

Writing for the “One-Third World”

Linda Doll, editor with InterVarsity Press in the United States, offers suggestions for broadening market appeal.

The ministry of Christian books written in a western, English-speaking country, and then sold worldwide, is an extensive one. When such books are translated, their ministry goes even farther. But isn't it also true that Christians in Kansas or New York can learn from books written in Nairobi, Budapest, Rio de Janeiro, or Taipei?

English-reading folk need insights first written down in Korean, Polish or Spanish. “One-Third World” readers can learn from the “Two-Thirds World,” not just the other way around.

Not so easy

A frustrating aspect of publishing—at least for InterVarsity Press/USA (IVP), linked with sister movements in the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES)—is that IVP can seldom make books from authors in developing nations succeed in the American market. Most have inadequate sales and are unsustainable. One reason these books do not sell is that they may lack cultural relevancy.

IVP would like to publish more material that originates outside its North America/U.K. “home base.” But if it takes a risk with a manuscript that doesn't exactly fit the American cultural context, it is really “shooting from the hip.” And no publisher wants to lose revenues and go “belly up”!

What can be done?

There is no pat answer to finding a place in a particular culture's market for excellent books from elsewhere. But there are a few things writers and editors can do to broaden the appeal of their books beyond their market.

Avoid idioms. Terms like “shooting from the hip” and “belly up” are culturally imbedded idioms that can enhance or destroy comprehension, depending on the background of the reader.

Look at the cultural aspects of the book. Jamaican writer, Faith Linton, says, “I was nine years old before I read a book in which the children didn't put on hats, snow boots, coats and mittens when they went out to play in December.” She had to read stories through their cultural “screen,” without understanding the kinds of activities, foods, weather and vocabulary that show up in a book written, say, in Kansas City, Kansas, instead of Kingston, Jamaica.

Use names and stories from various cultures when possible. Authors write from their own experiences. But they may be able to illustrate some of their points with examples from beyond their own subculture, and may help their writing appeal to a wider readership.

Make the book as broad as possible. Speak of Africa instead of West Africa, when appropriate to the subject matter. This will remove a barrier for East African readers. Broaden a Taiwanese perspective a bit so that most Asians can identify with it. When possible, make applications that fit the whole planet!

Avoid generalizations that do not fit everyone. One might write, “Christians should use their daily bath time to offer prayers of intercession,” but remember not everyone bathes every day. If an author teaches about stewardship by discussing the interest paid on a brand new car, they may not communicate much to a reader who can never hope to have a car because in that person's country a car costs fifteen years' wages.

Over the years, InterVarsity Press/USA has published a number of books by non-Western authors. In print, at present, are Vinoth Ramachandra, of Sri Lanka (*Gods That Fail and Faiths in Conflict?*), and Masumi Toyotome, of Japan (*Three Kinds of Love*). Some other IVP/USA foreign authors (currently out of print) include Ayako Miura, Japanese novelist and poet (*The Wind Is Howling: An Autobiographical Journey from Nihilism to Christianity*); Indian author Vishal Mangalwadi (*When the New Age Gets Old*); Korean Yong Choon Ahn (*The Seed Must Die and The Triumph of Pastor Son*).

Think about whether the preferences of foreign readers can be addressed so that the product still works in the local market. Some books contain great amounts of information—but no North American reader will wade through all that detail. Maybe an abridged version of the book can be available for foreign rights consideration. Some books use a writing style that in the United States would be considered too ornate or grammatically complex, but in its country of origin it is preferred and seen as educated.

Cultural relevancy counts

Each publisher needs to determine what best suits their target market, and sometimes the best an editor can offer is sympathy for a tough situation. And, we can pray for more writers to produce fine Christian materials in every part of the world. Eventually, perhaps, some of those materials will find readers in every nation and culture. ❖