

Two National Heroes: Jacob Two-Two and Pippi Longstocking

• Maria Nikolajeva •

Résumé: À partir de deux classiques contemporains, *Fifi Brindacier* (1945) d'Astrid Lindgren et *Jacob Deux-Deux et le dragon* (1975) de Mordecai Richler, l'auteur explore les identités nationales suédoise et canadienne. L'élaboration du personnage principal reflète des caractéristiques géographiques, historiques et culturelles propres à chacune d'entre elles. Or, malgré certains traits communs comme l'âge, l'indépendance d'esprit et la contestation de l'autorité, une différence fondamentale se fait jour, laquelle ne peut s'expliquer que par un particularisme de l'identité nationale: Fifi est déjà un personnage fort qui n'a aucun désir de grandir, tandis que Jacob souhaite grandir et acquérir la force d'un adulte.

Summary: The paper investigates Canadian and Swedish national identity, taking as a point of departure two contemporary classics: *Pippi Longstocking* (1945) by Astrid Lindgren and *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (1975) by Mordecai Richler. The construction of each novel's central character reflects significant geographical, historical and cultural aspects of Swedish and Canadian national mentality. Despite many similarities between the two characters, for example their age, independence and rebellious attitude toward authority, their profound difference can only be accounted for by the national identity they express; Pippi is already strong and has no desire to grow up, whereas Jacob wishes to grow up into adult strength.

Who am I, a Russian resident in Sweden, to speak about Canadian national identity? I am, specifically, *not* a Canadian, and I have little insight into what Canadians think about themselves. This essay presents an outsider's view, in the hope that an outsider might see things which the bearers of nationhood might easily overlook.

My arguments are based on some elementary notions in cultural semiotics. One is that no phenomena (such as a language, culture or literature) can exist as totally confined. Any such phenomenon can therefore only be defined by contrast to another similar phenomenon (see, e.g., Lotman). Canadian children's literature cannot be defined other than in contrast to other literatures.

In my book *Children's Literature Comes of Age*, I try to identify some basic questions and problems arising from the concept of national children's literature (20-26). I suggest there that in the context of cultural typology and the semiotics of culture, national literatures can be defined either prospectively or retrospec-

tively. A prospective approach is taken when a nation discovers that it lacks a literature of its own and sets about creating it. For such a discovery, there must already exist an established literature in other countries. With a retrospective approach — which is probably more common — historians of literature judge on the basis of certain criteria that particular texts from the past can be considered to belong to the literature of a given nation. The British philosopher Paul Gilbert proposes a similar description in slightly different terms when he speaks about voluntarist and realist approaches to nationhood (199f).

Most often we define national literatures with ourselves as the point of departure, dividing cultures into “our own” and “alien.” According to the semiotics of culture, this automatic division is the most primary mechanism of cultural activity. The retrospective (or voluntarist) approach to national literature implies determining which texts in the history of literature are “our own” and which are not. But it is extremely difficult to identify the criteria that govern our choices. Themes or subjects, dominant genres or modes, moral and ethical values — all these factors are too vague, and subject to constant change. The only more or less certain criteria are ethnic-linguistic ones. Through language, writers identify with a certain culture.

In their definitions of themselves, then, Canadian authors who write in English may choose to consider themselves Canadian. But then, they may also think of themselves as being North American, or broader still, just as writers in the English language. The boundaries between national literatures often correspond to linguistic boundaries rather than to geographical ones. I think this is easily seen in Canada, where the Anglophone literature has closer bonds to British and American literature than it does to French-Canadian literature.

On the other hand, while the rest of the world may not notice any radical difference between English-language literatures (in Sweden, no one, except a specialist, does) the inhabitants of each English-speaking country are often well aware of, and proud of, “their own” particular authors, although they seldom can pinpoint the distinctive traits of their national literature. The smaller a nation and the more oppressed it is politically and culturally, the stronger its national identity — consider the Irish (Paul Gilbert’s example). And why not, also, Canadians? For a variety of reasons, Canadians themselves may not feel that way — but this is what many general cultural studies suggest.

The existing surveys of Canadian children’s literature illustrate the two concepts of retrospective and prospective definitions of nationality very well. For Sheila Egoff in the second edition of *The Republic of Childhood*, the question of what is distinct about Canadian children’s literature simply does not exist. Her approach is retrospective; she simply decides what Canadian children’s literature is by including it in the book. A similar approach is to be found in Judith Saltman’s *Modern Canadian Children’s Books*, where the main criteria seem to be the author’s residence or the address of the publisher.

In *Children’s Literature in Canada*, however, Elizabeth Waterston feels compelled to discuss the specific features of Canadian children’s literature and disclose some factors which have influenced these characteristics. For her, the Canadian-ness of Canadian children’s literature is connected with the shared

mentality of a group of people. This sort of attitude is especially prominent in Roderick McGillis's short chapter on Canada in the abhorrently ethnocentric *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, edited by Peter Hunt, for obvious reasons: Canadian children's literature is there opposed to British and American children's literature. Similar lines of thought are to be found in another outsider's attempt to define Canadian-ness: the Swedish scholar Gabriella Åhman's *A Life and Its Mirrors. A Feminist Reading of L.M. Montgomery's Fiction*.

Although it is more natural to delineate Canadian children's literature in the context of British or American children's literature, I have chosen Sweden as a contrast — and not exclusively for the apparent reason of my own background. In some respects, it seems, Canada and Sweden have more in common than Canada and the US — geography and climate, for instance, which I believe are decisive for the formation of national character: both countries have vast spaces with low population concentrated in a few big cities; dramatic seasonal changes, in particular long and cold winters; unfertile lands, seemingly unsuitable for humans to live in (in fact, all of Sweden lies North of the 55th parallel); but despite this (or maybe exactly because of it), a strong love of and respect for nature. In my article "Pigs aren't meant to have fun," I have tried to trace the impact of these factors on Swedish children's literature. Elizabeth Waterston speaks of "Our Own Space," noting: "Each of [Canada's] physical features has had intellectual and literary consequences" (1). Furthermore, both countries have a long history of being backward economically (as agrarian, fishing, timber-producing countries), politically (Canada as a former colony, Sweden due to its long-term neutrality), and culturally (with very few exceptions, the two nations have not contributed anything valuable to world literature, drama, art, or music). Both have vindicated themselves internationally through sports.

Naturally, Canada and Sweden also have many differences. For instance, Sweden, unlike Canada, was once a great empire. Losing this position once and for all in the early eighteenth century gave the nation an inferiority complex — possibly comparable with the Canadian one, but caused by a different reason. On the other hand, and like other nations which gained independence late in their history, Canada has a substantially stronger national identity, which cannot but be felt in its literature. Furthermore, Canada is a young and dynamic nation, a nation still in the making, in fact, while Sweden is an old, solid and rooted nation, reluctant to changes, alien to the spirit of adventure and exploration. Canada is bilingual, with ties (or antagonisms) on both sides of the Atlantic. In the formation of its national literature, Canada both received inspiration from Britain and France and struggled for liberation from metropolitan influences. Sweden is culturally homogeneous, and its language is only spoken, outside the country itself, by a small minority in Finland. Swedish literature, including children's literature, is basically self-generating. Canada is a country of immigration (which is clearly reflected in its children's literature), Sweden, until quite recently, a country of emigration (to Canada, among other places, a fact which Swedish children's writers, with very few exceptions, prefer to forget).

In terms of the status of children's literature, the positions of Sweden and Canada are also very different. If foreigners know anything at all about Sweden beside Volvo and Björn Borg, they will know about its children's literature — in

earlier years about Selma Lagerlof's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, a true homage to Sweden, and nowadays about Astrid Lindgren's Pippi books. But girls and women around the world who have read and admired *Anne of Green Gables* are hardly aware of Anne's Canadian origin (although Elizabeth Waterston tries to convince her readers that Anne is indeed unequivocally Canadian!). If, as Åhmansson suggests in "Mayflowers grow in Sweden too," *Anne* inspired *Pippi Longstocking*, it is not necessarily by being Canadian.

According to a number of different Canadian sources, Canadian children's literature was practically non-existent before 1975, by which time Swedish children's literature was well-established within the country and acknowledged internationally, not only because of Astrid Lindgren, but also because of a number of acclaimed young adult novels and picture books (see my article "Literature for children and young people," in Warne's *History of Swedish Literature*). Without going deeper into possible reasons for this, I assume that the need for reading matter for Canadian children could easily be satisfied by British and American books, while in Sweden this demand had to be filled, to a significant extent, by native literature. The great quantity of books being written and published inevitably creates the question of their national identity; and while a certain number of Swedish children's books may be "nationally neutral," others are unmistakably Swedish in themes, settings, and general tone.

If Canadian children's literature starts as a national literature in 1975, then *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, published that year, and, after *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), the first success outside of Canada for a Canadian children's book, must be viewed as one of contributing factors, a watershed, a bifurcation point. From many examples in other countries, we see that the name of one successful writer, preferably one awarded a major international prize, can make the world aware of the existence of an obscure national children's literature: consider Tove Jansson from Finland, Christine Nöstlinger from Austria, Annie M. G. Schmidt from the Netherlands. (I may be hopelessly Eurocentric in this statement — I know that books by these writers are widely known across Europe, if not elsewhere. So is *Jacob Two-Two*.)

If so, *Jacob Two-Two* put Canada on the map of international children's literature, much as *Pippi Longstocking* did with Sweden thirty years earlier. While Canadian children's literature starts its modern chronology in 1975, modern Swedish children's literature starts in 1945, the publication year of the first *Pippi* novel. Both dates are, of course, arbitrary (and convenient for scholars and jubilee committees), since both novels were preceded by a vast number of books paving the way for them. Thus, both sum up earlier experiences just as they point toward future development. By looking closely at the two title characters in these books, we may be able to approach — I dare not say discover — the secret of national identity. For the Swedes, Pippi is unquestioningly *the* national character. Can we see Jacob as the bearer of national self-consciousness? Is the Hooded Fang the British Empire and the colonial past? Once again, as an outsider, I am well aware of the delicacy of the posed questions. There is also a considerable danger of constructing national mentality on the base of one single character; with these reservations, however, I am still willing to proceed.

While Judith Saltman has observed the similarity of Jacob and Pippi, she has neither treated them as representatives of nationhood nor noticed the decisive differences between them. Saltman points out, as a common denominator, "a mock-heroic affirmation of children's autonomy in the face of their powerlessness in the adult world" (83). This is an accurate description of both books; indeed, empowering the child is the essence of them. Pippi has also been compared to two American characters, to the Cat in the Hat by Eva-Marie Metcalf (78f) and to Curious George by William Moebius; while both Metcalf and Moebius recognize the anti-authoritarian spirit of *Pippi*, they tend to put more emphasis on mischief, escape and compensation.

Jacob and Pippi are often described in reference works as "comic fantasy." Pippi's endless tall-tales are remarkably echoed in *Jacob* in all the horror stories with which Jacob's siblings try to scare him, as well as by the incredible accounts of adults like Mr. Loser, the barrister. The absurdity of the court scene in *Jacob* (evoking *Alice in Wonderland*) matches both the school and the charity event episodes in *Pippi*. In both books, adults are presented as ridiculous and hypocritical. While Jacob learns that big people are never, never wrong, that if they punish you it's for your own good and it hurts them more than it hurts you (20f), Pippi is told that children should be seen and not heard — a standard formula of traditional Swedish child-rearing — whereupon she happily retorts, "it's nice if people are happy just to look at me! I must see how it feels to be used just for decoration" (*Pippi in the South Seas* 24). The fact that Richler develops the same theme thirty years after Lindgren testifies to its undying relevance.

The concept of "Child Power" corresponds to the concept of Pippi as such — the mere fact that she exists. But while Pippi's strength may seem to be her weapon against adults, her challenging of adult order is actually expressed mainly through language — through interrogation of arbitrary linguistic practices presented as unconditional laws. In fact, Pippi only uses her physical strength against vile, unfair (and exclusively male) adversaries, like Mighty Adolf, or the burglars Bloom and Thunder-Karlsson, the closest equivalents in the *Pippi* books to the Hooded Fang. In all other situations, Pippi uses her wits, as she does in the much-quoted conversation with the school teacher in *Pippi Longstocking* (54f). Similarly, at the beginning of *Jacob*, the young character drives his mother mad by trying to grasp the illogical logic of language:

"... when you tucked me in at night, you said when I got up *this* day would be tomorrow "

"That was yesterday."

"You said it was today."

"It was, and then *this* was going to be tomorrow."

"But you just said *this* day is today too" (2)

Neither in *Pippi* nor in *Jacob* can adults acknowledge the linguistic genius of a child. Jacob's mastery of language is even presented as if it were a deficiency, getting him into trouble. In fact, though, it is a recognition of the adults' inability to listen.

Language, of course, is the most powerful tool of national identity. Both Jacob's and Pippi's "deconstruction" of language in their inadequate spelling

skills (Richler 65, *Pippi Longstocking* 144, *Pippi Goes On Board* 104) gives the child reader a confirmation of their own language proficiency. Once again, the arbitrariness of the spelling rules imposed by adults is interrogated. At the question-and-answer bee in *Pippi in the South Seas*, Pippi says: "S-e-e-s-i-k is the way I have always spelled it, and it seems to have worked out just fine" (45).

At this point the superficial similarities stop. One obvious difference is of course that Pippi is a girl and Jacob a boy. Does this only reflect the authors' projected gender? Doubtfully. It is of course not totally unimportant to know that Astrid Lindgren comes from a country with an early and strong feminist movement, and that she had made a professional career and became financially independent long before she started writing. It is, however, more important to view the texts as they are. *Jacob* is based on the male myth, the myth of achievement and success. This is the myth of a nation searching for identity, a "cultural hero" exploring and defeating Otherness. *Pippi* is based on the female myth of adaptation and subversion. This is Otherness invading and disrupting the established order.

In a different context, I have pointed out Jacob's origin in folktale (see my "Stages of transformation: folklore elements in children's novels.") If Jacob is a trickster, a Tom Thumb — active, searching, inquisitive — Pippi may be understood as a Robin Hood, especially in the magnificently carnivalesque scene in *Pippi Goes On Board* in which she extravagantly pours sweets and toys over the town's children. But she is equally the progenitrix, the fertility goddess, the good and nurturing Mother Svea, reflecting the firm Swedish belief in the benevolence of their country. While Jacob seeks and finds the source of his individual well-being, Pippi is herself the source of wealth — maybe Astrid Lindgren's early vision of the future Swedish "welfare society"? Jacob illustrates what McGillis, with reference to Margaret Atwood, identifies as the main theme in Canadian children's literature, survival (334f); in *Pippi*, the primary sense is, her wildness notwithstanding, that of security, home, peace, and harmony.

As a male, Jacob is also entitled to the use of technology (the secret supersonic bleeper), which may be viewed as an ironic comment on the American influence in Canadian literature. Pippi has no magic powers and no magic objects to assist her. In exploring the book in terms of various systems of character, whether we prefer Propp's folktale model, Greimas's actant-model, or Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces" model, Jacob, a hero, has two helpers to rely on. Pippi is, instead, a helper herself. In fact, she is not even the main character of the story, if we accept as a criterion for a main character some form of development or at least a clear focalization (this is, however, not a common assumption — see Metcalf 68). We never share Pippi's point of view. Her role is to set the plot in motion, not primarily to be part of it. Thus, rather than finding herself a helpless victim of evil forces, she stages a shipwreck. She can even turn a fire into a big celebration. In other words, she neither seeks trouble nor shuns it, she is trouble herself.

Jacob is part of a big family (the British Commonwealth?) where he is the smallest, weakest and unwanted. Pippi has no family at all (Swedish notorious neutrality?). Her parents, her mother in Heaven "watching her little girl through

a peephole in the sky" (*Pippi Longstocking* 14), and her father, "formerly the Terror of the Sea, now a cannibal king" (54), might just as well be imaginary. Both the physical appearance of the father and Pippi's wild adventures in the South Seas in the sequels may be just another tall-tale (a daring, but not impossible interpretation). More important is the fact that both Jacob and Pippi are *functional* orphans, one of the primary archetypes of children's literature.

The way the characters are introduced, however, sets them wide apart. Jacob is incapable and deprived in every possible way. Pippi is more than capable, she is supernaturally capable, not only by her strength, but, for instance, in the little, almost unnoticed detail of her ability to eat toadstools without harm (any dictionary of myths will tell us that this ability indicates witchcraft). Jacob is lonely and insecure, reflecting "lack of experience and confidence," which McGillis identifies as specifically Canadian (333). Also, the notion of borderland, suggested by Elizabeth Waterston (3) is manifest in Jacob: he is small, victimized, marginalized. His task in the story is to establish his position. But Pippi is secure, self-assured, strong and rich from the beginning. Nobody wants to play with Jacob or even listen to him. Everybody wants to play with Pippi, and by the end of the book, when Pippi rescues two small boys from the fire, even adults have to accept her.

Another key difference relates to food. The scarcity and dubious quality of food served on Slimer's Isle is the opposite of Pippi's plentiful meals, served incessantly throughout the three books: pancakes, cookies, cakes, buns, caramels, "good sandwiches with meatballs and ham, a whole pile of sugared pancakes, several little brown sausages, and three pineapple puddings" (*Pippi Longstocking* 81), "bread and cheese and butter, ham and cold roast and milk" (112), not to mention pop soda growing in a tree. The symbolical meaning of food as the child's primary need is manifest in children's literature; scarcity of food in *Jacob* and abundance in *Pippi* are equally significant. The dull menu at the prison party (46) is contrasted to Pippi's numerous tall-tales involving exotic food, for instance, swallows' nests (*Pippi Longstocking* 66). Pippi always turns eating into joy. The closest correspondence to Jacob's prison diet in *Pippi*, Miss Rosenblom's hateful soup, is defied and defeated by Pippi's lofty distribution of sweets. Observe, however, that Pippi is never disrespectful about food; pie-throwing in the American film version from 1988 is totally against her nature. In fact, in *Pippi Goes On Board*, Pippi punishes the ruffian Laban who throws sausage on the ground.

Another major difference between the two books is in narrative structure, and this difference also seems to reflect the state of national identity: *Jacob* has a progressive (dynamic, linear) Pippi an episodic (static, cyclical) plot. This may again be related to the "male / female" binary, a progressive plot emerging from the male protagonist's concentration on a clear-cut goal and the female plot being repetitive and cyclical. Even Richler's title is dynamic, action-oriented, conveying the main conflict, while Lindgren's title is nominal and thus static. Although the title of the sequel, *Pippi Goes On Board*, suggests action, it is misleading: the story takes place on land; and in the end, Pippi decides not to go on board.

The plot of *Jacob* follows the most traditional pattern of children's literature: home (boring, but secure) / adventure / home, which may also be described

as order/chaos/order. The plot of Pippi is the reverse: she comes from chaos (in fact, according to Edström, she *is* chaos), to disturb order, from adventure to a home which is boring and therefore must be turned into adventure.

In this connection, it might be interesting to contemplate one detail that no critic can leave out: that *Jacob* is set in England. The extra-literary explanation is that the book was written while the author was living in England. It was, however, intended for Canadian children. I can imagine that England is somewhat of a mythical country for Canadians, the Other country, the magic world. The book begins in a typical fairy-tale manner: "Once there was a boy ..." (1). The dream frame may be seen as further estrangement, a cautious attempt on the part of the writer not to offend adults (that is, the existing order). Fantasy, involving the construction of alternative worlds, is a prominent genre in Canadian children's literature. It is not in Sweden. *Pippi* is set in the everyday, in the familiar. It begins: "Way out at the end of a tiny little town" (13), the "tiny little town" evoking one of the classics of Swedish children's literature, Elsa Beskow's *The Tale of the Tiny Little Old Woman* (1897), and placing the text into the specifically Swedish fairy-tale tradition, with its close ties to reality.

The objective of Jacob's quest is self-fulfilment — his maturation, his liberation from adults (which, again, may symbolize Canada's liberation). Pippi's task is to stir and wake up the old, stale, conservative, slumbering Swedish society, represented by the philistines of the tiny little town. She does not develop, since she is perfect from the beginning, this little Supergirl. Instead, she acts as a catalyst. This may once again be female, as opposed to the male's individual success; but it is surely also part of nationhood. Pippi wants other people to enjoy the benefits of her wealth — an attitude of an old and secure nation?

The prison in *Jacob* corresponds to the orphanage which the adult world threatens Pippi with. Both are clear inversions of the conventional idea of "childhood as paradise," especially in the phrase "where the sun never shone" (Richler 31). The description of the prison in *Jacob* is reminiscent of the many literary portrayals of English boarding schools, these brutal instruments of socialization. In the orphanage, Pippi learns, she will not be allowed to keep her horse and her monkey, two attributes which reinforce the child's closeness to nature, maybe even savagery — "monkeyhood," as Moebius chooses to call it (44). Pippi promptly refuses to go to an orphanage, thus rejecting the order imposed by adults. When Ken Annakin, the director of the American film version, lets Pippi obligingly be taken to a home, put on a dull uniform with a pinafore, and braid her hair neatly, he misinterprets the very concept of Pippi as a national character. She can even make "pining away in a dungeon" sound fun, so that Tommy feels enticed to "come down and pine away a little too" (*Pippi Longstocking* 72f). Is this the happy-go-lucky attitude of Sweden not having experienced war in 180 years?

The enumeration of Jacob's faults — he can't ride a two-wheel bicycle, dial a telephone number, cross the street, whistle, do joined-up writing, play checkers, or catch a ball — and of his crimes — "waking up his parents at six o'clock on a Sunday morning to say the sun is out," "gobbling all the peaches on the kitchen table," "telling Daniel's new girl friend that his brother couldn't take

the call, because he was on the toilet" (29f) is an example of a capriciously prescribed order. Pippi defies it by doing as she pleases, which includes walking backwards, or sleeping with her feet on her pillow, or watering flowers in pouring rain. While Jacob desperately contemplates his own ineptitude, Pippi refuses to accept that children "must have someone to advise them, and ... go to school to learn the multiplication tables" (*Pippi Longstocking* 40). Pippi's attitude to authority is marvellously illustrated by the phrase, "Policemen are the very best things I know. Next to rhubarb pudding." (41).

Jacob is socialized into the prescribed order because the order, like the national identity, is in the making. He — as well as the nation — is supposed to change, to mature and go further. Slimer's Isle is the adults' attempt to conserve children in the state of ignorance and innocence, "from which no brats return" (if we continue the allegorical interpretations, Britain's attempts to retain Canada as a colony). Pippi chooses to conserve herself, with the help of a magical chililug pill, at the end of the last sequel. She does not want to grow up — read, be socialized into the patriarchal order. Maybe she feels that the next generations of Swedish children will also need her assistance. Discovering the child in the Hooded Fang is a compromise between child and adult, a promise of peaceful co-existence. Liberating the child in the "charming good, well brought up, and obedient" Tommy and Annika (*Pippi Longstocking* 6), and making at least their mother realize the necessity of this liberation, is a nostalgic longing for everlasting childhood.

I have tried to show how the two characters enhance a sense of national identity. If Swedish children wish to be like Pippi (be strong and never have to grow up), Canadian children probably — as an outsider I cannot be too sure — wish to be like Jacob (grow up and become strong). Of course, new books offer new ideals; but these two characters, who opened up new perspectives in their respective national literature, will, I believe, remain significant landmarks.

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