

КОНФЕРЕНЦИИ

Hanna Liljeqvist, Åsa Warnqvist

BREAKING RECORDS AND SILENCES: AN ACCOUNT OF THE IRSCL CONGRESS 2019 “SILENCE AND SILENCING IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE”

The theme of the Congress that was held by the International Research Society for Children’s Literature (IRSCL) in August 14-18, 2019, was the following: “Silence and Silencing in Children’s Literature”. This article overviews the Congress’ main themes, summarizes the presentations and the key points of discussions. The Congress’ theme sought to capture the ambivalent nature of children’s literature which allows it to simultaneously function as a discursive silencing practice and as a tool for child’s empowerment. 513 delegates from 52 countries took part in the Congress, which accounts for richer research materials and deeper research itself.

Keywords: Children’s literature, silence, taboo, narratology, approaches to children’s literature studies

Since its foundation in 1970, the International Research Society for Children’s Literature (IRSCL) arranges a Biennial Congress for scholars of children’s literature. At a time when lockdowns and social distancing have become part of everyday life, it is not without a certain sense of nostalgia that we look back on the 24th Biennial Congress, which attracted hundreds of delegates from all over the world.

The Congress took place in Stockholm, Sweden, in the beautiful City Conference Centre, on 14–18 August 2019. A Nordic collaboration from start to finish, it was hosted by the Swedish Institute for

Hanna Liljeqvist, Åsa Warnqvist
Swedish Institute for Children’s Books,
Stockholm
hanna.liljeqvist@barnboksinstitutet.se,
asa.warnqvist@barnboksinstitutet.se

Children's Books (Sweden). The co-organizers were the Department of Culture, Languages, and Media at Malmö University (Sweden), the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University (Sweden), and the Faculty of Arts, Psychology, and Theology at Åbo Akademi University (Finland). The organizing committee consisted of the institute's Research Manager Åsa Warnqvist together with Professor Elina Druker, Professor Björn Sundmark, and Associate Professor Mia Österlund.¹ In the planning and preparation of the Congress the organizing committee also had invaluable help from Congress Assistant Simon Springare.

The Congress' theme was "Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature": the theme intended to highlight and explore the complicated relationship between children's literature and the issue of silence. As we had noted in the Call for papers, children's literature has long been, and still is, interwoven with a discourse of silence and silencing that has its roots in the notion that "children should be seen but not heard". We can draw parallels to how the discourses of Orientalism and patriarchy silence non-Western voices and women's voices respectively. At the same time children's literature can also serve to break the silence by giving children a voice or addressing tabooed topics. The Congress theme, starting with these different perspectives on connections between silence and children's literature, sought to capture the ambivalent nature of children's literature, which enables it to simultaneously function as a discursive silencing practice and as a tool for empowerment.

In the Call for papers, we expressed a wish to "cause an 'alarum' that will be noisily heard throughout the world of children's literature — and beyond!" The response exceeded all our expectations as hundreds of fellow scholars within the field of children's literature convened in Stockholm to heed our call. A record-breaking 513 delegates from 52 countries took part in the Congress, making it the biggest Congress in IRSCL history. The majority of the participants were children's literature scholars, but among the delegates were also artists, publishers, and other professionals within the field of children's literature. Over the span of five days, 460 presenters addressed a variety of topics or themes related to silence and silencing in children's literature, spanning from racism and censorship to agency and voice.

The five Congress keynote speakers also explored silence and silencing from a number of perspectives. Associate Professor Vanessa Joosen (University of Antwerp, Belgium) delivered the Congress' first keynote, titled "Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature: Theoretical Perspectives, State of the Art and Future Goals". In her keynote, Joosen presented an overview of the different ways in which silencing

and voicing operate in children's literature both as aesthetic practices and as frequently addressed topics. She also reflected on how attention to silencing and voicing has influenced the study of children's literature, which for instance can be seen in the great interest in theoretical approaches that critically examine the power structures that result in the silencing of certain groups and voices. Art historian and Senior Lecturer Temi Odumosu (Malmö University, Sweden) addressed the issue of representation in the second keynote presentation, "What Dreams May Come? Dealing with History and Decolonising Imagery for Children". Using a wide range of examples, spanning from 18th-century portraits to 21st-century advertisements, Odumosu uncovered the unspoken by pointing out colonial and racist elements in these images.

The third keynote speaker was Professor Andrea Mei-Ying Wu (National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan) with the presentation "The (Silent) Archival Stories of Children's Literature: Munro Leaf, Taiwan, and Beyond". By examining the archival traces of American author Munro Leaf's "cultural tours" of the Middle East, Europe, and South and East Asia in the 1960s, Wu demonstrated how archival studies can both fill and generate more silences. Professor Bob Davis (University of Glasgow, Scotland) drew attention to yet another perspective on silence in his keynote presentation "Silence, Sirens and Sleep: The Experience of Lullabies", which focused on the universal, yet relatively unresearched genre of the lullaby. His analysis of a selection of popular lullabies underlined the ambivalent relationship between the lullaby and sleep and, in turn, between the lullaby and silence. Lastly, Professor Boel Westin (Stockholm University, Sweden) delivered the Congress' final keynote presentation "A Hundred Miles of Silence: The Moomin Stories of Tove Jansson", where she explored the different functions and meanings of silence in Jansson's Moomin universe. For example, she showed how silence frequently is portrayed in a positive light in the Moomin books, particularly through its connections to chosen loneliness.

The panels were divided into ten sessions each consisting of 13 parallel panels. The large number of participants resulted in a rich and diverse programme. This was evident not only in the variety of topics addressed, but also in the presenters' choice of material. The highly international mix of scholars from different cultures and language areas made visible material that is often overlooked — or silenced — within a field heavily dominated by studies on Anglo-American material. Moreover, the variety of material within individual panels also served to illuminate many interesting connections and counterpoints across texts in different languages and from different cultures and countries.

Some panels focused on specific genres — such as poetry, fantasy, and fairy tales — whereas others were more topic-oriented, dealing with taboos, muteness, girlhood, and social inequality, just to name a few examples. In some panels the common denominator was the theoretical perspective, for instance cognitive criticism and ecocriticism. With so many participants and panels, it is impossible to do them all justice in a short summary. Only a few of the themes or topics will be mentioned here.

Representation was a recurring theme during the Congress, especially accentuated in panels and presentations on race, indigenous voices, diversity, (dis)ability, and LGBTQ+. Here emphasis was placed on highlighting voices that are often silenced in fiction for young readers, the variety and sheer number of examples brought up all pointing to the central role that “unsilencing” plays within the field today. Another prominent strand, also related to representation, was that of migration and refugee experiences. These issues were the focus of several panels, such as “‘Things Can Change with a Whisper’: Conversations about Immigrant and Refugee Experiences In and Out of the Text” and “Silent Voices: Refugee Stories in Contemporary Children’s Literature”. Discussions frequently returned to if and how children’s literature can give voice or bear witness to the stories of refugees and immigrants. Witnessing was also brought to the fore in the many presentations and panels on depictions of war in children’s literature.

Furthermore, the notion of “breaking silence” served as a fruitful starting point for discussions in many various contexts as evidenced by panel titles such as “Breaking the Silence with Challenging Picturebooks”, “Breaking the Taboo of the Death Topic in Contemporary Polish Literature for Children”, “Intemperate Tots: Breaking the Silence on Alcohol and Children’s Culture”, and “Breaking Silences, Claiming Representation: Race, Grief, and Creativity in Young People’s Literatures”. Another recurring concept was agency, which long has been a popular topic within children’s literature studies. During the Congress this was explored in panels on “Voice, Power, Agency in East Asian Texts”, “Voice/Agency vs. Censorship/Suppression in Korean, Russian, Czech, and Chilean Children’s Literature”, and “Voice, Silence and Agency in Literature and Film Set in Swedish Sápmi”. Moreover, digital developments within the book industry in recent years have led to an increased interest in these issues among children’s literature scholars. For example, in the Congress schedule this was represented by the three panels dedicated to “Digital Perspectives” that addressed such topics as literary apps, webcomics, and augmented reality picturebooks.

By raising the theme of silence and silencing in children's literature we hoped to stimulate discussion, to break the silence. This was accomplished in more ways than one, not only during keynotes and panels, but also during breaks. 513 happy delegates laughing and chatting over coffee make a lot of noise. After a year of Zoom conferences, the idea of over 500 people with similar interests gathered under the same roof feels like a distant dream. Hopefully, we can all soon get together again and cause yet another "alarum".

Notes

- ¹ The authors would like to thank co-organizers Elina Druker, Björn Sundmark and Mia Österlund for their feedback on this text.

Ханна Лильеквист, Оса Варнквист

Шведский институт детской книги, Стокгольм

РАЗРУШАЯ ЗАПРЕТЫ И ПРЕРЫВАЯ МОЛЧАНИЕ: ОТЧЕТ
О КОНГРЕССЕ IRSCl «МОЛЧАНИЕ И ЗАМАЛЧИВАНИЕ
В ДЕТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ» (2019)

В обзоре освещается конгресс IRSCl «Молчание и замалчивание в детской литературе», состоявшийся 14-18 августа 2019 г. в Стокгольме. Кратко характеризуется содержание выступлений пленарных докладчиков, тематические направления конгресса и ключевые темы дискуссий. Центральной проблемой обсуждений стала специфическая амбивалентность детской литературы, позволяющая ей одновременно функционировать как дискурсивная практика подавления речи и как инструмент расширения прав и возможностей ребенка. В конгрессе приняли участие 513 делегатов из 52 стран, что позволило существенно расширить как сам материал исследований, так и подходы к его изучению.

Ключевые слова: Детская литература, молчание, табу, голос, нарратология, подходы к изучению детской литературы