

NANCY LARRICK TELLS OF EARLY YEARS AT IRA

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by Nancy Larrick

I came into the International Reading Association via one of its parent organizations, the ICIRI (International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction), which I had joined in 1949. That was the year Nila Banton Smith became president of ICIRI, and shortly thereafter, she asked me to chair the Publications Committee and edit *The Bulletin of the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction*. Now, some 45 years later, I marvel that Nila Smith turned to me--and even more, that I had the courage to take on such a job.

At that time I was editing a group of children's classroom magazines, the *Young America Readers*, and shortly went on to become associate editor of children's books at Random House. I had been a classroom teacher in my home town in Virginia, with a bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature, but no education with a capital E.

In the ICIRI I found myself working with the giants in the field of the teaching of reading. They were from the great universities and reading clinics. I soon learned that many of these people were creators of the basal reader series I had heard of but never used. My experience had also been with books and children's reading. I had lived and worked with such popular trade books as *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley, *All About Dinosaurs* by Roy Chapman Andrews, and *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfield. I knew Dr. Seuss but not Dr. Gates and Dr. Gray.

The welcome and support I had from these greats of the reading field was marvelous. Even on short notice, Dr. Gray, Dr. Witty, Dr. Sheldon and others would send me an article for the ICIRI Bulletin, or give me their reaction to a new proposal. I couldn't have had more generous cooperation.

My first issue of the Bulletin (October 1950), like its predecessors, was mimeographed on 8 1/2 x 11 sheets, hand stapled. Not very classy looking, but it brought favorable comments, nonetheless.

But the title worried us. "The Bulletin of the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction" sounded too formal, too distant. Certainly not reader-friendly for the classroom teachers we hoped to reach. I suggested we make it simpler, more personal, and just call it *The Reading Teacher*. The Board approved, and the new title was used for the first time on the issue of September 1951. It was well received and has been used ever since.

At the same time we were struggling to work our way up from office mimeographing to office multilith and finally on September 1952, to what we called "real printing." Now instead of the standard office paper size (8 1/2 x 11), we went to a 6 x 9 page with two columns, still with self-cover. The issue of May 1953 showed a giant step forward--we had a lemon yellow cover imprinted in black and were ecstatic!

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By 1953, The Reading Teacher seemed to be well established as a professional journal to read and to watch. But I found myself at the crossroads. I was holding down a demanding editorial job at Random House. At the same time I was trying to write the dissertation for my EdD at NYU, and always I had The Reading Teacher assignments hanging over me! Time was running out at NYU, so rather than take an ABD and be stuck with it for life, I resigned as editor of The Reading Teacher in May 1954, and pushed through my dissertation to graduate in June 1955.

By the end of 1955, the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction (ICIRI) merged with the National Association for Remedial Teaching (NART) to form the International Reading Association (IRA). The Reading Teacher became the official publication of the new organization.

As might be expected, the IRA built on several significant principles established in the early years of the two parent organizations. One of these dealt with membership. Who would be eligible to join the IRA? In 1952, the assembly of the ICIRI had removed from its statement of purpose the wording that limited its services to "all English-speaking people." Officially it became a multi-lingual organization. From the beginning, the IRA was established to serve people of all languages and all nations. However, questions arose when state and local councils sought affiliation with the new IRA. One state reading council admitted only white members. A county reading council in another state restricted membership to remedial reading specialists. Classroom teachers, librarians, authors, editors, and parents were ineligible.

From the beginning, several influential ICIRI members were African Americans. Many were classroom teachers, parents, authors, and librarians. Without hesitation the board of the new IRA declared what might be called an Open Door policy: Anyone interested in the improvement of reading would be welcomed as a member regardless of race, nationality, language, or professional training. Affiliated reading councils, such as those of state and county, would be expected to maintain this Open Door policy as well.

It was a momentous decision for that period--just two years after the Supreme Court had ruled racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. I don't recall anyone raising objections to the Board's ruling, but several segregated groups seeking affiliation were told firmly that they would have to mend their ways to be part of the IRA. I do recall, however, that the Board was vigilant in its determination to see that non-white members would receive full privileges of membership. Several years later when it was proposed that the annual IRA conference be scheduled in a previously segregated city, questions were raised. Would our non-white members be welcomed in the hotels and restaurants? Would taxi drivers serve them courteously?

Months in advance of that national conference, the IRA president visited the site to meet with local committee members as well as representatives of hotel, restaurant and taxi associates to win assurance that all IRA delegates would be received with the same Open Door hospitality. Their pledge was given, and no violations were reported. I have always been very proud of that IRA president's vigilance.

The first annual conference of the IRA was held in Chicago on May 11, 1956, at the old

Morris Hotel. The organization was in its infancy (only four months and eleven days old). Mailing lists were still in a state of chaos. The organization was operating from one corner of Don Cleland's desk at the University of Pittsburgh.

Despite these valid reasons for postponing this first meeting, Dr. William S. Gray, the first president, insisted that we must have a national conference in the Spring of 1956 and publish the proceedings of its various sessions. His determination was unshakable.

Dr. Gray recruited students and colleagues of the University of Chicago who hand-addressed announcements, processed registration, worked out hotel plans, scheduled speakers, invited exhibitors and helped them set up. Facilities were arranged for 1,000 registrants. More than 2,000 showed up. Major speakers gave their presentations twice to accommodate the crowds. An air of excitement and enthusiasm prevailed.

The International Reading Association was a winner! And it was Dr. Gray who did it--steadily pushing ahead, insisting we take risks to meet brave goals and then making it happen. But the stunning success of that first conference did not wipe out the disturbing facts we had to face. Our office was in chaos because of lack of space and lack of money. In the first six months we had incurred a deficit (something like \$6,000, I think, which seemed much bigger in 1956 than it does in 1996). This distressed Dr. Gray, who was a meticulous business man. He proposed that he write a personal check to cover that figure. Members of the Board protested. He insisted. Then I pointed out that this would set a bad precedent--certainly not one I could face as the incoming president. This time Dr. Gray gave in to the Board.

We were still faced with Dr. Gray's determination to publish the proceedings of that first IRA conference. But publication costs money which we didn't have. I proposed that we turn to two publishers of reading materials for children: Scholastic Magazines and My Weekly Reader and ask for their support. Scholastic gave an immediate and affirmative reply. Their president, Maurice Robinson, and their editor-in-chief, Jack Lippert, both good friends of mine, offered a generous proposal: If the IRA would do all of the editing and proofreading, Scholastic would design the book and handle all production detail and costs. Both IRA and Scholastic would advertise the book; Scholastic would fill the orders. In case of a deficit, Scholastic agreed to absorb it. If there was a profit, it would be turned over to the IRA. And there was a profit! This generous arrangement, which continued for a number of years, was a lifesaver for the IRA.

Immediately after the first IRA Conference in 1956, we began work on the 1957 conference to be held in New York City. As the new president, I had to plan and implement the program. Dr. Albert Harris, the President Elect, was re-sponsible for advertising, registration, hotel space, exhibits, and finances. With both of us in New York, we could confer easily and frequently--and we did. No one could have been a more gracious and efficient partner than Bert Harris. I knew then that I was very lucky.

Immediately after that first annual conference, Dr. Gray was urging me to get the program lined up for 1957. I was overwhelmed by the prospect and appealed to him for suggestions. One day as we crossed Fifth Avenue on our way to a restaurant in New York, he tossed me a challenge I could not resist: "Call on your friends in the publishing world," he said. "Make use of your contacts here in New York, and make your unique contribution."

So I turned to friends at the Children's Book Council and the National Book Committee. I

conferred with children's librarians and, of course, my colleagues at NYU, where I had taught on occasion and had earned my doctorate. Each suggestion seemed to spark another. As excitement grew I began to wonder if these proposals would be well received by the rank and file of the reading teachers. Were we going too far with our innovations?

I needed advice. So I invited twelve or fifteen prominent IRA members in the New York area to meet with me one evening at Random House, then located in the magnificent old Villard mansion back of St. Patrick's Cathedral. We met in the imposing office of the Random House president, Bennet Cerf, then an extremely popular TV commentator. (His large and luscious photo of Marilyn Monroe set us off.) I remember that Jeanne Chall was one of the group as well as Alvina Burrows and Jeanette Veatch of NYU, and Mary Gaver of Rutgers University. Would they be receptive to program ideas such as these: (1) Bring in Phyllis Fenner, a magical storyteller and school librarian from Manhasset, with a busload of her fourth graders for a classroom session where children became involved in reading through storytelling; (2) Have another classroom session with Ruth Strang leading a group of teenagers in a discussion of books and reading; and (3) For the final session have a Book and Author Luncheon with authors and illustrators of children's books telling of their books.

My advisory panel gave me just what I needed: enthusiastic backing and more ideas. Even the Book and Author Luncheon, which I was fearful would be too much, was heartily endorsed. (When the time came, I got so carried away that I invited four speakers for that luncheon: Marguerite deAngeli, May McNeer and Lynd Ward, and a fourth now forgotten.) The Book and Author Luncheon was well received by 890 guests, and has been repeated at every IRA conference since that first one in 1956.

My early experience as a classroom teacher in Virginia and now my involvement in the production and use of children's literature in the classroom and in the home had strongly influenced my philosophy of education and still does. Yet I soon discovered that publishers exhibiting at those early IRA conferences were not displaying trade books for children. As I visited the exhibits of such firms as Macmillan, Doubleday and Harper, which published both text books and tradebooks for children, I found no trade books on display. Yet these companies were publishing some of the most distinguished gems of children's literature. Why? "Oh, we only exhibit those books for librarians, not teachers. Trade books are in a different division," I was told. It made no sense to me.

At Random House, where I was an editor of children's books, we had many titles which were perfect for classroom reading: *The California Gold Rush*, *The Pony Express*, *Paul Revere's Ride*, and *Custer's Last Stand* on the non-fiction list as well as stories by Noel Streatfield, Walter Farley, and on and on.

Why didn't Random House exhibit these books at such conferences as the IRA? I decided to try my idea on Lew Miller, our sales manager, who took my boss and me to lunch at "The 21 Club" to talk it over. I thought it would be a shoo-in. But, even the atmosphere of "The 21 Club" didn't soften the blow. "Nancy," he said, "you don't buy shoes for baby on the books you sell to schools." The subject was closed.

After attending another season of reading conferences where only textbooks were exhibited, I decided I'd rig up an exhibit table on my own for the next conference in New York. I measured, then shopped for material in Macy's basement and, with the help of my apartment-mate's sewing machine made a pleated table cloth to fit, created posters from color proofs and jackets and was in business--a Random House exhibit without the blessing or the

financing of Random House. And it was very popular! I think it was the first exhibit of trade books for children at an IRA conference.

Now at every conference there are many gorgeous professional exhibits of trade books for children. By this time a lot of shoes for baby have been bought on the sale of trade books to schools.



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