



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD**

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Parliament Library Address by Carmen Diana Dearden of the Banco del Libro Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2007

Good morning. I wish to take this opportunity to thank once again the Swedish government, the Swedish Arts Council, The ALMA organizers and the Swedish people for inviting us here and for treating us so well.

Like Katherine Paterson and Phillip Pullman before us, we are surprised and impressed that members of parliament should hold a session to talk about children's books and children's rights to read. It is not the first time that Sweden has surprised us and made us happy, but this is undoubtedly the one that has honoured us most.

The Banco del Libro's relationship with Sweden dates back for more than twenty years. It began when Raben & Sjorgen published one of Ediciones Ekaré's books -La calle es Libre, translated by Britt Isaksson-, who came to Venezuela to film La Urbina library where the story takes place. A story about a community who comes together to achieve what they want and need, in this case a playground for the children.

Later on, people from Banco del Libro came to a seminar in Stockholm to talk about libraries in marginal areas; the Swedish Children's Book Club and the SIDA sponsored mini libraries around La Urbina, and more recently, the Swedish Royal library awarded scholarships to eleven librarians from Central America for our on-line course for reading promoters. Last November, we

enjoyed having Larry Lempert and Agneta Edwards from the ALMA jury delving into our programs and helping us see ourselves anew.

In 1989 the Swedish Exhibition Centre organized a simple and yet beautiful children's books exhibition on our premises. This creative exhibit showed us that such things could be done at a low cost applying the slogan Susan Forslund enunciated: "When I don't have money, I think".

This could also be the Banco del Libro's slogan throughout the years.

The Banco del libro was founded in 1960, by a group of women volunteers, after the fall of a dictatorship in Venezuela. Most of them had been in exile in other Latin American countries and had returned with a fresh look at their own land and many new dreams. Helping to create a democratic society was their main goal. Since then, democracy has always been at the core of our work.

We believe education and information are essential tools for the formation of citizens able to think for themselves and so exercise their rights more knowledgably and freely.

Providing books to children and training the adults who work with them was, and is, the Banco del Libro's main concern. This is especially significant in a country where 42% of the population is under 20 years of age and 67% under 30. Banco del Libro was founded on the premise that books are an essential tool, not just for a democratic education, but for life itself. It was also based on the premise that to become a reader for life, people have to start at an early age.

During 47 years of work developing model library services and reading promotion programs we have aimed to give people free access to a wide variety of books and other materials. Libraries are essential to this access. This is why our earliest programs began with setting up model public and school library networks with the best and richest possible collections.

We believe the emotional experience of reading is important.

Our aim has been to get children and young people to feel that reading is not only useful for solving problems, such as ridding fleas from their for instance, or to vote in an election. But also, and essentially, that reading is an emotional experience that connects them with life. That it can produce sadness, laughter, anger, compassion, relief. The program Leer para Vivir (Read to Live) which began in the coastline state of Vargas in 1999 after terrible floods, was based on

creating a caring relationship between children (and adults) and books. Reading allowed them to look at their own stories, their past and their future with hope. Its success surprised even us. Perhaps the fact that they were in a very traumatic situation and our coming with beautiful books and stories to alleviate some of their fears had something to do with this; perhaps it was the simple fact that we were willing to listen to them; perhaps it was the force of their being able to comment and write about their experiences. Whatever the combination, reading has made a difference in their lives. And to those of us who worked with them.

It all began after our first storytelling session in one of the shelters that had been put up in Caracas to house the people who had lost their homes, and a six year old boy told us it was the first time he had been able to sleep since he had lost his house and his father, because he had under his pillow, the book we had lent him: Frog in love. From there we went to work in the damaged areas of Vargas, and have not stopped. Today there is a network of 62 schools and 4 “reading communities” run by the teachers and parents themselves, all volunteers, all having joined the group of their own volition.

Betty Porras, one the parents, who now has her own Reading Club said recently. “I don’t remember this program. I live it. I first came to it the 16th of March, 2000, the day of my daughter’s birthday. She wanted to go, but I was afraid to let her because since the “tragedy” she had chest pains. But she convinced me and we went. The way they approached us, the way they talked to us, the activities we did, made me stay. I saw my daughter’s pains and fears subside. After a while I thought: If this has helped us so much, why can’t I use it to help others? So I did. Now I have a reading club to lend books and tell stories. I read for myself, I read for the children. Reading changed our lives”.

We think enjoyment is important.

With our reading campaign of 1990, Leer es un placer (Reading is a Pleasure) the first time a mass media reading campaign had been done in Venezuela, we also tried to transmit the joy of reading.

This campaign was a good example of the alliances we like to create with both public and private institutions. It was designed by an advertising agency, financed by a bank foundation, and the TV channels aired the three 40second micros free during three months. It was a great success, especially due to Radio Caracas Television which aired them in prime time during the World Football Cup. For a while most of Venezuela was talking about books and football.

We believe in the importance of diversity.

Norbert Bibelny, Catalan philosopher, affirms that violence is the product of the biggest evil of this century: intolerance. And intolerance is merely the inability to put oneself in the place of another. It is a profound disregard of “the respect of the otherness of others”, which characterize Paradise Oscar and his wife in *Rasmus and the Vagabond*, as Eva Maria Metcalf says in her short biography of Astrid Lindgren published by the Swedish Intstitute.

When we understand the other we learn to be tolerant. And when we learn to be tolerant we are free. Because freedom can only happen when and where we have the possibility of choosing, of selecting, of thinking. That is to say, where options exist. It is the other side of the coin of absolutism. Reading is a rich source of tolerance and understanding because it is a double process of recognizing ourselves and accepting the unfamiliar, the foreign. Children’s books are not the only way to stop this tendency towards absolutism; they are not the only defense for diversity. But they can play a vital role by the simple act of presenting readers with other perspectives. Because we can, through books, become used to being in another’s place from an early age. And because we can be many characters, in a fictional space, we will be on the way to accepting diversity in reality.

We believe that books stir imagination and enable people to imagine a better world.

As Astrid Lindgren beautifully said:

“Alone with a book, a child creates images somewhere within the secret chamber of the soul that surpass anything else. Such images are crucial for human beings...

This we have seen endlessly: children absorbed in books, creating images in that secret chamber of the soul.

Once when I was talking with a Latin American president about children’s book and values, I told him that what I like best about children’s books is that they are subversive. In the good sense of the word, that they can change conventions and convictions, whether public or private. I also said I believed that if more politicians read children’s books perhaps the world would be a different place. He was not amused. I did not mean it as a criticism; I meant it as a hope for all adults.

It is with hope that we have done our work. Always exercising freedom to try out new ideas, ingenuity and creativity to face the constant lack of sufficient funds (“when we don’t have money, we think”); building alliances with public and private institutions; keeping many friends

who believed in us; maintaining a refreshing lack of bureaucracy, as cited by the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award jury; and, always, good humor, a bit of magic and much perseverance.

We hope we can continue to do so with the help of this wonderful prize you have given us.