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## Stepping into the dark: mourning in Astrid Lindgren's *The brothers Lionheart*<sup>1</sup>

"I needed to take only one step out into the dark".  
(Lindgren 1985, 183)

Astrid Lindgren's juvenile novel, *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* (1973), has enchanted me since I first read it while studying at the University of Alberta. In part, I write this essay to uncover why this story haunts me. More importantly, however, I wonder what young readers of the twenty-first century in Canada, where I live, and in North America generally, might make of this modern fairy tale and its parallel worlds of Lindgren's childhood Sweden and an imaginary realm of adventure, Nangiyala. How might they read *The brothers Lionheart* (Lindgren 1985) against conflicts they experience in their own parallel worlds of home and neighbourhood, school, television and the Internet?

At the heart of this novel is Karl Lion, a young boy who mourns the loss of his elder brother, Jonathan, who had died while saving him from a fire, and who faces his own immanent death. Afraid he may not be more than "a bit of filth" (Lindgren 1985, 48), Karl tells a story about Jonathan's courage: "Now", he begins, "I'm going to tell you about my brother" (Lindgren 1985, 7). Young readers are familiar with realistic fiction in which children face danger and the realities of death, or the loss of parents, siblings, or friends. They will not be surprised to discover that, as in other fantasy adventures, Karl and Jonathan must deal with acts of cruelty, treachery, and violence. In a strategy that appears to be unique in children's literature, however, Lindgren's young protagonist, much like Hagar in Margaret Laurence's novel for adults, *The stone angel* (1964), or perhaps echoing Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1967), a novel that was important to Lindgren, narrates – as he is dying – his own experiences of grief, fear, and hope. Karl cannot bring his brother back to live with him,

but he can join him in Nangiyala, with stories about which Jonathan had comforted him before the fire. Karl will not grow up and – as many young North Americans are encouraged to do – make something of himself through a successful career and the creation of his own family. He does, however, make something meaningful of his life by creating an imaginary adventure. In his tale, set in a medieval landscape, Karl rejoins his brother, finds his own place in a resistance movement against an evil warlord, and witnesses a great battle and the destruction of a fire-breathing dragon. By his act of telling this story, Karl resists death's threat to erase the significance of his short life and that of his brother. He affirms Jonathan's love, thereby giving his brother's life meaning and, in so doing, endows his own life with significance. Some young North American readers face their own chronic and terminal illnesses; others are aware of the struggles of their friends or family members. They often perceive, too, that they are growing up in a world marked by violence and terror, by the prevalence of deepening poverty in the midst of increasing affluence, and by an escalating ecological crisis. In Karl's fear that he might not be more than "a bit of filth," might they perceive a reflection of their own fears that they, too, are insignificant? *The brothers Lionheart*, provides such readers with an allegorical tale that affirms their own abilities to construct resilient and meaningful lives.

### The realism of Lindgren's fairy tale

Adult readers, however, seem often to have been troubled by this novel. In an article describing responses of British and Canadian librarians to public criticism of controversial children's fiction, Anne Curry reports *The brothers Lionheart* was questioned for its inclusion of suicide and for being "too depressing overall" (Curry 2001, 36). As Eva-Maria Metcalf and Margareta Strömstedt have detailed, the history of the Swedish reception of Lindgren's novel includes similar reactions (Metcalf 1995, 112; Strömstedt 2003, 321–4). Such responses disclose a perception that *The brothers Lionheart* consists of a few pages of realistic fiction concerning the deaths of two young boys, which is depressing, and a longer fantasy that, because a child-like goodness defeats cruel adults and evil monsters in an idyllic, pastoral setting, is sweet – until the mutually-assisted suicides of the young brothers end their adventures in their afterlife-world of Nangiyala and terminate, apparently, the appreciation of some adult readers. As Metcalf points out, Lindgren contradicts "the accepted norms of holding onto life at any cost" (Metcalf 1995, 113). To con-

strue the novel's ending as suicide, and a child-narrator's discourse about death and dying as morbid and inappropriate, is to misread this novel and deny the resilience and imaginative power with which the creator of Pippi Longstocking, Emil, Mardie, and Ronia seems to have thought children are endowed. We may glimpse this resilience and power when we read Karl's fantasy tale not only as a story set in Småland of the early twentieth century but also as the realistic action of a dying child.

Karl lives, as he dies, in a world that resembles that of Lindgren's childhood, a setting as ancient to young North Americans today, and perhaps less easily imagined, as the world of dragons and epic adventures. In their world of CT scans and powerful medications, young readers may wonder why little Karl is left to die and why his mother does not take him to a hospital. With a little explanation or Internet surfing, however, they may understand the historical context of Karl's situation. Like the father of his energetic literary cousin Pippi, his own father, Karl tells us, "went to sea", and his family has "never heard from him since" (Lindgren 1985, 7). He suffers from a chronic lung disease, probably tuberculosis, but as a dressmaker his mother would likely not have been able to afford care in a sanatorium or other treatments available in the early twentieth century. Unable to attend school, his world shrinks to a bed in the kitchen. Young North Americans may well understand that Karl's world pre-dates today's securities of life insurance, social assistance, and public health care; they will certainly perceive the reality of his loneliness, of his grief at the loss of his brother, and of his fear of being powerless and insignificant.

*The brothers Lionheart* is the story of a dying child who does what many dying children do: Karl realizes he is dying and finds a language with which to work out the significance of his living. "I think everyone knew except me", he says (Lindgren 1985, 7), confessing his belated awareness of his approaching death. Such knowledge is neither morbid nor fanciful, but consistent with the experiences of children who are terminally ill. "There is evidence", asserts Dora Black, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, "that children, even young ones, are usually aware that they are dying" (Black 1998, par. 1). In her study, *On children and death*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a psychiatrist and one of the pioneers of palliative care, has also argued that many children intuitively know when "they are close to death" (Kübler-Ross 1985, 1).

Among the books that were in Astrid Lindgren's possession at the time of her own death, and which are now housed in the National

Library of Sweden, are four of Kübler-Ross's books; in 1982, nearly a decade after the publication of *The brothers Lionheart*, Kübler-Ross inscribed dedications to Lindgren in three of them. One is her groundbreaking study, *On death and dying* in which she records conversations with terminally ill patients and describes a process shared by those who are dying and through which they work out their grief and give meaning to their experience; it was first published in English in 1969 and, although Lindgren's copy was published in 1978, it is possible Lindgren had read another copy as she was writing *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*. Lindgren's collection, however, does not indicate what she may have learned from Kübler-Ross; what it does suggest is that the storyteller's account of Karl's adventure of dying resonated with stories the psychiatrist heard from her patients, and resonated closely enough that she wrote, in a copy of *On death and dying*, "To Astrid Lindgren my sister in spirit" (National Library 2007). In the figure of Karl Lion, Lindgren creates a child who tells a story as a means of working through his double-edged grief over the loss of his brother and his own dying. He does so employing the language of fairy tales and mythology.

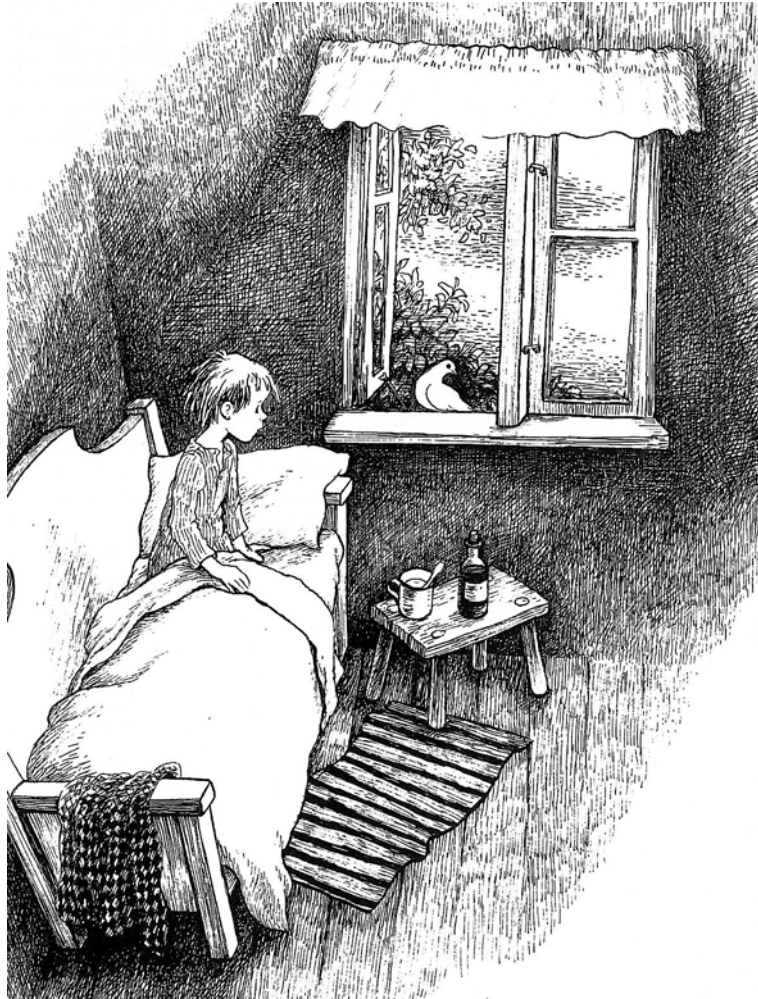
### Story-telling: the work of mourning

Two years after the publication of *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*, Bruno Bettelheim argued fairy tales provide a symbolic language by which children may perceive not only "that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable" but also that, "if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships", one overcomes them and "at the end emerges victorious" (Bettelheim 1975, 8). Kübler-Ross added that children employ symbolic language to communicate to others their awareness of being close to death (Kübler-Ross 1983, 1). Egil Törnqvist, who calls Lindgren's novel a "*halvsaga*", or "a half-fairy tale", argues Lindgren chose to describe Karl's realistic fears and longings in the stylization of fairy tales (Törnqvist 1975, 21). As he dies, Karl creates a story that is "almost like a saga [or, fairy tale]", he says, "and just a little like a ghost story"; it is a tale, however, in which "every word is true" (Lindgren 1985, 7). Margaret Somerville, founding director of the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law, reminds us that human beings are story-telling animals:

We communicate through imagination and intuition as much as reason and cognition. And we can find and communicate

certain realities only indirectly, not directly. Some kinds of knowledge can be sought only by setting up metaphorical-metaphysical spaces within which we hope to encounter them. This is true with regard to knowledge and wisdom about death. (Somerville 2001, xv)

“It feels”, Karl says, “as if it’s going to be tonight” (Lindgren 1985, 19): on the eve of his death, and afraid his death will render his life and that of his brother insignificant, Karl appropriates the symbolic language of folktales to create a space within which to understand



©Lindgren, Astrid. *Bröderna Lejonhjärta*. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1973 (*The Brothers Lionheart*).

death, and from which he communicates the truth of that wisdom indirectly – as does his creator, Lindgren – through narrative rather than rationalized discourse. Jacques Derrida, reflecting on the death of his friend, Louis Marin, suggests grieving is a work of mourning through which one may gain a “liberty of finitude” (Derrida 2001, 142). Poised between life and death, Karl sets up the symbolic space of the transitional world of Nangiyala in which he creates a tale of a death-defying adventure with his brother. It is his work of mourning, his means of gaining the liberty of his profound finitude. There are “things you have to do”, Jonathan tells Karl in Nangiyala, or “you aren’t a human being but just a bit of filth” (Lindgren 1985, 48). Narrating his story is the work of mourning Karl must undertake if he is not to be reduced to something equivalent to the dust and lint and broken threads under his mother’s sewing table, and if he wants to know the freedom of a genuine, finite human being to determine his identity and his relationship with his brother.

It is not only dying children who are aware of death’s reality and their own finitude; through television reports, and in their experiences with their neighbours, friends, or family members, young readers not only know about terminal illnesses but also about the reality of young lives cut short in road accidents, sudden storms, murder, and war. Reiterated four times, the statement of Karl’s fear of dying without having become more than “a bit of filth” is, as Eva-Maria Metcalf suggests, the novel’s leitmotif (Metcalf 1995, 106). It announces to young readers a paradox: precisely as they acknowledge the reality of their own fears and loneliness they may discover in such finitude the liberty to construct their lives as meaningful.

### Lindgren’s jump

Reunited in his imagined world with his brother, Karl learns Jonathan must make a journey into a neighbouring valley to uncover a traitor in the resistance movement. When Karl asks him “why he had to undertake something so dangerous”, Jonathan answers there are “things you have to do even if they are dangerous” or “you aren’t a human being but just a bit of filth” (Lindgren 1985, 48). A few pages later, Karl realizes he wants to go after Jonathan but is afraid; “I wasn’t at all brave”, he confesses. Recalling Jonathan’s words, he tells himself there are things he must do if he is not to be “but a bit of filth” (Lindgren 1985, 52). Appropriating his brother’s words, Karl reiterates Jonathan’s love for him and recognizes his own love for his brother. Doing so as he lies dying, he defines his relationship with

his brother. He neither denies the reality of his brother's death and of his own end, nor resigns himself to a construct of death in which a child's life that fails to reach adulthood has little significance; telling his story, Karl finds courage with which to resist death's erasure.

Later, Karl witnesses his brother rescue an enemy soldier and asks him why he has saved the man's life. "I don't know whether it was a good thing", Jonathan replies, "[b]ut there are things you *have* to do, otherwise you're not a human being but just a bit of filth" (Lindgren's and Tate's emphasis). But suppose the enemy had caught him, Karl asks. "Well, then they would have caught Lionheart", replies Jonathan, "and not a bit of filth" (Lindgren 1985, 130). Discovering that one's humanity is fashioned by loving the other – that which one is not and which may even be what one fears – Karl catches his first glimpse of the dragon, Katla (Lindgren 1985, 131), a symbolic embodiment of all that threatens to destroy his relationship with his brother. In the last moments of his story, aware Jonathan is paralyzed by Katla's fiery breath, Karl is afraid they are about to be separated again and their lives rendered insignificant. In the final moments of his life, Karl recognizes his imaginary adventure may yet be for nothing. As earlier he had listened to Jonathan's descriptions of Nangiyala, now he imagines Jonathan telling him of another parallel world below, Nangilima. "If we jumped down there", Karl realizes, "then at least we'd be sure of getting to Nangilima, both of us. No one need stay behind alone and lie grieving and weeping and being afraid" (Lindgren 1985, 182).

This leap is not an act of suicide or resignation to insignificance; nor is it a naïve act of faith. It is a protest, defying social isolation and existential finality. In reality, Jonathan is dead and Karl is dying; he must no longer wait for Jonathan to act; "it was not *we* who had to jump", he realizes. "It was *I* who was to do it" (Lindgren 1985, 183; Lindgren's and Tate's emphasis). It is an assertion that the love he shared with his brother, and their short lives together, may yet be positioned within an irreducible significance. This is what stepping into the darkness and jumping down to Nangilima will mean; this final adventure, what Kübler-Ross will call "the final stage of growth" (Kübler-Ross 1975), Karl admits is not an easy undertaking: "how", he asks himself, "could I ever dare?" All he need do is jump, or take "one step out into the dark" (Lindgren 1985, 183). In his final moment, Karl mirrors Jonathan's own action in the real setting of this novel, when he had taken him on his back and had jumped from the second storey window of their burning apartment building, killing himself and extending Karl's life: with Jonathan now on his back,

Karl jumps down to far away Nangilima. Perhaps English translations should have a footnote at this point, for the Swedish verb *hoppa* ("to jump or leap"), is virtually a homonym with the deponent verb, *hoppas* ("to hope"). It is precisely by stepping into the dark, by confronting his finitude – his fear of dying as nothing more than a "bit of filth" – that Karl completes the work of mourning, articulating a defiant hope that death's inevitability cannot undermine his newly found power to determine his relationship with his brother, the very thing that transforms both their lives as significant.

Young readers cannot go with Jonathan and Karl into the world of Nangilima; Lindgren closes the story before the two brothers get there. Readers must jump from Karl's story back into their own realities. His fantasy offers them a vision, not unlike the light that he, with his final words, tells Jonathan he sees (Lindgren 1985, 183). Lindgren herself, creating *The brothers Lionheart*, stepped into the dark and risked the censure of adult readers. In North America, young readers might perceive Karl's fear as a metonymy for the experience of insignificance in the face of overwhelming obstacles and find in Lindgren's fairy tale a reflection of their own resilience and power to protest that which kills love, to construct their own resilience and hope and, affirming the irreducible significance of their own finite lives, to transform their relationships and, perhaps, the world in which they live.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Marianne Lindvall of the University of Alberta, who taught me to read Swedish and introduced me to Lindgren's novel; to Lena Törnqvist of the National Library of Sweden who introduced me to the catalogue of books that had been in Lindgren's personal library; and to the participants in the Astrid Lindgren Centennial Conference (Stockholm, 2007) whose questions and responses have given me more to think about and helped me edit my paper for inclusion in this issue of *Barnboken*.

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