Humor, Hunger and Humanity: Food and Eating in the Works of Astrid Lindgren

Björn Sundmark

They ate and ate and ate. It was the feast of a lifetime, and they would never forget it.
(Lindgren, *The White Rose Rescue* 111)

In Astrid Lindgren's works – just as in real life – food is something both pleasurable and satisfying – and necessary! Food in Lindgren is not decoration, but integral to the fiction: hunger and/or excess drive the plot forward, the food scenes are meaningful, eating is part of characterization and world-making, and feasts and picnic build friendship and community. Other children's authors may explore the fictional uses of food and eating too, but few, if any, indulge in food in such rich and varied ways as Lindgren. I also believe that a "kitchen approach" to Lindgren's fictions can yield new insights into her work, as well as provide a critical perspective on food and children's fiction in general. For this purpose, a section on previous research on Lindgren and food will be presented, followed by a summary of the still emerging critical discourse on food and (children's) fiction. After these food criticism "hors d'oeuvres" the chapter will continue with the main course of this chapter: an exploration of food and eating in Lindgren's books. The aim is to show how Lindgren, with the help of the food motif, addresses the themes of humor, hunger and humanity.

Lindgren Food Criticism

Lindgren's appetite for fictional food and eating has not gone unnoticed. In her inventory of the food motif in Lindgren in *Läckergommarnas rike* ["Gourmet Kingdom"] Maria

Nikolajeva fittingly labels Lindgren "matmästaren" ("the food master/maestro"). In a subsequent publication, *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature*, Nikolajeva returns to this material and shows how food and meals function structurally and symbolically in the narrative. Another critic, Eva-Marie Metcalf, regards the food scenes as part of Lindgren's professional skill as a storyteller for children, giving children what they want – food (95). Vivi Edström, moreover, analyses Pippi Longstocking's "Gargantuan" tall tales about eating in the context of her "lies and boasting" (123-124) and identifies the farcical aspects and sensual pleasures of Emil's culinary pranks (161-167; 174-178). A more recent contribution by Anne Malewski focuses on the Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson trilogies and argues that the positive attitude to excessive eating to be found in these books "is a rare phenomenon in children's literature. There are not many examples in classic children's stories where food is as essential and freely available and gluttony as unrepentantly joyful" (114).

Ulla Lundquist's historical and biographical reading of *Pippi Longstocking* represents another approach to food in Lindgren's work. Among other things, Lundquist traces the manifold uses of food in *Pippi Longstocking* to Lindgren's preoccupation with food (and its rationing) during World War II. Lindgren's published *War Diaries* are indeed much about food, but in rather unexpected ways; there is rationing, of course, but if anything, Lindgren repeatedly stresses how *well* her family, and Sweden as a whole, fares in comparison to people in other nations. At Christmas 1940, Lindgren writes "We stuffed ourselves, just as usual. We must be the only nation in Europe able to do that, at least to that degree" (69). In other words, the food excesses in *Pippi Longstocking* is like Lindgren's (and other Swedish families) in relation to the hungering families of war-ravaged Europe. In other words, the food scenes in *Pippi Longstocking* do not seem to be a humorous and subversive reaction to any personal plight, but rather to the looming threat of deprivation, and even more so to the tribulations of others. In any case, food and eating is certainly a concern for Lindgren in the period when she is writing her first books. In this context it can be mentioned that her second published book, *Kerstin och jag* ("Kerstin and I" – not translated into English), issued the same year as *Pippi Longstocking* (1945), about the twin teen sisters Barbro and Kerstin, takes place on a farm (Lindgren called it her "peasant book" in a letter to her parents) and revolves as much around food production and farming, as of falling in love and growing up.

Lindgren's biographer, Margareta Strömstedt, brings up another formative wartime experience, World War I – a conflict in which Sweden was not directly involved, but one of food shortages and inequality between different classes of people. Lindgren and her siblings did not have to go hungry, but many others did. As a child, Lindgren took note. For her, the packed school meal, for instance, mercilessly displayed who had enough food to eat and who had not (Strömstedt 163). According to Strömstedt, Lindgren makes

creative use of such memories in the *Mardie* books, and even more poignantly in the short story "The Red Bird." In this dark fairy tale, the orphaned siblings, Matthew and Anna are scorned and shamed for their poverty:

> [W]hen it was time to eat their lunch packet, both Matthew and Anna were ashamed. Where they had only a few cold potatoes, the other children had bacon or cheese sandwiches, and Joel, the grocer's boy, had pancakes, a whole bundle of pancakes. Matthew and Anna stared at Joel's pancakes until their eyes grew shiny, and Joel said, "Little paupers, never seen food before?" (unpag.)

Fittingly for a fairy tale that opens with the subverted fairy tale-formula "Long time ago in the days of poverty" the two children die from cold and hunger at the end of the story (alternatively pass through a door in the snowy forest that leads "into the everlasting spring of Sunnymead").

So, although she did not have to go hungry herself either as a child, nor as a housewife during WWII, Lindgren shows a keen and commiserating eye for those who hungered. The one time in her life when she was quite poor, and at times went hungry, was when she worked as an underpaid office girl in Stockholm in the 1920's (Strömstedt 208-212). Lindgren's own account of this period in the short article "Jag läste Hamsun" ("I read Hamsun") is well worth quoting, not least because it shows how she identifies with the starving protagonist of Knut Hamsun's autobiographical novel *Hunger* (1890) and how she savors its absurd humor.

> Next Sunday I sat under the bird-cherry tree and read *Hunger*. And everything led to an intensive feeling of happiness over this book and of the young Hamsun and everyone else who wandered hungry through the cities of this world. Like me, for example. Well, well, I wasn't starving nearly as much as Hamsun who was over there in Kristiania [Oslo] chewing on a piece of wood. Here in Stockholm it was more like never having enough to eat. But it was possible to identify with that Kristiania madman and wonder how he had managed to come up with such a moving and incredibly funny book about hunger. How I laughed when I sat on my park bench; I had to hold up the book before my face so that people passing wouldn't think me crazy. (81, my translation)

In her article, Lindgren specifically points to *Hunger* as an inspiration to the tall tales, exaggerations and lying in *Pippi Longstocking*, but the influence may go even deeper. It is not

unlikely that the obsessive and absurd hunger fantasies in Hamsun's book also might have inspired some of the humorous representations of food and eating in *Pippi Longstocking*.

Theoretical Approaches to Food and (Children's) Literature

There are of course many other ways in which Lindgren's – or any author's – fictional representations of food may be analyzed. And conversely, there are numerous ways in which social and cultural phenomena surrounding the consumption of food can be "read" as meaningful narratives. The cultural and literary study of food can be traced to sociology, anthropology, linguistics/semiotics and sociologically inspired literary studies. The centrality of food to social theory is apparent already in Norbert Elias's idea of a general "civilizing process" from 1939, in which meals and etiquette play an important role. Likewise, eating (and humor) are instrumental to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival as a social institution, as well as of carnival's attendant literary mode, grotesque realism. With semiotics and structuralism the analysis of food in culture took another step. Roland Barthes, for instance, argues that food can be seen as a "system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior" (21). And as Barthes, and anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Edmund Leach show, the preparation and consumption of food, and the taboos surrounding what you can and cannot eat are deeply meaningful culturally and socially. In other words, food is a rich signifier (or *can* be, I should hastily add – sometimes a banana is just a banana!).

Clearly a "social" (or socializing) approach can be particularly fruitful in relation to children's literature, since social codes are often explicit, and presented as imperatives in literature for children. As Carolyn Daniel notes, "children must … learn all sorts of rules about food and eating. Most important, they must know who eats whom. Food events in children's literature are clearly intended to teach children how to be human" (13). A fine example of the "who eats whom"-agenda can be found in Edmund Leach's article "Babar's Civilization Analyzed." One of the categories Leach applies in the analysis of social distance between the different animals is precisely the edible/inedible dichotomy, expressed in terms of "edible strangers", "edible neighbors," "edible strangers," "inedible strangers," "inedible family members" (181).

Besides social theory, psychoanalytical and psychological approaches have also contributed to the analysis of food in fiction. Bruno Bettelheim's controversial but influential *The Uses of Enchantment* is a prime example. A central notion in psychoanalytical theory is that early experiences of food and eating (and hunger) during the "oral stage" (0-3 year) are deeply formative and profoundly affect our psychological development. If left ungratified (or over-indulged) at this development stage the child is prone to develop psychological disorders, it is claimed. Bettelheim maintains, for instance, that Hansel and Gretel suffer from "oral greediness" and "fixations", and hence are largely to blame

themselves for their dire situation (159-166). All psychological food-and-fiction analyses are not as orthodox and unapologetic as this – Nikolajeva's interpretation of food in Lindgren is one example – but it is not unusual that analyses of gluttony and/or the "providing mother figure" are presented in "psychoanalytic-light" terms.

An implicit psychological frame of reference might go some way towards explaining why some children's critics interpret food as "the sex of children's literature" (Katz 192; Carrington & Harding 1-2). Or suggest that "an appetite [sexual desire] is absent, perhaps displaced by that other primal and atavistic pleasure of eating" (Briggs 27-28). Other critics beg to differ and argue that food is indeed important in adult literature too and that it is misleading to view food and appetite in mainly (psycho)sexual terms (see Kara K. Keeling and Scott Pollard 3). It could certainly be argued that in life as in fiction, food is more central and fundamental to discourse than intercourse.

Humor, Hunger and Humanity

To be sure, food can represent so many things other than displaced sexual appetite: hunger, satisfaction, excess, enjoyment, work, play, power, belonging, alienation, identity, conflict, life, and death – and many other things. In Astrid Lindgren's works food is present in many different contexts and for different purposes. Very often food is associated with either the making of food, either as work or play (or both). There are also a great many descriptions of eating or being hungry. Thematically, the food motif can be understood in terms of humor, hunger, and humanity. In the end, the aim of this chapter is to clarify the ways in which Lindgren uses the food motif to explore these themes.

Fig. 1

Bertil and Simon Small share a meatball

Of course, the themes tend to be interrelated in complex ways. In the story *Simon Small Moves in* (1949) the boy Bertil gives Simon Small a meatball to eat (1949). Motif-wise it is simple, but the eating here is both about hunger (Simon is ravenous), humor (the play on relative size), and humanity (the sharing of food; Bertil's act of kindness). Ilon Wikland's illustration from the picture book version reinforce the theme of sharing, with both boys holding the meatball between them while eating it. Precisely because the themes of hunger, humor and

humanity tend to overlap and blend, the chapter is instead divided into on the one hand the making of food and, on the other, the act of eating.

Humor and the Preparation, Cooking and Selling of Food

In Lindgren's "farm" books – *Kerstin och jag* [Kerstin and I], the Emil series and the Bullerby books (sometimes referred to as the Noisy Village-series in English), both adults and children grow and make food. They harvest and fish and pick berries, they cook and bake, they prepare, serve, and eat. It is everyday activity, and holiday feast, and it is hard to distinguish between food work and food play. In the first Emil book, for example, Emil's mother and the maid, Lina, are making ready for a party on the farm, Katthult. They "prepared [meatballs and] spareribs of pork and calves' liver and salmagundi and apple pie and smoked eel and stews and puddings and two giant cheesecakes and a special kind of sausage that was so delicious that people drove all the way from Vimmerby and Hultsfred so as to have some" (37). In this example, the description and naming of different foods conjures up an atmosphere of plenty and industriousness – smell and taste is activated.

An even more elaborate food scene is evoked in a Christmas preparation scene from "The Great Obliteration Party" from the second Emil book, quoted here, *in extenso*:

> Now there was hustle and bustle in Katthult, for they celebrated Christmas there thoroughly. First of all, there was a great wash day. Lina and Krösa-Maja stood on the icy jetty by the brook and did the rinsing. Lina cried and blew on her frozen fingertips which were very painful. Then they slaughtered the great Christmas pig, and after that there was scarcely room for anything or anybody else in the kitchen, Lina observed. For there were the black puddings, pork sausages, oatmeal sausages, meat sausages, and potato sausages crammed among bacon preserves, spare ribs of pork, and I don't know what else. Juniper berry juice was brewed by Emil's mother in the brewhouse, in a big wooden vat, for the Christmas celebrations. And enough cakes and bread were baked to make you dizzy – rye bread, malt bread, saffron bread, wheaten bread, gingerbread, and delicious rolls, meringues, and pastries – oh, beyond number. --- And Emil's father went to the barn and brought back a couple of sheaves of oats which he had saved for the sparrows. 'It's a stupid thing to do,' he said, 'but after all, the sparrows must have their Christmas.' (83)

As wonderful and gastronomically evocative as this description is, I do think that the illustration by Björn Berg also perfectly captures the "hustle and bustle" of the scene,

and even expands on it. Everyone in the household is energetically preparing food: Emil and Ida are making ginger snaps, Lina is baking, Alma is taking out bread from the oven, Anton is tasting the broth, Alfred enters with fire-wood, and Old Krösa-Maja is grinding coffee beans. Even the cat takes an interest. The description is humorous in its excessive listing, but also warm and humane, with the whole household engaged in the preparations and working together. It is worth noting too that generosity and food-sharing is even extended to the sparrows.

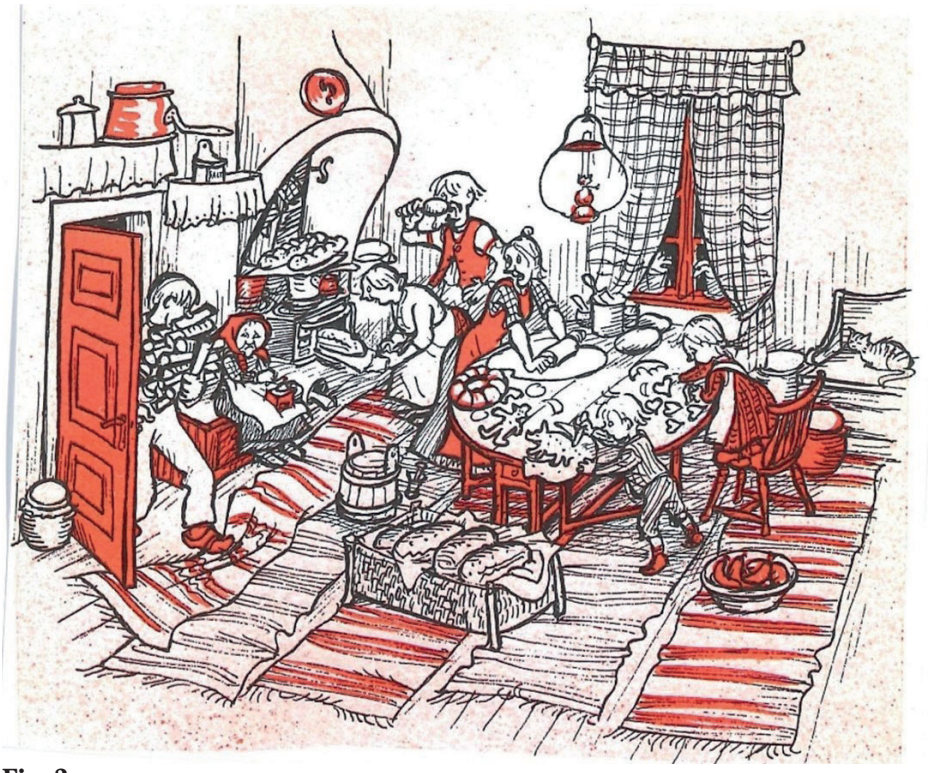

Fig. 2

Christmas preparations in Katthult

If the Svensson household described here can is an example of a collective food-making effort, *Brenda Brave* (1950) represents more of a solitary achievement. In this story, seven-year-old Brenda sells candy in the market square a few weeks before Christmas. The reason Brenda is there at all is that her grandmother has hurt her leg and is bedridden. Later in the story, Brenda also cooks the Christmas dinner. Food is central to this story: food as work (child labour, perhaps, for the cynically minded), and cooking as an essential skill when growing up. But food transactions are also shown to be acts of friendship and solidarity – between Brenda and her grandmother, certainly, but also between Brenda and the market goers, who flock to Brenda's candy stall. Unlike H. C. Andersen's Match-girl, Brenda sells her wares to the monied, yet (!) helpful townspeople, she survives the cold,

and returns to a living grandmother. The message is that, as human beings, we help each other, even if we are small (and, more remarkably perhaps, even if we are big!).

In the chapter "When it rains" in the second Bullerby book, Lisa quarrels with Anna and Britta, and ends up not knowing what to do. Her mother gives her the idea to make a sponge cake, something she has never done before. The baking is successful, however:

> I made a sponge cake all by myself, and very good it was too --- Oh, how exciting it was when mum took my cake out of the oven! She tipped it out onto a clean tea towel and it was all light brown and spongy. I had no idea I was so good at making sponge cakes. (81)

She then hastily "forgives" her friends so that she can offer them some of the cake. Soon after, Anna and Britta rush home to ask if they too can make sponge cake. In this example work turns out to be fun, and also leads to reconciliation between Lisa and her friends.

A more anarchic approach to making food is displayed in the Pippi Longstocking books (Ingrid Vang Nyman's illustration here is from the 1947 picturebook version). With Pippi work becomes play. With enormous energy she makes pancakes and bakes huge quantities of cookies. She is not playing with the food. Yet the way she prepares the food turns work into play. Unlike the well-behaved Brenda or the Bullerby children, Pippi does not follow instructions or recipes. She breaks conventions as easily as eggs, and gets yolk in her hair when making pancakes. As we can see in Vang Nyman's illustrations she has her kitchen utensils all over the place, and Mr Nilsson has to hide under a pancake during the flipping frenzy. But the result is "fantastic" according to Tommy and Annika. In another scene, Pippi rolls out dough on the kitchen

Fig. 3

Pippi making pancakes

floor, for "the counter is just not big enough when you are baking at least five hundred cookies." Pippi's baking is both carnivalesque, excessive, and joyful.

Another example of playing with food (or food as play) is in the episode in *Mardie* (or Meg as she is referred to in some English translations), when Mardie and her sister Lisbet are sitting astride a rooftop with a picknick basket full of meatballs and small sausages between. But before they have time to eat any of it, Abe, the next-door boy, appears. He plays a trick on them: "Shall we have a bet that you can't chuck a meatball straight into my mouth however hard you try?" (33). They think it is a marvelous idea, "No one but Abe could think of so many nice things to do" (33). They keep throwing, and in the end, he has eaten all their meatballs. A subtle twist to this food-episode is of course that Mardie and Lisbet can afford to play with the food – their family is well to do, and they won't have to go hungry, while Abe, who is a working-class adolescent, also sees this as an opportunity to get an extra meal.

This tactic is in some ways similar to that employed by Karlsson when he tricks Smidge out of his toffees and chocolate in the chapter "Karlsson makes a bet" in the first Karlsson book. If Karlsson wins, Smidge has to give him his candy; if Smidge wins, he is cajoled into giving Karlsson the treat anyway (to comfort the disgruntled loser); and when neither of these tactics works, Karlsson simply takes the prize anyway, swallows it and says that it has "disappeared by magic" (64-72). The same episode also has an example of making food, or "medicine," rather – "Karlsson-on-the-Roof's cock-a-doodle-moo medicine". Karlsson needs it since he says he is feeling ill, and Smidge makes the medicine according to Karlsson's recipe:

> He took some acid drops and raspberry jelly sweets and toffees and mixed them in a cup with the same number of squares of chocolate, and then he crumbled the almond cookies and sprinkled them on top. (65)

For Karlsson the medicine-making is of course just another way of tricking Smidge into giving him as much as possible of the sweets and candy.

It is interesting to compare this scene with the medicine-making scene in the second Pippi Longstocking book, *Pippi Goes Aboard*. Since Lindgren's two supernatural companions, Karlsson and Pippi, are each other's antithesis in so many ways – Karlsson is egotistical while Pippi is a helper; Karlson takes, Pippi gives – it is logical that the events unfold differently. In *Pippi Goes Aboard*, the medicine is not about tricking Tommy and Annika into giving her candy, but about Pippi making and tasting her own medicine. At the pharmacy Pippi asks for "six pints of medicine," and specifies that it should be good for "whooping cough and blisters on the feet and tummy-ache and German measles and a pea that's got stuck in your nose, and all that kind of thing." It should also be good for

"polishing furniture" (20). Pippi then mixes and drinks a large dose of it. Annika worries about this and asks how Pippi will know that she has not been poisoned.

> I shall find out, said Pippi gaily. I shall find out tomorrow at the latest. If I am still alive then, it's not poisonous, and the smallest child can drink it.
> Tommy and Annika considered this. After a while Tommy said doubtfully, and rather dolefully.
> Yes, but supposing it is poisonous after all, what then?
> Then you'll have to use what's left over for polishing the dining-room furniture, said Pippi, and poisonous or not, the meducin won't be wasted. (22-23)

In both Karlsson and Pippi, the making (and ingestion) of the food/medicine is presented in a humorous way. Medicine is neither made of sweets and cakes, nor of the random mixing different kinds of medicine (some of it intended for skin diseases). The humour is also manifested in both Karlsson's cunning and trickery and in Pippi's superhuman ability to consume just about anything (which also ensures that no one else is put at risk). As in the lists of food items in Emil we again encounter a vocabulary of excess, exaggeration and imagination in the absurd listing and naming of ingredients (or illnesses).

As Carolyn Daniel has pointed out, children's literature teaches children about food (13). Lindgren gives readers numerous examples of how children prepare, bake and make food. The line between play and work is fine. Children learn how to make meals through play and stories. Pippi's carnivalesque pancake-making and Lisa's earnest (and successful!) attempt at baking sponge-cake point to the centrality of food in children's lives.

Hunger and the Joy of Eating

Turning now from making to eating food, the focus shifts towards food in relation to hunger, appetite, and enjoyment. Ulla Lundqvist notes that "enjoyment of food permeates Lindgren's work" (150). But Lindgren also understands the nature of hunger and appetite, and that hunger is what brings out the greatest enjoyment. In the Kalle Blomkvist[1] mystery *The White Rose Rescue* (quoted in the epigraph), Kalle and Anders gorge themselves after an involuntary period of fasting:

> They ate and they ate. They cut thick slices of ham, and ate. The carved chunks off the best salami, and ate. They found a large, soft, wonderful delicious loaf, and ate. They peeled the foil off small triangles of cheese, and ate. They plunged their fists into the big box of raisins, and ate. They took bars of chocolate from the sweet counter, and ate. They ate and ate and

> ate. It was the feast of a lifetime, and they would never forget it. (111-112)

The urgency and appetite for more resonate in the text through the repetition of "and ate" (separated from the rest of the clause with a comma for effect) and the parallel phrasal constructions. As in previous examples, the naming and listing stimulate the imagination and sensory perception of the reader. But appetite is of course also a sign of the boys' robust health and vital energy.

By contrast, loss of appetite is a bad sign in Lindgren's stories. In the final story of the third Emil book Emil realizes that: "If Alfred wasn't hungry, there was something seriously wrong with him" (158). But poor appetite can also be employed for humorous purposes. When Tommy and Annika have no appetite after having had the measles, Pippi urges them (with a subversive dig at disciplinarian parenting) to eat their porridge with the argument that if they do not, they will never grow up and be strong enough to be able to force their own children to eat porridge. When this does not help, she goes on to tell the story about how the sailor Fridolf was cured of his lack of appetite with a "strengthening meducine" which gave him back his appetite: fifteen plates of porridge and 117 potatoes, including the breadboard, the jug the fifteen plates:

> Then he set about the table. He broke off all four legs and gobbled them down so the sawdust literally whirled around his face, but he said for asparagus it was on the woody side. Seems he thought the table top was tastier because he smacked his lips as he ate it and said it was the best sandwich he'd had since he was a little lad. (58)

Excessive and absurd, the story of Fridolf's boundless appetite is still life-affirming. The humor no doubt defuses some of the pressure on Tommy and Annika (or child readers) to be well-behaved and finish their porridge. If anything, it might even help children develop an appetite.

It is easy to get the impression that food in Pippi Longstocking is all about humor. But eating, which takes place in most chapters, is just as much about being together and about sharing, like in the birthday party, to which even the horse is invited to the table. Or the finale of the episode with the burglars, in the first book in the series, where Pippi after having tied them up and forced them to dance with her, offers them food.

> Pippi went to the pantry and took out bread and cheese and butter, ham and cold roast and milk; and they sat around the kitchen table – Bloom and Thunder-Karlsson and Pippi – and ate until they were almost four-cornered. (114)

When the more realistic characters also eat enormous quantities of food, like in the example from Kalle Blomkvist, it is always motivated by real hunger. And in Lindgren hunger must always be stilled. In the first Emil book, when he has been locked away and forgotten in the toolshed (to prevent him from doing mischief during a party) he eventually gets hungry. He manages to escape from his prison into the food store instead, where he eats all of the special sausage and then falls asleep. After a while the party guests and Emil's family remember Emil but fail to find him. Increasingly desperate they search for him. Finally, when they have given up hope, Lina finds him on the shelf where the sausage had been: "There was no sausage there now. But – Emil was there!" (50). Despite the loss of the famous special sausage, everyone is relieved, "it was a thousand times better to find him on the shelf than two kilos of sausage" (50).

In the context of food theory, it is interesting to note that eating, even excessive or reckless eating, is not criticized in Lindgren's stories (see Malewski). There is no threat of Freudian-Bettelheimian punishment for "oral greed." Hunger is natural. From a sociological point of view, the rules and etiquette surrounding eating are often challenged, and thus, in a sense reinforced, since they are made visible. Similarly, the social taboos surrounding who eats who is humorously challenged in *Pippi Longstocking in the South Seas* when Pippi says that if she were to be eaten by cannibals she would absolutely refuse to be stewed with carrots. Another example is when she sheds tears for the shark who misses his human meal.

Shared Food, Shared Humanity

Food is important and so is eating, but people more so. If someone needs food, like Emil in the example above, they should not be denied it. Sharing food signals friendship and solidarity. In *Rasmus and the Vagabond*, Paradise-Oskar (the tramp) shares his breakfast meal with the hungry Rasmus (the orphan): milk and rye bread with pork. This is the first of many food scenes in this book, and the most significant. It marks the start of the deep friendship between the man and the boy. The choice of food in this scene is probably not coincidental; milk and rye bread with cold pork was Lindgren's staple lunch during her school years, and in an interview, she conceded, "it is the best food I know. I could still give my life for it" (quoted in Strömstedt 163, my translation).

An even more urgent example of sharing food is in *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*. When Ronia finds Birk in the cellars under the castle he is not just hungering, but starving:

> "Eat if you are hungry," she said.
> There was an extraordinary sound, almost like a little scream, from Birk.
> And he took the coarse chunks of bread, one in each hand, and ate. It was

> as if Ronia was not there. He was alone with his bread, gulping it down to the very last crumb. Then Ronia handed him the jar of milk, and he put it greedily to his mouth and drank until it was empty. (69)

When Ronia shares bread with Birk their "brother and sister"-bond is further strengthened. It is one of several actions where their mutual dependence on each other is manifested. Starvation, or the threat of it, is also what in the end drives Ronia and Birk back to their parents (to "Lovis's bread") from the bear cave where the two of them have lived together during the summer months. And it is only because Ronia also will perish if they stay in the cave, that Birk gives up his stubborn self-reliance. Bread/food forges (and forces) bonds with family, with kin, and with others. Food and eating unites.

In *Mio, my Son,* Mio and his companion Pompoo become friends with the shepherd boy Nonno, whose grandmother gives them bread: "It was brown and crunchy, and it was the best bread I had tasted" (xx). Mio asks, "What is the name of this bread?" Nonno answers, "I don't know if it has a name; we call it the Bread That Satisfies Hunger" (29). A little bit later they drink water from a well: "It was the best water I had drunk in my life." Mio asks, "what kind of well is this?" Nonno answers, "I don't think it is a special well; we call it the Well That Quenches Thirst" (30). Bread and water are simple things, and Nonno and his grandmother are simple people – yet they come to acquire the deepest form of symbolism: the staff of life, the salt of the earth. The sharing of simple, nameless bread and water become symbolic of shared life and man*kind*.

In *Mio, my Son* we also see the opposite. After the evil Sir Kato has captured Mio and Pompoo he decides that they should be starved to death in his "Tower of Hunger" (146). This shows the depth of Kato's malevolence, and that he has completely separated himself from humanity. For in Lindgren there can be no greater evil than starving someone to death. But Mio and Pompoo survive their night of hunger in Kato's prison. Mio has been given a silver spoon that has belonged to one of Kato's victims, and in desperation he puts it in his mouth to ease his hunger. To his surprise he finds that,

> there was something in the spoon to eat. Something that tasted like the Bread That Satisfies Hunger and like the Water from the Well That Quenches Thirst. Bread and water were in the spoon and it had the most wonderful taste. It replenished my strength and my hunger disappeared. Strangely enough the spoon did not become empty. It filled completely with more food each time I ate, and I ate till I could eat no more. (151)

The saving grace comes in the form of a spoon from a victim. In this communion of humanity bread and water are magically transubstantiated out of thin air to overcome

hunger, death and isolation/alienation.

Mio, my Son is fairy tale filled with symbols and poetry, but a similar message is conveyed in the realistic-burlesque stories about Emil. I have referred to some of the food scenes above, and also written elsewhere at length about intergenerational solidarity in the series (Sundmark). However, I now return to the chapter "The Great Obliteration Party" in the second book of the trilogy. In that episode Emil invites the inmates of the poorhouse to a Christmas party at Katthult when his parents are away. In the beginning of the chapter Emil and his sister carry a basket with food to the poorhouse.[2] At that point the narrator turns directly to the reader:

> I don't expect you to know what destitute means, or what a poorhouse is, come to that, and be glad you don't. The poorhouse was something they had in the old days and if I were to tell you what it was really like, well, that would be far worse than all Krösa-Maja's stories about murderers and ghosts and wild animals. Can you imagine a small, run-down cottage with a couple of rooms full of poor, worn-out old people who have nowhere else to go and who live there all together in one big muddle of dirt and lice and hunger and misery, well, then you know what it is to be destitute and live in the poorhouse. (103-104)

What happens next is that the so-called "sergeant-major" who runs the poorhouse confiscates all the food. Emil, however, lures her away from the poorhouse, and together with his sister Ida and the farm-hand Alfred (whose grandfather is Batty-Jack, one of the inmates) they take the inmates to Katthult. The hunger and appetite of the famished poor is described in great visual and aural detail:

> And here was all the food disappearing in all directions. She listened to the crunching and munching and the slurping and the smacking of lips around the table. It was as if a herd of ravenous wild animals had thrown themselves over the bowls and dishes and plates. Little Ida understood that only desperately hungry people eat like that, but it was still a terrible thing to hear. (126)

The "crunching and munching and the slurping and the smacking of lips" is a "terrible thing to hear". The poor people are likened to a "herd of ravenous animals." When a plate has been completely emptied, the one who takes the last morsel calls out that it has been "obliterated." Soon everything has been "obliterated," and "that is why to this very day the party has been known as 'The Great Obliteration Party at Katthult'"(127).[3] When

Ida reminds Emil that they are expecting guests for dinner the next day he says, "They're fat enough as it is... surely it's better the food goes where it's needed most" (126). When everything has been devoured, they drive the inmates back to the poorhouse on a log sled.

In the final part of the story, the sergeant-major is trapped in a wolf-pit that Emil and Alfred have dug. At first, they pretend not to see who it is, and say that they have caught a werewolf:

> "Are you sure that's a werewolf?" said little Ida, her voice shaking.
> "It certainly is," said Emil. "A bad-tempered old lady werewolf is what it is, and they are the most dangerous of all."
> "Yep, for them's so greedy," said Alfred. (136)

They discuss what to do ("hand me my gun, Alfred!"), and compare wolves and werewolves favorably to the greedy Sergeant Major, to teach her a lesson. But when she admits to everything and shows remorse, they "recognize" her and help her out of the pit.

Conclusion

In "The Great Obliteration Party" many of the motifs and thematic strands come together that I have explored in this chapter. Many of the other examples marshalled in this chapter could be summarized and understood in a similar way. The episode begins with the making of food, an enterprise that engages the entire household across generations (see the quotation and Björn Berg's illustration in the beginning of this chapter). The listing and naming have both humorous and world-building functions; the description conveys a sense of excess and the exotic. Moreover, the food preparations are celebratory (it is Christmas time), almost ritualized, and serve to provide for the family, the household, and relatives, as well as for the poor, and animals (the sheaves for the birds). In this episode the preparations also include Emil's scheme for the obliteration party.

The food motif is explored further when the poor "obliterate" enormous quantities of food, and Ida realizes that "only desperately hungry people eat like that." One aspect of eating that I have not dwelt on in this chapter is closure, the end of the meal, when there is no room for more, when you are full and sated. Mio eats till "he can eat no more." Kalle Blomkvist experiences "the feast of a lifetime" (112). Bloom, Thunder-Karlsson, and Pippi eat until they are "almost four-cornered" (114). Emil's Katthult party is no exception, afterwards the people of the poorhouse are "so full that they could hardly move" (128). It is worth noting that this state of being is never criticized. Even if hungry people can be likened to "ravenous animals" and the sounds of eating can be a "terrible thing to hear," eating (more than) one's fill is never described in negative terms, not as excessive or nauseating. It is only if one person's overeating leads to others going hungry

that excess is bad, as with the Sergeant-Major. Finally, in this chapter I have endeavored to show how the food motif is employed for humorous purposes in Pippi Longstocking, the Emil books and many others. I have also shown how descriptions of food are used in descriptions of appetite and hunger, of eating and enjoyment of food. The third thematic focus has been on "humanity." The sharing of food is essential in Lindgren. It is the mark of humanity. Sharing food builds friendship and society. Greed, as in the description of the "werewolf"-like Sergeant-Major, who denies her fellows in the poorhouse their Christmas treats, is the opposite of humanity; greed is the sign of corruption and evil. Emil, on the other hand, represents Lindgren's ideal when he gives food to the hungry. Lindgren's "The Great Obliteration Party" is a perfect example of how humor, hunger and humanity can find thematic expression through food and eating.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais och skrattets historia.* 1965. Anthropos, 1986.

Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." 1961. *Food and Culture: A Reader.* Edited by C. Counihan & P. Van Esteric, Routledge, 1997.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Thames & Hudson, 1976.

Briggs, Julia. "Critical Opinion: Reading Children's Books." 1989. *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature.* Third edition. Edited by Sheila Egoff et al., Toronto UP, 1996.

Carrington, Bridget and Jennifer Harding. *Feast or Famine? Food and Children's Literature*. Cambridge Scholars, 2014.

Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2006.

Mary Douglas. *Food in the Social Order.* Russell Sage, 1984.

Edström, Vivi. *Astrid Lindgren: A Critical Study.* Translated by Eivor Cormack, Rabén & Sjögren, 2000.

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process*. 1939. Blackwell, 1994.

Katz, Wendy. "Some Uses of Food in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1980, pp. 192-199.

Keeling, Kara K. Pollard, Scott T. *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2009.

Leach, Edmund. "Babar's Civilization Analyzed." 1962. *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*. Second edition. Edited by Sheila Egoff et al., Oxford UP, 1980, pp. 176-182.

Lévi Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked.* 1964. Chicago UP, 1969.

Lindgren, Astrid. *Kerstin och jag* [Kerstin and I]. Rabén & Sjögren, 1945.

---. *Pippi Longstocking.* 1945. Translated by Florence Lamborn, Puffin 1977.

---. *Pippi Goes Aboard.* 1946. Translated by Marianne Turner, Oxford UP, 2015.

---. *Pippi in the South Seas*. 1948. Translated by Susan Beard, Oxford UP, 2020.

---. *Do You Know Pippi Longstocking?* 1947. Illustrated by Ingrid Vang Nyman and translated by Elisabeth Kallick Dyssegaard, Oxford UP, 2015.

---. *Happy Times in Noisy Village*. 1949. Translated by Susan Beard, Oxford UP, 2015.

---. *Simon Small Moves In*. 1949. Illustrated by Ilon Wikland and translated by Marianne Turner, Burke, 1965.

---. *Brenda Brave Helps Grandmother.* 1950. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Transl. Kay Ware, Webster, 1961.

---. *A Kalle Blomkvist Mystery: The White Rose Rescue.* 1953. Transl. Susan Beard. Oxford UP, 2017.

---. *Mio, my Son*. 1954. Ill. Ilon Wikland. Translated by Jill Morgan, Purple House, 2003.

---. *Karlsson on the Roof.* 1955. Translated by Sarah Death, Oxford UP, 2008.

---. *Rasmus and the Vagabond*. 1956. Translated by Gerry Bothmer, Plough, 2014.

---. *The Red Bird.* 1959. Illustrated by Marit Törnqvist and translated by Patricia Crampton, Arthur A. Levine, 2005.

---. *Mardie.* 1960. Illustrated by Ilon Wikland and translated by Patricia Crampton, Mammoth, 1979.

---. *Emil in the Soup Tureen*. 1963. Illustrated by Björn Berg and translated by Lilian Seaton, Brockhampton, 1970.

---. *Emil's Pranks*. 1966. Illustrated by Björn Berg and translated by Susan Beard, Follett, 1971.

---. *Emil and the Piggy Beast*. 1971. Illustrated by Björn Berg and translated by Michael Heron, Follett, 1973.

---. *Samuel August och Hanna i Hult*. Svanbäck & Nyman, 1973.

---. *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter.* Translated by Patricia Crampton. Puffin, 1985.

---. "Jag läste Hamsun – och därför ljuger Pippi Långstrump så förtvivlat." *Det gränslösaste äventyret*, edited by Lena Törnqvist. Eriksson & Lindgren, 2007, pp. 79-84.

---. *War Diaries 1939-1945*. Yale UP, 2018.

Lundqvist, Ulla. *Århundradets barn* [The Child of the Century]. Stockholm, 1979. Diss.

Malewski, Anne. "Unpunished Gluttony in Astrid Lindgren's Children's Books." *Feast or Famine? Food and Children's Literature*, edited by Bridget Carrington and Jennifer Harding, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, pp. 99-120.

Metcalf, Eva-Marie. *Astrid Lindgren.* Twayne, 1995.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Matmästaren Astrid Lindgren." *Läckergommarnas kungarike: Om matens roll i barnlitteraturen* [In the Kingdom of the Epicureans: The Role of Food in Children's Literature], edited by Ulla Bergstrand and Maria Nikolajeva, Centrum för barnkulturforskning, 1999, pp. 213-250.

Nikolajeva, Maria. *From Mythic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature*. Scarecrow, 2000.

Strömstedt, Margareta. *Astrid Lindgren: En levnadsteckning.* Rabén & Sjögren, 1977.

Sundmark, Björn. "'You and I Alfred': Intergenerational Solidarity in the Emil Series." *Intergenerational*

Solidarity in Children's Literature and Film, edited by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques, UP of Mississippi, 2021, pp. 31-43.

Notes

[1] In the first English translation Kalle Blomkvist is named "Bill Bergson."

[2] In her biographical essay "Samuel August från Sevedstorp och Hanna i Hult" (no complete translation in English, unfortunately), Lindgren mentions the local poorhouse, and how her own mother, like Alma, provided food for the poor (215-216). In the same essay Lindgren also remembers the enormous and elaborate traditional dinners with relatives of her childhood (233).

[3] In the Swedish original the dialect word "tabberas" is used, a corrupted form of tabula rasa, and presumably picked up from hearing church sermons. The connotations of the word of course reinforce the near-Biblical proportions of Emil's deed. "Tabula rasa" also suggests the clean slate (and clean plate), renewal, starting over, whereas "obliteration" is destruction, plain and simple.