



Bologna 2024: War Leaves a Mark

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By Ed Nawotka |

As expected, this year's Bologna Children's Book Fair is itself touched by and reflective of the global political scene, particularly the wars in the Middle East and in Ukraine. The plight of the Palestinians was at the center of several protests at the fair. One of the most prominent, dubbed the "Unfair" campaign, shows black-and-white sketches of children who have been killed in Gaza, bearing the name of the child, their age, and the statement "they will never read again." A booth at the fair presents the exhibition "Drawing for Palestine," which offers 56 illustrations for sale with the intent of raising awareness about the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The illustrations are all for sale with proceeds going to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Another poster, displayed prominently around the fair, reads simply, "Books Not War," above an illustration of a bombed city in ruins and on fire.



Books, too, address the issue, albeit somewhat more obliquely. Publisher Sylvia Vassena of Acoma Books in Milan is selling rights to *Mama's Perfume*, a picture book by Palestinian illustrator Baraa Awoor and Lebanese author Sharar Naja Mahfouz. The book depicts the relationship between a mother and her child, who is sent off to school with a perfumed scarf to comfort them and remind them of home. The book features illustrations created using various techniques such as oil, watercolors, golden dust, newspaper clippings, and handmade stamps. "I first came across Awoor's work last year at the Sharjah International Book Fair," Vassena told *PW*. "Usually, her books depict the trauma of life in Palestine, but this one is different and sends a message of hope. The ever-changing visual elements reflect the continuously shifting reality experienced by children in Gaza."

The book was originally published by Kiwi Stories, a publishing house run by Mahfouz in Dubai, where both Mahfouz and Awoor live. It has already reached its third edition in Arabic. Vassena has acquired the international rights and is working on selling translations and licenses worldwide. She believes the book's theme of identity is crucial in today's world, where people often confuse identity with ideology.

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“Awoor’s studio in Gaza City was in a building destroyed by bombs and razed to the ground, destroying all her work. She was told the explosion sent up a cloud of colored dust, glitter and paint,” Vassena said. “Can you imagine the surprise the Israelis must have felt at destroying such a building?”

During a presentation held by the International Board on Books for Young People preceding the announcement of IBBY’s [Hans Christian Andersen and reading promotion awards](#), executive director Carolina Ballester spoke of the war’s disruption and destruction of an [IBBY-supported library in Gaza](#). The organization remains dedicated to rebuilding these efforts through its Children in Crisis project.

“IBBY has always transcended boundaries of race and religion,” she said. In keeping with that spirit, the theme of this year’s IBBY conference in Trieste, Italy, is “Join the Revolution: Giving every child good books.”

Interest and focus on the war in Ukraine has waned somewhat, but remains an urgent matter of concern. As has been the case since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia two years ago, Russian participation in Bologna has been banned. The Ukrainian publishing industry has a booth this year, flanked by another for Old Lion Press from Lviv, perhaps the country’s best-known publisher of children’s books for the international market. Bologna created a new prize this year, given under the auspices of the fair’s BolognaBookPlus program, called the Talking Pictures prize. The award, which celebrates excellence in Ukrainian adult publishing, was won by Projector Publishing for “The Telegraf,” a magazine series devoted to Ukrainian visual culture.

U.K. illustrator Neil Packer, who is the 2024 BolognaBookPlus author ambassador and served as one of the judges for the prize, said, “It was an honor and a privilege to be asked to help select a winner for Talking Pictures 2024. The breadth and depth of the entries was remarkable and in many cases the subject matter was profoundly moving.”

