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“I’m Going to be a Businessman”

Learning about Money and Class in Ulf Stark’s Ulf and Percy Trilogy

Abstract: Ulf Stark’s Min vän Percys magiska gymnastikskor (My Friend Percy’s Magical Gym Shoes, 1991), Min vän shejken i Stureby (My Friend Percy and the Sheik, 1995) and Min vän Percy, Buffalo Bill och jag (My Friend Percy and Buffalo Bill, 2004) are entertaining and ironic tales of a boy’s childhood in 1950s Stockholm. The partially autobiographical trilogy on Ulf and his friend Percy takes up common themes in children’s literature such as the conflict between freedom and socialization, the longing for adventure, and the development, through constant interaction with one’s peers in a deeply homosocial world, of a sense of self and of an idea of manhood. The trilogy also reflects the ideological views on childhood and child development within the so-called folkhem, where children are seen as “citizens in the making,” striving for independence and social mobility in a society that tries to combine the common good with individual freedom.

Though ostensibly oblivious to class issues, the children in Stark’s novels learn about class differences through dealing with “stuff”: having things or not having them, trying to get the things they want, learning the exchange value of the things they have in order to trade them for other things – these are amongst the main preoccupations of the characters in Stark’s trilogy. This paper intends to investigate how the relationship between Ulf and Percy allows Stark to discuss the often paradoxical economic ideology of the folkhem, and how material objects are used as a narrative strategy to make class differences visible in a world that tries to deny them.

Keywords: Ulf Stark, money, folkhem, class differences, Swedish model, ideology

Among the many works Ulf Stark penned during his long career, there are some which display a retrospective attitude, mixing events, places and situations derived from Stark's early years with fictional elements.¹ This autobiographical inspiration is particularly evident in the trilogy about Ulf and Percy. The first part, *Min vän Percys magiska gymnastiskor* (*My Friend Percy's Magical Gym Shoes*, henceforth *Shoes*) was published in 1991, followed by *Min vän shejken i Stureby* (*My Friend Percy and the Sheik*, henceforth *Sheik*) in 1995, while the third and last part, *Min vän Percy, Buffalo Bill och jag* (*My Friend Percy and Buffalo Bill*, henceforth *Buffalo*) was published in 2004. The trilogy portrays the growing friendship between the two main characters during the 1950s. However, while *Buffalo* is set during a summer holiday away from the city - in a setting far removed from the concerns of daily life - *Shoes* and *Sheik* take place in Stureby, a suburb of Stockholm. I will focus here on the first two parts of the trilogy that, though rife with adventures and humour, detail the children's concerns in their everyday interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. In doing so, Stark often touches on issues such as class differences, privilege, and children's relationship to money. My aim is to show that, in describing the relationship between Ulf and Percy, Stark explores the often paradoxical social and economic ideology of the so-called *folkhem*, revealing a tension between a utopian and a disenchanting approach to the Swedish model. I will also discuss the role that material objects play in the novels as a narrative strategy to make class differences visible in a world that tries to deny them.

Before moving on to an analysis of Stark's novels, however, I will begin by briefly sketching the ideology of the *folkhem*, especially in its relation to children.

Children in the People's Home

Though the term *folkhem* ("the people's home") made its appearance in Swedish in the beginning of the 20th century as a way to refer to "community centers" or meeting places for the poor, it was soon appropriated by different political ideologies as a shorthand for the ideal society they envisioned (Dahlqvist; Götz). In its current use, *folkhem* indicates the political, economic and social ideology that sustained the so-called Swedish model from the 1930s to around the end of the 1980s, during the political hegemony of the Social Democratic Party. Substituting the revolutionary ideas of socialization of the means of production with the attempt to gain control over the wealth produced by the capitalistic system, from which the whole

of society was to benefit, Social Democracy envisioned a political and economic model marked by “the combination of an expansive Welfare State with successful big corporations and a powerful trade union movement” (Rojas 22).

The most enduring metaphor for this ideological framework is that of the nation as a good home for all Swedes, with the state cast in the role of the wise family head. This idea is best expressed in a 1928 speech to the Riksdag by Per Albin Hansson, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party and Prime Minister between 1932 and 1946. Hansson understood the potential of the term *folkhem* for “uniting the ideas of home, nationalism, and socialism,” envisioning that “the People’s Home would substitute a class-based society, both in rhetoric and in future political reality” (Brandal et al. 51):

The foundation of the home is community and solidarity. The good home knows no privilege or neglect, no favorites and no stepchildren. [...] In the good home equality, thoughtfulness, cooperation and helpfulness prevail. Applied to the great people’s and citizens’ home this would mean the breakdown of all social and economic barriers that now divide citizens into privileged and deprived, into the rulers and the ruled, into rich and poor, the propertied and the destitute, the robbers and the robbed. (Quoted in Hilson 109)

According to the ideology of the Swedish model, social unity was seen as a higher goal than individual aspirations, and social status was not primarily related to one’s wealth but to the contribution one could make to the general well-being: as Stockenström puts it, “money was in Sweden primarily discussed in terms of the common good and never as the sole means to individual success” (242). Accordingly, the Social Democratic policies that, from the end of the 1940s to the beginning of the 1970s, led to fast economic growth, increasing urbanization, wage equalization, a rise in consumption and taxation, and a general improvement in living conditions (Magnusson 232–256; Hägg 153–158), also reshaped the Swedish national identity, promoting “a vision of a genuine Swedish community of people above and beyond the existing class divisions” (Stockenström 241), whose ultimate goal was to “create equality through uniformity” (Rojas 38).

The well-functioning family mentioned by Hansson was not just a metaphor for the Social Democratic vision of what the state should be, or for the economic model that Social Democracy tried to implement: the ideals of the *folkhem* also had to be applied to actual families, especially when it came to childcare policies. The Swedish state

presented itself as a warrant for the well-being of children, and from the 1930s the welfare system took actions to improve the general conditions of families, framing childcare as a collective responsibility. Since all children in the folkhem had to be equal before the state, the welfare system had to actively cancel all inequalities. Childcare was, moreover, seen as an investment for the future: the scope of childcare policies was to produce well-adjusted and independent individuals that could, at the same time, function well as members of a collective; what was at stake was the future of the nation, and even of democracy (Andresen et al. 172–6; 330–332).²

The idea of children as the citizens of tomorrow, with a strong emphasis on their individuality and freedom, is reflected in the character of the “competent child,” which is often encountered in the literature for and about children produced within this intellectual climate (see Goga), with the heroine of Astrid Lindgren’s 1945 novel *Pippi Långstrump* (*Pippi Longstocking*) as its most prominent example, empowered as she is “in a way impossible within the existing societal norms” (Nikolajeva 321). The competent child is fully at ease with the world around him/her, endowed with the best skills to confront any difficulty or potential danger, and able to fulfill all the different roles required by society: as Åse Marie Ommundsen writes, “[t]he Nordic child is considered competent as a family member, a pupil, a consumer, and a citizen.”

This redefinition of childhood was at the heart of the project of the folkhem. As Bengt Sandin puts it, “the meaning of childhood was intimately associated with the welfare organization being created” (114). The concept of the competent child can thus be read as a reflection of the strong emphasis put by the ideology of the folkhem on the idea of a direct alliance between the individual and the state: the individual had to break loose from his traditional network of social relations and become a full citizen; in Orvar Löfgren’s words, “the new Welfare state should be populated by modern individuals, who have though to learn to exercise their freedom with a high degree of social responsibility.”³

It is my opinion that the story of Ulf and Percy, at least in the first two parts of Stark’s trilogy, can be read against the backdrop of the egalitarian ideology of the folkhem, and as a reflection on and a critical evaluation of precisely the ideal of the competent child, as their freedom, their agency and their personal development are still limited by the class differences the Swedish model aimed at removing.

As a matter of fact, ideology is far from foreign to children’s literature (see for example Sarland; Hunt). In children’s books, however,

ideology often appears in a covert manner, both through a text's linguistic features and its use of narrative elements, such as narrator and point of view (McCallum and Stephens 361–362). Therefore, before proceeding to examining how Stark questions the ideology of the folkhem, I deem it necessary to take a brief look at the novels' narrative structure, in order to fully grasp Stark's approach to the matters at hand.

Some Remarks on Narrative Structures

As mentioned above, both *Shoes* and *Sheik* are set in 1950s Stockholm. If we follow Andrea Schwenke Wylie's categorization of first personal narratives in children's literature – based on the temporal distance between the narrated events and the act of narrating, and on the level of engagement prompted by the text – we could consider Stark's trilogy as an example of “distant-engaging-narration” (185): that is, a kind of narration that adheres to the focalizer's point of view but that employs a narrator speaking from a later moment in time. However, while the spatial setting is described in great detail, no explicit chronological coordinates are given: yet, the temporal frame of the novels can be inferred from more or less covert references to historical and political events (for example Tage Erlander being Sweden's Prime Minister), from cultural objects and phenomena typical of 1950s Sweden (such as the music people listen to), and from remarks such as “[w]e were always in a hurry *back then*” (Stark, *Shoes* 1, my emphasis).

The same effect of temporal distance is also brought about by the retrospective style adopted by Stark and by the “autobiographical pact” the trilogy elicits. Not only is the main character Ulf's last name Stark,⁴ but both *Shoes* and *Buffalo* are first-person narratives told in the past tense, prompting the reader to believe that the character, the narrator and the author are the same person. By contrast, despite the first-person possessive “my” which reappears in the title, *Sheik* is told through a third-person narrator. However, this choice – especially when we read all three novels as a whole – does not completely undermine the feeling that we are dealing with an adult narrator evoking (at least in part) his own childhood memories.⁵

The temporal distance between Ulf's adventures and the narrator is further amplified by Stark's use of irony: commenting on the role of the narrator in first-person young adult fiction, and on the role of irony in this kind of narration, Wylie states that often “[i]n looking back on their youth, older narrators present their lack of experience

with an irony fine-tuned by hindsight" (186). This is precisely what happens in Stark's novels, where Ulf's often naive point of view is that of a child of the 1950s, but is presented to the reader by an arguably older and wiser narrator.

This "double perspective" also applies to the ideological frame through which Ulf sees the world: while Ulf's point of view is fully imbued with the ideals that were at the basis of the Swedish model, the narrator seems to adopt a retrospective critical and ironic gaze which reveals the contradictions and the limits of that model.

As Magdalena Żmuda-Trzebiatowska points out, several 1990s coming-of-age novels look back at the origins of the Swedish welfare state with a mix of nostalgia and criticism, stressing both the utopian promises of the folkhem and its shortcomings ("Styvbarnen"; "Myten"). Though aimed at a younger audience than Żmuda-Trzebiatowska's examples, *Shoes* and *Sheik* in particular do precisely the same: by retrospectively evoking his alter-ego Ulf's formative years, Stark creates, at first sight, a sort of universal childhood world to which all children can relate; at the same time, however, scattering clues throughout the text that anchor his narrative world in a precise social context, he encourages the informed reader to engage the ideals of the 1950s with the hindsight of the 1990s.

The same contrast between an enthusiastic and a critical approach to the Swedish model can be perceived in the gulf that separates Ulf and Percy. While the former's apparently egalitarian and class-blind gaze seems to be informed by the ideology of the folkhem, the latter shows a much more pragmatic – almost cynical – approach to reality. Percy's presence (much like the narrator's hindsight) offers a constant counter-narrative to the main character's perspective.

Ulf and Percy: Two (Almost) Competent Children

As we have seen, the "competent child" was one of the central concepts within the redefinition of childhood that took place within the ideological framework of the folkhem. As Åse Marie Ommundsen writes:

The competent children depicted in children's literature act as autonomous, active, robust, and responsible figures[.] [...] This picture of the competent child contrasts with the notion of children as innocent, inexperienced, powerless, vulnerable, ignorant, dependent, and immature human beings. (Ommundsen)

These sets of qualities play an important role in the characterization of Ulf and Percy; at the risk of oversimplifying a little, one might say that Ulf and Percy represent two (incomplete) versions of the competent child, each one of them falling short of the ideal in his own way. In a critical reading of Stark's Percy novels focused on the ideological construction of manhood, Magnus Öhrn points out that the main events in Stark's trilogy – apart from a handful of scenes set in domestic or scholastic settings – take place in a deeply homosocial environment, with the protagonists and their friends trying to come to terms with different ideas of manhood (132–134). This “boys' land” (“*pojkländ*”), which seems particularly fitted for the (male) competent child, is defined by Öhrn – quoting E. Anthony Rotundo – as “a distinct cultural world ... separated both from the domestic world of women, girls, and small children and from the public world of men and commerce” (Rotundo quoted in Öhrn 132).

However, it is not entirely true that the space occupied by Ulf and Percy is completely separated from the adult world and its worries. If Ulf almost exclusively is concerned with constructing his own boyhood, the same cannot be said for Percy: for him, the adult world of commerce is indeed highly relevant. In many ways, in fact, Ulf and Percy are depicted as almost antithetical characters. Ulf is plump, childish, naive, and is bullied both by other kids in the neighborhood and by his older brother. Percy, on the other hand, is strong and brave: he is good at fighting and spitting and is great at sports; he is so self-confident that he can even defy gender stereotypes by openly enjoying sewing lessons. Percy clearly becomes a sort of (male) role model for Ulf. At the end of chapter two of *Shoes*, for example, Ulf starts to exercise in order to stand up to his brother, and the narrator informs us: “Soon I will be strong, I thought. Soon I will be as strong as Percy” (Stark, *Shoes* 9).

Percy and Ulf seem to show the same polarization that Berggren and Trägårdh see in the characters of Pippi and Annika in *Pippi Longstocking* (259–260): Ulf, like Annika, represents the middle-class child who can sometimes engage in minor transgressions while knowing all along that he can go back to the safe nest of a loving family. Percy on the other hand, like Pippi, appears as the outsider, at once fascinating and scary, who embodies the dream of rebellion. Moreover, according to historian Göran Hägg, Pippi represents both an escapist dream and an image of the child as he/she was imagined in the folkhem: strong, independent, and capable of overcoming even the harshest situations (59–60). Percy shows a similar disposition, but he is faced with a much more realistic and prosaic world than Pippi;

he sure is strong and unconventional but, unlike Pippi, he does not have a suitcase full of golden coins. His working-class background is a stigma which is not easily overcome, and he constantly has to deal with the consequences of his economic and social disadvantage.

Ulf – as opposed to his other friends, who at first reject Percy – is peculiarly oblivious to Percy's social background; for him, he is just a fairly good approximation of his (manly) ideal. The narrator, however, subtly emphasizes those markers of Percy's social inferiority that the focalizer does not seem to notice or care about. This is particularly evident in the depiction of the material world that surrounds the children and the way they deal with "stuff." Thus, we are informed that Ulf lives in a spotless multi-storey house full of expensive things, such as the big chandelier that catches Percy's attention the first time Ulf invites him over, while Percy lives in an apartment building. While the first *hyreshus* (apartment buildings) in the suburb of Stureby were built in the 1930s, we know that Percy's house is "newly-built" (Stark, *Shoes* 11): it could be one of the apartment buildings built around 1950 to provide low-income families with better housing standards than they could find in the city.⁶ Much to the same effect, the narrator informs us that Ulf's mother plays the piano and has very strong opinions as to the proper haircut for respectable children, while his father is a dentist and an amateur radio operator who is learning French, likes classical music and reads good books (and hates comics). Additionally, Ulf's father is portrayed as a typical folkhem parent; despite not being as present in his children's lives as their mother is, he is nonetheless preoccupied with their education and well-being: in his extensive library he has several books on pedagogy and child rearing. Overall, Ulf's is a well-functioning family, as symbolized by the clocks in their house, which the father and Ulf's older brother wind up every night.

On the other hand, Percy's father sells Venetian blinds and is almost always out of work and money; he is often tired, and even more absent than Ulf's dad (when Percy gives him a birthday present he does not seem to pay any attention to it). Percy's mother is first shown wearing curlers, reading a magazine, and then dreamingly dancing to a Frank Sinatra song. The material space the two families occupy, their different occupations, interests and cultural tastes, clearly put Ulf and Percy's families in different class fractions.

The *Bildung* of the two characters also shows striking differences. While Ulf can safely embark on his journey of self-realization within a "boy's own sphere," learning about love and sex, and trying to gain respect from his peers, Percy has to find a way to ensure his

social advancement. In *Shoes*, when his concerned teacher asks him "Percy, Percy... What will become of you?" he calmly replies: "I'm going to be a businessman" (Stark, *Shoes* 16). The reply does not elicit any kind of comment from the teacher or Ulf, but, apart from signaling Percy's unconventional character, it gives us a glimpse of his uncommon interest in money. Though Percy's desire to become a successful businessman often creates funny situations, it is also a clue to understanding his social predicament, and the privations he is dealing with.

In this regard, *Shoes* and *Sheik* partially differ. In *Shoes*, the focus is on Ulf's quest for a more masculine behavior (which ends when the whole Stureby community, ironically, hails him as a hero for helping putting out a fire he himself has started), with Percy cast as role model and helper. In *Sheik*, Ulf is shown struggling to stand up to a bully and trying to win a girl's heart – succeeding at the first task and failing at the second one – but the focus gradually shifts to Percy, who is about to leave town because of his father's economic problems. It is then Ulf's turn to act as a helper who – mostly through chance – finds a solution to his friend's financial problems. In both novels, however, Ulf is concerned with matters of personal identity, while Percy is dealing with material issues.

In this sense, both characters only partially approximate the ideal child envisioned by the folkhem ideology. Ulf comes from the safe background that the folkhem desired for all children, but he never fully acquires all the qualities of the competent child. Percy, on the other hand, has all those qualities, but he is still what Per Albin Hansson would have called a "stepchild," lagging behind and trying to overcome privations and relative poverty.

All Children are Equal, but Some Children Have Worse Shoes than Others

Ulf, as already mentioned, tends to be represented as much more naive than Percy. This is especially evident in the way he believes in non-realistic and supernatural events and powers. For example, in *Sheik*, he believes that he can neutralize the bully, conquer the girl's love and turn Percy into a mathematical genius through hypnosis. Ulf's naivety is however best reflected in the way he perceives Percy's old and worn sneakers. The scene that introduces Percy's shoes into the narrative is a good example of the indirect way in which Stark chooses to depict Percy's predicament. It is the children's teacher that first notices Percy's sneakers:

Our teacher just looked at the shoes in silence. She lifted one of them up by the laces.

It was the first time I had seen Percy's shoes. They looked like a pair of drowned rats.

Our teacher shook her head as if she felt sorry for them.

"You had better get yourself a new pair of shoes, Percy," she said. (Stark, *Shoes* 13)

Later on, the teacher once again comments on Percy's shoes:

[T]he teacher wasn't happy. She wrinkled her nose.

She pointed at Percy's shoes. "Have you got those shoes on again?" she said. "Next time you must come with a new pair."

"These are my best ones," said Percy.

"I do not want to see them again. Do you hear?" said the teacher.

"Those are the worst sneakers I have ever seen." (Stark, *Shoes* 29)

Percy's shoes mean different things to different observers: to Ulf, they might be tattered but, when Percy tells him they are magical and can make him stronger, that does not diminish their allure: by the end of the chapter, he prays to God for a pair of similar shoes. To the teacher, Percy's sneakers are simply inappropriate; strikingly, the teacher – who is otherwise represented as a sympathetic character, with a soft spot for Percy – is incapable of inferring that they are a sign of Percy's lack of means. Percy's opinion, by contrast, remains unexpressed. However, the reader can guess that the teacher's remarks do not go unnoticed by the fact that Percy immediately tries to take advantage of Ulf, sparking his interest in the sneakers.

In her discussion of fashion in the fairy tale, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario points out that clothing items are often used as a way to discuss issues of class, status, and social mobility; in this context, shoes are especially relevant in that, as shown by the example of Cinderella, they often function as symbols for transformation and advancement; with reference to Perrault's *Little Thumb*, Do Rozario states that "[m]oney and good shoes are the desirable objects that can raise one in social standing; poverty and cheap shoes merely sustain a miserable situation" (180). In Ulf's case the tradition is ironically subverted: oblivious as he is to the material markers of status, he ends up desiring, as a means of achieving personal and social advancement, a well-established symbol for inferiority and social immobility. Percy, on the other hand, acts much like a traditional fairy-tale hero, who has to climb the social ladder from a position of disadvantage to a position which can give him economic security. However, Stark adds

a layer of irony even in Percy's case: the tattered shoes, a sign of his inferiority, immediately become a means of acquiring other things from Ulf, thus allowing him to improve his status:

"I would give anything to be able to walk on the beam like you can."
"Like what?" [Percy] said, looking up.
"What do you mean, like what?"
"What would you give?" he said. "You said that you would give ANYTHING!" (Stark, *Shoes* 29-30)

Percy's attitude to his new friend is, to say the least, ambiguous: he both acts as a loyal comrade, helping Ulf overcome his limits, and as a cunning con artist in-the-making. When Ulf invites him over, and the children start negotiating the sale of the "magical" shoes, we perceive again the differences between them. Ulf sees Percy's sneakers as an enchanted object, much like the "magical agent" identified in folktales by Vladimir Propp (43-50). He is ready to give Percy everything he demands, disregarding the actual economic value of the shoes.

Percy, on the other hand, appears stunningly aware of the law of demand and supply, and he is ready to exploit his advantage: noticing that Ulf sees the shoes as a sort of "specialty good" for which he is willing to pay any price, Percy displays an almost predatory attitude, exploiting Ulf's naivety. When the two children take a tour Ulf's house so that Percy can choose the things he will take in exchange for the sneakers, we are once again told nothing about Percy's thoughts, but we can guess from his attitude that he is carefully evaluating each item's value:

We started in the basement where Dad had his moped and a safe with some old gold teeth in it.
The we carried on up.
We went through the rumpus room with the stuffed bird. And the library where Dad rested between seeing patients, with a black cushion on his stomach. In the living room, Percy took an extra look at the big chandelier and tinkled with a few keys on the piano. Then we went through the dining room where there wasn't much to look at.
And finally we came up to my room in the attic. Percy immediately spread all my things out on the floor so that he could see them properly. (Stark, *Shoes* 59)

In *Sheik*, there is another scene that shows how Percy, as opposed to Ulf, is strikingly well-versed in economic matters. Percy has failed a test in maths, and Ulf first tries to hypnotize him, then – when the

trick does not work – he tries to help him with his homework. Percy, however, seems unable to grasp the abstract rules of maths, until he frames the sums in economic terms:

“You have to do division,” said Ulf. “It’s about the hardest thing there is. It’s like you were going to give eighteen buns to six small kids. They all have to have the same number of buns. How many will each one get?”

“They won’t be given any stupid buns,” said Percy. “They’ll have to buy them, three each, for cash. And if I get five cents for each bun that’s ninety cents.”

Ulf wrinkled his forehead. He had to do the sum on a piece of paper. “You’re right!” he said. “That’s multiplication. You are becoming a mathematical genius!” (Stark, *Sheik* 27)

For Ulf, his family and his middle-class friends, all children can get any amount of buns they want (after all, Ulf’s mother has an open account at the local bakery), whereas Percy knows all too well that buns have to be bought. Moreover, Ulf and his peers seem to have introjected the Swedish attitude to money described by Stockenström: they do not like waste, they do not flaunt their wealth, and they never discuss financial matters. Most importantly, they seem so convinced that the Swedish state knows no favorites or stepchildren that they cannot see the class differences that are still present in their society: such is the conviction that all children should be equal, that they see all children as *already* equal. In this regard, the teacher’s reaction at the sight of Percy’s shoes is especially telling. It is only Percy and his family that openly talk about money. Percy also shows a higher degree of individualism than Ulf and the other children, and defies the myth of solidarity inherent in the folkhem ideology: for Percy, with his almost capitalistic attitude, money is primarily a means of achieving individual advancement.

Only towards the end of *Sheik* does Ulf get a glimpse of the complexity of adult life: it is first through the words of Percy’s father that he learns about the law of supply and demand, and about the inequalities that still afflict society:

“Your father is a dentist. People come to him and get the holes in their teeth fixed. [...] And all the time people keep getting new holes in their teeth,” said Percy’s father. “And that means your father gets more money. Dentists don’t have to worry about whether there is enough money. They have enough to manage. But it’s not like that for everybody. Have you never thought of that?”

“No-o,” said Ulf. “No, I never have.”

“You think I’m only thinking of myself,” he went on. “You think I don’t know that Percy wants to stay here. Actually there’s nothing I want more. [...] I sell Venetian blinds, Ulf. And if no one wants to buy my Venetian blinds we have to move.” (Stark, *Sheik* 81–82)

The sudden appearance of the Sheik – a radio friend of Ulf’s father’s – saves the day, buying twenty thousand blinds and allowing Percy to stay in Stureby. Percy has surely “done the deal of a lifetime” (Stark, *Sheik* 101), and the sight of Ulf with a real sheik leaves the bully who tormented him breathless. Yet, it is only the intervention of a kind of *deus ex machina* that solves the situation and gives Percy the freedom from economic restriction that the welfare state has promised all children: the happy ending is thus somewhat tainted by the sudden realization that the project of the folkhem is far from completed. On the other hand, thanks to Percy, Ulf has become a better incarnation of the competent child: he is more resourceful, active and independent; but Ulf has also learnt to do business; that is, he has learnt something about the way value is produced and exchanged, and, most importantly, he has understood that, so far, not all children are equal in the People’s Home. This is probably the main lesson that Ulf learns in his *Bildung*, a lesson that Percy – the folkhem’s stepchild – has known all along.

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Notes

1 In an interview with *Barnens bibliotek* Stark said: "[jag] tyckte det var roligt att blanda ens egen barndom med sånt jag hittade på. Då fick jag en mycket större barndom" ("I thought it was fun to mix one’s own childhood with stuff I made up. That way I got a much larger childhood," my translation).

2 On the often contradictory mix of collectivism and individualism in the Swedish model, see Berggren and Trägårdh 229–258, and Dencik.

3 "Den nya välfärdstaten skulle bebos av moderna individer, som dock måste lära sig att bära sin nya frihet med en stor portion samhällsansvar" (my translation).

4 According to Philippe Lejeune, the nominal identity between author, narrator and the main character is the most important marker of the autobiographical nature of a text (*Le pacte autobiographique* 13–46). To avoid confusion, I will refer to the character as Ulf and to the author as Stark.

5 On autobiographical texts in the third person, see Lejeune "L’autobiographie à la troisième personne."

6 See the brief description of Stureby "Stureby – kort beskrivning av områdets historia." On the housing policies of the folkhem, and their social consequences, see Hall.