

## Sharing Australian children's literature with the wider world

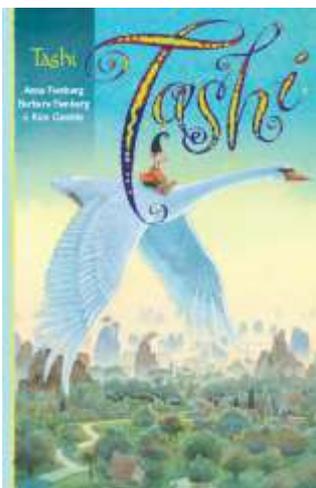
Angela Namoi, Rights & International Sales Director, Books for Children and Young Adults, Allen & Unwin (Australia's largest independent publisher)

Taking Australian children's literature out to the wider world is a fascinating exercise and it is always interesting to see what works, and what doesn't.

The world is divided up into territories, usually by language, and of course English is the most complicated one, given so many countries have English as their primary language. Growing up, as I did, on a small dot of an island in the Pacific Ocean that was part of the British Commonwealth, I had rich exposure to the variants of English as we delighted in reading books from all over the world – the UK of course, but also South Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, the USA, and India.

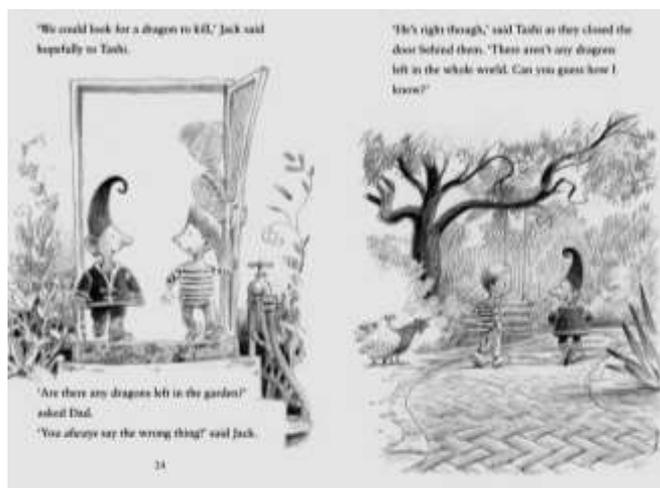
The younger the child the more 'right' a book has to be for them. That means language might need to be tweaked when it is released in a different territory. For example, a picture book in the USA might have to change 'Mum' to 'Mom', whereas in a middle grade novel Mum would be acceptable and a child would be old enough to hopefully be interested in the difference, as I was.

When we are talking about books for younger children we also have to focus very much on whether the illustrations are right. That's probably more important than the text. I know that our publishers often came to back to Australia, having fallen in love with a picture book at the Bologna Book Fair, only to find that in the *Australian* light, somehow the colours look 'all wrong'. Just that simple change of light can make a big difference to our perception of 'what will work'. Other issues can include for example, pictures with cars that are driven on the left; while in other English speaking countries they drive on the right. This means that 'real world' stories can be fraught with complications for very young children as each territory has its own particular ways of being; conversely fantasy and books featuring non-human characters can often be much more universal in their appeal.



Our chapter book series for 6-8 year olds, *Tashi* by Anna and Barbara Fienberg, and illustrated by Kim Gamble, is one of our most successful series, with more than 1.2million of copies sold in Australia in the 20 years since the first book came out and still selling strongly. We have done rights deals in about 28 languages. In the US and UK *Tashi* is our bestselling title via our distribution channels as well (and we were thrilled when Angelina Jolie, in a random moment during an interview last year, said these are her children's

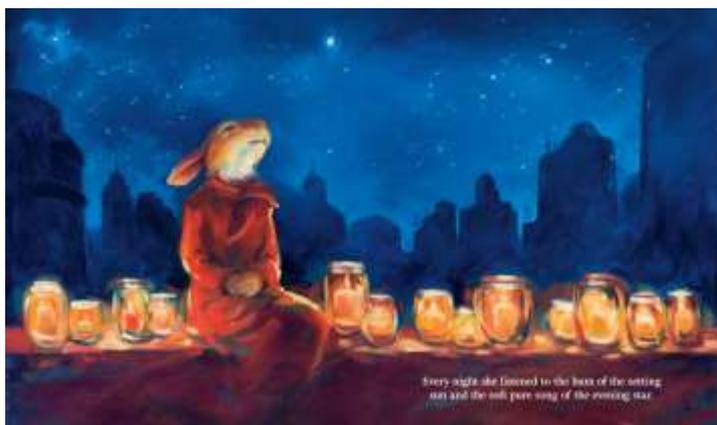
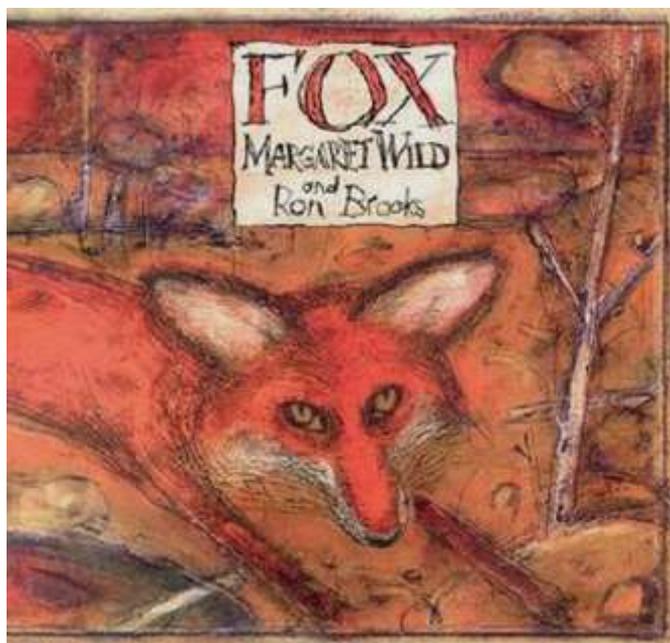
favourite stories!). All of the elements have to mesh well, and we believe *Tashi* succeeds because the storylines are great, the illustrations are wonderful, and the books appeal equally to children, parents, booksellers, teachers and librarians. A winner!



Generally books with universal themes are the ones that do best – and especially books that have themes that will translate to the library and school market. We are not a schools publisher but we have a list that lends itself to supplementary reading lists and we find that this is the sweet spot for us in terms of having a title work in a different territory.

#### ENGLISH 4-11 - WEBSITE EXTRA

*Fox* by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Ron Brooks, has been sold into 23 territories around the world, and is still selling in all of them. In the UK it was originally acquired by Orchard Books (and was an Honour Book for the Kate Greenaway Medal) but rights reverted when the company was absorbed into the Hachette Group. We are very pleasantly surprised that it still continues to sell in its thousands in the UK via our own distribution there. This is a book that is used around the world, from countries as disparate as Brazil and Japan; the USA and Mongolia; Israel and Turkey; to help young children who are struggling with friendships, often just after they start school. A compelling drama about friendship, loyalty, risk, loneliness and betrayal which speaks strongly to readers who are wrangling their first years at school. Many teachers use the book and find that it inspires confidence and hope. The superb art lends such power to the storyline that this book continues to inspire generations of children. 'A strongly atmospheric psycho-fable--visually striking--an open-ended discussion starter.' *Kirkus Reviews*



A much newer book on our list, *Adelaide's Secret World*, written and illustrated by Elise Hurst, looks set in my view to appeal to very much the same market as *Fox*. The theme in this book is one of overcoming fear to enable connections with others – a rich and sumptuously illustrated story about courage, change and finding your soul mates. I think it has a long future ahead.

Allen & Unwin is a publisher that publishes picture books for older readers – we often find that images can speak as powerfully, or more powerfully than words. *The Island* by Armin Greder is an example of what works – and also, in some markets, of what doesn't. This is a gritty picture book for 7 to 10 year-olds which is ideal for classroom discussion

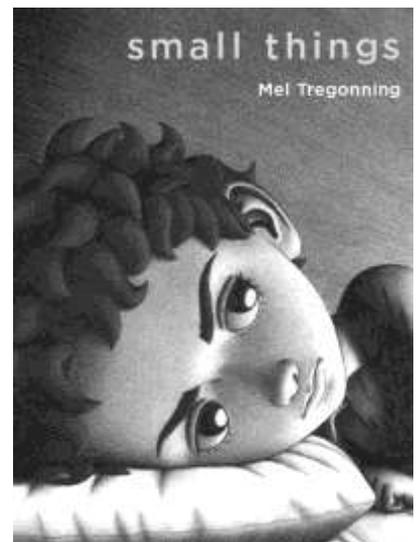
with its exploration of ideas about insiders vs outsiders, and about how those who choose to help can be thrown out of a community. This internationally acclaimed, award-winning picture book is astonishing, powerful and timely. Armin Greder has just completed another, very important picture book for our times – do look out for *Mediterranean* in the UK in October this year.



Graphic novels are another area of growing interest and one of our few sales into the UK (along with 30 or so other territories) is highly acclaimed author Shaun Tan's marvellous *Tales from Outer Suburbia*. Ten wonderful stories in this collection reveal the quiet mysteries of everyday life: homemade pets, dangerous weddings, stranded sea mammals, tiny exchange students and secret rooms filled with darkness and delight. Succinct text and stunning illustrations make this a powerful collection.

ENGLISH 4-11 - WEBSITE EXTRA

*Small Things* by Mel Tregunning, will be released in the UK in June this year. Entirely without words, this is a universal story, told simply and with breathtaking beauty, about dealing with sadness, anxiety, depression, heartache or loss, and finding your way in the world. With youth suicide rates rising, this is a timely and important recognition of the issues that can often precede action.



Of course there are lots of books that don't 'travel' so well. At the picture book level our books about sunshine and long white beaches are not quite right for a lot of places in the northern hemisphere; our animals are quite different (which can have pluses as well as minuses); we have Christmas in the summer; and we tend to have too much text, in relation to illustrations, for many territories. Humour is also tricky – Australians tend to be more ironic and our current Australian Children's Laureate, Leigh Hobbs, is a fine example of this. Pitching his *Horrible Harriet* books to publishers 10 years ago was amusing because Harriet is an oddball and I enjoyed watching publishers eagerly turning the pages, keen to see how she is ultimately 'redeemed'. She isn't, and that's part of the quirky humour of these books for an Australian audience. But it didn't work for other countries. The best thing about Harriet is that she had to invent a friend because she didn't have one, so we now have several delightful *Mr Chicken* books to tickle our funny bones even more! A play about Horrible Harriet, and introducing Mr Chicken, premieres at the Sydney Opera House next month.

Once we move up the age range school differences become an issue. We tend to find that stories set with friends and family, and with school not such an integral part of the action, will work much better in other parts of the world. (What isn't defined can be imagined by the reader, in the way that best suits them.) This influences interest in acquiring rights and generally the contemporary novel only works for us once we move to YA – everyone has hormones!

As an Australian publisher, we do have an 'extra' problem pitching our books to UK publishers because of the way copyright has traditionally been assigned. A UK publisher expects to acquire 'UK & Commonwealth rights' and it seems that Australia (especially with an Australian book) is too big a market to give up. It's a sad fact and is reflected in our rights sales. In 2016 we achieved 62 rights deals for our children's books around the world. 10 of those were for North American English

language rights; only 2 of them were for UK English language rights. (The bulk of the rest were for foreign language rights). We are pleased to have a presence in the UK now, so that all of our books for children and young adults have a chance to be discovered and loved by British readers.

## **References**

*Fox* Margaret Wild (Allen and Unwin)

*Horrible Harriet* Leigh Hobbs (Allen and Unwin)

*Mr Chicken* Leigh Hobbs (Allen and Unwin)

*Mediterranean* Armin Greder (Allen and Unwin) (Forthcoming October 2017)

*Small Things* Mel Tregonning

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* Shaun Tan (Allen and Unwin)

*Tashi* Anna and Barbara Fienberg (Allen and Unwin)

*The Island* Armin Greder (Allen and Unwin)