

Introduction by Maria Nikolajeva

Astrid Lindgren – famous and unknown

Astrid Lindgren (1907–2002) is the greatest and best-loved Swedish children's writer of all times and one of the best-known children's writers in the world, although her fame is not equally distributed in different countries. She was chosen as one of the twenty authors who received the longest entries in the *Oxford encyclopedia of children's literature* (2006), which, given the Anglo-American bias of this publication, is the indisputable acknowledgment of her universal reputation. Winner of the Andersen Medal (1958) and numerous other awards, she was also an outstanding and influential public figure, making substantial contributions to the debates and occasionally even legislation on children's and animals' rights, war and nonviolence, and various cultural issues. In 1976 she contributed to the downfall of the Swedish government with her pungent pamphlet on tax policy.

Lindgren was an extremely prolific writer with over a hundred books to her credit, including plays, essays, and memoirs. Her characters, whether they appear in realistic or fantastic settings, have common traits with the traditional folktale hero, the youngest son or daughter, the oppressed, the powerless, the underprivileged, gaining material and spiritual wealth during a period of trials. This feature of Lindgren's writing, seldom acknowledged by scholars, has gained her a special appreciation in the former totalitarian states of Eastern Europe, where the rebellious pathos of her children's books and the subversive interrogation of all forms of authorities were recognized. Her novels for children have been turned into stage, radio and television versions and animated as well as live films, both in Sweden and elsewhere. Many of her short stories and fairy tales have been published as picturebooks, illustrated by the most prominent Swedish artists. Her children's verses have been set to music and are regarded as part of the treasury of Swedish children's songs, in some cases substituting in public function for the traditional church hymns. She was voted the Swede of the Year several times, and was made

honorary doctor at three universities. A number of major awards and scholarships have been established in her honor, the most recent the international Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, initiated by the Swedish government and comparable in monetary value to the Nobel Prize. Lindgren truly holds a unique position in children's literature and her impact cannot be overestimated. Her greatest contribution is perhaps to have created an extremely favorable climate for children's literature, to have opened avenues for new forms and styles, and thus to have raised the general status of children's literature in Sweden and throughout the world.

The Astrid Lindgren Centennial Conference, organized by the Swedish Institute for Children's Books in May 2007, brought together scholars from twenty countries, ranging from Iran to Estonia, from Canada to Taiwan. I do not think that the organizing committee had really counted on such wide response. It is a well-known fact that Astrid Lindgren's books are translated into more than eighty languages, including Kymrian, Swahili and Zulu, but this does not necessarily mean that she is proportionally appreciated. In fact, many European children's books, even though they are translated into English, are practically unknown in the English-speaking world, due to many reasons. For instance, merely 1 % of all children's books published in the USA are translations – translated books simply get drowned in the flood of national publications. Further, European culture is treated with certain suspicion in the English-speaking world, again due to lack of information, reluctance, ethnocentrism, perhaps even arrogance. In the three-volume collection of universal masterpieces of children's literature, *Touchstones* (1985), brought out by the North American Children's Literature Association and edited by Perry Nodelman, only two non-English classics have been included, *Pinocchio* and *Heidi*, both apparently because of their status in popular culture than in children's literature: the Disney movie *Pinocchio* (1940) and the numerous versions of *Heidi*, including several TV-series. The American film *The new adventures of Pippi Longstocking* (1988), directed by Ken Annakin, may have contributed to a better knowledge of this character, as several new editions of the Pippi books have been published in the USA since then. However, judging from my own experience, few English-speaking colleagues of children's literature are familiar with Pippi otherwise than by hearsay. Lindgren's other characters, such as Emil, Ronia, Mio, Rusky, Noisy Village children are still less known. In many colleagues' eyes Lindgren's enormous popularity among young readers in Sweden and elsewhere places her somewhere between Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. Poor transla-

tions do not exactly help to challenge such views, and the fact that Lindgren has been awarded Andersen Medal does not seem to convince the doubtful.

On the other hand, Astrid Lindgren is widely known and popular in many European and Asian countries. Partly it can once again be explained by the translation policies: in countries where the majority of published children's books are translations, these have better chances to become integrated into the new culture. Further, Pippi and other Lindgren characters perhaps feel sufficiently familiar in Germany or the Netherlands and just about enough exotic in China and Japan. However, as the Stockholm conference clearly demonstrated, in many countries they are, as in the USA, only known from popular media.

It is naturally gratifying to know that Astrid Lindgren is after all known and loved all over the world, at least well enough to attract so many scholars. It is less pleasing to find out that in some countries, notably in Spain and Portugal, she is only known through television series and although books are translated they are not reprinted and have not become a natural part of the respective countries children's literature. In Sweden it has been part of the Astrid Lindgren myth that *Karlsson-on-the-roof* was the most popular of her characters in the Soviet Union. The truth revealed at the conference is that it was the first book translated into Russian and remained the only book for many years. It was soon turned first into a radio show and then into a theatre play that ran as a matinee in Moscow and Leningrad for over thirty years. In the 1970s, two short animated films were produced, and two picturebooks were published with text and illustrations based on the films. There was not much left of the original books, but the picturebooks, with the usual print runs of several million, created the image of Karlsson for several generations of Russian readers. The image was amplified by numerous merchandise items, including dolls, plates, towels, and sweets. I take this example to show that the popularity of a Lindgren character does not necessarily imply first-hand knowledge of her books. Even most Swedes today only know Pippi from movies. I usually test my students by asking what the name of Pippi's horse is. If they answer "Little Fellow" they have not read the book (the horse is called Horse). It is then not so surprising that the conference delegates expressed concerns about the lack of adequate translations, books that have been out of print for years, and characters corrupted by popular culture. Some of the dilemmas stemming out of the transmission of Lindgren's work into other cultures are examined in Astrid Surmatz' paper in the present

issue of *Barnboken*. Is it possible at all to render all the deeper layers Lindgren's texts in translation when they are hidden even from today's readers because of lost historical context? I may add: is it essential to be aware of this context, or can the books be taken at their face value? Each layer may appeal to different readers.

The majority of the international papers focused on Pippi, so she is undoubtedly the most popular of Astrid Lindgren's characters, even though some cultures have their own favorites. Yet why haven't her many other remarkable child figures received as much attention? Has prince Mio become overshadowed by Harry Potter? Is the master detective Kalle Blomkvist too tame and old-fashioned? Does Mischievous Meg bear too much resemblance with the traditional girl's book heroine? Is Emil too much anchored in the typically Swedish rural community? Is the idyllic world of the Noisy village too far away from today's reality? Are the everyday adventures and small-scale concerns of the children on Seacrow Island irrelevant for children in other countries? I agree that Pippi is the most challenging Lindgren character for a scholar, but it feels a pity that so few of her other works were highlighted. A couple of exceptions were *The brothers Lionheart* and *Ronia the robber's daughter*, the latter in comparison with Pippi (see Alan Richard's and Roni Natov's papers in this issue). The crucial question is whether this lack of interest is once again due to absence of books in print, or to poor translations, that do not convey much beyond the plot? Some papers pointed out Astrid Lindgren's stylistic brilliance, her rich idiom, much of which has become part of the Swedish language. Yet the session on translation showed clearly how much gets lost when a book is transposed from one language to another.

In spite of all these problems, new dimensions of Astrid Lindgren many-faceted talent were undoubtedly revealed at the conference. She was presented as an outstanding modernist, a pathfinder in portrayal of the competent child, a master of psychology whose texts invite profound psychoanalytical investigations, as revealed in Karen Coats' paper. We were repeatedly reminded that Lindgren has always taken the side of the weak and the oppressed; the most prominent example is Ulla Lundqvist's paper. We were taken on exciting guided tours through the gallery of her animal characters (see David Rudd's paper) and got involved in the complex problems of illustrations (two examples of this aspect are represented in Elina Druker's and Agnes-Margrethe Bjorvand's papers). Our attention was drawn to the many literary connections between Lindgren's works and some of her predecessors, such as L. M. Montgomery and

Helena Nyblom. We learned, not quite unexpectedly, that Lindgren was also a superb writer of autobiographies. More surprising, in the first place for Astrid Lindgren's passionate admirers, were the papers dealing with the dark sides in her books; some of these papers are published in the present issue. It is rewarding that the Astrid Lindgren celebration did not turn into unison eulogy; too many reports and interviews this year have portrayed her as a nice and harmless storyteller. Nice and harmless was the least thing she was, which we also heard in papers dealing with her role as a passionate defender of human rights.

In April 2007 I attended an Astrid Lindgren conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Much was said in the many excellent papers about the influence that Astrid Lindgren had had on writers and the raising status of children literature; likewise many comments were given concerning the eternal question whether Pippi is a bad example or an emancipatory symbol. There was, however, one paper that made the greatest impact on me: the American colleague Lynn Valone claimed that Pippi was absolutely impossible in the USA today because she played with pistols. I was about to protest when it occurred to me that a couple of weeks before a shooting tragedy took place at an American university. I agree, Pippi with her pistols is not a good example for American kids. When violence becomes an everyday occurrence, pistol jokes are no longer funny. On the other hand, it seems that Pippi inspires young girls in Iran, girls that are restricted in their behaviour far more than little Annika who is supposed to take care of her next best dress. There are as many sides to Pippi as there are to her creator.

The papers in the present issue of *Barnboken*, the first wholly English-language issue of this journal, have been selected from the broad scope of conference presentations. The selection has endeavoured to reflect both the international nature of the conference and the variety of subjects and approaches. In the first place, the editors have strived to focus on the less self-evident aspects of Astrid Lindgren's work. In spite of her enormous popularity, there is still much left to be explored.