

FOSTERING A LOVE OF THE WRITTEN WORD IN ICELAND

Speech
by
First Lady Eliza Reid
at a seminar on
Reading among Children and Youth
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Dear guests:

Blindur er bóklaus maður. The Icelandic language contains many unique proverbs, and this is one of my favourites. It means, *blind is the man who has no books*. Ever since Icelanders have had the tools to record our stories, we have placed a high priority on their value and their significance in communicating with other peoples, in teaching us about the world, and in entertaining us.

In Iceland, we are very proud of our literary heritage and its long tradition. We do not have old buildings to showcase; there was never material or means to construct lasting houses. Instead, the oldest works of art we can share with the world are literary works.

In Iceland, as in the other Nordic countries, we place great emphasis on the importance of developing a love of reading from an early age, and of fostering children's creativity. We also know of course that children who begin the habit of reading early – no matter *what* they are reading – are much more likely to become lifelong readers.

Nevertheless, in this era of competing interests, of Fortnite on the PlayStation, cell phones streaming Eurovision videos, and long spring days encouraging our next generation of men's and women's football heroes (well, that last one is also a good thing!), we find that reading comprehension has declined in recent years in Iceland. According to the PISA survey, we now lag behind our Nordic friends. Of particular concern is the number of boys who fall below the level of functional reading, and the number of immigrants who are struggling to become literate in Icelandic.

But, dear friends, of course this is going to be an optimistic talk on what we in Iceland are doing to improve these results and to nurture the same love of the written word that our ancestors had.

We offer a number of grants, prizes, and initiatives led by both municipalities and the national government that help to foster this love of the written word.

Mýrin, or “The Moorland”, is an international children’s literature festival that is held every two years. The Nordic House in Reykjavík – itself located in a moor, of course – plays host to a series of lectures, panels, exhibitions and workshops that are very entertaining for young people. There are plenty of interactive exhibits and dynamic presentations to get people of all ages involved in the fun of reading.

In addition to Mýrin’s exclusively literary focus, a “Barnamenningarhátíð” or children’s cultural festival is held in Reykjavik each spring and always features literary and reading projects as part of the programme. There is always a focus on children’s creative output, with the aim of sparking their cultural interest through creativity.

Another festival is the Reykjavik Reads Festival, hosted by Reykjavik UNESCO City of Literature (our capital, incidentally, is the world’s first non-native English speaking such city). The festival is all about the joy of reading, and the city especially encourages schools to take part.

The good people at the Reykjavik UNESCO City of Literature also have a Sleipnir reading project. For those of you who may not know, Sleipnir is the eight-legged horse of Óðin. At the City of Literature he is a large, blue, horse (with eight legs of course), who acts as a sort of “reading buddy” for children and visits schools, kindergartens and libraries with the message that it is fun to read.

For the first time this year, several parties cooperated in a new project, “Sögur” (Stories), once again meant to spark children’s interest in storytelling in all its forms, be it books, films, plays or more, by encouraging them to choose their favourite existing cultural material and to write their own stories.

The initiative was a big success; 80 short stories, 25 plays, and 20 screenplays were submitted for consideration. They included the story of Hnoðri the hamster who went to the vet and suddenly changed into a human; a magical elf who appears to help a girl who is being teased by boys in her class; and a book called Bókavandræði or “Book Trouble,” in which the young protagonist wakes up and finds out that he has somehow been transformed into a book

that no one wants to read. The awards ceremony announcing the best entries was broadcast in prime time on national television – and featured a lot of slime.

Writers too are involved in building a love of reading – after all, they have a vested interest in it! Ævar Þór Benediktsson is an Icelandic actor and an author, but better known as “Ævar Vísindamaður” – Ævar the Scientist. In 2014 he launched a reading competition for school children between the ages of 6-13. Classes in schools would compete with each other to see which class, grade, and school had read the most over a certain period.

As a mother of three school-aged children, I can tell you that the competition can get quite intense! The slogan of the reading competition, or "reading challenge" as Ævar calls it, is simple: "What do you WANT to read today?"

The highlight comes at the end of the competition: For each book completed, students fill out a piece of paper and all of those pieces of paper, from all over Iceland, are put into a giant bowl for a draw organised by Ævar. The more you read, the more pieces of paper you have in the bowl at the end of the competition. Five names are then picked at random, and those children become the heroes in Ævar’s next book, published every spring. The theme of the reading challenge changes each year and also becomes the theme of the books; first we had dinosaurs, then robots, last year aliens visited Iceland and this year five lucky readers get to be superheroes in a different dimension. Young people have read more than 230,000 books over the course of four challenges.

While festivals and competitions help foster this love of reading, it’s also important to encourage people to write books for this age group, especially in “smaller” languages like Icelandic, and Finnish. (Which reminds me that in mid-November each year we celebrate the Day of the Icelandic Language, an occasion that also involves plenty of reading-related activities for young people.)

The minister of education, science and culture recently announced a decision to add a new grants category to the Icelandic Literature Center’s grants allocation. The new grants are earmarked for books for children and young adults.

Reykjavik City offers a children’s literature prize too, recently announcing a new prize that will be handed out for the first time in 2019. The Guðrún Helgadóttir Prize – named after a beloved and prolific Icelandic children’s author - is given for a new manuscript for a book for the children and young adult market.

For the past two years, I have had the privilege of attending the “Stórupplestrarkeppni” (Big Reading Competition) reading competition in the town of Hafnarfjörður, just outside of Reykjavik. The competition originated in this community, but is now held annually all over the country. Seventh-grade students, two representing each school in the district, all recite sections of a children’s story and a short poem.

It is exhilarating to witness these young people, right at the age where standing in front of hundreds of people can be monumentally intimidating, dynamically deliver tales in confident tones.

Research has shown that children enjoy poems that they understand and that cover topics they can relate to. I thought I would end these remarks with a lovely poem by one of Iceland’s most beloved living poets, Þórarinn Eldjárn (incidentally, son of a former president of Iceland, and father of comedian Ari Eldjárn who is with us here in Helsinki and will entertain guests at our reception tonight). The poem is entitled “Bókagleypir” or The Book Swallower. I will read the first and last verses, first in Icelandic, so you can enjoy the poem’s rhyme and rhythm, and then in English.

Bókagleypir

Hann Guðmundur á Mýrum borðar bækur,
það byrjaði upp á grín og varð svo kækur.
Núorðið þá vill hann ekkert annað,
alveg sama þó að það sé bannað.

Guðmundur from Mýri loves to eat books.
He started for fun but now he’s obsessed with their looks.
There’s nothing else he wants today.
He knows it’s forbidden, but does it anyway.

Hann segir: Þó er best að borða ljóð,
en bara reyndar þau sem eru góð.

He says though poetry is the best food
It’s only those written well, only those that are good.

But perhaps, given the location, I ought to end with some inspirational words by one of our Finnish friends, specifically that gift to children’s literature herself, Tove Jansson. To quote Moominpappa, on life in general, but perhaps given today’s topic on what we can learn from reading: “The world is full of great and wonderful things for those who are ready for them.”