Beyond The End

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Who doesn't love a creepy tale? As young adults we are used to looking for unsettling situations in the media we consume. We do that for fun, or maybe, on a deeper level, it's actually a human need: to exorcise what terrifies us through the power of stories. When children are the ones asking the hard questions though, it becomes a whole lot more complicated. We need to rethink our relationship with children's literature.

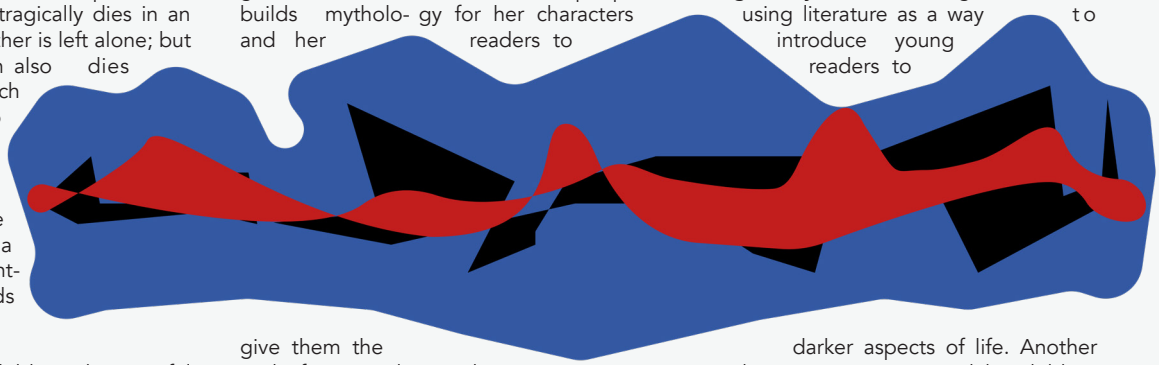
A normal writer wouldn't talk about suicide and euthanasia in a book for children. But Astrid Lindgren was not a normal writer. *The Brothers Lionheart (Bröderna Lejonhjärta)* scarred many childhoods in the best way using themes such as familial death, illness, suicide, and despotic oppression; all explored in one red thread. At the beginning of the story, we are introduced to little Skorpan, bedridden with tuberculosis and unlikely to survive for long. His brother, Jonatan, tries to alleviate his pain by telling him stories about Nangijala, a mythical land beyond death, where sagas and campfires still exist. When Jonatan tragically dies in an accident, his little brother is left alone; but not for long. Skorpan also dies from his illness, which transports him to Nangijala, where he and his brother live epic adventures by joining a resistance group, subverting a dictatorship, and fighting dragons. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it?

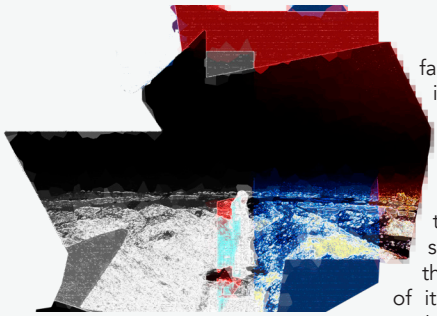
What struck me as a child was the eventful story, but what hit me in adulthood were the heavy undertones of the whole thing: the story happens in this liminal space, most likely Skorpan's hallucinations or near-death experiences, and hits terrifying plot points one after the other. The ending is so strong and emotional that many concerned parents wrote letters to Lindgren expressing their disappointment. She responded as legends do: by telling them that Bröderna was by far her best-received book by children, who wrote to her in big numbers asking for a sequel.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of an afterlife, but Nangijala isn't really a religious construction. Jonatan, a 13-year-old child, makes up this alternate reality as a way of helping his brother – and himself – deal with his near death, a concept so big and scary that has required a justification since the beginning of time. Nangijala is therefore the result of an almost primordial need, solved the same way as humankind did millennia ago: with storytelling. Lindgren, who treats children as real people, builds mytholo- gy for her characters and her readers to give them the tools for grappling with the complex and the mysterious. Nothing new as our societies have been doing that forever.

Myths and folklore are born for this exact reason: to explain the unexplainable. They have served this function by answering with comprehensible stories, proxies of wisdom gained in a centuries-long process, transmitted in both verbal and written form to generations of old and young. Folkloristic traditions are usually thought of as ways of preserving culture and they are more than a tool for archiving, they are for teaching – which is probably why so many children love mythology from a tender age. And yet, those parents writing angry letters didn't seem to get the concept, as many others don't in the new book banning rage spreading all over the world. Adults find refuge in the supernatural far more often; why shouldn't children be allowed to explore the theme of the end through stories?

Lindgren is just one of a long line of artists using literature as a way to introduce young readers to darker aspects of life. Another popular success appreciated by children and adults alike such as *The Lord of the Rings* is also heavy on recalls to the afterlife. Tolkien himself said that death and immortality were the real themes of his masterwork, and he wrote it for his 5-year-old. Tolkien also dedicated a big part of his studies to fairy tales, their meanings, and their effects; he defined the ideal mindset for reading them as "with the heart of a little child." In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, he once identified a double use for such





fables: to introduce children to things "that are beyond their measure rather than short of it" and to provide adults with "Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, all things of which children have, as a rule, less need than older people."

Of course, the point of exposing children to darkness through stories isn't to provide them with trauma, but hope. Tolkien said that each fairy tale, *The Lord of the Rings* included, should have a eucatastrophe – a turn for the better, "the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat." Its objective is not to hide the shadows, but rather to spread light on them, offering a way through them thanks to the power of stories, just as Jonatan does for his little brother.

In 1977, four years after *The Brothers Lionheart´s* debut, writer Gloria Goldreich published an article arguing that a flourishing of children's books about death was happening: "It is consistent that a society [...] explaining the mysteries of molecules and atoms [to children] should also produce works of fiction which attempt to define and explain death." But are we that better at giving answers to ourselves via stories nowadays? Writer Amitav Ghosh thinks not; quite the opposite. In his 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he argues that we're failing to give fiction manifestations to the biggest problem of our time: the climate crisis. Ghosh thinks that society has become more complacent, more interested in the present than in hypotheses for the future, and that literature reflects that. Therefore, it is failing to give us any perspective, utopian or dystopian, about the future to come. And a problem on which we apply no imagination, folklore and Tolkien teach us, is a problem we can´t solve.

It is crucial that we keep telling stories about the world that surrounds us and even more about the things that put us in uncomfortable positions. Moreover, we need to make heavy-themed stories available to children, as they are necessary for their cognitive and social development. Young people are used to creating their transmittable traditions (so-called *childlore*) and we adults are often dismissive of it (refered to as the *triviality barrier* by psychologists), but we need to recognise this as a need. It's us, the grown-ups, who are responsible for giving them the tools to confront the black holes that we individually are not able to look through.

> As a ferocious fan of the Lionhert saga in my youth it truly did shapae my world, just like Theo describaed. So much so that my perceptions of death have hugely influenced my life.

An Indifferent Child

During my childhood, I missed the last moments with my grandfather at his funeral because I was playing with my friends. When my beloved great-grandmother passed away, I couldn't even shed a tear. At the funeral, I thought people were faking crying.

I used to believe people can't perceive death; like a fallen leaf on the surface of water. Initially causing ripples, the surroundings try to smooth the disturbance, returning to normal. In my naive childhood, I believed death was just a ripple that would eventually settle, and we would meet at some endpoint.

Flying Blind

I always felt that life and death were like a game because death wasn't the endpoint. I devoutly believed in everything, and watching the crying people at funerals always made me wonder why. After all, we would meet at the endpoint, wouldn't we? Fantasising that I was the player, bidding farewell to one NPC after another, I gradually grew out of naively holding onto the view that we would eventually meet in heaven, and as I grew older, I failed to cherish the present, only desiring to reach the end of the game and become a successful player. So I chose to not see love, death, and anything emotional, just choosing flying blind.

You Only Live Once

This continued until my senior year. A series of events led me to question my worldview, and I began to believe that maybe there was no god. But wait, no god? Does that mean no afterlife? Suddenly, my world collapsed.

Every night, I faced not only regrets about my life up until now but also endured the concept of nothingness after death eating my soul. I wasn't afraid of loneliness; I feared the void. I started to fear death which led me to begin to love and enjoy being alive. I became hedonistic, prioritising the present. I partied every day instead of focusing on my studies. I began to hate sleep, and on the brink of almost dying, I would sleep for a day and be grateful I didn't die. Yeah, if we only live once, we'd better seize every moment to be happy, wouldn't we?

Death Is Just a Full Stop

In February of last year, my grandmother passed away. It's strange to say, but this was the first time I truly acknowledged death and felt sadness. My grandmother was a teacher, and trying to be the best student, she always cherished me.
After the funeral, I began to reassess myself, reflecting on the past. I realised I never truly understood the beliefs rounds death in my culture, nor did I live my life properly. I started relearning and understanding our culture, acknowledging the fascinating worldview my people hold. I still don't adhere to any religion, but I'm willing to believe in the existence of God because I don't want my grandmother to leave me with no tether.



A friend of mine once asked, "What is the end of a person's life?" I said, "Void." He disagreed; he said it wasn't about death; Death is just a full stop. But what about the sentence before the full stop? My understanding of death had always focused on it being a full stop, bringing nothingness. Yet, I forgot that the full stop is part of a splendid sentence.