

DEUTSCHE AKADEMIE FÜR KINDER- UND JUGENDLITERATUR, VOLKACH

Grand Prize

Friday, 20 November, 18:00

SPEECH WALLY DE DONCKER, IBBY PRESIDENT

Dear friends

It is a great honour to take the floor as IBBY president in this lovely building during the presentation of the 2015 Grand Prize of the German Academy of Literature for Children and Young Readers.

The main purpose of the Academy is to promote German literature for children and young readers. Apart from its idealistic and charitable work to promote literature for children and young readers, it supports the cooperation between science and projects in the field. The mission of IBBY – the International Board on Books for Young People – includes stimulating research and scholarly works in the field of children's literature and to give children everywhere the opportunity to have access to books with high literary and artistic standards.

As you can see, the Academy of Literature for Children and Young Readers and IBBY both work towards achieving the same goals.

Now, I would like to congratulate Rafik Schami, the 2015 laureate of this prestigious award. Europe is currently confronted with thousands of refugees, many of them coming from Syria as you did many years ago. Your experiences and stories can help Europeans gain insight into the background and feelings of these refugees. A human being is a human being. A child is a child. An individual. Not an anonymous mass. IBBY is moved by the plight of these refugees and works to protect the rights of the child whenever needed.

Just before World War II Jella Lepman, the founder of IBBY, had seen the books of Erich Kästner and others thrown onto bonfires – books and reading were dangerous. She fled Germany with her children and started a new life in England. During the war she was employed as an advisor for women's and youth affairs by the BBC and the ministry of foreign affairs. When the war was over, she was sent to the ruins of Germany to work towards the re-education of women and young people. During her work, an old idea of hers turned into reality: it was that children's books could play a role in creating mutual understanding. Thus, in 1946, she organized the first exhibition of international

children's books in the Haus der Kunst in Munich. From this exhibition, the International Youth Library was born, and IBBY followed quickly afterwards.

Since its beginnings in 1953, IBBY has steadily grown. As you all know, it has not always been easy to find funding. Still, the initiatives kept on coming and IBBY evolved into what it is today – 77 national sections all over the world. It represents countries with well-developed book publishing and literacy programmes, and other countries with only a few dedicated professionals who are doing pioneer work in children's book publishing and promotion.

People often ask me questions about IBBY. What exactly is IBBY? What does IBBY do? What does it stand for? I always ask them if they have enough time to listen to my response! If I drop some names of celebrities who were responsible for the launch of IBBY, they usually are quite impressed. However, that is just me getting warmed up: the Hans Christian Andersen Awards for children's literature often rings a bell. If I tell them about the IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award, International Children's Book Day, the Child's Right to Become a Reader: IBBY's Books for Children Everywhere Campaign, which was the starting block for the IBBY-Yamada workshop programme, the IBBY Collection for Disabled Young People, IBBY Honour List, Silent Books, the IBBY Children in Crisis Fund, and its partner the Sharjah/IBBY Children in Crisis Fund, IBBY world congresses, regional congresses, our journal Bookbird... they are rendered speechless. In addition, I also give them examples of initiatives taken by some of the IBBY national sections worldwide. And, to top it off, I often tell them about the many institutions that are IBBY-related or that have resulted from an IBBY initiative: I have never met anyone who was not impressed by the international work done by IBBY.

One of our objectives is battling illiteracy. IBBY takes this battle further than most other NGO's who are concerned with the promotion of learning to read. IBBY wants to promote a reading culture and give every child the opportunity to become a life-long reader and this is only possible if the child enjoys reading. To help this along IBBY focuses on quality literature for children.

IBBY and the Academy could work together on this. We must present a front against the increasing commercialization of children's and youth literature. We must refuse to consider young readers as commercial products. We want to cherish them by giving them quality literature and illustrations.

As a world organization, IBBY continues to argue that reading is a basic right for everyone. To be able to read, good materials, such as poetry books, novels, picture books, have to be available to all children. Recently, a librarian told me

that we are creating a new elite, by which he meant that children who enjoy reading and devouring books could do so because their parents have the means to buy books. IBBY must continue to advocate for all children to have the right to great literature; this includes children from underprivileged families, immigrant children, refugees, disabled children and sick children. Those who cannot – or may not read are excluded. This is something that IBBY cannot accept.

IBBY protects the rights of the child when needed. When these rights are being violated, we will always choose to protect the child. IBBY Italy gave us a perfect example when they chose to help the flood of child refugees arriving on the small island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean.

More recently IBBY has called on the US Government to care for the thousands of unaccompanied refugee children and families after they cross the Mexican/USA border on their incredible journeys from their war-torn and violent homelands in search of a place to live and grow. Upon their release from the detainment facilities we ask the Government to allow them access to appropriate books, to have contact with Spanish-speaking librarians who are trained in bibliotherapy, and to ensure that their well being is monitored as they are processed through the system. Books and reading save lives and give traumatised children a chance to become whole, contributing citizens as they grow up.

Amanda Craig wrote in the British newspaper, *The Independent* on 23 June 2015, that we are now living in a Golden Age of children's literature. The First Golden Age started in the 1850s thanks to the increasing status of children.

The Second Golden Age, which fed the imagination of the baby boomers, ran roughly from the 1950s to the 1970s, and is quite different in that it reverberated with a new moral consciousness.

This Third Golden Age is ripe with an extraordinary amount of talent. It is an enormous field, and is publishing vastly more books of all kinds. What might once have been called comics are now graphic novels and are treated seriously. iPads have enabled books to become animated, with sound, music, special pop-up features that young children especially love to explore. The creative potential of books in a visual sense is growing all the time. We have never had so much access to so much information, and we have never had so many ways of enjoying it through story. Really, this is an astounding time in which to be a reader!

"One of the fascinating things about children's literature is that it's a barometer of the times. You can use it to take the cultural temperature. I can't understand why no-one's been interested in this before!" wrote Rosemary Goring her column in the Scottish newspaper The Herald Scotland.

Just like Rosemary Goring, I cannot understand the lack of interest in children's literature. I am often staggered by the fact that some of the leading people in the literary community know so little about children's and youth literature. I am convinced that children's books are a country's best ambassadors!

The World Literacy Foundation (WLF) has warned that illiteracy is "a worldwide crisis" that will cost the global economy 1.2 trillion dollars this year – 1.2 trillion dollars!

The same Foundation has put forward that a global body should be created to manage resources for international literacy initiatives.

Children's early reading skills must be vastly improved to combat illiteracy.

IBBY has been working on this for more than sixty years and the Academy for nearly forty years. The findings of the WLF show that the importance of our work will continue to grow.

Thank you for your attention!