The experience of traveling to Cape Town, South Africa, to attend the 29th International Books for Young People (IBBY) Congress in September 2004 will remain with me for the rest of my life. Not only was it an honour to represent Australian Catholic University (ACU National), it was a privilege to have been chosen as the inaugural recipient of the Frater Scholarship.

My time there was spent not only attending the Congress over six days but also visiting schools, libraries, museums, art galleries and the South African Parliament. I was especially fortunate to have visited South Africa during the 10th anniversary of democracy and to witness many poignant exhibitions detailing the oppressive years of Apartheid rule, others celebrating the newfound freedoms of the nation, and many highlighting the social and economic challenges facing the new South Africa.

The Congress, the first time held on the continent of Africa, hosted over 700 delegates from over 60 countries. Speakers included experts in the fields of children’s literature and illustration, children’s libraries, book publishing, education and child psychology. A highlight of the Congress was the awarding of the Hans Christian Anderson Medals for best author and illustrator. Winning author, Martin Waddell from Ireland and illustrator, Max Velthuijs from the Netherlands, spoke of their work, creative inspiration and the need to present words and pictures that only stimulate children but assist them in gaining a fuller understanding of our diverse world.

I met and spoke with many interesting and committed individuals from all over the world and as a result broadened my outlook as a teacher on the way educators can more effectively present challenging materials to students. I saw the work being done in community libraries throughout Cape Town, especially in the poorer black townships of Langa and Delft where students, unable to access computers at home, are given free internet time in addition to extensive learning support.
As a Master of Education graduate (specialising in Literacy Education) I was invited to conduct two writing sessions with primary aged children at Delft Public Library. I was surprised at the children’s difficulty in expressing their creativity but impressed with their ability to take on new ideas and give it their best. The supervising teachers present were keen to share these sessions and subsequent classes were organised at Delft Primary School with the Special Education teacher and her classes.

During my school visit to Isikokelo Primary School in the township area of Khayelitsha, I had the opportunity to read and share an advance copy of ‘Jungle Drums’, (kindly provided by Penguin Books Australia) the most recent picture book by Graham Base. Set in Africa about a colourful collection of African animals, it was a sad revelation that only a handful of the class had ever seen a real elephant, giraffe, warthog, lion or zebra. They greatly enjoyed the story and the activities that followed - the story now has its place in the Year Six book collection.

Most importantly, I witnessed the difficult conditions under which many teachers work, and the enormous social problems that impact upon daily school routines. Crime, drugs, HIV Aids and poverty have left many children in dire circumstances needing additional support both in class and at home. I spoke with many teachers and parents trying at best to survive in a new economy with limited resources.

Since returning to Australia I have kept close contact with two teacher librarians in the Cape Town area and shared with them a number teaching and learning practices as well as giving links to a number of useful Australian education websites. I have also written a feature article for the NSW Independent Education Magazine (IE) on working conditions for teachers in South Africa and made contact with a number of delegates in India, the West Indies, Palestine and Ireland, sharing ideas about children’s literature and writing.

My time in South Africa has left many impressions. The sight of Table Mountain with its famous ‘tablecloth’ cloud hovering above and ‘The Twelve Apostles’, great, mountainous sentinels stretching along the southern African coastline, provide Cape Town with a dramatic and unforgettable physicality. The people, Africans, Europeans, Malays, Indians and Chinese, their varied cultures, religions, languages and cuisines, come together in an exciting mix of customs and traditions. The music on the streets, the bustle in the market places, the banter in the packed to capacity buses and the pride so many take in being citizens of the new South Africa add to these lively and lasting impressions.

I am most grateful to Bob and Margaret Frater for sponsoring this scholarship and to the Bob and Margaret Frater Scholarship Selection Committee. I also thank the Catholic Education Office, Sydney for their support during my visit to South Africa. It is my hope that future candidates of this award are able to gain as much knowledge and pleasure as I received from this rewarding learning experience afforded me.