Lennart Hellsing – a brief description

Most Swedish children are familiar with the character of "Krakel Spektakel". Most children, and their parents and grandparents, also know the song about the wizard from India.

For sixty years Lennart Hellsing (born in 1919) has been one of the authors who have played a key role in children’s culture in Sweden. Alongside Astrid Lindgren he, too, has been a portal figure in formulating Swedish children’s literature as it is today. In his capacity as a critic, he broke with what he considered the moralism, sentimentality and sickly-sweetness surrounding children’s books. He has been outspoken about the middle-class view of literature as a tool in moral upbringing. In his opinion, the mission of books is to develop children’s feelings and imaginations, to give them “instantaneous experiences and pleasure in the present”. He has written that books ought to "point out new routes to happiness or ways out of sorrow and despondency".

His first poems for children were published in 1943, his first children’s book in 1945, the same year that saw the publication of his first volume of poetry for adults. Since then, his publications have come to number some one hundred titles, including a dozen “adult” books although it should be pointed out that, his oeuvre has effaced the frontiers between children’s and adult literature.

In addition, Hellsing has made a large number of media reports and radio programmes, and written some children’s operas with various composers, film manuscripts and an incalculable number of beloved children’s songs. For a period of time he was a record producer, making children’s recordings with his own material as well as that of others. He is an avid collector of books, and has succeeded on many occasions at developing experiences for children that span the total spectrum of the arts, including a combination of words, images, music and movements. Composers with whom he has collaborated include Knut Brodin, Laci Boldemann and Georg Riedel.

Lennart Hellsing has an international background. His maternal great, great grandmother, who married a Swedish man and lived in Stockholm, was quick to familiarize young Lennart with English nursery rhymes. He later translated many of these, and published various collections of children’s rhymes in Swedish. His own poetry has certainly also taken inspiration from the English nonsense tradition.

To a large extent, Lennart Hellsing’s children’s books are written in rhymed, highly rhythmic verse. He has a penchant for interesting, unusual words, and often invents words of his own. He masterfully communicates language pleasure and the joy of exploration even to quite small children. Recurrent motifs include the shimmering Orient of the folk tale. He has also described the Orient in both journalistic reports and poems for adults. And, contrary to received wisdom from common sense educators, his verses are full of sweets and cakes of the kind we are not meant to consume in large quantities.

Hellsing was also early to translate children’s poets such as A A Milne into Swedish, and he has continued to translate regularly far into his 80s.

Although it is difficult to do his poems justice in translation, they have been translated into many languages. However, very few of his books have been translated into a large number of languages. The only one of Lennart Hellsing’s books to have been translated into a large number of languages is Den underbara pumpan (literally The Marvellous Pumpkin), which can be found in at least Danish, Norwegian, Finnish, English, German, Dutch, Hebrew, French, Kurdish, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Afrikaans and Japanese. In England Krakel Spektakel is known as Billy, in the United States as Jimmy Potter, in Denmark as Lasse Lurifaks and in Germany as Krabel Spektakel.

All Lennart Hellsing’s children’s books have been illustrated by prominent Swedish artists and illustrators. He has selected his own illustrators, often introducing artists who have not previously illustrated children’s literature. Stig Lindberg, an outstanding designer, illustrated several of Hellsing’s early books, thus creating unforgettable figures. Other artists who have illustrated several Hellsing books are Poul Ströyer, Fibben Hald and Tommy Östmar.

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