

THE ESTONIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CENTRE – A SMALL INNOVATIVE CREATIVE CLUSTER

Anne Rande, director of the Estonian Children's Literature Centre

Although we have reached the 21st century and our everyday communication mostly takes place in modern information networks, I am still absolutely sure that "Life without a book is no life at all". The staff at the Estonian Children's Literature Centre is doing everything we can to bring all people behind that statement – both children and their families. We wish that children could live in a protected world and be happy. But no one can be happy, good and successful without reading books. An important part of children's culture is children's literature, which helps children to get to know the world, to develop their value judgements and shape identity, to create a wide cultural view and develop national feelings. That is why the importance of children's literature cannot be overestimated.

The Estonian Children's Literature Centre is already 75 years old but yet this unique institution of children's culture is bustling with innovative activities. We have a very clear aim – to build the reading habit in as many children as possible, and why not also in their parents.

There is no doubt that our Centre is the richest and largest temple of Estonian children's literature not only in Estonia but also in the whole world. And I am absolutely sure that for children the way towards the world of books should begin with reading what is published in their own country.

In spite of the ups and downs of history and with the support from the state through our Ministry of Culture we have developed into a children's literature centre which is unique in the whole world. The building has an exciting interior and different possibilities and is a perfect place for all kinds of innovative activities.

We wish to give children and young people the opportunity to feel proud and happy when they enter our building because namely for them the Centre has been made so beautiful, exciting, enjoyable and special. Our Centre should make each and everyone wish to be a better person, it gives us all more dignity. It is a house that should wake up beautiful emotions and dreams in all, even indifferent or snobby people. In short,

the team has done its best to develop the new home of the Estonian Children's Literature Centre into a true childhood paradise.

And one more thing. We are working not only for those who personally visit us but for the whole country; during the last ten years we have been representing Estonian children's literature also in the rest of the world.

Years of consistent innovative work has helped to develop the following areas:

Archives Library collects

- Children's books and children's periodicals published in Estonian and in Estonia;
- World's classics in children's literature and awarded books in their original languages;
- reference books, monographs, journals and other materials on children's literature;
- illustrations of children's books.

Specialised Information Centre

- creates databases and provides information to researchers of children's literature, translators, publishers, teachers, students and other interested persons.
- performs research on Estonian children's literature.

Development and Training Centre

- organises conferences, workshops, lectures;
- conducts surveys among readers;
- publishes materials on children's literature.

Major projects

- Nukits Competition (Young Reader's Choice Award);
- Raisin of the Year Award;
- Muhv Award;
- Read Aloud Day on 20 October;
- exhibitions;
- creative contests.

Treasury of Children's Literature and Art Gallery

The Treasury gives an overview of the Estonian children's book through the ages.

Illustrations of children's books from Estonia and foreign countries can be admired in the gallery.

Children's Library

provides services to pupils of basic schools and all other persons interested in children's literature.

So, for the last year and a half we have been enjoying a building where books and reading get a totally new meaning and value. We now have

- proper stack-rooms for books, book illustrations and art;
- a fantastic library open six days a week;
- a building full of children's illustrations;
- the first Estonian museum of children's books;
- two halls with excellent acoustics showing enjoyable art from children's books. If necessary, the halls can be transformed into one large conference room or concert room;

- a quite fantastic attic hall – a paradise under the sky so original that it is difficult to describe it. Fairy tale readings, art chamber events, literature salons, toddler meetings and lots of other exciting events take place there;
- a unique inner courtyard for theatre, exhibitions and concerts in summer.

In order to achieve our aim – to make reading attractive as widely as possible – activities in the Centre are in full swing six days a week. We are proud that in this important work we have received valuable help from Mrs Evelin Ilves, the First Lady of the Republic of Estonia, who is the patron of our centre.

Our visitors find unforgettable impressions, childhood memories and extraordinary emotions – all of them would create an appetite for reading even in people who have never thought much of books. Our house should remind the young and the old what fun it is to read books. And believe me or not, even noisy children behave in a more quiet way when they are in our Centre, because a cultural and dignified environment is a natural educator.

The aim of the Centre is to lead the small ones to the book – this way is not always straight and wide, sometimes quite funny things may direct you to reading. The most important thing is that children and books finally meet, and the sooner it happens the better – no one opens their first book as a grown-up. All children are born to read, and grown-ups have to guarantee that children can use this right.

The thoughts and deeds of grown-ups should always focus on children who carry our hopes. Let us help them to discover books as early as possible because reading children become reading adults.

To achieve this aim, the Estonian Children's Literature Centre offers different ways and possibilities:

- during 2000 to 2008, the cooperation between the Centre and Estonian publishers has produced over 40 original books for children and youth, many of them are now included in recommended literature lists of schools. The additional value of such co-operation projects is the opportunity for new children's writers to show their talent; I would like to mention a fantastic pilot project that produced the collection called "My first book". The idea came from our Centre and the collection was also compiled here. This book was

given to all the children who were born in Estonia in 2008, that year there were 16 233 babies according to statistics. The project was financed by the Ministry of Culture and the First Lady's Foundation of the President's Cultural Foundation.

- a well-functioning cooperation with homes, kindergartens and schools;
- organisation of different competitions, for example the Young Reader's Choice Award called the Nukits Competition (Nukits is a well-known character from an Estonian children's book). This is a rather unique tradition in the whole world – there are not many opportunities for children in any country to choose the best original children's book, both in the category of the writer and the illustrator. I would like to add that there are participating, thousands of children: at the 9th Competition in 2008 we received the votes from 7250 children all over Estonia. Grown-ups have a separate possibility to say their opinion;
- an opportunity to see exhibitions of illustrations from children's books;
- a possibility to visit the museum which acts as the treasury of children's books;
- meetings with exciting book people (writers, artists, publishers, translators, etc);
- toddler meetings help to discover books already in early childhood;
- the art chamber and fairy tale room offer great activities for children who love handicraft and fairy tales;
- the literature salon brings together young people with similar interests;
- enjoyable concerts invite music lovers almost every week;
- there is a possibility to play the piano;
- the whole Centre is a great inspiring place where to spend quality time with friends.

In conclusion I would like to invite you all to visit the Estonian Children's Literature centre at 73 Pikk Street in Tallinn!