

Lisa Baermann – Senior Director of Development & Alumni Relations

Lisa Baermann: Welcome parents and friends! We are pleased to be with you today as we introduced Concordia's first masterclass. The idea of masterclass came about as Suki and I visited faculty members regarding the Concordia fund project. We realize just how packed our faculty is with noteworthy employees who are accomplished musicians, artists, composers, authors, and experts in their field, who share their experiences everyday with our children. We wanted to share some of their experiences with you as well. So masterclass is a project just designed for you, our Concordia parents.

Lisa Baermann: To launch our first master class, we are sitting down with Lisa Toner. Lisa is our Elementary School and Early Childhood librarian and we are so glad to be spending time with her.

Lisa, thank you for being with us! Obviously we are sitting in the middle of your library, and you are Concordia's EC and elementary school librarian. Can you tell me a little bit more about your career and how you came to Concordia?

Lisa Toner -- Author and Elementary School/Early Childhood Librarian

Lisa Toner: I've always been a librarian. I qualified with my masters in librarianship, and I have always worked in an educational setting. I spent ten years working as a children's librarian in London, in the city of Westminster, where I worked largely with the schools that came into the library. I then moved into the University of Cumbria, and I was a university librarian for nineteen years, dealing with bigger kids and the universities. Then I decided to move to international schools, and I was for two years in the Shrewsbury International School in Bangkok before moving to China, and I ended up here in Concordia in Shanghai.

Lisa Baermann: When I heard you had authored forty books, I thought I wanted to know more. Can you tell us a little bit more about the books that you have written?

Lisa Toner: I began writing in 1993. Between 1993 and 2008, I think I had just over 40 books published. Largely they are picture books, but I have also written quite a few chapter books for the seven to nine year old age range. I have one teenage novel, and I even wrote a script for a BBC television story time program.

Lisa Baermann: I understand the desire to want to have books for your children. What made you feel like there was something missing that you thought I'm just going to write it on my own.

Lisa Toner: It didn't always work quite like that. The first book that I wrote was because there was a gap in the market that I was missing for my children. That was the alphabet book. After that one had been published, I was writing as I was inspired. So stories would come to me, and story ideas would pop into your head. Random moments, and you might write it for any age group. For whatever the story you have, and been inspired by. Also, publishers would commission books for specific topics or specific age ranges. I was commissioned to write a series of phonic books, for instance. So it works both ways.

Lisa Baermann: Your books cut across genres, styles, ages. Do they reflect the stages that your children were growing through? Or were you inspired in some other ways?

Lisa Toner: So, when I wrote the teenage novel, my children were not teenagers. But for some of the other books, it did picture their age groups, but that is just random, really.

Lisa Baermann: I know that Dr. Gerdes is a fan of your books. In fact, I believe it's how I found out from your proliferous work. What was it like to come to Concordia and find your books in your library?

Lisa Toner: I was absolutely delighted to find the books were here! If I'm honest, whenever we go aboard and visit a library, I would take a sneak peak of the catalog and just to check if any of my books were in that library. Now, unfortunately, some of my books are now out of print, or not available in China, but we do have a number of the picture books here. I have been able to use them and read them to our children here.

Lisa Baermann: Lisa, how did you start writing? What was the impetus?

Lisa Toner: One of my eldest sons was learning his alphabet. I was very frustrated because the alphabet books weren't available to me at the time. They were quite boring. So they would start with A, and was usually apple, and they would go through to Z, and it was usually zebra. To get the repetition, which is the educational value, you would have to go back to the beginning, and it was back to "apple" again. That wasn't really as exciting, as engaging, as I was looking for. So I came up with the idea of having multiple alphabets in one book and that's how *Amazing Alphabets*, the concept was born. *The Amazing Alphabet* has eight alphabets in one book. So, eight different thematic A to Zs, and the ideas were taken to a publisher, who snapped it up, because it was an original idea for an alphabet book concept. Once you have one book published, it's much easier to get others published because you then have a name in the market. The first one is the A to Z of children's names, and then you have an alphabet of things in the home, and then you have an alphabet of musical instruments, and

then you have an alphabet of things outdoors, animals... Eight different topics, so eight different alphabets. Once you have been accepted by one publisher, you can then have ideas and type them to other publishers. If you have already been proven to be accepted within the publishing world, it is easier to negotiate with publishers to have other ideas accepted.

Lisa Baermann: I can see that your role as a parent influences your writing. Can you share a little bit more about that?

Lisa Toner: I have always been passionate about reading for pleasure, both as a parent when I was encouraging my children, and as a professional in the library world when I'm encouraging all the children to read for pleasure.

Lisa Baermann: Can you tell me a little bit more about your character Fran?

Lisa Toner: I have two books with the same characters Fran and her dog Fred, who have a really lovely relationship. She's quite a corky little character, and I actually had the idea first of all about the flower. For young children to learn about what flowers need to grow, and they don't need human food, which was quite amusing. I used the name Fran because of the alliteration with flowers and the name Fred. The story started with "Fran found a flower pot filled with soil." So you got lovely language, rhythm, and rhyme within the sentence structures, and that goes throughout the book. That's a lot of alliteration using the letter "f".

Lisa Baermann: Series books are really popular. Of course, the most popular has to be Harry Potter. Do you see another phenomena coming out of an author today like that?

Lisa Toner: J.K.Rowling was amazing! I was working in the children's library at the time, and she just took the world by storm, and she is credited really with raising the level of children's literature and children's reading. I have actually met her, she's published by Bloomsbury who also published Fran's *Flower*, and I was in the publisher's office, looking at some of the artworks for *Fran's Friend* when she was in there talking about her third book. So we have shared an editor.

Lisa Baermann: I love reading, and my kids love reading. Can you tell us why reading for pleasure is important in addition to just making us happy?

Lisa Toner: There's been quite a lot of research on this very topic, and I'd like to draw your attention to one in particular. It was a longitudinal study in the UK, which actually proved that children

who read for pleasure consistently do better in their exams results later on in their school years across the curriculum, even in maths, which is brilliant! So children who read consistently for pleasure, read the benefits of that educationally, and it has been proven that this effect can be up to 4 times as effective than when they have a parent who has a higher degree.

Lisa Baermann: Wow! That's significant! Raising scores by four times!

Lisa Toner: So teachers are very influential in this, but largely their role is about teaching the mechanics of reading. So they are the ones who teach the ABC, they teach phonics, site words, and they do the leveling. Librarians are very important as well. We have knowledge of a vast range of genres, nonfiction topics, and we know new authors that are coming up, and we can connect children to the resources that are right for them, introduce them to new things and help, challenge them and move them on.

Lisa Baermann: So how can we encourage children to read books for pleasure?

Lisa Toner: So the parents have perhaps the single most important role in influencing their children to become passionate readers.

Lisa Baermann: What are some things that their parents can do to encourage their children to read for pleasure?

Lisa Toner: So parents are, in fact, a role model, and they can be the single biggest influence in children learning to read passionately for pleasure. And they do this because children will follow their examples. If children see their parents reading for pleasure, and reading significantly, then they will follow that example. And if you can share the passion you have for reading with your child, that creates a special bond, and it really helps to make reading for pleasure much easier.

Lisa Baermann: What are some specific things that parents can do to encourage reading?

Lisa Toner: Reading is reading is reading. It doesn't REALLY matter what the format is, whether it's a print book, whether it's a magazine, whether it's an e-book, or whether it's an audiobook. Personally, I enjoy listening to audiobooks. I like somebody reading a story to me. I understand that parents do have some concerns about screen time, but there is a very big difference between just playing computer games and reading an ebook. In fact, as children through the educational system into middle and high school and then until university, reading e-books will become more required. So the more practice they can have in navigating through e-book, and using them, the easier they will find that resource to use

when they get higher up into their school life. So, Concordia subscribes to a number of databases, and there are several of them which cover reading materials. For very young children, in early childhood, we have Tumble Books, and Tumble Books are really great, because they would often have the words underneath the book, and a little ball would bounce over the words they highlight. The little child can follow the text as it is being read to them. Then for Grade two and up, we have SORA and Big Universe. SORA is the place to go for all our fiction books; Big Universe is the place to go for nonfiction topics. These are all in MackinVIA, and most parents should have a card which tells you how to get into MackinVIA. If anybody is struggling, I'm more than willing to help you navigate through those sources and sort your passwords out. Please do just contact me. I'll be happy to help. (Lisa Toner's email: lisa.toner@concordiashanghai.org)

Lisa Baermann: As a parent, I could read and read to my children, but I found it more difficult to go beyond simply reading. What kind of advice do you have for parents?

Lisa Toner: So, have a lot of books available for your children to choose from. Variety is very important. Have different formats, have different topics, different genres, different reading levels... Just have them accessible, so the children can pick and choose from the books as they want to. They may want to try a harder book, or they may want to try a different format sometime. I think it's quite important to be comfortable when you're reading to make that a pleasurable experience. So it's a really good idea to have a book nook, and it could be a blanket fort, or a space in the bedroom that's really their space where they can cuddle up on a cushion, settle down, and have some reading time. But the very important part of this is for the parents to read to the child. It is all about the child reading themselves and decoding the text. That is a fact, but the probably more important in encouraging reading for pleasure, is for the child to be read to. Many parents might do this at bedtime, because this needs to be a consistent part of the routine. Read to your child, perhaps a little bit above their own reading level, challenge them, stretch them. You can choose the stories, or you can negotiate that between you, but make that reading time fun. And there are several ways to bring those stories to life. You can use voices. So if one of the characters is particularly wicked, you can use that cagily voice. Or if it's a grumpy giant, it can be a grumpy voice. You can use pace. So, you can speak more quickly when things are getting exciting, and slow things down if it's something sad happening. Or you may use a pause for dramatic effect. And those techniques bring the story to life, and they help to make the whole reading experience much more enjoyable for the child.

Michael Rosen, who is the author of "*We're Going on a Bear Hunt*." His father read to him and his brother when they were teenagers, and even into their forties when they would go home for a family visit. The father would sit and read to the whole family. And don't stop! Don't stop! It is a pleasure to be read to. Keep that going.

Lisa Baermann: What are some specific things that parents can do to encourage reading?

Lisa Toner: You can talk about a character. You can ask the child whether they thought the character made the right decisions, whether they thought the ending was right, whether they might make a different choice if they have been involved in the story. You can look at the pictures. Nowadays, illustrators provide a wealth of details in the artworks. There's lots of things that can be used as discussion pointers. You can look for particular colors; you can look for objects in the picture. You can predict what's going to happen on the next page. Sometimes the illustrators will use text in a particular shape, and you can discuss that and trace your fingers around where the words are going. Just to get involved in the book. You can also create reading moments in everyday life. You can read the menu in a restaurant; you can read adverts; you can read receipts in a shop; you can read anything and just create daily small moments for reading. Do get relatives involved in reading to your children, but that should be as well as and not instead of you reading. Reading to your child consistently is the most important thing.

Lisa Baermann: I think that my son has read Harry Potter at least ten times. How do you feel about rereading?

Lisa Toner: Very important. There is absolutely no problem with repetition. We all love to revisit things that are pleasurable to us. I'm sure you know you have a favorite piece of music, and you are very very happy to listen to it multiple times. The same goes for books. I know it can be a little frustrating for the parents to have to keep going over and over and over several books, but it is very beneficial for the child. When I was a toddler, I had a favorite book. It was "Andy Pandy and the Snowman," and I would ask for this book ad nauseum. My mother sometimes tries to cut corners, and I knew this word. I couldn't read myself, but I knew the story, and I would say, "It's not the narrow stairs! It's the narrow winding stairs!" So, I would correct it, but that was a really important part of my reading development. I still remember that book to this day. So, please let your child read things multiple times.

Lisa Baermann: What are some of your favorite authors?

Lisa Toner: My very favourite author has to be Diana Wynne Jones. She is a British author. She is, unfortunately, dead now, but she was the forerunner to J.K. Rowling. Her books were about magic and mystery, and she was a very big influence on the Harry Potter series. I think *Howl's Moving Castle* has to be my old time favorite book.

Lisa Baermann: We are sitting in the midst of the library, and I wish that parents would be able to see where we are right now in the new renovations. You had some very specific goals in mind when you were developing the plan for this. Could you share some of those?

Lisa Toner: So I was trying to make books more accessible to the children. Particularly for our younger readers. So a lot of the books were spined on, which were very easy for me to find things, but less easy for the children to navigate through because the very little ones can't read the

titles on the spine. What they look at is the picture on the front cover. So I have tried to, within the space available, make it possible for more books to face front materials. So you can see behind me, we have displays, and that means that I can theme displays, and rotate them on a weekly basis. These have been very successful because children would choose books from the displays that they would never find in a tightly packed shelf. It's about trying to connect the children and the books together, most successfully. So, this is a piece of furniture which really ended up for preschool and pre-k children, and they have that board book collection, which I have been expanding and increasing. The kids can sit in there when they are browsing and looking for their books. I chose a dragon because we are in China. I had a customer made for us.

Lisa Baermann: Just like some of the concepts that you employed in the library renovation, are there ideas and thoughts behind what parents can do at home to create a physical space for children that's encouraging for reading?

Lisa Toner: You can create book nooks; you can carve out time for reading to your child. For instance, you can let babies play with books. Even very very young children can benefit from handling books. It is probably a good idea to let them have board books or cloth books or bath books because they put them in their mouths. By handling the books, they are learning the mechanics of books and how to turn the pages, and that's a very important part of their reading development. But parents can also visit book shops or libraries on the weekends. That can be a treat. You can give books as presents for birthdays. Simple little things that show children the books and reading are important to you as a parent.

Lisa Baermann: I remember when my daughter was about six or seven years old, we were living with my husband's grandmother. She ventured into the cellar. It was a dark and musty place, but set up down there, grandma had a range of all of the books from her children's youth. Sarah was finding something to do, and she found this table of just stacks of books. I remember how that changed her. How her eyes were figuring things out, and she found a new series of *The Misty of Chincoteague*, *Black Beauty*, and all things great and small. Just really great classic books.

Lisa Toner: Some books date really easily, but some are timeless--the classics. So some books you would read as a child yourself, it's absolutely wonderful to reintroduce those and share the love that you had of those books with your children. That message that you are giving to them, and the children will remember that forever.

Lisa Baermann: I always thought it's a good idea to read a variety of genres. What are your thoughts on that?

Lisa Toner: It is very important to read across the genres. Although, people in general would tend to have a favourite. I love fantasy books, but I'm very not keen on horror stories and scary books. It doesn't mean that I don't read them. It's just that I would not choose these first of all. But, it is important to read and have a widest possible reading diet. I know there are some parents who are worried about graphic novels, but I would say that, in actual fact, there are a lot of values in reading graphic novels. Children do gravitate toward graphic novels, and when they're reading for pleasure, not the same as that reading that their teachers would assign for them. Reading for pleasure has to really hook the children into the book. If that happens to be a graphic novel, then so be it. The graphic novels are, actually, quite a sophisticated way of reading, because you also have to read the pictures, and there is a certain skill to doing that, but the children think that is an easier option, and they are drawn into that. I used to read a lot of graphics and comics when I was young, *Judy and Bunty and Twinkle* in my days, and I read professionally now. So it doesn't do you any harm. It doesn't really matter what you are reading as long as you are reading. Could be the back of a cereal packet, as long as it's reading.

Lisa Baermann: Do you have thoughts about how we direct our children through reading levels?

Lisa Toner: The teachers are the ones who do the assessments, and they assign the books to a particular level, and the books in the classroom are all leveled. Here in the library the books are not leveled, very deliberately, because this is free choice time. It is important for the children to feel that they have a little bit of ownership of the free choice that they have. These are the books that they can read for pleasure. And it is ok for them to read books that are a little too easy than the assigned reading level, because we all like to have a little bit of comfort in our lives. We would all do things that are a little bit easier, less challenging at times, and that's fine. Sometimes children would choose the books that are too difficult for them, and maybe it's because they are really interested in the topics and that's the only book available. Sometimes those childrens would be looking at the pictures, but they might be reading the captions, or they might be just picking up one or two words in that particular book. What I would say to the parents, in either case if you are worried about the levels your child is reading, talk to them about the books, read with them. Get involved in the books that they are reading, and really engage with your child. Don't be judgemental. There are a lot of parents who are very critical about the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, for instance, because the illustrations in there look quite cartoonish. So the assumptions are made that these are easy books. In actual fact, some of the content in the text is middle school level, and parents don't necessarily know that unless you have read them yourselves. Read it with your child.

Lisa Baermann: Do you have any other pros of wisdom as a librarian?

Lisa Toner: Yes. There are three things:

- The first is that we as human beings are story animals. People have been telling stories to each other way before books were printed. Storytelling is an important part of our culture and our civilization. For children to understand the whole story, when they are reading books, is important.

But it's also important to tell stories. A really easy thing that parents can do is to share stories from their childhood.

I can remember my mother telling me, from her childhood, when her brother, my uncle, went missing. My grandmother couldn't find him and panicked. The whole street was searching high and low for my uncle, and he went inside my mother's dollhouse, which is fairly large, and just curled up in one of the rooms and had a sleep. The whole street was panicking, and then he woke up and came out again. That story stayed with me, and that's now part of my family's history. I passed that story on to my children, and there's a wealth of culture and real ownership of your family's own stories. They don't have to be the best stories in the world with the most sophisticated endings, but they are your stories. So, tell stories to your children. Tell stories that they will remember. Repeat them, it doesn't matter, just keep going with them.

- The second thing is to encourage your child to read to other people. It's very good for you and your child to have that special bond, but your child could read to other relatives. Your child could read to the pets if you have one. Dogs are great listeners to stories. If you don't have any pets, then they could read to their stuffed animals. Anybody at all. Encourage them to tell their stories to others, whether it's reading or telling stories. That will help them to develop their language and their fluency, and that's an important developmental tool.
- The third thing is to read yourself. Did I mention that before? READ, READ, READ... The more you read, the better.

Lisa Baermann: Lisa, thank you so much for being with us today. I really appreciate the time that you took and the experiences that you shared with us.

Lisa Toner: You're welcome.

Lisa Baermann: Thank you for being a part of our Masterclass. Hope to see you next time!