Connecting Across Languages and Cultures through Visual Narratives:
IBBY Silent Book Lampedusa Project

A library for the island’s children, so that they can learn to
tell the difference between the horizon and the border, for
children just passing through, so that Lampedusa can be
more than just a staging post on their journey. Because
through books we can build an ethos of welcome, respect and
participation. **Guisi Nicolini, Mayor of Lampedusa**

In response to the waves of refugees from Africa and the Middle East arriving on
the Italian island of Lampedusa, the International Board on Books for Young
People (IBBY) launched the project “Silent Books: From the World to Lampedusa
and Back” in 2012. The project involved creating the first library on Lampedusa,
a remote island in the Mediterranean and the first port of call for thousands of
immigrants arriving from across the sea on their way to a new life. The people of
Lampedusa were used to being abandoned by national authorities and had few
public services. The children living on the island (about 600) did not have access
to books beyond their school textbooks and had not experienced what a library
could offer. The goal of this library was to help local and immigrant children
recognize that their lives are not limited by political conflict and to make life
connections across languages and cultures.

The project also included creating a collection of outstanding silent books that
could be understood and enjoyed by children across languages and cultures.
These books tell stories through visual images and are rich in sensations,
dreams, and memories. Silent books, a term used in Europe, are known as
wordless books or visual narratives in the U.S. The Italian section put out a call
to other IBBY sections around the world, asking for the best of the best of their
silent books. Translation was not an issue because there were no words, just
superb storytelling with images. Children who spoke different languages could
“read” these stories. The criteria for selection included books that:

- narrate a journey, during which characters are open to the world at large
- project an ethos of welcome and respect, of coexistence and friendship
- show the curiosity of childhood
- tell stories because children need a world of stories to build
  understanding, exchange memories, and make sense of life
- invite new stories and new dreams
- portray agency where characters take an active role in society
- help readers gain a knowledge of themselves and others
- prompt questions about worlds that are different than that of the reader
- talk about the passage of time and the cycle of life and nature
- relay small moments of happiness
This collection has toured as an exhibition at various venues in Italy, Europe, the U.S., and around the world. To date, there have been four collections of Silent Books: 2013 (110 books from 23 countries), 2015 (51 books from 18 countries), 2017 (79 books from 20 countries), and 2019 (67 books from 16 countries). Within each collection there is a selection of Honor Books, selected for their originality, complexity, historical value, and subject matter. They provide a sweeping overview of the world of wordless book publishing around the world.

Silent books are rich, original and have a powerful narrative force. Resources on the IBBY/Silent Books site offer suggestions on effective ways to use the books when crossing linguistic or cultural barriers. IBBY Italia has compiled *10 tips for reading silent books in a community that does not speak a common language.* IBBY Sweden has produced a booklet giving ideas about how to use the Silent Books with children: *Silent Books: A Handbook on Wordless Picture Books with Narrative Power.* IBBY also wrote a report of the initial development of the project and the activities, *Silent Books: From the World to Lampedusa and Back*.

All of the Silent Book lists and resources on using them can be found on the IBBY website.

Mariella Bertelli, a librarian and storyteller who has worked in the Lampedusa library, sums up the power of stories and particularly Silent Books this way:

> The barrier-free nature of these wordless books — outside of language, culture, age and intellectual ability — adds a totally democratic element to the reading experience. This fundamental concept goes hand in hand with IBBY’s mission that it is through children’s books that we can create more tolerance and understanding among the people of the world. (*IBBY Sweden, Silent Books: A Handbook on Wordless Picture Books with Narrative Power*)

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