



Astrid-trans-Lindgren

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Patricia Crampton on her relationship, personal and professional, with the most translated writer in the world.

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The first time I met Sweden's greatest living author she was already, officially, an OAP. She looked like an affectionate elf. Now, at 82, Astrid Lindgren still looks like an elf, rather more wrinkled, and it is possible to deduce from the elfin look the truth of her assertion 'I write for the child in me'. And yet it would be difficult to think, offhand, of a wiser, more tolerant and considerate person. But her tolerance is reserved for people. Her loathing of cruelty and injustice is manifest in her writing and her activities.

As the translator of some of her books, I am constantly humbled by her generosity. Astrid does not simply praise - she does it in a way that is more like bestowing trust, and inevitably the translator is even more committed. Bolder, too. People often ask if it is easy to translate Astrid Lindgren. Yes, it is. In the first place, it's easy because it's fun; in the second place (I'm sure most translators would agree) it is actually easier to translate a really good writer than a mediocre one. And the translator is inevitably one of the people who finds out exactly how good the writer is.

The astonishing 'Pippi Longstocking' books, the happy childhood scenes of 'Bullerby' and 'Emil' had already been published in English before I was lucky enough to begin translating her. But all of them, together with the later books about flying 'Karlsson' the alter ego and the semi-autobiographical Madicken ('Mardie') books, through the lyrical sorrows of **Sunnanang** and **My Nightingale is Singing**, to the brave and beautiful **Mio, My Son** and **Brothers Lionheart**, to **Ronia, the Robber's Daughter**, perhaps her most complete achievement, and most recently the funny and moving **Dragon with Red Eyes**, say something distinct and unique to her readers. Just as, writing about herself, Astrid has never so much as hinted at the trouble and suffering in her own life, so her implicit message is always: Life is very good; be yourself, have courage, go to meet it and you will find it so.

This is not to say that her outlook is unrealistic. On the contrary, she rejects the immediate, comforting illusion. I remember her response when a young publisher's editor wrote to ask if she could omit from the second 'Mardie' book the chapter in which the headteacher begins to beat the pauper child, but stops when the newspaper editor's daughter screams at him. Astrid refused, but she also told the young editor what a very pretty and charming girl she was, and that she, Astrid, quite understood why she wanted to throw out such a bitter episode. And just as she had made her refusal easy to swallow, so the episode itself turns into something positive when a slow, difficult friendship develops between the two children in the story. Quite a few authors writing in a 'language of limited diffusion', like Swedish, are prepared to sacrifice a phrase here, an idea there, in order to make their books acceptable in the world's major language. Astrid's integrity would not even begin to allow such a sacrifice of anything she regards as important.

As well as her personal generosity of spirit, Astrid's financial generosity is legendary for a most uncommon reason: she refused to abandon highly taxed Sweden and move to the warm south as so many western writers have done. She

protested only (and humorously) when her tax rate high-jumped over 100%. Translators have been lucky as well as the Swedish exchequer: with a part of her earnings abroad from translations of her books, Astrid established through the Federation Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT) the Astrid Lindgren prize for translation of children's literature. When the Mildred Batchelder prize in the USA was awarded to my English translation of **Ronia, the Robber's Daughter**, Astrid's letter of congratulation contained the following: 'I wonder if you are going to the States or not for the big event? I ought to warn you, because I went to my home town, Vimmerby, to get a very honourable award, and on the way back to Stockholm my car went into a little cliff and I had to be put in a hospital for more than one month ... So if you go to the celebration, please take good care of yourself!' Sadly, the Mildred Batchelder doesn't run to funds for the translator to attend the junketings, but not long after that, lo and behold, the Astrid Lindgren prize itself came my way; and as a FIT member I was in Vienna to receive the award. And sure enough, I was able to wave at the audience a heavily bandaged leg, badly gashed when running to answer the telephone ... There was even some masochistic glee in following Astrid's example on a lesser scale.

I am glad to have had the fun of translating Karlsson's effrontery (my son was telling his girlfriend a joke from one of those books last night); for the emotion of involvement with **Nightingale**, the excitement of **Robber's Daughter**, the chance to identify with Astrid through working on 'I Remember' from **Samuel August ... og Hanna i Hult**. And I am very glad of Astrid Lindgren, of her humour and kindness and her ability to bring back 'the intensity with which one experienced it all when one was new to this earth'.

Patricia Crampton turned from general translation to translating children's books when her own children arrived in the sixties. In early days she particularly enjoyed translating the series of 'Mr Bumblemoose' books from the Dutch, Paul Biegel's 'Little Captain' and 'Virgil (the Fattest Dwarf of Nosegay)' books, and in the teenage range, books by Hannelore Valencak (German) and Anne-Greta Winberg (Swedish). Astrid Lindgren's books have obviously given her great joy, and **Ronia, the Robber's Daughter** won the Mildred Batchelder award in 1984, as did Rudolf Frank's powerful anti-war novel **No Hero for the Kaiser** (from German) in 1987. She is a keen member of IBBY.

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