

BOOKS AND CLOUDS

Review by Lynda Sullivan

Books and Clouds (Libros y Nubes) (2013), Director: Pier Paolo Giarolo, Italy / France, 85 minutes. View the trailer at: <https://vimeo.com/82825239> (accessed 21 August 2017).

Books and Clouds (Libros y Nubes), is a documentary film by Italian director Pier-Paolo Giarolo which beautifully portrays the literacy and cultural movement of the Network of Rural Libraries of Cajamarca (*Red de Bibliotecas Rurales de Cajamarca*). Based in the northern highlands of Peru, where people and books wander above the clouds, this movement that spans nearly half a century has worked tirelessly to promote not only literacy but also the valorisation of the ancient Andean wisdom, traditionally passed along the generational chain orally and now captured and imprinted in books.

Giarolo's film introduces us to Sonia, a young girl who rejoices in reading and makes frequent trips to Tio Manuel, her uncle and her librarian, with earnest requests for new additions. We then follow two women, Nancy and Dina - mothers, farmers, librarians - as they make trips to the city to exchange their community's collection of read books for new ones. The rural libraries may consist of a bunch of books in a saddlebag, but they are kept vibrant by the constant exchange between libraries. The librarians are elected by the community and, as with all in the rural libraries network spanning 500 communities across the region of Cajamarca, are volunteers.

In the global North, reading is more often than not an individual act, perhaps reflecting the prominent tendency towards individualism in society. In the Andes, however, reading is often carried out in a collective, mirroring the strong presence of community in the local culture. Engaging in reading circles enables those who cannot read to become 'listening readers'; the door is opened and they can step into the world within a book's pages despite being illiterate. It also encourages literacy in a more informal, gentle,

culturally acceptable manner, especially amongst older women. We experience a reading circle in Nancy's house as the family gathers round the dinner table to listen and imagine together.

Also present at Nancy's table is Alfredo, co-founder of the network, and the person responsible for the production process of the books. Soon after *Bibliotecas Rurales* came into being the network members came to realise that by accepting into circulation any book that came their way they were actually perpetuating colonisation, turning themselves into its agents, as printed 'knowledge' was overwhelmingly occidental. What seemed to merit reproduction was the 'foreign', thereby depreciating what was indigenous. To address this imbalance, the network began the process of collecting testimonies of local wisdom and practices, transforming the spoken word into print, and circulating these books among the libraries. Communities thereby stepped away from simply being passive receivers of other culture's knowledge and started actively promoting their own.

One project within *Bibliotecas Rurales* based on this premise is the *Enciclopedia Campesina* project. We see Alfredo firstly collect the material, teasing out old tales of morality and beliefs from community elders, or observing and recording the particulars of expert skills such as weaving, farming, pottery-making etc. We accompany him as he transforms the oral testimony into text and images and then books, which are collected by coordinators such as Nancy and Dina and taken back to the communities and into the waiting hands of expectant readers, such as young Sonia.

We see how the books come alive when Sonia's grandmother is struck down with the mysterious illness known as the *malhora*. Over thousands of years the Andean communities have been observing the curative nature of plants, learning the properties of this extensive medicine cabinet that sprouts from the Earth - 'the most ancient book in the world'. Sonia opens her ears to the echo of her ancestors as she searches Tio Manuel's library and finds what she's looking for in the book entitled 'Traditional

Medicine’. Grandfather Pascual and Sonia go in search of the appropriate sacred plants and, with the help of a local healer, grandmother is treated.

The fact that books can aid the cultural affirmation of the Cajamarcan people and be used as a tool in the fight for a more just world may be seen as surprising for many who remember how the written word made its entrance in this part of the world. The invasion of Cajamarca on 16 November 1532 was preceded by the reading of *The Requirement* by the Spanish priest Valverde, a document which informed the indigenous population and Inca Atahualpa that they should surrender all their possessions, land and people to the invaders, otherwise they would be taken anyway and their women and children would be raped and murdered; a fate that would be blamed on the Indians for not surrendering. They were also required to convert to Christianity, to follow the very church that gave permission for their annihilation, and presented Atahualpa with the Bible. He reportedly threw the book on the ground, which was the spark used by Valverde to call for the massacre that followed; with guns and horses the Spanish killed more than 10,000 unarmed people in one afternoon.

For most of the next 500 years the local indigenous population were subjugated and suppressed. A new society was formed based on the premise that the locals were inferior and the invaders unquestionably superior. A sustained and prolific attempt to annihilate the local culture, belief system, values, language and sense of self-worth was undertaken. A system was set up to indoctrinate the youth and shame them away from their roots: the education system. This context tells us what a huge task it was for the Cajamarcan people to regain ownership of their story, to resume the right to educate their own children with indigenous form and history, to re-install pride in their identity, and take the written word out of the hands of the colonisers and turn it into a tool for liberation. As Alfredo, the co-founder of *Bibliotecas Rurales*, says in the film: ‘A spade can be used to plough furrows or dig graves; the book, previously a source of foreign aggression, emerges as another well from which to drink’.

This film embraces many themes that could be further explored in global education initiatives including: literacy movements; community education; cultural affirmation in the face of colonisation; indigenous knowledge and its oral transmission; volunteerism and community cohesion. *Books and Clouds* is expertly made and poetically composed, and has won eleven international awards. It has been screened in cinemas and on television across Europe and would be a useful teaching aid for global educators in all education sectors.

If you would like more information about *Libros y Nubes* please contact sullivanlynda@gmail.com.

Lynda Sullivan is a writer and rights activist. She has just come back to Ireland after spending five years accompanying the indigenous campesino communities of the northern highlands of Peru as they resisted the imposition of a mega mining project that would destroy their water supply and ancestral lands. She also became part of the movement to strengthen and rescue the Andean culture, which is living the alternative to extractive capitalism.