



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN  
MEMORIAL AWARD**

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## Parliament Library Address by Philip Pullman Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2005

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for inviting me here. But, you know, I'm not used to speaking to politicians. As a matter of fact, like many writers, I am more like a nervous animal than a confident public figure. Asking a writer to make a speech is rather like dealing with a badger or a bear: we have to be pushed out of our burrows with a stick, and we emerge blinking and peering into the light, and bite someone quickly and go back again.

But I promise not to bite anyone today. This is a happy occasion; the wonderful award that I'm sharing is enough to make the most dangerous and unpredictable animal calm and sweet-tempered. It is really an extraordinary act of generosity and faith on the part of the Swedish government and people – faith in children, and in literature, and in the humane importance of art in general. I want to thank everyone concerned with setting up and organising this award, and express my gratitude for the invitation to come and speak to you today.

But I did wonder if I could find anything to say to you that would be relevant to your world, the public world, the world of politics, as well as to mine, the private world of books.

So I thought I would ask my grandfather's advice. Since he's been dead for a long time, I can't ask him directly, but I might be able to follow his example. He was a clergyman; he was the priest of a village in the English countryside, and every Sunday he preached a sermon. He spent Saturday writing the sermon in a little black notebook, and on Sunday he went into the church

and preached it. He was a very good preacher: combining the public and the private was exactly what he did. When he died I inherited his notebooks, all of them, going right back to 1930 or even earlier, and when I heard I was going to speak to the Swedish members of parliament I thought – well, they won't want to listen to a sermon, but maybe in Grandpa's little black notebooks I can find some ideas about how to make a good speech.

So I took them all out of the cupboard and looked at them properly for the first time. Alas! I couldn't read a word of them. His handwriting was completely illegible. It was no use relying on Grandpa.

So I was on my own. Well, that's not a bad place for a writer to be, and so that's where I'm going to start. As a matter of fact I find that I have some good company here, because I had the pleasure yesterday during the award ceremony at Skansen of listening to some very interesting and sensible remarks by the Minister of Education, Research and Culture, Mr Leif Pagrotsky, and the first thing I want to do is echo what he said about children and art.

As the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award recognises, children certainly need books. As a matter of fact, they need art of every kind. Children need to go to the theatre, for example, as much as they need to run about in the fresh air. They need to hear real music played by real musicians on real instruments as much as they need food and drink. They need to read and listen to proper stories as much as they need to be loved and cared for. They need poetry as much as they need clothing and shelter.

The difficulty with persuading people about this is that if you deprive children of shelter and kindness and food and drink and exercise, they die visibly, whereas if you deprive them of art and music and story and theatre, they perish on the inside, and their starvation doesn't show. So the grown-ups who should be responsible for providing these good and necessary things don't always notice until it's too late; or we pretend that art and music and theatre and so on are not necessities at all, but expensive luxuries that only snobbish people want in any case; or we claim that children are perfectly happy with their computers and video games, and don't need anything else.

But they do. Children need art and music and literature, they need to go to art galleries and museums and theatres, they need to learn how to play musical instruments and to act and to dance. They need these things so much that human rights legislation alone should ensure that they get them. The proof is the eagerness and the delight with which they embrace them, the passion with which they throw themselves into any activity that matches the qualities they bring to it, the inventiveness and wit that's released, and the self-respect that comes when a child begins to master something difficult and challenging.

And the truest thing that a child learns through making art of any kind is that they are in the same game as the great artists and writers and musicians. They are doing the same thing. These old men and women from hundreds of years ago with their wigs and their formal dress, or these wrinkled old people from yesterday, they are not just dead figures in a museum of pompous behaviour, they are fellow-craftsmen, fellow-workers, struggling to make a living, trying to remain true to the voice in their heads, working with the same materials and the same tools as the ones we work with now, fired by the same excitements, consoled by the same hopes, moved to tears by the same sorrows. And more: they are living still, they are enchanters and sorcerers with the power to call down spirits from the empty air, and raise the dead from their graves.

And children need to learn that this is their own inheritance. This is what belongs to them. They need to know that they have the right to roam freely through centuries; that to be cut off from the past of the whole world is to live in a sort of refugee-camp in time, knowing only the present day, living on scraps, and stumbling from place to place with their eyes firmly shut while the sun and the moon and the stars blaze above them.

When we are adults, and if we're lucky enough to have developed the habit, we can find our own way to the world of art, to plays and operas, to books and music and art galleries; but children can't do it on their own. They need to be taken. They need to be helped to find their way into the experience by people who've been there before. And this has implications for education, and most of all perhaps for teacher training. We need teachers who understand that children don't need simple language, they need beautiful language; they don't need the cheapest, they need the best; they don't need silly art because they're children, they need great art because they're human.

The second thing I want to say about the private and the public is this: both the public world and the private one depend on democracy. It's easy to see how democracy works in the public realm. But how does democracy work when it comes to reading a book, which is one of the most private experiences of all? As a matter of fact, I think reading is intensely democratic.

In the first place, the meaning of a book only emerges when the reader and the book come together. The meaning is not fixed and determined for all time by the writer alone: it comes out of negotiation and argument and questioning and compromise. It's like a conversation. The book suggests, the reader questions; the book responds, the reader considers. Both sides are engaged in the process, because both sides are necessary. Readers need books, and books need readers. Without the reader to open the book, all the possibilities of the words lie enclosed as if in prison; but when the pages are open, and the light of another mind shines into them, all the meanings are set free.

And secondly, every reader is different. If we all read in the same way, with the same minds, there would be no democracy. There would be no need for democracy, because we wouldn't be human beings at all, we'd be insects. But every single human being is different from every other one, and each person comes to a book with their own qualities, their own experiences, their own hopes and expectations, their own unique temperament. All these things contribute to the rich pattern of meaning that develops. This reader sees what that one doesn't; one reader agrees, another one disagrees. And as we talk about the book with other people, with our friends or family, so the circles of democratic understanding spread out around it.

Thirdly, when we read a book, we are active about the process. We decide for ourselves how we want to read it. We can skim, or we can read it slowly; we can read every word, or we can skip long passages; we can read it in the order in which it presents itself, or we can read it in any order we please; we can look at the last page first if we want to see who did the murder. We can read our favourite book over and over again, as children do. We can put the book down and reflect, or we can go to the library or look on the internet and check what it says against another authority. We retain our freedom – in fact, in reading just as in politics, when we exercise our freedom, we enlarge it.

All this is democracy in action in the private world. And there's one other similarity that's worth considering: when a politician stands for election in a true democracy, he or she does not

threaten the public with punishment if they don't vote the right way. You don't earn people's votes by bullying and violence; you earn them by presenting your case as attractively and persuasively as you can. The same is true for a storyteller. If I want someone to read a book of mine, it's no good telling them that they have to. I can't make a law about it and send them to prison if they refuse. I can only get someone – a child or an adult, it's the same for both – I can only get a reader to follow me into a story by making it so interesting that they want to. It's entirely voluntary.

So there is a lot of similarity between the democratic work of politics and the democratic work of literature. In fact, every totalitarian state we know about has taken great care to censor literature. They never learn; there's a news story that appeared recently on the internet about Turkmenistan. Apparently the President of Turkmenistan has closed all public libraries, on the grounds that people don't need to read. I know very little about Turkmenistan, but I'm sorry to hear this. The Turkmen people will suffer, and in the end the President will fall. Much better to let people read.

The last thing I want to say about the public and the private is this: I think that we adults, often for very good reasons, many to do with education, are in danger of making too many things public that ought to remain private. Children need to have their own privacy respected. They need a space where they can be private, and alone, and silent, and secret. They need the freedom to wander in the sort of place where stories begin.

And I don't think we always get that right when it comes to education. I don't know how it is elsewhere, but in my country now we are too concerned with testing and measuring, and with telling children how to do everything. "Children! in order to pass your school tests, you need to write stories," we hear, "and this is how you should do it. First of all, you must make a plan. This is how to make a plan: you think of the beginning of your story, then you think of the middle, then you think of the end. Put 1,2,3 beside them. Then you write the story according to your plan. Take 15 minutes to make the plan, and 45 minutes to write the story. Begin!" Well, you know, that is not how I write a story. That is an example of the public invading the private, telling it what to do, and getting it wrong. And because I'm speaking in public now, to ladies and gentlemen who have public responsibilities which are very important, I thought I would like to try and describe to you what the private aspect of writing a story feels like.

Writing a story feels to me like fishing in a boat at night. The sea is much bigger than you are, and the light of your little lamp doesn't show you very much of it. You hope it'll attract some curious fish, but perhaps you'll sit here all night long and not get a bite.

And all around you is silence. And plenty of time. You're in a calm state of mind, not asleep, not at all sleepy, but calm and relaxed and attentive: not the sort of heavy stupor you fall into after several hours' television, but the sort of unharassed awareness that we achieve when we're truly absorbed. True calm intense relaxed attention.

Are you going to find a fish? Well, there are things you can do to improve your chances: with every voyage you learn a little more about the bait these fish like; and you're practised enough to wait for a twitch on the line and not snatch at it too soon; and you've discovered that there are some areas empty of fish, and others where they are plentiful.

But there's a lot you can't predict. Sometimes you'll feel a tug on the line and pull in nothing but seaweed; sometimes a cunning fish will flicker at the hook for a moment and disappear, with the bait in its mouth and the hook left bare in the water; sometimes a great fish will swim round and round, close enough to touch, and then with a flick of a tail plunge down into the deeps and vanish without touching your poor bait at all.

And the sea is very big, and the weather is changeable, and you really have only the most rudimentary knowledge of what things lie in the depths. There might be monsters there that could swallow hook, and line, and lamp, and boat, and you. These powers are not interested in any plans concocted far away on shore, with 1-2-3 beside them; none of the fish are interested in plans, or in reason; the fears and delights of fishing at night have nothing to do with rationality. So you set off in your little boat, your little craft of habit and intention and hope, and bait your hook, and drop it in the water, and sit and wait, calm and relaxed and aware of every ripple, every faint swirl of phosphorescence, every twitch on the line, until ...

That's what beginning to write a story feels like to me. There's a lot that comes after that, but if it doesn't start in that sort of way, in silence and mystery, then it isn't worth doing. I'm sometimes told that, well, of course, you're a professional writer, it's different for you; but children need a simple way, they need instructions, they need 1-2-3. Not true! You don't become a professional writer by doing 1-2-3 until you graduate, and then leaving it behind to write in a grown-up way.

Not at all! When I write a story, and when a child writes a story, we are colleagues and fellow-craftsmen. We work in the same way. We begin in that silence, in that privacy, in the wide darkness of the sea, which is so precious, and which every writer of the past – the great democratic fellowship of the dead – has shared in their turn. If there is one principle that should govern every moment of education, I think it should be this: everything we ask a child to do should be something that is truly worth doing. Fishing at night is worth doing; writing by 1-2-3 is not.

Well, that's more or less all I know about the public and the private. Thank you very much for inviting me to stand here in public and speak to you. Very soon I shall go back to my private world, and write another book. But I'll do so happy in the knowledge that there exists a country with a government as wise and enlightened as yours, one that values the books that children read to the extent of paying a complete stranger from a different land this great compliment, just because he enjoys putting words together and telling stories.

And that brings me, I promise, to the very last thing I have to say: I enjoy writing stories. In fact, I love it. I try to do it as well as I can, but if I didn't love it, I wouldn't do it at all. The luckiest people in the world are those who can wear themselves out working night and day at something they enjoy and believe to be important. Children deserve that kind of luck as well.