



SCBWI Exclusive with... Maria Russo and Leonard S. Marcus

Maria Russo is minedition's US Editorial Director, based in New York. She is the co-author of *How to Raise a Reader*, the popular guide to fostering a lifelong love of books in children ages 0 to teens. Before joining minedition and Astra Publishing House she was the Children's Books Editor at the *New York Times*, where she handled thousands of children's books each year, assigning reviews and essays, and writing regularly herself about children's books and their creators. Maria has also been a writer and editor at publications including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Observer*. She earned a PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University, where she taught for three years in the School of General Studies and she's a member of the jury for the 2021 Bologna Children's Book Fair Illustrator's Exhibition.

Leonard S. Marcus is one of the world's foremost writers about children's books and the people who create them and is Editor-at-Large at Astra Publishing House. He is the author of more than 25 award-winning books. Leonard is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Book Review* and *Horn Book* and was *Parenting* magazine's book critic for 21 years. He is a founding trustee of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. Leonard has judged the *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children's Books of the Year Award (four times), the National Book Award, the Ragazzi and SM Illustrator Prizes of the Bologna Book Fair, the Fundación SM's Catálogo Iberoamérica Ilustra, Scholastic Asian Book Award (jury chair), and Chen Bochui Award and is currently Jury President for the Astra International Picture Book Writing Contest.

Q: Tell me about minedition and what led you to this venture.

A: minedition has been publishing picture books across the world for nearly two decades. It was founded in Europe by Michael Neugebauer, who published selected titles in the US, too. The imprint developed a devoted following with books by notable artists Lisbeth Zwerger, Kveta Pacovska, Robert Ingpen—all Hans Christian Andersen Award winners—and famed author and naturalist Jane Goodall. In 2020, minedition was purchased by Thinkingdom Media, a prestigious, privately own Chinese publisher, and the new owners decided to establish a US editorial operation.

That's where we came in. Maria became the US editorial director and Leonard quickly joined her as editor at large. After many years on the other side—Leonard as a historian, reviewer, and educator, Maria as review editor and journalist—we were both eager to work directly on creating children's books.

Q: What do you look for in a manuscript that has you saying you must acquire it? What's on your manuscript wish list?

A: We like texts that are poetic, passionate, child-centered, and come from an authentic and heartfelt place. We want to be surprised by a manuscript and feel it's one we've never read before. We are looking for nonfiction picture books with an intimate personal dimension. Poetic texts that leave lots of space for an illustrator to shine. Any book that illuminates a culture that US children may not know about and that does it in authentic and artistic way. Books that speak to issue children around the world are facing, such as climate change and migration. And that's just the beginning.

Our wish list includes, besides everything mentioned above, stories with emotional power that illuminate global issues like climate change, migration, food insecurity, or the pandemic; nonfiction centered on interesting creatures, such as fireflies, okapi, jellyfish, hummingbirds; stories featuring nontraditional families; a picture book oral history.

Q: What about art?

A: When it comes to illustration, we gravitate to design-forward work with emotional authenticity. Having said that, we are wide open to art in many different media and styles.

We would love to publish a great picture book with photographic illustrations.

Q: Once you buy a manuscript, what can authors expect of you?

A: We pride ourselves on giving a great deal of attention to our authors and illustrators and working closely with them to help them arrive at their best work. Because we have a small list, we really do spend a lot of time on every one of our books.

Q: How do you find the illustrators you work with?

A: We are establishing relationships with agents, and we are in the habit of scouring the internet and checking out everything currently being published. We go down Instagram rabbit holes. After the pandemic we hope to visit art schools, check out exhibitions, and we continue to draw on and expand our very wide circle of contacts and friends and are involved in outreach in every possible direction.

Q: What are a few minedition US books that you feel exemplify the list?

A: *Marwan's Journey* by Patricia De Arias with illustrations by Laura Borràs touches on the worldwide plight of refugees in a visually engaging, child-friendly way. Set along the Amazon River, Sueli Menezes' *One Boy's Choice*, illustrated by Annika Siems, is a tender grandfather/grandson story wrapped around a subtle message about environmental awareness. Yoko Maruyama's *Little Santa* is a charming and original tale about how the world's children got their presents on one special Christmas Eve.

Q: Do you publish only picture books?

A: Picture books and board books too. The latter format has long been one of minedition's specialties and Michael Neugebauer is a true expert! We believe a board book can be a real work of art and create a memorable shared experience for very young children and their parents. The board books by Japanese illustrator Yusuke Yonezu epitomize the genre at its best: ingeniously conceived and designed, emotionally aware. Another fine example: Italian artist Giuliano Ferri's board book fable *Brick by Brick*, which is all about taking down a wall and building a bridge, instead.

You can query Maria and Leonard during the month of March leonardsma@aol.com maru@minedition.com