

Focus IBBY

by CAROLINA BALLESTER

Focus IBBY 63.3

In this third Focus IBBY of the season, I am extremely pleased to welcome two guest contributors for a fresh look on the IBBY activities held at the last Bologna Children's Book Fair. I wish you all a lovely summer / Austral winter!

IBBY at Bologna Children's Book Fair: 2025 Edition!

Once again, IBBY's time at the Bologna Children's Book Fair has drawn to a close. With this being my personal first of what I hope are many more fairs to come, it was indeed an incredible week. Although the fair ran from March 31 to April 4, we began our time at Bologna early, as always, with the IBBY Executive Committee meeting on March 29 and 30. We were graciously hosted by the Bologna Fiere, and amidst the views of stands being constructed and through many, *many* cups of coffee, our Executive Committee (EC) discussed a packed agenda.

The EC reflected on the success of the 39th Congress in Trieste and began to look ahead, as IBBY president Basarat Kazim reaffirmed her commitment to IBBY's growth through the enlistment of new IBBY Sections, to further enrich our great network. The EC also shared stories from their regions, highlighting the constant collaborations taking place across our sections, and in this feeling of camaraderie, the EC gravely stressed the importance of collectively supporting children in crisis. From Palestine, to Lebanon, to Ukraine, to Iran, the EC emphasized the unprecedented level of violence faced by children around the world, and reaffirmed once more IBBY's call to take action through the IBBY Children in Crisis Fund, to provide aid in IBBY's capacity, to provide comfort through bibliotherapy practice, and to rebuild the libraries and spaces of reading that are so essential to the joys and development of a child. With this sense of purpose, the EC and IBBY Secretariat leapt into the festivities of the fair.

As always, the IBBY activities in Bologna fair



IBBY Executive Committee at work in Bologna.

kicked off with the annual press conference held on Monday at the Illustrators Café. It opened with a warm welcome address from President Kazim and updates on multiple IBBY projects and collections, and the expected announcement of the 2026 Hans Christian Andersen Award candidates and jury. The 2025 Selection of Outstanding Books for Young People with Disabilities was presented by Leigh Turina of the Toronto Public Library. This was a poignant affair, as after more than a decade of presiding over the collection, Leigh has now retired, and has passed on the baton to her colleague Ariana Ferrone, in the Toronto Public Library's Service Development and Innovation Department. We are thrilled to have her join the team as we continue to bring this biennial collection to life.

The 2025 edition of the book fair also saw the launch of our new project, the IBBY–UNESCO Collection of Remarkable Books for Young Readers in Indigenous and Endangered Languages, announced by our partner Cristina Puerta of UNESCO. As part of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, this new project is our global call to protect and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity in children's literature, with submissions open until December 15, 2025.

We were also thrilled to congratulate Patricia Aldana's receipt of the Jella Lepman Medal. Recognized for her lifelong commitment to bringing books to young readers around the

world, Patricia has been a driving force behind many of IBBY's impactful initiatives. IBBY awards the Jella Lepman Medal to an individual or institution in recognition of an outstanding contribution to IBBY and its mission.



HC Andersen Jury president Shereen Kreidieh at the IBBY Press Conference.

Our program continued with exciting events held at the fair, including our ever joyous IBBY Aperó at the IBBY stand, where old and new friends connected in our shared love to bring books and children together. A special panel for *Bookbird*, “A Quest for the Last Unicorn: Finding Pleasure in Children’s Nonfiction,” was moderated by our very own Chrysogonus Siddha Malilang, with speakers Marc Aronson, Giorgia Grilli, Tina Bilban, and Mingzhou Zhang. This was followed by our daylong celebrations on April 2 for International Children’s Book Day, hosted by IBBY Netherlands. The IBBY stand came alive with messages from all around the world of writers, illustrators, publishers, academics, and children’s literature enthusiasts who stopped by to celebrate International Children’s Book Day. Author Rian Visser, author of this year’s message for International Children’s Book Day, spent the day celebrating with us as well, and shared her message once more: “These words belong to you even though they came from me.” The fair culminated with the IBBY European Regional Conference, beautifully reflected on by Morgane Vasta of IBBY France later on in Focus IBBY.

Finally, we unveiled an important new project in collaboration with IBBY UK: “Children’s



Leigh Turina at the IBBY stand.

Books from and about Palestine,” a selection of twenty books that highlight stories of resilience, identity, and hope at a time of immense tragedy and devastation due to conflict. Displayed at our stand throughout the fair, the collection saw many visitors who expressed their commitment to children in crisis. We hope that this collection will be for the world’s children to share.



Pam Dix, IBBY UK president, presenting books for and about Palestine.

Alessandra Leopardi joined IBBY in February 2025 as administration and communications officer after completing her master’s degree at the Geneva Graduate Institute, where her research focused on the importance of literature and reading in ensuring children’s right to a quality education.

by Alessandra Leopardi

"We Are Accountable to Children!" On the 4th IBBY Europe Regional Conference

All across the Bologna Children's Book Fair, publishing rights for children's books are negotiated, and stories cross borders. Paradoxically, the atmosphere is tense: in Europe and around the world, children's rights are increasingly compromised, and new restrictions are being placed on the stories meant for them.

On April 3, 2025, book professionals from all over the world gathered in Italy for the IBBY European Regional Congress on the theme "Books make a difference! Children's right to read in challenging times."¹



Illustration by David Pintor.

Beyond recommendations and opinions, children's rights must be respected and strengthened.

Eva Berghmans, a Belgian human rights expert, revisited several recent cases in Europe that show how reading spaces for children are becoming political fault lines, where norms and values clash.

A few examples: Hungary is currently facing proceedings before the European Court of Justice for its 2021 law banning the "promotion" of homosexuality to minors. In Germany, a reading session hosted by drag queen artists sparked national controversy. In Belgium, political leaders have influenced library acquisitions. In the UK, books are being pulled from school libraries under pressure from

conservative groups, and public libraries are closing at a rate of approximately forty per year.² In Slovakia, individuals perceived as too progressive have been removed from positions in cultural institutions.

At the same time, smear campaigns on social media target artists, librarians, and teachers—such as the Pim Lammers case in the Netherlands.³ These attacks, often fueled by far-right groups, call for legal and collective responses. In Belgium and the Netherlands, libraries are adopting charters affirming their inclusive role. Tools exist to help adults and children defend their right to read when facing censorship and intimidation.

Eva Berghmans recalled the principles of children's rights, in Europe and beyond; the rights to education, information, and freedom of expression are enshrined at multiple levels: in national constitutions, in the Council of Europe's missions, and in three international treaties ratified by most UN member states. "These rights [including the right to education, to information, as well as freedom of expression], are concrete: they entail actions, political choices, and shared responsibilities."

"Books Make a Difference!"

From creation to mediation, field professionals offered new perspectives and tools for action.

For Ken Wilson-Max, inclusive publishing is not just about publishing for minorities; "it's about showcasing what all children share, providing them with access to stories where they can see themselves reflected, regardless of their realities." Based in the UK, the Zimbabwean-born author and publisher works to steer commercial logic in a more inclusive direction—"gently changing the ship's course"—while staying attuned to market realities. Through HarperCollins, he launched the Kumusha Books collection to help children "find their home in books." *Kumusha* means "ancestral home" in Shona.⁴

"We live in a time when simply mentioning the existence of lesbians provokes more outrage than a genocidal war!," snapped Polish researcher Mateusz Świetlicki. He cited the

case of Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's latest novel about the war in Ukraine, which was attacked on Amazon and removed from a school library simply for containing the word *lesbian*. He denounced the resurgence of a growing "homophobic agenda" in several countries: queer characters are now more visible—but also more censored. He emphasized the importance of clearly distinguishing between selection and censorship: "Let's choose good books!"

"Giving access to literature is not enough; children must also be supported in becoming critical readers," asserted award-winning reading advocate Valentina Stoeva. She highlighted her country's contradictions: in Bulgaria, access to books remains unequal and not inclusive, and libraries are underfunded. Through the EURead network, she contributed to a manifesto defending reading as a fundamental right.⁵ She also promoted the Children's Choice Award, where 18,000 children selected and read books with their families—a project that helps prepare them to make informed civic choices.⁶

"To read is to live!" said Marie Aubinais; reading brings us together. As a journalist and author engaged for over twenty years with ATD Fourth World street libraries (winner of the 2024 IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award), she spoke about the emancipatory potential of outreach mediation, close to where children live. In a climate marked by fear, the stigmatization of the most vulnerable, and a social divide between "us" and "them," she offered concrete examples: Festivals of Knowledge and Arts, cultural workshops that build connections and help residents observe, question, and reimagine their environments.⁷

Every Word Has an Impact on Society

The second part of the discussions focused on how children perceive and exercise their freedom of expression today, through books and creativity.

Committed to defending children's rights, British specialist Nicky Parker and German researcher Fariba Schulz presented the European project "Seen and Heard," led by Amnesty International and several partner universities.⁸

"As long as rights remain just a promise," they explained, "stories allow us to imagine how the world could make them real." Conducted in Malta, Berlin, and Wrocław with 600 children aged ten to fourteen from over fifty nationalities, the project combines critical discussions and literary workshops where young people explore political questions:



Chris Riddell illustrated the discussion live from his studio via video call.

"Who gets to speak and act in stories, and whose perspective is left out? Can literature be a tool for action? Which children's rights are addressed? And how?" British illustrator Chris Riddell, a mentor in the project, emphasized the power of collective creation in troubled times—mentioning, for example, how one of his drawings depicting an orange Grinch,⁹ referencing Donald Trump, was censored by the Dr. Seuss estate just before the opening of the Bologna Children's Book Fair.¹⁰

Finally, Gvantsa Jobava, a publisher in Georgia and president of the International Publishers Association, described how the cultural sector is mobilizing against the rise of authoritarianism in her country. She condemned two newly adopted laws: one limiting the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in schools, and another targeting foreign-funded NGOs.

Reminding the audience that "autocracies are powerful because they are united and support each other," she issued a call for solidarity:

We are ready to fight for democracy. Are you ready to support us? And to support yourselves as well? This is not just about us. This is a common fight for Europe!"

Charalambos Demetriou, a Cypriot member of IBBY's executive committee in charge of Europe, echoed this call as he closed the session: "The inspiration we've drawn here must now be turned into action."



Conference speakers and organizers.

It is precisely in times of adversity that actors in children's literature must unite and organize themselves to ensure to continue to make all voices heard.

*by Morgane Vasta IBBY France,
IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Award
jury (2022 - 2024 and 2024 - 2026).*

Developments in Children in Crisis: IBBY-Story Sunbirds Libraries Are Havens Campaign

As Bologna concluded, IBBY connected with a group of passionate KidLit authors—the Story Sunbirds. This connection resulted in the IBBY-Story Sunbirds' fundraising campaign, "Libraries Are Havens," dedicated to the librarians who have worked at the two IBBY libraries in Gaza since 2008. Our librarians, their families, and their communities are in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, forced to leave their homes and with difficult access to living essentials. With them in mind, the Story Sunbirds, IBBY, and IBBY Palestine dedicated a month-long campaign in May fundraising the delivery of humanitarian aid to our librarians, as it is through their incredible labor that books reach

the hands of children, and despite the immense suffering, they continue their work in bibliotherapy and reading promotion for the children in Gaza.

With the support of hundreds of advocates and the goodwill of our incredible network, we were able to successfully reach our goal of US\$10,000. This campaign was, for us here at the IBBY Secretariat, a moving testament to the power of community and the collective mission we all embody: to protect children and their right to find comfort in reading in times of terrible crisis.

This feeling is embodied through the beautiful words of this year's winner of the Carnegie Medal for Writing, Olivia Lomenech Gill, who dedicated a part her speech to the IBBY libraries of Gaza:

So it is with these words that I renew my promise to deliver books to Palestine—a free Palestine with a national library, housing stories of love, struggle, and resistance, and a little section with some of the most beautiful picturebooks in the English language. I need your help with that. I hope that IBBY, who have renewed the pledge to continue supporting libraries in the devastated Gaza strip, and IFLA [the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions], might be interested in participating, and as many libraries and publishers as possible with their help—with your help.

To read Olivia's full speech and for more information on our Gaza libraries, the "Libraries Are Havens" campaign, and the IBBY Children in Crisis Fund, please visit our website at <https://www.ibby.org>.

Notes

1. The presentations and the full program are available on the IBBY Europe website, <https://www.ibby-europe.org/>; there is also a video in which David Pintor shares the story behind the creation of the poster's illustration.

2. Stephen Menon and Laurence Cawley, "A Library Is More Than a Place with Books, It Is a Lifeline," *BBC News*, 17 Mar. 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg117gdky10>.
3. "Pim Lammers was due to be honored at a children's literature festival, but received death threats and ultimately withdrew. At the heart of the controversy was a short story published seven years earlier, which far-right groups labeled as pedo-pornographic. The Dutch press has supported the author, whose text, when read in full, is intended to raise awareness about abuse." "Aux Pays-Bas, un auteur jeunesse pris dans une 'tempête parfaite' d'accusations," *Courrier International*, 10 Feb. 2025, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/polemique-aux-pays-bas-un-auteur-jeunesse-pris-dans-une-tempete-parfaite-d-accusations>.
4. HarperCollins Children's Books, "Kumusha Books UK," <https://harpercollinschildrensbooks.co.uk/kumusha>.
5. EURead, "EURead Statement on Reading and Literacy," <https://euread.com/euread-statement-on-reading-and-literacy/>.
6. EURead, "Biserche Valshebno Children's Choice Award," <https://euread.com/campaign/biserche-valshebno-childrens-choice-award/>.
7. ATD Quart Monde, "Les Festivals des Savoirs et des Arts," <https://www.atd-quartmonde.fr/les-festivals-des-savoirs-et-des-arts/>.
8. "Seen and Heard: Young People's Voices and Freedom of Expression," <https://seenandheardproject.eu/>. The project's official website has additional resources coming soon.
9. The Grinch is a green, furry character from a 1957 picturebook by Dr. Seuss: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*
10. Chris Riddell, "Dr Seuss Turns in His Grave...: How the Grinch Was Cancelled," *Substack*, 28 Mar. 2025, <https://christopherriddell.substack.com/p/dr-seuss-turns-in-his-grave>.
11. Gvantsa Jobava recommends reading Anne Applebaum's book *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World* (Allen Lane, 2024).



Carolina Ballester was born in Paris and studied in Spain and France, obtaining an MA in political science from the Madrid Complutense University and degrees in Chinese and Arabic from the French National Institute of Oriental Studies (INALCO). She worked as a translator and as cultural attaché at the Consulate of Spain in Shanghai. In 2013, she joined the Shanghai International Children's Book Fair team as program manager, and over ten years she promoted and developed international interest in children's illustration as well as served on juries for children's illustration catalogs and contests. She brings to IBBY an interest and wide knowledge in children's literature and illustration, as well as international experience and fluency in several languages, including French, Spanish, English, and Mandarin. She joined IBBY as executive director on September 1, 2022.