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Always on the child's side

To provide a title of a speech given at “The Astrid Lindgren Centennial Conference. The liberated child – childhood in the works of Astrid Lindgren” is a phrase very well expected namely *Always on the child's side*. There is not much to brood over the theme very long, because we all know, that nobody speaks so persistently for the children of the world, not even the UN conventions, so clearly and so movingly as Astrid Lindgren does – and she speaks so that they themselves can hear, rejoice and be comforted. It could also have been the heading *Always on the side of the powerless, the weak, and the feeble*. Astrid Lindgren's compassion for the poor inmates of the workhouse is as great as ever Charles Dickens', and her concern for the penniless young men and women who toiled long hours for a little pay – or none – with no brighter prospects than that of the asylum is equally great and worth dwelling on. Nonetheless, children are her first and foremost concern, so this article will concentrate on them.

Astrid Lindgren's career as a writer started at a time when caning and flogging had hardly been questioned as the main method of teaching children to behave and behaving meant obedience and submission. No wonder Pippi Longstocking was hailed with enthusiasm by the kids – and proclaimed a danger by many of their so-called elders and betters. This article presents a few examples from the Pippi trilogy, but before that, it is appropriate to reveal something by her hand that is less known. She did not in her earlier career often take part in debates in the media, but a few instances do exist. She wrote once in a housewives' weekly, and it is decidedly remarkable and, like most of the words from Astrid's pen, very amusing.

Traditional upbringing versus free-thinking

Her article is a contribution to a discussion about how to raise children, launched by quite a powerful woman, press secretary to the foreign ministry. This lady does what many a prim and proper person had done before – and would do again – she attacks Pippi Long-

stocking for her lack of manners, and advocates a traditional upbringing instead of the free-thinking approach that was to be found in BOOKS. She spells BOOKS in block capitals, thus expressing her mistrust of – well, even her contempt for, modern child psychology. Parents should not read that kind of stuff but instead listen to their own instincts when it comes to teaching their children obedience and good manners. Lindgren opens her article by quoting a short poem:

All the old things are so new
for a tiny toddler, who
just has seen the light of day.
(Harriet Löwenhielm, my translation)

That is why, she continues, it is not altogether easy to be a poor little one. The world is so full of unknown and frightening things and the poor little one has nothing to rely upon but the grownups who have already lived for a long time and know so much. It should be their obligation to build a safe world, and a warm and friendly one for the little child. But is that what they are doing? Much too seldom as far as she can judge. They teach and instruct children so energetically from dawn to dusk; they are so desperately anxious that they should, from the very start, behave like grownups. It seems that being a child is a detestable quality which has to be resisted no matter how. Most parents, she argues, don't seek advice in BOOKS, they trust their instincts, and then she gives another example.

I saw it the other day in King's Street. A mother came walking with her little boy who "had just seen the light of day" so he was eager to explore the amazing world around him. He stopped in front of a shop window and wanted to stay there for a little while. Then it must have been instinct that instructed the mother to tell him: "If you don't come along immediately I shall leave you never to come back. And the police will come for you."

I hardly think she would have said this, if she had read THE BOOKS. Then she would have been aware that what is first of all required if you want a child to be harmonious and so-called well-behaved is to make him feel safe and secure. (Thank goodness children rather quickly realize what a lot of nonsense adults are talking and how little all their threats are to be believed, or else the agony of their minds would have no end.) (Lindgren 1948, my translation)

This is written roughly at the same time as the last Pippi volume, *Pippi in the South Seas* (1948), a book which actually contains a little apology for Pippi's behaviour. Mrs Settergren, Pippi's indeed very well-behaved playmates Tommy and Annika's mother, speaks to the ladies who have seen Pippi in action at a tea party. These friends of Mrs Settergren's are shocked to learn that Tommy and Annika will be allowed to accompany Pippi on a trip to the South Seas:

"You don't mean to say that you are going to send away your children to the South Seas with Pippi Longstocking? You can't be serious!"

But Mrs Settergren said:

"And why shouldn't I? The children have been ill and they need a change of air, the doctor says so. All the time that I have known Pippi she has never ever done anything which has been bad for Tommy and Annika. No one could be kinder to them than she is."

"But my dear - Pippi Longstocking!" said the ladies disapprovingly

"Exactly," said Mrs Settergren. "Pippi Longstocking may not have very good manners, but she has a kind heart."

(Lindgren 1955, 59)

Pippi versus adults

Let's see at the very first chapter of the same book, *Pippi in the South Seas* (1948). It starts so peacefully in Pippi's garden, which has become a real tourist attraction. Visitors are not too numerous, however. But one lovely summer's day there comes a Very Important Person - the acronym VIP hadn't been coined at the time, but would be quite satisfactory here. It is a "fine gentleman" in a stylish car who wears shiny shoes and a thick gold ring. He has seen the sign "To Vilekulla Cottage", and decides to look at it, convinced that the sign implies "for sale". Pippi, Tommy and Annika are sitting on the steps of the porch in brilliant sunshine, and soon a very special conversation takes place between the fine gentleman and Pippi, who acts the way she always does when addressed by foolish adults: she pretends to share his opinions and plans. He decides to pull down Vilekulla Cottage once he has bought the place, and build a stately house there instead, and then he looks at the lovely old oak tree in the garden in which ginger-beer is growing: "I'll have that cut down!" Tommy and Annika cry out in despair, but Pippi, unmoved, keeps on playing at hopscotch. When at last she decides to answer she willingly offers her support. I quote:

"I'm Pippi Longstocking," she said, "and this is Tommy and Annika," she pointed at her friends. "Can we help you in any way? If there's a house to be pulled down, or a tree to be pulled up, or anything else to be altered, you have only to say so!"

"Your name does not interest me," said the fine gentleman. "All I want to know is where I can find the owner of this house. I'm going to buy it."

(Lindgren 1955, 6-7)

Pippi of course does not reveal her ownership and the fine gentleman sits down to wait for an adult to turn up, pleased to have learnt that the owner is a *she* – as women don't know anything about business matters, in his male chauvinist opinion. He lowers himself to indulging in small talk with the children, telling them among other things that as soon as he becomes the owner of Vilekulla there will be no more playing around his garden, for to his mind there is nothing worse than children. This is the very zenith of the exchange:

"I quite agree," said Pippi, who stopped hopping for a moment. "Children ought to be shot."

"How can you say such a thing?" said Tommy in an injured voice.

"What I mean is that all children ought to be shot," said Pippi. But it wouldn't do, because then there would never be any kind old gentlemen. And we couldn't do without them, could we?"

(Lindgren 1955, 8)

Toward the end of the dispute, Pippi changes her mood and leaves sarcasm for sharper and less elegant attacks on the bullying intruder, who at last understands that Pippi has been making fun of him, and since he can't get hold of Pippi he seizes Annika to give her a good spanking. Pippi of course stops him immediately and carries the fine gentleman to his car, where she throws him headlong into the back seat.

Let's dwell for a few more moments on Pippi. She was as everybody knows, the first really liberated little girl in world literature; she is free to do exactly what she wants to do and nothing else like go to school or doing work of any kind. Certainly we often see her busy doing different kinds of work like cleaning the kitchen floor or baking gingerbread – on that very floor – but she always turns the labour into a joyful game. She also eats what she likes best, coffee and cheese sandwiches, sweets and pancakes – no oatmeal porridge

is ever served at her table. Astrid Lindgren knew what all the other readers who took Pippi to their hearts in the 1940s knew, that oatmeal porridge can be a horror, no matter what the parents say about how lovely it is, and how good it is for you.

Irony

Annika and Tommy are the true incarnations of my generation, sitting there in front of the oatmeal porridge, so nutritious and good for them, as they are recovering from the measles. Annika complains:

“Why must I eat it?” she wailed.

“What a silly question to ask,” said Pippi. Of course you must eat your lovely porridge. If you don’t, you won’t grow big and strong. And if you don’t grow big and strong, you won’t be able to make your children eat their lovely porridge. Oh no, Annika. Think of the dreadful muddle there would be over the porridge-eating in this country, if everyone talked like that!” (Lindgren 1955, 48–49)



© Lindgren, Astrid. Sunnäng. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1959 ("South Meadow").

It is not hard to guess, there is not much porridge-eating in Astrid Lindgren's books. Neither is there any spanking although there are lots of mischievous children, in fact there is hardly any punishment at all. When somebody has earned a penalty, like Emil, the whole thing is turned into triumph. Emil is happy to be locked up in the tool-shed carving his little figures, very well aware that he is much smarter than his father, who thinks the boy is ruefully contemplating his sins.

Instead there is a lot of playing not only in Vilekulla Cottage where work is also turned into games, but also in Noisy Village, in June Hill, on Karlsson's roof and in all the other unforgettable paradises that Astrid Lindgren has created to the joy and solace of children around the world. Her own childhood was full of imagining, playing and having fun and she always stresses the importance of play in the lives of children. Thus she is vehemently indignant when she tells stories of little orphans who have to work and toil all day, like the two little siblings Anna and Mattias in the story "Sunnanäng" ("South Meadow", 1959), the first in a series of four in a beautiful volume with the same title. The four stories in the book all have the same introduction: "Long ago, in the days of poverty", and they all tell us about children in need – in need of love, protection and not least, in need of joyful playing. The story of Anna and Mattias is a very sad one: mother- and fatherless they have to work all day for a greedy farmer who most unwillingly allows them short periods at school only because he has to obey the law. Astrid Lindgren, always shunning sentimentality, prefers another approach, that of irony, even scorn, when she describes the fate of the poor orphans in these words:

The hands of little children can do quite a lot of work, provided you hold them back from carving bark into little boats or into whistles, or building little huts among the grassy hills, little children's hands can milk the farmer's cows and clean the cowshed – little hands can do everything, if you only keep them far away from wooden boats and playhouses and other such things that they would love to busy themselves with.
(Lindgren 1959, 5, my translation)

Miserable children

There are quite a few miserable children in Astrid Lindgren's world. She saw them all around, and she could not help spinning her stories about their dull grey lives and about how they were rescued, com-

forted and sheltered. Not all of them are exploited as farm hands like Anna and Mattias – a few of them are ill in bed, others just neglected and longing for a mother’s or a father’s love, like Bo Vilhelm Olsson in *Mio my son* (1954). Bosse’s stepparents certainly don’t spank him or make him clean cowsheds, but their constant and continuous humiliation of him is definitely a more sophisticated kind of violation of a little child – mental cruelty might leave deeper wounds than a cane.

There is however, one occasion of spanking in a Lindgren story. It can be found in the second book about Mischievous Meg, or Mardie as she is known in the translation quoted below. The situation is as follows:

The wretched girl Mia whose clothes are always dirty and whose hair is full of lice is Mardie’s worst antagonist and whenever the two classmates meet there are always abusive quarrels or fights between them. But one day Mia has been caught after having stolen the head teacher’s purse and she is to be punished in the classroom. She refuses to apologize. A disaster is in the air and both teacher and pupils



© Lindgren, Astrid. Madicken och Junibäckens Pims. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1976 (Mardie to the rescue).

feel it. The scene is such an accurate illustration of Astrid Lindgren's attitude to violence in education that I want to remind you all of it:

Then at last Mia looked at the teacher and there was something in her eyes which made Mardie begin to cry.

Then the head teacher came back with his cane and it was not only Mardie but the whole class which was crying.

But not Mia. She was still standing by the table in her out-grown dress and her dirty pinafore and her black stockings with holes on the knees. She was looking out of the window as if it did not concern her at all.

"Now Mia, you must ask my forgiveness," said the head teacher.

"You can do it now or afterwards, whichever you decide!"

But Mia was not going to decide anything. The silence went on and on until the head teacher grew furious.

"Bend over," he shouted. Mia bent obediently and then the cane came whistling down and struck her thin behind with a dreadful sound. No sound came from Mia, but everyone in the class was sobbing and the teacher had her hands over her eyes.

The head teacher lifted the cane again and then somebody actually did scream, but it was not Mia.

"No, no, no, *no*," screamed Mardie, the tears spurting from her eyes.

The head teacher looked angrily at her and paused.

(Lindgren 1981, 83-84)

At supper that evening, Mardie relates the whole event to her father, also telling him what Mia said instead of *forgive me* when she stalked towards the door on her thin legs before anyone could stop her. She said it loud, so everyone could hear the word: "Pisspot". Mardie's father, a true democrat of the early twentieth century, retorts: "That's the most indecent thing I have ever heard", and Mardie who misunderstands her father argues "Yes but you see /--/" trying to defend her enemy Mia. "It was the head teacher who was indecent, said Papa, not Mia. She used exactly the right word for him" (Lindgren 1981, 84). Wisdom to be concluded, or why not an eleventh commandment: He who layeth hands upon a little child is - a PISSPOT!

In conclusion

On conclusion it is appropriate to quote from a novel by Astrid Lindgren which has not been as widely read as her other books but which is nonetheless a favourite for many readers. It is called *Kati in Paris*

(1953), and it is a truly romantic story about being in love, going to Paris to marry and finally settling down in one's first home. In the final chapter Kati has given birth to a son and, lying in bed with the baby in her arms, she gives him these words of fear and hope for a little creature to which *all the old things are so new because he has just seen the light of day*:

The whole world is filled with forests and seas and mountains and rivers, which you haven't seen yet, but perhaps you will some day. The world is a wonderful place to live and life is a precious gift. Don't ever believe those who try to tell you otherwise. It is true that life can be hard sometimes, I'm not going to tell you that it isn't. There will be times when you will cry. Perhaps you will even feel that you don't want to live any longer, Oh, if you knew how it pains me even to think of this possibility! I could give my heart's blood for you, but I can't take away a single one of the sorrows which await you. Still, I want to tell you that the earth is man's home, and it's a wonderful home. I hope that your life will never become so unhappy you won't realize that. God bless you, my son!
(Lindgren 1961, 152)

And God bless the children of the world who will become richer and happier if we contribute to their world by giving them what Astrid Lindgren gave: love, respect, and wonderful reading matter.

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