

32nd **IBBY** Congress in Santiago de Compostela, Spain

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LONA GERICKE

Children's Librarian, Bellville Public Library

The theme of this year's International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Congress was *The strength of minorities*.

The over 700 delegates from 72 countries were welcomed by the mayor of Santiago, Mr Bugallo in the following words: 'Santiago (a World Heritage Site) is a city of tales. Like a scene taken from a fairy tale, as visitors walk, a stone forest grows, traced in the dreams of Romanesque and Baroque architects. The city offers its medieval flagstone pavements, alleys that lead to ancient convents, semi-lit churches, manor houses, green cloisters and one of the most beautiful collections of monumental squares

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in Europe. The most beautiful stories are always a matter of faith ...' Dante Alighieri, Federico Garcia Lorca, Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Spanish writers like Manuel Rivas have all written about the beauty of the city, singing its praises.

After many long hours by plane, I arrived in Santiago, promptly to fall in love with the 'dark forest of stone, set against the laughing green of the countryside'. But I was there to work, and for the next few days the congress programme offered many choices in plenary sessions, panel

discussions, and seminar sessions on the topic of minority languages, reading and cultures.

We all constitute an immense minority in one way or another. Either through promoting, writing or illustrating books for children and young people and publishing them in a language or culture distinct from the majority codes; or reading books against the backdrop of an economically unstable climate or with physical and mental disabilities, which hinders access to cultural equality. Often children are forced to act as adults in societies which disregard the fundamental rights of childhood. There are those who are forced to emigrate and start anew in a foreign language or culture. There are also those experiencing, speaking, learning and reading as part of a minority group.'

Other issues discussed were the fact that children's literature still has a minor status in the eyes of editors, writers and the media. Diversity and tolerance were propagated.

Literature written in minority languages face a wide set of challenges: the survival of such literatures depends on factors such as the socio-political context, the extent of the official status bestowed on them and the general public's response to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Many of the plenary lectures were given in Spanish, with simultaneous translations into English. Sometimes one really had to concentrate hard to follow the direct English translation which were done in spurts and with pauses.

Emilia Ferreiro from Argentina/Mexico gave the opening plenary lecture, and she referred to the complex realities of multilingualism. Teachers speak a language, but often cannot write in that language. Differences are denied. Schools deny diversity. She spoke about displaced peoples, and that the children of immigrants cannot be ignored. She said that diversity should be translated into a workable language.

Victor Montejos' (Guatemala/USA) talk was titled, *On the path of the Maya Ahtz'ib: indigenous literatures as a source of knowledge, power and identity*. He accepted the challenge of proving that his culture was not just a relic of the past but that their cultural heroes were immortalised in the hills, landscape and sacred geography around the town. A Mayan fable stated, for example: 'He who cuts down trees shortens his own life.'



He concluded that he has survived, that minorities do not need others to speak for them.

Anne Pellowski (United States of America) chaired an interesting session about oral tradition and minorities without a written language. (In this session, Professor Thomas van der Walt substituted Carole Bloch from South Africa who fell ill and could not attend the congress). Anne enthusiastically exhibited beautiful handmade books from all over the world, containing traditional riddles, tongue twisters and untold stories; accompanied by her book, **Drawing stories from around the world**.

The speaker from India identified three problem areas: children who cannot read, those who want to read, and those who do not want to read. In India they use oral tradition and make it more contemporary with interactive centres where the books are displayed on a washing line at the child's eye level so they could find their best friend among these. To understand the magic behind the words, dancers demonstrated the oral tradition in dance.

I also attended an interesting session on the influence of cartoons on Arab children by Nadia El Kholy of Egypt. She stated that American humour was not acceptable in the Middle East; for example, the cartoon *Sesame Street*, which was totally Arabised, was more acceptable than *The Simpsons* because Egyptian cultural and social values were given, not imposed American sensibilities. *Bakkar*, an indigenous cartoon, is still the most popular.

The next two speakers stressed firstly, that graphic novels have replaced comic books in Australia, and secondly, that educational graphic novels were children's favourites in Korea. One source can be put to multiple uses.

Lygia Bojunga of Brazil did an interesting presentation on how alternative traditions were given a role in her country where the work of local artists, for example, the women who decorate their houses with paint and designs, had the opportunity to display their work in a museum, showing off like dancing peacocks. They claimed that there could not be a bigger honour than having their work on display; this being a strong concept that links all of them and recognises the beauty of their work. Here the artist is the author who tells her own story in a visual travelogue. Since children are as individualist as adults, she asked for a sense of empathy with someone who is dissimilar.

This was followed by a visually delightful presentation about illustration as the medium for representing minorities. During this session Piet Grobler (well-known South African illustrator who now lives in the United Kingdom) also presented a paper. By means of illustration both speakers from Spain addressed issues, stating that quality literature is in fact a minority literature versus mass publications and illustrations. Miguelanxo Prado of Spain stressed the fact that childhood can be seen as a fragile defenceless minority; and that the individual is in fact a minority; that creative works seek universal recognition.

A great variety of interesting papers were delivered; the choices were mindboggling, and I tried to fit in as many sessions as possible.

Other issues addressed were, for example: are girls a minority or majority in children's literature?; how an award should be established to recognise quality minority literature; the Somali Bilingual Book Project: serving refugees and immigrant families; oral tradition and its decline; how you can tell stories if you put your mind to it; the naïve youthful narrator in the literature of South African apartheid by Daniel Lehman (USA); young people's literature in Brazil: gender and sexual orientation minorities; boys as a minority in libraries and reading promotion



▲ Author Manuel Rivas from Spain, an inspirational speaker who delivered one of the most moving talks at the congress



► Seen here are Piet Grobler, award-winning South African illustrator who now lives in England and Lona Gericke, children's librarian, Bellville Public Library

activities; the impact of translated texts of picture books on reader responses; publishing warm books for the warm countries, (in particular picture books); literature for refugee children, and many more. In fact the selection was so varied and huge that it was difficult to choose.

One of the most moving talks of the congress was the plenary lecture by Manuel Rivas from Spain. He said: 'Santiago de Compostela is a remarkable creation. It arose from a star which marked a tomb and it flourished on that grave. We are referring to an open work - in any case - the chronological pages are spiralling and overlap like the petals of a mysterious rose.' He is a very poetic and philosophical speaker. According to him children's literature is capable of showing the complexity of the world; he calls it the subversive literature inside the circle of literatures. He talks about the subversive energies of creative writing which cannot be subordinated; do not receive orders; and cannot be dominated. He sees this literature as relevant, charming, captivating; it is like an open body which embraces a whole subversive memory. This literature will fight against abandonment and injustice. Universal literature will stand up and rise itself; this is insurgent literature.

For me personally it was a wonderful experience to be able to meet with so many old IBBY friends; to talk about children's books published in South Africa; to meet so many new faces from 72 countries and listen to all the exciting voices sharing ideas and a mutual passion for children's and youth literature; to hear so many languages buzzing away at lunch time; to attend the magnificent opening ceremony and hear the Minister of Culture Gonzalez-Sinde Reig enthusiastically support the cause whereas in South Africa we are still battling to get financial support from the government to support us in spreading the message of the important work IBBY does internationally, and in what IBBYSA attempts



◀ ▼ The beautiful city of Santiago



to do here in South Africa. Sadly, the City of Cape Town for which I have worked for 22 years as a children's librarian, has so far not given us any financial support, or any other support purely by encouraging membership of IBBY amongst librarians working in children's services.

At the presentation of the Hans C Andersen Awards - received by David Almond for writing and Jutta Bauer for illustration - these winners both presented the most interesting and captivating papers which I am sure we will be able to access on the IBBY website. I was so mesmerised that I forgot to take notes! David Almond held an inspiring acceptance speech. He is the English author of several excellent books for teenagers, such as *Skellig*. He spoke optimistically of the future of children's literature and described the children's book world as the 'hot-bed of literary experimentation'. Jutta Bauer from Hamburg, Germany, made a personal illustrated presentation of how the parts became the whole, giving tribute to fellow illustrators, mentors, colleagues, family and editors. As a major source of inspiration she mentioned Tove Jansson. Her own picture books, such as **Selma*, **Queen of colours* and **Opas Engel* are available in many languages.

A very interesting booklet was compiled by Galician Publishers entitled *Worlds of story: stories of the world*. According to them the history of Galician children and young adults' literature is a tale of someone who has been asleep for a long time, and who only awakened in the first third of the 20th century by the publication of a few isolated works. In 1996 Teijeiro published the following verse *In the bonfire of verses* which received two awards and was on the IBBY Honour list of 1998:

*Voice without words:
Silence
Sea without water:
Desert
Sun without rays:
Mystery
Light without brightness:
Knife
Hand without hand
Scream
Pain without groans:
Time
Me without you:
Silence.*

The IBBYAsahi Reading Promotion Awards 2010 were presented at the beautiful Hostal dos reis Catolicos at the Santiago Cathedral. The winners were Osu Children's Library Fund (Ghana), and Fundacion Taller de Letras Jordi Sierra I Fabra, Medellin (Colombia), proposed by IBBY Spain.

The Osu project is a charity established in 1991 to encourage reading and literacy among children and adults in Ghana. Five large community libraries in impoverished areas in Ghana's capital were built and stocked, as well as 150 smaller libraries in schools and villages in Ghana. The project in Colombia runs activities with the city's reading programme in the four poorest and most vulnerable municipalities.

The final dinner was held in the Pazo San Lorenzo, a small hermitage or monastery build in 1216; a very beautiful place. The cloister was built in the 17th century and the boxwood with original drawings is from the same century. Here I was privileged to spend the evening in the company of Professor Thomas van der Walt of UNISA, Piet Grobler; and the very charming Miriam Moellers from Berlin who works

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with International Children's and Youth Literature and is interested in working with South Africans in promoting children's literature.

I left this captivating city with many warm memories. There was little time for sightseeing, but my hotel was situated near the cathedral, so I walked the route every morning to the



bus stop to catch the bus to the Palacio de Congresos.

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May the good work IBBY does be continued for many more years, even centuries!

Note: *Titles not in CPLS stock

