

# The 30th **iBbY** Congress

## Jay Heale's Chinese experience

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### Correspondent

Do not tell me you have already forgotten the 29th International Board On Books for Young People (IBBY) Congress on children's books right here in Cape Town during September 2004 - because our IBBY friends around the world are still talking about it.

The latest Congress was very different: three concentrated days in an underground convention centre in Macau. Quite why anybody decided to hold an international conference on children's literature in the Las Vegas casino centre of China, we never discovered. The conference centre was in Fisherman's Wharf, without windows and decorated with green and gold Roman soldiers. In the same prime waterfront strip are an imitation volcano (with a helter-skelter inside), a Japanese Ninja castle, Aladdin's Palace (with a children's playground) and a ruined Roman amphitheatre (built deliberately to look ruined).

It was prime time for chatting with long-time IBBY friends such as Katherine Paterson (United States of America), Tayo Shima (Japan), Catherine Mitchell (Canada), Joan Glazer (United States of America). Margaret Mahy was there with a support group of New Zealand buddies who sang a Maori song when she was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen medal for writing. The medal-winning German illustrator, Wolf Erlbruch, was not able to attend but a video film showed his pleasure.

We had two 13-course Chinese dinners, the first one heralded by a parade of cooks and waiters led by the Chief Chef, carrying platters of roast suckling pig with flashing electric eyes! Curiously, the speeches took place while the (lengthy) meal was served, so there was much muttering and munching which made it hard to listen. One got the impression that the act of making a speech was considered more important than what was said. Certainly, there was a line of dignitaries on display.

The very first keynote presentation was by Brian Wafawarowa, director of New Africa Books and president of the African Publishers Network. This was one of several indications that IBBY was directing much more attention to Africa since the 2004 Congress in Cape Town. Indeed, I was warmed and delighted by the number of people who congratulated me on our South African achievements, calling the 2004 Congress 'inspiring' and 'stimulating' as well as highly enjoyable.

Macau was a smaller Congress - just over 300 people during three days, whereas we had 583 delegates for four and a half days. They had

copied some of our innovations including having young people to present the entertainment.

Though one lot of teenagers intoning Chinese opera was really enough! For me, the highlight was easily their Children's Forum. Seventeen selected primary and high school pupils presented their (highly rehearsed) views on why they liked reading and books. I started to get bored with variations on 'Books are good for you' when a blind boy of about eleven was helped on to the stage. Overcoming his obvious fright, he told us how it was difficult to read books in Braille (even while he could get them) because they did not indicate the subtly different tones so vital in the Chinese language. Then he played, on an electronic piano, some Mozart with increasing confidence. I gave him a one-man standing ovation. To my surprise, his friends led him over to sit beside me - and as I tried to convey my admiration, I found people were taking photographs...

There is now a Virtual Exhibition of African children's books easily accessible via Internet at [www.ibby.org](http://www.ibby.org) - very useful to check your stock of junior Africana - and it will be updated regularly, I'm told.

For the record: the new IBBY President is Patricia Aldana of Canada, and the new Andersen Jury President is Zohreh Ghaeni of Iran. The 2008 Congress will be held in Copenhagen, Denmark - after that 2010 in Santiago de Compostela, and 2012 in London.

Before I flew back, I endured (and occasionally enjoyed) a three day tour in the grip of the Chinese tourism industry. However, it meant that I tasted the splendours of the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and the incredible Terracotta Army which is still being excavated. Faded grandeur in places but kites floating over the Temple of Heaven in a sunset sky was a wondrous sight. In between there were obligatory visits to a jade emporium, a lacquer factory and a Cloisonné workshop with attached tourist supermarket. Meals included multi-flavoured dumplings and Peking duck: all served with a revolving circular plate loaded with dishes from which you helped yourself. Lots of noodles and vegetables.

Altogether, an experience never to be forgotten - even if 'holiday' is not the right word! Why not make plans to join IBBY in Copenhagen in September 2008? Details of the next Congress at [www.ibby2008.dk](http://www.ibby2008.dk)

