

Locating Books as Transatlantic Commodities

In the second contribution to our series on basic questions of Transatlantic Literary History, Corinna Norrick-Rühl (WWU Münster, Germany) underlines the potential of Book Studies to offer insights into the research area. How do texts travel across the oceans and between continents? And which aesthetic or economic decisions initiate these movements?

By Corinna Norrick-Rühl

[In his lucid essay](#) on this blog, David Kim touches upon the significance of the »institutional partnerships and personal friendships« that shape our research agendas. Serendipity plays an important role in these far-flung connections; but happenstance can promote coalescence of research areas on your own doorstep, too. In this case, Kai Sina's research group for Transatlantic Literary History and my research group for Book Studies are located just a stone's throw away from each other at WWU Münster. *Buchwissenschaft*—the study of the book—encompasses what in the Anglophone world is often subsumed under the umbrella term »book history,« or, more open-endedly, »book studies« (cf. Noorda/Marsden 2019). Book Studies at WWU Münster dates back to the 1950s, starting out as the »Research Institute for Book Studies and Bibliography / Institutum Erasmianum,« followed by a period as the »Institute for Book Studies and Textual Research« under Gabriele Müller-Oberhäuser's expert direction until 2015.

Since April of this year, I have had the pleasure of repositioning the chair of Book Studies. We now concentrate on twentieth- and twenty-first-century book culture alongside book production, distribution and reception, with a special emphasis on the Anglophone world. We base our research and teaching activities on a broad understanding of »what is called *the book* only for lack of any better collective noun« (Howsam 2006: 3), an understanding which comprises printed and digital text forms. We are also very much situated within German academia, where *Buchwissenschaft* is a discipline in its own right, a »small subject« according to the nomenclature of the [Arbeitsstelle Kleine Fächer](#). Only in Münster, however, is *Buchwissenschaft* nestled securely within an English Department, inviting and invoking a fruitful crossover between postcolonial and transnational research contexts and Book Studies. In our work, we also recognize our own locatedness at the heart of a bustling and historic German city in North-Rhine-Westphalia. The tendrils of the global publishing industry stretch into our region, which is home to Bertelsmann, the multimedia conglomerate which owns the world's largest trade publisher, Penguin Random House.

A strength of Book Studies is its foregrounding of the processes »in between« authors and readers, and of the people and the invisible labor that contributes to moving texts from one place to another. In cooperation with scholars of Transatlantic Literary History, I believe that Book Studies can provide tools and approaches that will deepen our understanding of how some texts travel, and why others do not.

David Kim illustrates how academic research and teaching are necessarily in conversation with (and sometimes limited by) geographical and social contexts, but they are also influenced by the researcher's backgrounds and experiences. In the interest of full disclosure, my penchant for transatlantic questions is also biographical. My American father met my German mother when they were both students working for the Volkswagen Tourist Delivery Department in Wolfsburg, Germany, half a century ago. As a by-product of the booming twentieth-century transatlantic trade in automobiles, I am today a citizen of Germany and the United States, constantly in flux between homesickness and belonging. This experience, personal as it may be, informs my work and has spurred my interest in the dynamics of the transatlantic literary marketplace.

In *Geographies of the Book*, Charles W. J. Withers and Miles Ogborn encourage book historians to »explore the local places in which written materials were produced, and their impact on the nature of books as material and signifying objects; the patterns of dispersal and modalities of movement through which books travelled, and the implications of those for forms of knowledge; and the geographical positioning of readers whose located reading practices shape how books were consumed« (Ogborn/Withers 2010: 10, cf. Keighren 2013 for a helpful review and prospect of »geographies of the book« as an emergent area of study). Throughout history, printed books have crossed the Atlantic in sailors' seabags, immigrants' trunks, tourists' suitcases, literary »care packages« and in containers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the material assemblages of books—reams of paper, bags of type, and printing presses—also traversed the oceans. Even today, printed books travel, as evidenced by railway booksellers and airport libraries.

If you pick up the book nearest you and briefly try to reconstruct its geography, you might flip to the copyright page first. But that is just one stop, one place, in a long chain of movement. How far has this book come? While our scholarly apparatuses and the copyright page foreground the place of publication, usually only one or two cities in which the book's publisher is headquartered find mention. For English-language trade books, these are (more often than not) London and/or New York. For German-language trade books, these are more varied: maybe Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin, Zurich or Vienna. However, the urban sheen provided by this cosmopolitan namedropping belies a much more complex story of creation, production, distribution and delivery of this book to your overflowing desk. Think of the authors making progress on their texts during remote writing retreats, of the editors reading manuscripts on vacation for lack of time in the city office, of faraway forests feeding into the paper industry, of industrial printing centers and binderies, of warehouses neatly placed in the middle of nowhere to keep costs low, of local booksellers delivering books by bike during lockdown. Simply put, »books cannot be understood outside their geographies« (Ogborn/Withers 2010: 25).

As an example of the transatlantic connectedness of the book trade, I'd like to elaborate briefly on an ongoing project that I am pursuing titled mail-order book culture. In this project, I am studying the wider

distribution of texts through popular mail-order book clubs such as the Book-of-the-Month Club in the USA, the Círculo de Lectores in the Spanish-speaking world, and the Bertelsmann Lesering in post-war Germany. While the clubs all have their individual structures, the central selling points—convenience and concessions on the retail price, curation, and fostering a sense of community among members—were similar across markets and cultures (cf. Norrick-Rühl 2019). In a nutshell, book club selections were guaranteed a larger audience than trade editions, and the publisher as well as the author received sizable additional income. The book clubs also made reading material available to people living outside of urban centers, who otherwise had limited or no access to new books.

When considering Transatlantic Literary History, it is central, I believe, to include questions of licensing and distribution. Book club editions were highly visible, yet affordable commodities that contributed measurably to transatlantic cultural exchange, simultaneously influencing and sometimes subverting the canon of »world literature«. On his website [Books of the Century](#), Daniel Immerwahr has compiled all of the Book-of-the-Month Club selections from 1926 to 1973. Quantitative analysis of these titles has shown that 12 percent of the main selections during this period, that is 85 books, were translations from any language into English. As I have argued, the status as the club's »Main Selection« guaranteed foreign authors and titles a wide readership and reception, thus offering them a much-needed boost in an otherwise difficult market. The Eurocentric perspective of American publishers and, by consequence, the book clubs that selected from the body of available titles, is quantifiable: German was overwhelmingly successful as a source language, with 28 titles, followed by French with 21 titles, Russian with 11 titles, Danish with 5 titles, and Norwegian and Italian with 4 titles each, as well as 12 titles from 8 other languages. From the German, names like Vicki Baum and Erich Maria Remarque intermingle with Thomas Mann and Heinrich Böll: Weimar Republic bestsellers and Nobel Prize winners equalized, commodified and also presented to a wide reading public in the same book club packaging (cf. Norrick-Rühl 2017).

Publishers' archives lay bare the layers of correspondence between authors, literary agents, publishing houses, book clubs and foreign publishers, through which texts were pitched, edited, proofed, OK'ed for print, sold as licenses, translated, marketed, or repurposed in national or foreign book club editions, newspaper serializations, or condensations. Bids in big-name auctions for international licensing deals were sent via telegram (cf. Schulte 1972).

Archival research can shed light on, but also further complicate, the intricate geographical networks that texts are bound up into. As a research fellow at the [Harry Ransom Center](#) in Austin, Texas, this February, I found records in the A. A. Knopf collection showing that books sometimes found their way across the Atlantic in order to be re-purposed as book club selections. A failed attempt at this type of import/export relationship shows the legal and financial entanglements involved in this transaction. In 1964, the South African firm Book Club Associates wanted to order 250 sets of *The World of the Past* by Jacquetta

Hawkes at Knopf's »bedrock export price« (Liebgott 1964). Since printing their own edition of the book was not economically viable, this club sought to import stock and repurpose it as a book club edition. In this particular case, both Knopf and the British publisher who held the South African rights, Thames and Hudson, tried to negotiate an economically viable deal for the Knopf books to be provided directly to the South African firm, as Thames and Hudson was running low on stock of their own printing. After months of to-and-fro, the deal was considered a »sleeping dog« (Koshland 1965) and the books, ultimately, did not make their way to Johannesburg.

As Priya Joshi argues, »the novel is several kinds of commodities. It is a material product, like others, that is fabricated both in small batches and mass produced, in workshops and sometimes in factories, processed, assembled, and eventually purveyed in a dizzying array of outlets and platforms« (2018: 219). The twentieth-century printed book, as illustrated by the brief examples laid out here, is undeniably a transatlantic commodity. If the goal is to write a fuller and richer *Transatlantic Literary History*, Book Studies can contribute: by looking beyond the authors and their literary networks to understand the sometimes aesthetically — more often economically — motivated decisions, the invisible labor, the legal transactions and the logistical processes which have made and continue to make texts travel.

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