

Speech in honour of Frida Nilsson & Friederike Buchinger for “Sasja und das Reich jenseits des Meeres” [Sasja and the Empire beyond the Sea] (by Benno Hennig von Lange)

Part 1

A child, an island. The father's shoulders, the feathers and wings of a bird of prey. Runaway pigs. A house, with a terminally ill mother inside. A favourite dog. Flying. Night. Death.

“Death” – this is also the title of the first chapter of Frida Nilsson's “Sasja and the Empire beyond the Sea”. Here she is already laying out the central motifs that shape the long narrative of this book. In this story we meet creatures that resemble birds of prey, dogs and pigs, but are much more than that.

They are friends and companions, merciless enemies.

As readers, we experience moments of the greatest danger, the greatest courage, the deepest loneliness and the most selfless friendship. And the driving force behind this adventure is the unconditional childlike love for a mother. But Sasja's mother is no longer his mummy. For ever since he learned that she has a tumour and will soon die, he can no longer bear to call her Mama. He now calls her Semilla, his Semilla.

Sasja lives with his parents in a house in the country. The happiest moment of his life was when he was playing by the stream behind the house, and armed with only a small stick, he defeated a whole army of enemies. But we don't find out about that until much later.

In the beginning, there is only the child, who spends a rare peaceful and carefree afternoon with his father on an island in an archipelago. There they observe a sea eagle feeding and protecting its offspring. Sasja, the intruder, finds eagle feathers and plays: “Look at me! I can fly too! I'm not dangerous!” he calls out to his father and the bird. This little scene contains the basic constellation of the text, which is dreamlike in many respects.

When they return home, the sadness returns, the anxiety, the fear. The question of how much time is left before the mother is gone forever. The guilty conscience for having enjoyed a carefree, happy time. This could be the end of the story. We know this story from literature, from films or from our own experience. When it comes to death, we are powerless after a certain point. We lose a person forever. Accepting this and finding our own images for life after death is a challenge that is almost impossible for any human being to master, and even more so for a child.

Semilla already has a beautiful vision for her son: a short, easy journey on a large, magnificent ship. And then Death transforms you into something new and beautiful. Sasja believes his mother: She would die. He and his father would mourn. The memories would fade, life would go on. And that would be it. And that wouldn't be a bad story.

But Frida Nilsson is a great writer, and if anyone still needed proof of that, she has provided it with this fantastic, exuberant narrative. Because she doesn't let it end like that. And it doesn't end anyway, because this is just the beginning.

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Part 2

Literature can do anything and in particular it can renew our conceptions of death, fill them with ideas and life at will and offer a perspective instead of an open end.

This is exactly what Frida Nilsson does: She takes Sasja with her, going on an adventure with the child who promises his mother he will cheat Death. This setting makes the richness of this book possible. For Sasja's journey into the Empire of Death is so much more than a hero's journey. It is great literature and takes the reader on a journey full of upheavals and insights: Nilsson gives us time and provides us with the space to reflect upon the important questions of life. For example, on the relationship between children and parents – the meaning of role models and rules on the one hand and the importance of freedom, trust and, above all, children's games on the other. And this is why it resonates with me as an adult reader far beyond the confines of a children's book.

The adult inhabitants of the Empire of Death try with all their might to prevent Sasja and his child companions from approaching Lord Death. In vain. Death is a very relaxed, smart kind of guy in a purple dressing gown who spends most of his days eating cake. Once in his house, Sasja finally meets his mother again. She still has her human form, her shell that Death has fallen in love with, that he claims for himself alone. Death claims that Sasja's mother is better off with him. And that, of course, he also has the power to kill Sasja or send him back to the humans without his mother. But Sasja does not abandon his plan: He takes up the fight and Death finally has to let them both go.

“But the sea did not remain so calm for long, for then the wind came and with it the swell. And the swell increased and became waves. And when the waves did not abate, but became great breakers, as high as a house, I clung to her and said:

‘Mama, I feel sick!’

And she said:

‘Lie down, I’ll take care of you.’”

And that's how Sasja returns home with his Mama.

Frida Nilsson receives the Lynx of the Year 2019 tonight for “Sasja and the Empire beyond the Sea”. She has written a timeless, dreamlike, thoroughly poetic masterpiece about being a child, not least about being human. The little boy is able to do something his father cannot. Nilsson puts all her eggs in one basket: It is the power of imagination that allows Sasja to triumph over Death and opens up unforeseen spaces for him. And it is Nilsson's sensitive and richly pictorial language that gives him a shape and a voice of his own. Thanks also to the impeccable translation by Friederike Buchinger, who is also the recipient of the award here and now, it is an unforgettable read that will stay with me and all of us on the Lynx jury for a long time to come.