

Coronavirus Worklife: Children's Book Literary Agent Stephanie Barrouillet

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Despite useful digital alternatives, Tel Aviv-based Stephanie Barrouillet says there remains a need for rights and publishing pros to meet.



Masked sunset watchers in Tel Aviv on July 10. Israel is imposing a new partial lockdown next week amid an outbreak of some 3,000 new coronavirus COVID-19 cases daily. Image – iStockphoto: Alex Eidelman

By Porter Anderson, Editor-in-Chief | [@Porter_Anderson](#)

'The Need to Meet'

As world publishing looks toward a unique autumn season, Tel Aviv-based rights agent [Stephanie Barrouillet](#) has seen how the industry's ways of working have evolved in response to the [coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Everything “from how to replace business trips, book fairs, author events, and festivals,” she says, “to how to present new titles to sales reps and booksellers—and how to get the books into readers’ hands.”

Barrouillet, the “SB” in S.B. Rights Agency, is part of a class of literary agents who normally log air miles at a fast clip to get their clients’ content to potential buyers on several continents. Particularly in the children’s book sector, the ability to move quickly is critical. They need to turn up across a table as a familiar and trusted partner to rights buyers.

S.B. RIGHTS AGENCY

“But with the uncertainty of global confinement,” she tells *Publishing Perspectives* in a summer’s end interview, “it became clear to me that there wouldn’t be much, if any, traveling this year.

“While meetings in person can’t be replaced, incorporating virtual meetings into my daily routine was, and still is, an effective way to keep the business running, to share experiences, and brainstorm with clients and editors.

“To maintain some structure, I also started early on making ‘virtual business trips.’ I managed to preserve some of the business plans I’d scheduled for 2020. One good thing is that with virtual meetings, you can reach out to publishers around the world, while there’s only so much travel you can do. Virtual meetings have become a necessity and part of our new reality during the coronavirus period.”

‘A Sense of Community and Solidarity’



Stephanie Barrouillet

In many markets, children’s and young readers’ titles have fared better than some other categories of book during the pandemic months, particularly as parents working from home have scrambled for content for their kids’ entertainment and education.

“Many bookstores were shut during the pandemic,” Barrouillet says, helping to rev a digital commerce boost in books online. “With kids stuck at home, books start becoming a necessity for filling time and for learning.”

“I find that smaller and independent publishers are interested in reaching out internationally to sell rights, a way to build revenue when local sales may be down.”

– Stephanie Barrouillet, S.B. Rights Agency

News reports from Israel have demonstrated the kind of challenge many markets are having maintaining progress against the coronavirus. [Reuters’ Jeffrey Heller reports](#) that Israel is imposing a partial national lockdown because roughly 3,000 new COVID-19 cases are being logged daily. In its 7:28 a.m. ET update (1128 GMT), the [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center](#) sees 125,755 confirmed infections in a population of 9 million, with 991 fatalities.

One effect of the pandemic she’s seen, Barrouillet says, is “a sense of community and solidarity among readers not only for their local bookstores but also for local publishers. With the insecurity of the times and a need to help the industry, I’ve seen local publishers’ associations putting more emphasis on promoting their cultures and translation grants available to international publishers.

“Publishers are joining forces,” she says, “to overcome the crisis. National collective stands have become a major representation platform for Frankfurter Buchmesse,” she says. “As many publishers won’t be able to take a stand or attend the fair, having representation through national collective stands is an opportunity to remain present and active internationally.”

This is also reflected, of course, in the rise of national collective sites, as well, such as the recently launched [New Italian Books](#) and [Brazilian Publishers](#).

“Being visible and having a diverse portfolio,” Barrouillet says, “is particularly important in times of crisis.

“I find that smaller and independent publishers are interested in reaching out internationally to sell rights, a way to build revenue when local sales may be down. Those publishers are looking for agents—which we always encourage and welcome at S.B. Rights Agency.

“While I can’t wait to go back to physical meetings, I believe that some of the new systems put into place will stay and will improve our way of working.

“Some great initiatives have popped up, including some literary and professional podcasts such as [The Make Books Travel Podcast](#) from [2 Seas Agency](#), introducing professionals from different markets and fields. Some agents are using podcasts or recorded interviews to promote their authors and latest titles.

“There have also been global initiatives to connect publishing professionals from all around the world and one initiative I joined is [the Facebook group Publishers Without Borders](#). Through digital tools we still can pitch titles, meet publishers, network, follow conferences and even in fellowships. I participated in the Tbilisi digital fellowship, a great opportunity to learn about Georgia’s literary scene and to meet with a small group of fellows.

“But the coronavirus has impacted many local and international book fairs, which are still trying to work out how to digitize or move online and remain relevant in this new world.”

‘Ahead of Frankfurt Book Fair’



Titles represented by S.B. Rights Agency this autumn include, from left, 'The Story of Baldomera' based by Ismael Arias on a true story about a man and his donkey, with illustrations by Ayesha Rubio (NubeOcho, Spain); 'The Seed Hat,' nonfiction by Sima Özkan with illustrations by Kübra Teber (Redhouse Kidz, Turkey); 'Topless,' a work of fiction about cyber-bullying by Jutta Nymphius (Tulipan Verlag, Germany); and 'Incredible Stories,' about how we process news and information by Oliver Dupin with illustrations by Séverine Duchesne (Editions Orso, France)

That question of how well trade shows and book fairs are finding traction online still is largely an open one.

We all know from the Zoom appointments on our calendars that panel discussions and other online presentations can be accomplished. But, as is a question with the newly opened digital evocation of the Beijing International Book Fair, even a question timing becomes difficult to answer. Is it better to create a kind of forever-fair effect as Beijing is doing—with a professional program that doesn't even start until a month after the online programming opens—or to compress much of a show's activity into a more traditional week or so, as Frankfurter Buchmesse is doing October 14 to 18?

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– Stephanie Barrouillet, S.B. Rights Agency

“With so many international and local book fairs cancelled,” Barrouillet says, “I feel that more publishers are opening to the idea of virtual meetings, especially ahead of the Frankfurt Book Fair.

“While virtual meetings are within everybody’s reach—although not ideal if working from home while home schooling—one of the greatest challenges is to shift from a physical to a digital book fair. Frankfurt is working hard and paving the way for a new book fair model. And some aspects of it will, I’m sure, stay with us when we go back to normalcy.

“But reproducing the insane schedules of back-to-back meetings, drinks and dinners, and the adrenaline that keeps us going for several days” in the live setting of Frankfurter Buchmesse, “is an extremely difficult task, not least because of time-zone differences.

“Rights professionals rely on meetings at book fairs and on business trips to pitch titles and generate sales.

“Some agents are planning to do group digital meetings, conference style, to present titles to a broad audience. I think this is a good idea and the group meetings could also be targeted by genre for agents who specialize in various areas.

“In addition, the presentations could be recorded for publishers who live long distances away, so they could watch at a suitable time. And rather than being held over the course of several days, I anticipate that the Frankfurt meetings this year will span across several weeks, coordinating schedules and time differences.”

“While Frankfurt Book Fair will be different this year, the need for editors and rights professionals to meet on a personal and professional level is getting stronger after the months of confinement,” Stephanie Barrouillet says.

“I believe that the new structures being constantly developed and put into place will make us more efficient and focused in the future. And I wish everyone a successful Frankfurt Book Fair.



In Tel Aviv's Jaffa Flea Market on June 5. Image – iStockphoto: Alex Eidelman

More from Publishing Perspectives on rights in international publishing is [here](#), more on literary agents is [here](#), more on Stephanie Barrouillet's work is [here](#), more on Frankfurter Buchmesse is [here](#), and more from us the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on international book publishing is [here](#) and at the CORONAVIRUS tab at the top of each page of our site.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Porter Anderson

[f Facebook](#) [t Twitter](#) [g+ Google+](#)

Porter Anderson has been named International Trade Press Journalist of the Year in London Book Fair's 2019 International Excellence Awards. He is Editor-in-Chief of Publishing Perspectives. He co-founded The Hot Sheet, a newsletter for trade and indie authors, which now is owned and operated by Jane Friedman. He formerly was Associate Editor for The FutureBook at London's The Bookseller. Anderson also has worked as a senior producer, editor, and anchor with CNN.com, CNN International, and CNN USA, and as an arts critic (National Critics Institute) with The Village Voice and Dallas Times Herald.