

BUILDING BRIDGES

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Those of us who work in the field of children's books know that helping children become readers is one of the greatest gifts we can give them. We know that children who read for pleasure have a far better chance of becoming successful adults with power over their lives who are also empathetic and engaged as citizens.

Children who have access to high quality books that reflect their own lives are empowered by seeing themselves. Likewise, children who have access to high quality books about children from other places learn to understand and care about others who might seem outwardly so different.

Through these books they can understand that deep down we share the same feelings and needs. One of the guiding metaphors of our work is that children need access to books that are windows and mirrors – one child's window is another's mirror.

Paradoxically, children in rich countries while they have an over-abundance of goods today rarely see books coming from other places as publishing grows ever more concentrated and more likely to focus on best-sellers. And in wealthy countries many children still experience an absence of books in their daily lives.

Even worse, according to UNICEF's 2017 report, 50 million children are in severe danger because of war, displacement, and famine. And many million others live in countries in which books are for the few.

For these children who are so frequently uprooted from home, usually desperately poor and in danger, the chances of having any books are remote. The institutions that work with them are financially and logistically stretched as never before.

But, as this exhibition shows, there are bright shining exceptions as well.

One of the most important developments in the past thirty years has been the rise of brave and talented independent publishers in all parts of the world that are committed to publishing quality books. Countries that even forty years ago were largely only recipients of books from Europe, the USA and Japan have now become generators of some of the most exciting, pertinent and excellent children's books. These books are culturally authentic, adventurous, as well as beautifully written and illustrated. They speak to children from the cultures that created them and also to children from other cultures, thus giving them a chance to know and see and understand others.

These developments owe a great deal not only to the individual publishers and editors behind these ventures, but also to two sister institutions – the Bologna Children's Book Fair, which is 54 years old this year, and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) now in its 64th year with active members in 77 countries. Both have a fundamental commitment to building bridges between children around the world by promoting the creation, dissemination and sharing of the very best books from everywhere.

They give prizes for merit and produce lists of books that are the best that countries have to offer. These two great institutions have nurtured and supported a vast community of people who are dedicated to the ideal that every child, everywhere, has the right to become a reader and receive the comfort and joy that the best books can provide. Authors, illustrators and publishers come together at the annual Bologna Children's Book Fair and at the biennial IBBY world congresses to exchange experiences, practices and their creations.

These meeting places are invaluable in developing worldwide networks of people working with children and books. It is stimulating to see the production of other cultures, to sit and talk with someone making books in a society entirely different from one's own and discover the many things we have in common. These vibrant connections make us want to create books that are as good as the best that can be found anywhere, as well as to find and nurture writers and artists in our own countries and languages and discover and give our children the best from others.

Equally important and rich has been the sharing of our world wide work in the promotion of reading. These interchanges have allowed us to understand how important books are in children's lives. Over the years we have seen that children living through crisis, whether caused by natural disaster or by war and conflict, can be reached and helped by giving them books and reading to them. Finding out about what has been most helpful in one situation deepens our practice in another.

One of the things we have learned through this seeing and sharing is that even in the most terrible situations children need all kinds of good books. Sometimes they want books about terrible experiences just like their own; at a different moment books that make them laugh might be much better.

Or possibly they will prefer to imagine a whole different enchanted life into which they can escape. Each should be available when most needed. But books alone are not enough.

The essential link to these books is the committed adult reader who knows how to follow the child's needs and to listen and to talk. The deep connection between a child and an adult who reads to them on a regular basis, whether related or not, plays a vital and essential role in creating a whole human being. We have seen this over and over again. Today, in many places around the world, people, are reading to children in crisis.

Children who live in peace and have access to families and institutions that understand the power of reading are fortunate. But so many don't.

And there is so much more we can all do. We must strive to give every child everywhere the empowering possibility of having wonderful books that are mirrors and windows. We must also ensure that the comfort and safety of having an adult hold you in his or her lap and read you the perfect book is there just at that moment you need it.

Being read to and becoming a reader might truly help to save a child's heart and ultimately his life. We need bridges of understanding that will help build a world where all children can be safe at last.