

The Ways of Love

Halldór Guðmundsson

It was May 1985 when Astrid Lindgren visited Iceland. She had been invited by Iceland's film festival, which opened that year with the film *Ronia the Robber's Daughter* directed by Tage Danielsson. She had a reading at Nordic House in Reykjavik, and both the government and the rest of Iceland's public establishment made her welcome with lavish receptions and dinners.

Her Icelandic publisher was *Mál og menning*, originally a literary society set up in the 1930s by radical authors such as Halldór Laxness to publish good books at low prices and strike a blow for socialism, not least with the magazine *Rauðir pennar* (Red Pens). Half a century later *Mál og menning* had become more like every other publishing house, whose board had hired me as publisher the previous year. I was fresh from literature studies, a 28 year old, who knew nothing about publishing, but of course thought he knew everything about literature. By then *Mál og menning* had been publishing Astrid Lindgren for years, both her children's books and her longer stories, and my predecessors had done a great job making her known to Icelandic readers.

But this was still during the cold war, and because of the publishing company's background – and because we had a right-wing government – we from her publishers were not invited to any of the official events in Astrid's honour (except for the one held by Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who had been elected president a few years earlier). I was too inexperienced to voice any objection to this, let alone be concerned with the official guest-lists, luckily, and besides I was sure that I wouldn't be missing anything. I heard, among other things, that at one dinner a well-known Icelandic writer had talked to Astrid Lindgren at great length, and with unmistakable pride about how he had been translated to Danish until our Swedish writer – translated into

all world's languages – turned to him and said: “I think we've heard quite enough about that now!”

In the end Astrid Lindgren personally expressed a desire to meet the representatives of her Icelandic publisher, and in the midst of all the festivities her hosts found a couple of hours on the Saturday morning where she could visit our office, which was located just above our bookstore in the city centre. Nothing in particular happened, she was served coffee and pastry, but I can't remember a visit by any other author making such a big impression on me.

“On the night that Ronia was born, a thunderstorm was raging over the mountains, such a storm that all the goblinfolk in Matt's Forest crept back in terror to their holes and hiding places. Only the fierce harpies preferred stormy weather to any other and flew, shrieking and hooting, around the robbers' stronghold on Matt's mountain.”

Few writers manage to capture the reader's attention from the very first sentence and keep them in their grasp until the very end, even leave them wanting more. Nor did it matter if she was writing for teenagers or children, about the adventures of their contemporaries in Bullerby, or *Bullerbyn* as it's called in Swedish. Of all the Swedish Academy's failings, which as we know are more than a few, I think the biggest one was not giving Astrid Lindgren the Nobel prize for Literature.

More than 30 years have passed since the morning we spent together in Reykjavík; and I'm not going to pretend that I had any personal relationship with her, or be able to recall how she looked back then without confusing it with the countless photographs we've seen of her since. But from the first moment, I found her just as captivating as her stories: wise and sharp and ironic in addition to her kindness, with an aura that made this smug young publisher quickly feel like a shy young boy with his tutor.

After having a coffee in the canteen we went to my office, where she looked at the shelves of books which *Mál og menning* had published over the decades. For some

reason or other I wanted to show her a few of the books that had recently been translated from Swedish, most of which are forgotten now, but were a mostly a testimony to the writer's big heart, or his social awareness, or his psychological education. Astrid said nothing, made no comment at all, just continued perusing the bookshelves until – in the middle of my increasingly unsure speech about contemporary Swedish social-realism – she found a slender old re-issue and plucked it from the shelf. It was *Victoria* by Knut Hamsun, perhaps the most elegant little book about love to ever come from the Nordic region. She then gave me a long stare, with an ambiguous smile in her eyes – because a person like Astrid was not one to ridicule – and said: “So nice to see that you also publish literature.” I don't remember the company's catalogue ever enduring a comment quite like that in all my years as a publisher, which ended up being twenty.

This reunion with Hamsun's book, which was first published when Astrid Lindgren was five years old, triggered something within her, and she began talking about the books she had read in her youth; those which helped shape her into the great narrator she became. In actual fact, when she visited I had just published a Swedish novel for the first time, *The Christmas Oratorio* by Göran Tunström, which has a wonderful episode where the book's 18-year-old protagonist, Sidner, visits the grand old lady of Swedish literature, Selma Lagerlöf. Selma needs the young man's help to split open the pages of the books she has been sent, so that the authors, should they happen to drop by, would at least think she's been trying to read them. The books are taken from the shelves, and Selma offers her comments, stories and thoughts about them, or the authors, only now it felt like I was Sidner, in Tunström's story. It is perhaps the most beautiful chapter in the book where, among other things, Selma tells the young man how difficult writing a book can be: like forcing yourself to walk through a wilderness, long journeys without a drop of water, not a single tree to rest beneath – then suddenly an oasis, and the leaves part and it all becomes poetry.

Our conversation followed a similar path, we walked round the office and downstairs

to the bookstore, where Astrid took one book after the other from the shelves and talked about the novels she had read when young: several of Hamsun's early works, but also *Havoc* by Tom Kristensen, the Danish masterpiece from the inter-war period; and *The Missing Bureaucrat* by Hans Scherfig. But what did these three books — Hamsun's love-story about Johannes the miller's son; Kristensen's dark portrayal of the journalist Ole Jastrau who drinks himself to death in Copenhagen; and Scherfig's satire about Theodore Amsted, fleeing his regimented life at the War Office (as Scherfig so neatly calls it) — have in common? Perhaps all three are simply examples of great Nordic narrative art from the first half of the 20th century, beyond the confines of narrow realism, and which all had a huge influence on the next generation of writers, such as Halldór Laxness, who was five years older than Lindgren.

Astrid wrote a great deal about love, between children and parents and friends, but perhaps only one love story in the traditional sense – the book *Samuel August from Sevedstorp and Hanna in Hult*, with this irresistible beginning: "Now I want to tell you a love story, not one I have read or found, just one that I have heard. Many times heard. It contains more love than about anyone I have read of in books, and for me it is moving and beautiful. But that could be because it is about two people who happened to be my parents." She wrote about death, not least in *The Lionheart Brothers*, and she also wrote her own wayfaring story *Rasmus and the Vagabond*. From her very first book about Pippi there is an anti-authoritarian, anti-bourgeois tone in her books; albeit a conciliatory one. These stories are more similar to Hamsun and Scherfig than they are to Tom Kristensen's dark modernism, but we should remember that Astrid was well acquainted with the Copenhagen of the late 1920s. It was there she had to leave her son Lars, who she visited as often as she could; later demonstrating a convincing aptitude for describing the loneliness of young boys. These were lonely and difficult years for her too, and it's not strange that she read the Danish writer's break-through novel, which is set during the same period.

Books like these had become her literary background, not that she appears to differentiate between children's books and other books. They say that children are the most demanding readers, and a good children's novelist makes no lesser demands of himself or herself than any other great poet. Astrid Lindgren's works are equally good examples of narrative art as the male-written novels she picked from my bookshelves. Her themes - love, adventure, and death - are classics in themselves.

Of course, this kinship shouldn't have surprised me. But it was something I hadn't considered during my many years studying literature, where children's books were never a part of the syllabus and few, if any, saw Astrid Lindgren as on a par with, or possibly a wiser story-teller, than early Hamsun, for example, who she had read and admired in her youth.

Our reminiscences are always coloured by a degree of self-deception, and that was certainly true in the case of this young publisher, but I think I detected both warmth and a smile in Astrid Lindgren's eyes, when she bid me farewell outside the bookstore with the words from Victoria: "Now remember, Halldór, the ways of love are filled with flowers and blood, flowers and blood."

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