

## 2003/Sept CORNELIA FUNKE - Publishing News

A couple of weeks ago Catherine Lockerbie, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, was bemoaning the paucity of translated literature in the UK. "Publishing in this country is incredibly parochial," she said in the *Independent on Sunday*. "We talk about joining Europe...yet more often than not we don't know what they're reading or what they're writing, so we don't know what they're thinking." There were no doubt many "here-heres" from all those involved in the Marsh Awards for Children's Literature in Translation about her comments.

Books from abroad do get published, but few achieve major success - one of a number of quite pertinent reasons publishers aren't exactly falling over themselves to do more. But there are exceptions and German author Cornelia Funke is a truly exceptional one; her first book to be translated into English, *The Thief Lord*, has notched up 80,000 UK sales, 170,000 in Germany and has conquered the US by selling well over 250,000 copies. "Every German publisher said that you can't sell a book to the UK," Funke tells me, "and even if you do it'll only sell 48 copies."

Funke, who has 40 titles to her name, including picture books, easy-reading books and three long novels, is an illustrator who turned to writing 16 years ago when she got bored with the titles she was commissioned to work on. The first story she wrote, a children's fantasy that's now out of print, is actually the basis for her next novel, *Dragonrider*, which will publish here in 2004. She is, she says, amazed by her success on the wider world stage.

But before *Dragonrider* there is *Inkheart*. How would you like it if the characters you were reading about in a book walked off the pages and into your life? For real. Kind of neat if it was Winnie-the-Pooh, maybe, but in *Inkheart* it's Capricorn and Basta, and cuddly they most certainly are not. "The story just seemed to be waiting to be told and was very easy to write," says Funke, "and it's the same with the sequel." Which is called? "Ooh! I don't know yet, *Dustfinger's Return* maybe...Barry's thinking about it." The Barry in question being Barry Cunningham, Publisher at The Chicken

House, who found *The Thief Lord* and took another of his trademark leaps of faith.

Funke is herself something of a linguist, speaking English fluently and with ease, though she doesn't write in it. "I love your language, you have the most words and it's far easier to express yourself in English. Anthea Bell has done an amazing job of translating *Inkheart*, I've been really, really happy working with her...I sometimes had the impression she knew more about my characters than I did myself! It's been a special treat for me to read my book again in translation - it actually sounds better to me, there's a singing quality to it."

The book, like its predecessor, is embellished with Funke's own deft illustrations. "My uncle is quite a famous etcher and lithographer, but I use proper ink and a steel nib, as fine as possible...I want the words and pictures to have an equal amount of light and shade." Spoken like a true artist. Does she write what she sees in her mind's eye? "Yes, often, and it's sometimes quite scary; I'll see a scene and I don't know where it will fit in the book, so sometimes I'll make a sketch to remind myself, and, like in a movie, I imagine characters as actors - Victor, in *The Thief Lord*, was Bob Hoskins."

Really serious sales figures, film deals that are more than just hot air and critical acclaim, and still Funke seems to be genuinely unaffected by what has happened to her in such a short time. "Most people in Germany don't know, and even I don't believe it sometimes and I have to pinch myself. It's rather weird at the moment, when I get a call from New Line [Cinema] to tell me that Nicole Kidman loved the book...but I know they're all famous for their promises and I have to keep calm, just like the British!"

As we finish I wonder if her achievement will pave the way for other German authors to break through in the English-speaking markets. "They will have a better chance now...I do tell them how I did it by paying for a translation, but not many write like I do, mainly they write social realism and that doesn't travel very well. Children don't walk into a bookshop and ask for a book that teaches them something."