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Extraordinary Expat: Tuire Siiriainen

By Sarita Rao - 18th October 2016



Tuire Siiriainen, from Finland, is a children's book illustrator living in Luxembourg. She tells Sarita Rao more about the importance of illustration to children's stories, and about her personalised book "Message in a Bottle".

Watching the captivated looks on the faces of children at an illustration workshop, I can see that Tuire is a natural at understanding young minds.

She came to Luxembourg in 2012, initially to work as an au pair, but quite quickly she began on a new course – that of children's book illustrator and publisher.

“Drawing characters and creating stories is something I’ve been doing since I can remember. As a child I dreamt of becoming a comic book artist, but in my 20s I realised the profound impact the books of my childhood had had on me,” explains Tuire.

Together with her partner, Tuire got the idea for a personalised children’s book concept and set up a company to self-publish her first book, “Message in a Bottle”.

A child’s own adventure

“Message in a Bottle” is a personalised story book about a little brave bird called Kiki, who finds a mysterious message in a bottle for your child. Kiki decides that she simply must deliver the message – and that’s how the adventure begins.

To make the story more educational, Tuire added a world map showing the route Kiki makes to a child’s home country, and the animals she meets on the way. The final destination is highlighted with a flag – so for children living in the Duchy, it’s a Luxembourg flag.

“Parents tell me that the book creates a very special bond between them and the child, and revealing the personal message at the end can be a very emotional moment for many,” she says.

Having spent a long time observing and understanding what makes some books so popular with children (I met Tuire at the Roald Dahl 100th birthday anniversary), Tuire tells me that the characters and events in a book are very real for many children.



“Children listen attentively to stories, not just what has happened but how a character reacts to events. They also pay a lot of attention to the illustrations,” she says adding: “In my book there’s a crab with only one eye (and a patch on the other), and I often get asked about it by the children listening to me reading. That’s another story I always say.”

Books should challenge and engage children

For Tuire, a good children’s book is one that respects the audience by challenging them. This could be through the choice of words (not always using the easiest ones), and through a wellbuilt, rich story. In picture books, she cites re-readability as a key ingredient.

“A good book should invite the child to return to it over and over again. Illustrations should be a constant source of interest, so children can spot new things, or ask about characters,” she elucidates.

“Message in a Bottle” is an organic project for Tuire and she wants to develop more stories with different animals around the same concept.

“On demand printing allows you to take a concept and play about with it, based on your audience’s feedback. It also means I can get more inventive with children’s books,” she says.



Her Finnish roots, mean Tuire enjoys clean air and nature but she loves Luxembourg for its unlikely cultural encounters, no doubt helped by the many nationalities that live in the Duchy.

“I miss a traditional wood-heated sauna, ideally by a lake,” she explains, adding: “Nothing quite beats the smell of a sauna heating up.”

Her advice to would-be children’s book authors is to share ideas and their manuscripts early on, and be open to feedback. She points out that children’s books are often produced with team work between author, illustrator, editor and book designer.

“I cast off most of my doubts and fears about jumping into the unknown and decided to stay in Luxembourg and publish my very first children’s book. I’ve never regretted it,” she says.

City Savvy giveaway – watch this space

Tuire will be running a “Message in a Bottle” event at Chapter 1 Bookloft in Howald on 12 November and will be exhibiting her personalised book at the TopKids fair at LuxExpo 5-6

November.

Look out for a City Savvy giveaway of Tuire’s book (which the winner can have personalised for their child) and a Kiki soft plush toy!

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Sarita Rao

Sarita ditched the day job in London for a less hectic life in Luxembourg in August 2013. She spends her days freelance writing, arbitrating fights between her children, and waiting for ‘wine o’clock’ time (that’s 6pm for most mothers).