A journey through Astrid Lindgren's worlds

Astrid Lindgren's stories are some of my first memories. Mummy, who was Astrid's Dutch translator, read all her books to us children. This has had a great influence on what happened later.
When I was eight years old, my parents bought an old farmstead in Småland, in southern Sweden. We used to go there in the summer, in autumn, in winter and in spring. Our neighbours, two siblings, had a working farm where I helped out every day. An old-fashioned farm, where the farmwife still called the cows in the forest with a pretty melody, where hay was piled on the old-fashioned drying racks, where food was cooked on a wood-fired iron stove. I took part in the sewing circle with my small piece of knitting. The priest played the organ and read aloud to all the old ladies. And the old ladies drank their coffee off the saucer, with a lump of sugar clamped bet- ween their lips. I was quite convinced that Småland would become my future; I would take over the farm and become a farmer.
In a way, Småland did become my future, but thanks to another place where I also used to spend many hours every day, the cabin where the farm-hands had used to live. Here, my siblings and I did woodwork, painted and built enormous landscapes and dolls' houses – landscapes with lakes and rivers and caves, dolls' houses with furnitu- re, china services, curtains, wallpaper and a complete larder filled with food; all made from wood, fabric and clay.
Now it sounds like Sweden was my life, but I really lived in Holland. My friends there had never seen a toolshed like Emil's, or an ancient forest like Ronja's, or even tasted a cinnamon bun like Karlsson's. But they loved Astrid's books, just like I did.
Perhaps it is not so strange that, with this background, I became a children's book illustrator. After finishing at the Academy of Art in Amsterdam, my first commission was to make a picture book of the story "When the Bäckhult farmer went to town", which Astrid had written in the 1950s. Now I had the chance to paint my longing for Sweden and the Småland snow landsca- pe as I sat there in the Dutch drizzle. And it was as if Astrid's childhood memories and my own melded together.
The strange thing was that my documen- tation was hardly done in any library, but among my Småland neighbours. In their wardrobes, I found clothes that their parents had worn, their cupboards held old china and their heads were full of informa- tion about how people lived in Småland in around 1910.
Later, I did several picture books for Astrid, at the same time as I did illustra- tions for many Dutch authors and also star- ted writing myself.
But it was thanks to the picture books with Astrid's texts that Staffan Götestam came looking for me in 1994 and commissioned me to create the story journey at Junibacken. To begin with, I was a bit doubtful. Why were they building a story journey out of Astrid's fantastic works? Were the books not enough as they were? My doubts also concerned the train. Why was the audience not allowed to move at its own pace? But fairly quickly I realized that only with the train would it be possible to bring big and little people on a dream-like journey, where light, sound and movement could be adap- ted to each other, where I myself could determine sightlines and eye levels. No glass windows would be needed to protect the décor.
Despite all my doubts, I chose to take the step and join the great project. The starting point was a rough model showing the route of the cable way. The commission was to make room for six of Astrid's books. The rest I had to fill in myself.

A boarding station and a carriage were the first bits I had to imagine, and it was obvious to me to start with Vimmerby sta- tion, as it would have looked when Astrid was young. In a small wooden carriage, which also existed in those days, the audi- ence would be ferried from the more realis- tic books about Mardie and Emil in Småland to Stockholm and the "semi-rea- listic" Karlsson on the Roof and Simon Small, and finally to the folktale-like worlds of Ronja and the Brothers Lionheart.

I used the techniques of film-making, by changing the scale of the stage sets and the height and angle of the carriage as needed.

For instance, it was important that we in the cable carriage, just like Karlsson, could fly high above Vasastan. For this reason, 240 small-scale houses were built, to con- trast with Karlsson's, which had to look as realistic as possible with all of Karlsson's strange belongings in natural scale.

When I did my drawings, I was always careful not to show the main characters too clearly, in order not to collide with earlier interpretations. Emil sleeping in a dark cupboard, Birk and Ronja as silhouettes against the camp fire, and Simon Small sit- ting deep down in a sugar bowl. In this way, I hoped there was enough space for the children's own mental images.

All kinds of decorative craftsmen were con- tacted, from among others the Stockholm city theatre Stadsteatern, the Drottning- holm Theatre, the Royal Dramatic Theatre and Filmhuset, the Swedish Film Institute. Their experience helped to translate my two-dimensional images into three-dimen- sional stage sets. We were constantly expe-rimenting and searching for solutions, not least because of the practical regulations. The fire safety rules were so strict that the costume maker almost felt obliged to make all the clothes from sheet metal. Every day we came across surprises, such as an emer- gency exit or a fire escape in the middle of Ronja's fort or Emil's toolshed.

In the end, I worked with nearly 70 expert stage set craftsmen – tree makers, house carpenters, cliff sculptors, water moulders, cobblestone setters, landscape builders, makers of dolls, animals and dra- gons, and of course lighting experts. Some had 20 years of experience, while others were unemployed within their professions. But all had as their first task to re-read the books, so that they knew the stories they were telling.

We soon noticed that my paintings were not enough as precepts for the scene buil- ding. But if I said that Ronja belonged to the Viking era, and the Wild Rose Valley of the brothers Lionheart to the Swedish Middle Ages, then it became easier to understand the appearance and materials of the architecture and costumes.

As extra help, I handed out photographs of flowering cherry trees, Småland door handles, mossy single roof tiles, street lights and waterfalls. I travelled from sout- hern Sweden to Lapland, taking photog- raphs everywhere. Sometimes I bicycled around with mossy branches or black rocks on my luggage carrier, in order to show what I meant.

But although I did all this work, it was as if my craftsmen were training me to be a stage designer. They taught me all about different materials, how to build models and make builders' drawings. I had never held a scale rule in my hands before!

We worked night and day, because we were running out of money and time. We had chosen a fairly unusual route for a multi- million project: experimentation, small- scale work, personal inventions. My intuition told me that the most personal could become the most universal in the end.

The fact that this attitude sometimes collided with the management of Juni- backen is not so surprising. Convincing them that every detail had to be made by hand, that no mass production of, for instance, dolls' hands was possible was not always so easy.

Letting the doll makers create an entire character, a farmer with horny hands, Mrs Petrell with pale, slender fingers and a lot of jewellery, this was really part of the joy of the work. Everybody worked their hearts out, with enormous feeling and empathy.
The only person who could be our guide on this story-like journey was, of course, Astrid. Every morning for several weeks, we sat together in her sofa and worked. We read the books and studied the illustrations carefully, and meanwhile the storyline wound its way and tied together all the adventures on the journey from Junedale to Nangilima. And finally Astrid was satisfied with her text. It was translated into all sorts of languages – my own mother read it in Dutch.
And then at last, on 8 June 1996, Junibacken was opened by the Swedish King and Queen. I took a trip on the train, and my mother read to me. Just like twenty-five years ago.

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