

Opening speech of the 21st international literature festival berlin of the children's and young adult literature

Marianne Kaurin

The magic of a good story

Thank you so much for inviting me to the 21st annual International Literature Festival of Berlin. After more than a year of pandemic, it is truly wonderful to be able to travel and to meet people again. Thank you also for asking me to write the opening speech for the Children and Young Adult's Program. It is an honour to be here and I am looking forward to participating in the program. But first. The speech.

I have never written a speech like this before and during my summer holiday I spent a lot of time thinking about what I should say and how I would present myself. I mean, it is a speech. At a festival. An International Festival of Literature. In Germany! You have to say something important, right?

Then one day, in our summer house where I spent my holiday, I found a photo of a girl. In the photo the girl is sitting on her bed, in her pink pyjama, about ten years old, with messy hair and big glasses. She holds a book in her lap, *Anne of Green Gable*, and there is a bookshelf next to her bed, very messy, literally bursting with books. The girl is not looking into the camera, her gaze is on the book. It is a random photo, capturing an everyday situation. A girl and her books. It made me think. And it made me remember.

If someone had told the girl in the pink pyjama that many years later, she would speak in front of a large audience, she would have crawled under her covers to never emerge again. She wouldn't have thought it possible. That ten-year-old girl in the pink pyjama was in fact a very quiet girl, you know the type that would only raise her hand in class if she were one hundred per cent sure that she had the correct answer. She was afraid someone would laugh at her. That someone would whisper. She was afraid she wouldn't be good enough. Afraid not to fit in. A quiet and timid girl. Once she was ill and had been absent from school for a few days, the teacher said on her return: *Have you been sick? I didn't notice.*

I don't know who she thought she would become when she grew up, but it certainly wasn't someone who would stand in front of an audience to talk about something important.

This girl thought it was quite demanding to be a child. Not because she had a difficult childhood. It was more the feeling of *being* a child that made it difficult. Everything seemed too big and momentous and unsafe. Things could change at the blink of an eye.

Grown-ups on the other hand, didn't seem to have any problems. They didn't have crushes or fall out with their friends. They weren't afraid of anything. Grown-ups made breakfast, went to work, had dinner, watched the news, and went to bed. It all seemed so simple. She couldn't wait to be a grown-up.

Her overfilled bookshelf gave her the opportunity to be someone else, a tougher version of herself. One that would cross oceans on her own, one who could lift a horse, who tricked everybody into believing she was a boy or one who could cut her rival's hair clean off. Through those books she could live many different lives. Be someone completely different. Put her own life on pause for a while. Get to know people who felt the same way. And just maybe get to know herself better?

Luckily, there were no interruptions, nobody that peeked into the room and commanded I'd tell them what I was learning from reading those books lying on the bed in my pink pyjama, lost in all those stories. And yes, as you've already gathered by now, that girl in the pink pyjama is not a character from one of my stories, she is in fact me.

I had the privilege of reading the stories I *wanted* to read. Nobody questioned why I was reading the same book for the third time. Nobody asked me to explain why I thought the author had written that book, or what he or she thought the reader would learn from reading it. Nobody demanded that I should write a summary of what I felt after reading the last page or give an analysis of the topic. Nobody asked me how many words I could read per minute.

I was lucky enough to revel in the stories alone. In peace. I could take part in those stories and make them my own. Through them I experienced what it was like to be a poor servant girl in the 1880s, a king, an orphan, a detective, an astronaut, someone who's madly in love or the strongest girl in the world. I got to *live* with these characters without any interruption from the outside world. Without having to report to anyone about my endeavours.

As an author of children's and young adults' books I'm often asked: "What do you want the readers to *learn* from your book"? Adults ask this question, children never do. At first, when I had just published my debut novel, I thought of possible answers. "I want them to learn about the Second World War and the persecution of Jews in Norway" (which was the topic of my first novel). But both the question and its answers didn't sit right with me.

I thought to myself, why do they have to learn so much? If *teaching* was the main purpose with writing, shouldn't I write educational books instead? So, I changed my answer: "I want the reader to learn something about what it's like to be human". But this didn't seem to be an adequate answer. It seemed that the golden standard was that the reader always should *learn* something. Something tangible that could be measured. "What it's like to be human" seemed too fleeting an answer.

Another question I repeatedly would get was if I thought, as an author, that children or teenagers would be interested in the stuff I was writing about. "Do you think teenagers are interested in the war"? "Do they care about social inequality"? As if all children and teenagers are alike just because they happen to be in the same age group.

It struck me that these are questions only authors writing for a young audience have to answer. For example, would you ask an author of crime novels: "Do you think adults are interested in murder"? Or the author of an epic novel about love: "Do you believe adults are excited about love"? I checked with my colleagues who write fiction for adults, and they

said, no, they never have to talk about what the reader should learn or if they thought the readers would be interested in this or that.

Many of us adults are deeply concerned about children not reading enough literature. We talk about “tomorrow’s readers” and all good that will come your way if only you read. You will do better in school, there is a good chance you will succeed in higher education and get a good job. Reading books is in many ways thought of as an important step to achieve something further ahead. Reading is something you do to *gain* something else. At least, this seems to apply to children and teenagers. The book in itself, and the reading experience, is not enough. You should learn something, understand something, you should develop, move forward.

But do we ask the same of the adult reader? Would I read a single book if I had to explain and analyse, and give an account of how many words I had read per minute? Probably not..

In our eagerness to get children and young people to read, we may have forgotten what’s most important: We read to explore, to dream and to escape. We read to walk in someone else’s shoes. We read to relax. We read because it’s fun. Because it makes us laugh. Because we like to be spooked. Because we feel less alone. We read because it’s our way of making sense of the world

You know how it feels to be inside a story. A film, a series, a game, a book. And maybe we should just let you stay there uninterrupted? Imagine if we started demanding to know what you *learn* from TikTok, Snapchat, Fifa or Fortnite. Wouldn’t that kill the pleasure of it all?

On behalf of the adults, I hope we can stop expecting so much from children’s reading and instead encourage your curiosity, creativity and the need for stories. Inspire and boost your need to be someone else, to take part in something else than your own life. During the pandemic, this need has seemed more important than before.

If anyone asks me today what I wish that the readers should learn from my books, I answer: nothing. Because the most important thing I can give a reader is the possibility to live a life that resembles or doesn’t resemble their own. The possibility to encounter someone completely different or someone they recognise.

And every now and then, I’m still that girl in the pink pyjama with big glasses and a messy bookshelf full of treasures. Who reads so that her mind can wander and because she enjoys the magic of a good story.

Marianne Kaurin

