



THE ASTRID LINDGREN  
MEMORIAL AWARD

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Reading guide for

*It's Useful to Have a Duck* and

*Nocturne: Dream Recipes* by Isol

Laureate of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2013

Written by Ulla Rhedin

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## About the author

One of the interesting things about Isol, the Argentine picture-book author, is that everything she says and does is unusually well steeped in theoretical reflection. She speaks, for instance, of how important it is that “we illustrators take up our rightful position as *authors* by assuming all the responsibility and freedom that that entails. According to Isol, a picture book has either a *single* author, who creates both words and pictures, or *dual* authors, who work together to create a common story in words and pictures. Traditionally, the writer of the words has been more widely acknowledged as the author, the person who “came up with the plot” – a notion that Isol challenges:

The plot is often reasonably simple and linear: Here comes a girl. She walks across the yard, where she meets ... Compare that with the illustration, the graphic concept, the surrounding narrative, the shaping of space, character, attributes, composition, light, the artistic technique, colour palette, typography, format, layout ... the entire design. The general public has no idea how many thousands of options the illustrator has to sort through.

(Panel discussion at Kulturhuset, Stockholm, 21 May 2013)

Her own oeuvre comprises a dozen or so picture books that are entirely her own creation and several works on which she collaborated with other authors. Asked to identify the difference between the two categories, she points to how, in her own picture books, she lets the pictures carry the story in combination with the words; hence it is not possible to guess what is happening from the pictures alone. In the books based on texts by other authors, she takes a freer approach to her illustrations and may introduce her own narrative lines.

Isol is a multidisciplinary artist. Born Marisol Misenta in 1972, she grew up in Buenos Aires. Her early childhood coincided with Argentina’s military dictatorship (1976–83). Those were difficult times in Argentina, but she recalls enjoying a secure and creative upbringing in an artistic family. Her father was an artist, her mother a singer, her grandfather wrote scripts for the comic books that were so popular in Argentina at the time, and her younger brother went on to become a musician. Isol herself trained as an art teacher and later studied painting and graphic art at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is also a professional singer and has made a name for herself as a soprano on both the classical and the modern music scene in Argentina. As well as creating picture books, she is active as a poet, composer and singer in the modern electronic duo SIMA, alongside her brother Zypce (available on YouTube).

Her picture-book career was kickstarted in 1997 by an honourable mention in a Mexican picture-book competition. The illustrations to her story – about a boy who loves his dog so much that he wants to be a dog himself – were so expressively and powerfully drawn in oil pastels that the publisher felt the need to ask her to tone down the expression. After receiving the honourable mention in the competition, the book, *Vida de perros* (1997, *A Dog’s Life*), was published with minor changes and turned out to be a successful debut work. Ever since, Isol’s main publisher has been Fondo de Cultura Económica in Mexico, an 11-hour flight from her home in Argentina.

## About the books

In its citation, the ALMA jury wrote that Isol “shifts [...] ingrained perspectives and pushes the boundaries of the picture-book medium.” This is especially true of *It’s Useful to Have a Duck* (2010) and *Nocturne: Dream Recipes* (2012), both of which can be described as concept books because content and form influence each other and the narrative is not a conventional, coherent story. These works could be extended to continue infinitely, or they could be filled with entirely different content without negating the design concept.

### *It’s Useful to Have a Duck*

When this little book for young children in chubby, square format first appeared in Spanish in 2007, it attracted attention for its twin narratives in yellow and blue. The English translation, too, has two titles, representing different narrative perspectives depending on which side of the book is facing up. The yellow front cover bears the title *It’s Useful to Have a Duck*, which is a first-person narrative from a small boy’s perspective. The blue back cover, meanwhile, bears the title *It’s Useful to Have a Boy*, which is the story as narrated by a duck.

Image-wise, the two versions are identical, consisting of the same eight scenes. So, even at the structural level, it is interesting to compare what the textual formulations mean to a reader trying to interpret the narrative of the images. Suddenly we can see how the text focuses but simultaneously limits our interpretation of the images; by changing just a few words, the text makes us look at the images anew. The scene where the boy sits on the duck’s back is like a see-saw ride for the boy, whereas the duck uses the boy to get a back rub. With the duck sitting on his head, the boy has a hat, whereas the duck has a lookout post. The dual narrative perspective, where everything is turned upside down, is both comical and philosophical.

To say that the book is aimed at young children is a qualified truth. Readers of all ages may find it amusing, thanks to its ingenious format, and may substitute new content more appropriate to their age group.

In this connection, it is an interesting exercise to discuss the book image by image, and to compare the respective narrative of each yellow and each blue image. How could the hat become a lookout post? How was the drain of the bathtub transformed from a hole into a resting place?

It is also possible to compose follow-on stories in keeping with the concept of the book. Think up new episodes continuing both narratives from the boy’s perspective and the duck’s perspective respectively. How do the comical points arise?

Reverse the perspectives big and small, human and animal. What happens when the giant animal encounters the small human?

Create your own encounters between two very different perspectives.

The fold-out or accordion-style book has a long history as a picture book for young children. A book of this kind used to be called a “Leporello” after the manservant in Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*, who in one scene feels the need to rattle off his master’s

entire catalogue of female conquests to one of the ladies in the famous “catalogue aria”.

*Nocturne: Dream Recipes*

As far as the medium is concerned, Isol goes a step further in pushing the boundaries of the picture book with her “ring-binder book” *Nocturne*. It can be browsed from the top down or the bottom up in upright format, and can be stood up on the child’s bedside table like a miniature stage.

It sets out to be a collection of recipes, intended to inspire the viewer/reader to have exciting dreams through a number of individual tableaux offering unexpected perspectives on existence. What we initially see as a peaceful scene, with the fisherman in his little boat waiting for the fish to bite, turns out to contain a great deal of drama when a huge whale surfaces behind him. In the “boring book” scene, a boy is lying beneath a tree reading. When the image is illuminated, various wild animals appear among the tree trunks, and the quiet forest becomes a jungle.

Describe the various images and explain what happens when they are illuminated. What are the tales, legends, stories and dreams that lie hidden in the images?

Discuss how ambiguous existence can be. Appearances can be deceptive. Surprises await us where we least expect them. The book is suitable for all ages. Among siblings, in playgroup or in class, children can take it in turn to choose a dream and describe what happens in secret.

At the end of the book is a blank page, ready for readers to create their own dreams. Here they can draw or paint an image to be illuminated. Better still, transform the page the way Isol does when she gets together with children: place a few objects – a cake-dolly, screws, cookie cutters or cut-out figures – on the page, illuminate it, and discuss the results. What stories now come about?

For further discussion of concept books:  
See the reading guide to *Basu ni Notte* by Ryôji Arai.

*This Reading Guide was written by Ulla Rhedin, member of the jury for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. It was first published in February 2014.*