

**From a box in the attic to a Memory of the World –
Astrid Lindgren’s remarkable archives at the National Library of Sweden**
(Lena Törnqvist, Adelaide October 2007)

“Remarkable” is a word often used by Astrid Lindgren and remarkable is a word which can be used to describe her as a person.

She was a farmer’s daughter who published her first book when she was 38 years old

- who achieved a position as one of the leading authors of children’s books in the world;
- whose audience range between the ages of three and ninety;
- who is translated into more than ninety languages – 95 to be precise;
- whose works have achieved sales of more than 145 million copies globally;
- who received well over one hundred national and international awards and distinctions, including four honorary doctorates;
- who was congratulated by royalty and statesmen and thousands of “ordinary people” on her birthdays. At the reception for her 80th birthday in 1987 not only the Swedish prime minister was present but also the ambassadors of *both* the Soviet Union and the United States, and when she turned 90 she got 14 sacks full of letters!;
- who was looked upon as a substitute grandmother, a mother-confessor and a fairy godmother by thousands and thousands of people, especially in Scandinavia and Germany;
- who had some forty motion pictures made from her books;
- who enjoyed a position as one of the most influential persons in Swedish public debate at an age when most people retire, and whose opinions resulted in front page headlines in leading international newspapers;
- whose funeral resembled that of a statesperson and brought one hundred thousand people onto the streets of Stockholm
- in whose honour the Swedish Government established the “Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award” – with a prize sum only exceeded by the Nobel Prize
- who left behind probably the most extensive archives any Swede has ever brought together. These archives are now included in UNESCO’s Memory of the Word Register.
— surely such a person can be called remarkable!

And yet I imagine most of you didn’t recognise the name Astrid Lindgren when you read the programme for this conference. You are probably more familiar with Pippi Longstocking. A nine year old girl with freckles and hair the colour of a carrot. She is the best known of all of Lindgren’s literary characters. Pippi lives in Villa Villekulla together with her horse and monkey, and she is the strongest girl in the world and has a whole knapsack full of gold coins. Ever since she first appeared in 1945 Pippi has been loved by children all over the world. Her independence, fearlessness and sense of justice – not to mention what fun she is – made her a role model for generations of girls.

Before I describe her archives, let me introduce the woman behind them. Astrid Lindgren was born in 1907 outside the town of Vimmerby in the south of Sweden. Her father was a tenant farmer; the family ran the farm belonging to the vicarage for three generations.

Astrid was the second of four siblings. She had one older brother and two younger sisters. All four of them worked with words. Astrid’s brother – besides being a farmer – became a member of the Swedish parliament and an author of political satires, one sister was a translator and the other a journalist.

Astrid loved being a child and looked upon her childhood as the best time of her life, a sort of paradise lost, and she used many of her childhood memories in her books.

At thirteen she thought life was more or less over. She felt ugly, miserable and misunderstood. Her friends, on the other hand, described her as someone always keen on fun and mischief and somewhat of a leader of the group. In other words – it seems to have been a rather ordinary adolescence. She finished school in 1923. A year later she was offered a position as a trainee on the local newspaper.

In 1926 her life changed radically. At eighteen years old Astrid became pregnant by a man thirty years her senior. Her parents were highly respected members of society and Vimmerby was a very small town. The scandal was really huge.

Her parents were of course shocked but supported her when she refused to marry the father of her child. Instead she moved to Stockholm and trained as a secretary. She was determined to cope on her own. And she was equally determined to keep her baby. Late in the autumn she gave birth to her son Lars.

For various reasons Lars was born in Copenhagen, Denmark and she had to leave him in foster care there. This was probably the most difficult period of her life.

For three years the boy stayed in Denmark while she tried to get her life in order. Every penny she could spare was spent on trips to Copenhagen. The last year before she married in 1931, Lars lived with her parents in Vimmerby.

This experience and the years she had to struggle to sort her life out and create a home for her child formed not only Astrid Lindgren's life but also her literary work. Her books are full of abandoned boys looking for a father to love and of stories about the love between a boy and a man, some of them the most unlikely father figures you can imagine: a farm hand, a tramp, a fairy king. The girls in her books, on the other hand, are strong, self confident and capable – most of them sisters or at least cousins to Pippi Longstocking.

During the whole of the 1930's, Astrid Lindgren was a housewife taking odd jobs as a typist or stenographer. She had a few very conventional stories for children published in different magazines. Her daughter Karin was born and it was she who in the early 1940's "invented" Pippi Longstocking. The story grew gradually as a bedtime story and in 1944 Lindgren sent the manuscript to a publishing house – and was turned down. She rewrote the story and the next year another publisher accepted it. The book was an instant success. By that time, Astrid Lindgren had discovered the joy of writing and had already got two other books published.

And now things happened fast. Two more books were published in 1946, another one in '47 – and a picture book and the first film – one more book in '48, a book and a film in '49 and so on and so forth. And all of them became bestsellers and were praised by most critics!

The severest backlash came almost a year after Pippi Longstocking was published when the first professor to hold a chair in education at a Swedish university in an article described the book as showing a lack of literary taste and humour. He found Pippi to be "morbid" and "something unpleasant which scratches at the soul". But the children loved her!

At this time Astrid Lindgren also became a popular radio voice. She read her own stories on the air and was also engaged in a quiz show which ran for fifteen years. Some of her stories were first written for radio and one for television and nearly all of the books have also been dramatised and filmed. Almost all of these adaptations she did herself.

One of the things which became clear during my work with the archives is how efficient Lindgren was. In the period 1946-1970 she wrote most of her books, plays for theatre and

radio, and film manuscripts, at the same time as she was managing the department for children's literature at one of Sweden's major publishing houses.

Her everyday schedule could look like this: In the mornings – and in the summer – she wrote her own books, at the office in the afternoon she helped other authors with their manuscripts and in the evenings she answered letters – sometimes as many as 20 per day. She also handled all of her foreign and film rights herself, she loved going to the cinema, theatre and concerts, kept in close contact with her family, relatives and friends and travelled a lot. Not to mention that she was a very well-read person. Her capacity for work was impressive and she certainly made good use of her training as a secretary!

In 1970 Astrid Lindgren quit her job as a publisher and she looked forward to writing full time. In 1973 she published *The Brothers Lionheart*, one of her major novels.

Then in 1976 something happened which once again changed her life. She discovered that through new tax rules for self-employed people like herself, the income tax that year would amount to 102 per cent. Typically for her, she wrote directly to the minister of finance, urging him to do something about this as it clearly must be a mistake! But she was met with arrogance and was told that she “was very good at telling fairy tales but less good at counting”. It all ended in a media debate which lasted more than six months. Astrid Lindgren played a considerable part in the outcome of the general elections later the same year. For the first time in 44 years the Social Democrats lost their position as the party in power.

In 1978 Astrid Lindgren was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers' organisation. Her acceptance speech was entitled “Never violence” and in it she drew parallels between violence in children's upbringing and political and military violence. “Even future statesmen and politicians have their characters formed before their fifth year of life – alarming as it may seem”, she said and went on: “Certainly, children should show respect for their parents, but it is quite certain too that parents should respect their children and never misuse their own natural superiority.”

This speech struck a chord in Germany and also in many other countries and Astrid Lindgren received hundreds of letters praising her views on child rearing. And other letters severely criticising her. Some people were upset over the way she quoted the Bible.

Her speech helped influence the public opinion and in 1979 Sweden was the first country in the world to abolish all physical and/or mental punishment in child rearing. Other countries followed suit.

The two major debates on taxes and child upbringing in the 1970's had made Astrid Lindgren a public figure in large parts of Europe. The letters to her no longer came in tens or hundreds but in thousands. Her correspondence became something of a burden. Popularity and fame also have a downside. Still she managed to write one more major opus, *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*, published in 1981.

In the mid 1980's her eyesight began failing, her son died at only sixty years old and she also met with other sorrows. But outwardly she kept up appearances. And she initiated a new debate which came to last for almost ten years – this time on how domestic animals were treated in factory farming. As I have said she was a farmer's daughter. Together with a researcher on veterinary medicine – Astrid Lindgren always made sure she got her facts right – she started a campaign against factory farming. It resulted in “Lex Lindgren” a new law on the keeping and handling of farm animals. And once again she caused headlines in the international press. This time most reactions came from the English-speaking world.

As late as 1995, when she was 88, Astrid Lindgren once again took a stand, this time against the neo-Nazi ideas awakening among certain groups of young people. Full of fighting spirit she exclaimed: "It won't do to relax and lie back. Obviously one has to get actively involved!"

In her last few years AL was weak and tired. Finally on January 28th 2002, at the age of 94, she died at home, in the same rented four-room flat in central Stockholm where she had lived for more than 60 years. She was buried on March 8, International Women's Day.

I have wondered many times what made Astrid Lindgren save so many documents related to her life and work as she did. She was not a "collector" in the true sense of the word. And she was not deliberately building her own monument. As she once said: "I am not impressed by much. And least of all by myself." And it was not because she was a frustrated archivist or librarian as there is no special system or order in which she arranged her papers. The material was just put in boxes, all mixed up, and kept in the attic. In 1976 a researcher working on a dissertation on Pippi Longstocking was invited to make use of the material. But she soon abandoned the plan as it was far too time-consuming to go through everything to find the things relevant to her work.

In 1980 Astrid Lindgren made an agreement to transfer everything in the attic to the manuscript department of the National Library. There the material was simply stored away and new boxes were added whenever Lindgren's home became overcrowded.

I first heard about the archives around 1996 when I began work on a large Lindgren exhibition. I had worked at the Swedish Institute for Children's Literature since 1971 and had become more and more specialised in Astrid Lindgren over the years. I had also been trained as a librarian at the National Library and had many contacts there. So I asked to have a look at the material. I was told it consisted chiefly of fan mail from children. It took me about five minutes to establish that this was much more than boxes of fan mail. It was a gold mine!

Some two years later, in January 1999, I began my work and I have now spent the equivalent of more than four years full time and I am *almost* (but not quite) ready with a survey and first inventory of the archives.

The work has been both stimulating and frustrating. One problem has been the amount of material, another the lack of resources. The budget of the National Library, based on Government grants, does not allow for single projects on this scale. In 2002 we managed to get private funding covering my salary for three whole years. At the moment we are looking at new possibilities (two attempts have failed). This takes time away from the "real" work. It also means that the whole time I have been the only one working on the project (with the exception of help with the shorthand material).

On the positive side there is the close co operation with Astrid Lindgren's family and relatives. This is invaluable both for solving questions related to individual documents, names etc, but it also means that new, very interesting material has been – and still is – added to the archives.

One example: Only about a month ago the family donated an underground, typed edition in Czech of *The Brothers Lionheart*. It is one of three surviving "samizdat" copies, the two others belonging to a museum in Prague. This non-official translation was commissioned by Charta 77, the committee working for an independent Czechoslovakia in the 1970's and 80's. Although most of Lindgren's books were translated in Eastern Europe, *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Mio, my Son*, both of which can be read as political allegories, were not officially translated until quite late on.

My own background of course also helps. As a librarian I worked more than 30 years at a children's literature research library, and during the last decade of Astrid Lindgren's active time, quite close to her. It is a bit strange finding letters from people you know – including yourself – and documents related to events you took part in yourself in the archives, but it makes the job easier!

The archives are kept in underground bookstacks. Forty metres below a park in central Stockholm there are two enormous caverns, each containing a building 150 metres long and five stories high. Each storey has two wings and the documents of the manuscripts department are kept in one of these. Here I spend most of my time with AL's papers.

Today the archives contain more than 50 accessions, the first – and largest – filled almost 17 metres, and the smallest is just a few odd sheets. New material is still being added. The earliest document is dated 1933. When finally processed, catalogued and put in individual wrappers in boxes, the archives will fill more than 130 shelf metres.

A substantial part is made up of correspondence, primarily letters received. I have estimated the number of letters at something between fifty and seventy-five thousand all together. About 50 per cent of them are from adults. There are letters from friends and relatives, colleagues, publishers, entrepreneurs and of course a lot of fan mail.

The correspondence bears witness to the unique position Lindgren held in Swedish society. There is mail from author-to-be who enclose their manuscripts and ask for an opinion; there are touching letters from parents who have lost a child and write about the comfort the book *The Brothers Lionheart* brought both to their child and to themselves; and letters from people asking for advice on every possible subject ranging from their own health or private finances to political issues and world peace.

The different public campaigns on taxes, child rearing and animal farming resulted in letters from all levels of society, from farmers, businessmen, politicians, industry workers, artists. I think all established political parties – and some not established – are represented.

Letters from adults are arranged by sender. From 1986 onwards – when the amount of letters became overwhelming – simple fan mail is just arranged chronologically by year and divided into writers from Sweden and abroad. The same system goes for all children's letters. Exceptions are made for children recognised as being of special interest – children who acted in the films, children who later became writers or children of relatives and friends etc.

Almost all of the original envelopes remain. This means I have had to open every single letter to judge which category it belongs to. Today you cannot tell that from the handwriting. From the middle of the 1990's, when people started using PCs it is even harder. For me it has become evident that the handwriting of at least Swedish school children has deteriorated much in the last fifty years. Also the thousands of drawings by children in the archives present an interesting field for future research.

Most of the children's letters are standard fan mail, but there are also examples of highly personal and sensitive evaluations of certain books.

Let me give just one example: I quote from one letter dated in 1988. The sender is a girl who has obviously read *Mio, my Son* about the struggle between prince Mio and the evil knight Kato. She writes (my translation):

Hello. I am eight years old and born in Sweden though my parents come from the Iraqi part of Kurdistan where there is a knight Kato. The evil knight in your book is fantasy but in Iraq he is real. He kills many children. His real name is Sadam. Do you know how he kills – he does it with chemical weapons. I want you to write about Kurdistan, there are many children killed there.

As I mentioned, Astrid Lindgren handled the foreign rights to her books herself. This means that there are letters and royalty statements from more than 80 foreign publishers. They contain valuable information for those studying the sociology of literature and related subjects. For example: it is possible to find out exactly how many copies of Pippi Longstocking were sold in France in 1954 and what Lindgren was paid for them!

Many letters from more or less serious private entrepreneurs are quite amusing. There wasn't – and still isn't – a field of enterprise where you couldn't make use of the name Astrid Lindgren or her characters. The plumbers' association wanted her to sit on a jury for a competition they arranged for school children; the butchers wanted her to cook in an advertising campaign, and a producer of wellington boots wanted to borrow the name of one of her characters for his boots. One advertising agency asked her to promote "the sensible toilet paper" and they assured her that this was no crap but a very serious enterprise and that the paper was environmentally friendly!

All of these and 90 % of all other suggestions were rejected. Usually there is no copy of Lindgren's answer. She wrote on a small correspondence card without a copy or she simply phoned. But she often made a note on the letter or envelope of what the answer would be. After working for a couple of months I suddenly realised: the strange doodle I had noticed on the envelopes was shorthand for "No"!

There is one draft for an answer which says a lot about Astrid Lindgren, her personality and her wit. A very popular Swedish drag show called "After Dark" wrote in 1982 (when AL was 75!) and asked if she was interested in a joint project. Between the lines you can read that they wanted permission to use her literary characters.

The answer simply reads:

No, that is not possible. I sleep After Dark. When it is daylight, then I write, but only for children. Sorry!

As I mentioned earlier, Lindgren didn't make copies of outgoing correspondence. Exceptions were made when she wanted to be sure of what she had said or promised. This means that many of the maybe 700-800 carbon copies in the archives are of special interest. In some she explains why she has taken a stand on a particular question, comments in detail on the work of a translator or – on rare occasions – gives advice to other authors. *But she never ever discusses her own work.* On one single occasion she writes to a very close friend:

"I hereby have the pleasure of announcing that I have started on the last chapter. I did it yesterday. [...] I have a feeling I have lived with these blasted Lionhearts for years now."

That is about as explicit as she will be on these matters.

The original manuscripts of famous authors are usually considered to be of great value for research. Almost all of Lindgren's original manuscripts can be found in the archives. There are some 290 manuscripts (originals or copies) altogether, books, films, plays, radio plays, articles and essays. But many of them are fairly uninteresting other than as artefacts. Because they are perfectly typed and there are almost no alterations at all in them. You could just as well read the printed book.

The really interesting material is found in the more than 680 shorthand notebooks. In these one can follow the creative process, see how Lindgren tried different expressions and words, how she wrote and rewrote until she was satisfied with a text. That is if you can read her very personal shorthand! It was very frustrating indeed to find one of these notebooks where she has written in ordinary script: "The Brothers Lionheart. Last chapter. Not the final version." And not be able to read one sentence!

To manage to bring some order to this part of the archives, I have had help from a teacher of shorthand and parliamentary stenographer who with great difficulty has made an inventory of the notebooks. To decipher them we have estimated would take 5 or 6 years.

But of course there are also *some* interesting manuscripts. I can't say how many times I have been asked if there are some unknown and unpublished works in the archives. And yes, there are. But only a few very early items. There are some very simple tales obviously written for her daughter in the 1930's. They are typed and anonymous but can be attributed to Lindgren because of the contents.

More interesting are some short pieces clearly meant for women's magazines. So far I have not been able to find out if they were ever published.

And – perhaps most notable of all – among the manuscripts there is a screenplay dating from 1943 written for one of the most popular actors in Sweden at the time. It says something about the self-confidence of Lindgren that she actually sent this to the film company and then reminded them when she thought their answer was late in coming. This happened one year before her first book was published and two years before Pippi Longstocking.

The play was never filmed.

The newspaper cuttings take up a substantial part of the archives. There are some 100 000 articles, interviews, reviews of her books, films, theatre plays etc. The first few years she pasted everything into scrap books but soon gave that up and just left the cuttings in their original envelopes together with everything else. I wish I had time to arrange them by title and genre for the benefit of future research. But this is far down the priority list. For the time being I have to limit my work to removing paper clips and rubber bands and putting the envelopes in boxes chronologically by year.

The archives contain diplomas and other evidence of appreciation from all kind of organisations, ranging from governments and national academies to children's reading clubs. Among the more original is a "breast feeding" award for promoting breast feeding in *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*.

The awards are by no means restricted to the world of children's literature. Lindgren received the Albert Schweizer medal from the US, the Karen Blixen medal from Denmark, the Lev Tolstoy medal from Russia and the Gabriella Mistral medal from Chile, just to mention a few.

She had a very relaxed attitude to all these honours. When she received a prestigious medal from the Swedish Government she weighed it in her hand and remarked that it was about as heavy as a beer bottle. A prize in the form of a statuette could be used to prop the window open when she wanted to let some air in, and so on. Most of these artefacts are still kept in her home, but the documents related to them are included in the archives.

The photo collection contains snapshots taken by admirers who met Lindgren briefly, a lot of pictures of admirers, their children and grandchildren (which are kept together with the letters), and photo albums from schools in Germany named after her (there are almost 200 of them). There are also a few portraits by press photographers. But no pictures from her childhood, no family pictures or pictures of her friends.

Most of the pictures in the collection are from stage performances. It has been said that there is a play by Astrid Lindgren staged somewhere in the world every day of the year, so there are also numerous posters and theatre programmes.

Although the material is so comprehensive, there are few really personal documents. Usually Lindgren kept a clear line between her public and private sphere. Some telephone books from

later years, some membership cards, lots of formal and informal invitations – but few really private papers.

The archives convey a picture of Astrid Lindgren the public person; the author, the mass media profile and the moral and social conscience of Sweden. To find the private person you have to look closely and read between the lines. Although she gave the impression of being always accessible for the press and for her many admirers, her need for privacy was great. She also managed to keep this borderline in the archives she left behind.

Thank you!

PS. When all efforts to get funds for the continued work with the archives failed the Astrid Lindgren Literary Estate, controlled by her family through a company called Saltkråkan AB (www.saltkrakan.se), in January 2008 decided to step in and cover the costs for another three years. At the same time the formal donation documents were signed and parts of the archives made available for researchers. Private correspondence, certain business correspondence and some other material will be available in 10-50 years, depending on the nature of the material. Inquiries can be directed to lenna.tornqvist@kb.se.