
Nose Stuck in a Book

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Who is a librarian? For the majority of us it is a person responsible for lending out books and cataloguing new purchases. However, there is much more hidden behind the title. A good librarian must follow the development of the electronic database programs, have a good overview about the contents of their library, be able to advise the visitors how to find the right books and occasionally, be prepared to organise various programmes for the visitors of the library. Especially popular are events offered by municipal libraries to young readers and their parents.

We have approached Isabelle Mattsson, one of the Erasmus students of Library Science, currently finishing her study stay at Charles University, Faculty of Arts, to share her experience of studying this particular field and offering a project on Astrid Lindgren's "Ronja, the Robber's Daughter" to children in one of the partner schools of the Europe Meets School programme with us.

Isabelle, why have you decided to study Library Science? Is it a popular study programme in Sweden and at your home university?

I always liked the idea of the library as a place that is not commercialised and where everyone is welcome and can have free access to information. I'm also interested in being able to handle information, especially since it is so important in today's society. With many sources accessible on the internet it's not a problem to find information; the problem is to find the right one and being critical about it. I also thought it would be awesome to work somewhere where you get to be surrounded by books all day long.

The study programme is not that popular in Sweden, it is only available at a few universities. At University of Borås where I study, it's not one of the largest programmes either, but it is the oldest and best known education in its field in Sweden.

Library Science is nowadays a rather technical study field, a thing many of us are not really aware of. Could you tell us what studying it includes?

A lot of people have the impression that we read books all day long. Although I wouldn't mind that, it's not really what the study looks like. To explain it in short, most of it is about handling information in different ways: how to search for it, to catalogue it and to retrieve it. We also have some courses about the more non-technical aspects of the profession, such as how to approach the different user groups, theory and history.

You are just ending your Erasmus study stay at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. Was your stay here beneficial? What does the Department of Library Science offer for Erasmus students?

The study stay sure was beneficial for me! Not only for the opportunity to take classes not offered at my home university, but also for the experience of living in another country with different culture and language. It makes you grow so much as a person. And the Erasmus experience as well, meeting people from all over Europe and the whole world is so amazingly fun and teaches you a lot about the world.

There were not a big number of courses in English on offer in my host department, but the ones I took were interesting. "Research Methods in Library and Information Science" was really helpful as preparation for my bachelor thesis; "The Baroque Aristocratic and Bourgeois Libraries" was so informative and a bit different since Library History is not my main subject. It was also an unusual way of learning since we got to visit many old libraries in Prague. I also learned a lot from "Video games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon." Video games are becoming just as important a medium as books or movies and in this lecture we got a thorough look at the history of these games and an understanding of their future potential.

Being a librarian often means working with very various groups of library visitors – from university professors to small children who have just learnt how to read. I still fondly remember some programmes offered to me and my classmates by the local library when I was attending the Primary School. You had prepared a nice project on probably the most famous Swedish writer, Astrid Lindgren, in the frame of Europe Meets School programme of the Erasmus Club of Faculty of Arts. You also visited with this group the Primary School Strančice close to Prague. Was Astrid Lindgren your favourite writer when you were a child?

Astrid Lindgren was indeed one of my favourite writers. I especially liked Ronja and Pippi Longstocking as a child. Lindgren is always on the children's side in her stories; I think that's one of the reasons her books are so loved still. Another favourite author of mine was Tove Jansson. I loved the Moomin books. She's still one of my favourites. Her books can be read by both children and adults and I love the different characters with their quirks and personalities, the melancholy and the accompanying drawings.

Astrid Lindgren died in 2002. Is she still very popular in Sweden? Or are the Harry Potter books, for example, better sold these days in your home country? Who are or were other Swedish children books authors?

Yes, Astrid Lindgren is always up-to-date and probably one of the most liked persons in the whole Swedish history. For example, Sweden is going to get some new bank notes next year and she's going to be on one of them. There is also going to be a new movie "The Brother Lionheart" based on one of her books, directed by Tomas Alfredsson. Everyone seems excited about it. I don't know exactly if Harry Potter is more popular in Sweden today though, it might be a close call.

Another well liked and famous Swedish author for children is Sven Nordqvist who writes and illustrates the books about Pettson and Findus, about the farmer Pettson and his cat Findus. You can look at the illustrations in this series for hours; they're so full of details.

Some more recent popular Swedish children books today are the series of The JerryMaya Detective Agency by Martin Widmark and Helen Willis. Criminal stories for children are really popular these days, just as they are for adults.

Could you introduce us Astrid Lindgren a bit? Did the children in your host class in Strančice know her and her books?

Astrid Lindgren was born in Vimmerby, a small village in the Swedish countryside. She used a lot of experiences from her childhood as inspiration for her books. She liked to read and write as a child already. As an adult she moved to Stockholm where she lived for the rest of her life. She came up with Pippi Longstocking when her daughter was sick and told her stories about Pippi every night. She got to release a few other books before it, but it was Pippi that made her famous. She wrote over 70 books and is one of the world's most translated authors.

The children in my host class knew just a few of her stories; they were familiar with The Children of Bullerbyn, Karlsson on the Roof and Pippi. It was interesting that they often knew the movies rather than the books.

In your project you concentrated on a popular book "Ronja, the Robber's Daughter." What did you do with the children in your project? If after finishing your studies you are indeed working in a library, would you like to prepare similar programmes for the children attending the library you would work for?

The children in my host class were pupils in 4th grade of a Primary School and were quite good in English for that age. There were two joined classes but they worked really well even though the space was a bit tight for all of them.

I started with a presentation about Astrid Lindgren's life. Then we read a chapter from Ronja about when she's out skiing, gets stuck in the snow and meets some of the creatures of the forest. I thought it was suitable since it was wintery, funny and exciting at the same time. The children drew some really amazing and creative pictures of what happened in the story then. Finally, in the last class, we made some posters about Astrid Lindgren.

As to the future – yes, I would love to do similar projects and discussions about books. I feel good if I can broaden someone's horizons like this, make other people discover how amazing my favourite books are, or get them to try some different literature from what they are used to and read or enjoy a story they never would have known otherwise.

Thank you for the interview.