A Three and a Half Year Old Girl's Responses to Astrid Lindgren's *My Very Own Sister*

by Maureen Crago

Unless adults study very sensitively the way in which individual small children understand their early books, they run a high risk of failing to comprehend the processes whereby children learn to follow pictures and story. Very often adults have long forgotten the vividness of their early fears and curiosities and respond in a blunted way to a small child's concerns. This is what happens on the individual level. When adults write about the responses of "children" to their first books how can they begin to have any confidence that they know what they are talking about until they submit themselves to the discipline of examining responses at the microlevel?

A decade has elapsed since the first voices were heard calling critics in the field of children's literature to listen to the responses of children. Marilyn Cochrane Smith (1980) reviewed the then-published handful of parent diaries and said that what was needed was more evidence.

Little has changed in terms of the material that is available to anyone seriously interested in children's response. We should not be surprised about this, because observing children's responses to their books is a highly labour intensive activity. All of us have probably met at least one person who would love to have had the opportunity of keeping a diary of their child's reading experience. In fact many of the articles that are still being written about children's early reading experiences are impressionistic recollections written in tranquillity which make pleasant enough reading, but are not sufficiently robust to endure close questioning. It is one of the ills that plague this field, it seems to me, that it is a great deal easier to analyse the ideas of adults about children's responses than it is to investigate those responses themselves.

As a writer who has jointly with Hugh Crago offered for publication quite a proportion of the diary material available, I am in this article concentrating on our daughter's responses to one picture book. For details of daily reading procedure, see **Prelude to Literacy** (1983). One of the observations that we made is that from time to time there were books that our children discovered that met with an extraordinarily intense initial reaction. We were very familiar of course with the pleasure that any new book usually promised. But occasionally there were books that made the cup run over. For our daughter Astrid Lindgren's **My Very Own Sister** was one, **Nim and his Food** (translated from **Jeudi a Bon Appetit**) was another. These two books came to Anna's notice in 1976 when she was just three and a half years old. A comment recorded two weeks before we borrowed **Nim** from the library and three weeks before we borrowed **My Very Own Sister** shows that Anna had commented "I like magic books" as she was looking wistfully at the covers of new library books borrowed for her but being withheld, to save them for a plane trip the following day. Hugh's note at that time in the diary was: "This seems to be the first indication of a preference for (or even recognition of) fantasy." His comment later that month, adding to a summary of Anna's book-oriented behaviour at three years six months reads:

*"A very marked and interesting development in recent weeks has been the beginning of a systematic attempt to comprehend the postulates of some of her fantasy-based books — **Harold and the Purple Crayon, In the Night Kitchen, Jennifer's Rabbit.** At this stage it looks as though* dream fantasies *only are involved — i.e. works set wholly in an imaginary world are as yet unquestioned. See also the records for Sarah's Room and King Grisly-Beard."*

The next point in this summary at 3.6 relates to another turning point, this time in relation to what appeared to be a developing need to be introduced to continuous narrative, as opposed to a diet that consisted wholly of short picture books which were read over and over:

"Perhaps the beginning of another big change. Anna rejected My Very Own Sister after only a very few minutes (as of 30.1.76) when she was approaching three years and seven months. Correlating this with remarks in a letter from

Virginia Lowe about Rebecca's now wanting a different *story every night rather than a repetition of the same book over and over intensively for a week or so, we decided to change to chapters from a longer book of the Young Puffin type."*

Clearly, for Anna, three years and six months was something of a watershed time. In **Prelude to Literacy** we dealt with Anna's grappling at this age with what was real and what was fantasy, particularly as exemplified by her exploration of **Jennifer's Rabbit** by song writer Tom Paxton. For our purpose here it is enough to know that Anna was poised on the edge of discovery about the real-fantasy distinction, and as well, at the same time, coming to that moment when her love of new stories was leading her to signal that she was more rapidly tiring of hearing the same book several times repeated.

Astrid Lindgren's picture book text **My Very Own Sister**, about Barbara and her "secret twin sister" Lalla-lee, is gratifying in its concentration on food, pets, safe adventure and being needed. Barbara, feeling temporarily ousted from her parents' affections by the arrival of a baby brother, retreats to the companionship of Lalla-lee, who is queen of an underground realm. She is distressed by Lalla-lee's warning that "when Salikon's roses fade" Lalla-lee will be gone. When Barbara returns home she finds that her parents have given her a longed-for dog. As she walks in the garden with the dog, Barbara observes that the rose bush Salikon's blooms have all faded, and the hole at its roots which led to Lalla-lee's Golden Hall is no longer there. Hans Arnold's illustrations are romantic and fantastic: Barbara and Lalla-lee have long golden hair and chaplets of flowers; the fantasy Good People in the underground kingdom wear flowers and long dresses; the pages abound in weird architecture, odd creatures and lustrous-eyed, Disneyfied rodents.

I remember being very much struck at the time by the comment of a library assistant who had had a high regard for Astrid Lindgren's work, that she had not lived up to her standards in writing **My Very Own Sister**. Too gratifying, perhaps? And yet this is a story that deals with the very real pain of dispossession, that axe-blow at the base of the first-born's world tree, the retreat into wish-fulfilling fantasy, and the return to a happier reality facilitated by thoughtful parents. There was no evidence at the time we first borrowed this book that Anna had understood the therapeutic burden of this story. Eventually when it was borrowed the third time she produced a lengthy memorised version of **My Very Own Sister** and Monica Beisner's **Fantastic Toys** one morning in bed, including the detail "Daddy loves mummy best, and mummy loves my baby brother" and *supplying* the information that as Barbara and Lalla-lee part for the last time they *hug* each other. By then, Anna had had a sister of her own for five months, which perhaps enabled her to absorb the details about Barbara's family life and to invent an act of physical affection.

Anna found a shiny new copy of My Very Own Sister in our local library when she was 3.6. She borrowed the book for a week (27.1.76-2.2.76) and for five days, her interest in it was intense, declining to nil in the two days that followed. Since then, the book was reborrowed when Anna was 3.9 (her choice, for a fortnight); 4.7 (her choice, for a fortnight) and 5.2 (my choice).

What I propose to do in this article is to take, opening by opening (there being no page numbers) the remarks Anna made about the book in her first borrowing of it; that is, remarks made in the five day span when she was most visibly excited by the book. On some days the book was read twice or three times and her comments on the second and third reading in the day explored a different focus each time. Everything that Anna said about that book in that first week will be transcribed here (from tape-recording, unless I explicitly say so) with explanation of her apparent meaning when that is necessary. A dash is used to indicate a pause in which Anna searched for words, or suddenly changed direction. On two occasions it was not I who read to her, but Anna's father, Hugh.

Front cover
The front cover illustration shows Barbara and Lalla-lee on horseback, escorted by butterfly and bee people, passing a group of flower folk and snails. Anna drew attention to this illustration in the second reading on 29.1.76:

A: *You see what's on the cover? There's a worm and a rabbit, and what's that? A little girl? Or a lady?* [Girl next to rabbit, lower left hand corner. Where little girls can be bigger than adult fairy people, this question has point]. *What's all these things?* [Flower folk with petal hats]. *And what's that?* [Girl]. *What sort is she?*
H: *I think she's a magic girl.*
[Hugh is doing his part in fostering comprehension of the real-fantasy distinction in this statement].

Title page
The title page shows a tiny girl in a simple one-piece garment sitting side-saddle on a snail and holding aloft a flower as big as herself. Snails in this book do not have eyes on stalks; their faces are more nearly human. Anna remarked:

28.1.76
She's sitting on a worm with a flower in her hand. It's very small.

Elsewhere she calls this type of creature a snail, using "worm" to apply only to serpentine creatures. She went on to remark in words which were not recorded exactly that the girl on the snail has a swimming costume on and is going to swim. It would seem that comment "It's very small" refers to the girl, shown to be small in relation to the flower she carries and the snail on which she rides.

Opening One
The first opening introduces us to our heroine, Barbara, who faces us directly on the right hand page to tell her story. Beside her is the rose bush Salikon, the home of a variety of small creatures. Two small ladies hover on the same page, one with butterfly wings, and the other with a plain set of wings. On the left hand page, a swarm of bees flies off to the left, observed by a flying manikin.

29.1.76
A: *Is that little lady a butterfly lady?*
M: *Yes.*
A: *Aaah!*
30.1.76
A: *Um, is that a bee?* [Winged being near bees].
A: *Is that the same one?* [Similar being on opposite page].
A: *It goes ON AND ON — you can't read me the rest, because you can read me a bit of Bad Hat.*
[That is, **Madeline and the Bad Hat**].

Her rude comment "It goes ON AND ON" was at the time her standard way of saying that she was bored with whatever she was listening to or looking at.

Opening Two
Opening Two gives us a fuller view of the rose bush Salikon, with a hole beneath it into which Barbara is gazing. She is surrounded by miniature people, and furthest from her, in the lower right hand corner, is a snail carrying on his back a green beetle person with waving antennae. The text in this opening concludes". . . where Lalla-lee is queen."

29.1.76 FIRST READING
A: *Was Lalla-lee the queen? Was she big?*
Anna's difficulty here lies in the fact that Lalla-lee is a little girl like herself, and in her previous experience, queens have always been adult, and princesses little girls. When I asked her what she thought, she said that Lalla-lee was queen, and not big.

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *Um — is that a ladybird, and all they ladybirds?* [Lower left hand corner]. *Are these magic people?* [Right hand, near gutter]. *And that's a magic — and that somebody.*
H: *Yes, I think he might be a kind of beetle magic person.* [Beetle near Barbara's foot].

30.1.76
A: *The thorns might come into all these animals.* [That is, those standing around or hovering around the rose bush].

Anna here relies on her own experience of roses. Similarly the next question depends on her knowledge that where there is a queen there may be a king.

A: *Is this the one going to be the king?*

The one she thus identifies is the beetle person in the right hand corner, riding a snail.

Opening Three

Opening Three drew one comment only. For this relative silence I can see no reason. An adult and baby mouse in the lower right hand corner are given prominence by their isolation on the page. The right hand page shows Barbara underground, knocking on the door of the Golden Hall, watched by all manner of curious animals and insects. To her right are four large green animated toadstools, among whom Anna may have expected to locate Nicko, who is mentioned in the final sentence of the text:

"The door opened, and Nicko, the little dwarf who cooks Lalla-lee's food, bowed and grinned at me just as he always does."

27.1.76
A: *Um, where is he?*

When I told her that he appeared over the page, in Opening Four, she was able to find him. It was a habitual response of Anna's at this stage to want to identify in the picture any person given prominence in the accompanying text.

Opening Four

Opening Four shows Lalla-lee and Barbara enthroned on a sofa, which had lion heads on the arms and at the back, a carved girl and boy queen and king hold a crown. The girls are surrounded by their white rabbits, and their black poodles, Ruff and Duff. On the right hand page, Nicko dangles a carrot before a white rabbit.

29.1.76 FIRST READING
A: *Um, that's where they are — is that Lalla-lee — and is that Ruff?*

Her identifications were correct, but the question has point, because the two dogs are exactly alike, and the girls have small differentiation — Lalla-lee wears a crown, and a dress of another hue.

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *Oh look! There's two rabbits. Are they real rabbits?*
H: *They seem to be real rabbits, yes.*
A: *Why?* [Her "why" seems to mean "prove it!" or "convince me!"]
H: *Lalla-lee thinks they're real rabbits. Barbara thinks they're real rabbits.*
A: *THEY'RE not.* [these were the lion heads on the chairs].
H: *No.*
A: *They're dogs.*
H: *You think they're dogs?*
A: *Yes, they're faces of dogs, and I think THEY'RE people — I think that's a king and that's a queen, because they've got crowns on.*
[The crowned figures at the back of the throne].
A: *Is he going to give a carrot to the rabbit?*
H: *Do you think he is?*
A: *Yes.*

It is interesting that she asks if the rabbits are real, whereas she has seemingly been content with simply identifying such characters as the "butterfly lady" and the "magic people" without raising any questions about their reality. Anna's final question in this sequence: "Is he going to give the carrot to the rabbit?" perhaps shows us what the force was behind her first question: "Are they real rabbits?" In other words, she is concerned that Nicko may be offering food to toy or inanimate rabbits (of the same status as the carved lion heads and the carved girl and boy with crowns). But perhaps also it is her own toy white rabbit, mysteriously named Mrs Sneeze, that is behind these questions. Just the previous week, when talking about **Jennifer's Rabbit** she had said: "I might dream of Mrs Sneeze and then Mrs Sneeze might turn into a real one — but how can you turn into a real one? — I might see how quiet rabbits are — All right, I'll say 'What a quiet rabbit you are. And I'll go back to sleep.'" In relation to the somewhat alarming sight of Jennifer's rabbit coming alive in the night, she imagined her own toy rabbit doing the same. There is possibly a memory of this lingering behind her questions here, as well as her own experience of a rabbit as being just a toy, rather than alive and hungry.

In the last reading session for the week, 30.1.76, Anna said

After this picture, that's going to be all.

She thus made it plain that she had

seen and heard enough. I read on.
A: [Pointing to the poodle] *That dog has short hair, so I think he likes the summer — Let's see at the end if he has it — Has he long hair?* [She then compared the poodle with rabbits and the illustration of the poodle in the basket in opening thirteen, establishing for herself that poodles have long hair. This allowed a discussion I initiated with her the day before about long and short-haired dogs.]
A: [Pointing to the sofa on which the girls sit] *Is this going to be the throne?*

I had referred to it as the throne, because of its high back, but something about that seemed wrong to Anna — probably its two-seater nature. In Anna's experience until now, thrones had been one-seaters. She had encountered thrones for instance in Helen Craig's illustrations for **Animal Castle** at 2.5. in **Noggin the King** at 3.0 and in **Wide-awake Jake** at 3.1. All three were high-backed, cushioned and uncompromisingly narrow.

A: Um, you can tell me — tonight you can draw these rabbits — can you draw things?

This remark refers to my habit of copying into the diary (at night, after the press of the day) features from the illustrations which puzzled Anna, when it was simpler to copy them than to find the exact words. But why single out the rabbits? Somehow my drawing of them has something to do with her uncertainty about whether or not they are real. It seems likely that rabbits have become a key to the question of what is real and what is not, in association with Mrs Sneeze and **Jennifer's Rabbit**.

Opening Five
The fifth opening shows the girls naked, playing ball in a pool, in the centre of which two upright stone fish spout water. Two doves flutter in the spray. In the roses in the lower right and left hand corners sit two bees, the one on the right blending well with the background.

27.1.76
A: *Those girls are swimming. They are standing up with their arms in the air.*

"Those girls" in its vagueness suggests that she may not recognise them as Barbara and Lalla-lee. Demonstrating her notion of the crawl, she stood erect and paddled with her arms.

28.1.76
A: *What are those birds getting? A shower? And the fish are drinking those drops?*

There is nothing in the illustration to convey to someone ignorant of the workings of fountains that the water arises from the fishes' mouths to fall back into the pool; Anna has seen the direction at least partially reversed. (See **Prelude to Literacy** for more on the business of learning to read pictures).

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *Oh look! Bee! — Where are their clothes?*

Hugh suggested to her that the girls' clothes were in another room, because they were not shown in the illustration. "Where are their clothes?" may also mean "Why were they suddenly naked?" (Something about her preoccupation with the naked state occurs in Hugh Crago's discussion of **In the Night Kitchen**, unpublished, 1982).

Opening Six
The sixth opening is the sole wordless spread. In it the unperturbed pair, riding bareback on Goldenfoot and Silverfoot gallop through the "Terrible Big Forest where the Wicked People live. They have green eyes and long arms" and rush silently after the girls. In the green dimness on all sides are less threatening denizens of the forest.

27.1.76
A: *What do they do? Are they trying to kill them? — What's that?* [A Wicked Person].

She is inquiring into the intentions of the Wicked People, and what exactly they want to do to the girls. She then pointed out a winged "boy in blue trousers" at top right, and the snails at bottom right.

A: *They have faces like — have — Why are they sitting still?*

She focused on the cluster of small green toadstool creatures.

A: *Are these hens? I think they are.*

My eye like Anna's was drawn to the yellow goggle eyes and wedge of nose, so that for a long time I saw these shapes as sitting doves, rather than as the bells of toadstools; look hard and there are stalks to be seen.

A: *Look at that thing. It is a bird and it has a nose and a trumpet.*
H: *How do you know it's a bird.*
A: *It has claws — the Wicked People have claws too. There's a giraffe.*

The trumpet-nosed "bird" has no wings; its hands are engaged in fingering the holes of its nose-trumpet (presumably a conceit derived from Bosch and Bruegel?)

28.1.76 THIRD READING
A: *Why haven't — why aren't there any words there?*

After two readings of this opening, Anna finally comments that it differs from the others in containing no text.

Opening Seven
On the left hand page of the seventh opening, lower left, stands a Good Person holding out a tray of sweets. On the right hand page, Barbara and Lalla-lee are on horseback with the Terrible Forest behind them, and a group of Good People in front of them. Wicked People and other odd creatures watch them from the safety of the Forest.

28.1.76 FIRST READING
A: *Um — um — is there one of the Wicked People . . .* [Enunciation unclear, probably because she is talking about something emotionally loaded, as well as because she is unsure of how to frame her question].

A: *Are they the sparks?* [Pointing to what seem to be tiny flowers beneath the hooves of the horses, standing motionless at the forest edge].

The text at this juncture says: "But Goldenfoot and Silverfoot ran so fast that sparks flew from their hooves — golden sparks and silver sparks."

Um — those Good People are very close to where the Wicked People live.

Taking this comment (as well as the earlier mumble) to indicate some concern about the proximity of the Wicked People, I suggested to Anna that there was a sort of invisible magic wall at the Edge of the Terrible Forest, which restrained the Wicked People from leaving the Forest. She accepted this, but interpreted it in her own way, thus:

I think it's this thing.

That is, searching for what could keep the Wicked People in the Forest, she picked out a green bat-winged being with a trumpet-nose, in the centre, and then located a second of them. Their ages are indeterminate.
A: *Um — um — there's two of these creatures there — I think they're both babies. Um — you see it has eyes and a nose.*

In other words she either misunderstood or misheard my "invisible magic wall" and hit on the most anomalous-looking creature she could find in the illustration, producing a solution by putting two puzzles together. In the process she accords a very high protective status to babies!

28.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *This Wicked Boy isn't looking annoyed — I think he wants to look happy. I think he's smiling instead.*

This boy differs from the others in having his bent arm outstretched to the right. His eyes have a slightly milder expression than those of the other Wicked People, as his brows are not as sharply inclined. Anna's early preoccupation with Bad Men and her conclusion that they were depicted with slanting brows is discussed in **Prelude to Literacy** (1983). Here she remarks on annoyance as a sign of the Wicked People, and selects one who seems more kindly disposed. This focus seems to be an attempt to reassure herself that there is some gentleness among the Wicked People, and continues her interest in the security of the two girls that is hinted at in her earlier statement about how close the Good People are to the haunt of the Wicked People, in the first reading for this day.

27.1.76 THIRD READING
A: *Um — why did they want to cap — capture them?*
M: *What do you think?*
A: *Because they feel like it.*

The text reads: "The Wicked People wanted to capture us and put us in the Terrible Big Cave." No reason is given for this, so Anna seeks one, and gives one that satisfies her.

The next day she made no comment about this opening the first time the book was read.

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *Why's she looking like that?*
A wrinkled old Good Person has a smiling, pursed-up mouth. This was not a common sight in Anna's acquaintance with picture books.

Opening Eight
The eighth opening drew no comment. In it a group of Good People cook and proffer sweets to the girls.

Opening Nine
The ninth opening shows "the Most Beautiful Valley in the World where the flowers sing and the trees play musical instruments." The brook hums a tune.

28.1.76
A: *Isn't it funny?*
M: *What?*
A: *The water and the flowers and the trees and things.* [They all have faces] — *Oh look! The trees have tree fingers!* [Small chuckle].

28.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *That isn't the same day as this day, is it?* [Comparing Opening One]. This I accepted as a true statement because the text in the first opening says: "Yesterday was a warm day . . ." The illustration there could show our heroine addressing us in the present, or could show her setting out on yesterday's adventure. To me, she appears to be telling the story, in a frame for the rest of the book. If this is so, Anna is correct. I take it that Anna based her question partly on a memory of the use of the word "yesterday".

28.1.76 THIRD READING
A: *Why isn't — why isn't that tree playing?* [That is, playing a musical instrument]. She was pointing to a tree at the valley's edge, which was not participating in the music-making.
A: *Why couldn't she hear the brook's tune?* [Text: ". . . and I couldn't hear the brook's tune"].

Barbara is so upset by Lalla-lee's words that she is aware only of her fears of what Lalla-lee can be about to say to her. Anna fails to engage fully with the emotional content.

29.1.76 SECOND READING
Anna brusquely pushed away Hugh's hand, which obscured part of the foreground, so she could "see the brook — and all these things."

Opening Ten
Opening Ten is an evening scene, showing Barbara ahead on Silverfoot, distressed because Lalla-lee has said "when Salikon's roses fade I shall be gone." Anna interrupted after the words "the tears running down my cheeks" to ask:

27.1.76 *Why did they go down her cheeks — were they only perspiration?*
M: *No, they were tears.*
A: *Why? Why was she crying? Was she unhappy?*

It seems likely that what we are seeing here is her need to turn away from the evidence of pain — that is, if she was able to grasp this level of the message at all.

28.1.76
A: *Is that her?* [That is, Barbara. Lalla-lee is behind her].

This suggests, like her comment on Opening five, 27.1.76, she finds it hard to distinguish between the two.

A: *Is it night time there?*
M: *Yes.*
A: *No. The sky is blue when it's day.*

True enough, but there are clues: the white orb in the sky, the lighted windows in the house near by, the darker-than-usual tones for all the familiar things. Note that as in her question about opening nine on the same day, she was concerned about time.

28.1.76 THIRD READING
A: Why wasn't there — was — was — was Lalla-lee in there? Is

Lalla-lee in there yet? Is she still in there with nobody in her house?

This is a curious question which could show that Anna failed to notice Lalla-lee riding behind, or that she interpreted this as two pictures rather than a double page spread. She appears to be asking if Lalla-lee is in the house on the left hand by herself. All that is clear is that Anna is trying to work out where Lalla-lee is. Is she still thinking about Lalla-lee's statement "when Salikon's roses fade, I shall be gone?" While this question seems to be somewhat overshadowed by the emotional content of the story, her next question brings us back to safe ground.

A: *Um — what's that there? A big church?*
M: *A house.*
A: *What do people do there?*

Anna saw this eccentric house as a church because of a spindly spire and a structure that resembles a bell tower. My label "house" did not satisfy her, because in her understanding, houses don't look like churches, or have any of their stereotypical features. Her question: "What do people do there?" was an attempt to solve the problem of what sort of building it was; and an indication of dissent from my statement.

Opening Eleven
The eleventh opening is a cosy return to Nicko and the rabbits with log fire and pancakes. In the foliage, top right side, a little lady looks down upon the scene from her balcony. Three babies are in bed in the hearts of flowers, and of these only one appears to be asleep. The text reads: ". . . Goldenfoot and Silverfoot were all wet with sweat when we got back to the Golden Hall."

28.1.76: *Why were they all wet?*

The word Anna herself used (as we saw when discussing the last opening) was not "sweat" but "perspiration", but her experience of the phenomenon and her understanding of it was limited. Perhaps (comparing her comments on the preceding opening) she is worried that "wet" may signify tears.

A: *Are they back in the Golden Hall again?*

The text states that they are, although Anna's previous question refers to information earlier in the sentence rather than the mention of the Golden Hall (see above) so that Anna may have tuned out in preparation for asking about the sweat. Furthermore, the illustration shows us a different view of the Golden Hall from those in openings four and five.

A: *Ooo! Whose little house is that?* [The little one at top right].
A: *Um — what are those little girls lying down in there for? Are they having their little rests?* [These are the tiny babies bedded in the flowers].
She chuckled at her reference to "little rests", the name for her own afternoon sleep.

A: *Um — and — um — is that one having his — her little rest? But they aren't asleep, those two girls. But that one is.*

LATER READING NOT RECORDED VERBATIM
She speculated lengthily about how good it would be to have a bed in a flower.

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *Is she* [Lalla-lee] *giving that one* [pancake] *to him* [dog]?

That is in fact what is happening. Again as in opening four she is puzzled when food is offered to a creature. She seems to be grappling with the problem of what is real and what is not. Real food and fantasy creature, or real food and toy dog?

Opening Twelve
A crowd of hedgehogs, mice, caterpillars, worms and a rabbit watch as Barbara climbs the ladder back to the upper world.

27.1.76 A: *Why is she climbing up the ladder?*

It is hard to divine why this should occur to her to ask. Is she wondering why Barbara should want to leave the Golden Hall?

29.1.76 SECOND READING
A: *That's a lady — hey! Do we see any ladybirds here?* [For the importance of sound association,

see Weir, 1962].
H: *Well, I can't see any — that's a caterpillar person, isn't it?*
A: *Mmm and a worm and a worm and a worm — and a worm and a worm and a worm. I think he's a giraffe because of his long neck.*

[This creature has horns]. A yawn followed and a semi-audible comment which was seemingly a request for the identification of another creature.

A: *Is that a caterpillar and they worms? Is that a caterpillar and that a worm?* [These two in the top left hand corner]. *What's his name?* [Which creature this was was not recorded].

H: [Losing patience] *I haven't the faintest idea.*

Opening Thirteen
The thirteenth opening comprises two separate illustrations, but there was no comment on either of them, apart from that recorded under opening four. The comments relating to this opening are otherwise textual. The story ends with the words ". . . and there was no hole in the ground any more." No explanation is given for this. It is not surprising then that Anna seeks one.

28.1.76 A: *Why wasn't there any hole in the ground any more?*

She fails to understand that the disappearance of the hole means that the fantasy is over. That night she also asked "Whose dog was Ruff?" Probably the fact that the dogs' names were so similar made it harder for her to remember. She missed the textual cue: ". . . my dog down in the Golden Hall." The text reads: "That night I was so happy I could hardly sleep."

A: *Why was she so happy?*

Astrid Lindgren does not explicitly say that Barbara is engrossed in her new pet and has no need of Lalla-lee any more. Where the text leaves that sort of gap, Anna needs to fill it in. Notice that again it is an emotional implication that has eluded her.

The Back Cover
The back cover elicited no response at all, despite the fact that it appears to offer as much to engage the eye as any of the other illustrations.

Humour, annoyance and delight

Let us now look back at the types of remarks which this book inspired in Anna, and when she responded. Her only chuckles both came on one day, which leads me to wonder if she was in the mood for laughter that day, rather than that she had suddenly noticed details that amused her. But as we observe her "Oh Look!" exclamations, it becomes clear that she did gradually perceive additional facets of the illustrations. In both places where she chuckled, the stimulus can be interpreted as the unexpected discovery of characteristics that made the pictured object out to be like Anna herself.

Opening 9 A: *Isn't that funny — the water and the flowers and things — Oh look! The trees have tree fingers!*

These trees have eyes, nose, mouth, arms and maybe leaf-hair, which makes the singling out of their fingers curious, but parallel to comments made six months before. We were reading Felix Hoffmann's **A Boy went out to Gather Pears** in which a stick and a bucket become animated. She ignored the stick's face and asked (11.6.75) what "those things" were (his feet), the next day remarking "What funny shoes he has!", insisting they were shoes when I questioned her. (Because the stick was little — the book is small format — and rough-hewn, I could not be sure whether Hoffmann had shoes or feet in mind). Again (11.6.75) she remarked "It's fun that the bucket has feet." It seems as if faces in strange places were already accepted, but that Anna was more likely to be amused by human hands and feet in unexpected quarters.

Opening Eleven A: *Um — what are those little girls lying down in there for — are they having their little rests?*

These exotic beings who sleep in flowers need their afternoon rests just as much as Anna did! (See **Prelude to Literacy** ch. 12 for more on "like me" humour).

On two occasions she showed annoyance. Once (29.1.76) when Hugh was obscuring part of the foreground of opening nine, and once, when she decided that she had had an overdose of this book. She once expressed pleasure, which we detected in her tone at the time, rather than in her language.

A: Is that little lady a butterfly lady? . . . Aaah!

In view of her intense devotion to this book, we are probably justified in seeing this as manifesting delight in the very existence of such a personage.

Responding to the text

Some questions seem to have had their genesis in the text, rather than in the illustrations. Among such questions are (for opening two) "Was Lalla-lee the queen?" Apart from this one question for opening two (and even here it is moot whether Anna would have asked the question at all had not the illustration shown her a queen much younger and smaller than she was accustomed to), her text-related questions clustered towards the end of the book; openings seven, nine, ten, eleven and thirteen, with two for openings seven and ten and three for opening thirteen. Like the example we have just looked at, they may indicate discrepancy between what we would expect and what we are told (differing views inside the Golden Hall) or evidence that the characters are responding emotionally to their circumstances.

Responding to the illustrations

There are instances of speculation, where Anna works from what is known to what could happen, as when she remarked that one of the Wicked People in opening seven "wanted to look happy", showing that her need was to deny their uniform wickedness. She makes this particular Wicked Person more approachable by labelling him a "boy", denying that he looks annoyed, positing that he "wants to" look happy, and then loses sight of her denial that he is looking annoyed, declaring "I think he's smiling instead". It takes her four steps to arrive at this positive position, progressively reshaping an anxiety-provoking perception into its opposite; this exactly, is what Freud called "reaction formation". Her last speculation was the lengthiest, but not recorded verbatim, about how good it would be to have a bed in a flower. Whereas in the previous example, her own emotional response to the protagonists' danger prompts her thinking, so that from the world of her own experience she attempts to convey protection into the world of the fiction, in this example, she would like to take a possibility from the fictional world for herself. What would it really be like to have a flower for a bed? Anna made a large number of comments about the illustrations, labelling and drawing details to adult attention. Some of these statements were prefaced by "Oh look!" suggesting to me that she had only just perceived the detail she was then remarking on. In every instance her statements concern the human characters, fantasy-humans and animated objects. She could, for instance, have talked about the two separate disembodied eyes in the foliage in opening seven, which in fact appear to be fruit, or she could have pointed out the varied shapes of the sweets in opening eight, where the stove looks totally unlike ours, and in another context would have deserved a comment, but she did not. Anna's persistent preference was for the human (or animate) over the non-human (and inanimate). See **Prelude to Literacy** (1983).

Questions

The largest body of comments are all cast as questions. These outweigh the statements by two to one. Among these questions are simple requests for names: "What're all these things?" Some of her questions go beyond labelling into a search for more understanding. When she asks about the Wicked People: "What do they do — are they trying to kill them?" she is endeavouring to penetrate beyond the information provided by the text. The story states baldly that the Wicked People come rushing silently after the girls, to imprison them in a cave, leaving us in the dark about their reasons, and also about what the Wicked People do the rest of the time! Anna's question "What do they do?" is not to be taken as a generalised curiosity about their way of life, but as an inaccurately

expressed future ("What will they do?") Her chamber of horrors is short on detail, but it does occur to her that the Wicked People may want to kill the girls. Notice that although the text does not tell us much about the Wicked People, the implied threat is quite enough to focus Anna's attention.

What the book means to her

On one level, this book describes the loneliness of a first-born whose mother now spends some of her energies caring for the new baby brother. Barbara's fantasy playmate fills the void until her parents relent and buy the pet she has asked for. When she first encountered this book, Anna did not connect with Barbara's unhappiness. She was in this regard "too young" for the message Astrid Lindgren attempted to communicate. But where emotional threat existed on a level that she did apprehend, she wanted to deny it, or limit it, or when it seemed impossible to resort to these methods, she then wanted to know what the full danger was.

On another level, Astrid Lindgren's story takes Barbara into an underground kingdom where adults are shrunk in stature and relegated to a serving capacity, and do not seem to restrict the girls' freedom. The protagonists eat sweet foods and explore a fantastic world in which they may flirt with danger, and be feted by the Good People. It was on this level that Anna responded most comfortably. She was intrigued by the variety of humanised creatures, Lalla-lee's royalty and the Wicked People.

Although Anna encountered this book at 3.6, at a time when she was just beginning to distinguish between reality and fantasy in picture books, there was no sign that she spotted the shift from fantasy to reality in this story. Stories which are framed, as this one is, pose problems of their own, and those narrative frames which point to a story within a story tended to be ignored (**Prelude to Literacy**, 1983). Nonetheless there is evidence that the distinction between what is real and what is fantastic is a focus of interest for her in the questions she poses about the rabbits and the carved heads. Are they equally real, that is, alive? Dogs, rabbits and food are all grouped together in openings four and eleven and her concerns seem to be constant as she attempts to understand both illustrations, in the same reading session. Once she had identified the unusual features of the fantasy world she was able to put this book aside; the puzzles that remained — on the emotional plane and the ability to detect immediately the borderline between fantasy and reality — were not yet within her grasp.

Hans Arnold took the liberty of adding most of the fantastic lifeforms himself, extending Astrid Lindgren's story while remaining true to its spirit. For Anna, this embroidery was as important as Astrid Lindgren's original fantasy. There are some who talk of preschool children's need for pictures and stories which faithfully reflect their daily life. Were this always true, we should expect Anna to find Hans Arnold's bestiary alienating; this was the reverse of what happened.

During this week, she was absorbed in mastering text and pictures, but the mastery seemed to be an end in itself. By this stage (3.6) Anna had mostly lost the urge to recite slabs of text (see **Prelude to Literacy**) and there was not much obvious carryover in phrasing and vocabulary from books to ordinary speech. The book was becoming a world of its own.

Essentially **My Very Own Sister's** rise and fall had to do with this mastery of text and picture just now referred to. Unaware of her unreadiness to grapple with the emotional freight of the story, she was excited about the odd creatures in the illustrations which were all new to her. Once she had learned to identify these and could understand the story to her satisfaction, the gold nuggets that had caught the eye had already been pocketed, as it were, and she was already looking forward to searching for gold in other books. Most preschool children's encounters with picture books are likely to fall into this pattern.

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Biographical Note

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