

SWEDISH PARLIAMENT

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Good morning, and thank you for having me as your guest before Parliament today, it is a pleasure to be a visitor to your beautiful country. My name is Sonya Hartnett, and I have been awarded the enormous honour of the 2008 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Since the jury telephoned two months ago to tell me I had won, my normally quiet life has become a whirlwind, and the question I've been asked again and again is, *How does it feel?* The answer is that it feels amazing and scary and weird, but mostly it feels astonishing. On the evening that Larry Lempert, the foreman of the jury, left a message on my answering machine telling me that Sweden was trying to contact me and if I got the message could I please wait at home until he telephoned again, I had been out walking my dog by the creek near where I live, worrying about the commitment I'd recently made to renovate my house. My books haven't earned much money over the past year, at least, not enough; and I was facing the prospect of going to the bank, probably some time within the next few days, and asking to loan the money I'd need for the renovations. As I walked, I'd cursed myself for making such a stupid commitment. The house didn't need all that expensive work, and I was about to burden myself with a bank loan that my income would struggle to repay. As I walked with Shilo in the gloom of the autumn evening, the horrible ghost that has haunted me throughout my adult life didn't hesitate to start whispering dire words in my ears. This ghost only has one threat to utter, but it is one that chills my blood. *Now look at the trouble you're in!* it hissed. *Now you're going to have to get yourself a real job!*

A real job: such a simple little phrase, but it has given me grief for years and years. Though I've put every ounce of my mental and emotional energy into my writing, though I've applied myself to refining my skills over years and years, I have never truly believed that being a novelist meets the description of having a *real job*. Perhaps this is not helped by the fact that, in Australia at least, very few people think of writing – particularly writing for children and teenagers – as being a proper job either. Playing Australian Rules football is a job, training for the Olympic swimming team is a job: writing is not a job. It is, according to many Australians, several of whom have not hesitated to voice the opinion to me, 'easy money'. And it's true that there are plenty more demanding ways in which to earn ones living, a couple of which I have tried. And yet, when it comes to necessity, I believe that creating

books for young people is right up there with the most vital of occupations that anyone can pursue. When a child opens a book, he or she puts their trust, mind and heart into the hands of the author: given this, who would want that author to be anything less than hard-working, intelligent, thoughtful, and ethical? My job – the job of all who write for the young – is not really to sit on my bed typing words while drinking coffee and eating chocolate, although that is, in fact, how I usually go about it: but to use what I know and feel and think and understand in an effort to make the child who'll read my work a more considering and broad-minded child, an adventurous and daring child who will grow into an adult who might do something to make the world better - - and if this is not a testing and respectable job, then I don't know what is. Certainly, I did not write my first book that was strictly for children until I had written a dozen for adults and for young adults, because I did not feel, before this, that I had perfected my craft sufficiently to write the story as well as I hoped to write it. One might say that I could write for children only after first practicing on adults for 20 years.

Anyway, to return to the creek and the ghost. When the ghost growls the words *real job*, it means the sort of job that will be given to a 40 year old hag with little experience in any field of much use; the sort of job to which I would have to catch an early train and spend all day indoors, away from the sun, away from the creek, away from my dog, so I could take home a pay packet to pay my stupid bills because the books were continuing to do what they have pretty well always done, which is to not sell in numbers adequate to support their creator. Some of Australia's authors for young people do make enough money to live very comfortably – mostly they are writers who write about poo and bums and boogers and farts. I like books about bums and farts as much as anybody, and so no doubt do many of the children who read my books - but they are not the sort of stories I write, nor could I write, because I lack that particular knack. Lacking it, I would have to get a real job, and the 25 years in which I've struggled to make a name for myself as a author would come to an end. And although I would hate having a real job, because there's so little that is nice about having one, the silver lining to this appalling cloud would be that I would no longer have to worry. I would no longer wrack my brains ceaselessly, day after day, year after year, in the quest to dredge from my imagination the plot for another book. Because although I've written novels for a quarter of a century, I have never lost that crawling fear that one day I will run out of ideas, and my career will end with a whimper of cluelessness. Walking along the creek, was somewhat of a relief to know that my writing career would be throttled by the bald bad matter of money, rather than the shameful burning-out of ideas.

Nonetheless I was in a downcast mood when Shilo and I arrived home and saw the red light blinking on the answering machine, and heard an accented voice saying it was Sweden calling, and could I please stay home and wait until Sweden rang again. ‘Sweden?’ I said to Shilo. ‘The only Swedish people are the Astrid Lindgren Award people.’ Of course, like all Australians, I also know Angetha, Benny, Bjorn and Frieda, but I did not think it would be them ringing. A phone call from Abba, however, could hardly be more unexpected than a call from the Astrid Lindgren Award people would be, as far as I was concerned. I knew about the existence of the prize, having been previously nominated in 2007; research at the time told me that earlier winners included Maurice Sendak and Philip Pullman and Katherine Paterson. These are names that existed in a realm far beyond what I could hope to achieve; nevertheless I can remember thinking how wonderful it would be, to be awarded such an incredible gift, and pondering what could be done with that kind of money, and visualising how it would all unfold, telling my publishers, telling my mum, waking up with the knowledge that ones life had changed. Such imaginings made my hopes rise, despite my awareness of how unlikely they were to transform into reality: yet when the Banco del Libro was announced as the 2007 winner, I accepted the news as surely everyone else on the nomination list did: with a fine feeling that there was no shame in losing to such an eminently worthy winner. Venezuela’s Banco del Libro is exactly the sort of organisation that *should* be recognised for the good it is doing in this world. But as my imagined scenarios fizzled away and my life went on as it has always done, I reminded myself of one of my golden rules: *Don’t Get Carried Away by What Will Probably Never Happen*. I applied the rule when I was told, late last year, that I had again been nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Award. *Do not get carried away*, I warned myself. And, having embarrassed myself with my hopes and daydreams the previous year, I took the advice, and put the matter if not out of my mind, then well into the back of it, to the point where I didn’t know that that day I was walking with Shilo along the creek was also the day that the 2008 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award was being announced. When Larry Lempert telephoned again, which he did almost the instant I’d finished wondering who, besides Abba, we knew in Sweden, I have to say I was *stunned*. I genuinely considered that it could be an elaborate joke. It also crossed my mind that Larry might be about to ask me to inform John Marsden, the other Australian on the nomination list, that *he* had won, although why Larry would ask me to do this, rather than do it himself, I’m not quite sure. Over the phone, Larry read to me the jury’s motivation, relaying such flattery as ‘linguistic virtuosity and brilliant narrative technique’, but as I sat on the veranda steps overlooking the front

garden, there was no linguistic virtuosity coming out of me. There was just a stunned babbling. And behind the babbling was a voice in my head repeating the same question over and over, a question it has asked often in the weeks since, despite the generous words of the jury's motivation, despite my awareness of how hard I have tried, over the years, to produce work that is worthy of being written, read preserved on a young person's bookshelf. The question is this: *Why me?*

I was born in *Melbourne*, in 1968. I'm the second eldest of what eventually became six children. I was a runty, shy child, happiest hanging around the house with my mum and being left to my own devices: I was not a child who had many friends, and although I probably would have liked to have more than I did, which was frequently one and sometimes none, I also loved to spend time on my own over weekends and holidays, roaming the parkland that surrounded our suburban home, tending to my menagerie of mice and birds, drawing and painting and making things out of scrap. One of my favourite solitary pursuits was reading, and as a child I was devoted to books. I loved the feel and smell and look of them, I loved their ability to transport a kid to another place, far from squabbling siblings and harassed parents and the lonely schoolyard and the shared bedroom. I saved and saved my pocket money to buy Enid Blyton in particular, and what books I could not buy I borrowed, although I much preferred to own than to loan, because I loved books not just for their content but for the physical object that they were. I wanted to own them, I needed them to be mine, I wanted to be a character on their fabulous pages – but I did not want to write. In truth, it only dimly occurred to me that a book actually *was* written by somebody – in the 70s, there was none of the cult of the author that there is today, and apart from Enid I could not have named anyone who'd written the books I'd loved. I read what I was given at birthdays and Christmas, I read library books that featured animals or little girls on the cover or in the blurb. I was nine when I started writing stories of my own, having been given the homework of inventing a make-believe tale, something that, despite my love for reading, I had never tried to do. Perhaps I'd never done it because I did not imagine I could: I was not a particularly gifted child academically. But that day, when I was nine, I discovered that the writing of a story could achieve that magical escape from mundane reality that I'd always assumed only *reading* a story could do. Despite the instantaneous love I felt for creating plot, scene, and character, I did not decide, that day or even anytime soon after, that I would be a writer. I was the product of a Catholic upbringing, and had had it drummed into me that I would never do or be anything worthwhile: someone as ordinary as myself could never be something as remarkable

as an author. Indeed, throughout my entire career I have always hesitated to describe myself as a writer, because it *still* does not seem possible that I could be such a thing. It's this self-doubt that prevented me from really getting my hopes up about my chances of winning the Astrid Lindgren Award. It's this self-doubt that has been asking, *Why me?*

Trying to answer that question, I've looked back, during the last couple of months, over the 25 years since I had my first novel published when I was 15. Since 1984 I've written 18 books, two of them while I was still at school. The majority of them have been written for a readership of children and teenagers, but a couple, including the one I'm working on at the moment, have been books for adults. Writing for children in Australia is, as I have already complained, an undertaking greeted with next-to-no respect; and, with one or two exceptions, it is my books for adult that have been the most successful financially, and brought me the most critical attention. But writing for adults is not what gives me the greatest pleasure. It is easy, and it is boring, to write for a mind that is already knowledgeable about the way of the world, a mind that is cynical, solidified by experience, grown beyond adventure and silliness, wary of strangeness, too busy to be challenged, and sometimes resentful of a challenge. I like to write for readers who are capable of being surprised, who are willing to investigate something new, who have not yet set their opinions in concrete, who live in a world that is painted in bright colours, not in shades of grey – and such readers are young readers. They are the readers who delight in the smell and feel and shape and weight of the book, so the object itself is precious, and much flipped-through and dog-eared, and carefully inscribed. They are the readers who are imaginative enough to fall in love with fictional characters, which is what I did when I was a teenager, and did for years as a writer, too, so that when I finished working on a novel I would feel the characters' absence from my life, and miss them like lost friends. It is young readers who are brave enough to trust the writer, to be willing explorers rather than presumptuous consumers; and, as far as my work goes, when I ask for a young person's trust, I am asking for a lot, because my novels, even those for young children, can be difficult, the language sometimes archaic, the setting frequently one of war or poverty, the pages full of peculiar characters and stern landscapes and ruthless behaviour and weirdnesses of a hundred kinds. All of which made me wonder even more, *Why me?* In Australia, I am a writer who is read by the most intelligent children, the most alienated teenagers – my work is certainly not for everybody, not nearly as joyful as Maurice Sendak's, not nearly as accessible as that of Katherine Paterson, not nearly as community-spirited as the Banco del Libro's. I had heard the jury's generous assessment of my work, and I have always believed that my books are,

underneath their oddness, good for *something*, loveable to *somebody* – a writer has no choice but to believe this, or how could he or she go on? ... but still this didn't account for *Why Me*. This was the Astrid Lindgren Award, and the only thing I knew about Astrid Lindgren was that she wrote *Pippi Longstocking*. I had read *Pippi* near the time I started writing my own stories, around the age of nine or ten, and although Pippi's name was accompanied in my memory by a sense of wildness and freedom, I remembered few specifics except that she had climbed a fantastic tree, and she owned a horse and a monkey. As a nine year old, I had envied her access to all three. But if I was hazy on the details, I've always been well aware that *Pippi Longstocking* is a classic in the canon of the world's great literature for children, and as such I knew that the Longstocking books must feature those grand themes common to time-honoured children's classics – loyalty, trust, friendship, courage, forgiveness, understanding, patience, kindness, care. I have always tried to include such themes in my work for the young, not because I am high-minded or have any wisdom to impart, but because I think it is important that, given the trust and innocence a child brings to a book, the book has a responsibility to leave that child a better, rather than a worse, person at the final word. I make my novels touch on these time-honoured themes simply because they are traits worth trying to instil in a child. I went down to the bookshop – a bookshop in which I worked part-time for eight years, and if there is a more arduous job than dealing with the public on a daily basis, I would not like to know what it is – and bought a copy of *Pippi Longstocking*, curious, now, to discover what else she has besides a tree and a monkey and a horse, to learn what it is about her that has made her creator a national hero commemorated by such a breathtaking prize. I hadn't crossed paths with the red-headed minx for years, but suddenly she'd returned, like a miracle, to rescue me at a time when I couldn't have needed her more.

But I am, of course, far from the only one whose life has been altered by Pippi Longstocking. Tommy and Annika, the neighbourhood children, share many of the rambunctious almost-orphan's adventures, and as fictional stand-ins for the reader they are a wide-eyed link between Pippi and the reader, who, like Tommy and Annika, can't help but be impressed by Pippi's free-wheeling existence and her happy-go-lucky attitude to life. As she bounds joyfully from one spirited encounter to the next, Pippi Longstocking proves herself a fighter, a hero, a storyteller, a wit, a sailor, a weight-lifter, a chatterbox, an acrobat and a proud liar, all attributes that, though Pippi lives an extraordinary life, can be aspired to by every ordinary child. Miss Longstocking is devoted to the entertainment and indulgence of the self; in any situation, she always wins, not through cruelty or unfairness, but because there's an innate

justice in the world Lindgren gives her to inhabit, which lets the innocence and directness of children be right, when the adults around them are interfering and scheming and wrong. Pippi is uneducated in the traditional sense, but her ineptitude at maths and spelling and etiquette are liberating for her, rather than a source of anguish. Her life is occasionally lonely, and intermittently she feels sad about her lost mother and father – but such feelings are rare, and tragedy is never allowed to stain Pippi's world. What child would not want to be her, or at least be friends with someone like her? Lindgren's great skill, in creating this feral girl, was to show her readers that the world is not the heavy-handed place it can often appear to be from a child's point-of-view. Pippi teaches that there is no need to be afraid – that things work out in the end, that dramas which seem cataclysmic often prove to be mere passing clouds, that a failure to be perfect is not a disaster, but rather a fact in which to take pride. In clean, fresh language that is often wryly humorous, Lindgren never falters in her insistence that children are individuals who need freedom to make choices, especially wrong ones; to explore the world; to test their courage; to imagine possibilities; to play and fight; to develop independence and creativity and individuality. Behind the noisy, bossy, dazzling entity that is Pippi, Lindgren slips into the novel themes of friendship and hope, loyalty and fairness with such subtlety that they are like glimpses of blue sky seen from a careering rollercoaster ride. I do not know that any of my characters will stand the test of time the way Lindgren's sturdy redhead has done, and I doubt I will ever stop being astonished in the face of the question *Why me?*, but it will always be a tremendous honour to have had my work linked in this way to Astrid Lindgren's masterpiece, her splendid goals to my goals. I hope my work does carry in it, somewhere, some of the sympathy and appreciation she had for the young, and an understanding that it is a privilege to be able to provide them with the means to extend their emotional and imaginative lives. The encouragement of thoughtfulness, playfulness, kindness and culture, through art, through music, through the study of nature, and certainly through reading, cannot help but improve the future of our children, and, through them, the future of our world. Put simply, we need to support the writing of good books for children, because we need to know that we have done all we can to leave behind us a decent world.

Which leads me to a final question: why you, Sweden? Your international reputation is of a gracious and liberal-thinking people, so the question probably answers itself. A few weeks ago, a woman in a gift shop in Melbourne asked me why I was in the company of two filmmakers from Swedish television. Cutting a long story short, I replied that they were making a documentary about Australian writing for children. She thought about this for a moment, and

said, 'Why aren't *we* making that film?' And that, I think, sums up the facts of the matter. Australia will never support writing for young people in the way your country is doing - no other nation of earth will do so, I expect, because no other country has the imagination. But every other country is humbled by the generous concern this Award shows for the well-being of the world's children. I will never forget the great kindness you have shown me in granting me this prize, and I will always try to live up to the faith you have put in me. For the rest of my life, a flame will light in my heart – and in the hearts of all who create children's literature - at the words *Sweden* and *Pippi Longstocking*. People keep asking how I am going to spend the prize, and I tell them I'm going to buy back the joy I've always taken in words, a joy that, strangled by financial woes, I was starting to lose before the jury telephoned. Joy, and maybe a sports car – it's the sort of thing Pippi, who bought herself a horse with *her* newfound fortune, would want me to have, I think.

Thank you.