Astrid Lindgren's writing desk, overlooking Vasa Park in Stockholm

Anders Ristenstrand

Looking for Pippi Longstocking

Discovering the stories behind Astrid Lindgren's beloved literary redhead on a trip to Sweden

By Jamie Quatro

At first all we can talk about is the light, my daughter-in-law and I. It's the end of May in Stockholm, as far north as either of us has ever been at this time of year. "Cuts like a knife," Jess says, when we get up at 7 a.m. to take a run through the narrow streets of Gamla Stan, Stockholm's Old Town. "Precipice-edge," I say later, sitting at breakfast at Hotel Ruth in Vasastan, "like that angle of light when it's the cusp of fall." At noon, we say the light is pervasive, insistent, a flat hand pressing down on the buildings and landscape. Around 11 p.m., the sky grows dusky and appears backlit, like light from beneath the sea; at midnight, it's still too light out to see many stars.

Jess and I are close friends. The fact that she's also my daughter-in-law feels like a wild stroke of luck. When I asked her to come on this trip with me, she readily agreed. Her mother had recently passed away, quickly and tragically, from pancreatic cancer. An international trip would be something to look forward to during an incredibly difficult time. When I told her my assignment was to write about Astrid Lindgren, the author of the *Pippi Longstocking* books, Jess grew quiet. She pulled out her phone and scrolled, then handed it to me. "It's one of the last texts I got from my mom, before she passed," she said.

I read the text: *I love you, Pippi*.

"It's the nickname she gave me when I was little," Jess said, "because I was a gymnast and climbed all over everything.

"No one called me Pippi but her," she said.

Like most American kids in the 1970s and '80s, I grew up reading the *Pippi* books: *Pippi Longstocking* (1945), *Pippi Goes on Board* (1946), and *Pippi in the South Seas* (1948). I was captivated by the impious 9-year-old who lives in a rumble-tumble house called Villa Villekulla. No parents, just a pet monkey named Mr. Nilsson and a horse she can lift above her head with one hand. Next door live Tommy and Annika Settergren, her companions in adventure (and often her voices of reason). I could see why Jess's mom called her Pippi. Jess isn't just strong physically; she's fun-loving, spontaneous, and can word-spar with anyone. She's also, like Pippi and Lindgren herself, a lover of animals and nature.

Now we're standing in the flat at Dalagatan 46, where Astrid Lindgren lived from 1941 until her death in 2002. Her granddaughter Malin is our guide. Lindgren is arguably the most celebrated author in Swedish history: She published 75 books, and about 170 million copies have been sold, with translations appearing in more than 100 languages. I expected her apartment to be large, opulent, but the flat's size and furnishings are modest. It's exactly as Lindgren left it: a red floral couch in the sitting room, the small beige typewriter on her writing desk overlooking her beloved Vasa Park.

"But this isn't where she wrote," Malin tells us. "She drafted in bed, in shorthand. The shorthand allowed her to write as fast as she could think. By the time she typed up a manuscript, it was perfect." Because of this, until recently no one knew how much revision went into her work. Now, Malin explains, a crowdsourced project managed by Uppsala University and the Swedish Institute for Children's Books has allowed scholars to reconstruct and study Lindgren's unique shorthand. It turns out that she would sometimes revise a single sentence more than 100 times.

Here are her spectacles, a jar of pens, a sculpted dove on the window ledge. Her shelves are crammed with small gifts sent from people around the world—a tiny pig carved from wood, a wreath made from pine cones, an elephant hand-painted with daisies. She received thousands of letters and answered as many as she could; 75,000 of the letters are archived at the National Library of Sweden. On the walls of the apartment hang framed illustrations from Lindgren's books. It's the first time I've seen Ingrid Vang Nyman's drawings for the Swedish editions, simpler than the Louis S. Glanzman drawings I'd grown up with, but I find the same little redhead with a face full of freckles.

"I truly believe you are the ugliest kid I have ever seen," says a fine gentleman in *Pippi in the South Seas*.

"You're not exactly a stunner yourself," Pippi retorts.

Like Pippi, I was a redhead as a child. "Strawberry" was the term people used. I was also freckled—I grew up in Tucson, Arizona, where the sunshine was unrelenting year-round. I believed the red hair and freckles made me irredeemably ugly. Pippi challenged this belief. When she spots a sign in a shop window asking, "Do You Suffer From Freckles?," she tells the shopkeeper, "I don't suffer from freckles ... I like them ... if you happen to get in any salve that gives people more freckles, then you can send me seven or eight jars." For me, a firstborn, rules-following, do-anything-to-get-an-A student, Pippi was both doppelgänger and alter-ego.

Malin explains that it was her mother, Karin, who came up with the name. "Karin was sick in bed," Malin says, "and wanted to hear a story. 'Tell me about Pippi Longstocking,' she said." Astrid came up with a character to match the name. Malin shows us the tiny bed where Karin slept—an 18th-century-inspired children's day bed with a headboard and footboard that look so much alike I can't tell which end is which. Pippi herself sleeps with her feet on the pillow and her head beneath the covers; I wonder if this bed might have been the inspiration.

Eventually, Lindgren typed up the Pippi stories as a gift for Karin. She also submitted the manuscript to a contest—and won. *Pippi Longstocking* was published by Rabén & Sjögren in 1945, and by the end of the 1940s the book had sold more than 300,000 copies, saving its publisher from financial ruin. Lindgren would go on to work as an editor and head of the children's book division at Rabén & Sjögren, a position she held until she retired in 1970.

"What was it about Pippi," Jess asks Malin, "that made her such an instant success?"

"Pippi was one of the original superheroes," Malin says. "The comic book superheroes were all male: Batman, Superman. A female superhero was unheard of. Also, the Pippi books contained no moralizing. She didn't go to school, she bucked social norms and politeness, and there was no reprimand. Pippi was celebrated—she celebrated herself—exactly as she was."

"Lindgren took control of the narrative. It ended up being the way she would live the rest of her life."

Lindgren wasn't afforded the same leeway by the society in which she grew up. Born in 1907, she lived with three siblings on a farm called Näs, near Vimmerby, southwest of Stockholm. Her parents, Samuel August and Hanna Ericsson, were farmers who encouraged reading and imaginative play. Lindgren showed talent as a writer, which in those days led to secretarial work. She graduated at 16 and took a job at a Vimmerby newspaper, doing proofreading and writing short notices. The paper's editor in chief, Reinhold Blomberg—a 49-year-old father of seven children who was in the middle of a messy divorce—began to pursue her. When Lindgren became pregnant at 18, the scandal in Vimmerby was immediate. "To be the victim of all that gossip was a bit like lying in a snake pit," Lindgren wrote.

She went to live in Stockholm. When the time came to give birth, she traveled to the Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen, the only hospital where she was not required to provide the name of the baby's father. Her son, Lasse, was born on December 4, 1926. Lindgren left him in the care of a host family and went back to Stockholm. She continued working, saving all her money for trips to visit Lasse, until he turned 3, when she brought him back to live with her. When the boy realized he wouldn't be returning to Copenhagen, she wrote, "he folded himself across a chair and cried quietly. Without making a noise, as if he realized that it didn't matter … Those tears still cry within me and I suppose will continue to do so until I die."

Lasse was sickly, so Lindgren took him to the cleaner country air of Näs. Her family drove through town in

From above left: Lindgren in Sweden with a few of her books in 1962; Gamla Stan, Stockholm's Old Town

Courtesy of The Astrid Lindgren Company (Lingren); Yrul Aries/imagebank.sweden.se (Old Town)

an open buggy. *We claim this child as our own*, they were saying. *Go ahead and gossip all you want.*

In modern parlance, Lindgren took control of the narrative. It ended up being the way she would live the rest of her life. She met her husband, Sture Lindgren, at the Royal Automobile Club, where she had taken a new job. They married in 1931. Karin was born three years later, and in 1941 the family of four moved into the flat at Dalagatan 46. Sture died in 1952, and Lindgren never remarried.

Jess and I wonder aloud how she weathered the loss of her husband. "Oh, she was just fine," Malin says with a laugh. "She had children and grandchildren. She needed children more than she needed men."

My grandmother, my mother's mother, outlived not one but two husbands and died just shy of her 104th birthday. My paternal grandmother lived to 97. How lucky I am, I think, to have this new daughter here with me; my son's wife, yes, but also, increasingly, one of my closest friends.

She might need me now, in the wake of her mother's death, but someday I'm going to need her more.

One of Lindgren's final creative projects was to help design the Story Train at Junibacken, a kind of indoor theme park for children, with hands-on activities and live shows performed by child actors. The attractions are themed around Swedish kids' books. Jess and I ride the bus to a stop near the island of Djurgården, where Junibacken sits beside the Vasa Museum. The light here is glossy, diffuse; walking over the bridge, it seems to be reflecting off a body of water *above* us, a kind of supra-sea over our heads.

At Junibacken, we meet the theater's artistic director, Mikael Kallin. A former actor, Kallin writes the scripts for all the plays. "But Astrid's work is so tightly constructed," he explains, "the shows are basically already written." Above all, Kallin wants Junibacken to be a place for storytelling. He says that his youngest audience members are babies, sometimes only 6 months old. For these youngest patrons, Kallin writes puppet shows. "It is often the first time parents see this capacity for humor in their babies," he says. "Up till now, it's the parents who are in their faces, making them laugh. Now the babies watch the puppets and laugh, and the parents can see that their children are having unique thoughts and experiences, separate from them. I love witnessing this moment. It is a meeting between children and characters, and a meeting between parents and children."

"Although the ride is only 15 minutes long, the experience is mesmerizing, spiritual even."

After a tour of some of the playrooms, we board the Story Train: a simple box car, outward-facing, that moves through miniature scenes designed by artist Marit Törnqvist. Lindgren wrote the script for the journey through the worlds of her storybook characters—Madicken, Karlsson, Ronja, Emil, and the Brothers Lionheart. The attraction took two years to complete. If you listen to the Swedish narration, it's Lindgren's recorded voice you hear.

Although the ride is only 15 minutes long, the experience is mesmerizing, spiritual even, difficult to put into words. When we step back into the light and round the corner to see a half-side reconstruction of Villa Villekulla—filled with noisy children "playing Pippi"—I can tell Jess has been crying.

"Are you OK?" I ask her. "Yeah," she says. "That was just ... there's something about being read to like that. It made me miss my mom."

The next day, Jess and I leave Stockholm and take a three-hour ferry ride to Visby, a town on Gotland,

From top: a Story Train scene and a present-day Pippi at Junibacken

Courtesy of Junibacken (Story Train); Ulf Huett/Junibacken (Pippi)

Left: the sun sets over medieval-walled Visby

the Swedish island where the *Pippi Longstocking* TV series starring Inger Nilsson was shot. Some of the footage was edited into a full-length film and released in Sweden in 1969; in 1973, when I was 2 years old, it was dubbed in English and released in the U.S.

The ferry makes its slow way across the lethargic Baltic, the sea capturing and holding the abundant light like a placid lens. A trade route stop during the Middle Ages, Visby was a crucial part of the Hanseatic League, crammed with what were considered tall buildings at that time, five- and six-story warehouses for storage of goods. Our guide, Gunilla Lauström, says that approaching the island in those days would have been like coming upon a medieval Manhattan.

It's cold and gray and damp, but we go ahead with our walking tour of various *Pippi* film sites. Lauström takes us to the spot where Pippi rides her horse into town, through one of the gates in the island's still-intact medieval wall. She leads us along storybook streets until we reach a house that, in the film, is a candy shop. The street is untouched, the house exactly as it appeared in the film. Later, at the underground pool in our hotel, I meet a young woman whose sister used to rent that very house. "So many people just walked in and peered through the windows, she ended up moving," the woman says.

"We've come across the Atlantic, and then the Baltic, to arrive at this crisp oasis."

We have plenty more on our agenda for our last day in Gotland: a museum, a visit to a renowned farm-to-table restaurant called Lilla Bjers. But the sun is out. Wild poppies bloom everywhere. Jess wants to check out a little-known swimming quarry she read about. We rent bicycles and ride out to the countryside and down a dirt lane, rounding a last bend until we see the glint of light off water.

Here, I think, *here* is the bright-lit center of it all. We've come across the Atlantic, and then the Baltic, to arrive at this crisp oasis. I think of the penultimate chapter of *Pippi in the South Seas*, with Tommy and Annika and Pippi on Kurrekurredutt Island: "Wonderful days followed—wonderful days in a warm wonderful world full of sunshine, with the blue sea glittering and fragrant flowers everywhere." Jess and I change into our swimsuits in the open air.

I toe the water. Frigid. Jess—Pippi—jumps in first. I follow.

Take the Trip

In Stockholm, stay at **Hotel Ruth** and delight in the impressive breakfast spread. Arrange a private tour of **Dalagatan 46**, Lindgren's apartment, then explore **Vasa Park** and **Tegnérlunden**, where you can see a famous statue of the author. Kids will love **Junibacken**, which is dedicated to children's literature, and also the **Vasa Museum**, where you can explore a 1628 warship. Toast to Lindgren and Pippi at the fittingly named **Röda Huset** (Red House), where the drink menu is designed by award-winning bartender Hampus Thunholm and incorporates local flavors such as carrot and plum.

In Gotland, stay at the historic **Clarion Hotel Wisby**, which has preserved its old-world charm with a winter garden and a spa and pool in the medieval cellar. (For a real blast from the past, visit during Medieval Week, August 4-11.) Enjoy lunch at the family-owned, farm-to-table restaurant **Lilla Bjers**, which is KRAV-certified, one of Sweden's highest organic certifications. To try *fika* (Swedish coffee and cookies), check out **Berså** in Tofta. Pippi fans will, of course, want to go to the real-life Villa Villekulla: located at **Kneippbyn Resort**, it's open all summer and features rides for children, as well as a water park.

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