

# Astrid Lindgren's Twin Roles

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**Abstract** In the history of Swedish literature, 1945 is usually regarded as a milestone: Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* was published, revolutionising not only children's literature but the attitude towards children and their upbringing. "The modern Swedish children's book" was born. The period after the Second World War is known as "the golden age" of children's literature since several of the great authors of children's books and literature for young adolescents made their debuts and continued to write for many years. The publishing house of Rabén & Sjögren at that time was a relative newcomer to the publishing business. The following years were a great success; Astrid Lindgren was the company's most notable author. A major factor in the establishment of its reputation was the double role of Astrid Lindgren, who was not only its most important author but also the editor of children's books. She was one of the first Swedish authors to demand that the quality of books for children be the same as that of those for adults. As author and publisher, Astrid Lindgren devoted her life to making children's books good reading.

**Key words** Astrid Lindgren; Pippi Longstocking; Rabén & Sjögren; publishing

In the history of Swedish literature 1945 is usually regarded as a milestone. "The modern Swedish children's book" was born and Astrid Lindgren's book Pippi Långstrump (Pippi Longstocking) was published and revolutionised both children's literature and the attitude to children and their upbringing. The period after the Second World War is known as "the golden age" of children's literature since several of the great authors of children's and youth literature made their debuts and continued to write for many years. A relatively stable group comprising Astrid Lindgren, Lennart Hellsing and Tove Jansson, provided the solid base and they and many of their most notable colleagues were printed by the publishing house of Rabén & Sjögren. The house was, at that time, a relative newcomer to publishing. The business started in 1942 and very quickly established a profile as a publisher of quality books for children and young people. Certainly, a major factor in the establishment of the company's reputation was the double role of Astrid Lindgren as she was not only the editor of children's books but also the most important author for that company.

## 1. Author and Editor

Astrid Lindgren worked as editor-in-chief for Rabén & Sjögren from 1946 to 1970 and for almost a quarter of a century was responsible for children's literature. When Astrid

Lindgren was appointed she was already well known as an author; her first Pippi Longstocking book was published in 1945. She was also a qualified secretary and was regarded as extremely suitable to assist the company manager Hans Rabén. The company believed that it was an opportune time to invest in children's and youth literature. Hans Rabén's involvement in children's and youth books led to his being internationally acknowledged which amongst other things in 1956 resulted in his appointment as president of the International Board on Books for Young People (Åkerman 16). Marianne Eriksson, Astrid Lindgren's colleague and successor as editor noted on Astrid Lindgren's interest in tackling the publishing of children's books at the company: "It was an exciting challenge, it sounded fun and she also needed the money!" Eriksson went on; "Anyway, in the autumn of 1946 Astrid became responsible for children's literature at Rabén & Sjögren. 'I knew absolutely nothing about publishing', said Astrid herself, 'but I knew a good book when I saw it. Or rather I should say, read it. It was simply to get going, searching for children's books.' " (Eriksson 80).

When Astrid Lindgren started her work at Rabén & Sjögren she had the valuable experience of being on "the other side", the author's, and therefore had a unique insight. In 1944 she wrote an accompanying letter to Albert Bonniers publishing house where, in principle she rejected her own and first Pippi Longstocking book. This letter bears witness not only to her special brand of humour and wit, but also how a company might regard the manuscripts that flood in. In *Excelsior! Albert Bonniers förlag 150 år. En jubileumskavalkad i brev* (Excelsior! 150 years of Publishing at Albert Bonniers- a Jubilee Collection of Letters), the letter is reproduced in its entirety with the humorous comment: "Receiving story books, written by creative mothers who maintain that the stories have made their own children happy are an everyday part of a publisher's work. As with all manuscripts, one has to remain very alert. Occasionally there can be something of exceptional worth. A housewife, a mother-of-two living on Dalagatan in Stockholm, sent in a whole bunch" (501). Here is the accompanying letter, which is well-worth including in its entirety:

Stockholm, 27th April 1944  
Albert Bonniers Publishers Ltd

Please allow me to enclose a manuscript for a children's book that I fully expect you to return instantly.

Pippi Longstocking is, as you will discover, if you take the trouble to read the manuscript, a little ubermensch in the figure of a child placed in a quite ordinary environment. Thanks to her supernatural strength and other characteristics she is completely independent of adults and lives her life just as it pleases her. In her interactions with grown-ups she always has the last word.

In Bertrand Russell (*Education and the Good Life* 85) I read that the strongest instinct in childhood is the desire to become an adult or perhaps the will to gain authority and that in fantasy the normal child clings to images that contain a desire for power.

I don't know whether Bertrand Russell is right but to judge by the sickly popularity of Pippi Longstocking over a number of years amongst my own children and their peers, I am inclined to believe it. Now, I am not so presumptuous that I imagine that just because a number of children have loved to hear about Pippi's adventures it doesn't necessarily mean that it will become a printable and readable book when I write it down on paper.

To convince myself of the situation, whatever that may be, I hereby leave this manuscript in your capable and knowledgeable hands and can only hope that you don't alert the social services. For safety's sake, I should perhaps point out that my own incredibly well brought-up small God's angels of children have not suffered any damage as a result of Pippi's behaviour. They have understood that Pippi is a special case, who in no way can be a role model for ordinary children.

With great respect,  
Astrid Lindgren (501 – 2)

The publisher's rejection letter is dated 20<sup>th</sup> September. It is not signed, but contains stock phrases that they would have liked to have published the book and that "the manuscript was therefore circulated for reading" but they had already purchased manuscripts for the whole of 1945 and 1946 and that "we are not ready to commit to 1947." The letter ends with: "The manuscript is very original and entertaining in all its incredibility and we truly regret that we shall not be able to publish it. We therefore return it to you with this letter by registered post" (Hjort 501). Astrid Lindgren is obliged to use similar phrases herself when, in later years, she herself is required to reject manuscripts sent in by other writers. The book about Pippi Longstocking was revised and subsequently published by Rabén & Sjögren in 1945.

Astrid Lindgren became an invaluable resource when it came to attracting new writing talent to Rabén & Sjögren. One cannot ignore her own experiences as a writer as well as her commitment and opinions about children's literature when one looks at the Swedish "golden age of children's literature". One way for the publisher to come into contact with new talent was the recurring competitions where Astrid Lindgren participated in formulating the rules, was a member of the panel of judges and took great responsibility for the competitions. That Astrid Lindgren was skilful as an author is common knowledge, but few know anything about the huge contribution that she made as an editor and even fewer can imagine how her advice and comments have shaped the authors of classic Swedish children's books for at least 25 years.

It is very interesting to see how Astrid Lindgren helped and guided a succession of her author colleagues in different ways. By studying the letters that have been preserved it is possible to construct a clear picture of how Astrid Lindgren worked and about her perception about what makes a good children's book. To sit on two chairs at the same time was not problematical for her. When she acquired her position at Rabén & Sjögren there were many who believed that her own books might take priority, but the opposite occurred. "She often went into the head of advertising and asked him not to make such a fuss of her" (Carlberg 29). In addition, Astrid Lindgren had

an obvious disposition to help and a benevolence towards achieving the overall goal that as many children as possible should have access to as much good literature as possible.

Altogether there remain about 300 letters that bear witness as to how Astrid Lindgren worked as a publishing editor.<sup>1</sup> Most of these are privately owned since Astrid Lindgren chose to clear her office and throw out all her papers and manuscripts when she left the company and few letters have been kept at the publishing house. Rabén & Sjögren do not have a dedicated letters archive, but it has been possible to find a small collection of letters within the company. Astrid Lindgren rarely took copies of her letters, but there are authors as well as Astrid's own relatives who have saved letters. In addition there is correspondence in the Swedish Royal Library's handwriting collection which is part of an archive that occupies 150 metres of shelves; one of the largest collections left by any individual Swede. In 2005 this archive was included as part of UNESCO's "Memory of the World Register".

## 2. The Market for Children's Literature

When one looks back at children's and youth literature, during the time that Astrid Lindgren worked for Rabén & Sjögren, it is clear that the market conditions were quite stable, even though there was a thorough transformation in the view both of children and of society during the 1950s and 1960s. The structural transformation of society that occurred meant that children and young adults — as they are now referred — even as readers, came to look differently. The concept of a youth market develops slowly during the 1950s and stabilised as a genre in the 1960s. Youth became a clearly defined market segment with its own interests and needs and literature developed to satisfy those desires. It is not always easy to identify how trends are created, what they are influenced by and what influence they have, but I would in any case like to highlight how changes in society lead to different styles of literature and how readers are influenced. Literature can certainly affect society in many fields, for example, by initiating debate, but here it is clear that changes have taken place in society first. It is a matter of contention whether literature for adults influences children's literature or whether it is within trend-sensitive children's literature that one can first notice new tendencies. Further, one cannot avoid the question about international influences, especially from the English speaking countries, which obviously affected Swedish children during this time.

There was no publishing policy at Rabén & Sjögren and, when one looks at the correspondence that survives, I believe that it is clear that Astrid Lindgren's perception about what constitutes a good children's or youth book weighed more heavily than fleeting trends. However one can detect a change in output and an apparent renewal in the years prior to 1970, something that certainly didn't come suddenly but cautious fluctuations had begun in the early 1960s. Development went slowly towards greater reflections of society and everyday realities; this culminated around 1970 when Astrid Lindgren left her position at the publishers. Before the 1970s, authors and publishers as well as Astrid Lindgren herself defended security and harmony in books for the young. However, this is an issue that slowly arises during the 1960s

when the political and social conscience even came to encompass children's literature. In her own books Astrid Lindgren is both a traditionalist and an innovator when she often uses old genres and literary structures and creates something new and unexpected with them and she remained true to her style even in the face of the beginnings of change in the book market. The reason for this is most probably that Astrid Lindgren had found a way of expressing herself that suited her and her many readers, and that she had a fixed idea and feeling for how a children's book should be irrespective of trends in the book market. In January 2009, in the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen*, Liselotte Weimer reviewed, amongst other things, a new translation of Pippi Longstocking to Danish and commented, without quoting any reference, that Astrid Lindgren, in the shape of her position as a publishing editor, was holding back new trends: "Concurrently with her authorship, Astrid Lindgren was, for many years, a children's literature editor at her publishers. Here she was shown to be a clever reader with rather conservative views. It has been humorously remarked that she certainly would not publish her own books" (Weimer 3).

In *Tradition och förnyelse. Svensk ungdomsbok från sextiototal till nittiototal* Ulla Lundqvist raises the question of trend sensitivity in youth literature, which she believes to depend upon "the moral undertone that is almost always present in books for youngsters [and that] tends to make the message so clear that the aesthetic qualities are easily assigned a lesser role" (Lundqvist 36). Astrid Lindgren never renounced, either as an author or editor, the aesthetic qualities and it is my perception that she was very clear about what a good children's or youth book should look like and that she knew which way the wind was blowing.

### 3. Astrid Lindgren's View of Children's Books

In order to understand the background to Astrid Lindgren's position between her authorship and the manuscripts sent by others, it is fruitful to study the view of books that she presented in public. As publishing editor, she wrote sales letters to bookshops where, in both a clever and well-informed way she explained about the company's publications and attempted to encourage readership. In these letters, she wrote at the beginning "Astrid Lindgren calling." This is something that naturally ought to have contributed to awakening the readers' interest. The works of her author colleagues received the most attention even if her own books were mentioned in the letters.

A typewritten text preserved at The Royal Library explains the actual importance of Astrid Lindgren's perception of reading. She was herself a great reader, read books for both adults and children in several languages and has testified in a number of contexts how important reading was to her throughout her entire life. It was important to her to explain this to others, especially to children. I have been unable to identify where this text was published, but it is possible that it was part of the company's sales material in the form of a letter to accompany a new publication where it is aimed directly to the child reader with both challenge and persuasion:

What kind of person are you?

Here! Here is a book. Are you happy? Yes, books are something to be happy about. And learning to read is fun. It is even more fun when you can read and know that the world is full of books that are a complete joy to read.

There are two types of people. Some love to read while others never even look at a book if they can avoid it. Which sort are you?

If only you knew how lucky you would be if you became one of the first sort! How wonderful never to sit and be bored and sigh: What shall I do? You know that all you need to do is open a book, so that you will immediately be in an enchanted world where anything at all can happen. Such that you can laugh at, cry with and even be made to shudder.

And do you know what? People who read have a much better life than people who don't. That's how it is. Now it is so that many children learn to read with pleasure. But then it is as if they lose the desire and they simply don't want to read anymore. It must be because they don't find anything attractive in reading books.

But we who have made this book, we who have really tried to make it as exciting and varied as we could. Just so that you don't lose interest. Don't do it then!<sup>2</sup>

There are some texts where Astrid Lindgren has written about children's literature and children's reading. In these articles, written for a cultured public with an interest in literature, Astrid Lindgren has written about children's literature and her views. The first article is from the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* in November 1953 under the headline "Att skriva för barn" ("Writing for children"). There, from what we can see, several years before all the children's book theorists who have described reader-response, Astrid Lindgren, emphasised the child's role as co-creator of a work of literature and describes reading in a way that came to be known in theory as hermeneutics, an attempt to understand the reader's contact with the text and the author.

The writer should not boast too much. It is not to his credit that his words and sentences have a shimmering life which can summon bliss. It is the reader who has created the miracle. In the child, and only within the child, is an eternal, enviable fantasy that can create a fairytale castle if one only provides a pair of rough stones to build with. Everything mystical that is hidden between the covers of a book is created by the author and the reader together. (Lindgren 1953)

In the same article, Astrid Lindgren reflects on a quotation from the creator of Mary Poppins, Pamela Travers, who is reputed to have said: "I write for the child within me" and intuitively Astrid Lindgren feels that she is right: "One writes to entertain and satisfy the child that one once was" (ibid.)

The second article, "Därför behöver barnen böcker" ("Why children need books"), was written in 1958 and published in *Skolbiblioteket*. In content it is similar to the first article, but here Astrid Lindgren goes a step further when she describes how children create miracles when they read. From taking the point of view that that children co-operate by filling in "the gaps", later research by Wolfgang Iser de-

scribes the process of first reading, the subsequent development of the text into a 'whole', and how the dialogue between the reader and text takes place, she has placed great faith in the power of books and developed opinions about the ability of fantasy to change reality:

Books need a child's fantasy, it is true. But it is truer that a child's fantasy needs books to be able to live and grow. There is nothing that can replace the book as fertile ground for fantasy. [...] A child alone with a book creates pictures somewhere in the secret rooms of the soul that are superior to everything else. Such pictures are necessary for human beings. The day that a child's fantasy can no longer create them is the day that the human race steps into poverty. All the great things that have ever occurred, happened first in someone's fantasy and how the world of tomorrow will be depends to a large degree on the power of the imagination that exists with those who are just about to learn how to read. That is why children need books.

"Litet samtal med en blivande barnboksförfattare" ("A short conversation with an aspiring author of children's books") was published for the first time in *Barn och kultur* in 1970, but since then has been reprinted and quoted in several places. Here, Astrid Lindgren uses humour as the main weapon when she pokes fun at poor children's literature as well as authors who don't ask themselves the question about how a good book for children should be. Astrid Lindgren herself answers that she has arrived at a notion of what a good children's book should be:

It should be good. I can assure you that I have mused about it for a long time, but I can't find any other answer; It should be good." She also compares the working conditions for authors of children's literature with those of writers of books for adults. She maintains that the same freedom should apply to all authors regardless of the age of the readers: "Write freely and from the heart! I wish you and all authors of children's literature the freedom that a writer for adults obviously has, to write what he likes and how he likes.

Astrid Lindgren does not express support for a distinct ideology in the article "Litet samtal med en blivande barnboksförfattare" ("A short conversation with an aspiring author of children's books"), apart from the importance of the harmony of content and language, but she emphasises the right to freedom of expression for the authors of children's literature (Wallinder 37). If it is not an ideology it is in any case a viewpoint that should have characterised her work as a publishing editor. The starting point for the reasoning in the article is clearly based upon the experiences that Astrid Lindgren accumulated during her time as publishing editor. Even if Astrid Lindgren does not touch upon her own authorship in the article, her double role is not uninteresting here. By asserting the artistic and literary value of children's literature, placing it alongside adult literature and demanding the same treatment and appraisal she contributes to raising the status of children's literature and therefore indirectly her own

position as an artist.

Astrid Lindgren was one of the first who demanded that the quality of a children's book be the same as for a book for adults and the same conditions for authors of children's literature as for writers of books for adults, irrespective of her role. Her view has conditioned attitudes towards children and children's literature on several levels as well as contributed to the development of a serious and literary approach to books for children.

#### 4. Work as an Editor of Children's Books

By studying the correspondence between Astrid Lindgren and "her" authors, in the same way as, for example, studying the relationships of Max Perkins at Scribner's publishing house with "his" authors Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe (Berg), one can gain an appreciation of how the influence has occurred in the relationship, but at the same time realise how complicated a tapestry is created and how difficult it is to identify the individual strands. All authors are affected by others, even world-renowned authors have been influenced by everyone from friends and wives to publishers and book buyers. Leonard S. Marcus alludes to Max Perkins in the title of his study of Astrid Lindgren's contemporary, Ursula Nordstrom who was the editor of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls from 1940 to 1973, *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*. He writes from an American perspective that she is regarded as the single most creative force in developing publishing in the field of children's literature during the 1900s and she edited many of the milestones in children's literature such as Laura Ingalls Wilders pioneer series, E. B. Whites *Charlotte's Web* (1952) and Maurice Sendaks *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963).<sup>4</sup> There are many similarities with Astrid Lindgren, in her attitude to those authors she guided:

On taking charge of the department, Nordstrom made it her policy that no artist or writer wishing to present his or her work would be turned away, with or without an appointment. If she sensed that the visitor had talent — her antennae for this remained permanently extended — time and telephone, and the daunting stacks of manuscripts and mail, ceased to exist for as long as the get-acquainted session lasted. Nothing but the young aspirant's thoughts and confidences mattered to her, or so she made one visitor after another feel. (Marcus xxvii).

Ursula Nordstrom has even mentioned, in an interview in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1979) that she had contact with the child within her and that it was essential to her success in the publishing world: "Well, I am a former child, and I haven't forgotten a thing" (Marcus xxii). In one important fact Astrid Lindgren and Ursula Nordstrom differ: Ursula Nordstrom wrote just one book herself, *The Secret Language* (1960) and was as such not active as a writer in the same way.

A long list of useful and valuable qualities and personality traits are required if one is to become a successful editor. The most important trait is to be able to discern when a writer has talent even if their manuscript does not reach the mark and to have



an eye for what can be done to rectify this, but it also requires more. Thomas McCormack, editorial director of St. Martin's Press, lists the following qualities of the ideal editor: "intelligence, sensitivity, tact, articulateness, industry, patience, accessibility, promptness, orderliness, thoroughness, a capacity to work alone, a capacity to work with others. Plus sensibility and craft. No humans need apply" (McCormack 71). A good children's book editor the demands in addition, a particular feeling for how life is for a child, an understanding of how children think and understand texts and pictures and how these can be presented for young readers in a way that they can get maximum out of the literary. Peter Hollindale highlights just this in his work *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* "the children's book cannot normally be a culturally simultaneous transaction between the author and reader. It is written, in part, from memory, because the author's childhood is over." He continues: "The author must construct childhood from an amalgam of personal retrospect, acquaintance with contemporary children, and an acquired system of beliefs as to what children are, and should be like. Between the author and the child there is a cultural and historical gap, almost always of at least half a generation, usually much more" (Hollindale 12). It is the task of the editor of children's books to ensure that the author and the child meet and that the structure functions for present and future readers.

### 5. Astrid Lindgren as an Editor

Astrid Lindgren was a considerate, honest and professional editor who always had the child reader's interests at heart. She often wrote long typed letters giving detailed instructions on how a manuscript could be improved and explained, with care, what the flaws and weaknesses were. She had an eye and the capability to voice what she intuitively felt. She was focused and clearly explained her reasons for recommending changes in authors' manuscripts. Almost all authors have thanked her for the help that she has given them even if, at the beginning, they felt hurt that their submission was not as good as they thought when they sent it in:

Dear Astrid Lindgren!

Mrs Lindgren, naturally, does not remember me but more than 7 years ago, I sent a novel to you "July and August" which you very kindly read and criticised. It was certainly not a good work, it was rejected and Mrs Lindgren did not think either that it was the greatest novel but advised me to write more and better. I vowed never to pick up a pen again. . . I wrote this and that, all of which were, of course, rejected. Until one year ago when Rabén & Sjögren accepted another novel that I had written; "Grandmother and Ebony". Perhaps Mrs Lindgren has seen it at sometime at the company? It hasn't become a bestseller but has largely received positive reviews and I have come some way along the way. Now, I am not writing at all to say "what was it I said" or such like, but simply to thank you for the advice that you once gave me — to try to write and try to do better — and, in the future, I hope to do even better than the current book. I would have loved to have sent you a copy, but in arrogance I have already given out my copies and there are none left. . . !!! but I hope for a reprint

and then!

With hearty greetings and wishes for a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Yours affectionately E P<sup>5</sup>

A concrete example of how Astrid Lindgren worked, how receptive she was to a good story when she saw it and an illustration of a special sensibility toward children is the origins of *Vill du leka med mej?* (Will You Play With Me?) by Elle-Kari Højeberg from 1962. Elle-Kari Højeberg (b. 1952) had said that in 1959 she was with her mother, the journalist Elly Jannes, in Portugal. As a six year-old child she became ill with meningitis and when she recovered she would write a letter home to her father. Elle-Kari told the story and her mother wrote it down. Elle-Kari was a great reader as a child and had already an appreciation of how a good story should be told. The pattern is rigid with a continuous chronology and the story has an unambiguous construction with a climax where the story turns. Lisa sits in the porch and wants someone to play with. Several animals and children pass by, but none of them have time for her. Then a little kitten comes that wants to play with her and sits on her knees and purrs for a while. When it is most pleasant the story turns so that the animals as well as the children return in reverse order and want to play with Lisa but then “she played with the kitten — and they played and played — for ever” (Højeberg 1962)<sup>6</sup>. When Elle-Kari and her mother arrived home from their travels, Elly Jannes showed the letter with the story to Astrid Lindgren who immediately showed interest. There were several years’ delay and the young writer was 10 years old before the book was published with illustrations by Ilon Wikland and the book was translated into German, Norwegian and Danish. Now, when the journalist Elle-Kari Højeberg looks back on her first and only children’s book she is most impressed at how “Astrid Lindgren was great at taking up exciting ideas” (ibid. ). It is also clear in this context that Astrid Lindgren saw that the short story would be the perfect addition to the company’s series of books for the smallest children. At the beginning of the 1960s, Rabén & Sjögren published several simple picture books in a small format, white with a clear front cover illustration that told short stories for children who were not yet old enough to read ordinary picture books.

Astrid Lindgren was a witty and humorous person, and a sense of fun is something that is often mentioned as a necessary characteristic for a good children’s book editor and it is something that continually leaps from the pages of the letters that have been preserved. In a letter dated 30<sup>th</sup> March 1966, Astrid Lindgren writes to a woman who has submitted a story written by her husband. Astrid Lindgren has considered the story and replies with a glint in her eye:

I have looked at your husband’s tale for intelligent children and it is very skilfully done, but I think that it is more for the intelligent than for children. We have no possibility to publish the story.

With hearty greetings  
Astrid Lindgren (30 March 1966)

When there was nothing else to do but reject a manuscript, Astrid Lindgren had the skill of doing so in a clear but friendly way, such as in a letter of the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1966:

We have read your jungle stories, but unfortunately we have no possibility to publish them in book form. The genre of speaking animals is rather over-exposed. We think it is difficult to create something fresh. But we understand that the H \* \* \* children must have a wonderful time experiencing these adventures in the jungle together with their father.

With friendly greetings  
Astrid Lindgren (9 March 1966)

On the other hand, when it comes to manuscripts that show the promise to become good books, Astrid Lindgren spends a great deal of effort to formulate what could be improved.

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1966 Astrid Lindgren is at her summer residence in Furusund writing to the young debutant Eva Bergold who has submitted a manuscript to the publishers. She writes a several page long letter to Bergold. After the encouraging introduction she goes through the manuscript pointing out the weaknesses, suggests improvements and motivates these in detail:

Dear Eva Bergold, clever girl, I have been sitting on my balcony here in Furusund having fun with your Autumn term. You write spiritual and amusing texts and we would love to publish your manuscript (although not until next year you understand. I hope you are aware of how it is with printing works and the way they work. So that you understand how far it is from leaving a manuscript to the final book). However, as fond as I am of you and your manuscript, I must point out that in my opinion there are a number of blemishes, which I hope to persuade you to rectify. It seems to me that you sometimes, through your love for the absurd, sometimes forget what sort of book you are writing. That you sway from one thing to another. Despite this it is in most aspects a realistic story. Language wise you can be as giddy as you like but the happening must not suddenly break away from the realistic sphere, because then one doesn't know what one is reading. Your description of people leaves something to be desired, they are a little shallow. You have a way of finding the most remarkable wording about the people in your book but fail to give us deeper knowledge about them. I don't believe, after the book that I know especially much about even Trude and Hjördis, not much more than that they are both unusually glib. (28 June 1966)

Evidence that Astrid Lindgren also tried to recruit skilful authors to Rabén & Sjögren is shown in a letter to Gertrud Lilja dated the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1950, which should have made the recipient very happy. With both humility and genuine admiration, discus-

sion about finance and argument in favour of proper young peoples' books, Astrid Lindgren tries to get her colleague to try to write for youngsters:

Dear Mrs Lilja!

I read your short story in the latest edition of *Vi*. Arnell answers the questions about why he really writes and for whom, with the words: "For each and everyone, perhaps. Anyone who reads and exclaims: there you are! There you are — I have felt exactly the same way many times when I have read Gertrud Lilja. The first time was when I was around 20 years old and I read your short story collection "People". I think that I have read most of what you have written — and I have never read a stupid or careless line that has come from your pen. There are not many authors you can say that about.

Many times, I have thought about writing to you and expressing my thanks, but I didn't and I probably wouldn't have done so now had it not been for another purpose. I am employed by a publisher, Rabén & Sjögren, where I have also had published a number of children's books. I don't know if you are aware that this publisher specialises in young people's literature. In the past few days the company has announced a competition for youth novels. I have taken the liberty of enclosing an invitation to take part. Also, I would like to take a further liberty to ask— would not Gertrud Lilja be willing to write a book for Swedish youth? When one recalls the superb portrayal of a girl in "The storm passes" one realises that there is hardly a writer in the country who could have done it better than you. If you don't have the desire to enter the competition, would you consider writing a book anyway? As you see the financial terms are equally as good as for adult literature. And books for young people have a much greater longevity in general and, above all, they are sorely needed.

With greatest respect,

Astrid Lindgren (8 March 1950)

That an author is not an isolated genius working in a vacuum is demonstrated by Astrid Lindgren and the Finno-Swedish author Kai Söderhjelm in letters conveying views on freedom. Astrid Lindgren advocates freedom for authors of children's literature, but it is a modified freedom. Kai Söderhjelm has to consider Astrid Lindgren's view about what is commercial, what children can possibly appreciate, undefined "general orders from above", the views of librarians and teachers about what is suitable, etc. Freedom is, in other words an illusion. If one examines Astrid Lindgren's declaration of freedom in "A short conversation with an aspiring author of children's books" one finds that the freedom that she "*wishes*" [my italics] for authors of children's literature is the same that writers of books for adults have. The only conclusions that one can draw from this is that not even writers of books for adults can use their freedom fully and that for authors of children's books to have equal freedom is actually wishful thinking. Freedom is really just a fine word the meaning of which is limited by miscellaneous values and financial constraints. Freedom within a defined framework is offered to the authors, regardless of the target readership, but there is

still an important difference in the framework:

I can imagine that an adult writer who wants to be exclusive and needs the book as a playground for his desires and anguish can, perhaps, completely ignore his readers. He can have his small, narrow readership anyway as there is always the view that there are souls that will understand him. But those who write for children and youth and refuse to think about the readers are actually writing for no-one at all. ( June 1955)

What Astrid Lindgren means here is a term in research into children's literature that later became known as "adaptation" or "adaption", that is to say acclimatisation of children's literature to suit child readers.

The finances of the company are touched upon in several places in the correspondence and it is clear that Astrid Lindgren is forced to think in financial terms. Her knowledge about the book market and her experience as an author plays a role when she balances the artistic element with financial considerations in the company's output. In her role as a publishing editor, she is obliged to consider the reality of market forces. She says that the income from the Enid Blyton books finances quality publishing and that she can't "work to any other principle than to recommend books for publishing that according to my own conviction, whatever that now is, are appropriate for the readership for which they are intended" (1 June 1955). The meaning of "appropriate" is a question of interpretation, but it is interesting to observe that it is Astrid Lindgren's own conviction that governs what is published by Rabén & Sjögren. In the previously quoted letters and articles, Astrid Lindgren turns against trends. This is also true of her own authorship, for example *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* (*The Brothers Lionheart*) (1973), a genre cross-over tale with facets of both sagas and fantasy, is published during the height of social realism.

Astrid Lindgren's position as Sweden's leading author of children's literature combined with her duties as publishing editor for the largest publisher of children's books is unique and of great interest. She is genuinely skilful, diplomatic and humble in relation to the authors, who in fact were also her colleagues. In his memoirs, *Heller kärlek än krig* (Rather Love than War), Kai Söderhjelm has confirmed the importance of Astrid Lindgren for him personally and for Swedish children's literature as a whole over the years: "For more than twenty years, she advised and guided me, took care of my books and was a constant support. I have perhaps already said many times that her great contribution as an editor should not be forgotten simply because she has had even greater success as an author. It is she that has made Swedish children's literature into an important and well-known branch of literature" (Söderhjelm 195).

An interesting thought is that Astrid Lindgren, despite her pronouncements against fashions and fads, is herself a trendsetter. Her personality, values and opinions carried more weight than any other publishing consideration at Rabén & Sjögren. All manuscripts landed on Astrid Lindgren's desk and it was she who kept contact with Sweden's leading authors of children's books. The perspectives that Astrid Lindgren advocated concerning the readers, language, humour, excitement, etc. in-

fluenced the output of the company for more than 25 years.

Helene Ehriander has received funds from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for research into Astrid Lindgren's role as publishing editor.

## Notes

1. Relatives have given me permission to use the letters that were written to Astrid Lindgren and by her in her role as publishing editor.
2. See Astrid Lindgren collection, Royal Library, acc 2009/28.
3. See Alvar Wallinder, *Vem bestämmer?* (*Who decides?*) (Cikada; Gävle. 1987) 37.
4. Maurice Sendak was presented with the first ever Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2003 with Christine Nöstlinger.
5. Royal Library handwriting section.
6. Also see telephone interview with Elle-Kari Höjeberg 16 February 2009.

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mi.

---. Letter from Astrid Lindgren to Kai Söderhjelm, 1 June 1955, handwriting section of Åbo Akademi.

---. Letter from Astrid Lindgren to Eva Bergold, 28 June 1966, private collection.

---. Letter from Astrid Lindgren, 9 March 1966, Rabén & Sjögren's archive.

---. Letter from Astrid Lindgren, 30 March 1966, Rabén & Sjögren's archive.

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