

## READING ACROSS BORDERS

### Organization

Fundación La Fuente (CHILE)

### Introduction

To change the state of the world is a lofty goal that can only be achieved in community, but before we can even begin to tackle the concrete problems we face, we must know what our ‘community’ is comprised of. Of people, from a multiplicity of national and cultural identities, all of which have wisdom and experience that deserve to be celebrated, debated, and shared. The so-called communications age holds the promise of empowering the citizens of the world and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and culture, and most especially the Internet has emerged as a powerful tool with the potential to unite people across borders, cultures and walks of life. What, then, is not working? More than ever, we continue to witness eruptions of violence, strife, xenophobia, fundamentalism and exclusionary world-views that represent a clear failure to achieve this promise. Around the world, people are trapped in battles for land, sovereignty, freedom, dignity, and the right to exercise the democratic values that so many of us hold so dear.

This breakdown in communication, this ignorance and lack of understanding among so many members of the human race is a complex matter that cannot be solved by one approach, but efforts must be made because the need is urgent. And it is this need that **Reading Across Borders** aims to address, by attempting to instill, through an innovative program of literature in translation, the way in which our youngest citizens learn about the world around them. The Fundación La Fuente (FLF) firmly believes –and has learned through experience-- that literature aimed at young readers has the power to break through cultural barriers, create bridges between nations and, ultimately, effect change by inspiring children to learn about their global neighbors through the magical experience that takes place when a child sits down and reads an unforgettable book.

Reading Across Borders is, in essence, quite a simple idea: a virtual library of thought-provoking, inspiring, entertaining, engaging children’s books and stories from all around the world, translated from and into a variety of different languages, and made available through an Internet-based system that represents a paradigm shift in the way literature circulates, but which also ensures that the legal rights of author, illustrator and translator will be protected.

Book publishing is a massive, international industry. Why is it, then, that some of the most compelling children’s stories and books do not reach the international audience they deserve? Over the last half-century the book business has had to

compete with television, movies, video games and now the Internet in order to survive, and this often means that the worthiest books and stories from an educational or intellectual perspective get steamrolled by the cookie-cutter books and stories that offer more succulent profits for book publishers—the television and movie tie-ins, the cynically created cartoon characters designed as cheap entertainment to keep kids out of trouble, the bestsellers that may be enjoyable but do little to foster the kind of values that the Global Redesign Initiative champions and that are in such dire need of revival all around the world.

Reading Across Borders is an effort to address a problem that is the result of systemic failure. The big-picture problem is that too many of us have no knowledge of people and cultures beyond our own national borders. The small-picture problem is that today's publishing industry, which in an ideal world would serve as a conduit for transmitting this vital knowledge, is not delivering children the kind of cross-cultural literature that promotes international understanding, due to the constraints of an economic structure that encourages publishers to treat books as commodities rather than cultural treasures. In addition, the expenses associated with translation, printing, shipping, and storing physical volumes make any cross-cultural literary endeavor prohibitively expensive, given that these factors raise prices to levels that make books unattainable for the vast majority of children around the world. To make matters even gloomier, many first-world governments have extremely limited public support for the promotion of literature beyond their borders. Moreover, the children's books that do get translated, by and large, follow a 'north to south,' colonialist pattern that we aim to correct. Far too often it is books and stories from the so-called First World that are translated for the benefit of less-developed countries, and yet there is a wealth of stories and books from all over the world that deserve to 'travel north,' so to speak, but do not because of unfavorable economic and political conditions. This is the situation that FLF aims to change, by radically redesigning the way in which children's books are translated, published and made available to the public. FLF has undertaken this challenge precisely because it has made tremendous strides in addressing similar problems in Chile.

### **About Fundación La Fuente**

Fundación La Fuente (FLF) is a non-profit institution engaged in promoting and implementing educational and cultural initiatives that benefit at-risk communities. Since 2000, FLF has been creating school libraries, improving public libraries, equipping mobile school and community libraries and developing museums and cultural centers in urban and rural areas all over Chile. Its staff brings a diversity of backgrounds and experience to the organization and includes primary and secondary school teachers, specialists in literature, actors, musicians, artists, management experts, designers, sociologists, child development specialists, and librarians. FLF's landmark program, Creating Tomorrow's Readers, develops school,

public, and mobile libraries for school children and communities at large. The project entails the implementation of a reading program, and to this end teaches educators and librarians how to develop and manage reading and related cultural activities. The goal of the project is to introduce and encourage reading among children, youth and community by providing reading and teaching materials that respect and celebrate each community's specific interests and needs. In the nine years since its establishment, the Fundación La Fuente has raised and invested US\$9 million for the benefit of our programs, which operate in over 72 neighborhoods in cities, towns and villages throughout Chile, a country that extends over 2.500 kilometers from Antofagasta in the north to Puerto Aysén in the south. From our center of operations in Santiago, we have built libraries and brought programs to some of the most remote corners of a country with a transportation infrastructure that presents tremendous challenges to these kinds of efforts. FLF belongs to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA); the Center for the Book, Library of Congress; and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY). In 2009, FLF was named Institution of the Year by the Chilean Book Council for its efforts in support and promotion of books and reading, and FLF's founder and executive director, Verónica Abud, was named Social Entrepreneur of the Year by the Schwab Foundation and the newspaper *El Mercurio*. In addition, the Palestinian Foundation of Chile honored her this year with the Edward Said Award, which recognizes outstanding contributions to the country's civic life.

### **Reading Across Borders: Proposal**

Reading Across Borders plans to create a selection of children's books and stories from Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia that represents a diversity of experiences, traditions and cultures in the interest of promoting cross-cultural understanding. The texts will be selected in committee, by an international council of advisers that would include, among others, experts in children's literature, educators, book editors, librarians, and international institutions already working in this field, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the International Research Society for Children's Literature, and IBBY. In its initial phase, Reading Across Borders will assign the translation of these texts into the six official languages of UNESCO publishing, but the goal is to add more languages as the project matures. For the launch of the project, we will be working with texts aimed at readers from 7 to 10 years of age. Reading Across Borders will negotiate with authors, illustrators and translators for the rights to publish these texts for the exclusive purposes of this project. The texts will be edited and designed in cooperation with the authors, translators and illustrators, and an appropriately unifying design format will be established to create a coherent collection without stripping the texts of the original, individual qualities that make them special. The texts will reside on a digital platform in the form of PDF files and will be available free of charge for one-time-only use by individuals, given that the rights for the texts will have been

paid for in advance. However, in the event that an institution wishes to publish a given text in bound book form, a separate publication agreement will be drawn up in order to address the specific legal matters relating to the publication in question and to protect all contributors involved.

We have structured the project so that it may begin on a relatively small scale, with a limited number of texts and a limited number of original and target languages, but as time passes, it can easily be expanded in a number of different directions: firstly and most obviously by adding original and target languages, by creating new collections for more age groups and even, at some future point, establishing collections with specific themes within the age-group categories. There are many possibilities for expanding this project, and they will depend primarily on the interest we are able to generate with the first collection that we produce.

The question of creating a digital archive, rather than a collection of bound books, is fundamental to this project for two main reasons. The first goal of this project is to establish a ‘treasure trove’ of great stories from around the world that will encourage reading and promote cultural understanding among young people. But equally critical to this project is its second goal: to make those books and stories accessible to as broad a public as possible, and the economic realities that affect the cost of publishing, exporting, importing, shipping, and storing bound books make digital texts in PDF form infinitely more attractive than bound books, especially in countries where the book prices are prohibitive for the majority population. As of yet, the book industry has not learned how to use the Internet as an effective platform for publishing, and our project aims to be a pioneer in this effort.

### **Reading Across Borders and the GRI thematic framework**

The very essence of Reading Across Borders is an iteration of the first point of the GRI Thematic Framework, for at its core it is a project that aims to help children, parents and educators discover and rediscover the value of reading, both for the pleasure it brings as well as for the wisdom and knowledge it imparts. The marvel of the very best children’s literature resides in its ability to introduce children to the values that are critical to fomenting and sustaining a democratic society: tolerance, understanding, dignity, respect, empathy, and optimism about the human spirit despite hardships and injustice. Through this program we hope to make children curious about the world beyond their front door, town, city, and country, because we firmly believe that by exposing children at an early age to people, places and situations that are different from their own, they have a better chance of growing up free from the prejudice and ignorance that fuel so many of the world’s conflicts at present. Children who are encouraged to think beyond national, cultural, religious and political affiliations are less likely to fall prey to stereotypes, discrimination, prejudice, violence and hatred. By giving children knowledge of

other cultures we will be empowering them: to learn about others, to learn about themselves through others, to think with an open mind but also to think critically, to think for themselves and others in humanistic, rather than nationalistic, religious, or political terms. Compelling stories and books from around the world can be a first step toward a humanities-based education that will give them tools for thinking openly, analytically and generously about the human condition and the world around them so that one day they might try to make it a better, more democratic, more just, more peaceful place to be than it is at the present moment.

Reading Across Borders cannot pretend to solve such massive, complex and delicate problems as those of xenophobia, intolerance, violence, terrorism, human rights violations, armed conflict—in fact, it is hard to imagine any proposal to the GRI capable of such an achievement. The kinds of issues mentioned in the fourth theme of the GRI, “Enhancing Security,” are vast in scope and must be tackled from many different angles and disciplines. In one sense, it may seem beyond the purview of this project. But in a deeper, and perhaps less quantifiable sense, Reading Across Borders aims to make progress in all these areas by translating and disseminating books that just might change how people think and, consequently, act. Would terrorism occur if there existed true understanding between factions in conflict? Would weapons of mass destruction be quite so plentiful if ignorance, doubt and suspicion were replaced with the trust and good faith that comes from genuine comprehension of the other? Would human rights violations occur with such impunity if humanistic values were the cornerstone of educational systems around the world? FLF believes, and has seen through its own experience in Chile, that books can be powerful tools for changing how people think about the world around them. Arts-based social entrepreneur programs such as Reading Across Borders are particularly well positioned to respond to many of the problems mentioned in the “Enhancing Security” section precisely because the arts offer a relatively neutral, non-partisan, and depoliticized forum for bringing otherwise incompatible groups together.

### **Reading Across Borders as a response to a need that has arisen as a result of market or governance failure**

One need not be an expert in childhood education or children’s book publishing to realize that there is presently a crisis in children’s reading habits around the world.

The reason for this crisis is complex: the movie and television industries are more focused on entertaining rather than educating their youngest customers, and by creating simplistic ‘name brand’ characters with which they bombard movie theaters, television channels, and the Internet as well as video, book, toy, stationery, department and other stores, it is now harder than ever for quality children’s literature to reach the audience it deserves. For financial reasons much of

the book publishing industry has had to acquiesce to the realities of an economy that sees books as products that must compete with movies, television, video and other digital games for children's attention. And this is true all over the world: very often it is those books with the greatest name-recognition that manage to get translated into foreign languages, thanks to the sales numbers they can often guarantee publishers. This is the failure that needs to be addressed. This is what needs to be rewired, or rewritten: the process by which children are inspired to engage in a world of imagination and possibility that cannot be accessed by passively watching a television show or playing a video game for the thousandth time.

There is another systemic failure that Reading Across Borders aims to address: the book business and the Internet conundrum. Unlike the music industry, which has adapted to the changes that the digital age has wrought on its business, the book industry has failed to take advantage of the Internet as a constructive tool for the dissemination of literature, and for the last few years has been agonizing over what to do. We believe that the Internet must be not just assimilated but embraced as the very backbone of Reading Across Borders, because the digital platform is the very best one for meeting our project's objectives. At present there exist immense libraries of quality children's books all over the world; they are marvelous but static. There are many admirable collections of children's literature that are published as bound books, but they often never reach the audience they deserve because of the great expenses associated with producing, printing, shipping and storing bound books. Reading Across Borders ventures to break free from the logistical and financial burdens implied by the publication of bound books, by publishing valuable texts on the internet while protecting the legal rights of the copyright owners involved in its projects.

A free-market economy and a sluggish book publishing industry are not solely to blame for the situation that Reading Across Borders aims to address and correct. Though there are exceptions to this rule, there are far too many governments that fail to support cultural endeavors such as the one we are presenting herewith. A surprising number of countries do not even boast a ministry of culture at all, a fact that underscores a very sobering reality: the realm of culture, which is such an ideal space for building bridges, healing wounds and establishing lasting alliances among disparate nations and cultures, has been sorely overlooked, disregarded or inadequately supported on the governmental level. How do we know? A project such as ours should already exist, and it does not.

## Conclusion

Reading Across Borders is based on the premise that culture can go where politics and economics often cannot. It is a project that aspires to open the door to international communication and understanding by providing meaningful, compelling children's literature all around the world, in a multiplicity of languages, from a multiplicity of cultures in the firm belief that children who learn about their fellow man will grow up to be adults who care about their fellow man. Culture and education ministries, to say nothing of book publishers, should have undertaken a project like this a long time ago, not only for its cultural value but also for the potential earnings it could produce if administered properly. But this kind of project is an anomaly in today's world because the kinds of organizations that should sponsor them have failed to adapt to the changes and challenges of our digital, global 21<sup>st</sup> century world. They have failed to see that great literature can also be a very good business. They have failed to see that great authors can open channels of communication that politicians cannot. They have failed to see that the arts in general and literature in particular have the power to make people see the world for what it is and also for what it can be.

Reading Across Borders sees all this. It sees these systemic flaws as challenges that must be undertaken and conquered with an entirely new set of priorities, values and beliefs. The institutions and organizations that determine what kind of literature is published for children are in dire need of a redesign, and it was only by rethinking this system entirely –looking beyond commercial enterprise, beyond governmental institutions, beyond dominant languages and nations-- that Reading Across Borders was conceived, as an organization that will work from the ground up, with local advisors all around the world who can orient our book-selection process away from the hype and background noise of the commercial publishing and entertainment industries, and focused on the shared objectives and values that we have presented in this proposal.

It is our belief that books have been gravely underrepresented in the circuits of international cultural exchange, mainly because traditional book publishing is a cumbersome, high-overhead business that is hard to adapt to the multilingual, multicultural world in which we live. But the Internet has the power to change this, and when it is used intelligently, as a tool for communication, the dissemination of great literature –and the values that are conveyed through it—can become a reality, and that is what Fundación La Fuente aims to achieve through Reading Across Borders.



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