

The Vanished Land of Childhood: Autobiographical Narration in Astrid Lindgren's Work

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer

Published in: *Barnboken*. 1-2. Special issue: Astrid Lindgren Centennial Conference. 2007. 83-9.

In her essays and speeches Astrid Lindgren stressed over and over again her special relationship to her own childhood. However, what constitutes this relationship and how it influenced Lindgren's literary development and her self-image as an author has not been adequately investigated. Based on the recently developed concept of cultural memory as a new paradigm in the cultural and literary sciences and on recent cognitive studies in memory research, I would like to demonstrate that there exists an important connection between literature and memory in Lindgren's literary work.

Three types of autobiographical writing

The variety of autobiographical narration in Lindgren's work is astonishing.

Three types of autobiographical writing can be distinguished:

- (a) childhood memories in a general sense, i.e. autobiographical texts written for children and/or an adult readership, like *Mina påhitt* ("My Ideas," 1971; *Samuel August från Sevedstorp och Hanna Hult*, ("Samuel August

from Sevedstorp and Hanna from Hult,” 1975); *Mitt Småland* (“My Småland,” 1987)

(b) “hidden” autobiography, for example *The Children of Noisy Village*, 1947; *Mardie’s Adventures*, 1960

(c) fictional autobiography, i.e. *Assar Bubbla* (“Assar Bubble,” 1987).

The first type consists of Lindgren’s memories about her childhood and a biographical account of her parent’s love story as a precondition for her own existence. These texts are published either as short narratives, essays or illustrated books with photos. Nevertheless, these narratives fulfill the four criteria for the genre autobiography according to the “autobiographical pact” constituted by the French scholar Philippe Lejeune in his seminal study *On Autobiography* (1975): They are written in prose, they provide a record of an individual life, they are first-person narratives, and there exists an identity between author and narrator on the one hand, and narrator and protagonist on the other.

In contrast to these texts, Lindgren’s children’s novels – for example her trilogy about the *Children of Noisy Village* or the *Mardie* books – can be labeled autobiographical novels or “hidden” autobiographies (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 2004). Characteristic features of these literary works are the changed names and/or the choice of third-person narrative. In this case knowledge of the author’s biography supports the assumption that the children’s novels mainly deal with events from the author’s own life. This assertion is additionally

supported by Lindgren's claim that the stories in the *Children of Noisy Village* novels are reflections of her own childhood (cf. Edström 1992).

The third type – fictional autobiography – is extremely rare in the realm of children's literature. None the less, with *Assar Bubbla* Lindgren wrote a prototypical example, a hybrid story hovering between feigned autobiography and fantasy. In this a metanarrative, describing the alleged theft of the Pippi Longstocking manuscript by the robber Assar Bubbla, Lindgren mockingly embeds this first-person narrative in an authentic framework by situating it in Stockholm and by introducing herself as the manuscript's author. While the reader is initially not quite sure whether the theft really happened or not, the appearance of Pippi Longstocking accompanied by her horse and her monkey in Lindgren's apartment points the reader to the fact that the author is merely playing with the reader's expectations. Although some elements are non-fictional, for example the description of Lindgren's apartment and the origin of the Pippi Longstocking book, the story of the theft is purely imaginative and fantastic.

Typical features of Lindgren's autobiographical texts

In the following sections I will concentrate on the first type of autobiography outlined above, since Lindgren's autobiographical texts shed a light on her self-image as an author that deeply influences her children's books. However,

Lindgren has not written a typical autobiography starting with her birth or early childhood and closing with either the transition to adulthood or another remarkable event, thus describing an important lifespan in chronological order. On the contrary, her autobiographical writing is restricted to childhood memories on the one hand – only a few autobiographical remarks address her unhappy youth, described as a painful break with childhood –, and a fragmentary structure on the other hand. When reading Lindgren's published autobiographical comments, the reader is not able to arrange these statements into chronological order. Lindgren's comments provide some interesting sidelights on her childhood, but they merely present small parts of her life emphasizing her delight in books and play, her love for nature and her harmonious family life in a rural community (Metcalf 1995 and Ritte 1986).

At first glance this self-portrait seems to be a reliable description of a child living in close relation with nature and very beloved by her parents. But on closer consideration readers may be troubled by the absence of relevant information that normally turns up in childhood autobiographies, for example siblings, friendship with children of the same age, and school. Although Lindgren had three siblings, she hardly mentions them in her autobiographical texts. Similarly, she seldom tells of other individual children or friends. When speaking of other children, she generally refers to them as "we," - and it is rather surprising that school visits – with the exception of one passage dealing with boring Sunday school lessons – do not play an important role, either. Lindgren's

childhood memories outline an unusual childhood, the strangeness of which is highlighted by the emphasis on her relationship to nature. In this regard, sophisticated readers might be encouraged to reflect upon the intention of Lindgren's autobiographical narrations. Are they really true reports about her childhood based on her memories, or do they consist of impressions and passages which serve to convey a certain image of Lindgren's childhood?

Both questions give a clue to a better understanding of Lindgren's autobiographical writing. In order to reveal the complexity of these texts, I would like both to analyze the underlying concept of childhood and to consider recent studies in memory research (cf. Kofre 1996 and Markowitsch 2005). When reading the moving story of Lindgren's parents in *Samuel August from Sevedstorp and Hanna from Hult*, the reader might expect a genealogical and chronological order in Lindgren's autobiographical accounts of her own childhood. But Lindgren neither deals with her development from infancy to adolescence – a common feature of childhood memories – nor does she structure her story by exact date and time. On the contrary, the undated narratives give the impression of timelessness. Only the detailed description of the seasonal changes in nature evokes a certain dynamic of time passing, whereas the child herself remains ageless in the autobiographical texts. Her exact age is never mentioned.

Romantic Images of Childhood

The characteristic features of the child described in the autobiographical essays and narratives bear a close resemblance to Romantic images of childhood, in particular the concept of the strange or eternal child, modelled by E.T.A. Hoffmann in his pioneering tale for children entitled *The Strange Child* (1817). Hoffmann realized the complexity of this significant literary child figure and thus added a new facet to the Romantic image of childhood. The strange or eternal child is unusual for several reasons: its mysterious background, its family situation, and its loneliness. In addition, the strange child has inexplicable magical abilities: It can fly and understand the language of nature. Further characteristic features involve the peculiar lack of details concerning its age and name. The strange child has no proper name and remains ageless. Furthermore, the contrast between education and play is also characteristic of this motif. The strange child never goes to school because the rote learning at school suppresses the child's imagination (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 2007). Besides its magical abilities, most of the above mentioned aspects fit the characterization of the child in Lindgren's autobiographical writings perfectly: agelessness, the proper name is never mentioned, a special relationship with nature, and the importance of play and imagination in contrast to school and education. Since Hoffmann's tale has been translated into almost all European languages and exerted a great influence on the development of children's literature in England, France, Russia and even the Nordic countries, it is my contention that Lindgren's image of childhood has also been influenced by this motif. As has already been shown by

scholars working in the field of children's literature, figures such as Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson on the roof are modern transfigurations of the strange child (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 1999). These observations lead to the presumption that Lindgren adjusted her childhood memories to the Romantic tradition in order to stress the exceptional status of her own childhood.

In this regard the ambiguous metaphor of the “vanished land (of childhood)” plays an important role. This metaphor not only refers to a poem by Alf Henriksson cited by Lindgren in her essay “The Vanished Land” (part of the collection *Samuel August from Sevedstorp and Hanna from Hult*), but also to the Romantic idea that childhood represents the former Golden Age of mankind, circumscribed by the symbolic image of the vanished land that will never come back again. This topical aspect also emerges in Hoffmann's *The Strange Child*, when the siblings Christel and Felix have to leave their beloved home forever. At the same time they also must cross the threshold between childhood and adulthood, knowing for sure that they will never meet the strange child again. The strange child, symbol of imagination and never-ending play, will only appear in their dreams, thus reminding them of their lost childhood.

However, the melancholic overtone expressed in the metaphor of the “vanished land” not only circumscribes the feeling of irretrievable loss of one's own childhood, but also the irrevocable loss of a certain historical and cultural period described by the author as “the horse age.” Characteristic for this “horse age” are, according to Lindgren, the tramps, the markets, the horses and carts as

means of transportation, the religious holidays as highlights of the year, and the strong relationship between people and nature, among others. She also recollects that many people were poor and uneducated; however, these comments do not disturb Lindgren's positive portrayal of her childhood. By combining her childhood memories with a description of a bygone era, Lindgren's autobiographical narratives both represent an account of an individual childhood and additionally contribute to a broader concept of memory, characterized as cultural memory. By identifying her own childhood with a past cultural-historical period, Lindgren conveys the impression of a double loss: one's individual childhood and a pre-industrial era characterized by a strong relationship between nature and child.

However, when reading Lindgren's childhood memories, one recurring aspect catches the reader's eye: Although the loss of childhood is irrevocable, the one and only method to recall some feelings and sensations of this life stage is the ability to remember one's own childhood as precisely as possible. In this regard Lindgren claims to be in the privileged situation to recall almost everything from her childhood, thus insinuating that she never lost contact with this period of her life. This assertion somewhat contradicts her predominant metaphor of the "vanished land of childhood," but nevertheless, Lindgren emphasizes – in accordance with the Romantic tradition –, that the only way to be in touch with childhood is to remember, stressed by the recurring "I remember" that introduces new sections in her autobiographical texts.

New Findings in Memory Studies

But what does Lindgren remember of her childhood? A detailed analysis of her autobiographical narratives reveals that certain themes are dominant; in addition, the texts are characterized by a fragmentary structure. Each passage deals with an important event in the young child's life, but the chronological order is not quite clear. The child's agelessness corresponds to the apparent timelessness of the occurrences presented in the narratives. Another important feature is the restriction to the child's point of view, thus concentrating on the child's perceptions which are rarely complemented by heterodiegetic comments. These narrative strategies are influenced by restrictions of the genre itself, as will be shown by referring to memory research.

In memory studies, autobiographical memory as a variant of episodic memory is defined as the capacity to explicitly recall the personal incidents that define an individual's life. In addition, autobiographical memory demands the cognitive ability to reactivate those records, once they have been formed, to call them up whenever necessary (Anderson 2001). Regarding early childhood memories, the case is rather complicated. As the child psychologist Katherine Nelson has demonstrated, memory in early childhood is dedicated to the generation of general event-memories that help organize the child's knowledge of daily routines like bathing or eating. This stage is marked by infantile

amnesia, that is, a total blocking of memories, usually those prior to age 3, and a significant lack of accessible memories of the years between ages 3 and 6. If we accept this account of the late emergence of autobiographical memory in early childhood, it does much to explain the fragmentary quality of the earliest memories claimed by most adults.

On closer consideration, these scholarly findings are reflected in the narrative structure of Lindgren's autobiographical narratives. Since early childhood memories until the age of 6 or 7 are distinguished by a fragmentary quality, thus also contributing to the inability to name the exact date and time of the memory fragments, Lindgren obviously decided to choose a literary strategy that more or less refers to these problems. In addition, the fragmentary structure serves to create a kind of mysterious aura as a constituent feature of Lindgren's childhood memories. Since the author does not tell everything about her childhood, the reader is obliged to fill in the gaps by reading her other works, or by combining the incomplete information given in different texts.

Lindgren refers to the mysterious atmosphere and the fragmentary character of her memories in the essay "The Vanished Land": "Is that the kind of childhood memory to bring up? No, perhaps not, but much of what I remember consists in isolated remarks which help me to remember the people who uttered them and the situations in which they were uttered" (Lindgren 1988, 158). Although she remembers certain episodes from her childhood, she cannot tell when they happened and how old she really was. Interestingly, her

autobiographical narrations address instead the overwhelming intensity of sensations (especially smells), the influence of nature on the child's development, the importance of locations, and the impact of the child's play. Sensations and images are important because individuals store in their memory not just persons, objects and events, but also aspects of an object's physical structure and the individual's involvement in the process of apprehending such relevant aspects, for example the emotional reactions and the mental state at the time of apprehending the person, object or event (cf. Coe 1984). These observations are also evident in Lindgren's autobiographical writings: although she is able to remember people, she nevertheless emphasizes that she first and foremost recalls nature, the place of the child's imaginative play. Nature and the sensations evoked by nature are so closely related to her childhood memories, that Lindgren hardly mentions situations where nature is excluded, for example Sunday school lessons. The only positive event she describes that is unrelated to nature is found in her autobiographical story about her first encounter with books, thus creating a link between nature as a place of play and imagination and culture as a place of education and imagination.

To conclude, this short overview on the multiple aspects of Lindgren's autobiographical writing illustrates the complexity of the author's narrative and thematic strategies, thus demonstrating the intimate relationship between Lindgren's autobiographical texts and her children's novels on the one hand, and on the other the anchoring of her work in literary tradition, in particular the

Romantic image of childhood. In addition, the comparison between memory research and Lindgren's narrative techniques demonstrated that an interdisciplinary perspective on the functions and restrictions of autobiographical narration contributes to a better understanding of childhood memories in general and of Lindgren's autobiographical narratives in particular.

Bibliography

Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Coe, Richard. *When the Grass Was Taller. Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1984.

Edström, Vivi. *Astrid Lindgren. Vildtoring och lägereld*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren 1992.

Kofre, John. *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory*. New York: Norton, 1996.

Kümmerling-Meibauer, Bettina. *Klassiker der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Ein internationales Lexikon*. 2 vols. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1999.

Kümmerling-Meibauer, Bettina. "Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Kindheit. Autobiographische Erinnerungen in der Kinderliteratur." *Beiträge Jugendliteratur und Medien* 56 (2004): 4-17.

Kümmerling-Meibauer, Bettina. "Images of Childhood in Romantic Children's Literature." *Romantic Prose Fiction* edited by Bernard Dieterle, Manfred Engel and Gerald Gillespie. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2007 (forthcoming).

- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *The Children of Noisy Village*. Translated by Florence Lamborn. New York: Viking, 1962.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Mardie's Adventures*. Translated by Patricia Crampton. London: Methuen 1979.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Mina påhitt*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1971.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Samuel August från Sevedstorp och Hanna i Hult*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1975.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Assar Bubbla*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1987.
- Lindgren, Astrid. *Mitt Småland*. Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1987.
- Lindgren, Astrid. "I Remember ..." *Signal* 57 (1988): 155-169.
- Markowitsch, Hans, and Harald Welzer. *Das autobiographische Gedächtnis*. Stuttgart: Klett, 2005.
- Metcalf, Eva-Maria. *Astrid Lindgren*. New York: Twayne 1995.
- Nelson, Katherine. *Narratives from the Crib*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Ritte, Hans. "Astrid Lindgrens Kindheitsmythos. Beobachtungen zu ihren Bullerby-Büchern". *Astrid Lindgren: Rezeption in der Bundesrepublik* edited by Rudolf Wolff. Bonn: Bouvier, 1986, pp. 81-103.