



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD**

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

Award Lecture by Philip Pullman Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2005

Thank you very much for inviting me here.

I am grateful for many things, not the least of which is that I'm able to speak to you in English with the knowledge that you will understand me. We native speakers of English are not always aware of how lucky we are, firstly that our language is so rich and so expressive and has been the vehicle for so much great literature, but also that the rest of the world so obligingly takes the trouble to learn it, so that we can speak to them and listen to what they have to say in return. This is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that others do the hard work; the curse is that we know so little, so very little, about things that are not written in English; and that we are so pleased with what we already have that we seldom explore beyond the boundaries of our own language.

However, from time to time we have the chance of expressing our appreciation, and that's part of what I want to do today. Thank you for letting me speak in English! And of course thank you to the jury for allowing me to share this wonderful prize, and for inviting me here to speak to you.

Now at first I wasn't sure what I should say. Then I remembered that from time to time I get asked to make speeches to audiences of librarians or teachers or booksellers. And I confess, if I make a speech to the general meeting of the West of England Library Association in 1996, for example, and then five years later I get asked to speak to the North of Scotland teachers' annual conference, at the other end of the country, well, I might just say to the teachers one or two

things that I said to the librarians on the previous occasion.

But that would not do for an event like this. The Swedish Royal Library is bound to be very well informed, and they will know exactly what I've said before. So I can't play that trick with you.

Instead I'll say something a little more personal. I'll tell you about how I became involved in this world of ours, the world of the books that children read. To start at the very beginning: when I was a young boy I learned to read with the help of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* – the tale of how the elephant got his trunk, and how the camel got his hump, and how the rhinoceros got his skin, and the *Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo* and all the other wonderful stories in that book.

There was one occasion I remember very well: we were on board a ship sailing to southern Africa, and I was about five or six. We were going there because my father, who was an officer in the Royal Air Force, had been posted to the country that was then called Rhodesia, but which we now know as Zimbabwe. Anyway, someone had given me a copy of the *Just So Stories*, and I was looking at the pictures and repeating some of the words my mother had read to me, because I knew them by hear. And I was looking at the page as I said them – and suddenly those black marks on the page became transparent: I could see through them! – or not through them, exactly, but past them – or something. Not all of them, and not all at once, but there was a little passage I could understand. I could read.

And the thing that made that happen was the language. The thing that made me sit with the book held up close and whisper it to myself over and over, was the wonderful rhythms and sounds of the words:

“He ran through the desert; he ran through the mountains; he ran through the salt-pans; he ran through the reed-beds; he ran through the blue gums; he ran through the spinifex; he ran till his front legs ached.”

“He had to!”

And: “Once upon a time, on an uninhabited island on the shores of the Red Sea, there lived a Parsee from whose hat the rays of the sun were reflected in more-than-oriental splendour. And the Parsee lived by the Red Sea with nothing but his hat and his knife and a cooking-stove of the kind that you must particularly never touch.”

And: “At last he came to the banks of the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees, precisely as Kolokolo bird had said.”

Now there were a lot of words in those sentences, and others like them, that I did not understand. But that didn't worry me. What mattered was that I could say them aloud. Of all the tastes that childhood brought to my grateful mouth – peanut butter, sausages, chocolate cake – the taste of words like spinifex and salt-pans and more-than-oriental splendour was so delicious that I've relished it all my life.

And I have always believed, as a result of that experience, that when it comes to telling children stories, they don't need simple language. They need beautiful language. So when much later on, towards the end of my schooldays, I came to the poetry of John Milton, and *Paradise Lost*, I was never intimidated by the language because I had already learned that the way to approach the sense is through the sound:

Through many a dark and dreary vale
They passed, and many a region dolorous,
O'er many a frozen, many a fiery alp,
Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death –
A universe of death, which God by curse
Created evil, for evil only good;
Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds
Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,
Abominable, inutterable, and worse
Than fables yet have feigned, or fear conceived,
Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimaeras dire.

So my first involvement with literature was at the level of pure sensuousness. It tasted good. It sounded beautiful. It felt both soft and powerful at the same time: saying those words aloud was like stroking the flank of a tiger.

A little later on, I began to take an interest in longer stories. I began to look through the language, so to speak, and see the worlds and the characters it revealed. And like many children, I found in stories people who could be my friends, people who always welcomed me into their worlds, but let me remain myself.

Because I think that we often make a mistake when we talk about the way children identify with this character or that. We say that children like Pippi Longstocking because they identify with her: they see themselves having her adventures, and living the gloriously free life she leads. We say that they identify with Pippi when they read. Well, I don't think it works quite like that. When I read stories about Robin Hood or Superman or the Lone Ranger, I didn't want to be Robin Hood or the other heroes. I wanted to be in the story, certainly, but I still wanted to be me. I wanted Robin Hood and Superman to be my particular friend, and I wanted to share their adventures, and I wanted them to value having me around, because I was brave and daring and honourable and witty.

I think that when we read Pippi Longstocking, the same is true: we want to be in the story, but to remain ourselves; we want to be Pippi's friend. And it's the genius of Astrid Lindgren that she has given every child a wonderful friend, every child the chance to be the friend of Pippi, and to find themselves delighted and enriched by Pippi's friendship. In my case, I didn't come to Pippi herself till I was an adult. My particular friends in childhood were the Moomins of Tove Jansson. I loved them all, and I never felt so happy as when I was welcomed into their gentle and eccentric company.

Another special friend of mine in my early reading was Erich Kästner's Emil. If you remember, Emil's father has died, and he lives with his mother very happily – with one or two exciting adventures involving trains, and thieves, and gangs of children – until one day the local police inspector announces, to Emil's astonishment, that he would very much like to marry Emil's mother, if Emil has no objection.

I understood Emil's predicament very well. I was in a similar situation by this time; it was a few years after my learning to read with Rudyard Kipling, and my father was dead, just like Emil's father. But in my case the police inspector didn't ask my permission. Perhaps we did things differently in England. Besides, he wasn't a police inspector really, he was an officer in the Royal Air Force, just as my dead father had been, and he just married my widowed mother like that, quite suddenly, or so it seemed to me. Anyway, it all worked out happily, because my stepfather was a good man, as Emil's Inspector Jeschke was.

However, it's not as simple as that. What we know – the readers – is that Emil's mother would much rather not get married again; she would much rather go on living with Emil, just the two of them, looking after each other very happily; but she's thinking of the future, Emil's future as

well, and after all Inspector Jeschke is a good man. We know this, but Emil doesn't – until he finds out. And what does he do then? His grandmother tells him that he can do one of two things. He can ask his mother not to marry, and that will be the end of it; or he can keep silent. But if he decides to keep silent, the silence must last till the end of his days, and he must be cheerful in his silence and not go round with a face like a mourner at a funeral. And Emil decides to do just that. For the sake of his mother, he'll pretend that everything's all right; and he does, and it is.

What I learned from my reading of Emil was that stories can tell us about ourselves, and that tension and drama, suspense and excitement, courage and resolution are not only found in stories about shooting and fighting and bandits and villains.

A few years later, when I was grown up, I became a teacher, and I began to tell stories to the children in my class. I thought it would be a good idea if they knew something about the great stories from mythology, because I loved them myself and I just wanted to tell them; so I began to tell them stories of the gods and heroes of Greece, because that was the tradition I knew most about. I told them about Theseus and the Minotaur, about Perseus and Andromeda, about Apollo and Hermes and Aphrodite; I told them about Oedipus and the Sphinx and his doomed attempt to escape the terrible fate hanging over him – that's a story that never fails to work.

Then I told them about the Trojan war, from its origins in the story of the golden apple all the way through the seduction of Helen, and Agamemnon raising his army, and the anger of Achilles and the death of Hector and the defeat of Troy, right up to the return of Odysseus to claim his kingdom of Ithaca. All of that, three times a year for twelve years.

And what I found when I was telling those great stories over and over again was that firstly, I never got tired of them. And secondly, that the children always listened. I know they listened, because when I meet some of my ex-pupils today, grown men and women with children of their own, they remind me of those stories. "I always remember those stories you used to tell," they say. If you tell a child a good story, they never forget it.

But the third thing I learned was about my own way of telling stories. I learned what I was good at, and what I wasn't. I claim no credit for the success of the stories with the children in my classes: the stories have lasted for three thousand years because they have survived all kinds of tellings. They are wonderful stories that always work. But I found parts of them easier to tell than others; I was better at some things than at others.

For example, I could always describe a landscape in a way that helped the children to see it clearly, and when there was an exciting scene, full of tension and drama, such as the moment after the death of Patroclus when Achilles comes out on to the trench around the Greek camp at the end of the day and looks out across the battlefield, his golden head blazing in the sunset, searching for Hector, the man who has killed his comrade, and then utters a cry so terrifying that the very horses of the Trojans rear up in horror and tangle their chariot traces in confusion – I could always make that work.

But lighter moments, funny stories, the birth of Hermes and the mischief he got up to on his first morning, I found much harder. I couldn't make the children laugh. That's a talent I just haven't got.

And I would never have dared to try and tell a story like Emil's, a story of ordinary people like us in domestic situations like those we see around us every day. That's another talent I haven't got. I know it because I used to try, in those dusty classrooms twenty, twenty-five years ago, and I couldn't do it. I found the things I could do in mythology and folk tale and fairy tale, and I was very lucky to have the opportunity to discover what my strengths and my weaknesses were. Nowadays, when I have the chance to speak to young teachers, I urge them to learn a lot of stories and tell them to their pupils.

Actually, you don't need a lot of stories; you need one every week for a school year. Next year you can tell them again, and you'll tell them a little better, and the following year they'll be better still, until it's the one point in the week that every child looks forward to and no child will ever forget. It's important to tell the stories, to stand in front of the class without a book and just tell them, and not to read them aloud. Reading aloud is good, of course it is, but that has a different feeling and a different purpose. And there are so many good stories in the world that you're bound to find some that work very well for you.

Thinking about myths and folk tales and fairy tales, much later on, I realised that they work as well as they do because each of the great stories has a particular shape. And when you become aware of that shape, it has a profoundly sensuous appeal. It has the same attractiveness as a smooth marble statue: you want to stroke it; you want to run your hand over the surface, to feel the undulating shapes and the rise and fall of the contours. And you want to shine a light on it in such a way that it reveals the shape, that it throws interesting shadows, that it brings out the

rhythm of the whole form. In other words, you want to tell it for yourself. And you begin to see similarities between this form and that one; you begin to see how many stories in the world have the same basic shape as Cinderella, for example, or Beauty and the Beast.

But that's not to say that every telling of the stories is the same. Far from it. For example, the story I've just mentioned, Cinderella, which in the Grimms' famous collection is called Ashputtle, and who elsewhere is called Aschenbrödel, or Oochigeaskw, or Mossycoat. There are many hundreds of versions of that story from all over the world. The central figure is the girl who is transformed by the fairy godmother, or by the doves who roost in the rose tree growing from her mother's grave, or by the waistcoat of moss that her mother weaves for her, until she looks as beautiful on the outside as we know she is on the inside, and finds love and happiness.

Well, I've told that story too, but from a different angle. I always liked the idea of the rats who were transformed into pageboys and who rode in the coach to the palace, and at the stroke of midnight they were all turned back into rats. Suppose, I thought, that one of the pageboys didn't get back to the coach on time? Suppose he didn't get changed into a rat, but was still a boy? So I wrote the story of a little boy who said he had been a rat. That was all he knew: "I was a rat!" he said. And suppose there was an old couple who had never had a child, much as they had longed for one. Suppose he turned up one night and knocked at their door. What would happen next?

So I wrote that story and called it by what the little boy said. "I was a rat!" And because it's the story of Cinderella, really, and it begins after the famous marriage, when she's become a princess, I had to bring her in at the end. And just as the little rat-boy wishes he could go back to being a rat, she has discovered that it's not such a great life being a princess after all; but neither of them can go back. We can't go back. We have to go forward. She has to be as good a princess as she can be, and he has to do his best to be a boy.

Much of the reading I've spoken about so far, the books I loved and learned from, involves stories of one sort or another. And one kind of story that I came to value when I was a little older was the sort that tells us about our origins. I've mentioned Rudyard Kipling's delightful and funny stories about how the elephant got his trunk, and so on; well, even when I was very young, I didn't think those stories were actually true. Children can understand what a joke is.

But there are more serious stories that do attempt a kind of truth – a psychological truth, if you

like. They try to account for the way we are – for the way our minds and hearts behave, for why we are alive, for why we have to die, for what this life might mean. One of the great stories that does that is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I mentioned already how I came to value the language of it when I was at school; I remember my teacher, Miss Jones, who is still alive and well at the age of 88, and whom I went to visit only last year, and who gave me a bottle of Welsh apricot brandy in case my car broke down on the journey home – I remember that Miss Jones had a very good way of teaching: first of all we'd just read the poem aloud. Simply that. Just read it aloud and pay attention to the sound of it.

But like all great works, *Paradise Lost* is a work of profound philosophical implication. It tells the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, created by God and placed in this happy spot surrounded by beautiful flowers and trees covered in fruit. What could go wrong? Something has to go wrong, or there isn't a story. And of course the problem lies with the serpent, or the Devil, who tempts Eve to taste the fruit of knowledge; and then Adam joins her and eats it too; and from then on, everything changes.

I think this is one of the most important and profound stories about us, about human beings, that has ever been told. It accounts for the fact that there seems to be a difference between us and the rest of nature; it accounts for the feeling of alienation, of not being at home in the universe, which afflicts so many thoughtful people, and which has given rise to all kinds of religious answers; it begins to deal with one of the greatest scientific mysteries there is, which is that of consciousness.

Scientists have been studying the problem of consciousness for many years, and they learn a little more about the brain with every experiment they do and every paper that's published; but what consciousness is is still a deep and unanswered mystery.

The story that Milton tells in *Paradise Lost* doesn't solve the mystery in a scientific way, but it does provide a sort of story-explanation. And because of how stories work, the story satisfies us even before we search for an explanation. We can love it as children, and we can wonder at it as adults. The explanation goes something like this: when Adam and Eve were created first in the garden, they were at one with it. They were part of the beauty of everything around them, because they lacked the knowledge of good and evil. They were like animals; animals can't be evil; animals can't be embarrassed, unless they have lived with human beings and acquired some of their characteristics, as dogs do in a very slight way.

But the knowledge that Adam and Eve acquired by eating the fruit set them apart from nature. Instead of being part of it, they were separate. The first thing that happened was embarrassment, self-consciousness: they became aware of their bodies, and covered themselves. They felt shame. They were expelled from the beautiful garden that had been their home, and they had to make their living by toiling at the earth – by exploiting it. They had an instrumental relationship with nature: it wasn't what they were any more, it was something separate that they did things to, they altered and moved and changed. We might say they took the risk of destroying it.

This story isn't scientific, as I said. But it's truthful in another way. I found it so profoundly satisfying that I thought about it for a long time, and some years ago, when I found myself beginning a big story that I felt would take me a long time to finish, I found myself telling that same narrative over again. His Dark Materials is yet one more in the long list of stories that retell that first great story of our origins. But I didn't want it to be only a lament for something beautiful that has been lost, because truthfully I don't feel that the story means that.

My character Lyra, who is the Eve of this story, does something heroic and good when she gives in to the temptation to find knowledge and love, and in the end, although she suffers, she gains immeasurably too. So does the world. This happens every time that the story happens, and the story happens in everyone's life. It's the story of leaving our childhood behind and entering the world of responsibility, experience, adulthood. I used to see it happening with the children I taught. They were beginning to go through exactly that stage in their lives when their bodies begin to change, when into the world of childhood there come strange powerful new feelings, sexual feelings, causing confusion and delight and fear and mystery and joy and shame. Self-consciousness.

So this ancient story that we find at the very beginning of the Bible, at the very origin of our culture, is repeated every day, every year, in every generation, in every human life.

Anyway, my long apprenticeship as a story-teller allowed me to tell this story as well as I could. I knew how to do it.

And at that point I realised how lucky I was to be writing a story that would probably be read by children. Now I have to be careful how I say this. I never like to say "This is a story for children" or "This book is intended for 9-11 year olds" or anything of that sort. As a matter of fact, you can't intend to have an audience of any kind. You can't lift the phone and say "I want

some 12-year-old readers, please,” or “Send me a large number of 8-year-olds at once,” as if you were ordering a pizza. The proper verb to use about your audience is not intend but hope. Maybe no-one will want to read your story at all. The most you can do is tell the story as well as you know how to do it, and then – wait. Or better still, don’t wait; get on with the next one.

But because by that time I’d written and published a number of books, and found some young readers, I thought that when the first part of *His Dark Materials* appeared it would be children who read it. If the story found any readers at all, they would probably be young. And, as I say, that was a lucky thing – lucky for me, and lucky for the story. Because, as I had discovered, and as I said after the first book in the trilogy was published, there are some themes, some subjects, some stories that are too large for books that only adults read. They can only find the space they need to breathe and move and grow in books that children read. Putting it another way: if a story is to satisfy us fully, it must be the sort of story whose shape a child can take in. Children have no difficulty in understanding the stories in Shakespeare’s plays. They have strong vivid outlines that a young mind can grasp at once: an old king divides his kingdom between his three daughters, only one of whom loves him. A young prince is told by his father’s ghost to avenge his murder. Three witches meet a general on the battlefield and promise him the crown of Scotland, and his ambitious wife urges him to kill the king in order to gain it. And so on.

So when I found myself telling a story of this sort, I knew that if my version was going to be any good at all, it would have to be the sort of story that children would read. And I am profoundly grateful that they did.

I think that one reason for the good taste that children show in this matter of the stories they choose to read is that they are more interested in events than in criticism; they care more for interesting characters than for a beautiful prose style. Instead of thinking “How does this novel fit into the post-modernist project of subverting narrative expectations and deconstructing outmoded notions of causality,” they want to know “What happened next?”, and that is a very good question for a storyteller to bear in mind. If you hope, as I say, that your readership will include children, then you have to take a pretty old-fashioned view of narrative. You have to think of some interesting events, put them in the order that best expresses the connections between them, and narrate them as clearly as you can.

And as I say, the strange thing, the disconcerting thing for those writers who are deeply intellectual to realise, is that the great subjects and themes and questions can only find room to live in a story of that sort. I’m not dismissing modernism: the discoveries of modernism, whether

in the field of literature or music or the visual arts, are magnificent triumphs of the human imagination, and have given us great masterpieces to cherish while civilization lasts. But it's only when we see characters who are more or less like ourselves, in a social setting that is solidly conceived and persuasively rendered, enacting events that have an ethical context and performing actions that have moral consequences, that we begin to feel ourselves in the presence of human significance and truth. And by characters like ourselves I include the Moomins, and Brer Rabbit, and Maurice Sendak's *Wild Things*, and a duckling who was laughed at for being ugly.

I spoke of "actions that have moral consequences", and I want to finish by saying a little about that.

It's been one of the characteristics of literature – of story – since time began that it shows us characters performing actions, doing things, and experiencing the results. The simplest fairy tales and the most profound novels and plays do exactly this. The great teachers of mankind, including the founders of religions, have always known this, and have encapsulated their teaching in stories. Their moral teaching. Story is a place where we can go to learn what it is like to do things and suffer the consequences, or enjoy the consequences; to learn in safety, as it were, as children do at school, trying things out under the guidance of an expert. From stories we can learn what it feels like to be betrayed, and what it feels like to betray; what it feels like to be stolen from, and what it feels like to be a thief. We can learn what it feels like to be poor, and to be denied justice; we can experience the courage and the resolution it takes to fight oppression and cruelty; we can see the consequences of failure and we can learn the price of success.

It's important to understand clearly how this works. Stories don't teach us to be good; it isn't as simple as that. They show us what it feels like to be good, or to be bad. They show us people like ourselves doing right things and wrong things, acting bravely or acting meanly, being cruel or being kind, and they leave it up to our own powers of empathy and imagination to make the connection with our own lives. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It isn't like putting a coin in a machine and getting a chocolate bar; we're not mechanical, we don't respond every time in the same way.

But however important the moral, however ethically useful and philosophically profound the message, it will not have the slightest effect if people don't want to read it. How many moral tales have been written on purpose to make children obedient and truthful and hard-working?

Thousands and thousands. Where are they now? Forgotten, every one. Yet again, children display their instinctive good taste with regard to literature: in this case, by refusing to read anything that's meant to be good for them. We should remember that. Children choose to read stories that please them, not stories that are ethically instructive. The moral teaching comes gently, and quietly, and little by little, and weighs nothing at all. We hardly know it's happening. But in this silent and discreet way, with every book we read and love, with every story that makes its way into our heart, we gradually acquire models of behaviour and friends we admire and patterns of decency and kindness to follow.

And what's true for the reader is true for the storyteller. Only when a story begins in the delight of the writer will it have any chance of pleasing the reader. Nothing that is done for the sake of solemn duty is any good at all. When we're beginning a new story, we need to feel a sort of lightness of heart, a sort of exuberance and playfulness; we need to fool around with the story and just have fun. In my case, it isn't until much later that I find out what the story is about, in a serious sense. At first I'm only fooling around. I wouldn't do it otherwise. I'm enjoying the taste of telling something new – just as I began, all those years ago, by relishing the taste of those words of Kipling in my mouth, and the taste of the words of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, and Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the words of all the other poems I grew to love. Sheer delight. Sensuous self-indulgence. Pleasure. In fact, the way into the school of morals, if I can put it like that, goes through the gateway of delight. There is no other way in. If literature can enrich and transform our lives and those of our children, as I think it can, it begins to do so by pleasing our senses. In this way, as in so many others, *Pippi Longstocking* is a good guide to life.

Well, here I am, in my fifty-ninth year, with more good fortune than I deserve. I once wrote a story called *The Firework-Maker's Daughter*, in which Lila, the little girl who wants to be a firework-maker, discovers that she has to acquire some royal sulphur from the fire-god if she wants to make the best fireworks. So she makes her way to the volcano where he lives, and learns to her dismay that she will have to offer him three gifts in exchange. But she hasn't brought any gifts, and she goes away, as she thinks, empty-handed.

It's only later on, after she's passed through danger and fear and difficulty, that her father tells her the secret he knows he should have told her before: that without knowing it, she did take three gifts and offer them to the fire-god. The first was her talent, and the second was her hard work, and the third was – luck. No two of those gifts are any good without the third; we need all

three. But if we offer them sincerely to whichever deity it is who presides over our particular art, he or she will not refuse the royal sulphur. Without knowing it, Lila came away richly blessed with the royal sulphur, which was the ingredient that makes for success.

Well, I think I have a certain amount of talent; I think that in my time I have worked as hard as I could; but what's beyond doubt is that I have had a very great deal of luck. I know several writers and illustrators of the sort of books that children read who are just as talented as I am, and who have worked just as hard, if not harder, and any of them would richly deserve to stand here today as the recipient of this magnificent award. But I am the one who had the luck. And I'm not yet sixty. I'm still a young man. I have many years left in which to write more stories, and I certainly intend to do exactly that. Thank you again very much for inviting me here; thank you to the jury for allowing me to share this award with Ryoji Arai; thank you for listening; and I hope that we all live happily ever after.