

Astrid Lindgren – internationally renowned author of many children's books including Pippi Långstrump (or Pippi Longstocking in the Anglo world) and Mio Min Mio – passed away at the age of 94 on Monday, the 28th of January. In 1980, an interview with Astrid Lindgren and Agnetha Fältskog was sponsored by A Non-Smoking Generation and published in a pamphlet handed out to children in Swedish schools.

Meeting of women from Småland

Astrid Lindgren, an author who maybe has meant more than anybody else to millions of children with her stories about Pippi Långstrump (Pippi Longstocking), Emil and Barnen i Bullerbyn (The Children in Bullerbyn).

Agnetha Fältskog, singer in the group ABBA, composer of her own hit songs and an idol for many teenagers.

Both have had big success internationally. Both are admirers of each other's talents and have been wanting to meet for a long time. Now they had the chance to do so. The first question:

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELVES?

Astrid: Since I'm older, I guess I'll go first. I don't do anything but write children's books. I've done that for about 35 years. I have written some that some children might know of: Pippi Långstrump, Karlsson på taket (Karlsson on the roof), Emil i Lönneberga (Emil in Lönneberga). That's my main activity.

Agnetha: Well, I'm thirty, I'll be thirty-one. I'm a singer and a member of the group ABBA. I've made a lot of records and toured for many years and worked in this business since '68.

Astrid: '68? How old were you then?

Agnetha: I was 18 years old. Then I worked as a solo artist and toured the folkparks.

Astrid: But what about singing, you must have done that since you were a baby?

Agnetha: Yeah, almost.

DO YOU HAVE ANY CHILDREN?

Astrid: Oh yes, two of them, but they are grown up and very old now. I have seven grandchildren, of which the oldest one is 30 years old, so Agnetha could actually be my grandchild.

ARE EITHER ONE OF YOU IS FROM STOCKHOLM?

Astrid: No, much better than that, both of us are from Småland.

Agnetha: I'm from Jönköping.

Astrid: There's an Olrog-ballad, about the border between Jönköping and Kalmar county. I'm from Kalmar county and you're from Jönköping. We're still from Småland both of us.

Agnetha: It's a good breed.

Astrid: Yes, and very stubborn.

Agnetha: Oh yes, that's very helpful.

WHAT DID YOU DREAM OF WHEN YOU WERE CHILDREN?

Astrid: I can't remember having any, if you mean what I would be doing as a grown-up. No, I figured that there'd always be something but I absolutely not had any idea of what I wanted to do. I never did anything purposefully. I think that it's been that way for me all of my life. It just had to happen, and then it

happened. I happened to go to Stockholm and got an education as a secretary. As an author I'm a pure weather report product, I would say. I went out one evening when there was newly-fallen snow, I fell and sprained my ankle and had to stay in bed. Since I'm a good stenographer I wrote down the adventures of Pippi Långstrump, which I earlier just had told my daughter about. If it hadn't snowed on that day in March 1944, I wouldn't be sitting here now.

Agnetha: It's hard to remember, but a singer, that's what I think I always wanted to be. My father was a variety show king in Småland. He had his own ballet and wrote his own lyrics for the New Year's variety shows. But I was never a part of that. He always played the guitar at home. I really grew up with music around me. When I look back on all the idols I had... I sat in front of the record player and put on LPs with Connie Francis and sang along. That's when I learned perfect playback. At that time I hadn't studied English yet.

Astrid: It's pretty good when you know what you want. Most of all when it comes true like it has for you. Some people ask: if you were given a new life, would you then choose the same?

Agnetha: What would you say?

Astrid: Well, I would say that I definitely would. I can't see anything but advantages, lovely and wonderful.

Agnetha: Of course I would want to do the same kind of work, but if I could have the experience I have today, I wouldn't make the same mistakes. But maybe that wouldn't be as much fun. I have had many Astrid Lindgren books read to me during my childhood.

Astrid: And things have worked out well too!

Agnetha: Yeah, I have grown up with all these books. Astrid: I read a lot as a child. But in my home, we had no other books than the Bible. And then the vicar gave us religious novels. My brother ordered some terrible books about criminals from a publishing house in Malmö. But I read all different kinds of books. I thought they all were real good.

DID YOU HAVE TO WRITE ESSAYS IN SCHOOL?

Astrid: Yes, that's when I experienced success for the first time. They were read loud. When I was thirteen, I even had one published.

Agnetha: When I read your books I thought to myself that I wanted to be able to write in the same way. I particularly enjoyed - not Pippi and those that were the best known ones - instead Barnen på Bråkmakargatan (The Children on Bråkmakargatan) and Bullerbyn.

WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE WHEN YOUR FIRST BOOK WAS PUBLISHED?

Astrid: For a moment I thought it was quite special, but I didn't exactly jump with joy. How did it feel when you made your first record?

Agnetha: It was a big thing to me. I had really committed myself to this. Before I released my first single I sang with a dance orchestra in Småland for three years. One day I sent a tape to Little Gerhard - the old rock king. He didn't like the orchestra but fell for me. It was very difficult for me. I was under contract with the orchestra and had to in a nice way try to tell them I was quitting to make a record.

Astrid: How did that record come out, was it a success?

Agnetha: I recorded two singles at the same time. That was quite unusual, it proved that they believed in me a lot.

DO YOU THINK IT'S IMPORTANT WHAT YOUR CHILDREN ARE READING NOW?

Agnetha: Yes, Linda can read by herself, she's eight years old. The younger one, he's just three years old and I read to him. I'm a real overprotective mother I've been told, and it's probably true, because I care a lot about my children.

Astrid: I wish all mothers did the same.

WHAT DO YOU PREFER LINDA READING?

Agnetha: Astrid Lindgren... She also wants to read Kalle Anka (Donald Duck) comic books.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT?

Agnetha: It's a bit sad, I'd rather have her read a book, Min Skattkammare (My Treasury) is quite good.

Astrid: When they want comic books, then they should have some. You shouldn't tell children that "comic books are bad, you can't read them". I wouldn't give them any horror comic books, but all so called funny comic books, even though we might think they're silly, fill their purpose.

ARE YOU WORRIED HOW THINGS WILL GO WHEN YOUR CHILDREN BECOME TEENAGERS?

Agnetha: Yes, I'm very concerned. Everything worries me. The schools and how things have developed the past few years - a deterioration I think. They have a lack of respect. I can see that with Linda, who's in first grade. Her teacher has big problems with some pupils.

Astrid: You don't want a real extreme obedience back in the schools. There used to be some terrible conditions in schools earlier. There were teachers who terrified pupils. That's not good either. But why does it have to sway like this? But then there are also those who were born to be teachers and there are those who weren't but still teach. There are those who have the ability to teach a class so that the children like to listen to them. They are probably affected by all these impressions from TV, etc. They can't concentrate in the right way, they don't have an inner peace like it used to be. Then a few in a class can ruin it all. Then it's not easy to be a teacher. You have to admire those who put up with it.

Agnetha: There are other things that scare me, like, for example, drugs.

Astrid: Imagine seeing ten, eleven, twelve year olds laying drunk out by Hasselbacken. I've seen that. Then I'm very glad that my children are grown-up. But I still worry about my grandchildren.

Agnetha: Often I worry about what I should do to protect them from dangerous things. Apparently it doesn't make any difference what background they have. There are children who come from stable relationships, from marriages that have lasted and been quite peaceful, but they still get involved with drugs.

Astrid: Oh yes.

Agnetha: How can I make them understand that they can always confide in me, that they can always talk to me? I don't know how you would solve that. I just hope that drug use is declining. That this is some kind of reaction, a cry for help from youth and children.

Astrid: If only all youth had something meaningful to do, if they had something fun, more involvement from adults, if adults could feel as if they were parents to all children and really commit themselves. I get so sad when I see certain things, you know that they only have one life and then you see how they intentionally do all they can to ruin it for themselves. It must be because they don't know what they're doing. They don't know that they have this lovely wonderful, valuable body, which is supposed to function throughout their lives, and then they start ruining it. They don't understand that they'll have this body when they're getting old.

Agnetha: It was just like when the punk rock came - I've never understood it. I think it seems to be like a cry for help - what is it, to just be rough?

ASTRID, WERE YOU WORRIED WHEN YOU RAISED YOUR CHILDREN, YOU MUST ALSO HAVE FACED PROBLEMS?

Astrid: I wasn't very worried, it wasn't like that... You should know that I raised my children in the beginning of the 1930's. There was never any question about... it was never like: Mom, now I do whatever I want to do, instead if I told them something, they did it... No, there wasn't anything that I had to worry about like in that way. I can guarantee you that.

WERE YOU A KIND MOTHER?

Astrid: I played with my children and had just as much fun as they did. That's something that only children know, if an adult enjoys being with them, if they have fun being with them. You can't pretend, "now we're going to have a good time". It has to come from inside you. Not everybody enjoys spending time with their children.

Agnetha: No, I'm afraid it's that way.

HOW DO YOU THINK YOUR GRANDCHILDREN ARE DOING, DO THEY SEEM TO BE HAPPY?

Astrid: I don't know so much about them. It seems as if they're doing good. But I can't see it from the inside and know what it really is like. You can actually only know your own childhood and mine was wonderful. But I think that many children, just like you said, cry for help.

Agnetha: And probably many parents too. I'm sure there are many who have missed their children. But again, their are many parents who have supported their children.

Astrid: When I walk in the streets I observe all people intensively. I saw a mother and a young boy and I thought that this boy is lucky. They were calm, both of them relaxed, holding each other's hands and were occupied with their own separate thoughts, but they exuded affinity and trust. I felt like walking up to them saying: "Oh, how good things are with you and your mom." But you see others "now come with me"...

Agnetha: I also feel bad seeing that. I feel bad when I hear children scream, even though I have my own children who scream. I don't even want to see who's screaming, I look away, I just want to get away from there as fast as I can.

ARE YOU A KIND MOTHER, AGNETHA?

Agnetha: Yes, but I have certain rules. They should try to keep their rooms somewhat clean, they have to go to bed at a certain time, they can't watch TV too much, and especially not some programs.

Astrid: Oh, you're good then, I don't think many parents manage that nowadays.

Agnetha: But sometimes they make a scene. Recently Linda was in a period of defiance. And the young one (Christian) keeps me very busy. But I love my children. It's important that they're doing good.

WHAT DO THEY SAY WHEN THEY GET MAD AT YOU?

Agnetha: Well, usually it's bloody for letting out...

Astrid: You can't punish children for letting out their aggression. They have a right to do so.

Agnetha: Linda usually runs up to her room and slams the door. But then I let her stay up there and calm down. Then when she comes downstairs she's a different person. Then she has understood.

HAVE YOU NOTICED IF YOUR CHILDREN HAVE INHERITED ANY OF YOUR ARTISTIC TALENTS?

Agnetha: Yes, both Linda and Christian are very musical. Astrid: They should be.

Agnetha: Yes, the young one, he dances. Linda and I recorded a Christmas LP last Christmas, but it was never released due to lack of time but it will be released next Christmas. It came out good and it's a lot of fun to have it as a memory.

Astrid: Yes, even if it never would be released it's a lot of fun to have it.

WHAT DOES LINDA HAVE TO SAY ABOUT HAVING A FAMOUS MOM?

Agnetha: Well, she has to deal with that in school, but she's not impressed. She doesn't think there's anything special about it, but if someone is unfair, she defends ABBA. If someone says "I don't like ABBA", then she replies, "You shouldn't say that, you should go home and really have a good listen to them". Both her mom and dad are in the group and I think she's a little bit proud of that.

Astrid: She should be.

DO YOUR CHILDREN HAVE ANY ARTISTIC TALENTS, ASTRID?

Astrid: I don't know. My daughter was writing before I began writing. She wrote her memoirs when she was five years old. She couldn't read but she could write. She was constantly active during her years growing up and when she would be grown up, she said she would be fat and write books. And this was before I had written a single book. But she didn't become either one of those things. She's a translator. My son is interested in technical things. Maybe they don't want to get into the same field of work because their mom is an author.

IN HOW MANY COUNTRIES ARE YOUR BOOKS SOLD?

Astrid: Well, I guess they've been translated into 54 languages.

Agnetha: Do you know what the translations are like?

Astrid: I wish I knew. I can tell you that I don't know Chinese very well. For Lotta på Bråkmakargatan I was given a proof from America. After I had read it I immediately sent a telegram: stop this right away. A translator can with just one word... Lotta stands on

top of the dungheap because she has heard that things grow well with dung and rain and she wants to grow and become as tall as her siblings. But in the translation it said: "Lotta got up on top of a pile of decaying leaves" - because it couldn't be dung. Then I wrote and asked don't American children know that there are better things than decaying leaves to make things grow? If not, I'm not impressed with American agriculture! Later they had to correct it.
HOW MUCH INFLUENCE HAVE YOU HAD OVER THE FILMS AND TV SERIES?

Astrid: Well, I guess I've had that. I didn't have much influence over the first movies since I didn't care about them. But after those I've written most of the manuscripts for the movies.

Agnetha: The music in these movies have been very good.

Astrid: Yes, there have been different composers. Georg Riedel composed the music for the Pippi movies. For Lejonhjärta I think there was someone called Isfeldt, I believe.

Agnetha: I think they're great. There are some very good songs.

ARE YOU DISSATISFIED WITH ANY OF THE MOVIES?

Astrid: Yes, I wasn't very satisfied with the first ones. But... Film is an art of possibility. It has to do with budgets and things like that. But all of these movies have been popular. I might have an image of myself: this is how it's supposed to be, and then you see another, a film image. But things come together and suddenly you think: well, this is it. I have collaborated very closely since the 1950's with those who have made the movies.

Agnetha: They have come out very well, I think.

DO YOU HAVE NIGHTMARES SOMETIMES BEFORE YOU GO OUT ON STAGE?



Agnetha: Yes, I have. It's just like what you're saying, before I go on stage. It's always like that. And sometimes it happens that I forget the lyrics. You stand there and suddenly your mind goes blank. The lyrics are completely gone. You keep thinking and thinking and you come up with strange words and then suddenly, you're back in the song again.

Astrid: But you have to know the lyrics by heart?

Agnetha: Oh yes, we have to. In our last concert we performed almost twenty songs. But the lyrics are in there. One line follows the other. It's logical in a kind of way, when you've started.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE MOVIE THAT YOU MADE, THERE ARE MANY CUTS IN IT, WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU WATCH IT?

Agnetha: Well...

Astrid: You probably think there's that woman, just like Greta Garbo used to think when she watched her movies.

Agnetha: I have always had a hard time liking the work we do on stage. I've always felt that I don't want to see the work we do on stage.

Astrid: No, you want to hear it.

Agnetha: Yes, I want to hear it. Our strength is the records, the work in the studio, when the songs are created, when the guys compose them and we build them up.

Astrid: Is it still like in Poland where they tear down walls to get a hold of a record? I'm going to Poland in May. Maybe I'll bring a record, then I'll be popular. **HOW MANY COUNTRIES DO YOU SELL YOUR RECORDS IN?**

Agnetha: I don't know. Most of them I think. I read about it somewhere, or if it was Stikkan who said it, including China. Even in Russia.

Astrid: That's incredible.

Agnetha: Yes, it really is. How have we managed to be so successful everywhere?

ASTRID, WHY DO YOU THINK ADULTS LIKE YOUR BOOKS JUST AS MUCH AS CHILDREN?

Astrid: When it comes to a children's book, adults have to be able to stand it in order to read it. If not, it's not good. If you ask me the question: How should a good children's book be, then I answer: It should be good! Because you never ask how good a collection of poems or a good novel should be. There's really no good way to judge children's literature, in any other way than as literature. You have to have the same demands, on artistry, on genuineness, good language and so on. You can't just sit down and say: well, this is how a good children's book should be.

Agnetha: It's just as if they would ask us, especially the guys, how do you write a hit, do you think that now we're going to write a hit? They don't. You don't work in that way. How would you know?

DO YOU PICTURE ANY SPECIAL KIND OF CHILDREN IN FRONT OF YOU WHEN YOU WRITE A CHILDREN'S BOOK?

Astrid: No, I write for the child that's still inside me. I never think that there will

be children reading my books. Never. I write just to have fun. It's just as fun writing books as it is reading them. Since I always read books, as a child, and I still do, I can feel when I write that this is the way I want it. I go inside it in some kind of way. No, I never think of any other children. It doesn't matter what they think either... I can't let it. It's good if they're just as childish as I am.

Agnetha: They are.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IF LINDA CAME HOME AND SMELLED LIKE CIGARETTE SMOKE

Agnetha: Well, what do you do? I don't know. I'm going to instill in her now as she's growing up that she shouldn't smoke. That it's bad for your body. Not excessively, but in some way make her understand that it's not good. Because if you once you have started to smoke, then it's difficult to keep from doing it. Once a smoker - always a smoker. I myself stopped smoking for two years and I was sure of myself, but later, all it took was one cigarette, and I was back there again.

Astrid: I think you should tell them this: that they have a body which is exceptionally great, what machinery, lungs that work, heart and all the limbs, stomach. Should you then voluntarily provide it with something you know will ruin it?

Agnetha: The first cigarette isn't good either. I remember very well, how I forced myself, I felt sick.

HAVE YOU EVER SMOKED, ASTRID?

Astrid: Yes, I have, when I was a young girl. I stood behind a woodpile and smoked on the sly because I would have been in a lot of trouble if someone had found out about it. It was a no-no. But when I came up here to Stockholm I felt more sure of myself. But I have never inhaled so I guess that doesn't make me a smoker. Then it's quite easy to quit and I can't really say if it's difficult or not to quit. Because of that it's quite a difference. The best thing is to never start smoking. If you only could make the kids realize this. I see kids out in the street and I feel like walking up to them saying: My dear, please quit for my sake.

Agnetha: I'm sure it's not a good thing to talk about it too much. Then they start getting curious about it. It's the same thing with alcohol. For a while I thought why don't they sell it in all stores, totally, like they do in some countries, in many countries. Maybe it's stupid and harsh to say it. There would then be people who couldn't handle it, for many years, at the same time they know what they're doing, how dangerous it is. Maybe then you'll get rid of that curiosity.

Astrid: I don't really believe in that. I think that the most stupid thing we did was when we let go of the ration book. I knew it then and now I'm saying it. It made it so much easier for women to get a hold of alcohol. They never got anything from their husband's ration book, or very little. You can say that it was unfair, but maybe it's fair if it kept you from becoming an alcoholic...

Agnetha: I don't think having a ration book would work today.

Astrid: Maybe not now. But it worked then at least. And there wasn't a lot of alcoholism among women and most of all children couldn't start drinking like they do now.

Agnetha: But on the other hand, if they're used to there being alcohol at home and if they don't see you abusing it, then it shouldn't be a big deal.



Astrid: It's miserable right now. When they begin in the seventh grade they must start drinking, because then everybody's drinking beer. And it's cool to be drunk on Saturdays. Otherwise it's not fun. Watching their parents, they always see that when you want to have a good time, when you have a party, wine must be a part of it.

I THINK IT'S BEGINNING TO CHANGE, IT'S STARTING TO BE COOL TO BE SOBER, COMPARED TO FOUR, FIVE YEARS AGO...?

Astrid: Yeah, it's probably quite a difference.

Agnetha: Yeah, that's what I'm hoping for.

Astrid: But parents need to be disciplined themselves. If they smoke and drink, and then tell you that you can't, then that won't work.

Agnetha: No, we must set a good example.

Astrid: If you only could make the young ones realize, the ones who haven't started smoking or drinking, if there was a way to make them think that: no, dad and mom can smoke and drink. I have better common sense than they do.

WHY DID YOU START SMOKING, AGNETHA?

Agnetha: Well, I guess it was because I wanted to be cool, like the others. I was fifteen years old. I was even younger when I took the first drag.

Astrid: My daughter also smoked when she was very young and had a father who thought: well, if she's going to smoke, she should smoke properly, so he came home and gave her a full carton of cigarettes. And she smoked, until she fainted. She was trying on a dress and then suddenly she just fainted. Then she began to feel like she should quit. She just couldn't tolerate it, so she quit.

Agnetha: I think it's very difficult to quit unless you're suffering from it. If nothing's wrong. I don't feel good when I smoke. I smoke very little right now. I feel as if I experience heart palpitations. And I can't understand how anyone can start off their day with a cigarette, the first thing they're doing. That really makes my head spin.

Astrid: I met a journalist. He had quit smoking, and I knew that previously he smoked a lot. Why did you quit, I asked. Well, he said, he had been to Thoraxkliniken at Karolinska (a hospital) to write an article about a surgery. He was already there the day before and was standing in the cafeteria. Next to him there was a man who also was about to get something to eat. They began talking. The man was from Norrland (northern part of Sweden), a quite young man with a wife and three children. The day after when the journalist returns it's the same man who's laying there on the operating table. He was jet black inside. There was nothing they could do so they stitched him up. He was dying. At that point the journalist decided to quit smoking.

Agnetha: I guess you need to see such horrible things in order to understand.

Astrid: But if you want to influence young people you don't want to bring up a story like that, you want it to be something more positive: To never start smoking. They'll have a better life if they never start.

Expressen reported that Björn Ulvæus visited the building where Astrid Lindgren lived in Stockholm to leave flowers in her memory. He told the reporter, Sofia Stridsman, "Like so many other Swedes, she was my first experience reading. There is no other Swede who has made a deeper impression." Björn did not know Astrid personally, but he had met her a few times. "I received a book about her written by Margareta Strömstedt. Dedicated, written in shaky handwriting, it said, 'To Björn, another Smålännning,'" Björn told Sofia with tears in his eyes. A Smålännning is a person from Småland, a region in the south of Sweden.

Translated by Claes Davidsson

