

Estonian Illustration Exhibition “Tere! Hello!”

Estonia is delighted to be the Guest of Honour at the 2025 Bologna Children’s Book Fair and to greet you all at the world’s doorstep to rich children’s literature.

It’s widely known that Estonians are avid fans of singing, reading, and nature. We have unique song festivals that bring together tens of thousands of singers on a single stage, our homes hold the most books per capita than anywhere else in the world, and our pristine biomes includes vast forests, mystical bogs and marshes, sparkling rivers and lakes, and a sea dotted by islands of every shape and size.

Nature and traditions are a chief source of inspiration for Estonian stories, the singular quality of which can be encountered in our books and illustrations alike. The exhibition “Tere! Hello!” opens the door to the world of contemporary Estonian illustration, highlighting works’ ornate details, playful use of colour, and technical mastery. Featured here are 40 artists with a devotion to storytelling, creating original characters, and a more liberal creative approach nuanced by global trends. These influences have brought along a diversification of styles, an originality of emphases, and experimental modes of expression. Significant shifts can also be seen in the design and form of Estonian children’s books, in which image and text are increasingly interwoven and play an equal role in conveying the story. We also have many of our own wordless picture books in which the illustrations perform the role of storyteller independently.

Estonian illustration’s charm lies in its variety. Given our small population, it’s remarkable that we have so many professional illustrators, each of whom enriches the field with unique styles and subtleties. It’s certainly also due in part to a lack of traditional illustration courses at Estonian universities, which has given artists the freedom to walk their own paths, experiment, and create something truly unique.

In 2025, Estonia is celebrating 500 years since the very first Estonian-language book was published, though illustrated secular works for children didn’t appear until the mid-19th century. Just as how the Estonian nation has experienced numerous unexpected twists and turns throughout history, so has Estonian children’s literature existed in a state of perpetual transformation. Moralizing texts, rigid formats, and politicisation have gone and been replaced by whimsical, playful stories where fantasy and humour stand in the spotlight. Estonian illustrations also no longer merely mimic the text, but expand it, offering novel perspectives and adding colourful facets.

Children’s literature and book illustration are highly valued and cherished elements of Estonian culture. The Estonian Children’s Literature Centre is a clear example: a state organisation tasked with advancing children’s literature and popularising reading among youth. In pursuit of these goals, it organises annual creative competitions and frequent illustration exhibitions, hosts events with authors, and cultivates opportunities for writers. Estonia’s best-illustrated children’s books are chosen annually, and the nationally prestigious Edgar Valter Award for Illustration is given biannually.

We welcome you to this exhibition, which offers a broad and outstanding overview of the diverse and colourful world of Estonian illustration, spotlighting our illustrators' superb talents and their ability to make every book's visual language lively and memorable.