

# ALMA acceptance speech by Carole Bloch

PRAESA founder, Neville Alexander, loved *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde. I do too – and we’ve retold it in five languages to share in South Africa. I believe it captures the spirit of our work – you’ll remember how *The Happy Prince* gave of himself to allow others to help themselves. And how he persuaded his friend, the little Swallow, to pluck out his jewel of an eye and slip it into the hand of a poor little match girl, so that she would have something to take home and her father would not beat her.

ALMA\_PRAESA\_Konserthuset\_2015-06-01\_680pxOur task is not charity but it does come from a charitable spirit. We have to transform children’s opportunities for literacy across South Africa from ones which often offer desert-like learning spaces to fertile ones where they can blossom into joyful readers and writers. So, aiming towards opening hearts and minds, the jewel we are slipping into the hands of children – and adults – is the power of a great story – in a multitude of languages.

We believe that the stories we tell, write and read can change lives. Sharing stories inspire us all to struggle against becoming overwhelmed by the challenges we meet each day in our fractured and profoundly unequal society. This is the impetus behind the Nal’ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign PRAESA runs. Too many ill-educated and disillusioned young people leave school telling angry, and resentful stories. A dangerous situation is brewing. Recent attacks on ‘foreigners’ from other parts of Africa suggest that we are horribly comfortable with the practice of ‘othering’ people. Increasing numbers of us remain trapped in ‘racial cages’ from which as Neville warned “we are willing to lay down our lives in ethnic and genocidal civil wars”. Now more than ever, we must learn from history, analyse and envisage alternatives to free our minds to imagine and even bring into being the ‘non-racial’ society that so many fought to see enshrined in South Africa’s constitution.

Nal’ibali means ‘here’s the story’ in Xhosa. The story of the rainbow has guided our quest for national unity. But the rainbow has an illusive quality; it fades. So we prefer Neville’s conception... Imagine the great Gariep River flowing into the ocean of humanity with its main tributaries being African, European, Asian, and “American”. As these tributaries flow together they constitute the rich and complex culture of South Africa. At different times, the flow and influence of one tributary is stronger than another – but none ever disappears, because they are all part of the great river. This offers us dynamic ways to value ourselves and others, allowing us above all else, to cherish the fact that we belong to one human race.

PRAESA’s home in Cape Town, is known as both the Cape of Storms and the Cape of Good Hope. As Neville liked to remind us, how we see things always depends on our angle of vision. Today, as we accept this great honour, our angle of vision is one of hope. The ALMA award in 2015 touches the lives of so many people – past and present staff members, partners and friends, local and global – and many thousands of children and adults in communities across South Africa. Thank you for affirming PRAESA’s work. Your faith in us will intensify support to bring the power of stories home for many years to come.

Astrid Lindgren is smiling tonight and so is Neville Alexander.

To all of you who have made this possible, especially IBBY-Sweden and IBBY-SA as well as IFLA who all nominated us, the ALMA jury who chose us, ALMA staff who are looking after us with such care, from my colleagues at home, and from the three of us here now, as we say in Xhosa, Siyabulela, we thank you.



