a chance to explore the world of art and imagination. During these years, original content books on visual art, cinema, poetry and theater were created. Aminori publishes sophisticated fiction that speaks about emotionally sensitive human experiences. Human feelings and senses are in the focus of Aminori, as well. Our book design has been highly rated in book competitions.