



# Classics in Short No.68: Pippi Longstocking

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**Brian Alderson** on Astrid Lindgren's **Pippi Longstocking**.

Sixty-odd years of monkeying about and now there's a new dress for?

## **Pippi Longstocking**

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### *Mischief*

is much in the air amid the northern rocks where Seven Stories has its abode. The Centre for Children's Books has been persuaded to mount an exhibition devoted to Horrid Henry, and his horrid activities are to be framed by glimpses of some fellow mischief makers.

### *But what is mischief?*

Discussions of near-Kantian complexity have been held attempting to analyse in what way 'mischief' may differ from 'misbehaviour' or 'disobedience' or downright, bloody-minded rebellion. Historical and modern precedents have been advanced and subtle, hitherto unsuspected discriminations made between such ne'er-do-wells as Billy Thoughtless in the eighteenth century and more recent characters like William Brown, George (of the Marvellous Medicine) and the Naughtiest Girl in the School.

### *I don't know*

if Pippilotta Provisionia Gaberdina Dandeliona Ephraimsdaughter Longstocking has figured in these debates but she is a person who well exemplifies the dilemma that confronts authors writing positively about children with feral, Bolshevik, or other anti-social tendencies. Child of a long-dead mother (who she believes is keeping watch on her through a hole in Heaven) and a matelot father whose fate is unknown since he was washed overboard from his ship, Pippi is the owner and sole occupant of Villekulla Cottage in a small Swedish market-town where (to the horror of many) SHE DOES EXACTLY WHAT SHE PLEASES.

### *She arrived there in the 1940s*

according to Astrid Lindgren's first account of her activities published in Stockholm in 1945. This consists of a dozen or so episodes in which Pippi (with her monkey, Mr Nelson) features as prima donna, usually accompanied by her adoring acolytes from next door, Annika and Tommy. Since she has more strength than a sumo wrestler (thus being able to carry her horse around if she feels like it) and is furnished with a trunkful of gold coins, her freedom of action is pretty well unfettered and we find her disposing of policemen who want to put her in a Children's Home, causing mayhem in the village school with voluble objections to 'silly stuff' like arithmetic (she only went for a day because she liked the idea of having school holidays), and eventually rescuing two children from the top floor of a burning house,

## *?Have I behaved badly??*

she asks rhetorically at one point and answers that 'I didn't know that myself?' a remark that illuminates her status as a Holy Fool. According to Bettina Hürlimann, one of the European critics who d**Pippi Långstrump** classic from the moment it appeared, there was consternation among some adult readers ' teachers and librarians and the like ' who were wary of Lindgren's endorsement of so independent, not to say arrogant, a heroine as Pippi. But child readers, especially the Annikas who were not much accustomed to meeting such self-assured girls in their books, brought **Pippi Longstocking** to world renown. (We are told that Lindgren has been translated into over 90 languages and her success has been rewarded with the Hans Christian Andersen Medal and the Gold Medal of the Swedish Academy.)

## *Is Pippi really a classic though?*

As Holy Fool, Pippilotta is allowed by her creatrix to get away with anything. Bull-baiting, tightrope walking, throwing bullies up into trees are occasions for what is not much more than feeble slapstick rather than for engaging drama, and the higgledy-piggledy sequence of her adventures deprives the book of narrative shape so that it peters out instead of developing towards a firm conclusion. Your real mischief makers ask for a sharper and more shapely comedy than we get here.

## *However famous in post-war Europe*

**Pippi Longstocking** took nine years to reach Britain, OUP publishing it in 1954 in a translation by Edna Hurup, and with illustrations not by its original illustrator, Ingrid Vang Nyman, but by Richard Kennedy (the two sequels, **Pippi Goes Aboard** and **Pippi in the South Seas** took just as long to reach us). Oxford reissued the titles in 2000 and 2001 as 'Modern Classics' with some rather offhand chapter headpieces by Tony Ross and now ' as has been noticed in **BfK** last November ' they have produced a fancy quarto to celebrate the centenary of Lindgren's birth. Hurup and Kennedy have been dropped in favour of a new (but less lively) translation by Tiina Nunnally and new illustrations (with the usual quota of boss-eyed, vaguely oriental characters) by Lauren Child.

## *There could be regrets*

about the loss of the 1954 participants who well represented Lindgren's purpose. But the newcomers have taken radical measures and in doing so have rescued the story from some of its own weaknesses. Graphic high jinks both in the typography and the artwork have combined to give the book a Pippi-ish abandon. 'Now she was walking backwards?' says the text in the first chapter as Pippi appears so doing at the edge of the page. The pretty stupid circus chapter is now a tour de force with, for instance, the tightrope walkers treading a line of the text and with the guttural ringmaster having his vocabulary set in a semi gothic typeface. When Pippi goes up to the front door of the neighbours' house the steps are formed from the words that tell you so. Well-chosen and cleverly executed such japes give us at least a classic of apposite book design.

The illustrations by Lauren Child are taken from the 2007 Oxford University Press edition, translated by Tiina Nunnally (978 0 19 278240 3, £14.99 hbk).

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.



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