

Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member
Review September 2006
Author Mieke Janssen Matthes
Title Unlocking the Secret of Otherland
Publisher [KIT Publishers](#)
Details Illustrated by Frans Kwakkenbos.
2006 [KIT Publishers](#). Amsterdam
paper 96 pages, €18.50 \$34.95, ISBN 90
6832 587 6
Links [KIT Publishers](#)



Miecke Janssen-Matthes was honored at last year's SIETAR Europa/France Congress by having a meeting room named "Otherland" in honor of the new book she created for child expatriates. Now an English version of this book is in hand, and a splendid new tool has been added to the resources of those who receive expatriate families in their destination countries as well as for those who teach in international schools around the world. Of course it is the children themselves who are the biggest beneficiaries of this workbook on living abroad.

Unlocking the Secret of Otherland is designed for children ages 7 to 12 who go abroad for an extended period of time and serves as a kind of journal for capturing and reflecting on the experiences of a new "Otherland," whatever its real name. It deals with internal thoughts and feelings as well as the facts of everyday life in the new environment. It leads the user through the experiences of strangeness, difficult moments and homesickness as well as school classroom, fun, family, friends and feasts in their newly adopted home. Most of all the dynamics of cultural difference and the rhythms of culture shock are explained and discussed in simple terms with examples that children can understand and appreciate.

Like many of the earlier generation of interculturalists, Janssen-Matthes was not born such. She came to the field from educational psychology, and it is evident from this book that her expertise lies in being able to understand the mental and emotional challenges that newcomers to another part of the world, particularly young ones, need to face and digest, and she has at hand and offers the tools needed to do so.

Unlocking the Secret of Otherland is a workbook, a scrapbook, a textbook and a source of imaginative learning tools. Looking at the language level of the English version, one must imagine that younger children will require adult guidance and motivation as well as a certain pacing in its use, while older children may proceed with self-directed learning. It is important also to look at the child user's personality, expecting that the more introverted may more highly value the journal or diary aspects of the book, while the more extroverted will prefer interacting and talking with others about their experiences and discoveries in their Otherland guided by the book's activities. Both learning styles can certainly benefit.

One would envision this book as part of a standard kit for expatriation training and follow up for children. The price, however, might be a bit daunting. Hopefully the publishers might follow up with a less expensive version—the current offering is very glossy and highest quality paper and print. Children’s workbooks should be easy to open, lie flat, and be in paper that easily works for pen, pencil and colors without the sense that one is messing up something valuable. Today many young expats, even in tender years are already regularly in touch with distant friends and family online. Perhaps there could be a bloggy version of this material open to both privacy and sharing. These are but suggestions to take even greater advantage of the excellent curriculum of transition that the *Unlocking the Secrets of Otherland* already offers.