

Astrid Lindgren and Being Swedish

Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002) was a children's writer of international repute. Although many of her stories are set in specific times and particular places in Sweden, her work transcends the time-bound and narrowly provincial. Her settings, be they urban, countryside, or fantastic know no borders even when they “are” Swedish down to the last nail. And, of course, outrageous and transgressive characters like Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson-on-the-roof hold no passports; they belong (and are out of place) everywhere. I believe, too, that Lindgren's oral storytelling style makes her more readily translatable into other languages and cultures than if she had used a more literary style. Finally, Lindgren’s deep concern for the vulnerable (yet potentially empowered) child finds resonance across possible cultural divides. Lindgren writes for a commonwealth of children.

However, it is also true that Astrid Lindgren and her work hold a special place in the hearts and minds of Swedes. One could even argue that the collective identity formation of Swedes owes a great deal to her. The template for a good (if old-fashioned) childhood is that of the Bullerby children. Childhood pranks are inevitably compared to those of Emil. Attitudes of solidarity and courage are lent shape by Ronia and the Brother's Lionheart. The expression “han fattas mig” (feebly translated “I miss him”) is frequently seen in obituaries. Names like Ida, Emil, Annika and even the invented Ronia have acquired currency (and not only in Sweden). The The tourist board of Småland puts her name to good use; there is a Lindgren theme park in Vimmerby close to where she grew up; Stockholm has an Astrid Lindgren open-air museum (“Junibacken”). Thus, the boundaries of Lindgren's imagination have, to some extent, become the boundaries of our own, Swedish, self-imagination. I shall argue, moreover, that Lindgren, in the face of the prevalent idealisation of modernity and urbanity (up until the mid 70's at least), stimulated the recuperation of the memory of a collective agrarian past and created a complex but essentially idealised version of this past that is with us to this day.

Many different factors have contributed to the unique position of Lindgren's oeuvre. First of all we have Lindgren herself. Despite Sweden's present day level of urbanisation most Swedes can (or at least could) identify with Lindgren's humble rural upbringing. Most Swedes are at one or two removes from life and labour on a small farm; and very many people own cottages in their “home” counties. Over time Lindgren became what could be called a national storyteller. Not least was this achieved through immensely popular audio recordings of her own work. In these performances – sometimes a voice-over accompanying a film sequence, sometimes an independent audiocassette recording – the oral qualities of the original texts are apparent.

Lindgren also assumed a public persona. She would speak out on political matters too – taxation, treatment of animals, child abuse – and the politician’s would listen; actually they could not afford to do otherwise given the position of Lindgren as the beloved storytelling grandmother of all Sweden. It has been pointed out that it was Lindgren’s satirical story “Pomperipossa” from 1976, in which the high level of taxation was criticised (Lindgren was subjected to 102 % taxation on her royalties), which led to the first defeat of the Social democrats in 44 years. When she later brought up environmental issues, politicians were careful to listen.

In this paper I shall focus on the three books about the Bullerby Children. It is one of Lindgren's most autobiographical texts, and, among Swedes, one of the best loved. Most

importantly it sets up an alternative vision of the good society to that provided by modernity, and thus recuperates a past that (at the time of writing) was being repressed and written out of history, whereas today it has become the received, idealised story of our forebears. It tells the story of a year in a small farming village as seen from the perspective of a seven-year old girl, Lisa, and her friends. Interestingly, *The Bullerby Children* has also been filmed twice (with Lindgren's assistance), which makes it possible to trace shifts in sensibility, and to consider aesthetic and cultural changes imposed by the transposition from one medium to another, as well as over time.

Lindgren wrote three Bullerby books: *Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn* (1947), *Mera om oss barn i Bullerbyn* (1949), and *Bara roligt i Bullerbyn* (1952). In between, she did books about Pippi Longstocking, Kati, and Bill Bergson and others. As for the Bullerby books there are different English translations and editions, but the most readily accessible in English at present are *The Children of Noisy Village* and *Happy Times in Noisy Village*, plus the picture book *Christmas in Noisy Village*. The two films by director Lasse Hallström are also available internationally.

On the occasion of her 90th birthday man of letters and ex-expatriate Swede, Herman Lindqvist, wrote that for him who grew up in different parts of the world, Astrid Lindgren meant more to his sense of Swedish identity than any other person, and he writes: “her books kept the dream of Sweden alive” (Lindqvist). He adds that the recordings where she tells her own stories became the “voice of Mother Svea” (Sweden’s counterpart to John Bull, Uncle Sam and Jeanne of France). For many immigrants and refugees who come to Sweden, Lindgren is an important cultural guide. A Chilean journalist who had spent many years in Sweden wrote about his sense of frustration when he learnt about Lindgren’s death back in Santiago and he couldn’t find anyone to talk about her books.

Swedish-American film scholar Christine Holmlund writes that the Lindgren characters continue to serve as “tiny cultural attachés and diminutive ambassadors” (3). Holmlund goes on to point out three historical periods that Lindgren’s oeuvre revolves around and which are “foundational for ‘modern’ ... Swedish society: (1) the small-town and urban welfare state of the 1940s to 1970s; (2) the rural, peasant era of the 1880s to the 1920s; and a mythical Viking era” (5). Holmlund’s three periods are illuminating I find, although I disagree with the Viking designation; I would rather call the third category mythical, medieval, fantastic, since there is no depiction whatsoever of Viking society in either *Mio My Son*, *The Brothers Lionheart*, *Ronia the Robbers Daughter*, or in Lindgren’s fairy tales (*Sunnanäng*). Having said that, it is also true that Lindgren’s fantasy stories have a definite northern quality, not least in the depiction of landscape, or in the violence, which at times reaches Viking levels. The first category corresponds to Lindgren’s own adult life; these are the decades that saw most of her literary output. The second is Lindgren’s own childhood, at least in part. The third is the time and place of myth and oral storytelling. Often, however, the line is blurred between fantasy and history, like in the *Brothers Lionheart*. Historical time is blurred too. Bo is transported from modern Stockholm to the fairy kingdom of his father.

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. They play and the show affection in a way that would have been most unusual even in Lindgren’s own happy childhood. A hug was exceptional. And even Lindgren’s father, Samuel, an unusually kind-hearted patriarch, would scarcely have indulged in sleigh-riding for the fun of it like the dads in Bullerby. It is true, however, that Lindgren’s parents and

others of that generation often granted (of necessity perhaps) their children a much larger scope of freedom than later generations have done.

The 1880s to 1920s was not just fun and games, as Lindgren was herself very well aware of. But 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 (incompatible) worlds.

Bullerbyn is an idealisation of the past, made believable by the strong presence of the seven-year old narrator Lisa (nine, in the English translation!). The Bullerby narratives typically center around 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 proceeds through summer; the other Autumn and winter. The rhythm of natural season and human calendar is borne home. In Bullerby everything is fun, even chores such as picking potatoes. And we believe it! Lindgren's act of identification is so successful that we do not doubt. In interviews, she has stated that this was by and large her own childhood, and how she experienced it. Even if Bullerby falls short of literal truth, it appears realistic and psychologically true.

When Astrid Lindgren died in 2002 at the age 94 she was grieved as something of a national grandmother. Commentators frequently brought up the subject of her Swedishness. Peter J Olsson named her “the ‘Swedishest’ we have”. In the obituaries one can sense an ambivalence towards the perceived idealisation of the Bullerby books. They are lauded for their appeal yet criticised for being unrealistic and setting a standard impossible to live up to. The Bullerby village does not exist? Has it ever existed? one critic asks rhetorically.

At the same time others are quick to point out that Lindgren were able to paint with darker colours. Ola Larsmo reminds us of the fairy tales which all of them begin with the formula: “Once upon a time in the days of poverty” and which all portray poor, sick and neglected, and yet heroic and wonderful children. He sees these texts as correctives to the too cute Bullerby books. Yet even in the Bullerby books the critically inclined can sense a darker reality: the children are afraid of the drunken shoemaker Snäll (who is anything but “snäll” literally kind or quick person). Snäll mistreats his dog, shouts at the children but is also something of an outcast in the village. Does he really have an option when Olle's father, an independent farmer, wants to buy his dog? Hard work is a given. That's why the parents are rarely seen and why the children are left on their own; the parents work all the time. The children work too, they help out on the farms. There are also near fatal incidents, as when Lars goes through the ice when skating. “It's a wonder we never got killed”, Lindgren reminisced herself, when comparing her childhood to that of the Bullerby children. This is something that modern safety-sensitive parent like myself have occasion to think about. In any case, the Bullerby books are not all about a gilded childhood.

Yet the deepest underlying anxiety is that all of this 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 hear nothing of it. One of them says that 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; they moved to the urban centers. Maybe one out of six stayed in the countryside. Astrid went to Stockholm, her brother Gunnar, the prototype for Bosse took over

the farm. The happy, populous society did break up. Lindgren knew that; her readers, at least the adult readers knew it too.

When talking about the alleged idealisation of the Bullerby books it is also important to consider the time and context in which they were written. The Swedish template for children's books set in a farming community would have been *Sörgården* ("South farm") by Anna Maria Roos, a book specifically used for pedagogical purposes. The many short texts that make up *Sörgården* were aimed at inculcating reading skills as well as promoting national pride and bourgeois values. In comparison, the Bullerby books appear to be utterly anarchic, with their insistence on play, whether it is in school in the potato field. Not as wild as Pippi but not as tame as *Sörgården*, the Bullerby books would have appeared as realistic texts without a didactic purpose.

Another aspect is modernity. At the time of publication, nothing could have been stiffer and less ideal than an ordinary upbringing on a farm. The present and the future was all about the city and all about individualism. To write about a jolly countryside collective was definitely not progressive or utopian in any way.

Pippi on the other hand was criticised for being too extreme and vulgar and far fetched. A famous critic went so far as to imply that Pippi's antics bore the signs of mental illness. But Pippi Longstocking is modern. She is a child of her time, as Lena Kåreland have so convincingly shown (*Modernismen i Barnkammaren – Modernism in the nursery*). When Lindgren submitted her manuscript of Pippi Longstocking to the leading publishing house in Sweden, Bonniers, she was well aware of how radical and extreme the text was. She states that the manuscript will no doubt be returned (and it was – Bonniers did not accept it), but the interesting thing is that she goes on to defend her move by pointing to Bertrand Russell's books on education (ultimately derive from Alfred Adler) and by referring to her own children's enthusiasm about it. That is, she argues that the text is in line with modern pedagogical thinking and with the reading/listening preferences of modern children.

The Bullerby books did not have to be defended in the same way, nor did they cause a stir – then. Pippi is avant garde where Lisa appears to be a throwback to an earlier period. But when we feel that the Bullerby books are idealisations, we do it from a 21st century perspective. They certainly did not appear as such when they were written.

I would, however, argue that the valorisation of the countryside and country life at the precise moment in history when that way of life was seen as dated and outmoded is a daring and radical move since Lindgren does not give vent to nationalistic or conservative ideas. 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 frames of the mode of writing of each set of texts, the former being realist accounts and the latter enacted in the comic-fantastic.

Another aspect of the Bullerby books which deserves to be brought up in this context is that this is, as Reinbert Tabbert has pointed out, one of the first and most successful instances of a first-person narrative where an adult author writes in the voice and persona of a seven-year old girl. This too, is a radical move. Just how radical, I didn't realise until I checked with the English translation currently in print and found out that English Lisa is nine. Presumably her exploits are too free and dangerous to encounter in a seven year old?

Finally, I return to the question of Swedishness. The time periods Holmlund refers to are part of it, but I would like to add a couple of other key terms and concepts. To Swedes, it's Lindgren's regional affiliation that makes her so Swedish. It's because her characters, especially those from the county of Småland (the Emil books, the Bullerby boks) speak in dialect that they appear ur-Swedish. Even if you are not from Småland, you can relate to the linguistic regionalism. In passing I think the ability to translate this quality of Lindgren's work into other languages stands in relation to the success of her work: in German the translations try to do her regional dialects justice, in English and French they don't.

Moreover, the characters fulfil stereotypical expectations. Småland people are supposed to be thrifty, hard-working and have a fund of country-wise sayings. Lindgren's characters have that. The settings are typical too: rural småland, the archipelago with its fishing community and summer guests (incidentally Lindgren said it took her thirty years to dare to write about this typical Swedish milieu not having grown up in such an area), the forest (ever present in the Swedish psyche), and the little town of Katie and Mardie. Characteristically, Lindgren's more realistic books feature places in their titles: Bullerbyn, Saltkråkan, Bråkmakargatan, Lönneberga. Incidentally, the translations Noisy village or Troublemaker street miss half the point: "buller" does mean noise, but it sounds like a place name as well (like Dinsby or Rackets perhaps); "bråkmakare" is a troublemaker, but it is also an old term for flax braker (evidently a noisy undertaking), and thus a perfectly normal street name.

Lindgren's attitude to children (they should be independent) and class (or preferably lack thereof) are also shared by a majority of Swedes. This does not mean that she generally portrays classless societies. Not even Bullerby village is classless. There are no rich or genteel people around, certainly, and the farmers (and their children) work just as hard as their farmhands (and their children) but there is obviously a difference between the farmers and their employees. The same can be said about ethnic variation. Lindgren's literary cosmos is a reflection of the monocultural, monoethnic Sweden that existed up until the 1960s. In Pippi in the South Seas Holmlund asks whether the Lindgren's popularity will survive in a more diverse society.

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