



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD**

©Illustrations: Björn Berg, Ingrid Vang Nyman, Ilon Wikland

Library Address by Katherine Paterson Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2006

The first thing I would like to say to you this morning is “thank you.” This is an astounding moment for me. I have never had the privilege of addressing a group of lawmakers before, not even the Senate and House of my own tiny state of Vermont, certainly not the congress of the United States. The irony is I think I know what I’d like to say, given the chance, to our present congress, but it’s probably just as well that I won’t have that opportunity. My mother often said to me, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” And, although I am a great fan of the Vermont delegation in Washington, I wouldn’t have many kind words to say about the rest of the elected representatives of my county these days.

So it is a much happier, if more difficult task to speak to the Swedish Parliament. Ever since it was announced that I had won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, everyone I know has been marvelling with me that there exists a government in this world that so values children, that so wants children to have the books they need and will enjoy, that it gives an award of this magnitude to persons who seek to provide those books, regardless of where they live and work . Maybe this is not astounding to you. Sweden has led the world in its concern for the physical and intellectual welfare of its children. But it is astounding to those who struggle on behalf of the children elsewhere, only to find their efforts despised because their work is only with and for children who are, after all, powerless in a culture that worships power.

So after I say “thank you” and express my astonishment at your vision and generosity, what else am I to say? I am a storyteller, so I’ve decided to tell you a story. It’s a true story about a friend

of mine. I'm going to call him Walter, though that is not his real name. Walter began life in a family of modest means in a city on the East Coast— father, mother, then two younger brothers. Walter, a lively child, was less than enchanted with school, but somehow he scraped through the boring days, investing a minimum of effort. Life may not have been wonderful for Walter, but it was okay, it was normal. Then suddenly, one day, Walter's life turned upside down. His father walked out, leaving his mother with no marketable skills and three small boys to care for.

It was a time when the job market was flooded with veterans returning from World War II. Women who had worked to support the war effort, left their jobs and went home to be the perfect housewives and mothers of the fifties. But Walter's mother had to go to work. There was of course no child care system in place in our country— proper stay-at-home mothers didn't require it. Nor was there any government effort in place to track down dead beat fathers and force them to pay child support.

It isn't hard to imagine what Walter's mother went through, working at whatever jobs she could find, worrying all day about what her three little boys were doing, worrying all night about how she was going to feed them and clothe them and keep a roof over their heads.

As summer approached her worry increased. Even though the city streets might have been less dangerous in the fifties than they have become, she was a good and caring mother who didn't want her children running loose all day long. So when she heard about a farm out from town where the farmer and his wife took children in for the summer to give them three months of fresh air and good food at no cost— oh, the children would be expected to help out with the chores, but they'd want to, wouldn't they? — when she heard about this opportunity, she jumped at the chance. As soon as school was out, Walter and his two little brothers went to spend an idyllic summer in the country.

You are already anticipating trouble. The farmer was a stern taskmaster. He expected the children to work and work hard. Quite soon Walter's lively, not to say rebellious nature, landed him in trouble. Punishment was called for. And punishment the farmer decreed was to be locked up alone in the gloomy attic of the old farmhouse. Now we imagine an angry, homesick, apprehensive child climbing the dark staircase, hearing the door at the bottom slam shut and the key turn in the lock.

It is summer, so there is still a little light coming from the small window. I don't know if Walter is crying, if he is, it is probably tears of anger, but eventually, like any prisoner, he begins to

look about his prison. And he sees that he is not alone. The farmer has also exiled to the attic Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson, Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Milton. Walter takes down a dusty volume, carries it to the window and begins to read.

During the rest of that otherwise dreadful summer, Walter contrived to get himself punished on a regular basis. But by the next time he was exiled to the attic he had managed to secure a flashlight for himself, so that his reading would not have to stop when the sun set.

He went back to the city and back to school. School continued to bore him, and he was never more than an indifferent student. Yet at the same time his teachers were writing him off, Walter was hungrily reading everything he could get his hands on. During those nights in that attic, the world had opened up for him. He had learned that books could stretch his mind and heart as nothing else and no one else had ever done before. He could not get enough.

Those in authority were surprised when Walter, who had exhibited no academic ambition in high school, opted to take the scholastic aptitude tests that are usually required for university admittance. When the scores came out, Walter was called into the office. He must have cheated. There was no other explanation for his phenomenal score. He would have to take the test again, but this time he would be doing so under carefully monitored conditions. Walter repeated the tests with a teacher standing over his shoulder and again pulled down an astounding score.

Walter received his undergraduate degree and went on to earn a Masters degree from Harvard University. He became an innovative and successful businessman, and, more importantly, a devoted husband, father and grandfather— a man, not only of intelligence, but of wisdom, compassion and delightful good humor. Despite a full and busy life, Walter still reads widely and voraciously. “Books saved him,” his wife says simply.

Imagine for me a different scenario. Nine-year-old Walter has climbed those attic stairs, but instead of books, he finds piled by the window a set of workbooks and standardized tests and a finely sharpened pencil. Even if, out of boredom, he had filled in the blanks on every page of the workbooks, even if, he had completed every test, can he believe for a minute that doing so would have enlarged and changed his life?

Or fast forward to our own times. Suppose a current day Walter had climbed those attic stairs and found a computer, already connected to the world wide web. Yes, he might have come upon information to expand his knowledge of the world, or he might have stumbled into dark internet

sites, manned by sick and angry souls, who would seek to persuade him that violence was the only way to combat the pain in his young and impressionable spirit. I am very grateful that the treasure hidden in the attic was books—great books—wonderful stories.

One summer I was invited to lecture at Chautaugua—a place in New York State which has been famous since the 19th century for its lectures and concerts. It is considered a great honor to be invited to speak there, and I was proud, if nervous—just as I am today. A driver was sent to the airport to meet my husband and me. I had expected a student driver, one who was earning money during his summer vacation, but our driver was a retired airline pilot who loved spending his summers meeting the visiting lecturers and artists. As soon as we got in the car, he handed me several huge scrapbooks in which he had pasted clippings, notes and autographs of all the celebrities he had driven back and forth to the airport. His last passenger before the Patersons had been George McGovern. He told us that he and the former presidential candidate had spent the trip discussing the possibilities of accidental nuclear war. Then he stuck his head around and looked at me. “Now what is it you do, exactly?” “I write novels for children and young people,” I said.

There was a long silence, pregnant, I imagined with disappointment. “Well,” he said finally, “that’s important—I guess.” He went on to explain in the tone of many intelligent American adults that he never read novels—just scientific books and journals and some history. He didn’t really have time for novels. His wife was the one who read novels. He was too polite to voice the unspoken fact that not even she would be reading children’s novels. Incidentally, he didn’t ask me to autograph that scrapbook.

I’m always saddened by the reminder that otherwise intelligent people feel that novels are peripheral to their lives. I know that writing stories for children is not on the level of preventing nuclear war, but, with all due humility, I wouldn’t write novels for children if I didn’t think it was truly important.

We used to think of ourselves as the tool making animal, but now we know that a chimpanzee can sharpen a stick and turn it into a tool. Then what is our distinction as human beings? The scientist Jacob Bronowski writes that “The power that man has over nature and himself, and that a dog lacks, lies in his command of imaginary experience. He alone has the symbols which fix the past and play with the future, possible and impossible.” We are, in other words, the animals that can imagine, and we have from the times lost in the mist of pre-history, fed that imagination with stories.

I have always been taught that the evils of the world are the result of sin, but perhaps we should consider that poverty, disease, crime and war also result from a failure of the human imagination. We cannot fully imagine ourselves as victims of injustice, nor can we fully imagine how wrongs of injustice might be righted. A novel can illumine the imagination because it let's us experience another person's life at a very deep level—it allows us to eavesdrop on another person's soul.

When Abraham Lincoln was introduced to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he is quoted as saying: "So this is the little woman who wrote the book that made this big war." My dream is that someday a novelist will be greeted with the words: "So this is the person who wrote the book that helped heal the world."

I think this is what many writers are seeking to do. The results are not as dramatic as the reactions to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a hundred and fifty years ago, but healing happens in many small ways. The essayist Barry Lopez speaks eloquently about the power of the story to heal—"to repair a spirit in disarray." The task of fiction he says, is to "illumine and make whole." To heal means to make whole. This is more than patching up, putting a bandage on a wound. It is more than simple catharsis, the purging of the emotions. Healing here is concerned with growing, with becoming. And that is why children's books are so important. We don't come into this world fully human. We become human, we become whole, and the stories we hear and read as children are vital nourishment in this process of becoming fully human.

As Astrid Lindgren herself has said: "Alone with a book, a child creates unique images somewhere within the secret chamber of the soul. Such images are vital for human beings. The day that children are no longer capable of creating such images will be the day when mankind is impoverished."

Astrid Lindgren herself was surely a writer we must greet as a woman who in *Pippi and Scotty* and *Mio and Emil* and all the children of *Noisy Village* helped children to create unique and magical images in the secret chambers of their souls. With the creating of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in her honor the Swedish people are surely the nation that is helping to heal and enrich the world. I thank you and I applaud you, and I pray that my own nation will follow your imaginative and gracious example.