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 **Leap of Faith in Astrid Lindgren's *Brothers Lionheart***

Eva-Maria Metcalf

Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 23, 1995

pp. 165-178

10.1353/chl.0.0142

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Leap of Faith in Astrid Lindgren's *Brothers Lionheart*

Eva-Maria Metcalf (bio)

I believe in children's need for consolation. When I was a child,

people believed that when you die you go to heaven; that was not one of the most amusing things one could imagine, to be sure, but if everyone went there. . . . That would at least be better than lying in the ground and not existing any more. Today's children no longer have this consolation. They no longer have this tale. So then I thought: one could perhaps give them another tale that can provide them with a little warmth while they wait for the unavoidable end.

Astrid Lindgren to Egil Törnqvist, 1973

If we believe Astrid Lindgren, a major driving force behind *The Brothers Lionheart*, to which she refers above, was her desire to console. Despite the prevalence of violence and death and despite the novel's controversial conclusion in death and suicide, it is both a consoling and a hope-inspiring book. Not everybody has interpreted the novel in this fashion, however. Like Lindgren's early success, *Pippi Longstocking*, it was greeted with sharp criticism as well as with praise when it first appeared in 1973, and the debate has not quite subsided yet. The reason for the different readings can be sought in the novel's complexity and ambiguity, the main focus of my reading.

The Brothers Lionheart follows the tradition of the fantasy tale, in which primary and secondary worlds are closely linked in a tension-filled coexistence. Lindgren carefully crafted the fantasy paradigm to allow readers a choice. In fact, the novel is designed to work on two levels: for the child to enjoy and escape and for the adult to understand and empathize. Thus, it can be read as a heroic quest, providing the reader with plenty of adventure and a story about love that conquers death; but it can also be read as a psychological portrayal of a sick boy coming to terms with approaching death and a developmental novel that traces the main character's growing self-confidence. In my discussion of *The Brothers Lionheart* I found **[End Page 165]** Zohar Shavit's concept of the ambivalent text quite helpful, because this novel, which speaks to children and adults alike (but does so in very different ways) constantly crosses borders and hovers between two distinct discursive practices (Shavit 63-69).

The story is told in retrospect and in the voice of Karl Lion, called Rusky, who is confined to his sofa-bed in the kitchen and is slowly dying of a lung disease. His beloved brother Jonathan died in his attempt to save Rusky by jumping from the window of the burning house with Rusky on his back. Rusky survives but is shortly thereafter carried off to Nangiyala, a land of dreams and magic, already familiar to him from his brother's stories. There, the brothers are reunited and experience a brief moment of peaceful bliss, but all too soon they are separated again as they struggle against the forces of evil embodied by Lord Tengil. Tengil, who reigns over the neighboring Wild Rose Valley with the help of a cruel dragon named Katla and scores of mindless and ruthless soldiers, threatens to bring Cherry Valley where the two brothers live under his control too. A long and dangerous struggle for freedom ensues in which both brothers play key parts. In the final battle between the forces of liberty and the forces of oppression, Tengil is killed by Katla, who remains a threat. Jonathan volunteers to rid Wild Rose Valley of the fire-spewing dragon but is paralyzed by Katla's flames in the process. Now, roles are reversed, and it is up to Rusky to rescue Jonathan from terrible suffering by leaping into the looming abyss with Jonathan on his back in order to reach the paradisiacal Nangilima, where they will be restored to health and happiness and stay together forever.

Rusky's leap into death and darkness is cushioned by his faith in Jonathan's story that his step into the abyss will take him to lush and peaceful Apple Valley, where he will...

Leap of Faith in Astrid Lindgren's *Brothers Lionheart*

Eva-Maria Metcalf

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Children's Literature 23, ed. Francella Butler, R. H. W. Dillard, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (Yale University Press, © 1995 Cornell College).



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