



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD**

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Award Lecture by Banco del Libro Representatives Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2007

Carmen Diana Dearden:

For the past few days we have been describing what the Banco del Libro does; today we would like to talk about it from our personal experiences. We would like to tell you our stories, which are also the Banco del Libro's story.

Many projects have been developed in these 47 years. We cannot tell you about all of them. But the three of us here today have chosen a few that are dear to our hearts and will tell you about them from our personal perspective. There is a common thread in all of them that has to do with how the Banco del Libro works.

1. There is Freedom to think and do.

Because Banco del Libro was created when Venezuela was coming out of a dictatorship and starting to reaffirm democracy, the people that began this institution truly believed in democracy and practiced it. Only some general guidelines were given and everybody had to imagine the best way to do their work.

How to start a bookmobile service to the marginal barrios in Caracas?

How to invite a teacher in Ciudad Guayana who had never seen a children's book to use it with her students? How to use books to help people who had survived a natural disaster? It is a freedom that has always stayed with us and often leads to "lively" discussions.

2. People are important

We have tried to have an interdisciplinary team of the best people working with us. Creative, with real interest in reading and the urge to make our country a better place to live. Also, a mixture of generations: experience and the energy of youth. We have been less successful in having a good mixture of genders. Women have always predominated.

3. Flexibility and alliances allow us to survive

Because we have always been short of income, imagination must not only deal with new and daring ways to promote reading, but also how to achieve them. Alliances with public and private institutions have always been our trademark, not only to get funds but also to involve others in the type of work we believe is important.

And lastly: Persistence, persistence, persistence.

María Beatriz Medina:

I came back to Venezuela at the end of 1979 after spending three years studying abroad, and I had the opportunity of working in Banco del Libro's Children's Books Selection Department.

I had arrived to the place that would welcome the vocation for literature and reading I had inherited from my poet and editor father. In the "barracks" of Altamira I was warmly received by a group of bancolibreros (this is what we call the people who work at Banco del Libro) that were struggling to hold up an institution that was almost 20 years old.

It was a time of transition. Banco del Libro's traditional library services were about to be transferred to governmental institutions to be implemented throughout the whole country. The Banco was looking for new ways to promote reading. Children's books became an important object of study and research. Banco del Libro's publishing house, Ekaré, had just been founded. I can still smell the ink drying on one of the first copies of Margarita, Ruben Darío's poem, reinterpreted by Mónica Doppert's illustrations: a brave girl goes out to make her dreams come true. In a sense it was a metaphor of Banco del Libro's work, inhabited by many brave girls.

We created the Children's Books Selection Committee, an interdisciplinary group that met once a week to study and evaluate children's books published in Spanish. As a result of this work, the Committee made lists of recommended books that were used as guides to form the collections of libraries and reading corners throughout the country.

In 1980, Verónica Uribe, who co-founded Ekaré, conceived the idea of Los diez mejores Libros para niños y jóvenes (The ten best books for children and young people). This event celebrated its 27th anniversary last April. In those years Parapara, a magazine specialized in children's literature, was first published and it was core to the study and research of children's literature in Latin America.

The Banco became a place to grow both professionally and personally. My sons Ramón and Francisco started to read with the books that had been evaluated by us, and with Ekaré's first editions, which connected them with their reality and taught them their mother tongue at the same time. Nowadays they read with the independence needed in order to develop a critical sense that is allowing them to find their own place in the world.

In 1982 I left the Banco in order to work at the Museum of Fine Arts and in the Papel Literario (Literary Paper) of the newspaper El Nacional, but I always remained connected with Banco del Libro. In 2001 I returned home.

In this second period the institution was different. It had new headquarters, new projects, and a more unstable economic situation. The government's funding had gradually decreased and it became necessary to establish new alliances with private companies. Fortunately, many businessmen had developed a new awareness towards social responsibility.

Children's literature research took on relevance and the Documentation Center was used to its maximum capacity. The development of training programs became a priority.

We organized workshops, lectures, and seminars trying to create an interdisciplinary program in which people interested in reading promotion and Children's Literature would be able to study the evolution of literature's role in society throughout history, the changing relationship between reader and text, and investigate the concept of childhood and how it manifests itself in children's books. And on a more practical level, gain tools to tell stories or design reading promotion activities and projects.

Its success led us to take the program to another level: transform all its contents in on-line courses so people from all over the country and continent could have access to it. The on-line version of this program was launched towards the end of 2004. We believe that, step-by-step, this program is allowing us to create a network in Latin America in which people devoted to promoting books and reading among children will be able to exchange their thoughts and experiences. We are now working with the Chilean Ministry of Education in order to help them

develop their own on-line program based on our experience.

2003 was a year of political turmoil in our country. Due to the difficult climate of controversy that we were going through, we elaborated a project that advocated literature as a space for encounter and recognition, meant to reinforce a culture of integration, and a sense of belonging and respect: *Tendiendo Puentes (Building Bridges)*.

Since then, being aware that literature can allow individual and social transformation, and that the aesthetic experience enriches us and relates us to reality in a different manner, we have continued to develop projects aimed at promoting reading and citizenship.

I believe that Banco del Libro is one of the country's institutions that is able to re-think Venezuela, because it was created by and for reading. As Gianni Rodari said, "the story is the place of all hypothesis, and we can build a much more pleasant world only if we are capable of dreaming it". At Banco del Libro we think that those of us who promote reading are on the path of making those impossible dreams come true.

Brenda Bellorín:

A few months after my family and I returned to Venezuela from a period living in the U.S., my aunt Rosita gave me a huge box wrapped in white and red paper with a sticker of a girl reading comfortably on a bean bag. My welcome box was filled with Venezuelan picture books from Ediciones Ekaré, the Banco del Libro's publishing house. I treasured the indigenous tales, especially the love story of the light bug and the blackberry, and the adventures of a mischievous rabbit trying to con a friendly skunk. I carefully colored all the drawings in the Nature and Ecology series during recesses at school; I learned about the animals, insects, and plants from my country. I read and reread *La curiosidad premiada (Curiosity Rewarded)* finding comfort in this picture book about a girl more curious and impertinent than I was. I memorized by heart the poem of Margarita, a girl who sailed the skies seeking a star for her brooch. At that time I didn't have a clue that my first "real" job in 1994 would be with the publisher of the books that I was enjoying so much.

From being assistant editor in Ekaré I moved into working full time in Banco del Libro in 1996 as part of the Research and Documentation Center staff.

1999 was an odd, intense, special year. Right from the beginning I felt I was moving from the obliviousness of Generation X to XXXX. What should I expect from the new millennium?

Where was it taking us? My dissertation was finished, which meant my undergraduate years were also coming to an end. I didn't know where to start, but I knew I wanted to start something new, something different.

A letter from UNICEF and the Public Library Simón Rodríguez of Amazon State arrived just in time. They wanted Banco del Libro to be, once more, part of the crew of the Bibliofalca, a boat that travels along the Orinoco River with a reading room, books, magazines, and pamphlets offering indigenous communities along the banks services that the Library does on land.

Carmencita Martínez and I were assigned to this trip: we were to design workshops for teachers that would allow them to discuss why reading and writing were important, even for oral cultures.

We planned the workshops together, bought supplies and swim suits together, and went to get our malaria shots together.

Carmencita has been in and out of Banco del Libro since she was in college. In the 70's she first worked in our main library in Caracas. In 1993 she returned, on loan from the Ministry of Education, and has stayed on after her retirement from the Ministry. She has been all over Venezuela giving workshops, organizing people, and creating projects that bring books and children together. Wherever she goes, she makes people aware that they can change their circumstances.

We took a plane to Puerto Ayacucho and then drove to Puerto Venado, where the Bibliofalca and the rest of the crew awaited us. The other three members of the crew •the captain, the librarian, and a sailor• were all members of different indigenous tribes of the Amazon, filling me with all sorts of ethnographic expectations. It took more than twelve hours to get to San Pedro del Río and a couple of glasses of water with sugar for Carmencita, who, despite sailing the same “literary” waters that Verne had written about, wasn't particularly comfortable. When we finally docked near a small island, the stars came out. The island looked like a huge turtle swimming in the dark waters of the Orinoco.

Once we set up camp, we brought chairs to the shore and sat there in silence for a long while. The night ended with Chipiaje, the sailor, telling stories of the Jivi cosmogony.

He told us about the wonderful Caliebirri-nae tree. How all the fruits would spring from it, and how, no matter how hard the animals tried to cut it down, the Caliebirri-nae remained intact until Materri (the squirrel) cut it with its teeth. He said that when the Caliebirri-nae fell into the Orinoco, the animals had food to eat for three months, and when their feast finally ended, the

seeds of the fruits became the yucca, guamo, and pineapple plants that can still be found on the slopes of the Autana.

Chipiaje (oddly wrapped in a towel that had a huge dollar bill printed on it) kept on telling stories of the times when men and animals lived in harmony and could talk to each other. He continued for hours from one myth to another, as if he were an infinite warehouse of stories. I remember thinking then that a traditional storyteller wrapped in a dollar was the ultimate image of the reality of the Venezuelan Amazon.

In the days that followed we went from one community to another, talking about the importance of reading, the need for citizens to be able to read and understand their rights, and about how useful it is to keep the oral tradition alive.

At San Pedro del Río, when I made craft-books with the children, who curiously drew houses with chimneys and covered the pages with hearts, I thought that even in the middle of nowhere stereotyping is synonymous with civilizing.

I remember seeing a very orange sunset sitting on a rock at Laja Lisa, while having a discussion on Saussurian linguistics with two enthusiastic young teachers who barely spoke Spanish. Modern linguistics in a prehistoric landscape seemed like a bizarre interpolation.

This image, along with the children's drawings, and Chipiaje wrapped in a dollar bill made us ask ourselves if we were there to educate or alienate. The question is inevitable in a context in which indigenous cultures struggle to survive and/or mingle with the world of the criollos. An institution like Banco del Libro must negotiate the gap between oral tradition and print culture to make people aware that, no matter the text's format, reading is always an invitation and a tool to read ourselves and our surroundings. It can enable these separate cultures to communicate and can be a means to struggle for inclusion.

From the other communities we visited, I remember the speechless refugees who came in a canoe from the Colombian side of the Orinoco, asking their fellow Piapocos for a place to stay, and the emaciated young man telling us with no horror on his face about how the guerillas had taken over their village and killed his cousin. I recall thinking then how strange it was to know that there was a war going on a few miles away; noticing that the Orinoco is not only an indomitable river, but also the border between Colombia and Venezuela, the border that many would think separates their problems from ours.

After we finished the workshop we returned to Caracas. The captain had contracted malaria. Everyone was very silent during the trip back home.

By the time I got back, I was two days away from graduation from the Universidad Central de Venezuela -just in time to pick up the cap and gown at the rental store. I felt the timing was right. The fear of moving into XXXX was gone. Nothing could top the rite of passage I had just experienced. At least that was what I thought then.

After my graduation, amidst the arrival of the new millennium, the rain poured day after day and floods left our coastal state of Vargas in a state of crisis. Thousands of people lost their lives, homes, and work places. The geography of the whole state had changed and those of us who lived in Caracas and used to visit Vargas on weekends felt overwhelmed when finding ourselves unable to recognize the “beach” where we had once had so much fun. Seeking to provide some kind of assistance to those who had lost everything, Banco del Libro created the Leer para vivir (Read to Live) bibliotherapy program, coordinated by Carmen Martínez. I was involved in this from the beginning; I needed to cure my own feelings of devastation.

After almost eight years there is no doubt that Leer para vivir was a poignant demonstration of the positive influence books can have on a community. Survivors learned how to communicate with their children by reading to them. Teachers learned how to make reading enjoyable for students, and being part of the program encouraged residents to find jobs in libraries and schools as storytellers. Literature slowly but surely became part of daily life in many of the communities that were touched by the program, which is now in their hands.

As for the healing effects of bibliotherapy, not only the inhabitants of Vargas state found comfort in books and Leer para vivir. Books, in connection with the children, parents, and teachers saved us all from succumbing to a plague of oblivion like the one that swept García Marquez’s Macondo. Together, in Story Time and with our conversations, we stuck little yellow notes on things in order to name and remember them.

After this very intense year, I had no further doubts that reading can help us live.

As María Beatriz Medina has mentioned, in 2001 we began developing a training program on print culture, literary criticism, childhood history, and children’s literature. One of our long-term goals has been that this would become part of the curricula of Venezuelan universities. Last year this program was revised to create an extension course with the collaboration of the

School of Humanities and Education of the Universidad Central de Venezuela. With this, we had realized our dream.

Banco del Libro's academic chapter does not end here. I'm proud to say that I'm part of the faculty of the recently created on-line M.A. on Children's books and literature with the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the Fundació Germán Sánchez Ruipéres (Spain), which included students and professors from 11 different countries in its 2006-2007 academic period. It has been fascinating to interact with people of such diverse backgrounds and contexts that believe in the importance of children's books and reading. We have just concluded the admissions process for 2007-2009.

I hope that through this brief description of my journeys through Banco del Libro, you will be able to appreciate the uniqueness and generosity of this institution and why it's such a good place to grow. There are plenty of things and people to learn from and creativity is always welcomed. It has been nurturing and exciting; just like that white and red box containing wonderful Venezuelan books that made me, and still makes me feel right at home.

Carmen Diana Dearden:

I have been here the longest and have been through practically every program of the Banco del Libro. Once I was even part of the rebels of the young generation.

I first came to Banco del Libro after graduating from university, a long time ago. My son Alex was then five months old. He is here with us today with his own son Gonzalo. That is how long ago it was. I can measure my time in the Banco del Libro by my three children's growing up within it.

I went for what I thought was a short visit to my friend Virginia Betancourt, founder of Banco del Libro, and to see the trees my mother had planted around the modest offices. They were very austere left over barracks from a highway construction; the alleyways between them were narrow and winding and sometimes the roofs leaked. But it was a place full of vitality, enthusiasm and pioneering spirit. I was hooked, and stayed on. And on. Since 1988 we have a new and airy building, but the same spirit prevails.

My initiation into Banco del Libro was in 1969 in Ciudad Guayana, a newly created city in southern Venezuela where a model school library network was being developed sponsored by a state Corporation. Maybe it is difficult to believe, but there were no school libraries in

Venezuela in those years, so this was really a pilot program. It was a pioneering and exhilarating time. Anything was possible.

There were no librarians, so we started by selecting and training teachers. At first, it was not easy for teachers and directors to grasp the significance of the school library and what it could mean for them and their students. We encountered things like the school principal who pointed to the books in pristine condition and said proudly: "See how well kept they are? That's because I don't let any of the students touch them!"

On another occasion we found that some maps, a tape recorder, and music cassettes were missing. The school district supervisor told us in a gloomy voice that the principal had taken them to use at home. When we asked him to report it, he answered: "And have him put a spell on me? No way. He's a witch doctor!" For someone like me, who had studied anthropology and literature, it was sheer magic.

This led us to change tactics, and instead of putting up a complete central library from the start, we started with small classroom libraries. Each school had to win its central library. To feel its need. And in the meantime, teachers gradually felt more at ease with books. It worked. By 1972, all 16 primary schools in the city had libraries and a Training Center, which coordinated them. It changed the way children and teachers learned, and more important, the way they thought.

By the time the first students graduated from sixth grade, having used libraries since 1st grade, we witnessed their street protest because their secondary schools had no libraries. Many people were not pleased with these protests. I confess we were delighted.

Twelve years later, the pilot program was no longer a pilot. Ciudad Guayana was the living demonstration of the changes a school library can produce in the school community and the formation of its students. All this was transmitted to the Ministry of Education so that its models could be applied to the rest of the country. With sadness and hope in 1980, we transferred the 23 libraries we had created and helped to grow. The rural libraries that had been put up as part of this network later served as models for 336 such ones installed in one classroom schools in different regions of the country with the sponsorship of international agencies and local enterprise.

My work in the model Public Library network in Caracas is filled with memories.

The bookmobile barrio service was a daring new concept for us in 1970. Even the Board of Directors of the Banco del Libro had doubts. It was a service that was to work at nights, from six

to eight pm. They felt it might not be safe; it was a time of student unrest and frequent violence in these areas. Many thought people would be too busy trying to survive to be interested in books, or maybe that too many books might be lost. It did not turn out that way.

We spent many weeks talking to community leaders, in different barrios, offering them the service. We chose five barrios, one for each day of the week, spread across the city, from east to west. In the beginning people looked at us with mistrust, wondering what we wanted in return, but after a few months we were completely adopted, and protected. The six to eight pm schedule was seldom met: we were always there at six punctually but seldom left before ten, and often at midnight with all the different activities. Because I coordinated the bookmobiles in those days and the service to schools began at 7Am, my day was often long. I tried to go home between services to see my family, and one night I heard a cousin ask my husband where I was going in such a rush. "To see her lover," my husband answered. "He's long and boxy and has wheels and blue and white stripes."

Of those days I remember particularly: the child who came to say that he could not yet return his book because he was teaching his mother to read with it and she was still a slow reader; the children posted on some barrio hilltops with the books under their arms, shouting from one hill to another when they saw us coming: "here comes the Bibliobus! Here comes the Bibliobus!" like sentinels sighting land; seeing the community of San José del Avila create a living wall around the librarian, in order to protect him from the police who wanted to take him away in the confusion of a roundup for the draft; the girl who had asked us to bring her a book about cows and burst out crying when she saw it because it was a very small book and cows were big creatures.

As in Ciudad Guayana with the classroom libraries, the bookmobiles were preludes to putting up community libraries when the conditions were right. The most successful of those was the Biblioteca La Urbina, run by Bruno Renaud, who later came to a seminar in Stockholm when SIDA and the Swedish Book Club gave funds for him to establish minilibraries in several nearby homes. There, we once asked the children to model the barrio people out of clay, each in size according to their importance in the community. They modeled motorcyclists, delinquents, community leaders, teachers, and councilmen. The tallest one of all was the figure of the librarian.

Some of the results of these service were: a very small percentage of the books were lost, smaller than in our main library, the community libraries became information centers for the whole

community: information to help them live and survive in better conditions, places to meet and discuss community problems, places for the young to meet, exchange ideas, dissent and enjoy themselves with the wide range of activities, from reading clubs to football games.

During the 1980's the public libraries of the Banco del Libro were transferred to The National Library, which, by presidential decree had created the country's Public Library system. This was, for several years one of the best in Latin America. Banco del Libro then concentrated on research and documentation of children's literature, as Maria Beatriz mentioned, and on different forms of promoting reading, to reach both urban and far off rural areas.

In 1978, Verónica Uribe, an exile from Pinochet's regime, and I began Ediciones Ekaré. It was a direct result of our work in the libraries and the lack of quality books that reflected our Venezuelan and Latin American culture. Once again, the Board of Directors was not very convinced it was possible and there was no money for publishing the books. So, with the help of Virginia Betancourt who was then Head of the National Library, we found sponsors for our first publications. Our first book *El Rabipelado Burlado* (The Hoodwinked Possum) came out the same month my youngest son, Conor, who is also here today, was born. For a long time he was known in the family as "El Rabipelado". The real rabipelados used to come in through the cracks in our barrack roofs and leave their paw prints on some of the artwork.

The Streets are Free, our first book to be translated, was published in Sweden by Raben & Sjorgen, for us a happy association with Astrid Lindgren. It is not our only association with Sweden. Three more of our books have been published here, all translated by Britt Isaksson. I have been here to see your wonderful libraries, to talk about Banco del Libro, and to visit the Swedish Children's Book Club during Marianne Von Baumgartner's time. From these trips I have made friendships, which still endure.

In 1989, when I was Executive Director of the Banco del Libro, we separated Ekaré as a full-blown publishing enterprise and sister institution.

Of the recent programs, my most poignant memories come from Read to Live, which as Brenda has said, was a comfort for all of us involved: preparing for it by making a survey of the books that had touched Banco del Libro staffers when they were children; the dread of the first day of storytelling amidst the unceasing rain and the happy faces when we finished; reading Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* by chapters once a week and hearing one of the parents say, as

we ended with tears in our eyes: “I guess this means we will have to start building our own new bridges.”

They say that once hooked by the Banco del Libro you never quite leave. It is a magnet that holds you tight and draws you back. This has been true for all of us. It has also has been a great university. An infinitely interesting, sometimes exhausting, Master’s degree.

My daughter Daniella (who is not here today but wishes she were) had a favorite book that she used to borrow from the bookmobile: Oscar Wilde’s *The Selfish Giant*. Not because the children redeem the giant, but because they tear a hole in his wall and go in to climb the trees in his garden.

We in Banco del Libro are always happy to be able to tear down some walls and invite everybody to explore the varied gardens of books and reading. If we can also climb the trees, it’s even better.