

Dear friends of children's literature.

I am honored to be able to take part in the International Children's Literature Day here in Madison, Wisconsin.

The first time I ever heard of Wisconsin was when I was seven years old and very ill and my mother bought a book for me. It was for the first time in my life. She was sitting next to me in the bed reading a story of a little girl living in the USA many, many years ago in the big woods in Wisconsin.

Her name was Laura and the writer was of course Laura Ingalls Wilder and all of her books were my favorite books when I was a child. I wanted them for birthdays and Christmas presents and I've got them all.

My second meeting with Wisconsin was back in 1987 when I was visiting friends in Janesville. One day we went to Madison and apart from airports it is the only major city I have ever visited in the USA.

And now I am back asking my self: Why Wisconsin? Why Madison? Like all human beings I am looking for meaning in my life. And of course there must be a reason why Madison has become MY city in this huge Country? Maybe this event is the meaning? We will see! I will certainly do my very best to make this into a meaningful encounter.

I have been a writer ever since I was able to write. I wrote stories for my little brother. And I illustrated them. I had my own publishing firm; it was my father's stapler, and I made a lot of books. The first one was published in 1975. As of now there are 42.

One of them is translated into English and that is the one I will tell you about first of all. It is called The Crow-Girl and it is the first book in the series "The children of Crow Cove". Let me begin by inviting you on a tour to Scotland because that is where I found Crow Cove. There are a few things you have to know before the journey:

Back in 1991 the Danish publisher Høst og Søn held a competition for Scandinavian authors of children's and young adult's literature. There are always two good reasons for participating. The first one is the prize money. The second is the dead-line. As an author you are often in lack of both.

But I was certain that I couldn't take part because I didn't have an idea. I had just finished a book and I had used everything inside my head. I was completely empty until a warm September evening when I was sitting in my garden.

I was watching a shooting star drawing a streak of light across the sky when I got the idea for a book about a child who is totally alone in the world. She should have no family, no friends, no neighbors. The book would be about what this solitary child would do.

But I had a problem. No child is left totally alone in present-day Denmark. Until I asked myself why it couldn't take place in another time and at another place? That was when I remembered an isolated spot I once visited a very long time ago.

In the summer of 1979 I was touring Scotland by bicycle with a girlfriend. We had a list of places where we could spend the night, and it was this list that led us to what later became Crow Cove.

On the list there was an address out on one of the islands along Scotland's west coast. We took the chance, catching the last ferry out to the island. The couple of cars on the ferry quickly disappeared when we landed, and we were left alone on the road that ran across the island from the ferry harbour.

Great banks of fog drove over the land and water. Occasionally there was a spot of clear sky that allowed a ray of misty sunlight to appear before the sky closed again.

Wild rabbits zigzagged across the road we followed to a little whitewashed town that lay at the edge of a turquoise lagoon. Small, rocky islands separated the bay from the sea, and the mild climate along the coast allowed a few palm trees to dip their toes in the water. There was no doubt: this was where we wanted to be.

The poor woman who'd put her address on the list was terribly embarrassed when we located her, because the guest house that she and her husband were building wasn't finished yet. So she found us lodgings with her neighbour, where we stayed two nights in their guest room before some family members arrived and we had to move out again. But we weren't at all ready to leave our island so soon.

We'd been told that before World War II, 2,000 people were living on the 56 kilometre-long island, and now there were only 200 left, so I thought that there had to be an empty house somewhere.

There was. Our two hostesses had never been there themselves, but they told us that if we bicycled 36 km. up north, we'd come to a rock that stood at man-height. We should leave our bikes there and follow a little path westward. After a couple of hours we'd come to an empty house which was used by boy and girl scouts and hikers and people like ourselves.

We packed provisions and our sleeping bags and took off. Thanks to the rubber boots our friendly hosts had lent us, we made it dry-footed through the hollows and finally stood on a hillcrest, looking out over a place that looked like this:

*"Near a little cove where a brook ran out to the sea stood three houses. One of them was not really a house anymore. It was a ruin, with only the lowest part of the walls still standing. The second house was in better shape, but it was also unoccupied. There were holes in the roof, and rain and wind had scoured off the whitewash, so you could see the gray stone it was made of. The third house was all the way down by the sea. It was white with a chimney at each gable ..."*

We spend two days and nights in the empty house. It was the first time I saw wild goats and seals in their natural habitat. And it was so quiet there. The only sounds were the murmuring of the creek, the waves against the beach and the whispering of the wind. (For you hard-core readers it may interest you to know that the island was the place where George Orwell wrote his science fiction novel "1984".) It was this isolated spot I chose that night in September for my story to take place. The book could begin here, in a time of its own. I could have a girl living alone with her grandmother and let the grandmother die and the tale would begin.

I decided to participate in the competition. And I decided to write a children's book, not a book for young adults. It was important for me not to cross the border. And at the same time I decided to write a story that could have been my own favourite story when I was 12. When I was 12, almost 13, I wrote this poem:

*Millions weep  
their tears fall on the earth  
their weeping rends the heart, shreds the silence  
and all are praying to the same god:  
Love*

It is almost too easy to distance oneself from a poem like that. It is obvious that I didn't like my childhood and was unhappy. That is one story. But that is not the issue here. What is important is what I share as a twelve-year-old with a lot of children at that age: the seriousness, the effort to grapple with the great existential questions and the feeling of being all alone in the world. Neither I nor they are unique. The Danish psychologist and writer Hanne Hostrup writes in one of her books:

*No childhood is perfect. The notion of the perfect childhood is an illusion – the image of an ideal. Childhood is a time when we experience everything for the first time, unprepared*

*and utterly vulnerable, with a merciless intensity. And no matter how wonderful our parents were, childhood was, in spite of all that was good and exciting in it, also a hard time, because we, with our immature minds, had to learn difficult things in a very short time. This is the lot of all people, not just a few “unhappy” ones.*

(Translated by Kathryn Mahaffy)

So to write my own favorite book at that age, I had to listen very carefully to my inner twelve-year-old girl, because if I didn't do it, I would let all the readers of her age down as well.

What I wanted to do was to tell them a story about a child of their own age who is all alone in the world ... and gets on with it. And that is what I always want in my books: A lot of problems and a happy ending. And I think that is why I write children's books. It is a way for me to give my own childhood a happy ending too.

I was thinking of all this while I was writing. Then I got caught up in the story, ran into practical difficulties: How do you tend sheep, how do you card and spin wool, what is a sheep's eye like? And I spend a lot of energy finding the right names for the characters.

As I got along I forgot where the borderline lies that defines a children's book, until I read a review in a newspaper with a quote from the Finnish author Eeva Kilpi that struck right to the heart of my project (Please be aware that here *she* is used for all mankind meaning both he and she):

*“Always remember: At about twelve years old people start to understand.”  
“At that point the person understands ‘everything’, like an observer; she is as unfettered ‘as a child’ – dependent on her parents, surely, subject to the history of mankind and at the mercy of the caprices of fate – but not yet hampered by the burdens of carnal desire and the constraint of norms. Later sexuality sweeps over her still free soul like a terrifying storm and changes everything, makes her an addict, dependent; and so as not to be crushed, she is forced to adopt norms. Then she is lost, and she will never regain the freedom of her child-soul, though she tries to track it down throughout life, and sometimes think she has found it.”*

(The translation of the quote is made from Swedish to Danish by Pàivi and Bent Sieburg and from Danish to English by Kathryn Mahaffy.)

The peak of childhood is the time just before it disappears. That was the time I was writing about. I just didn't know it could be formulated so clearly.

And I went on writing ... pursuing the freedom of my child-soul ... and from time to time I got the feeling of an eagle hovering over the landscape, and thought I had found my child-soul again. Until I came back to earth where I belong in my own adult reality. Still with the memory of childhood's loneliness like a silent echo in my mind.

Thanks to all that ... and to the dead-line I finished my book in time. I didn't win the contest, but I got my book accepted by Høst og Søn Publishers, as well as the three others in the series that I wound up writing.

When I finished writing *The Crow-Girl*, I knew that I was far from finished writing about the people and the universe I'd created. I felt at home in Crow Cove. I liked to stay with the little flock. But I ran into the problem about how to move on?

Of course, I could choose to continue writing about the Crow-Girl ... about Myna, as she is called by the end of the book. I could follow the passage of time and allow her to grow older and older. On the other hand, I'd promised myself to write the book that could have been my favourite when I was twelve. Then I preferred reading about kids my own age. As I told you: I loved the books about Laura from *The Little House in the big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, but as a child I thought it was boring to read about her when she was grown up, in love, and becoming a school teacher. At that time I was still on the right side of the border.

That's when I got the idea to give each book its own central character. In *The Crow-Girl* I'd been so lucky as to let Myna meet a younger girl named Eidi. So she became the main character in the next book and Myna was given a supporting role. In the second book called *Eidi* I let her meet the boy Tink, and he became the main character in the third book, while Eidi joined the supporting cast. The last main character, little Doup, dates back to the first book. His real name is Alek.

I hadn't decided ahead of time how many books there would be in the series. I stopped with *Alek* because I found I was repeating myself all too often when I described Crow Cove and its surroundings. I didn't want the series to become watered-down at the end; I wanted the last book to be at least as good as the first.

The universe I created for 'The Children of Crow Cove' was fictitious. It was something I thought up myself. But even in a fictive universe there are rules which must be followed. Sheep are still sheep and fish are fish, and since I didn't know much about either, there was plenty of work to do.

You can learn a lot from books: How to raise sheep and shear them, how to card and spin the wool. But to be able to describe the expression in the eyes of the Crow-Girl's little, brown sheep as it drowned in the marsh, you have to see for yourself.

I was able to describe how Rossan works together with his dog Glennie, because I'd watched an Australian sheep-dog herding sheep. I'd also collected mussels and driftwood and tasted seakale, so I didn't have any major problems researching the first two books in the series. But I had plenty of work to do when I began the third book, in which the boy Tink meets a drunken vagabond named Burd. Burd is good at many things ... like teaching Tink how to fish ... but it's hard to describe how to learn something when you know nothing about it yourself.

I found a tourist guide to the Shetland Islands, where the author, James R. Nicolson, briefly explains sheep-breeding and fishing, and in the back of the book I saw he'd also written a book called *Traditional Life in Shetland*.

It turned out to be a goldmine. By reading it I learned all about line fishing, which is the method Burd taught Tink, plus I got a lot of good ideas. When Eidi wants to show how amazingly good she is at spinning and knitting by pulling a shawl through a finger ring, it's something I found in the book.

Just like the light in the skull in *Alek*. In the Shetland Islands at Christmas, people put a little candle in a sheep's cranium; in *Alek* they use the skull of Alek's old horse.

However, my books are not historical novels from either Scotland or the Shetland Islands at the end of the 19th Century. There is nothing about lords or gentry or Christian faith ... there's actually nothing about any god in the books. This helps move the stories far away from a time and place where folks were much oppressed and very religious.

The books are pure fiction, where I've blatantly stolen, and been inspired by, everything I possibly could. I don't know if that is one of the ingredients in the recipe for a bestseller, but they turned out to become a success. The series is sold to Sweden and Greenland, France and South Korea and volume two, *Eidi*, will soon be available in English. I will end my lecture by reading from this book. (Translated by Kathryn Mahaffy and published by Farrar Straus Giroux)

In the beginning of it *Eidi* becomes a big sister and feels unwanted; so she decides to seek work away from Crow Cove. She wants to help Rossan up on the heath with processing his wool, but fate leads her into town and to Bandon, a wealthy merchant. Here she meets a neglected boy named Tink

I have chosen a piece of the chapter where Eidi meets Tink for the first time. I think it will describe for you the reason why Eidi decides to bring the boy to Crow Cove:

Bandon's house hummed with life. The courtyard was always teeming with people. In the rear buildings there was a shop where people could buy anything they might otherwise have bought at the market. Only now it cost twice as much, because there were no other merchants to drive the price down. But people traded there all the same, because there was a lot to choose from at Bandon's all year round.

But in the evening it all fell quiet. The sounds of voices and the clop of horses' hooves ceased, and all that was heard was an occasional deep bay from the watchdog, and the rattle of his chain. The room Eidi worked in was right across the courtyard from the shop, in a half-cellar room with windows that gave her a good view of it.

She often worked late, because she was not paid by the hour, but for every shawl she finished. The patterns and colors were up to her. Some of the shawls were square, others long with fringes at both ends, and they were sold as fast as she could weave them.

One evening the quiet was broken by Bandon's angry voice and the sobs of a child. Eidi looked out of the window and saw in the dusk Bandon dragging the boy down the steps of the shop. At the foot of the steps he raised his hand, and Eidi was just about to dash out and thrust herself between them, when her ear started to howl. She stopped in her tracks.

"I'll teach you to steal!" shouted Bandon and gave the boy a resounding box on the ear.

Then he turned on his heel and strode into the house. The boy sat down on the lowest step and hid his face in his hands, sobbing.

Eidi crept out into the yard and went over to the boy. The watchdog growled, but stayed lying where he was.

"Come with me," Eidi whispered. She took his hand and helped him up, then drew him with her down into the weaving room.

His nose was bleeding. She made him tilt his head back and hold a wisp of wool to his nostrils.

“What happened?” she asked.

“He found out I'd been stealing raisins,”  
the boy hiccuped at the ceiling.

“Are you hungry?” she asked. He nodded.

She brought out the rest of the food Lesna had sent  
with her; she hadn't taken time to finish it.

She put lamb chops and bread and cheese on the  
table, and the boy devoured it, still holding the tuft of wool to  
his nostrils.

“What's your name, by the way?” she asked.

“Hink,” he muttered behind the wool with his mouth  
full.

“Hink?” she repeated.

He chewed what was in his mouth and blurted, “No.  
Tink!” before taking another bite.

He ate everything she had laid out. In the meantime  
she packed her things together, and they left the room. They  
gave the chop bones to the watchdog, who wagged his tail  
when Tink took them to him.

“Come and see me tomorrow,” whispered Eidi  
before she slipped out of the courtyard entryway.