

Rights Edition Interview: Germany's Rita Fürstenau

In [News](#) by [Porter Anderson](#) / January 13, 2023 / [Leave a Comment](#)

Rita Fürstenau of Germany's Rotopol Press talks about comics, graphic storytelling, and the rights outlook ahead of the 50th Angoulême.



Rita Fürstenau at Rotopol Press in Kassel: 'I didn't expect other publishers to share their knowledge and experiences with me, but soon became part of a comic-family.' Image: Rotopol

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

'To Create Bridges Between Cultures'

Preparations are underway in France for the [Festival d'Angoulême's](#) 50th edition, and in advance of this big gathering of [comics and graphic-narrative industry players](#) and fans, *Publishing Perspectives* has had a chance to talk with Rita Fürstenau, publisher of Germany's [Rotopol](#)—a “publishing house for graphic storytelling” founded in 2007.

Angoulême's International Rights Market can feature as many as 75 representatives from about 35 nations. As an example, the Canadian embassy program in France this year will participate with a rights-oriented stand in addition to a booth in an exhibition-floor spot accessible to the reading public, as well. That participation is organized with support from Canadian Heritage and in partnership with [ANEL](#), [Québec Edition](#), [Livres Canada Books](#), and Québec BD.

The festival at Angoulême overall is primarily public-facing, but does include some professional programming, most focused around the rights center. All told, the festival is expected to attract 200,000 or more visitors this year.

One thing we've asked Fürstenau to tell us is whether there's anything to the assumption made by many that comics and graphic-narrative work may be less viable in rights-trading contexts because illustration, visual art, can be so closely tied to a given culture's traditions and stylistic qualities. Fürstenau, in fact, says she sees this question in terms of opportunity.

“As children are training and expanding their reading skills with every book they read and look for new challenges,” she says, “it can be a real joy for comic readers to discover new graphic languages. Comics are a great opportunity to get involved with a culture, as they open a multilayered perspective that can implement detailed visual knowledge or create a graphic atmosphere to communicate culturally anchored experiences.

“As publishers, we have the great chance to connect people to stories, narrative forms, and graphic styles they may not know yet and think about ways to create bridges between cultures. I always consider the communication part to be both important and fun because it comes with so many possibilities and formats: exhibitions, talks, readings, ‘after words,’ workshops, press statements, studio visits.”

'Including Translations in Our Program'

Has the elevated interest in comics and graphic narrative in recent years in many parts of the world meant that there may be more rights-trading interest in the field? There's actually a stabilizing effect on her business, she says, as rights-sale revenue contributes to her company's work.

“Maybe as a consequence of the growth of attention, audience, and sales many publishing houses experienced during the pandemic, I can see an increased interest in foreign books enriching our publishing programs.”

– Rita Fürstenau, Rotopol Press



"Maybe as a consequence of the growth of attention, audience, and sales many publishing houses experienced during the pandemic, I can see an increased interest in foreign books enriching our publishing programs at the moment," Fürstenau says. "For example, our growth has included expanding the in-house team and as a consequence, financial stability and planning became of more importance."

"For us, including translations in our program is a great chance to bring predictability into our schedules to complement navigating the editing processes of own productions."

When it comes to handling Rotopol's rights, Fürstenau has opted to use an agency. "[Stephanie Barrouillet](#) at SB Rights Agency" based in Tel Aviv, "is handling our rights for us. Collaborating with Stephanie is a great enrichment for Rotopol, as she brings more than 20 years' expertise and experience in the international rights market to the team. In Angoulême, she'll represent our full catalogue, including the recent and upcoming highlights from our program."

Highlights of Rotopol's Rights Catalogue

Fürchtet! by Christine and Markus Färber, Fürstenau says, "documents a correspondence in poetic texts and comic drawings started by two siblings after their father's suicide."

"Each page makes visible what words often lack. The dialogue opens a world full of enchanted memories, riddles, and feelings that, as intimate as they may be, bring to light something universal: Nothing is as one expects, fears, or hopes. Sister and brother let themselves be accompanied a short way through their present and their past. In the forest of their childhood, on the way through the valley, in multilayered image-word compositions and allegorical and occasionally ironic drawings, they show that in the end a place is often surprisingly more than just a catastrophe."

"Because of the strong graphic and narrative approach and realization, the book received great attention in Germany," she says. "It was selected among the 25 Most Beautiful Books in 2022 by *Stiftung Buchkunst*, received two Comic Awards, and was nominated for two more main book awards, one of them being the German Youths' Literature Award."

In Rotopol's most recent release, *Wie lange noch* (For How Much Longer), author Alice Social describes the experiences of her pregnancies in an interplay of irony and perplexity.

"Combining text and image, Alice Social organizes her doubts, fears, expectations, and wonders of this special time. The narrative in comic form proves to be the perfect medium, both for the humorous contemplation of personal insights and for the analysis of identity issues between desire and reality—as woman, partner, artist and mother-to-be."

One of this year's highlights for Rotopol, Fürstenau says, "will be our release of the third volume of our popular children's comic series *Nika, Lotte, Mangold* by Thomas Wellmann."

"In 13 new episodes," she says, "the comic reminds us once again how important it is to have friends. Because not only adventures, but also life's challenges can be tackled much better together."

In the book, three main characters face adventures, some big, some small, together.

"Wellmann," Fürstenau says, "proves once again that he's not only a skillful comic artist, but also a great narrator with a feeling for a child's view of the world."

The range of material on Rotopol's list is a driver of production that can make the company's catalogue attractive to rights buyers from many markets.

"Our publishing program," Fürstenau says, "includes comics, graphic novels, picture books, and graphic poetry for children and adults. At Rotopol, we explore the limits of what illustration and comics can achieve, to enable artists to realize unconventional content and visual ideas. We're interested in books that combine a strong graphic representation with innovative narrative styles and personal stories."

"At the same time, we see Rotopol as a network for creative exchange between contemporary German-speaking and international artists and an interested audience. To promote this dialogue, we travel around the world, are represented at book fairs, comic and literature festivals and organize exhibitions and events such as readings and workshops. We understand Rotopol to be a platform to bring together the creative potential around us, develop it further and make it visible in many ways."

Creating Rotopol: 'So I Founded My Own Publishing House'

"Expressing my thoughts in drawings has been a part of my life as long as I can remember," Fürstenau says.

"At Rotopol, we explore the limits of what illustration and comics can achieve, to enable artists to realize unconventional content and visual ideas. We're interested in books that combine a strong graphic representation with innovative narrative styles and personal stories."

– Rita Fürstenau, Rotopol Press

"But it was an important step for me to make drawing and writing a part of my professional path. While studying illustration at the school of Arts and Design in Kassel, I found myself in a very inspiring environment, constantly working on my own book projects, but felt disconnected to the works I could see published at that time and the feedback I got when showing my works to professionals outside the art school context."

"I was looking for possibilities to create visibility for my own works and the works of other young illustrators," she says, "that I thought were just so great and exciting and that I wanted to become accessible for more people. The many times I was told something was 'not matching the market,' made me even more curious. How can one know if anyone is interested in something if no one ever got the chance to see it? I wanted to find out if there is any truth in this or if it might be possible to create an audience that may not exist already, but would grow with the offer. So, I founded my own publishing house."

Working with fellow students, Fürstenau says, her interest in escaping the expectations of "short-term market trends" with an independent press firmed up.

"All of us coming from art school," she says, "we had no training in running a publishing business. Our learning curve was steep—the embodiment of learning by doing."

"At some point, my colleagues decided to focus on their artistic careers, so since early 2016, I've owned and operated Rotopol by myself."

"The challenges and opportunities of running the publisher not as a collective, but by myself, changed the working structures at Rotopol a lot," she says.



“So did winning the main Publishing Prize of the State of Hesse in 2018 and the German Publishing Prize in 2020 and 2022. The attention and financial support that came with the prizes helped to build up the in-house team I’m grateful to work alongside today.

“What I didn’t expect at all at the beginning,” she says, “was the exchange and close contact with other publishers.

“I was focused on creating a network for artists, collaborating with printers and bookstores, reaching out to journalists and connecting with readers. So, I was very surprised by the way in which the independent comic publishers in Germany accepted and supported Rotopol right from the start.”

Rita Fürstenau says that both in the German market and on the international scene, such collegial exchanges and support have made a major difference.

“I didn’t expect other publishers to share their knowledge and experiences with me,” she says, “but I soon became part of a comic-family—finding out that our vision of creating a platform for graphic storytelling was a welcomed addition to a cultural universe that was being built with passion.

“And internationally, within a few years, we found ourselves in the midst of an inspiring and up-and-coming network of independent publishers, which has been growing and deepening ever since.”



More from us on comics/bandes dessinées is [here](#), more on the festival at Angouleme is [here](#), more on comics and graphic storytelling more broadly is [here](#), more on the international translation and rights publication marketplace is [here](#), and our Rights Roundup series is [here](#).

More from us on the still-ongoing coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on international book publishing—referenced by Rita Fürstenau in our interview—is [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Porter Anderson

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

Porter Anderson is a non-resident fellow of Trends Research & Advisory, and he has been named International Trade Press Journalist of the Year in London Book Fair’s International Excellence Awards. He is Editor-in-Chief of Publishing Perspectives. He formerly was Associate Editor for The FutureBook at London’s The Bookseller. Anderson was for more than a decade a senior producer and anchor with CNN.com, CNN International, and CNN USA. As an arts critic (National Critics Institute), he was with The Village Voice, the Dallas Times Herald, and the Tampa Tribune, now the Tampa Bay Times. He co-founded The Hot Sheet, a newsletter for authors, which now is owned and operated by Jane Friedman.