



Transcription of *Conversation about Astrid Lindgren's works*

Participants: Malin Alkestrand and Maria Nilson

MA: Malin Alkestrand

MN: Maria Nilson

Square brackets, []: Notes about editing etcetera.

[A view of a campus. Then a cut to a picture of three books; the books are *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*, *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Pippi Longstocking*]

MA: Hello, and welcome! I am sitting here with Maria Nilson who is one of the teachers of this course, but who also teaches a course on Astrid Lindgren's works. Maria, why did you get interested in Astrid Lindgren?

MN: Well I think almost every Swedish person, now I am exaggerating, but a lot of swedes have grown up with Astrid Lindgren. I have read all her works when I was a child. My mother read them to me. I remember a few of the novels, I have read like a hundred times.

MA: [Smiles]

MN: And then I started teaching on this course for international students that are here on campus, "Astrid Lindgren's works". It is a great course to teach because it is students from all over the world, who generally know a little bit about Astrid Lindgren and who are interested in knowing more.

MA: Sounds good. So, you have a huge interest from the beginning then. Is there something special you need to think about when you are teaching or doing research on such a famous and beloved author?

MN: I think one of the challenges with teaching and also researching in authors like Astrid Lindgren, is that she is like an icon - like a Swedish icon – and she is really loved. And a lot of people, both in Sweden and all over the world, feel that they know her and that they are really fond of her. And then I try to tell my students and of course also myself; you have to take a step back and look at her work critically. And that is not...In a way that is a huge sort of praise for an author. Your work, we can look at it critically and still sort of admire it and read it, but you need to take a step back. One of the first thing I always tell my students is: “Stop calling her Astrid; unless she is your great aunt or you have actually met her.” She is Astrid Lindgren or just Lindgren, you need to keep a distance.

MA: And this obviously is very similar to when I teach courses on Harry Potter where I have so many different Harry Potter fans who are trying to make that move from being fans to becoming critical scholars or critical students.

MN: Definitely!

MA: So that is one similarity. Do you have any recommendations on good novels by Astrid Lindgren?

MN: I think especially if one tries to point to the novels that are fantasy or at least fantastic, I mean most people would know *Pippi Longstocking*.

[A cut to a picture of *Pippi Longstocking*]

MN: And there are of course fantastic elements in *Pippi Longstocking*: this little girl who has the strength of ten men. But Astrid Lindgren has also written three sort of big novels, and I teach on those novels on this course.

[A cut to a picture of *Mio, My Son*]

MN: The first one is *Mio, My Son* from the 50s. And that is also a fantasy novel with a primary world and a secondary world. A very unhappy little boy living in Stockholm and then he goes to a faraway land – the fantasy land – where he meets his father, the king. And that novel is very much; there are a lot of fairy tale themes in that novel. The number three, there are fairy tale creatures, and of course this little boy has to go on a quest to kill the evil Sir Kato. So, I remember my sister, my big sister, was terrified of Sir Kato when she was a child. He is an evil knight with a heart of stone. And he has claw instead of a hand.

MA: [Laughs] I also have memories of being very scared of some of the villains in Astrid Lindgren's works.

MN: But I think for me who is slightly middle-aged, it is *The Brothers Lionheart* that was huge in the 70s. And this was one of the novels that Astrid Lindgren actually got quite a lot of bad reviews for. Because this was at a time in Sweden where books for children, they should be realistic; and this is definitely a fantasy book. Mendlesohn and James in their *A Short History of Fantasy*, say that this is classic fantasy with traits of heroic fantasy. But they actually say that this is a book about killing a dragon, which I think is a very strange interpretation of the book. I am very fond of the dragon in this book.

[A cut to a picture of *The Brothers Lionheart*]

MN: She is called Katla, and I think she is one of the most misunderstood characters in all of Swedish literature.

MA: [Laughs]

MN: *The Brothers Lionheart*, it also has a primary world set in Stockholm and a secondary world. It is very much a story about brotherly love.

MA: [Nods]

MN: And it is also very much a story of how difficult it is to know who is good and who is bad. And about fighting oppression. And then it is an interesting novel; it is a lot about death,

and it has a very problematic ending but I am not going to spoil it for you if you have not read it.

MA: In which way do they fight against oppression?

MN: In this land that they come to, and they come to this land after they have died, it is like a fantasy land. And in the beginning, everything is wonderful. They have a nice house to live in, they have horses; it is all beautifully scenery. But then there is an evil ruler, Tengil, who uses this dragon as a weapon. And there is a huge sort of rebellion against Tengil; like resistance fighters. And among the resistance fighters there are traitors. So, there is sort of a lot of discussion about that. And also, about how to cope with being really afraid and what it is to be brave.

MA: Yes. And you mentioned a third novel as well?

MN: The third novel is actually Lindgren's sort of final big novel.

[A cut to a picture of *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*]

MN: It is *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*. And that is set entirely in a fantasy world; in a forest and the forest is filled with magical creatures. And in that novel...

[A cut and some sort of error in the film]

MN: I think Lindgren has done really her own thing, because she has used fairy tale creatures from fairy tales and also from mythology and legends, but she has changed them slightly; given them her own little twist. And this is a story very much about a father and a daughter, and about a conflict when the child doesn't want the future that her parent envisions for her. So, Ronia is raised by robbers and she feels very strongly about not becoming a robber.

[A cut to a picture of *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*]

MN: And then it is a bit... Sometimes people say there is a Romeo and Juliet theme, because she befriends with the rival robber family and become really close to the son, called Bork...?

Yes, he is called Bork!¹ Sometimes my brain just sort of takes a vacation... it is summertime in Sweden. But calling it a Romeo and Juliet theme is a bit misleading because there is no romantic interest here. It is brother and sister, and Lindgren is really interested in writing about siblings. So, that is a really nice novel, which now is made into a Television Serie from the Ghibli Studio, the Japanese production company, which is a really interesting interpretation of the novel.

MA: But it seems like we have some common fantasy themes here in all these books.

MN: Yes.

MA: The fight against evil. Questions about who is good and who is evil. But also, the power of love and how you fight against oppression.

MN: Yes. And I think that one of Lindgren's most important themes that she comes back to, is that you have to take responsibility. You have to fight against things that you think are wrong and that are evil; even if you are really scared. So, it is about standing up, not just for yourself, but for everyone else as well.

MA: And about saving the world.

MN: And about saving the world. That is always a nice twist, isn't it?

MA: Yes! And very common in fantasy literature.

MA: Thank you so much Maria!

MN: Thank you!

¹ In the conversation Maria Nilson says Bork. However, the transcriber thinks Maria Nilson is referring to Birk Borkason.

Reference

Alkestrand, Malin (2017). *Conversation about Astrid Lindgren's works*. Växjö: Linnaeus University, [downloaded online] 2017-09-10. Available from:
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