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The Bullerby books and tradition

The Bullerby series (1947, 1949, 1952) is as a whole one of Lindgren's most autobiographical narratives, and, among Swedes, one of the best loved. But the attitude towards "Bullerby" has undergone interesting permutations over time. Today, "Bullerby" is frequently seen as a regressive wish-fulfilment fantasy. But this was not how the books were regarded when they were first published.

The *Bullerby* series is one of Astrid Lindgren's most autobiographical works, as well as one of her best loved among Swedes.¹ Yet contemporary critics can sometimes display an ambivalence towards what they perceive as the idealisation of the setting of Bullerby ("Noisy village"). The books are lauded for their popular appeal yet criticised for being unrealistic and setting a standard so idyllic, it is impossible to live up to. "The village of Bullerby does not exist. Has it ever existed?" one critic asks rhetorically. Undeniably, Bullerby is far removed from contemporary culture – except as consumable nostalgia – and it no doubt appears fictional and unrealistic to most Swedes (upholding as it does a perhaps unattainable norm). Indeed, it seems that "Bullerby" has become the handed-down, idealised story of our forebears. However, as this article sets out to show, this is an anachronistic way of reading the *Bullerby* books. My argument is that by using a traditional, anti-modern, essentially realistic genre, Lindgren sets up an alternative vision of the good society in contrast to that provided by modernity, and thus resurrects a past that at the time of writing (the late 40s to early 50s) was being repressed and written out of history.

Play and work

The *Bullerby* books are set around the time of the First World War, but as Margareta Strömstedt has pointed out, the children's parents display attitudes that belong to a later era (1977, 99–101). They play and show affection in a way that would have been most unusual even during Lindgren's own happy childhood. A hug was exceptio-

nal. And even Lindgren's father Samuel, who was unusually kind-hearted, would scarcely have indulged in sleigh riding for the fun of it like the dads in *Bullerby*. On the other hand, it is also true that Lindgren's parents as well as others of that generation often granted (of necessity perhaps) their children a much wider scope of freedom than later generations have done. Another anachronism is that the stories, especially as they have been rendered in the films, depict pre-industrial rural life while infusing this vision with a sense of social security that belongs to the 50s and 60s (see Holmlund 2003).

The period between the 1880s to 1920s was not just fun and games, a fact Lindgren herself was very well aware of. However, the evocation of an agrarian past, with its proximity to nature and a more closely knit society than can be found today, combined with modern notions of personal freedom and individuality, especially for the child, proved highly appealing. It provides the reader with the best of two probably incompatible worlds. *Bullerby* is an evocation of the past, made believable by the strong presence of the girl narrator Lisa. The *Bullerby* narratives typically centre on an activity – babysitting, sleeping in the barn, going crayfishing, taming a dog. There is no plot other than that generated by the seasons. In the Hallström films this is further underscored: the first film takes place during summer, the second during autumn and winter. The natural rhythm of nature, tied to the human calendar, is borne home. In *Bullerby* everything is fun, even chores such as digging up potatoes. And we believe it! Lindgren's act of identification is so successful that we are left in no doubt. In interviews, Lindgren has stated that this was by and large her own childhood, the way she experienced it. Thus, even if *Bullerby* falls short of literal truth, it appears realistic and psychologically true.

Once upon a time in the days of poverty

In contrast to the charge of idealisation, it is also true that in her books, Lindgren was able to paint with darker colours. Ola Larsmo reminds us of Lindgren's fairy tales in *Sunnanäng* ("South Meadow") all of which begin with the formulaic: "Once upon a time in the days of poverty" and which portray poor, sick and neglected, yet heroic and wonderful children (2002). He sees these texts as balancing out the all-too cute *Bullerby* books (ibid). Yet even in the *Bullerby* books one can sense a darker reality: the children are afraid of the drunken shoemaker Good (who is anything but "good"). Good mistreats his dog, shouts at the children but is also something of an outcast in the

village. Does he really have a choice when Olaf's father, an independent farmer, wants to buy his dog? Hard work is a given. That is why the parents are rarely seen and why the children are left on their own: the parents work most of the time. The children work too. They help out on the farms, as when Lisa and Anna are nursemaids for Kerstin, and Olaf has to "milk the South Farm cows and feed the pigs and chickens" although he "would have liked to look after Kerstin himself" (1970, 189). There are also near-fatal incidents, such as when Lars falls through the ice while skating (1970, 88–89). "It's a wonder we never got killed," Lindgren reminisced herself, when comparing her childhood to that of the Bullerby children (Strömstedt 1977). This is something modern safety-oriented parents of the present generation may wish to consider.

The deepest underlying anxiety in the books is that this whole way of life will end. In the last of the *Bullerby* books the girls talk about their plans for the future – how they are going to marry the boys, thus perpetuating life in Bullerby village. The boys will not hear of it. One says he will go to America and wed an Indian princess. We want to believe the girls, but in real life the boys' version won out. Swedes emigrated to America (even if they did not marry princess Laughing-Water); or else they moved to urban centres within Sweden itself. Approximately one out of six stayed in the Swedish countryside. Astrid Lindgren herself moved to Stockholm while her brother Gunnar (the prototype for Pip) took over the farm – but also became a Member of Parliament. Their happy, idyllic society did break up. Lindgren knew that; her readers, at least the adults, knew it too.

Sörgården and Bullerby

When talking about the alleged idealisation found in the *Bullerby* books it is also important to consider literary context and the time in which they were written. The Swedish norm for children's books set in a farming community would have been *Sörgården* ["South farm"] (1913) and *I Önnemo* ["In Önnemo"] (1915) by Anna Maria Roos, a widespread reader used specifically for educational purposes. The many short texts that make up *Sörgården* and *I Önnemo* were aimed at developing reading skills as well as promoting national pride and bourgeois values. Eva Maria Löfgren has pointed out that Lindgren had a "*Sörgården*"-background which would have made her susceptible to Roos's textual framework (1996, 232). The influence is most clearly felt in Lindgren's *Bullerby* books, as well as her books about Emil (which were also set on a farmstead). In both of

these series as well as in Roos's, we find an extended nuclear family including maids, farmhands and a wide assortment of domesticated animals. The farms are run in a traditional way without tractors or any other machinery. Two of the three farms in Bullerby share the names of the ones in Önnemo. The episodic structure of both Lindgren's and Roos's books is another similarity. The books are not plot-driven.

When it comes to Lindgren's two farm series, there is an obvious difference in how the *Bullerby* and *Emil* books relate to the *Sörgården*-genre of writing. In the former innocence prevails, in the latter – written twenty years later – irony and farcical humour is the preferred mode. I would argue however, that in comparison with the didactic works of Roos, the *Bullerby* books appear quite anarchic, with their insistence on play, whether in school or in the potato field. Not as wild as *Emil* but not as tame as *Sörgården*. And to contemporary readers the *Bullerby* books would have appeared as realistic texts without a didactic purpose.

The cult of country life

The question of idealisation must also be put into the context of modernity, ie. the modernization of Swedish society. At the time of their publication, nothing could have been stiffer and less ideal than an ordinary, old-fashioned upbringing on a farm. The future was all about the city and individualism. To write about a quaint countryside collective was definitely not progressive or utopian in any way. Birgitta Cremnitzer has commented on this in her essay "Astrid Lindgren et le monde paysan." She writes that the "cult of country life" continued in the field of children's literature until the 1940s (1988, 143; my translation). Cremnitzer goes on to argue that around this period of time something happens: "the idyllic representation of the countryside vanishes and is replaced by a world which is better able to answer to the questions posed by modern children" (143; my translation). Cremnitzer goes on to analyse how Lindgren re-vitalises the country-farm genre in the *Emil* books. As I see it, however, the *Bullerby* books are even more interesting, because they are transitional: neither nostalgic, nor yet fully modern.

The *Bullerby* books did not cause a stir nor need defending in the same way as did their contemporary *Pippi Longstocking*. *Pippi* is avant-garde where *Lisa* in *Bullerby* appears to be a throwback to an earlier period. But when we feel that the *Bullerby* books are idealisations, we do it from a twenty-first century perspective. They certainly did not appear as such when they were written. I would also

argue that the Lindgren-theme of the freedom of the child is just as potently expressed in the *Bullerby* books as in *Pippi Longstocking*, albeit within the frameworks of their contrasting narrative modes, the former being realistic episodes and the latter comic-fantastic.

Not too rustic, not too nice...

In order to understand what the *Bullerby* books signalled at the time of their publication, it is necessary to look closer at their reception. Contemporary reviews parade words like “nice,” “wholesome,” “ordinary,” “everyday,” “realistic,” and “countryside.” Some saw the books as “*Pippi*-light” – not as original and funny as *Pippi*, but perhaps because of that, more “suitable.” Reviewers were not engaged for or against, as with the *Pippi* books. One anonymous reviewer in *Malmö Tidningen* held that the tone was just right: “not too rustic, not too nice, not too moralising and not too tidy” (1947). The expression “not too rustic” is especially revealing, I believe. Sweden was becoming an increasingly urban and modern society; this meant that people could relate to traditional *Bullerby* life, but they would not long for the past, they would not want something “too rustic.”

In a review in *Aftonbladet*, Britt G. Hallqvist (1953) characterises the *Bullerby* books as being “straightforward and unsentimental,” which, in turn, leads her to be critical about Ingrid Vang Nyman’s original illustrations; Hallqvist finds Vang Nyman’s artwork appropriate for “humoresques” like the *Pippi Longstocking* books, but unsuitable for “realistic accounts.” Accordingly, later editions of the *Bullerby* books feature Ilon Wikland’s far more realistic, but also more idyllic, illustrations. The combination of realistic and idyllic traits is carried even further in the filmed versions, notably Lasse Hallström’s two full-length movies. One can only speculate as to whether the *Bullerby* books would have been perceived somewhat differently had they retained their original illustrations to the present day. But of course, the greatest change in how the narratives are perceived has to do with socio-economic changes in the readership rather than in the texts/pictures themselves. Thus, what was perceived as realistic in the 1950s is precisely that which seems idyllic and far-fetched today, such as the un-chaperoned free-play of children, the proximity to nature, and the traditions.

A modernised Önnemo

Although Vang Nyman was criticised for her “zany” illustrations, Lindgren herself was not condemned for dabbling in different gen-

res. Hallqvist writes: “when it comes to children’s writers, they may be naturalists or romantics, realists or visionaries – there should be no either-or” (1953; my translation). On the whole, the *Bullerby* books received favourable press. The general impression, however, is that the rave reviews were saved for *Pippi*. The *Bullerby* books were seen as refreshing but essentially harmless. Conservative reader would find reassurance in a genre harkening back to the didactic and nationalistic Roos-readers of the early twentieth century. Radicals would read *Pippi*-like anarchy between the lines. In 1965 von Zweigbergk synthesises these standpoints: Lindgren’s “interpretation of the child’s world of play and fantasy, as it appears in both *Pippi Longstocking* and in the true-to-life suite about the lively Bullerby children – a modernised Önnemo! – was perfectly attuned to the modern philosophy of play” (462; my translation). However, despite its apparent harmlessness, I would also argue that the high estimation of the countryside and country life at the precise moment in history when that way of life was seen as outdated is a daring and radical move, especially since Lindgren does not give vent to nationalistic or conservative ideas. It could, moreover, have cost Lindgren her status as a reformer at the forefront of children’s literature in Sweden. Instead, she turned to the then-obsolete genre of farm life and infused it with new meaning.

Bullerby & modernity

In her study of “modernism in the nursery,” one of Lena Kåreland’s (1999) prime examples is *Pippi Longstocking*. And it is true that many of the aesthetic and pedagogical ideals invoked in modernism are given expression in *Pippi Longstocking* – the rejection of norms and tradition in all its guises, the linguistic free-play, and Pippi herself as the totally liberated child. *Bullerby*, by contrast seems to represent a return to stable values and a safe rural world. However, just as *Pippi*’s modernism can be seen as a response to and a critique of modernity, *Bullerby* too posed a challenge to contemporary society and modernity, although from the opposite direction. In using such varied tactics, Lindgren is in good company. For modernist writers like D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats, tradition is not mere nostalgia, not simply an idealised past or conservative politics, although it may be that as well; rather, tradition brings about a radical questioning of some aspects of modernity. Lawrence celebrates country life in *The Rainbow* (1915) and Yeats embraces Irish folklore and storytelling traditions. The *Bullerby* books, I would venture, are “modernist” in that

sense too: they implicitly question the modernization of Sweden by depicting a past that is different from, and in some ways better than, modern society, and thus presents an alternative; at the same time Lindgren depends on modern ideas about childhood, psychology and politics.

The Boundaries of Bullerby...and of Sweden

In this article I have shown that Lindgren, in the face of the prevalent idealisation of modernity and urbanity (up until the mid 70s at least), through the *Bullerby* books stimulated the memory of a collective agrarian past, and created a complex, fictionalised version of this past that remains with us to this day. Not only did the *Bullerby* books infuse the country-farm genre with new life, but more importantly, they provided positive images of traditional life in the countryside, while embracing modern ideas of child behaviour and psychology. Indeed it can be argued that not only *Pippi Longstocking* – but even the *Bullerby* books, too – represent a modernist critique (albeit mild) of contemporary society. Whether the *Bullerby* books are dynamic enough and sufficiently open to reinterpretation and thus can continue to invigorate today's diverse society remains to be seen. In closing, one may ask whether the boundaries of Lindgren's imagination to some extent risk becoming the boundaries of our own, Swedish, self-imagination.

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1 There are two translations of the Bullerby books, Evelyn Ramsden's (British) and Florence Lamborn's (American). Thus there are some inconsistencies between the two. For instance Ramsden uses the Swedish village name "Bullerby" whereas Lamborn employs a literal translation, "Noisy village." In the one-volume edition, which is a compilation making use of material from both translations, "Bullerby" is used throughout. It should also be noted that the English-language editions often are abbreviated in some way. The one-volume edition, for example, lacks several chapters included in the Swedish version.