



PublishHer: Mine Soysal

Emma House

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Continuing her series of interviews with women in the PublishHer network, Emma House talks to Mine Soysal, Turkish author, publisher and campaigner



Mine Soysal is an author and publisher. Born in Istanbul, she studied archaeology at university and worked as an archaeologist until 1994, when she entered the world of writing and publishing. In 1996, she founded Günışığı Kitaplığı, a publishing house specialised in publishing contemporary children's and YA books from Turkish and world literature. She herself is the author of YA novels and short stories.

Soysal worked as the chairperson of the Children's and Young Adult Publishing Commission of the Turkish Publishers Association for three terms, and since January 2020 has been a board member of the Turkish Publishers Association. She took part in the Executive and Monitoring Committees of the fifth National Publishing Congress held in 2009 - a turning point for the Turkish publishing sector; she also took part in the sixth National Publishing Congress, held in 2018. She works for many projects for the development of reading culture, fights against censorship and self-censorship, and works for the promotion of contemporary approaches, quality and diversity in publishing.

Living in Istanbul, Soysal currently works as the executive editor of Günışığı Kitaplığı.

You both studied archaeology and worked in this area before changing careers to be an author and publisher - what inspired this change in career and why publishing?

Archaeology was my childhood dream. I was curious about the past that created today. I had the opportunity to seek answers to my questions over the many years that I worked in the field of archaeology. I listened to the stories of extraordinary people I met in different places while practising my profession. I was used to working by writing, recording, and archiving everything, and over time the stories took over my mind and life. I was also unable to be an "ideal" civil servant who only did what she was told without any questioning! So when I realised that I could be much happier and more productive in the magical world of literature, I ended the professional life that had lasted more than 10 years at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums.



I wanted all children to experience what my country and its rich cultural heritage generously offered me when I was a child. I had experienced what a child who achieved his/her dreams can do in adulthood. I not only entered the world of books, but also dared to write and publish literature books for children and young adults.

You set up your own publishing company 25 years ago. How easy was this to do - did you face any challenges setting up a publishing company at that time in Turkey?

When I started to take my first steps in publishing, my friend Hande Demirtaş and my sister, editor Dr Müren Beykan, became my companions. Günışığı Kitaplığı was born out of the persistence of three young women wanting to create a quality literature collection for children and young adults. All three of us were very different people, coming from different life experiences. But we were all idealists who were dreaming of a happy and peaceful future for the world, as well as being avid readers of literature. Works of contemporary literature, poetry, and philosophy as well as the classics were our staples. Yes, our dreams were huge, but our investment capital was very modest. In the first years, we created additional budgets through publishing and doing agency work with private companies; we used all the money we made to develop our publishing house and publish new books.

The 90s were complicated years for our country, due to both the beginning of digital transformation and political turmoil. Our publishing, on the other hand, was getting stronger by evolving into a more innovative structure. At the time, when children's books were mentioned, mostly educational and didactic books were coming to mind. There were very few quality examples of children's literature. Moreover, the concept of young adult literature was not even known. We began to explain the unlimited possibilities offered by literature to school-age generations at every opportunity and in every way. We tried to show more adults that quality children's literature has no age limit and that it can give readers of all ages a shared reading pleasure.

One of the most important issues we focused on in the first years was to consider the needs of the market and create age groups. We catered for the ages 3-8, 8-12, 12+ and 15+. In addition to contemporary translated works, we met with creative writers in Turkey who focused their hard work on children's literature. We drew the attention of the masters of our literature and enabled them to produce original works for children and young people. Of course, some of our books received reactions by both the ministry of education and conservative circles. We defended literature, books, and our readers against the various forms of self-censorship created by the traditional family culture at school and at home. In the beginning, it was not easy to make quality books and to be visible on the bookstore shelves and in the media, while dealing with the controlling and oppressive attitudes of adults.

What is the motivation behind the publishing company?

Thanks to the contemporary works we have carefully selected from Turkish and world literature, we created opportunities to draw the attention of readers of all ages to the wonderful universe present in literature. We show with our books that children's literature does not mean that the books can be read only by children. We attach great importance to the liberating contribution of literature to a peaceful, egalitarian, and just world. We work with an understanding of publishing that is based on human rights, children's rights, and animal rights, that stands against all kinds of discrimination, racism, and violence, by being fascinated by the coexistence of differences that respect the harmony of nature. We believe that children and young people, like adults, have the right to be introduced to quality books, to access and read the books they want, and that a joyful reading experience can become a lifelong pleasure.

What are the challenges the publishing sector in Turkey is facing?

Like the publishers in many other countries, we fight against censorship and self-censorship every day. The economic and political problems in our country have a negative impact on our book market as well - such as



the prices of imported book paper and printing raw materials. Our rights contracts are also being negatively affected by foreign exchange fluctuations, causing unpredictable increases in production costs.

In Turkey, where the fixed book price regime has not yet been enacted, the devastating discounts of online sales platforms, which are getting stronger with the pandemic, are putting both bookstores and publishing houses in trouble. Increasing copyright violations in online media, a rapidly expanding unfair competitive environment, and new ethical debates caused by unlimited marketing opportunities are all on our agenda.

Bookstores in the pandemic are struggling to survive. Publishers pay the production costs in advance but can only collect the payments of the books sold much later. Pirated books are another serious problem that hasn't been solved despite best efforts. Bulk purchases for public libraries are insufficient, and the ebook and audiobook markets are moving much slower than expected. On top of everything, fundamental issues such as the publication of more quality books that support cultural diversity and expanding our cohort of experienced editors are always on the agenda.

Günişgi Kitaplığı goes the extra mile to promote a reading culture in Turkey, as do you. Can you tell us more about these activities?

Over the years we have been faced with many obstacles to the development of a publishing and reading culture in Turkey. We felt the need to work for different target audiences, sharing knowledge and experience, and finding common solutions. Starting in 2010, we tended to work like an NGO and to run innovative projects. First, we launched Literature in Education Seminars aimed at the professional development of teachers and librarians. To date, nearly 10,000 educators from all over the country have attended these seminars, which we will organise for the 15th time in spring 2022. Since 2011, we have been running the Zeynep Cemali Short Story Competition, for 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. The competition heralds the writers of the future, and the Award-winning *Stories Booklet* is being published annually and distributed free of charge to schools and universities every year.

We are holding our annual publishing conference, now in its 11th year, Zeynep Cemali Literature Day, online on 13 November, with the participation of all individuals and organisations that contribute creatively and professionally to the world of books. (In this year's conference programme, we will hear from the IPA President Bodour Al Qasimi, and Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk.) This conference has become an important independent platform that brings together creative professionals such as writers, editors, translators, and illustrators, as well as publishing house managers and employees, copyright agencies, booksellers and distributors, librarians, experts from the media and academia, to discuss and evaluate current developments. We publish the content of all our seminars and conferences on our digital platform Keçi (www.keciedebiyat.com), where we store and archive this valuable content for the use by our industry.

Alongside our Library for Children project, we are also carrying out regional training seminars on a continuous and regular basis for the public librarians. On our special website gunisigiYOU.com, we provide creative reading practices related to our books that inspire educators and families.

What is the situation like today for women in publishing in Turkey? Especially in leadership positions?

Since the 2000s, many more women have joined our sector. Along with the rising women's rights movement across the world, efforts from publishing houses to build more professional organisational structures have played an important role in this. However, the number of women managers and business owners who are in decision-making positions in publishing houses, distribution and retail companies, and even professional associations, is still low. Ingrained expectations from women, including family and social responsibilities, prevent them from having a say in creative fields such as publishing, where one's dedication may mean working 24/7.

How has your career as an author intertwined with your career as a publisher?

Writing and publishing are two unique pursuits with completely different dynamics. Publishing, a full-time



professional job, of course steals my time for writing, reading, researching. But even though it means I write fewer books, my identity as a publisher also places me at the heart of our reading culture. The books I have written have allowed me to meet, chat and discuss with children and young people across Turkey over many years. After every meeting with my young readers, I come back to the publishing house with new issues, questions, dreams in my mind and perhaps more importantly, with great hope. Young people give me extraordinary energy, making me think more and more deeply about different problems. They offer a perfect harmony that brings together the publisher Mine and the writer Mine. I am very lucky.

You talk to young people, educators and parents in schools, universities and libraries under the banner of Mine Soysal Literature Seminars and Talks. What messages do you aim to deliver?

In my seminars and interviews, my top priority is the right and freedom to read. It is very important for me that children and young adults, who are overwhelmed by the prejudices and excessively controlling attitudes of intellectually limited adults, discover the real magic that books and literature can create in their lives. I think they should experience the real pleasure of reading that will add meaning to their lives and create unexpected transformations. In my meetings with young readers, we talk about current issues such as gender discrimination, violence, femicide, miscommunication, poverty, wars and immigration, the climate crisis and equality.

I try to explain the rights and freedom of reading to families and educators in different ways. I try to show the adults in our country, where the rate of literary reading is quite low, that reading is not just a necessity but a mental pleasure that can only grow through personal discoveries. Instead of controlling and monitoring what children read, I tell them that it would be more effective to constantly offer them many quality options. I want children to understand that one day they can truly become readers only by freely experimenting with the subjects they are interested in and are curious about. For this, I invite adults to be interested in books and to acquire a pleasure in reading.

What comes next for Günışığı Kitaplığı and for you personally?

An easy future awaits neither publishers nor our readers. The new generations, who quickly and skillfully incorporate today's technologies into their daily lives, are caught in social media's bubble. The gap between new generations and adults is getting wider every day. Moreover, the adult world has forced them to live with the dire consequences of the global climate crisis. We constantly think about how we can prepare our children for the challenging future that awaits them; how we can bring them closer to science and arts and how we can support their mental and spiritual empowerment through literature. We are working on creative collections that will meet their ever-changing reading needs. We continue to offer them new books from both international and Turkish literature that we hope they will find unforgettable.

I'm also persistent. I'm writing new novels and stories for young people. My desk is very colourful with new files these days.

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