



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 035-F
Meeting: 144. School Libraries and Resources Centres with Libraries for Children and Young Adults
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

The Reading Adventure

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Abstract

Viewpoints of an author, not a library specialist, but of one in constant contact with the theme of reading due to a long relationship with the educational institutions throughout this broad country.

- * Books and reality in a third world county, supposedly democratic, that attempts to install protection of public and educational libraries.*
- * Problems and conflicts in education and the culture in a place where hundreds of thousands of children go to school because they are feed a meal.*
- * The small but meritorious crusades in favor of access to books by both public and private institutions. Successes and failures*
- * The need to look critically to understand, comprehend and improve a world plagued with injustices.*
- * The role of the popular & educational libraries in the formation of readers. The responsibility of authors of citizenship when confronted with conforming, that at times sustains a culture of elitism that is blindly enthused by globalization.*
- * The promotion of reading. Why? For who? For how many?*

The reading adventure in reality begins late, in the majority of the Latin American countries. It comes late, after many battles have been lost. However, we all know from experience that losing a battle is not losing the war. Therefore the responsibility to recover neglected skills does not mean they are lost forever. I speak from my perspective as an author, reflecting on a panorama as an author of books placed in schools and the community. At any rate my observations are not that of a specialist in libraries, but as one whose career is dependent on reading. My day to day circumstances are linked to reading which becomes apparent as I travel the country.

From the first day a newborn finds himself/herself surrounded by a family and an apparatus that plays music, speaks words, has colors and movements. The apparatus has no problems of time like those of its parents, who must work – or look for work – cook, attend to multiple conflicts both large and small that appear daily. A child grows protected by the family – with means or without – and a television.

This, over a long time, we are talking about years, without a doubt creates an accustomed comfort of how the world is and which are the fundamental elements that make up reality. We are comfortable with what we are accustomed to. We can recognize our system of life because it is the safest thing we know and it bolsters and supports us. It gives us a certain stability and protects us from change. Something that always produces a good dose of fear.

In a world where values are crumbling, I still believe – want to believe that books will survive like a bulwark of dignity. A book is a key, it is a door that can be opened, a place to inhabit where you can find what you shouldn't know. It is a field of knowledge of truth, of the prohibited, it leaves marks on us that cannot be erased.

But where are the books? The question like all questions has many answers. At first blush, the books are in the bookstores and the libraries, private & public. But in the bookstores are the books for the few and in the libraries also are books for the few and others. We are missing certain preciseness to understand one another. For example, where are we talking about? What town? What city? What country?

I can only talk about here and now, about Argentina at the beginning of the XXI century. Even though the here and now is too complicated because a school library in a small town from the Chaco (local native countryside)* and one from the Federal Capital is not the same. Here is the confusion and misunderstanding. It is quite probable that everyone present supposes I am talking about the advantages that the libraries of Buenos Aires have. I didn't say that. I'm saying they are not the same.

A school library in Buenos Aires possibly has thousands of books, and my anonymous village school has barely a dozen. Just like you don't give much weight to numbers on television, where the larger number is always better, what is of interest is not the number of books in the bookcase but what you do with them.

Another preconception is that in a place that has dirt roads by nature has less possibilities in many aspects. This is true, but not entirely. Scarcity of certain things does not impede having richness in other areas.

The prohibited door

Although many will remember, I will tell you once again the story of Blue Beard of Perrault. I don't know why this story came to mind recently. But it will illustrate once again how stories work. They keep turning over in one's mind until one day, ten or fifty years later, they recur in our memory.

The question is why Blue Beard suddenly appeared in my thoughts. I began to think what was it doing there until I understood it was explaining a few things that one can never really understand.

In summary, the story goes: Blue Beard was a rich, powerful and noble man, possessing all those qualities that made him the best at the game with young girls looking for marriage. But he had one problem; his blue beard was repulsive to all the young eligible maidens.

Jumping ahead in our story, Blue Beard gets married to a young lady. He succeeds, despite his gross beard; it is his kindness, affection, and enormous wealth, that brings her to live in one of his castles. As time goes by he announces to his wife that he must take a trip for a number of weeks, and he leaves her in charge of the castle, telling her to invite her family and friends to enjoy the amenities of this grand castle.

Blue Beard gives his young wife the keys to the castle's many rooms including to his treasure room. He gives her total control of the place. He then shows her a small key to one of the rooms, telling her that she prohibited entering this room for any reason. Then he leaves.

Soon family and friends arrive to enjoy the pleasures of this palace. The wife takes advantage of all the amenities, but her curiosity to know what is in the forbidden room is overwhelming. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to know what she does. She finds the small key and opens the door. To her surprise and desperation she finds women who have been slaughtered hanging from the walls – previous wives. When she tries to run off the small key falls to the floor and gets stained with blood.

She runs to her bedchamber and tries to wipe the blood off the small key, but alas it is a magic key. As she wipes off the blood from one side it appears on the other. During these desperate moments Blue Beard returns. He is early having completed his business ahead of time.

His young wife is discovered when she has to return the bloodstained key to her husband. Blue Beard pulls out a dagger and says he is going to kill her. She pleads for a few minutes to repent to God and he accedes to her wishes. When she is alone she calls her sister and asks her to climb the tower to see if her brothers, whom promised to visit her today, are coming. After waiting what seemed forever, Blue Beard arrives and is about to slaughter her as he had the other wives, but at the last minute her brothers arrive and kill Blue Beard. End of story, save some final statements of happiness and a moral to the story.

There is a prohibited door, a place we should not see, a key that should not be used, a punishment for curiosity that can be mortal. There is blood that leaves un-erasable stains, all the symbols that psychoanalysis can conjure up until exhausted. However, now I am only interested in the

relationship you can establish between this story of a key, a door, a prohibition, a punishment, and the presence of a book.

A book – I repeat – is also a key, a door that can be opened, a room where you can find what you shouldn't know. It is a place of knowledge, of the truth, and the prohibited. It too leaves marks that cannot be erased.

But here what we are doing is contrary to what the message of this story's moral is. We intend to violate the norm, utilize the key and penetrate the prohibited room, to satisfy our curiosity and look at knowledge, refuse to stay in ignorance as a matter of habit, even though we may confront some punishment of which we don't know what it could be. Let's not forget that in this case two brave soldiers are not going to appear to save the day and create a happy ending.

Perhaps we are also doing something else, ignoring the justice of punishment, or think everything could be different and the law would not necessarily always be just.

I want to digress here for a moment to state why I am not absolutely convinced that any of today's practices, readily repeated use of incentives, such as rapid reading, prizes for reading faster, citations for quantity, and the practice of pay for each book read.

Literature and art, in general, exert a time that is implicit in the text, in the melody of a poem, in the connection that the reader has with the text. Changing this reading experience to a prize for quantity is to bastardize the harmony and beauty. We create some tourists at a world exposition of art – which happened not long ago in Japan – where viewers of Michelangelo's Pieta, had to get in an unending line and pass in front of the sculpture to see it. See it? In a few seconds, they admired it only for the value in dollars.

The view of the author / The libraries

The critical view is a moral imperative to the author. In a world where injustice is evident if we observe the four corners of the world, washing our hands can make us appear to be a director or member of a troop of clowns, to whom the problems of hunger, which claim lives every day, is solved by ignoring their existence.

You can think it is impossible to ignore the unlimited barbarity that surrounds us. But apparently it is not to difficult, just close you eyes and look to the side. The proof of how easy it is, is that the barbarity which surrounds us only alarms us when violence breaks out. Then we realize the limits that we have accepted as a continuing reality. On that day we organize marches, carry placards and torches, large banners, and yell angrily, we exorcise for a while the barbarity and return to rest with a tranquil meal, satisfied over what was accomplished.

Tomorrow the newspapers, television news, and radio will provide the evidence of the success of these protests. They will showcase the dozens of miles of participants. We'll feel happy because we have proven that living in a democracy has many advantages. Notwithstanding the marches,

the protest, the hollering, the manifestations, I worry when it is just noise that satisfies us. Those of us who can, return to the peace of a well-served meal.

Is this living in a democracy? If I remember properly what I was taught in school, democracy is a system of government in which the public exercises the supremacy. Yes, that's it. Fifty per cent of the Argentineans live in the lowest poverty level. More than 9 million live directly in misery. Three out of four children under twelve are poor. We are a country of 36 million, and these are the statistics of reality. We are far from having understood the concept of democracy.

This is the place of history, where the libraries carry out – or can carry out, or should carry out – a fundamental role. In a society where books are converted into a luxury item – like all articles of luxury out of the reach of a large percentage of the population -, putting it in the hands of the general population is a splendid task that can complement the ancient task of compassion, one of the greatest thoughts of humanity. To all “Feed the hungry, provide drink to the thirsty” gather books and give to those who have that other thirst, that other hunger so necessary to satisfy, to advance mankind.

I started talking about the author and here the theme is libraries. What has happened is I can't separate one from the other, just as you can't separate the final point of a book from the reader.

If the libraries gave food and drink, to satisfy these other hungers it is evident that they are accomplishing a social function solving shortages, closing the gap that many times remains open because we believe, with good reason, that these other hungers are more urgent. The urgent can not be replaced forever because then we will be attending nothing but the needs of immediate survival.

It is clear that books are not only in the libraries. They are also in the bookstores, however, in libraries you find – or should find – them accompanied by a professional view, a critical eye, accomplished literature, not just good sellers, an ability to separate the wheat from the chaff so we librarians can help the reader, especially to the new initiate, and place before him/her the most beneficial options. It is not an easy task, just as the task of the child reader is not easy as that child takes their first steps, in which each fall makes the child feel like a step backwards. The librarian's task is difficult and full of responsibilities because the success or failure of creating readers is in large measure in their hands. To assume this responsibility is to be in charge of the real objective that is helpful. I believe this is the central reason of your profession, not to hand over books like an "automoton" with repeated gestures in a purely mechanical fashion and basking in pure technology.

School libraries form part of the same establishment where we teach reading. Their function complements the work from the classroom, that is to teach the technical aspect of reading, teach the decoding those signals that we call letters with those that form words and thus reading is learned. That is how we were taught to read. Yes, we read, but did we really learn to read?

In the best case scenario we learned to read the information in the daily paper, the clear and precise things where two plus two are four, where the words have a specific meaning and we all understand it the same. Where the word tree signifies *plant with a wooden trunk*; where the word

bird signifies *ornithological vertebrate animal with feathers*; where the word flower signifies *part of a vegetation that contains the reproduction organs of the plant*. And if we still have any doubt we run to the dictionary for holy remedy.

Later we find these same words in a poem and these definitions do not do us any good. Now they are another thing, put in a context that has other meaning, and can symbolize joy, sadness, liberty, an open door to which we may never completely understand. Besides, they no longer have that clear and unequivocal meaning that made it so everyone understood the word the same. Now each reader will have different experiences, according to his reading skills, his sensibilities, his intelligence, his age, his culture, the possibilities that his social station, cultural and economic situation can offer.

Perhaps there is a way of talking that is clear; I will attempt it with a poem by Emily Dickinson:

*To build a wall
all you need is
a three leaf clover
a bee
and a dream.*

*If we are missing a bee
we can build it with a dream.*

Remember I am a writer, and a (either “city dweller” or “member of the government” without knowing the author it is impossible to know which since it is out of context)* preoccupied by the shamefulness this reality of thieving corrupt politicians that systematically are prosecuted – then escape any conviction - and each time they return to power.

Other specialized skills don’t help, but common sense does. These concerns over literacy are not central to the staff that has excessive obligations. Thousands of teachers take on the task daily, among other things, the solitary task of attending and feeding numerous children, many who only go to school because there is a plate of food.

I talk while thinking of the arbitrary plans and change of plans that a government invents from day to day, new capricious and absurd systems that the next government changes for another system just as arbitrary and capricious as the one left behind. Very little weight is given to the opinions of those that have direct contact with the concrete difficulties of learning, or the communities closest to the school.

The questioning and the conforming

If at this gathering we look to generate a space for reflecting between those who produce literary works and those who guide and counsel, particularly the children, surely we will not all be in agreement on the criteria of what is literature, or for whom it is intended, or what function it accomplishes in society, etc. etc.

Simplified to the extreme, there are two or three fundamental ideas where paths cross. On one side there are those who see in literature for children a tool for education, or an object of

entertainment, a sane way to pass time away from the dangers of the street, to keep them out of bad company. We know that the good of the world is inside your home, and the evil starts to rule when we open the outside door. Better to look at this violent world through information (about the violence) from behind closed doors where children grow until their later years when they will enter public life.

On the other side are those who think that literature's role in society is a promise, not Conformist. It plants questions about your system of values. It fights for a justice that turns men's dreams into their destinies and gives them the right to happiness.

By an arbitrary separation of ages all this is permitted in books for adults. In children's books we enter the zone of prohibition, of things not talked about, of multiple taboos that rule the world of the infant, like silencing them in a magical way by letting them live in this existence. The same is true of themes on love and death, and ideologies of sexuality, of violence, where children are considered mostly as inadequate.

Books and day to day reality are not different things. If in the street there is hunger, injustices, pain, these are aspects of reality that should be changed. It is one of the functions of the author to tell, according to his conscience, each one of these conflicts from the earliest age of the reader.

Forming carefully with critical thought, conscious of the rights and duties, is an object of our educational system. But generally the capacity for analysis and reflection always remain because these subjects will never be resolved.

In all this, the role of the library is important because it is the only place which provides for expressions of defense, for the right to disagree with what is, or that things could be another way, or simply to doubt what was learned in the classroom. Certainly in the stories and poems are no solutions, but there is the possibility of discovering thoughts & ideas more open, more propositions, more possibilities and more doubts. And doubt is an advantage that can enrich us more than the poor security that two plus two is four in the search of peaceful lives.

It has been more than a century since Popular Libraries emerged with the revolutionary law that give impulse to a political objective that promised a prominent place for the community in the dominate culture. Its success was strengthened by previous democratic governments that did not sparkle for their permanence in power, alternated with periods of military authoritarianism wrapped in systems called democratic, that choked and retarded the development of all forms of culture, particularly popular culture.

But now we have had twenty years of governments more or less democratic – notwithstanding a country with frequent bumps in government. It was a preoccupation fraught with its corresponding ups and downs, to make a contribution to culture, with special attention to the development of popular & educational libraries. It has improved substantially due to the attention of specialized professionals who previously were lacking. Today we can talk about the growth both in quantity and quality of libraries dedicated to children both in and out of the school.

The censorship of the marketplace

Old and malignant like most plagues, censorship always is a debilitating factor that was held by those in power and wanted to decide who should read and know the world. Today, this country in which it was decided by decree that we belong to the First World, opened its doors with enthusiasm to globalization, this idea brought by countries that are world powers who want us to believe that we are all equal if we think as they do and obey their theories.

Now we have a new and dangerous form of censorship that functions in the worst way: the censorship that is imposed by the marketplace. It is more dangerous because no prohibition to any book is imposed. It is simply the concentration of great multinational publishers that are ruled by the laws of the marketplace. They opt for the publication of best sellers, or at very least, famous authors who are assured commercial success. Then they cast aside everything that does not bring great economic benefit.

In this aspect it is fundamental that the function of libraries, manage material selected for its quality, preserving the works that time, customs, and sales have left behind, and create the conditions for those books that appeal to criteria of good literature be kept in the mind of the publishers.

Great errors require great remedies. Organizations independent of national, local, municipal governments and private institutions should acquire and distribute children's literature, enriching year after year the schools with select updated material, as much national as that from abroad, taking advantage of the rich quantity and abundance of literary works.

Multiple promotional plans for literature ascertained the interest for a book, even in the most rural and smallest communities far from the great urban centers. Children's libraries are included in this great push. Children's libraries attempt with books of cloth and plastic to create a comfort and naturalness of a book for those only a few months of age. These are not practices that have managed to be refined, but they are opening the path setting down criteria of the necessity, of not just letting time pass.

Distinct private foundations today have centered their interests in covering the needs of marginal communities, arriving with thousands of books accompanied by specialists to instill the adventure of reading and most effective manner to manage books for librarians and their staff.

Quietly and hardly known for their small presence, thousands of coordinating committees, in each school, in each neighborhood, in each small town, labor like ants to transform radically the relationship a child has with a book.

The numbers that demonstrate the quantity of libraries attended to by these distinct organizations, as well as the quantity of books given out freely each year, are considerable and capable of making valiant transformations. The promotional plans of literature that assist schools and libraries, including experiences such as bookmobiles that go to places where no other possibility exist, shows a preoccupation for solutions to each situation that presents itself.

But it is not all roses. We recognize some good things that happen daily and are worthy of support. However, as always, the coin has two sides. The other side is this all has a relative value in the immense expanse of this country that is so rich and so disjointed. The society that knows they exist on the margins has learned to act in a fashion sympathetic to the multitude when streets are full of their protests. Their children go to school because there is a plate of food there, perhaps all they will get that day. A thousand books, two thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand are handed out in schools and libraries. The numbers lose importance if we know what is needed is ten million.

This reading adventure brings us to innumerable cross roads. Are our plans made with the necessities of each community in mind? Is there sufficient material support with adequate capacity? At any rate this is a daily construction job where a significant role is taken in good conscience and defending the proper necessities of each community as well as the knowledge of your power to reclaim and build.

As my last reflection, I don't know where I learned this, but it is worth noting: Books perhaps will make us more knowledgeable, but not any better. We know culture is an advantage, but it doesn't necessarily come from good intentions.

Maybe to resolve this isn't a dream, a utopia, but if we lower our guard and stop dreaming and fighting to make our dreams become reality, then we have lost the game.

**translator's explanations*