

Amanda Laugesen, *Taking Books to the World: American Publishers and the Cultural Cold War* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 193 pp.

Reviewed by **Erin A. Smith**, University of Texas at Dallas

Amanda Laugesen's *Taking Books to the World* reconstructs the history of the Franklin Book Programs, a public/private partnership to bring American books to the developing world between 1952 and 1978. Franklin arranged for the translation, publication, and distribution of these books from satellite offices in Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The project also invested in building the local educational and publishing infrastructure by training native editors, publishers, and book artists; building printing plants; founding libraries; and partnering with schools and universities to provide textbooks. Although it was an independent organization, it received significant funding from the United States Information Agency (USIA), the Ford Foundation, US trade and university presses, and host governments. From the beginning, Franklin juggled competing interests: anticommunism, modernization of developing economies, and building new markets for US books abroad. Laugesen has done tireless work in numerous archives and turns the (sometimes dull) annual reports, minutes of board meetings, professional correspondence, and accounts of the organization in *Publishers Weekly* into an engaging narrative history.

Framing this as a story about Cold War cultural diplomacy, Laugesen is in dialogue with recent work on the cultural Cold War—books like Greg Barnhisel's *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (2015) and Eric Bennett's *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (2015). *Taking Books to the World* is also a nuanced historical study of cultural beliefs about the transformative power of books and literacy, and, indeed, it has found a good home in the University of Massachusetts Press series, "Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book."

Laugesen organizes the book into six chronological chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. Chapter one discusses Franklin's founding and its roots in earlier forms of book diplomacy from World War II; chapter two looks at its first satellite office in Cairo and its influence in the Middle East; chapter three looks at its expansion into Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan and its (fraught) relationship with the USIA; chapter four puts Franklin's work in dialogue with modernization theory; chapter five presents a case study of Latin American and African efforts in the 1960s; and chapter six looks at the end of program in the 1970s. There is probably too much emphasis on historical coverage (insofar as this is a complete history of the program) and not enough analysis of the most interesting and provocative incidents and debates.

The most engaging chapter is the fourth, “Book Work as Modernization,” which puts the Franklin project in dialogue with shifting ideas about “modernization” and its relationship to imperialism. By the early 1960s, book diplomacy was reimagined as an engine of modernization and development (89):

Modernization theorists of the 1950s and 1960s argued that social, economic, and political changes were fundamentally integrated. They believed that all countries developed along similar lines as they moved from a so-called traditional state to a modern one, and they declared that modernization (in American versions of this theory) would eventually guide all countries toward democracy. (91)

Although Franklin staff saw their endeavor as profoundly *anticolonial* (they were building the education, infrastructure, and political foundation necessary for self-determination), the “developmental subject” who was the target of their well-meaning efforts clearly bore some resemblance to the colonial subject who had previously been the target of Western imperial powers (92).

Much like Joan Shelley Rubin in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, Laugesen tells the story of Franklin through biographies of some of its most important leaders. Datus Smith, formerly of Princeton University Press, was the founder and director of Franklin from 1952 until his retirement in 1967. A dedicated internationalist, he had an enduring interest in the Middle East, describing his “notorious phil-arabism” as fueling his vision for Franklin (32). From his first day on the job, he insisted on the principle of local selection (the folks in the host country would decide which books Franklin would translate and produce), a policy that left him forever at odds with the more frankly propagandistic USIA (32-33).

I was especially fascinated by the story of Esther J. Walls, assistant director for Africa from 1966-1971 (122-23). An African American woman who had started her career at the New York Public Library Countee Cullen Branch in Harlem, she believed in librarianship as a form of public service. She was driven by Christian commitment to “global community” and her “special sense of relationship” with Africans, whose faces looked like those of her extended family (122-23), not by the commercial interests that shaped the “bookmen” at Franklin.

Laugesen’s most nuanced analysis is her treatment of the Tehran office. This was by far the most successful of the overseas offices, partly because of the support of the (US-backed) Shah and his twin sister, who personally translated Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Childcare* for Franklin. Although the Shah’s regime was infamous for censorship, there was a vibrant tradition of publishing in Persia dating back to the nineteenth century. Franklin published over a million textbooks, 320,000 literacy teaching texts, and paid special

attention to children's books in Iran (104-05). They funded an offset printing plant in Tehran (still operating today), facilitated the importation of paper, and offered training to an indigenous workforce in publishing and book design. As in other places, however, Franklin found itself collaborating on literacy projects intended to spread ideas about free speech and democracy with military dictators and other oppressive regimes engaged in profoundly antidemocratic censorship.

There is actually little attention in *Taking Books to the World* to the books themselves. As Laugesen explains: "In this book I concentrate more on the functioning of US book programs than on the texts themselves. Although Franklin translated and promoted specific types of books and authors, the heart of its story was its vision of developing book industries and book cultures abroad" (3). Still, the books that Laugesen does discuss are fascinating. For example, Franklin commissioned translations/adaptations of two books by Sarah K. Bolton—*Lives of Poor Boys Who Became Famous* (1885) and *Lives of Girls Who Became Famous* (1886). These were nineteenth-century classics; the first celebrated famous self-made American men, a roster regularly updated to include more contemporary figures. The Arabic edition scrapped John D. Rockefeller, Calvin Coolidge, and Will Rogers, and substituted famous men from the Middle East (e.g., Kemal Ataturk). The Iranian edition had a chapter about the Shah's father, reputedly written by the Shah himself (75-76). Similarly, the *Lives of Girls* editions were adapted to local needs: including feminists and nationalists from the Middle East in the 1953 Cairo edition and Queen Noor of Jordan, a wife of Mohammad, and an early Indian freedom fighter in the 1958 Urdu edition. These texts were—quite literally—cultural contact zones. If Franklin imagined exporting celebrations of individual self-made men in the American style ("universal" stories of success), local translators/authors remade these texts for their communities.

Accounts of reading American books in the developing world can be maddeningly vague and incomplete, even during the relatively recent Cold War period. Nonetheless, there are intriguing unpursued tidbits in the book. *Little Women* was one of the bestselling books in the Arabic program (50). Laugesen argues that Franklin "chose to circulate Alcott's *Little Women* in a number of countries because it believed the book would be meaningful to people in many places and cultures while also transmitting American social notions about . . . gender roles" (72). Why was *Little Women* such a success in translation? Was there a correspondence between ideas about gender (and about conquering pesky feminine will/desires) in the US and in parts of the developing world? Or, as Barbara Sicherman's historical work on Progressive women makes clear, did resisting girl-readers embrace the young tomboy Jo as a feminist role model? Some informed speculation about how/why these books were sought after and what their impact might have been would have enriched Laugesen's history.

The author has a very brief (just three pages) “Conclusion: Assessing the Legacy” in which she makes the case for why her study of Franklin matters. Here she argues, “Franklin’s legacy may lie in the insight it provides into the nature of US cultural imperialism and internationalism during a dramatic era in world history” (156). I also think that this project has something uniquely important to say about our ideas about literacy, books, and reading, what Harvey Graff called “the literacy myth” nearly 30 years ago. Problematic as some of Franklin’s interventions were, their mission made me long for a (mythical?) historical moment when everyone took for granted that statesmen were great readers and that *everyone* should engage freely with serious books to equip themselves as citizens of the world.

Laugesen captured my imagination and my (utopian?) hopes best in her account of a speech by publisher Malcolm Johnson, a Cold Warrior who saw taking American books abroad “as a patriotic duty” (87). He proposed a “reverse Franklin” program in 1958 that would translate foreign books into English for a US audience. Thus, he suggested that the traffic in ideas should be two-way, but the program never materialized. As Laugesen points out, translations are still mostly one-way, and it is the gift of her own book that she has made us think again—carefully and critically—about the *right* way to do cross-cultural contact and the place of books and reading in it.