

*IBBY-iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award 2020*

*Marit Törnqvist*

In May two thousand and nineteen, when I heard from IBBY Nederland that they wanted to nominate me for the IBBY iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award, my first thought was: What? But I'm not a reading promoter! I'm a writer and illustrator. I'm someone who *makes* books!

When I thought about reading promoters, I imagined someone starting a library somewhere up high in the mountains in Asia. Or travelling from village to village in Africa with donkeys carrying packs of books.

And then I remembered, long ago during the children's book fair in Bologna, hearing a talk by a woman who had worked with books in Palestine.

She told us that she took suitcases full of children's books to air-raid shelters in Gaza. The children who were hiding there were so frightened that it was impossible for them to relax.

Having stories read to them was the only way for them briefly to escape the here and now and forget the hell they were living in.

A way to disappear deep into a story for a while.

A way to feel closeness and security while sitting on a grownup's lap.

And above all: a way to relax for just a few moments.

It was, I think, that day in Bologna that a seed was secretly planted inside me. I remember sitting with tears in my eyes because I suddenly understood what books can mean to children in need.

I remained an artist and a writer, someone who makes books.

And I began to travel for my work. From Burundi to Iran, from Turkey to Kenya, from Aruba and Curaçao to Suriname.

I discovered the endless possibilities that stories offer for starting conversations with children, for drawing with them and writing with them.

I didn't assume that every child was a reader, but I did know for sure that every child loves stories. And that every child has stories within them that want to be told.

That was why I quietly started coming up with one project after another that made children reach for books. To relax, to understand one another better, to learn, to disappear into a different world and to connect with other people.

I have seen a great deal over the years. Children who have fled wars, children living in the slums of Tehran, children working in factories, and children who had barely survived an earthquake and were living in tents.

And yet, when I won the IBBY iRead Award, I was surprised again. Because I wasn't a reading promoter at all. I was a writer and illustrator.

But I was delighted. The work that I'd been doing on the corner of my desk for all those years, simply because it was something I had to do, as it was so important to me, had won the best award of all: the 'IBBY iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award'.

And it had happened at a time when books and stories are needed more than ever. With eighty-two point four million people who have been forcibly displaced, a world of increasing polarisation and so much fear of others, of the unknown. Books have never been more important than they are today.

I simply can't ignore it anymore. This prize has told me that I *am* a reading promoter and have been for a long time, without even realising it. And the prize has also inspired me to embark on new projects.

I am very grateful. Grateful to IBBY and the iRead Foundation for creating this award. And of course, grateful that I was chosen as one of the two winners of this first award, together with Zhu Yongxin of China. I would therefore like to thank IBBY-Nederland and IBBY-Vlaanderen for nominating me for the prize. And Marloes Robijn, who talked to me for days and made a note of everything I have done in this field. I would like to thank the members of the jury, who decided to give me this prize. And I would like to thank the iRead Foundation for awarding me a large sum of money that will give me more opportunities to spend time developing new projects to promote reading.

I would also like to thank the hundreds of people who have supported me and worked with me during all the projects I have been involved in. There are a few people I would like to name specifically: Zohreh Ghaeni in Iran. Dorus Vrede in Suriname. Toin Duijx in the Netherlands. Eva De Vos in Belgium.

Finally, I would like to thank the children.

The children who have shown me what a book can mean when you are fleeing your home and when your world is in ruins. It is those children who are my motivation. Thank you.

*Marit Törnqvist*

*IBBY-iRead Outstanding Reading Promoter Award 2020 Laureate*

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