

The 22nd Biennial IRSCL Congress *Creating Childhoods*

Worcester, UK, 8 – 12 August 2015

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As one of the biggest and oldest international children’s literature associations, IRSCL (International Research Society for Children’s Literature) has left its footprint all over the world. However, the last IRSCL Congress in the United Kingdom was almost twenty years ago. Thus, one can imagine the thrill running through the veins of British children’s literature researchers upon hearing the news that IRSCL was coming back to the UK for its 22nd biennial Congress, with the theme of “Creating Childhoods”. The place chosen for this “creation” was St John’s Campus of the University of Worcester, sitting not far from the tranquil body of the River Severn.

According to Jean Webb, the Congress convenor, the impetus for this Congress was an awareness of two matters in the study of children’s literature that were “topical” but relatively “under explored”: one is “creativity” in the sense that “writers, artists and academics variously create, interpret and re-create notions of childhoods and the child body”, and the other the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of children’s literature studies. Jean Webb explained, “The Congress team at Worcester therefore decided to bring these two matters together against which to consider, interrogate and analyse children’s literature and texts in the widest interpretation, and to furthermore consider the impact upon children and childhoods from international perspectives”. Under such a guideline, the Congress consisted of two parts:

- academic discussions of childhoods and the child body, which, according to their general subject affiliations, were grouped into four themes/panels: History, Body, Media, and Childhoods;
- artistic workshops for re-experiencing and re-creating childhoods with storytellers, picturebook artists, a puppeteer, a children’s poet, a children’s writer, and an actor.

The organisers must have conjured up some magic, for they smoothly scheduled almost 300 presentations – in addition to the rich activities and workshops – into a five-day calendar, particularly considering the “rumour” that the number of the participants and attendees was the biggest in IRSCL history.

While browsing through all the abstracts, my first impression was that this Congress was truly international, interdisciplinary, and, above all, brought together a huge variety of fascinating research. The attendees came from various cultural, national and academic backgrounds.

The first day of the Congress started with the keynote speech from Maria Nikolajeva, who gave an overview of the development of children’s literature research, with particular emphasis on some of the current trends focusing on body and place, one of them being the cognitive approach. According to Nikolajeva, recent findings in cognitive neuroscience seem to suggest that children do not have the ability to acquire empathy until quite late in their childhoods. This is a very controversial statement which contradicts most of our life experience.

Michael Kerins, a master storyteller from Glasgow, was responsible for a different kind of experience on this first day, demonstrating the power of storytelling. With the help

of spontaneous props obtained from random audience members, Kerins, speaking in a musical Scottish accent, told the story of how he became a storyteller.

Starting from the second day, 266 presentations and five artists' workshops were scheduled into various parallel sessions. Due to personal research needs, I tried to cover most of the sessions on digital media while fighting hard against the temptation to attend other intriguing parallel sessions. However, I did succeed in getting a glimpse of some fascinating topics from Congress sessions focusing on other themes, too.

The "Body, Health, Well-Being" panel explored quite a range of topics, including the depiction of disability, gender and race in children's literature. It included an eye-opening presentation on "Trans Bodies in British Children's Fiction" given by Catherine Butler, a senior lecturer at Cardiff University. After introducing how "the landscape has changed for queer and trans children, in terms of both policy and the perception of trans people by the public and the media", Butler used two novels, *The Boy in the Dress* (2008) by David Walliams and *The Art of Being Normal* (2015) by Lisa Williamson, to discuss "the changed questions, assumptions and vocabulary with which readers are likely to approach" texts addressing such themes. During her presentation, she also discussed the different stages for trans children in terms of their psychological and physical development. In my opinion, the presentation attacked and mocked the ignorance of today's society with regards to the life of the LGBTI community. Like Michael Kerins' storytelling, Butler's presentation reflects the power of literature, as well as the need for mirror identities for children in literature.

Echoing Butler's identity aspect, Emma McGlip – a PhD student at the University of Glasgow – discussed the role of sport in a selection of young adult novels. She pointed out that sport could be thought of as an internationally recognised code to break down barriers of language and even gender. Moreover, it could also be used as a mirror for readers to identify with characters and find similarities in their own lives.

Later that same day, Evelyn Arizpe addressed the themes of child wellbeing and the creation of childhoods in her paper "Precarious Childhoods: Critique, Hope and Survival". Referring to both cognitive criticism and emotional literacy, Arizpe discussed four picturebooks that depict children living in precarious situations as a result of poverty, insecurity and violence across four different cultural contexts. Referring to the texts' images and words, she considered how these picturebooks invite their readers to move between wonder, empathy, pity, fear and horror, while also offering a greater awareness of social injustice.

I had the chance to attend only one out of 24 sessions in the "History" panel, yet it was enough to get a feeling of how multi-cultural it was. The session I went to consisted of three presentations on childhood reflected in Nordic, Scottish and Chinese children's literature from a historical perspective. Åse Marie Ommundsen from Norway discussed "the historical development of how the notion of a specific national (Norwegian) or regional (Nordic) childhood is constructed through children's literature from 1850 to the present". Maureen Farrell from Glasgow examined how young people's engagement with major historical events offered a particular view of childhood in Scotland and she also provided a close reading of Mollie Hunter's historical fiction. Surprisingly, according to Farrell, it is difficult to trace representations of Scottish childhoods in anything other than the fiction of the period. Shih-Wen Sue Chen from Deakin University provided an Asian point of view on

the development of childhood. By examining the illustrations and articles in *Mengxue bao*, the first children's periodical issued by Chinese authors (1897–1899), she explored how the Chinese concept of childhood changed in the late 19th century.

“Media, Creativity and Childhood” was one of the largest panels, comprising 40 sessions and 94 presentations. The topics explored in this panel were really multifarious: from poetry to drama, from films to apps, from picturebooks to graphic novels... It seems there was hardly any medium that was not covered in this panel.

As my research deals with story apps, I was quite happy to see three sessions investigating digital narratives. Sarah Mygind from Aarhus University introduced an award-winning Danish app to the Congress, called “Wuwu & Co.”. The app uses augmented reality technology during storytelling. While demonstrating how the app worked, Mygind explored the kind of interactivity that creates “a more immersive and physical interactive literary experience” for the reader. Aline Federico from the University of Cambridge introduced her case study with children playing story apps. By providing several video clips of a child playing with the app *The Monster at the End of This Book*, she analysed the case from a multimodal perspective, discussing how “children manifest their responses to the text in their gestures and dialogues with an adult co-reading”. Following Federico, I discussed the narrative patterns brought up by story apps, and provided a preliminary typology of the texts I had developed to show similarities between the so-called digital and non-digital narratives. Apparently, the audience was not that familiar with story apps yet, but they were quite interested in the subjects. One of the issues raised during discussion was how to reform publication procedures to cope with the development of digital literature. Junko Yokota, one of the pioneers of children's app research, expressed her concern regarding the speed of publishing. Everyone in the room agreed that the delay of publication is a serious issue for research on digital technology as technology develops so fast nowadays. There were many other interesting topics on digital and other media that I could not possibly cover, such as Anika Ullmann's discussion on digital natives and Ayoe Quist Henkel's account of digital young adult literature, to name a few.

In the “Childhood” panel, I had a chance to listen only to a report from Robert Davis from the University of Glasgow, who gave a historical overview of the trends prevailing within childhood studies today. He described several areas of dynamic development and discussed the possible creation of a “general theory of childhood”. In addition, Davis explored what advances in this interdisciplinary field might entail for the portrayal and examination of childhood across a range of cultural and literary forms.

While guiltily knowing that I have covered only a tiny bit of what went on at this huge Congress, I would like to mention a fascinating event that took place on its second day. It was called “Open Mic” and was held at the university bar on St John's Campus. After a few sips of beer, the floor first heard several stories from professional storytellers, and then sensational jokes, stories and songs from children's literature scholars.

If I had to summarise what I learned from the 2015 IRSCS Congress, on top of a multitude of new approaches and an awareness of the quickly developing world of children's literature scholarship, I would offer an understanding of what an amusing and inspiring lot children's literature scholars really are.