

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE IMPRESSIONS AS A CHILD AND NOW: AFTER READING LINDGREN'S BOOKS

I think that we all have favorite books from childhood. In my case, I loved the books “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak and “The Rainy Bookstore” by Rieko Hinata. As children, many of us have a strong longing for fantastic worlds and unusual adventures. Picture books and children’s literature are among the easiest tools to immerse oneself in such worldviews. These books provide an opportunity for children to enjoy dreamlike adventures away from the real world.

Some of these books allow them to openly enjoy the stories with the pure perspective that only a child can have, and when they read these books again after growing up, they will discover deeper messages and themes that they did not notice as a child. By reading them as adults, we can be exposed to the lessons and life truths hidden in the stories and be touched and moved in other ways than we were as children. These books provide a valuable reading experience that is not only entertaining but also offers new perspectives on various aspects of life.

Many of the works of Astrid Lindgren, the author of the book that is the subject of this presentation, also offer a unique reading experience. Not only do her works provide dreams and adventures for children, but they can also be read again as adults, bringing new discoveries and emotions. This is why Lindgren’s books continue to be loved by successive generations.

First, I will introduce Astrid Lindgren and her books. She was born on November 14, 1907, in Wimmelview, southeastern Sweden, the eldest of four siblings. She is famous for the “Pippi Longstocking” series that is about the bright and joyful daily lives of children.

Lindgren was an advocate for children’s and animal rights, and the book “Absolutely No Violence!” a book that summarizes the speech she gave in 1978 at the award ceremony for the German Bookstores Association’s Peace Prize. In this speech, she spoke out against corporal punishment at a time when violence was being used to discipline children. She emphasized that children themselves have their own will and that adults should allow them to do so and take a stand against forcing their will on, or abusing children. In fact, Pippi of the “Pippi Longstocking” and Lotta of the “Lotta series” have a strong and firm will and insist on maintaining it; and the adults and friends around them accept them, which I think shows her views.

Lindgren wrote a different kind of book from the bright and cheerful works. “Mio, My Son” is one of the most famous of these. The main character has a painful situation, and the book depicts his emotions and courage through his adventures.

I read “Mio, My Son” when I was in elementary school, but reading it again now, I have a completely different impression of it. Many people have similar impressions of Lindgren’s works as I do. Her books have an aspect of being fantastic and interesting to read as a child, and another aspect that makes us feel Lindgren’s awareness of problems hidden behind the story. This time, I will consider why the impression changed from the viewpoint of written

expression and so on, and what causes a unique reading experience for the readers. I use not only “Mio, My Son,” but also “The Brothers Lionheart.” “The Brothers Lionheart” has features like “Mio, My Son.”

I will start with an introduction to the story of “Mio, My Son” and “The Brothers Lionheart.” “Mio, My Son” is a fantasy novel. The story follows a young boy named Bo Vilhelm Olsson, who is an orphan living in Sweden and is often neglected and mistreated by his foster parents. One day, Bo is magically transported to a fantastic land called the Kingdom of Glimmeria, where he is revealed to be the long-lost son of the king. His true name is Mio. In the Kingdom of Glimmeria, Mio embarks on a journey to defeat the evil sorcerer Kato, with the help of his friends. The story explores themes of identity, bravery, and love as Mio faces challenges and discovers his true destiny.

The main characters of “The Brothers Lionheart” also face tough situations. The story revolves around the brotherly love between the sickly younger brother Carl (Cookie) and his older brother Jonathan. Carl is sick and knows that death is near, and his brother Jonathan comforts him by telling him stories about the afterlife, “Nangiyala.” However, it is Jonathan who goes to “Nangiyala” first. Carl eventually follows his brother to “Nangiyala,” but it is not a peaceful paradise, but a world under the rule of the dictator “Tengir.”

Jonathan rises to save the people of “Nangiyala,” and Carl joins his brother in the adventure. They fight bravely and eventually defeat “Tengir,” but Jonathan is paralyzed by the fire of the dragon Katra. The story ends with the brothers’ decision to go further to the next world, “Nangirima.”

In Lindgren’s best-known books, such as Pippi Longstocking, the stories are written from a third-person perspective. On the other hand, “Mio, My Son” and “The Brothers Lionheart” are written from the first-person perspective of the main character. In the Japanese translation, the story is told in a childlike tone with a few kanji (Chinese letters).

Also, the main character, Mio of “Mio, My Son” does not use many negative words when describing his situation. Even when he is harassed by his adoptive parents, he does not use expressions such as “tough” or “hard” and the story is told in a matter-of-fact tone. In fact, the only negative words he ever said to his adoptive parents were “I didn’t like my aunt because she talked about my father that way.” The only negative words he ever said to his adoptive parents were when he was insulted by his father. Because of these elements, when read at a young age, the protagonist’s situation is not so memorable, and the reader’s attention is drawn to the fact that it is an adventure story.

In addition, the focus of the “Mio, My Son” is solely an adventure tale of the main character who began spending time as Mio in the “Kingdom of Glimmeria,” and the heroic way he finds himself and grows through his encounters with friends and family there, and also not a questioning of the Mio’s current situation. Similarly, in “The Brothers Lionheart,” the focus is on their adventures in Nangiyala, with no mention of the brothers’ decision to do what is synonymous with suicide. Therefore, the seriousness of their current situation diminishes, and most children think these stories are just fantasy adventure stories.

Another point that differs from the impression I had when I read “Mio, My Son” as a child is that as I read on, I got the impression that those descriptions of the Mio’s time in the “Kingdom of Glimmeria” were merely the imagination of Mio. Children tend to perceive imaginary events as real. Imaginary friends are probably the most famous example of this.

This is also true for the children who read “Mio, My Son” who do not question the “Kingdom of Glimmeria,” which is another world, and accept it as if it were an “actual event.” Combined with this effect, when they read the book as children, they are not conscious of the possibility that it is only his imagination, and they read the adventure as if it were real.

Now, however, as his situation improves, one begins to feel a disturbing sense that it may be nothing more than imagination, like a Little Match Girl in Andersen’s fairy tales. Nowhere in the story is it expressed that this was Mio’s fantasy or imagination, but it is said that it’s reality. The fact that main character is missing in the original world after going to the “Kingdom of Glimmeria” also gives a disturbing impression.

The unique reading experience common to “Mio, My Son” and “The Brothers Lionheart” is one of the major characteristics of these books. The first impression is that the ending seems to be a happy one, but there is still some sense of discomfort, and the ending is not a happy one. The same characteristic can be seen in the folklore of Sweden, where Lindgren was born and raised.

As an example, I will use the story “A rooster, a mortar, and a club.” This is the story of a rich older brother and a poor younger brother. The younger brother is in a situation where the older brother despises him because of his good-natured personality. In Japanese folktales and fairy tales, it is a standard story where the good-natured younger brother becomes happy at the end of the tale. However, in this story, the younger brother is not happy in the end, and the story ends with “the younger brother is forever poor and miserable.” I feel that many of the stories in North Europe cannot end with the expression “And they all lived happily ever after.” These folk tales may have some influence on Lindgren’s story. It is also possible that the original regional tales of the Nordic region also form the basis for the uniqueness of Lindgren’s writing. “Mio, My Son” and “The Brothers Lionheart” reflect Lindgren’s own values and the influences she has received, giving us the opportunity to have a different reading experience from other children’s literature.

From what I have said, you can perhaps see the impression Lindgren’s books give us of her writing and the fact that they are masterpieces that are loved by generations of readers. Child readers find in her books the excitement of unusual adventure stories, etc., while adult readers find impressions and messages different from those in other children’s literature. I believe this is because her writing style is soft and child-friendly, yet we can catch a glimpse of her perspectives in the background of her writing. If you have read Lindgren’s books as a child, read them again. If you have not read them yet, read them now and you will be drawn in by their unique atmosphere.

References:

Lindgren, A. / transl. Otsuka, Y. (2001). *The Brothers Lionheart*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.
Toshio, O. (1999). *Sekainominwa <3> Hokuou.: Folktales of the world <3> North Europe*. Tokyo: Gyousei.

Web Iwanami (2020) [Astrid Lindgren, Her works and Her world] 2025/1/7
<https://tanemaki.iwanami.co.jp/categories/659>

Magical Manor house. (2022). [In 1978, Astrid Lindgren’s legendary speech. A little book about “peace.”] 2025/1/8 <https://www.mmanorhouse.com/2022/03/14/post-9608/>