

Acceptance Speech for the Eleanor Farjeon Award 2011

Firstly I would like to thank the Children's Book Circle and the Eleanor Farjeon estate for this honour. An award like this is fabulous, not just because we've won it but to be recognised by our peers as making an outstanding contribution in the world of children's books is very special indeed.

As always there were some amazing individuals and organisations nominated for the award this year and to be mentioned alongside them is an honour in itself. None of us do what we do to win awards or to be thanked; we do it because we want to make a difference and because we have a passion for children's books, but when you do get a recognition like this it's amazing. Especially for an organisation like ours where there are so many people across the country doing some truly inspirational things in the name of children's books.

I suppose it makes sense to spend a little time talking about the Federation, where we started and the types of things that we do.

It all began over 45 years ago with the wonderful Anne Wood, of later Telly Tubbies fame. In those humble beginnings parenting groups were the seed, the idea being to promote an enthusiasm for and about children's books as well as empowering and encouraging parents to share and enjoy books with their children.

An understanding of the power and importance of the book underlined this group - a knowledge firmly based in the understanding of reading for pleasure (an alien concept it still seems to some quarters). But, as we all know, reading for pleasure is the key to so many things. If you can ignite that spark in a child, if you can find that one book that feeds those embers that child's life will never be the same again. It will be infinitely better in so many ways.

And like any fire, where the circumstances are right it can catch quickly and spread, affecting everything around it, and beyond.

It was this spark that the original Federation wanted to create and nurture. We wanted to recreate the right environment as much as we could but fundamentally we also wanted to show others how they could do this: empower and encourage parents to be that spark to feed those embers.

Over the years the Federation grew from this small seed, quickly and immeasurably, because it was run with big ideas and with core values that meant something, that made a difference, that others knew were important. Groups started to sprout up across the country following this simple model: enthuse children and adults to share reading and you enrich their lives forever.

All these groups had slightly different ideas on how and who they would work with. But this is the beauty of an idea like reading: in different areas there were different opportunities, different partners and different priorities. Some

groups were in areas of high deprivation and some were in more privileged areas, but each had their own reasons why promoting and creating readers was important.

That's the thing about reading. No matter what your social, ethnic or cultural background, reading transcends all this. It has a deeper more basic importance. It's about communication and understanding. It's about things that matter.

As these groups started to grow across the width and breadth of the country following the same model, the Federation that we are more familiar with nowadays came into being. A national view helping to drive these groups and create more was needed. But it also meant that a national strand of our charity could create even more opportunities for reading to occur.

Expanding on the work that the groups were doing the national Federation began working to support the individual groups with advice and knowledge and with more of these opportunities.

In 1974 Pat Triggs, who at the time was Vice Chair, came up with the idea of a National Tell-A-Story Week. The idea held true those values that the very first group was set up with: a love of reading and a power of sharing books. It also gave groups another vehicle to promote reading with their members and with their partners.

Over the years National Tell-A-Story Week has been launched at places such as St Katherine's Dock, Hastings Castle and the Royal Armouries, inspiring in their own rights as the places where stories can come to life. Most importantly though it has led to so many new readers across the country taking part in a whole host of wonderful events that encourages us to share that spark and to ignite others.

In 1998 we extended National Tell-A-Story Week and turned it into National Share-A-Story month - a whole month of activities and events displaying our key values. National Share-A-Story Month continues to provide our groups and others the opportunities to promote and enjoy reading. Next year's event see us attempt to share a story across 2012 miles with as many children as possible contributing.

And it is this contribution of children that means so much to another of our national events. In 1980 Pat Thompson's belief in the power of young people and their views brought about the introduction of a revolutionary book award. The formerly named Children's Book Award sought out children's opinions about the books they were reading. Children were again at the centre, empowered to tell us what they thought other children would love to read and enjoy. It was the children that picked the shortlist, and children that picked the winners not the adults. As Michael Morpurgo said after winning last year's award, 'It's the one to win!' Over 30 years on and Red House Children's Book Award is still the only national book award where children have the definitive say about all parts of the award. Originally the awards that were given out to

the winning authors and illustrators were portfolios of all the reviews and artwork the children around the country had done. Although we now give out some fabulous prizes these portfolios are still the things treasured by all the shortlisted authors and illustrators the most, as it represents the time and effort the children have put in, enjoying the books that have been crafted for them.

As well as running an annual conference where we share our experiences and knowledge and enthuse others to run events and continue to promote reading we have also recently introduced another national celebration to our calendar. This one is close to my heart as it's something that I believe in strongly but also something that I felt made our charity more complete in terms of promoting all types of reading. National Non Fiction Day for the last two years has been promoting non-fiction in terms of how much it is read for pleasure, celebrating those young people who just want to read non-fiction and making them feel that their reading tastes count and matter just as much as someone who reads fiction. For a charity to be promoting reading we need to take into account all the different types of readers that are out there. Everyone has a different reading personality, places we like to read, things we like to read, habits we might have. For me it's only ever being able to stop reading on a page that is even numbered or divisible by five. I also have to find a page that finishes with a full stop. I am seeking help. Because of these individual reading personalities we need to show that whatever you enjoy reading it is worthwhile because it's the act of reading, and enjoying reading that is the important thing.

This brings us up to date and as you can see over the years the Federation has grown and evolved, yet throughout everything we do those main, core values that the original parenting group was set up with ring as true today as they ever did. The reason we are still around and just as relevant nearly 50 years on is that we deal with those things that are important, that are fundamental and are about enriching the lives of young people. We've seen many government agendas come and go based around reading and books (and we've made it through all of them!) but it is charities like ours who are putting themselves on the front lines that actually make a difference.

I'm coming up to having been involved with the Federation for nearly 10 years, not a patch on some that have been involved from the very beginning. The one thing that struck me the most then and still does now is the family feel that the Federation has. Whenever I go and talk about the Federation wherever it is someone always comes up to me to tell me about the involvement they may have had with the Federation. It's always a story they retell with warmth and even though I've never met them before it's like talking to a relative I've not seen in ages. Each and every member of our groups is a special person. They work tirelessly with tens of thousands of young people each year making a difference. They're the ones who are in schools, libraries, communities doing those things that suited board men and politicians talk about. They're the ones fanning those flames and stoking those fires. Books change lives. The Federation changes lives.