

Why Books Travel: Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* and the Internationalisation of the Book Market

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Abstract *The article describes which institutions pursue which goals to ensure that contents of books 'travel' from one language area to another and takes "The Whale Rider" (1987) by Witi Ihimaera as the point of departure. In addition, the journey of this literary work from New Zealand to Germany is taken as a motive to characterise the very different book markets of Germany and New Zealand comparatively and to describe where and how they get in contact. Both is embedded in a specific, Book and Publishing Studies view of the internationalisation of the book market that is based on the interests of the agents.*

Keywords *book market; internationalisation; publishing; licensing*

Introduction

The Whale Rider (1987) is a truly international book, or rather, when viewed as the result of the actions of various agents, an internationalised book. This article, based on a lecture given as part of the lecture series "One University – One Book: *The Whale Rider*. An Exploration of New Zealand with Witi Ihimaera's Novel" (summer semester 2023 at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz), centers following questions as a starting point: what interests and processes are involved in creating the conditions that allow a book to be published and read abroad? In other words, how does a book written in English in New Zealand come to be available as a German-language book in Germany? The contingent path that *The Whale Rider* took from Witi Ihimaera's manuscript to the hands of German readers – following the process template I am about to outline – is described in Anke Vogel's contribution in this volume.

The core process of 'travelling' books, which in short leads from authors via publishers in the markets of origin, with the important contribution of translators via publishers in target markets, and further via book wholesalers and retailers (which are not explicitly discussed here) to readers in the target markets is surrounded by

other agents, referred to in economics as indirect market participants. These contribute in the case of books often significantly to the distribution (and reception) of a text or a book, respectively. Specifically, they can play an important role for the fundamental decision to engage in the internationalisation of a text: the reaction of readers and literary critics in the market of origin can influence whether and how a publisher will start to actively present this text for licensing to other markets. These indirect participants of the literary market are also not discussed here.

The question addressed in this article is a specific Book and Publishing Studies one, in that it is not, as e.g. in typical literary studies discourses, related to what the text conveys as a book, what spaces of meaning it opens up, but rather asks how, by what means, with the help of which agents, etc. a text – made tangible and marketable as a book – is and can be made accessible, specifically across borders. This question is worth following up given that the text at the centre of this article is available in Germany in a German edition, even though it was originally published in English in distant New Zealand. Attention is paid here not so much to the processes and agents that in general make a text as a book ‘happen’, but rather to those that specifically contribute to this happening across borders, cultures and language areas. This constitutes a particularly visible part of the internationalisation of the book market. Towards the end of the article, I will briefly address the interesting aspect that these mediating steps, with all their underlying interests, but of course also coincidences, contribute to an understanding of the text as text; it is this thought, following which Book and Publishing Studies (understood as media studies of the book) can become productive, even indispensable, for the understanding of literature.

I begin the article by outlining the framework within which transnational transactions in the book industry can be systematically described and analysed – and which interest guide the agents of the internationalisation of the book market in general and the agents of the internationalisation, as it were, of *The Whale Rider* in particular. Subsequently, I attempt to compare the German and New Zealand book markets using a few suitable dimensions of analysis, and to identify the systematic points of contact of these two book markets.

The international book market or international book markets as a frame of reference for the ‘journey’ of books (“Why Books Travel”)

The objective to make the book market describable and analysable from an international perspective is pursued here following two complementary approaches. The first approach – which could be called the plural approach: international book markets – examines different book markets from a global perspective, focusing on their specific differences and similarities. Here, we ‘zoom out’ from the German book market (as our obvious point of reference) and ‘zoom in’ on other book mar-

kets, e.g. the one of New Zealand. The other approach – the singular approach: the international book market – focuses on the fact that different national book markets interact on an international book market (singular) in the sense of manifesting demonstrable, significant connections of various kinds. As mentioned, the case of translated licensed editions of books is the most obvious among these connections. This second approach also takes into consideration convergences between different book markets, e.g. in the form of converging or even internationally standardised technical or administrative solutions (like the International Standard Book Number ISBN), as well as of overarching legal frameworks such as the ones for the protection of copyright across borders. This one international book market – which in a certain sense, of course, is a construct – is typically not noticed consciously by readers beyond the obvious fact that, if they think about it, someone must have made it possible for them to buy and read a book containing a text that was originally written in another language. In the business-to-business part of the book world, however, this one international book market is an extremely vibrant cultural and economic reality, manifesting itself overtly for example in the form of the (international) Frankfurt Book Fair or international publishing conglomerates such as Penguin Random House.

A number of commonly used key figures is employed to make important dimensions comparable and help to map the differences and similarities between book markets (we will start by taking the perspective of international book markets in the plural and focus on differences and similarities). Most of these key figures are typically normalised across countries according to certain parameters – often the number of inhabitants – because without such normalisation, a comparison between Germany and New Zealand, for example in terms of the number of people employed in the book industry, is not very meaningful. Among these key figures are the number of new book publications per year or the number of bookshops, publishers and libraries, but also – if available – corresponding data on the (book) purchasing and reading habits of the population. Moreover, the respective book policy measures in force, such as fixed book prices, reduced tax rates or direct support measures are among the dimensions used for comparisons.

There are various forms in which this one international book market manifests itself as a comprehensive, integrated sphere of activity, from the licensing of titles in other language areas to the outsourcing / offshoring of production activities to the Global South. I will develop them based on the motivations of the agents involved, insofar as these can be reconstructed methodically¹. When book markets interact

1 Michael Bhaskar has convincingly illuminated the wider field of motivations for publishing books (independently of the specific aspect of internationalisation, however) with his concept of models; it complements the concepts of filtering, framing, and amplification briefly outlined below, but cannot be discussed further here.

with each other in whichever way (we are now taking the perspective of the international book market in the singular, focusing on connections and convergences) it should be possible to identify (typically: institutional, i.e., not individual!) driving forces that trigger and drive acts of internationalisation by the agents involved; it can be assumed that these forces are closely linked to their underlying interests.

Let's look at international, supranational organisations first. UNESCO, for example, commits the signatory states of the relevant declaration to promoting the international exchange of books (initially primarily just by not levying customs duties) because the free exchange of ideas, knowledge and self-development is seen as of great importance for the advancement of the intellectual process, intercultural understanding and ultimately the preservation of world peace (driving forces / interests). It has to be added that books were considered the medium through which this exchange primarily takes place (cf. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1950). The EU emphasises in a resolution the essential role of books as “an invaluable source of knowledge, education, culture, information, and entertainment” and as “a fundamental means of preserving and disseminating the values, cultural and linguistic diversity, and cultural heritage of the EU” (European Parliament 2023). There is also reference to the understanding between nations, integration, inclusion, and deradicalisation, as well as to social and economic effects in this document.

Not a few national governments are also explicitly pursuing the internationalisation of the book market, albeit for very different reasons, as the comparison between New Zealand and Germany will make clear. From the perspective of the German Foreign Office, for example, the focus is on the understanding across language boundaries (see Auswärtiges Amt 2020), in a more nuanced manner also education, conflict prevention, freedom of publication and the preservation of the cultural heritage are mentioned. The Goethe Institute, an instrument of Germany's foreign cultural policy with a core focus on books and literature, refers to “cultural exchange, education, and social discourse” as well as the dissemination of “information worldwide about the cultural and social diversity of Germany [...]” (Goethe Institut, n.d.). New Zealand's Ministry for Culture and Heritage (Māori: Manatū Taonga), on the other hand, emphasises the impact of a thriving culture on the well-being of (presumably primarily) New Zealand people and stresses: “Critical to that is the wellbeing benefits that culture provides, the connections people build with each other through cultural activities, and the clear economic benefit in the form of meaningful work.” (Manatū Taonga 2023). The ministry also talks about “presenting a distinctive profile as a creative and diverse society with a unique contemporary culture” (ibid.). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade also cites “better job opportunities and incomes from trade, investment and other international connections” and the opportunity for New Zealanders “to live, do business, travel and communicate more safely at home and offshore” (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.) as two of the

four top-level goals of foreign policy. This sounds noticeably less multilateral and more oriented towards immediate national interests than the corresponding German (and also EU) statements. Some of the world's most important and largest book markets have developed in free market economies (e.g., the US, UK and Germany); a political will to internationalise the book market (see above) is not able to achieve much on its own in such markets, because business decisions in these societies are made in companies, by entrepreneurs and executives, and government agencies are active in book production themselves at most to a minimal extent. Book companies must therefore have internal motivations to internationalise their business and participate in the international book market.

Only some of these corporate motivations are made explicit by the companies (for reasons of competition), others have to be extracted with methods of empirical social research. These motivations can be described very well using concepts from strategic management; strategic management is both a field of entrepreneurial activity as well as a subdiscipline of economics. According to these concepts, companies want to gain a competitive advantage over their competitors by, for example, purchasing supplies at lower prices and / or in better quality (including from abroad / other markets) or by selling their products at higher prices and / or to more customers (including abroad or in other markets) (Barney and Hesterly 2011, 334–336 [lower prices], 336–339 [better quality], 328–333 [new customers]). Internationalisation can therefore help companies achieve strategic goals such as growth or higher returns which are obvious top-level interests for companies. With regard to the aforementioned motivation to procure supplies, including services more cheaply or in better quality, it is particularly important to mention offshoring, which refers to procurement at conditions that are systematically more favorable for companies in countries with considerably different framework conditions (these can include lower wages as well as lower environmental standards, but also a particularly skilled workforce). Quite a few publishers use this approach for production tasks, e.g. for copy editing, typesetting, printing, binding, and, if necessary, packaging, i.e., the manual assembly of various components, such as in children's books with moving parts.

Based on this, the purchase of a license can be analysed as the purchase of intellectual property (manuscript, as a kind of supplier good) on better terms than would be possible on the domestic market, i.e., cheaper or of higher quality. In the case of book titles, a typical example would be a title considered to have a unique selling proposition or a degree of originality not available on the domestic market at the time. Selling a license to a foreign country – i.e., active international licensing – can be seen as a way to reach more customers than would be possible for the title and the intellectual property in the domestic market. Thus, both serve the purpose of the respective companies to grow and / or to increase their returns.

In addition to offshoring and licensing, (international) publishing conglomerates should not be forgotten as an obvious manifestation of the internationalisation of the book market. These typically come into existence through cross-border takeovers or mergers; such larger structures allow economies of scale to be exploited, not only to make back-end processes such as ICT, human resources management and even physical production (central printing and binding facilities for lower unit costs, etc.) more economical, but also – if this is beneficial to the specific business – in the form of the international management of brands.

Finally, international book fairs and international associations in the book industry are important points of contact between different book markets. Not only are fairs marketplaces where, for example, a large part of the license negotiations takes place, they also serve to represent common interests vis-à-vis supranational institutions (such as the EU). Most importantly, they serve as communication forums and are often the starting point for other types of cross-border cooperation, enabling networking and benchmarking – understood here as the sharing of best practices, i.e., effective solutions developed by one publisher that can be transferred to others across countries.

Coming back to our focus of licencing relations: the motivations / driving forces / interests attributed to cultural and political institutions and to publishing companies in the previous can help to explain why books generally are internationalised: ultimately as part of targeted business activities, possibly additionally incentivised by the supported of supranational or national cultural or political institutions. They do not explain, however, which book ‘individuals’ actually get selected and become the objects of licensing activities – it can be assumed that there is competition for corresponding attention, fought out by authors and responsible editors.

However, the analysis of such individual selection decisions lies beyond of what politics, political science, management and economics can reliably contribute to. It must be able to deal with aesthetic-epistemic value judgments as implicitly (and on social media also explicitly) made by book consumers and explicitly made by literary critics; the latter are usually trained in elaborate methods of hermeneutics and thus might trigger a broader and deeper discourse. Consolidated views of these value judgments, in the form of considerate individual assessments by the responsible employees involved and possibly reviewers in institutions and publishing houses are then important bases for the decision-makers in national, state-affiliated or supranational institutions, as well as by editors and other decision makers of publishing houses.

In other words and applied to the specific case of *The Whale Rider*: the above-described and often intertwined processes at publishing houses (to my knowledge not so much in cultural and political institutions) were set in motion because the assessment that this work deserves distribution beyond New Zealand and the English-speaking world has apparently prevailed in the discourse of relevant circles in

New Zealand. Tracing this discourse for a specific case, particularly *The Whale Rider*, would be a highly interesting project in its own right, with necessarily a historical-empirical focus. Economics and behavioural economics could potentially make methodological contributions to this, although hermeneutically oriented disciplines such as comparative literature would certainly have to take the lead here.

The book markets of New Zealand and Germany: differences, similarities and points of contact

The first question that arises in this context is what differences and similarities the two book markets of Germany and New Zealand actually show according to available data.

Looking at figures at the highest level of aggregation, it can be said that New Zealand has an annual book sales volume of USD 111.7 million, while Germany's is USD 9,945 million ("The Global Publishing Industry 2022" 2023, 8). According to Norrick-Rühl – using slightly older figures – this made New Zealand the ninth-largest English-speaking book market and the thirty-fourth-largest overall in the world at the end of the 2010s (Norrick-Rühl 2019, 62f.). Set into relation to the size of the population, book sales in New Zealand amount to just over USD 2 million per 100,000 inhabitants, while in Germany they exceed USD 11 million. New Zealand also has just over 50 new publications per 100,000 inhabitants and per year (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2022, 12) – compared to around 80 in Germany (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels 2022, 81). Furthermore, only around 10 people per 100,000 inhabitants are employed in the book industry (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2022, 11), compared to around 37 in Germany (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels 2024, 126); however, the specific criteria used to define employment in the book industry are not transparently disclosed in either case, which limits the comparability and overall significance of these figures. In terms of book policies, New Zealand has neither fixed book prices (Rønning and Slaatta 2020, 38–39) nor a reduced VAT rate for books (Rønning and Slaatta 2020, 42–44) – both of which are the case in Germany, where, in accordance with an EU directive, even e-books have been subject to fixed book prices since September 2016. It is interesting and worth further analysis that in New Zealand in 2021 approximately 12% of all new book publications were schoolbooks or educational titles (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2022, 9) and only 10% fiction titles, while in Germany the figures for 2021 were 5.6% (textbooks) and 21% (fiction titles) (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels 2022, 83–85). The share of sales generated through physical bookstores in New Zealand is still as high as 64.2%, while online stores account for 7.7% (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2022, 8) – in Germany, these figures are 39.1% and 27.1% respectively (Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen 2022, 8f.). For

New Zealand, the role of indigenous cultures is of particular importance; in 2021, 342 titles were published in New Zealand in two languages (i.e., in English and in the language of the Māori), 108 titles in the Māori language as translations from English, and 8 titles that were written in the Māori language; all of these figures have grown compared to previous years (Publishers Association of New Zealand 2022, 10).

The second question is where the German and New Zealand book markets get in contact with each other. With respect to the manifestations of an internationalised book market, we must exclude the above-mentioned topic of offshoring in the supply chain here – beyond anecdotal evidence in individual cases (which is additionally problematic to get in the case of distant New Zealand), it is obviously difficult to obtain essential information in a systematic manner: for understandable reasons, companies do not speak publicly about their approaches to gaining competitive advantages, if they do not have to.

As far as the extent of (international) corporate concentration in the book industry is concerned – a clear sign of the internationalisation of the book market –, this manifests for New Zealand by looking at the top publishers according to the national ranking already: Hachette (international, based in France), Scholastic (US), Penguin Random House (US / Germany) and Harper Collins (US); in Germany, Penguin Random House dominates the list by a clear margin, followed by Rowohlt, Droemer and Fischer (part of Holtzbrinck) and Ullstein and Piper (part of Bonnier from Sweden) among the top 10 publishing houses (Buchreport Express 2022, 17) – there seem to be no significant differences between the two countries in this respect. The flow of licenses between Germany and New Zealand is very modest indeed: in 2019, 12 licenses were sold from Germany to Australia and New Zealand (counted together) (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels 2022, 111) – that is 0.2% of the licenses sold. It should be noted here, as an additional sobering comparison, that in the same year 117 licenses were sold from Germany to Slovakia and 104 to Slovenia (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels 2022, 110) – where Slovakia and Slovenia are both small countries comparable to New Zealand. Unfortunately, no figures are available for the reverse licensing route from New Zealand to Germany.

As far as international book fairs and book industry associations are concerned, the Publishers Association of New Zealand is a member of the IPA (International Publishers Association [see International Publishers Association, n.d.]), where it meets the Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels (German Publishers and Booksellers Association); the New Zealand Booksellers Association (Booksellers Aotearoa) is a member of the EIBF (European and International Booksellers Federation [cf. European and International Booksellers Federation, n.d.]), where it also meets the Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels, because in Germany – unlike in most other countries, including New Zealand – publishers, book wholesalers, and booksellers have organised themselves into a joint association. New Zealand

publishers and associations also participate in the most important book fairs in Frankfurt, London, and Bologna, as do their German colleagues (see, for example, Frankfurter Buchmesse, n.d., for Frankfurt).

Conclusion

The fact that readers in Germany – as organisers of *The Whale Rider* project we are of course particularly grateful for that – have had access to a German edition of *The Whale Rider* for many years is the result of established professional processes of international book licensing that had been in place for decades (by the way: these established processes also ensure, for example, that English speakers have access to English-language editions of Jenny Erpenbeck's *Kairos*).

As I have shown in this article, these processes are a particularly evident manifestation of the broader internationalisation of the book market. This internationalisation, however, is not accidental: fundamental interests of the agents involved – I have concentrated on publishing houses and supranational, national and state-affiliated cultural and political institutions – let activities appear in the direction of internationalisation as obvious management options to grow and / or to increase the revenue (publishing houses) or to fulfil an institutions' mission, respectively. Here, I have focused exclusively on institutional interests, which is reductionist in the sense that literature also gets internationalised, because there are people inside and outside institutions that advocate the 'travelling' of books, for individual, cultural, political or philanthropic reasons and without looking at the mission statement or the accounting bottom line.

If this account has given the impression that these international licensing processes – though essential for access to texts in other language areas – are separable from the book content as a purely logistics layer, as it were, and have no effect on how we read such texts and attribute meaning to them, then this impression is misleading.

If we limit ourselves here to the role of publishers (i.e., not considering book-sellers and other direct as well as indirect market participants), Michael Bhaskar's theory of publishing (Bhaskar 2013) lends itself to any systematic analysis of publishing and also for following up this particular issue. For Michael Bhaskar, the essential aspects of publishing are the decision as to which texts are published (which he calls filtering), the decision as to the format (in the broadest sense, from the physical to distribution channels) in which they are to be published (which he calls framing) and the decision on the measures to ensure that more books with the selected content in the chosen frames reach readers than would without taking measures – he calls this amplification. With Bhaskar, we can identify multiple instances of 'gatekeeping' (as mentioned, more comprehensively by Bhaskar: filtering) on the path from authors

to publishers in their language area of origin and then (after translation) to publishers in the target language area. There are people in these publishing houses who decide whether a text will be published at all and then (proactively or on request) possibly also licensed. And then publishers decide on the format, i.e., in which physical form, with which cover and layout, in which imprint, in which series, etc. the text appears. These decisions undoubtedly have an effect on the reception of this text (see Bläsi 2021; Squires 2007). As part of the amplification, the same applies to, for example, the content and the tonality of the addressing of the target groups in the process of marketing, which also have an effect on the reception – according to Squires, literature is ‘made’ not least by this. The window metaphor used in media studies for argumentation purposes, according to which a medium merely mediates like a window without contributing to the meaning, therefore does not adequately describe the role of publishers and other agents involved in transferring a text from one book market to another – what is being decided and done on this path plays a constitutive role in the reception of a book, even if not necessarily in a conscious manner in the case of an average reader.

Examining the paths that books take from one language area to another in a systematic manner, as demonstrated here, is instructive; it can, not least, be used as a structuring template to analyse the contingent way *The Whale Rider* has taken. It is one core original contribution of Book and Publishing Studies to stress that what has been presented here has bearings on the approach to the text, even if of course *The Whale Rider* opens up most enlightening layers of meaning also without explicitly taking it into account. This article has also shown that the internationalisation of the book market is by no means limited to licensing matters; these are embedded in a growing number of connections and convergences.

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