

2024 Hans Christian Andersen Award

Acceptance speech by Winner for Writing, Heinz Janisch

39th IBBY World Congress, Trieste, Italy, 31 August 2024

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I feel deeply honoured to be standing before you, an illustrious assembly of aficionados of children's books, as the winner of the Hans-Christian-Andersen-Award twenty twenty-four. In two thousand I was allowed to take part in the twenty-seventh Congress of the International Board on Books for Young People in Cartagena, Colombia. My *Sonntagsriese* had been on the IBBY honour list.

In the acceptance speech I delivered on behalf of the nominees I recounted an old tale from Ethiopia. This was to morph into the *The Fire*, which was illustrated by Fabricio Vanden Broeck and published by Groundwood Books in Toronto.

Let me briefly recapitulate this story. I have a feeling it's got a lot to do with what moves all of us, who work in the field of children's literature, whether as authors, as illustrators, as translators or in the media.

So what is *The Fire* all about?

There was this man who had worked hard for his master for a long time, he had served him for many years.

One day he walked up to his master and asked him: "What can I do to be free at last?"

His master sneered: "You want to be free? I'll tell you what you can do. See that mountain peak over there? If you manage to survive for an entire night on that peak, naked, no clothes, mind you, you will be free the very next day."

The man takes leave from his best friend, fully aware that this is for ever. How is he supposed to survive that night?

Night falls and the man trudges up the mountain with a heavy heart, higher and higher, until he reaches the peak, which is covered in ice and snow. It is freezing.

His master has sent along two men to make sure there is no foul play and that the man does not seek shelter anywhere.

Naked and utterly defenceless the man stands on the peak. The freezing cold gets to him.

Then all of a sudden the man sees a fire that is being lit on the neighbouring peak. His friend has gone up with a backpack full of logs of wood and has lit a fire for him, a fire at night.

The man looks at the fire, which has been lit for him and it warms him.

His friend makes sure the fire does not go out and this is how the man stays alive in spite of the snow and the ice, with his eyes on the fire that has been lit for him and that lights up the darkness.

As the morning dawns, the man gets down from the mountain.

He is free. He celebrates his newly found freedom with his friend.

I find this tale moving.

Is it not our mission to light a fire for all who need it in the darkness and the cold?

Just as this old story from Ethiopia warms me, all of us may warm others – with our books, with words and pictures – and give them light, comfort, and confidence.

We know how powerful stories and pictures are.

We are the friend who has climbed the mountain and has lit a fire, who makes sure it does not go out, a fire that lights up the night, a fire that radiates warmth.

The late renowned Austrian actor Walter Schmidinger once told me an unforgettable story from his childhood.

After his father had returned from World War Two a physical and mental wreck, the elder Schmidinger was barely able to provide for his family. One day he decided to give his wife and his son a present. He bought wallpaper with a silky shine and used it to decorate the walls of their small flat.

When the sunlight hit the walls, the entire room was filled with a shimmer of light, a lustre that transformed everything and made it seem charged with meaning. To give others the present of a silky shine can make a world of difference.

It does not have to be a great log fire every time – a silky shine, a mysterious shimmer, a realization that life with all its difficulties is always a great and wonderful gift is sufficient.

Every poem, every story, every picture has the potential to be such a shimmer, to radiate such a silky shine, however deep the darkness may be in which it is embedded.

The marvellous embedded in darkness is a subject I have tried to address in *Hans Christian Andersen- Die Reise seines Lebens*. Illustrated by the Slovene artist Maja Kastelic, the book was published by the NordSüd-Verlag in Zurich.

“The most wonderful fairy story is life itself”, Hans Christian Andersen said.

In our book, which Maja Kastelic has realized with elements of the graphic novel, a girl and a woman mount a carriage, in which a man in a hat and black suit is already seated.

The journey at first proceeds in silence until the girl in her blue, rustling dress asks a point-blank question of the sort only children are capable of.

“Are you old?”, she asks the man in the black suit.

The man – Hans Christian Andersen – gives an answer that seems to me to be valid for all of us whose lives centre on children and on children’s literature.

He said, “So you want to know whether I’m old? Well, I’m as young as the boy I was once upon a time, who is still alive within me. And I’m as old as the man who is sitting in front of you.”

I think all of us who are active in the domain of children’s literature are both young and old.

Elsa, the girl in the carriage, has come with a book in her hand, which she proudly shows to the man. She asks him whether he too is into reading.

He loves books, answers the man, to the extent that he is a writer himself. When Elsa learns that he especially loves writing fairy stories, she asks the man to tell her one.

After hardly a moment's thought Hans Christian Andersen says, "If it's alright with you, I'll tell you the fairy story of my life", he says. "I'll tell you a story about a boy who learnt to fly".

The first five pages are illustrated in colour. As you turn the pages, the colour suddenly disappears from the pictures. What's going on?

Hans Christian Andersen, born on the second of April eighteen-o-five, grew up on the Danish island of Fyn – and his was a difficult childhood.

His father was a cobbler working for a pittance, his mother contributed to the household by working as a washerwoman. The family found it difficult to make ends meet. Deprivation was the order of the day, also for little Hans.

Life felt glum and dark.

Colour returns whenever father reads aloud from a collection of fairy stories, the recently published *Folk and Fairy Tales* by brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm.

Hans's father either recites fair tales or stages stories of his own devising with puppets he has made himself – and suddenly a blaze of colour illuminates life, all of a sudden there is fire and silky shine.

Suddenly everything appears to be within the boy's reach. The book of fairy tales has taught him to fly. Little wonder that he will later write *The Flying Trunk* (Den flyvenede Kuffert), which has a boy sitting down on a trunk and taking off.

But despite all this, life holds little light for Hans Christian Andersen – after his father's untimely death his mother can scarcely manage to provide for herself and her son.

When he is fourteen, Hans, with only a handful of coins to his name, climbs onto a coach that is to take him to Copenhagen, the big city where he will try his luck.

And we're back with light and shadow, darkness and colour.

Having seen Copenhagen as a paragon of beauty before his mind's eyes, Hans found it drab and depressing for a boy newly arrived from the country, who had the ambition to become a singer and an actor. As yet he was only looked down upon by everyone.

As luck would have it, however, the young man found someone, the director of the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, who was prepared to give him a break. He trained as an actor and was soon given small parts in theatrical productions.

Colour, however, only truly returned to his life when he became a successful author of fairy tales himself, illustrating them with silhouettes.

From now on light remained a constant in his life, and colours on the pages of the book are here to stay.

Hans tells little Elsa about the fairy tales he has written. All of them have a lot to do with himself.

He is the boy who becomes airborne atop the flying trunk – Hans Christian Andersen spent a great part of his life travelling. He is the Princess on the Pea, given how sensitive he is in many respects. He feels a deep kinship with the ugly duckling, which belittled and despised by the others to begin with, finally turns into a majestic swan.

At the end of the book Elsa and Hans demonstrate their belief in the efficacy of fairy tales and of indulging in wishful thinking – they both close their eyes and the carriage takes off en route to the desired destination...

One of Hans Christian Andersen's contemporaries who lived in the Austrian province Vorarlberg rather than in Denmark was Franz Michael Felder. Born in 1839, this writer, peasant and social revolutionary only lived to the age of 29. He only published a handful of books, such as the 350-page autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*.

Literature Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke has been joined by other renowned literary figures in drawing attention to the power inherent in the books of Franz Michael Felder. In *Ich war ein unruhiger Kopf. Aus dem Leben des Franz Michael Felder* [I was ever restless. From the life of Franz Michael Felder], illustrated by the Vorarlberg artist Sophia Weinmann and published by NordSüd-Verlag Zurich, I tried to get a handle on the life and work of this extraordinary man.

Here, too, darkness and light have an important role to play, as Sophia Weinmann loses no time showing on the cover.

Her ink drawing shows Felder in a dark suit, seated on a chair, immersed in a book.

Colourful books stack up on the floor. Colour also belongs to the two butterflies winging it into the picture, which you cannot overlook, not if you tried.

"A farmer needs to work hard like a horse and has no time for musing about butterflies".

This dictum by Felder's stern elder calls forth in the book many-coloured, beautiful butterflies fluttering from page to page and present throughout – perched on Felder's shoulder or on his head. As incarnations of his luminous fragile soul they waft through the book.

Fragile and vulnerable are qualities that also describe the red poppy flowers on the cover.

They are in bloom for an intense, brief period, in brilliant shades of red, and they fade much too soon and are carried off by the wind...

Felder's life, too, broke into bloom for a short, intense period of time, a moment of incandescence that has left traces to this day.

It goes without saying that I subjected Felder's autobiography to a close reading. In countless nocturnal sessions I copied scores of passages by hand and read them aloud to myself, seeking to capture a tone that would do justice to Felder.

I have the author leap from his own book and recount his life from a first-person-singular perspective. This is a presumption and a literary challenge at one and the same time.

"Of course you can leap from a book. After all, you were entrapped in it somehow when the book was first written".

This is how our book begins, and from the very beginning they are an integral part of it, the books and the butterflies.

Felder lived in the Bregenzerwald, far from Bregenz, the metropolis. He loved to perch on trees and to dream of distant places, rather like young Hans Christian Andersen on his Danish island.

And as was the case with young Hans, it was only through books that colours and diversity entered Felder's life.

An elderly neighbour – Felder calls him the "Lord of Letters" – has a cache a weighty tomes in his house and tells the young Franzmichel fairy stories. Again they do not fail to light up a life.

"I always found a role for Franzmichel in these stories and – hey presto! – the world was a fairy story for me. In a fairy story anything is possible. Any shepherd may become a king. And anyone who keeps their eyes during their walkabouts may find a treasure here and there."

Life on a farm requires every hand for the hard work in the stables and in the fields. Young Franzmichel does not absent himself, yet he reads any books that come his way, for example, those supplied by the village priest.

Regardless of the ambivalence with which Felder's father sees all this, there is this incident which will prove unforgettable for Franz Michael.

"When the annual calendar with its illustrations and stories was delivered to our home, I was allowed to read from it to my father. In the evening, we assembled round the calendar like around a fireplace. We sat in the kitchen and I read out aloud. My tired father listened and was proud of me. Once he even kissed me on the forehead – this had never happened before – out of sheer joy that I was on such good terms with printed letters."

Felder loves reading and treats himself to large doses of it. Little wonder therefore that the brightest page in our book is all about books, an entire shelf filled with books.

Franzmichel has heard of a man in Innsbruck who is rumoured to live in a room full of books. This fabled creature is called a librarian.

When he is asked at school, "What do you want to become later in life?", he answers, much to the bafflement of his fellow students, "I want to become a librarian".

A war breaks out, Felder loses his father.

Together with his mother he must now take charge of the farm, but no matter how hard he is made to work, he always manages to find time for his books, even in the cowshed. He always has paper and a pen at hand. He will write books that are published in far-away places such as Leipzig, he will immerse himself in social work, in his struggle with the "cheese barons", who make profits by exploiting the farmers, he will found a political party to fight poverty and social injustice, he will marry his sweetheart, Nanny, and he will father five children.

An intense, turbulent life.

After his wife's untimely death Franz Michael Felder will write his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*.

Today, the Franz-Michael-Felder-Museum in Schoppernau in Vorarlberg is testament to the writer and social revolutionary; there is a Felder Archive and a committed Felder circle. His books have been reissued for a great number of times. Franz Michael Felder is well known in Vorarlberg and in Austria. It is a shame that he is less well known outside of Austria. Maybe our book will make a difference.

As was the case with Hans Christian Andersen it was the world of books that enlarged his horizon, that made him lift his gaze and that made him inquisitive about this world and the possibilities it had on offer.

When at the end of *I was ever restless* the time has come for Franz Michael to die, he says, „There is no point in becoming grumpy now. This is what I wanted to say.

You may be born into a narrow valley and still have wide-ranging thoughts.
You may work hard and still have eyes for butterflies.
You may remain entirely one with yourself and still be there when others need you.
You may find happiness with people as well as with books. Both are infinitely precious.
Now I have exhausted myself talking but I've still got a few words of advice:
Climb every tree that exults in its tallness.
Open every door that makes you curious.
Raise your head sometimes and check whether there is someone in need.
And above all:
Don't let anyone look down on you, absolutely no one“.

Don't let anyone look down on you, absolutely no one.
I believe this is something all of us, who have a stake in literature and in art for children,
should take to heart.

You have heard me talk about fire, about shimmer, about a silky shine. Let's make our books
this fire, this shimmer, this silky shine for all those in need of warmth, encouragement and
confidence.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to those in charge at IBBY for the award of this
wonderful prize and for the important work IBBY is committed to all over the world. I would
also like to thank Carolina Ballester in particular for expertly taking charge of the organisation
and for the friendly reception we have been given.
I would like to thank the jury for the appreciation they have expressed for my work by
awarding me this prize. It feels good to be seen.
I would like to express my gratitude to all illustrators who have contributed their great pictorial
worlds to my books.
I would like to thank my publishers for their courage to leave the beaten track.
I would also like to extend my thanks to my translators who build bridges over the world and
to all those who further the cause of literature.
Last, not least, a big thank-you to my family. I know, I am in truth a loner with a family. That
both sides may coexist so seamlessly – withdrawal to write and wonderful togetherness – is
something I am profoundly grateful for.

There are lines that have kept me company for many years and that I would like to share
with you as I come to the end of what I have to say.
A poem by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas comprises this incredible sentence:

“The ball I threw
while playing in the park
has not yet reached the ground.“

The ball has not yet come to the end of its trajectory, it is still way up in the air.

The wonderment goes on.

Thank you for your attention.

Heinz Janisch, 31 August 2024