



Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award

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The Spirit of Astrid Lindgren

The statutes of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award stipulate that laureates shall be authors, illustrators, storytellers or reading promoters whose work or activity for children and young adults is “of the highest artistic quality” and “conveys the deeply humanistic spirit associated with Astrid Lindgren.”

Laureates over the years have shown a great diversity of style, character and subject matter. But they have one thing in common, which also unites them with Lindgren’s own values and lifework: the conviction that for young people, only the best is good enough, and that children’s culture is important and deserves our most serious attention. That—in spite of everything—there is a future, if we work together for a more humane, more dignified existence for people of all ages, regardless of ethnic, religious, social, or geographic background. And that what unites us is greater than what divides us, and all change begins with our children.

When Lindgren received the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1958, she delivered an acceptance speech that is often quoted. It ended with the words:

“A child alone with her book creates, somewhere in the secret room of her soul, her own pictures that surpass everything else. Human beings must have these pictures. The day when children’s imaginations can no longer make them will be a day when all of humanity is impoverished. All of the great things that have happened in the world happened first in someone’s imagination, and the shape of tomorrow depends largely upon the power of the imagination in those who are just now learning to read. This is why children must have books.”

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Astrid Lindgren practiced what she preached. Both in her life and in her books, she lent her voice to the weak and disadvantaged, protested injustice and bullying, and showed extraordinary moral courage. She treated all people equally, offering the same courtesy to child readers and heads of state. When she thought a thing was wrong, she did not hesitate to say so, and she admonished politicians to “behave yourselves. Behave so that that you will never have to look back and ask yourself why you behaved like that.”

At nearly 70 years of age, Lindgren entered public debate. She crusaded against insular, dictatorial politicians. She fought to abolish every form of violence and insult from the education and upbringing of children. And she was a voice for the voiceless, launching a debate on the treatment of livestock: cows, pigs, chickens, and all the other animals we depend on for food. She influenced Swedish legislation in all these areas. She fought for respect for all living things and denounced the abuse of power in every form. Through it all, her belief in human goodness remained unshakeable.

In 1978, Lindgren was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. She used the occasion to deliver an impassioned address, entitled “Never Violence.” In the speech, she said that the peace process always begins at home. We must raise our children with love and respect, not violence and coercion. A child who is shown love by its parents will learn to show love to the world. History has furnished too many frightening examples of what can otherwise occur: “The characters of our future statesmen and politicians are formed before the age of five. It is terrifying, but it is the truth.” This means that children’s rights should be our highest priority. In 1979, Sweden became the first country to pass legislation banning all forms of physical and psychological violence against children, thus outlawing corporal punishment. Astrid Lindgren played an important role in massing public support for the law. Despite opposition from many powerful groups, other countries have followed Sweden’s example. Ten years later, in 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, declaring that children have the right to freedom of speech, information, and religion, to free education, and to play, relaxation, and leisure.

The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award is one way of contributing to a more peaceful, more humane world. The award's international focus and its substantial cash prize testify to how important Sweden considers cultural stimulation to be for children's development. Astrid Lindgren was living proof of what that can mean. Her work will continue to build bridges between people, across generations and cultures, for many years to come.

Lena Törnqvist