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July 1990

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### Recommended Citation

Gabel, Susan L. (1990) "Literacy Around the World: A Report from the World Congress on Reading," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol23/iss3/9>

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## Literacy Around the World: A Report from the World Congress on Reading

by Susan L. Gabel

The doors have closed on the thirteenth World Congress on Reading, held in Stockholm, Sweden, July 3-6, 1990. Yet, for the over 1200 attendees from around the globe, the memories of the conference may continue for many years.

My own journey to Stockholm began almost one year ago, when the call for proposals was issued and I, having travelled through Scandinavia over 15 years ago, asked my husband if he thought we could afford to send me this summer. Naturally, he said, "No" and naturally, I sent in a proposal anyway. My topic, *"Themes of Disability in Literature for Children"*, was an important one to me and fit well in the strand of "children's literature from around the world". My excuse for submitting a proposal, despite my sensible husband's objections, was that proposals would be submitted from around the world and that mine would be insignificant compared to most. I looked upon the submission as a learning experience. The day my acceptance arrived, I knew that Stockholm was once again in my future and my husband knew that he could not say "No" again.

Two close friends made the trip with me. One friend, a special education teacher in Farmington, also attended the conference. The other friend, a social worker, went along for the fun of it. We arrived in Stockholm a

few days before the conference. Our hotel, on one of Stockholm's 14 islands, was very near the old heart of Stockholm where the former palace is still guarded by young Swedish men and where the streets are still cobblestoned and narrow. It was also very near the Grand Hotel, one of the most magnificent hotels I've ever seen. Its vine-covered front overlooks the Baltic Sea. Its back watches over the palace. We chose something a bit more austere, yet quite comfortable, for our living arrangements. A breakfast smorgasbord was included in our fee, as it is in all hotel accommodations in Sweden. The smorgasbord was quite plentiful and we enjoyed our Swedish breakfast daily.

One of the most exciting days we spent was in travelling the countryside north of Stockholm. We rented a car, braved the highway and drove to Sigtuna, one of the oldest villages in Sweden. Just 30 short minutes from Stockholm, this tiny village still holds the flavor of village life hundreds of years ago. It was here that, in an effort to demonstrate my knowledge of the Swedish language, I said to a shop woman, "Tack" (thank you) as she handed me my bags. She was quite tickled and giggled, handing me the bags and saying, "Tack su miken," which means 'thanks to you too'. Our day ended in Upsalla, where a cathedral built in the 1400's contains



much of the history of Sweden. Kings and Queens and other royalty are buried in crypts throughout the cathedral. As we drove back to the hotel, having successfully navigated the highways of rural Sweden, I couldn't help but think of the fact that our own English literacy had transferred successfully to assist us in using Swedish road maps and signs.

The next day, the Congress began with pregress institutes. Nine were offered, including institutes on literature-based reading programs, whole language, inquiry-based classrooms, and Swedish literature for children and young people. I attended "*Making the Invisible Visible: using writing to reveal and enhance disabled learners; thought processes and reading skills*". The institute was led by a team of U.S. speakers, most of whom use portfolio assessment and holistic scoring mechanisms in the evaluation of written expression. One psychologist from New York discussed an exciting research project in which her team is developing criteria with which to evaluate writings of people (young and old) in the emerging literacy stage.

That evening, the City of Stockholm hosted a welcoming reception at City Hall, which is located on the edge of an adjoining island. Conference delegates were treated to a magnificent smorgasbord of Swedish delights and were addressed and toasted by the President of the City Council of Stockholm.

The next day, my session was offered during the first time block of the day. I presented with Pat Smith, an Australian woman who spoke on humor in Australian literature for children. Her topic, "*And the Kookaburras Split Their Sides Laughing*" was funny and informative. Together,

we had a good-sized group of participants. Many participants spoke with me afterwards about their experiences with literature with themes of disability. It was great sharing with participants from England, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Other sessions, workshops and symposia offered that day included: "*Early Literacy Development*" chaired by Yetta Goodman (and attended by husband Ken Goodman); "*The Cultural Determinants of Literacy*", chaired by L. John Chapman from England and including speakers from around the world; "*Swedish Literacy in a Historic Perspective*"; "*Development of Reading and Writing Skills*" by two Finnish speakers; and "*Stages in Reading and Writing Development*" with Finnish, Norwegian and American speakers.

Thursday brought more exciting sessions, including an author's session which was electric. Don and Audrey Woods, author/illustrator team for so many popular illustrated books (**Heckedy Peg**, **King Bidgood's in the Bathtub**, and **The Napping House**), shared their writing and illustrating processes in "*Tenth Anniversary of a Children's Picture Book Partnership*". They delighted participants with singing versions of their books, including a visual display of Elbert spewing forth his bad words from **Elbert's Bad Word**.

A symposium on Thursday morning included several American researchers: Karen Wixon from the University of Michigan, Sheila Valencia, Phyllis Blumenfeld and Marjorie Lipson on "*Individual Reading Assessment: An Interactive Approach*". Another powerful team of researchers, some from Michigan, also spoke on the assessment of literacy "...*Looking at Growth in Children's Strategies and Attitudes*"



(Kathryn Au, Gerald Duffy, James Gavelek, Taffy Raphael and Laura Roehler). Ken Goodman spoke on Thursday afternoon too. His topic, "*Translating Theory and Research in Practice: Whole Language Teachers Take Power*", was timely and inspiring. I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Goodman during the conference and enjoyed talking with him about his old home, Detroit, and the fact that his daughter still lives and teaches there and is involved in a whole language teachers' support group. Technology related sessions were offered too, such as "*Computer Based Literacy Programs: Are They Really The Answer to World Literacy Problems?*"

Friday was the last day of the Congress and it proved to be a motivating one. Offerings included: "*Teacher Change: Learning Through Language*", "*Assessing Reading through Writing*", "*Research in Literacy Processes*" (with Danish, Hungarian, Brazilian and Finnish speakers) and "*The Social Context of Storybook Reading*".

Friday afternoon, I had reserved a place at the author's luncheon, which was held in the Cabaret dining hall adjacent to the Folkets Hus conference center. There, we were served a very Swedish meal: lightly smoked, thinly sliced salmon with dill sauce; steak with onions; Swedish potatoes (small, boiled, then quickly sauteed) and a meager salad. Salads were often the most popular part of meals at the Cabaret and diners always asked for more than the kitchen had prepared. Our author speakers were Janet Lunn (**The Root Cellar, Shadow in Hawthorn Bay and Amos's Sweater**) who spoke about being a "child of winter" and of how living in a land of winter (first northern New England in the U.S. and now on Lake Ontario) has influenced her

writing. She shared about her new book, **100 Shining Candles**, which will soon be available. Next, Jane Resh Thomas (**Saying Goodbye to Grandma and The Princess in the Pigpen**) spoke about "*Reweaving the Rainbow*", or how editors try to rewrite her original texts into watered down versions for basal readers. She shared her discouragement with this editing process by saying, "No one would ask a composer to remove the high notes for the benefit of the tone deaf...No one would ask a painter to remove the reds for the benefit of the color blind". She told us that her writing is "an attempt by one human to bridge the gulf of loneliness and to reach another human." Perhaps the most profound moments of the Congress were during Jane's speech, in which she revealed her desperate need for reading as the child of an alcoholic and sadistic father. While she hid her pain from the world, she escaped from the pain through reading. She brought the world to her home through books. She said she lived, "1000 other people's lives" and "could live in a happy family... could be happy" through reading. She confessed that to this day, she doesn't have the confidence to believe she's a real writer and so every time she sits down to write, she pretends to be a real writer. I had the opportunity to meet Jane personally, to walk the streets of Stockholm with her and to exchange addresses. This woman, who can't believe she's a real writer, has been writing for 15 years and has 7 published works.

One highlight of the Congress, for me, was to join the other international delegates at the closing plenary session late Friday afternoon. We were greeted by Carl Braun, the newly elected president of the IRA. Marie Clay, one of our most vital literacy researchers, who



lives and teaches in New Zealand and is currently Vice President of the IRA, introduced the speaker. Then, it was our great pleasure to be addressed by Kathryn Paterson, award winning author of **Bridge to Teribithia** and **Jacob Have I Loved** and many other works.

Kathryn, we were told, was born in China where her parents were missionaries. She obtained a master's degree from Union Theological Seminary. She has four children (two of them adopted) and today lives with her family in Vermont, where she produces some of the most endearing characters, where she weaves some of the most interesting stories, where she writes some of the highest quality literature for youth that we have today.

Kathryn's topic, "*Reading: the Future*", was a look at the politics of literacy and how literacy can be used as a means with which to shape peace or as a weapon with which to oppress. She told us that there was a time when it was possible to be free without being literate but that time has passed. To be free today, according to Kathryn, people must have mastery of printed language, or language will be used against them.

She concluded by quoting the famous Swede, Dag Hammarsjold, by saying, "There is no peace where there is not peace for all". Kathryn reminded us that peace includes freedom and justice. She reminded us that literacy frees people. Literacy offers justice to people. Therefore, literacy is essential to peace. Kathryn's message was certainly a reminder of why we were all in Stockholm that week: Soviets and Israelis, Norwegians and Germans, Pakistanis and Brazilians, Americans and Swedes. We were there to carry on the legacy of freedom and justice through literacy. We were there to promote the legacy of peace in an age when walls against freedom are falling. Kathryn gave us hope that perhaps, in our lifetimes, there will be "literacy around the world" and all people will be free.

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