

Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2015 – Laureate Speech by Kirsten Boie

Dear Carole, Ntombi and Malusi – *sanibonani!*

Dear Dr. Raabe, Dear Guests,

At the beginning of April, hours before this year's winner of the ALMA was announced in Stockholm, an editor for a German broadcast called me to ask if I would mind commenting on the decision – however it turned out – for the afternoon edition set to air only a half hour later. I agreed and so ended up experiencing the announcement online and in real time on my laptop. A short time later my telephone interviewer at the radio station seemed rather perplexed by my exuberant enthusiasm, judging by his awkward opening question: One expects the greatest prize in children's literature in the world to go to an author or an illustrator – yet in this case it went to a little known organisation concerned with promoting children's literacy in South Africa.

In my view, what is so fantastic about the Lindgren Award is precisely that it is not only for authors who write books for children, illustrators who make children's books a delight for the eyes – it is also, and rightly so, for those who make it possible for children to gain access to books in the first place. After all, without such people and their engagement, authors and illustrators would be unemployed.

I am sure that, had Astrid Lindgren weighed in on the decision concerning this year's award, she would have wished exactly the same result. Many times, in talks, essays and interviews, she talked about how important reading is for the whole life of a person and thus how important it is that children be supported in their reading, especially those who would otherwise lack access to books.

“You must show the child the way to the book,” she writes in her memoir *Das entschwendene Land* [The vanished land]. “For if the child does not find a way there, he or she will never find it and as a result will never help change the world for the better.”

Two things are worth noting about this quote: first, that Lindgren takes it wholly for granted that books can make children agents for positive change in the world, and that books are a necessary requirement for becoming such people; and secondly, that, in her view, the way to the book is not found automatically, but must be shown.

In my laudatory remarks today I would like to consider both of these aspects more closely, because both taken together make PRAESA the most ideal recipient of this award that I can imagine. I am sure that on the day of the award announcement, Astrid Lindgren, somewhere up there on her cloud, cheered even more loudly than I did down here sitting in front of my laptop; and she is surely still cheering, because the work of PRAESA aligns exactly with the principles that were of lifelong importance to her, and because its contributors work with *élan*, commitment and an enormous understanding to support the aim so central to her philosophy, by showing South African children the way to books, within the context of their particular contexts and life circumstances.

At first glance, it might appear superfluous to defend the importance of children's reading while standing in the International Youth Library. Many of us were probably passionate readers as children, galloping across the prairies with Old Shatterhand and Winnetou, joining the Five Friends to uncover sinister bands of thieves in caves deep beneath the Irish Sea, tearing through Swedish villages on warm summer nights with Kalle Blomquist, or selling matches in secret on the Berlin Oberbaum Bridge with Kästner's *Pünktchen*. In so doing we felt the desert wind in our hair, trembled in the darkness of the caves under the sea, hearing the waves rush by above us, felt the warm Swedish summer sand under our bare feet, and sensed the thrill of the forbidden with *Pünktchen*.

When our parents wanted to get through to us – to finally tend to our homework, or go shopping, or do the dishes (the sorts of things one had to do as a child in earlier times) – then they had to shake us pretty firmly on the shoulder, so enthralled were we in the marvellous world of the story, which our own little lives could never compete with. Only with great effort and unwillingly could we be made to slip back into the mundane.

How does such a thing happen? How is it that this world of books, which, to be precise, is built up from black scratches on white paper, could become more real to us than our own reality and could awaken feelings in us that were as, if not more, powerful than the feelings we experienced in our own lives? How is it that this magic still occurs with children today who have found their way to reading – be it here in our media-saturated society, where books compete with television, tablets, video games, social networks and so on, or in lands of the South, where houses may have no electricity, sanitation systems or flowing water?

Of this I am convinced: Reading is something wonderful, something incredible; it is something that – I will just go ahead and say it – cannot be replaced by anything else. Of course, one can also become a happy person without reading, a morally sensitive person, even a successful person. Still, reading provides life with an entirely new dimension, which ultimately influences all life's reaches. In what follows I will address why and how this is so, before moving on to say something about the very special case of PRAESA and Nal'ibali, PRAESA's literacy campaign.

To begin, I will not dwell long on the fact that reading in every global society today is a key qualification and that this key qualification is developed by frequent leisure time reading; it is obvious that an enthusiastic child reading for pleasure can capture the meaning of texts more quickly and with less effort than a neighbour child who never picks up a book in his or her free time and only experiences longer texts at school. I also need not say much about the fact that a child who can read easily will have a smoother time in all school subjects, even the natural sciences, than his or her neighbour who is at pains to understand a book. All of this is uncontroversial knowledge, as the great number of studies on the topic of literacy can attest. Reading increases success at school, reading develops cognitive ability, or quite simply: reading makes one sharp. And many people of my generation especially know that they owe their paths in life in large part to their love of reading; in my case, had it not been for my unquenchable thirst for reading as a child, I most certainly would not be standing in front of you today. This possibility to develop self-identity and purpose through reading is what we wish for all children.

Of course, the relevance of reading is not simply owed to its support of cognitive development (even though that support alone would be enough to make reading worth encouraging!). Nal'ibali, the literacy campaign of PRAESA, justifiably emphasizes the importance of reading for pleasure and enjoyment. Yet this emphasis will not make immediate sense to everyone. If our chief concern is pleasure, then can't children just as well sit glued to the TV, or play around on their computers, tablets and video game consoles?

As I said earlier, reading and listening to stories achieves something unique that no other medium can as effectively – and how it does so is very much connected to the reason why getting into books can be such a challenge at the start.

In a movie, people and things effortlessly stream by me in pictures, like in real life. Yet a story initially only gives me words; in fact, when I read I first encounter abstract symbols that I must first compose into words in my head. Everything else I must create myself and out of myself. When reading to myself, I must draw on my own experiences, memories and feelings to breathe life into those little black scratches and make situations, people and feelings seem real. For example, the emotions, images and thoughts that arise when reading the word "father" will be completely different for each one of us, and this is precisely why a text in its realization is as much a production of the reader as of the author. It is because our own experiences and feelings are in play that we experience the effect of texts so very powerfully; this is why children can become wholly absorbed in the worlds of stories, and this is why we will experience a book as completely different when reading it again twenty years later, because our own life has also changed in the meantime. In this respect, every act of reading is also a little psychotherapy session, wherein I may process

and digest the materials of my experience. And it is for this very reason that a book can impact a reader, especially a young reader, so deeply so as to shape his or her entire life.

We all have presumably experienced at one time or another how books offer escape from the unbearable during difficult times in life, or at least offer comfort. When a book shows children that an underdog like Harry Potter, rejected by his uncle and consigned to the cubbyhole under the stairs, later becomes the greatest wizard of all, they take hope: What all might still happen in their own lives? Books awaken dreams, give comfort and awaken hope; they impact our lives long after we have put them aside.

It goes without saying, too, that books can be thrilling and that they instigate innumerable chances to laugh out loud. Reading also expands vocabulary and develops syntactic knowledge – increasing a reader's expressive possibilities and thereby his or her possibilities for communicating with others. A teenager who is capable of standing up for his or her views in a dispute has no need to take recourse in physical aggression, when he or she is angry about a classmate or another kid who bumped into him or her in line at the grocery store. Reading helps with this, too.

Beyond that, reading also achieves something else that we sometimes underestimate: by witnessing the emotions of literary heroes and by learning what to call these emotions, a young reader can by extension learn to observe his or her own feelings from the outside, as it were, to give them names and to work through them in a very different way than when feeling overwhelmed by them, when reflection is not easy. As a result, the child is no longer the objective target of emotions he or she feels helpless in the face of, but instead becomes an active subject ready to work through them. We all know how important that shift is.

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. The importance of linguistic ability cannot be expressed more clearly than in German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous sentence. If there is no term in my language for a shade of colour that falls between blue and green, I will see turquoise but not be able to perceive it as a distinct colour – while a person whose language has several terms for this part of the colour spectrum will be able to perceive it more distinctly than I can. And while this point might seem a trifle when thinking about colours, it quickly gains in relevance when we think of emotion-words: should something count as a case of frustration or has it already become anger? What I can name, I can perceive more closely; otherwise it remains blurry and neglected. The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. For the literate child, these limits are pushed ever outwards with each new book.

Finally – and luckily this is an aspect of reading that in recent years is being championed beyond merely curricular relevance – frequent reading boosts readers' abilities to experience empathy. If in reading one is constantly in the heads of other people, if one sees them not only from the outside as in daily life or in movies, but also dwells inside a hero's thoughts and emotions as if they were one's own (which they are to a great extent, as I noted earlier), then one will also have an easier time in life understanding what is going on in the head of another person and behaving accordingly. The importance of empathy for an individual, but also for a society, should not be underestimated. Here, too, reading plays a significant role; perhaps this is what Astrid Lindgren understood when she saw in every young reader an agent for positive future change in the world.

I know the things I've listed are well known to most of you. If they are all true, then a society could really wish for nothing better than that many of its children become readers. This is why literacy support programs here in Germany experienced such a steep upward career after the catastrophic results of the first PISA study were published. This is why literacy campaigns are sprouting up like mushrooms from the ground; why even politicians have become aware, if not aware enough, that reading promotion is not some idle fad to be ignored, but something worth investing money in time and again. When I think of the 14% of 15-year-olds in Germany identified as functional illiterates in last year's PISA study, it is obvious we are still far from the ideal.

And now finally I come to PRAESA. If it is really true that reading is something like a magic formula that can be applied to create a better, happier life for an individual and even a society as a whole, then this finding applies not only to Hamburg, Munich, Stockholm and London; it applies all over the world – as much to the Townships of Johannesburg, to Mpumalanga and to Kwa Zulu Natal. Thus it is at least as important to provide children in these

places with access to books and to literacy as here in Europe. For these children, especially those whose parents had no chance for education and improving their socio-economic standing as a result of Apartheid politics and its aftermath, reading can provide opportunities of far greater significance than for children here in Germany – regardless of how high I consider its significance here to be. This remark is made quite apart from thinking about what books can mean to children who grow up without television, video games or other electronic media.

Fine! You might now say. Then they should charge ahead full steam down there. Why should it be more difficult to do than here, for us, the only difference being perhaps the financial support? Gaining such support is not easy for literacy advocates here, either, as anyone who has ever tried to start a literacy support program in Germany can confirm.

If it were only so simple.

Let us begin with that which is easiest for us to monitor: bookstores. How many bookstores are there, do you think, in the rural provinces of South Africa or in the Townships? And do you honestly believe that the online book trade is booming there? To buy books is practically impossible for most children and their parents, even if they really want to – which ends up meaning little anyhow, since there is usually no money for books in the first place.

I should say a few things at this juncture about myself, in order to make the case I have been building here more credible, so that you don't think my remarks are but the speculations of a person with an active imagination.

For eight years, I have been providing intensive support, including programming support, for an aid project targeting AIDS orphans in Swaziland, which borders South Africa. I travel there at least once a year to hold conversations, identify necessities and work on programming with people who are local experts. In the last eight months I was there twice; I returned from my most recent visit just three weeks ago. This last trip was the first time I concerned myself with issues of education and literacy, alongside the continuing matter of providing for the basic needs and medical care of the 5,500 children under our care. This new outreach effort put me in intensive email contact with Nal'ibali, the literacy campaign of PRAESA, in preparation for my trip, before the award had even been announced – in retrospect we can call this fate; in any case it helps you situate my enthusiasm for the ALMA jury's decision.

Though many things differ greatly across Swaziland and South Africa, these two countries are equal, or at least share a strong similarity, when it comes to wrestling with life circumstances that for us in Germany are utterly unimaginable. I have already spoken of book stores being absent. Do you believe libraries are represented any better? How many there are in South Africa, in the Townships, in rural regions, as well as how many schools there are, I cannot say. It is, however, fairly certain that they will rarely be within walking distance for children. I am also ignorant of how well-stocked and well-managed such libraries are. I did visit two of Swaziland's best-stocked libraries four weeks ago, which are run by educated, engaged librarians, but whose shelves are half or three quarters empty, and many of the books are in a condition that even I, who would rather read than eat, would have reached for only in direst need. The reason for this is simple: these books were not brought in according to a carefully planned acquisition policy by the branch or by the central library, but rather largely came from the well-meaning donations of an American aid organization that ships out so-called "gently used books" in containers. Those books are not always just "gently used," though, and the selection is always accidental: a farmer in Oklahoma might donate his Dan Brown, an architect in New York her Siri Hustvedt, a cheer leader in California might donate the second volume of Twilight and an elementary school child in Florida his copy of Where the Wild Things Are. I observed the unpacking of such cartons: books without any order, without any sensitivity to the interests and life circumstances of the readers to whom they are being shipped – mind you, these things are not the fault of the donors.

Even still! You might now interject. Even still there are books, even if they be worn, grubby and disorganized! While not ideal, it is still better than nothing.

Really? Put aside the fact that we in Germany cannot imagine our children borrowing such books from the library without wearing gloves. No, what matters is that we recognize the core problem these libraries face, the core problem of reading as it exists practically everywhere in Africa.

These books are in English. Even if books are available, even if they are shelved in close proximity to the children: in a school library, they are in English – because that is what people in Oklahoma, New York, California and Florida speak.

Not so with the children whom these books are destined to reach. English is the mother tongue of about 8% of people in South Africa. The children we are concerned with here speak isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Sotho, siSwati – languages far more removed from the syntax and phonetics of English than most of us imagine. Who among us believes that as an eight- or ten-year-old, just at the best age for awakening a passion for reading, we would have reached for a book written in English? And English at that is so closely related to German that we would have been able to guess a lot.

This is where the invaluable achievement of PRAESA, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, comes in, though it does not end there. Neville Alexander, the marvellous founder of this organization, the fighter against Apartheid who was imprisoned with Mandela for ten years on Robben Island and about whom we will hopefully hear more shortly – incidentally, he was from the eastern Cape region, and completed his doctorate in the 60s in Tübingen under the mentorship of Gerhard Hauptmann, so you see the significance of literature in his life! –; Neville Alexander saw how linguistic diversity was being ignored in his country even post-Apartheid. He saw that this was a central reason behind the lowered chances at education and socio-economic improvement for children whose mother tongue was part of a language group distinct of English – particularly since the entire school curriculum beginning with first grade took place in the latter language. Children had to learn English out of necessity. In Swaziland I regularly talk to twelve to fourteen year olds who have many years of all-English schooling behind them (in this regard the situation is identical to that in South Africa), and who neither understand my questions nor can give answers that go beyond what children here might master after one or two years of English in school. Given this, one wonders what these children have even been able to understand in the various class subjects in foregoing years.

Alexander fought against this miserable state of affairs, this injustice right up to his death about three years ago. In respect to South African classroom curriculum, he achieved at least a partial victory, and he also founded PRAESA, the organization concerned with the recognition of linguistic diversity in South Africa that we celebrate and cheer on today. Since the Lindgren Award is concerned with promoting literacy, I'd now like to talk about Nal'ibali, PRAESA's wonderful literacy campaign, which puts all of our home-turf literacy projects to shame.

Why? Because Nal'ibali must face many challenges in many respects – and it meets them with humour, analytic acumen and with a great of degree of professionalism and competence.

The first challenge is of course to provide texts written in the children's mother tongues. How to accomplish this? Which publisher would be happy to publish books in all of these languages and for extremely reading-remote target audiences – with minimal chance of profit? Look at how difficult it is in Germany to publish books in Turkish or bilingually, then you'll have an idea of the answer to that question. And then go visit Nal'ibali's home page and you'll learn of their pragmatic solution.

There you will find children's stories told by different South African authors, whose content also connects more intimately to the reality of the children; these stories are illustrated by South African illustrators and are already laid-out. They are available for download, reading out loud, and can be printed for free – in English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Sotho and siSwati. Overwhelmed by this offering, I emailed Nal'ibali before my last trip to Swaziland to ask if we could use the siSwati version of their stories, in other words to print them out for free for our children – because in Swaziland there is not one single children's book, picture book, young adult book written in the

country's language of siSwati – and whether we could really do this cost-free. One day later I received a reply: But of course! So I know first-hand about the amazing quality of service Nal'ibali provides – something that is of no small importance when it comes to helping people turn to reading for the first time.

And when I, a European sceptic made downright incredulous by thirty years of experience with the book market, asked a follow-up question: Ok, but how does this work with legal rights? Can I print for a great number? Is there perhaps a maximum number of free printings? I received – again lightning-fast – the answer: The more the merrier!

All this being said, not everyone in South Africa who wishes to use these stories for a school class, a pre-school group or a reading club has the means to do so. This is why Nal'ibali has initiated a collaboration with the Times newspaper company that consists of a bi-monthly Nal'ibali supplement that schools and reading clubs can have sent to them for free and in the requisite number; the supplement is available in the most commonly spoken language in the requester's region. Radio broadcasts across the various linguistic regions share the Nal'ibali stories with their listeners – because battery-powered radios exist plentifully even where there is no electricity.

And if that were not enough already, it is also possible to download the stories to one's cell phone and to read them to children anywhere in the country, because cell phones are ten times more common in the countries of Africa than is access to clean water. Nal'ibali shares its stories and reading tips over social media, too. Digital reading and its possibilities play a far greater role there than they do here for us – out of necessity contributors to PRAESA have thought much harder than we have about how to use the Internet for the promotion of literacy and reading for enjoyment. Nal'ibali is far ahead of us in this area.

In cultures without a long reading tradition simply providing access to stories is not enough. If parents, teachers and care-givers have not themselves experienced the joy of exploring a foreign story world as children, then they also do not know why the children placed in their care ought do so. To believe that stories alone are enough would be naïve. That is why Nal'ibali has built up an extensive network that provides guidance and help to these people: there are Cluster Mentors, Story Sparkers, Reading Clubs. Leaders of reading clubs may avail themselves of personal mentoring and support, as well as draw on the many tips on Nal'ibali's homepage and newsprint supplement. It seems that PRAESA contributors have thought about every imaginable option to show children the way to the book, as Lindgren wanted it – granted that the book is only rarely a book as we imagine it.

For me, that is the wonderful thing about PRAESA: everywhere one senses the passion – but never at the expense of rational analysis and well-rooted conceptual planning.

On this note and in closing, I would like to express my very personal thanks: if, for the first time, it soon becomes possible for us to provide children in the most remote mountain regions of Swaziland with printed stories in their mother tongue, then we owe this wholly to PRAESA and Nal'ibali. I myself have experienced at close range their immense impact.

And Astrid Lindgren and Neville Alexander? These were two people from the such different corners of the world, both with domestic and social backgrounds that made it impossible to predict the paths their lives would take and the means by which they would enrich the lives of so many people, and who both found their life's purpose through books, reading and literature – living proof of Lindgren's claim regarding the reader as an agent for positive change in the world. Who knows, perhaps they are sitting side by side up there on a cloud – let's just imagine it – and there they sit, peering down at us from above.

“Neville,” says Astrid Lindgren and bends over a bit to determine whether we gathered here today are sufficiently honouring our South African guests and award-winners. “Neville, I want to say something to you that I said about myself when I received the Hans Christian Anderson medal: All great things that have happened in the world, happened first of all in someone's imagination, and the aspect of the world of tomorrow depends largely on the extent of

the power of imagination of those who are just now learning to read. That is why children must have books, and why there must be people ... who really care what kind of books are put into the children's hands."

"I know that," Neville Alexander nods and replies. Naturally he knows these things to be true.

"That is why I'm so happy you are receiving this award this year!" Astrid Lindgren says. "It could not have gone to a better effort. I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart."

I wholly join her in this sentiment, and I am sure that everyone in the room feels the same. Congratulations PRAESA, congratulations Nal'ibali – continue your wonderful work and have great fun with children and with stories! Thank you – and ngiyabonga kakhulu!

Translated by Francis Bottenberg