



IBBY Camp March 2018

May 27, 2018 by debbiebeeks.co.uk

Being a visitor to the 6th IBBY Children's Library Camp in Lampedusa

This is not an archetypal library, in time it may become part of the wider Sicilian system and have the ability of inter-library loans etc. But right now it is growing with, for and by the people who have it. The IBBY Children's Library is a grassroots community project, supported by the mayor, started with a collection of **silent books** and a conversation in a café. Over the years, volunteers and users have occupied and offered what they have and shared ideas. Confidence and enjoyment has grown into community ownership of the space. The culture that has emerged within the walls of the building is open and curious.

An IBBY Camp is a week of visitors to programme events and engagement in the volunteer led children's library. As a practitioner I am concerned with the empowering and inclusive spaces that books and creative engagement can create. I wanted to witness, without the media lens, the refugee crisis in Europe. I was curious about the power of silent books in communities of inequality and tension. What I discovered at the 6th IBBY Camp were gentle acts of humanising activism, a renewed definition of what a library is for and what it can do.

IBBY Volunteers at the Gateway between Europe and Africa

'6th IBBY Camp, 5th to 11th March, Library open everyday'

IBBY Camp Volunteers after a long day in the library

As the camp and the various events and meeting progressed, I was reminded of

Benjamin Zephaniah and his take on the community activism that occurred after the Grenfell Tower tragedy in London, see [here](#). He highlighted the beauty of organised anarchy, the humanity of people coming together to organise and connect. For me this air of organised anarchy is the cause of the success of the library, the success being the humanity, the safe place to connect and share story for all the children of the island. I'd love to see Zephaniah be a poet in residence at the library, he and Deb Soria, (the project's instigator) would have much to talk about.

The Island

Lampedusa is much loved by inhabitants, nature tourists and holiday tourists, it's location is closer to Tunisia than to Sicily and boasts nature reserves, migrating turtles, whale and dolphin sightings, beautiful beaches and all the joy of the Mediterranean climate, Italian cultures and customs. Lampedusa may be more familiar to most these days because of the role it plays in the migrant journey from North Africa to Europe. The refugee crisis across the Mediterranean is magnified on this tiny island. The political glare, the system of asylum seeking and daily life occur in close proximity, not always seen but can be felt.

View from the south coast of the island.

The Atmosphere

March is off-season, only a handful of cafes were open on the main street near the children's library. This week was also the general election in Italy. Migration was high on the agenda and the incoming coalition government was not in the best interests of migrants. I was in the company of activists visiting the library; librarians, teachers, social workers, authors and book sellers for this 6th IBBY Camp, a highlight of the annual programme for the volunteer led IBBY library project. During our mandatory daily café visit for morning coffee, I saw police, immigration centre staff, immigrants, locals, coast guard, NGO workers and us – an eclectic mix of nationalities, ages – rub shoulders to squeeze past gelato and dolci to order café at the bar. As always in Italian culture, there's much conversation, these coffee trips were no different, except conversation was rarely exchanged between tribes and certainly not with the groups of immigrants. I felt an invisible and unspoken barrier, preventing connection and dialogue.

The Library

The IBBY Children's Library project was initiated by Deb Soria from IBBY and welcomed by the Lampedusa local authority and local networks.

It is run by a network of local volunteers who live on the island and is housed in a renovated fish mongers on the main street, Via Roma. Commonly known as a 'library on the frontier' It is the first library on the island, opened in 2013 for host community and migrant children. Those of us reading from a northern European perspective might take for granted cultural opportunities for children, our Facebook feeds tell us about weekly activities and entertainment to inspire and connect our kids with each other and the world around them; theatre, trampoline parks, libraries, festivals. Not so on this island in the med, where all drinking water and food has to be delivered from the main land. Of the 6000 population, 1000 are children, apart from school, the library is the only informal meeting place for children. Since 2013, the library has been refurbished, stocked with donated books, 1000 library membership tickets have been issued to every child on the island and the dedicated library volunteers who are young people and adults, open the library every Wednesday and Saturday.

IBBY Volunteers use the Silent Book collection to prepare for after school story times with Deborah Soria.

The purpose of the IBBY which is to gather people with something to offer the libraries and the communities to further the library project and offer programmed library events. In style of organised anarchy, a timetable for the week is stuck to the wall and the programme evolves as visitors arrive and contribute. Included were:

- Daily class visits from the elementary and middle schools for orientation, story times and book talks.
- Early evening craft sessions of painting and collage to create giant letters that spelled out the word Medertaneano.
- Puppet story sessions and story creating sessions with a librarian from Rome.
- A small group of young women students from the high school come to share the translation of an English/Canadian story about 'A Stranger at Your Door', a second phase of a project from a previous camp where a book was written by a visiting author, the students' translation will be used by a publisher in Rome to make a printed translation in Italian.
- Author/illustrator Armin Gerder and his wife Victoria take up residency in the library, meeting children and volunteers. Armin gives an evening talk

- about his work and later creates small artworks on the walls of the library.
- The local garden project for adults with Learning Disabilities run a session to set up a seed library.
 - Librarians from Sicily lead training on a new computerised book cataloguing system.
 - An evening strategy meeting helps to plan priorities and projects for the coming year.
 - I gave an evening talk about my practice in creative engagement and children's books and the ethos of inclusive practice.
 - I ran 7 drama and silent books sessions in the middle school (see below for more detail)

There is a steady bubble of activity throughout the day then the library bursts into life in the early evening when children's arrive for the 4pm to 7pm library sessions. Children from age 4+ arrive independently and with family members. Their ownership of the library space is evident. I witness the youngest children organising books and pulling them off the shelves and asking volunteers to read to them. Emerging teens who were the first children to use the library, issue books using a hand written issuing system. Small groups of primary aged children collecting pens and paper to sit together to chat and draw. Talking is everywhere. New people are embraced and people introduce themselves, within minutes books are out and stories are shared. This is what is expected in this space, by the children who use it. In summer months when more immigrant children arrive on the island this space belongs also to them. Amidst the political and media glare, the unspoken barriers elsewhere, this library offers a place of connection and story for children and families. A vital sanctuary and human right for host and visiting children alike.

Armin Gerder, author and illustrator of *The Island and Mediterranean*, chats with children informally in the library after school.

One of the many story times in the library, this one led by a librarian from Rome.

Beyond the Library

For IBBY Camp visitors like me, activity extends beyond the library. Residents and activists offered visitors an insight into the island. One afternoon we visited the east of the island to see the landscape and views, forage for wild fennel and asparagus. Another afternoon we went to the gates of the immigration centre and

to a memorial garden where 336 trees have been planted to represent the 336 migrants who died a mile off the island in 2013. [The Optician of Lampedusa](#) by Emma Jane Kirby Tells the story of this tragedy. The immigration centre was heavily guarded and not open to visitors. All we could do was witness the wire gates, look at the ten or more men in uniform with guns who looked back at us, the centre itself is not visible from the entrance.

Not until weeks later did I learn that we had chosen a pivotal moment to visit the immigration centre. At almost the exact moment we were at the gates, a riot was brewing inside. The immigration centre is designed to hold people for approx. four days for processing before they are sent on to the main land. This group of people had been in the centre for months. A fire broke out during the trouble. [This article](#) describes the experience of a migrant who has experienced arriving on Lampedusa. A translated article about the centre, it's conditions and the fire on 8th March [here](#). As a visitor to the island, an EU citizen, a white woman, I could have easily turned a blind eye and the issue of migration would not have touched me. This is perhaps what the thousands of tourists do who visit every summer. What I learn about the migration crisis from this visit, is how divided we are, the gulf between those who experience equality, human rights and democracy and those who don't is huge, and it is all around us if we choose to look. My lesson my insight from visiting Lampedusa is less about the experience of the migrant but the sharp focus and fresh eyes with which I see the systems of asylum in the EU. The system isn't there to help people and probably never was, regardless of how dear I value the European Bill of Human Rights.

[Activism on the Island](#)

Forum Lampedusa Solidale (FLS) is a network of Lampedusa residents who have come together as a result of the refugee crisis, they support the IBBY Library and act to humanise the lived experience of migrants on the island. This group go to the harbour when boats arrive to greet the people who have risked their lives in overcrowded, unsafe boats to reach the island. They offer smiles and kind welcome greetings as authorities process the arrivals. As we know from [media reports](#), not all the people arrive safely and in the cemetery in Lampedusa, some people who died making the crossing are buried. Paola La Rosa and FLS give tours of the cemetery. On Wednesday afternoon of the IBBY Camp I and other visitors from Sweden, Egypt and Italy went with Paola to hear and see the stories.

First impressions was of well-tended tombs, set out in a grid. Each tomb had

individualised name plates with photographs of the loved one, representing their personality, a grandfather on his fishing boat, another in his favourite hat. Squeezed in around these graves were the graves of the unknown with far less information on the plate, not even a name. Paola explained how the authorities do not have a mandate to investigate the deaths of the people who arrive seeking asylum on Lampedusa. The system of processing people on arrival does not allow for the identity of the dead to be a priority. Over the years that unknown people have been buried in the cemetery on Lampedusa, FLS have worked together to gather information about the dead and change the name plates or tell the stories of the individuals. They research documents and now try to ask questions about the dead at the harbour when they arrive, to capture as much information as possible. We visit the graves of women and men, some with first names, some with no name. Paola La Rosa is active in FLS and the library. She knows and shares the stories of their sea crossing, where they departed from and how they died. The stories are unbearable to hear. Unscrupulous traffickers taking dangerous risks with naive individuals with no other option but to trust them. A system of asylum and human rights that provides no safe passage. Many of the people who died had every right to apply for asylum and arrive safely on a plane. This act of sharing stories and names is a humanising and powerful act of defiance in the face of a global refugee crisis. This act of humanising and empathising characterises my whole experience of the IBBY Library project. To tell and share stories with others, to connect, to talk is the antithesis of dehumanising systems of oppression.

'For a stranger, the strangers don't cry' Plaque for the unmarked graves in the cemetery, placed by Forum Lampedusa Solidale.

Paola La Rosa tell the stories of lost immigrants.

Paola's work in the cemetery features in the film [Winter in Lampedusa](#).

Humanity, Connection, Solidarity

The IBBY Camp ended with a party in the piazza organised by IBBY Italia, Terra Riavvia Il Planeta, Forum Lampedusa Solidale – the event titled 'Seminiamo Relazioni'. As the party drew nearer, I felt a great weight of sadness and powerlessness at my lack of contact with the people who were resident in the immigration centre. I felt the tangible experience of democracy for me but not for others. We passed in the street and shared daily greetings in the café but the

invisible unspoken barrier prevailed. The majority of immigration centre residents in winter are men and I was visiting a children's library, I feared I would leave the island without connecting with the individuals who had risked their lives to reach the island.

The party on the Piazza began gently with a grand table of pasta and cakes, a DJ played tunes and once the food was finished, people began to gravitate to the open piazza to dance to popular Italian tunes. A small group of migrant men had wandered down from the church and were watching from the side. Then something beautiful happened. One of the IBBY Library Volunteers went to the DJ to request an Arabic pop song. In the first bar of the song the migrants, mainly Tunisians lit up and joined in the dancing. Everyone together, in circles, arms around each other, dancing, smiling.

For the first time that week, the silent, invisible barrier was broken. The dancing continued, more Tunisians joined the dancing, arm in arm we danced in circles, more stood at the side, watching, smiles all around. Two days before the party, the tensions inside the immigration centre had reached breaking point and a fire had broken out. And in this moment, the faces of this group of men relaxed and I could see for the first time that many were teenagers or in their early twenties. From my privileged standpoint, I realised that these were children and emerging adults, whose experience of living in hostile conditions were reflected in their faces. In two opening bars of a song, the invisible barrier was broken and we were able to see each other differently.

The party ended and the DJ was packing away. I joined in clearing the catering tables and carrying them back up the road to the church. A few migrants spotted an opportunity to help, joined us, we shared carrying of tables up the road. In this moment of shared endeavour we all had eye contact and smiled, we didn't speak the same languages but the latin variations of the same words became invaluable. One man caught my eye and said, 'Solidarité' and I responded, 'Solidarity' in English. As we carried a line of tables up the hill I heard the word 'Solidarité' ripple through the people behind me. This bitter sweet brief moment of connection made a difference to us all.

Let us not forget that this is not a story tied up with a happy ending. Those same people are still trapped within the system of asylum, transported somewhere different, waiting for a future. Summer is upon the island and more boats will arrive. The coalition government is yet to find a leader. The children's library will

continue to provide a safe place for all the children who find themselves under these circumstances to come together and share stories and dialogue, a place of literature to make sense of the world. That matters.

Dancing in the piazza.

5 thoughts on "IBBY Camp March 2018"



Beverley Naidoo

June 4, 2018 at 5:24 pm | Reply

Such a poignant account, Debbie. You offer us a vital window onto today's human tragedy in Europe and its 'gateway' island of Lampedusa. However small their contribution in the face of gigantic odds, those who have created and maintain this IBBY Children's Library have an alternative vision that matters – more than ever. Ironically, the Silent Books project reminds me of Russell Freedman's brilliant book 'We Will Not Be Silent'. It's about the White Rose Student Resistance Movement in Nazi Germany and those brave young Germans who maintained a vision of humanity in the midst of inhumanity.



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June 11, 2018 at 10:33 am | Reply

Thank you for your thoughts, I will look into Russell Freedman.



Simonetta Felli

June 9, 2018 at 12:47 pm | Reply

I have finally found the time to read your account on Lampedusa.... thanks!
I have been able to relive that beautiful moments passed together...an
experience of great human wealth!. Thanks <3



Vittoria Hawksworth

August 6, 2018 at 3:47 pm | [Reply](#)

Hi, I am interested in the project and would love to be involved. I am a teaching assistant in a primary school in England but I have a special interest in libraries. I am originally from Italy. Are you one of the organisers?
Thank you!



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September 17, 2018 at 9:22 am | [Reply](#)

Hi Vittoria

There are annual IBBY camps in Lampedusa where you can visit and contribute.

You can contact the organisers through their facebook page. Search for 'Biblioteca IBBY Lampedusa'

[Leave a Comment](#)

Hello, I'm Debbie

I'm a Consultant and Practitioner in Creative Engagement based in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, working nationally.



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Okay, thanks