

PIPPi'S MAMMA

Best known for her Pippi Longstocking books, Astrid Lindgren has become an icon in her native Sweden. As a groundbreaking new biography is published, we head to her birthplace and find an unexpected legacy

Words *Celia Woolfrey*





When nine-year-old Karin Lindgren demanded of her mother Astrid: “Tell me a story about Pippi Longstocking!” – a name that appeared from nowhere, she says – neither of them realised what kind of genie had exploded out of the bottle. Seven decades on, Astrid Lindgren’s tales have sold more than 145 million copies, and generations of kids have connected with ginger-haired Pippi, “the strongest girl in the world”, who lives a surreal, anarchic existence without parents or rules.

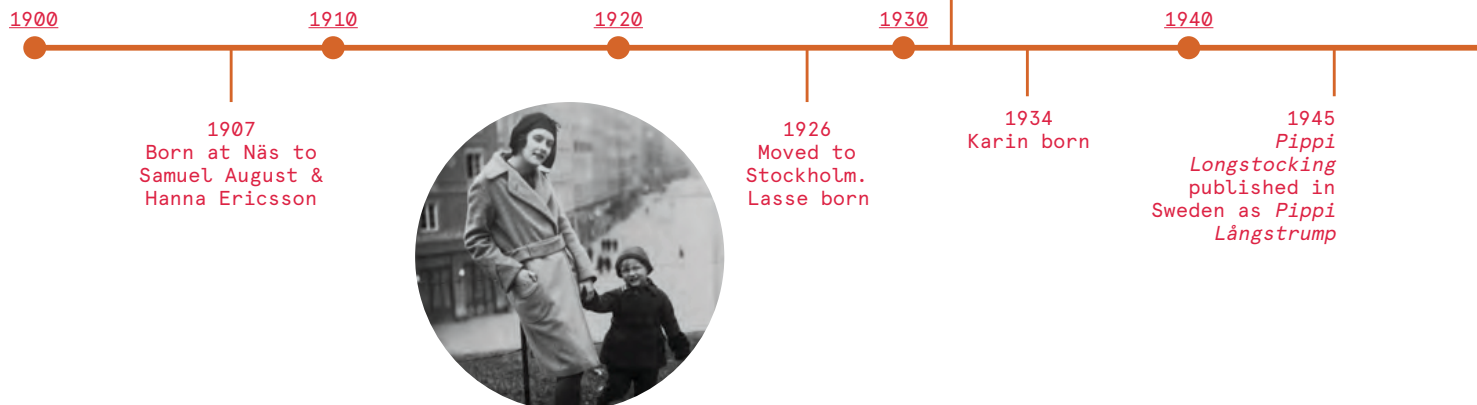
She and a host of other fictional characters, such as Emil and the Children of Noisy Village, have propelled Lindgren to global fame. Now, 16 years after her death, the author is virtually an industry in her birthplace of Vimmerby, south of Stockholm, where half-a-million visitors a year descend on the theme park that bears her name and the farmhouse where she grew up.

But the author’s popularity and her national-treasure status weren’t always assured. According to *Astrid Lindgren: the Woman behind Pippi Longstocking*, the biography published earlier this year by Danish writer Jens Andersen, the tale of Lindgren’s emergence as a writer is as gripping as the literary worlds she created. The first to be published in English, it tells the story of a woman who succeeded despite significant odds.

Armed with a copy of his book, I take the train through the southern Swedish countryside to Vimmerby to get a feel for the woman behind Pippi’s long shadow. The first stop on my search for the author is her birthplace: the little red house at Näs, on a suburban street on the outskirts of town. When Lindgren was born Astrid Ericsson in the early 1900s, the house was at the centre of the farm the family had rented for three generations, and was where she spent an idyllic-sounding childhood. She, her siblings and the farmworkers’ children had the run of the place, giving her a lifelong connection with nature, the imagination to make up stories, and resilience – as she said, girls and boys played equally wildly.

She had a stable start in life, with loving parents, a pious but secure upbringing, and a prodigal talent as a storyteller at school, which helped her get her first job as a trainee journalist on the local paper, *Vimmerby Tidning*, or the “Vimmerby rag”, as she referred to it. But it was clear from an early age that she had ambition for bigger things. “Dear little Vimmerby,” she wrote in a piece for the paper on her return from a 320km hike with friends, “It’s not that you’re a stupid town to come home to, but God preserve us from having to stay here forever.” »

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ASTRID LINDGREN





From left
 Samuel August and Hanna
 Ericsson with Astrid
 and Gunnar on a visit
 to relatives in 1909; the
 childhood home at Näs



1954
Mio, My Son (AKA
Mio's Kingdom)
 published

1981
 Astrid
 Lindgren's
 World opens
 in Vimmerby

1950

1960

1970

1980

1990

2000

1952
 Sture's death

1963
*Emil in the
 Soup Tureen*
 published

1973
*The Brothers
 Lionheart*
 published

1958
 Receives Hans
 Christian Andersen
 Award (the "Nobel
 Prize for Children's
 Literature")



2002
 Astrid dies in
 Stockholm. Her
 funeral is attended
 by the Swedish
 royal family and
 prime minister

“She fell pregnant at 18 by her married editor, and so began her ‘promenade through hell’”



To an outsider like me, the small town (pop: 8,000) seems an easygoing, peaceful place but you can imagine how restrictive growing up in a conventional farming community would have felt to a restless teenager who was obsessed with getting out into the wider world. Friends said she crackled with energy – one that “she practically gave off sparks” – and she was an eager part of a new wave of femininity sweeping through the world in the 1920s. In Andersen’s book, there’s a telling photo of Lindgren and her friends cross-dressing as men for one of their number’s 17th birthday celebrations.

Life took an unexpected turn soon after, and she did leave Vimmerby, but out of necessity rather than choice. In 1926 she fell pregnant, at the age of 18, by the *Vimmerby Tidning*’s older, married editor-in-chief, Reinhold Blomberg. So began what she called her “promenade through hell”, as she lost her job and was forced to place her son Lasse, who was born that December, with a foster mother in Copenhagen while she scraped a living as a shorthand typist in Stockholm.

She managed occasional visits with her baby at his Danish foster mother’s but, in between times, life in Stockholm felt bleak. “Sadness, pessimism and fleeting thoughts of suicide came especially to the fore on long Sundays, when Astrid was alone,” says Andersen.

These dark days, however, were to feed into the success of her later work, which featured characters such as Mio, a boy who escapes foster care to be reunited with his father, the King of Farawayland, and even Pippi, who has to cope with missing her parents.

Lindgren drew on her own experiences of being scared and hopeless in her books, which were groundbreaking in dealing with challenging subjects such as fractured family relationships decades before Jacqueline Wilson’s Tracy Beaker books, say, or even JK Rowling’s Harry Potter. While her stories are zippy, funny, and life-affirming, she never shied away from covering difficult subjects.

“She wrote about concrete, recognisable children in a concrete, recognisable world,” says Andersen. “Not from on high, as in earlier children’s literature, but from the inside out. From a perspective that made it clear the adult narrator had emotionally and intellectually entered the imaginative world of childhood – on the child’s terms.”

At the visitor centre at Näs, guide and lifelong fan Anna Aspenskorg tells me that this sense of honesty and frankness in dealing with emotions is what she feels children respond to in Lindgren’s books today – along with her love of play. »

Above
Astrid (standing, far right) and friends dressed up as young men, celebrate the 17th birthday of Anne-Marie Ingeström (seated) on 28 August 1924

“Her books were groundbreaking in dealing with difficult family relationships”

As Aspenskorg shows me round the house, restored to how it looked when Astrid was growing up, she points out where the children played Don't Touch the Floor, navigating off the ground from bed to stove to sofa. “The game is mentioned in *Pippi*,” she says. “Every time I read a book there's always some detail when I think, ‘Oh, she and Gunnar, her brother, did that.’”

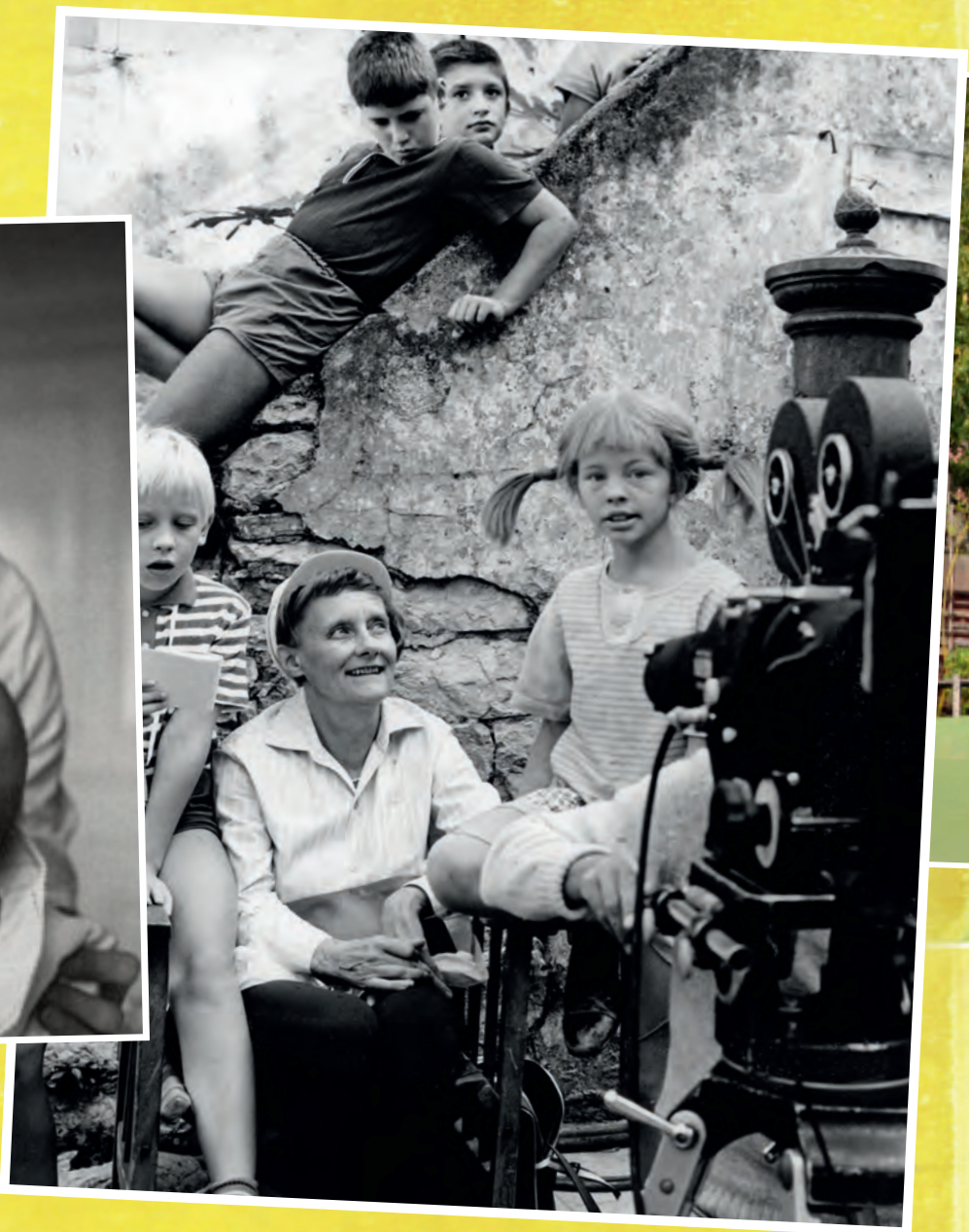
Astrid had a very strong bond with her brother and sisters, which sustained her throughout her life, and she poured energy into her own young family, too. In 1931, she married Sture Lindgren – another boss. She was able to get Lasse back to live with them, and she and Sture had daughter Karin in 1934.

Just as key in terms of her career, she found an editor and champion in the form of Elsa Olenius, who became a lifelong friend. Lindgren's breakthrough book, *Pippi Longstocking*, was published in 1945 after winning a competition run by publisher Rabén & Sjögren – it didn't hurt that Olenius was on the judging panel.

From that point on, Lindgren's star was in the ascendant. She wrote at least a book a year, selling in Sweden, then Denmark, then worldwide, and was shrewd enough to say yes to everything: writing theatre shows and TV scripts, and appearing as a panellist on the country's most popular radio programme, while also working as an editor herself at Rabén & Sjögren. By the 1950s and '60s she was a media superstar and was elected to De Nio (The Nine), a prestigious Stockholm academy dedicated to promoting literature, women's issues and peace. »

From top
A special 10th birthday
present for Karin; Ingrid
Vang Nyman's illustration
of Pippi for the first edition





Aspensborg makes the point that Lindgren was as influential a political figure as she was a writer: “I think Sweden would look quite different without Astrid Lindgren,” she says. “She changed our political landscape as she battled for human rights, children’s rights, animal rights. She was incredibly engaged.”

As Lindgren grew older, she continued to write prolifically and have a finger in every pie, while becoming a major force in the green movement in Sweden. Although her political visions that harked back to a more innocent time were sometimes dismissed as nostalgia, she remained a respected figure in society until her death, aged 94, in 2002.

Today, her legacy lives on at Astrid Lindgren’s World, a 15-minute walk away from Näs. The intentionally low-tech theme park is set on a wooded hillside, with live performances by Lindgren’s best-loved characters and mini-worlds based on the books. Originally known as Sagobyn (“Fairy-Tale Village”), the park was opened in 1981 by three Vimmerby families, closely vetted by Lindgren herself.

It’s now overseen by a group of supporters that includes Astrid’s daughter Karin, and other family and friends, to ensure it’s true to the Astrid Lindgren brand. “We used to say, if it’s not in the book, we don’t have it in the park. That’s what we’re aiming for,” says marketing and sales manager Lena Möller.

The park is a huge hit with three- to six-year-olds in particular, as well as older kids and their parents, and the feeling of excitement as they meet their favourite characters is palpable. Rather than the explicit commercialism of Disneyland, its ethos is focused on Lindgren’s own values – of playfulness, discovering things for yourself, and good, healthy food, with homely fare available in the on-site restaurant.

Just as Lindgren advised adults to butt out of their children’s play and let them get on with it, Möller »



“If it’s not in the book, we don’t have it in the park. That’s what we’re aiming for”

Step into other literary worlds



Harry Potter
Be wowed by the intricate sets, costumes and animatronic creatures from the Harry Potter film series on a Warner Bros studio tour, 32km north-west of London.
wbstudiotour.co.uk



Dr Seuss
Meet the Cat in the Hat, play rhyming games and invent stories on three floors at The Amazing World of Dr Seuss Museum in Springfield, Massachusetts.
springfieldmuseums.org



Miffy
The colourful Nijntje Museum in Utrecht, Holland is home to Miffy and her friends. Babies and toddlers will love learning about them by crawling, smelling and dancing.
nijntjemuseum.nl

From left
Astrid with Karin; on set with Inger Nilsson as Pippi in a 1969 film adaptation; scenes at Astrid Lindgren's World; "the strongest girl in the world" drawn by Ingrid Vang Nyman

“Sweden would look quite different without Astrid Lindgren. She changed our political landscape”

suggests that parents let their children take the lead when they visit. “We put the main shows in the guide you get at the entrance but we don’t put everything in because we’re trying to avoid parents overplanning. Just come into the park and follow your kids,” she advises.

It’s clear from a visit to the park and to Vimmerby that Lindgren was a formidable force. As someone who left school at 15, became a single mum in the 1920s at just 19, and didn’t have any ready-made connections in the publishing world, she made a phenomenal success of her life. So what was her secret?

“I think it was a mixture of things,” says Andersen. “Ambition, social competence and increasing fame over half a century. Don’t forget, she was a farmer’s daughter from Småland: very practical and very productive.” And yet, he says, “She was always very modest about her talents as an artist and never – ever! – thought of herself as a genius in children’s literature.”

Many would disagree: her name still chimes with millions of adults who grew up with her books. And while some of her stories seem to belong to a world that’s gone forever, her determination to give children a voice, respect them as people and acknowledge their innate courage retains its power. In the modern world, where helicopter parenting strips children of much of their independence, her books and their compassionate insight into how we treat children resonate as strongly as ever. alv.se, astridlindgren.com

Vimmerby is a three-hour drive south of Stockholm; Norwegian flies to Stockholm from nearly 70 destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com



From top
A child encounters Ronia
at Astrid Lindgren’s World;
56 million Pippi books have
been sold since 1945