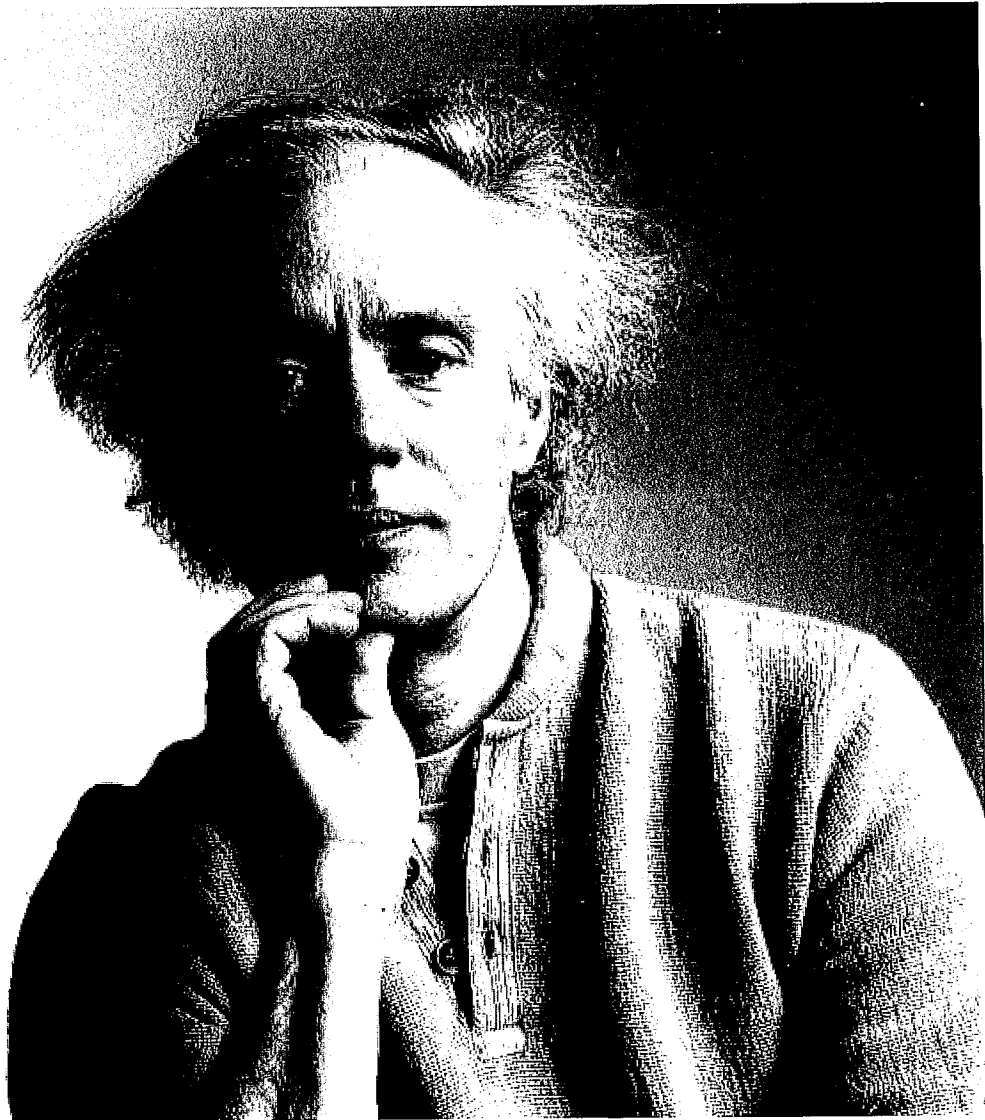


Ulf Stark

Swedish Nominee for the
2018 Hans Christian Andersen
Illustrator Award



Dear Jury Members and IBBY Secretariat

We are delighted to nominate Author Ulf Stark to the HC Andersen Award 2018

Biographical information

Ulf Stark was born and raised in Stureby, near Stockholm in 1944. Today he is regarded as one of Sweden's most important writers. He lives and works in Stockholm.

His break-through came in 1984 with *Dårfinkar och Dönickar* (eng title: *Fruitloops and dipsticks*), a novel about teens for teens which revolutionized literature for young people in Sweden. It's fresh energetic language and authentic portrait of the main character Simone resonated with the readers. Simone, by mistake thought of as a boy called Simon, challenges the preconceived notion of gender identity, making it a queer novel *avant la lettre*.

A classic in Swedish children's literature is *Kan du vissla Johanna?* (eng title: *Can you whistle Johanna?*) published in 1992. It was nominated to the prestigious August Prize and received the Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis in 1994. The film, adapted to the screen by Ulf Stark, is shown every year at Christmas in Sweden with over two million viewers.

Ulf Stark often returns to his childhood's landscape of Stureby, most notably in the critically acclaimed Stureby-series (*My friend Percys magical gym shoes*).

As an author, his work ranges from poems for children, picture books, middle grade novels as well as literature for teens.

His books are translated into several languages.

Bibliography (a selection). Titles submitted to jury are in bold.

Ett hål till livet (poetry for adults)
1963

Sophämtarna
1966

Skärgårdsliv
1967

Mick Jagger, herr Bertrand och jag
1969

Petter och den röda fågeln
1975

Petter och de upproriska grisarna

1976

Patrik
1978

Dårfinkar och dönickar (Fruitloops and dipsticks)

1984

Maria Bleknos
1985

Låt isbjörnarna dansa
1986

Jaguaren (ill. Anna Höglund)
1987

Sixten
1987

Karlavagnen
1989

Min vän Percys magiska gymnastikskor (My friend Percy's magical gym shoes)
1991

Kan du vissla Johanna? (Can you whistle Johanna?)
1992

Min vän shejken I Stureby
1994

Liten
1994

Hunden som log
1995

Guldhärtat
1996

Min syster är en ängel
1996

Ängeln och den blåa hasten
1997

När pappa visade mig världsalltet (When dad showed me the universe)

Ill. By Eva Eriksson

1998

Lilla Asmodeus

1998

Ensam med min bror

2000

Den svarta fiolen

2000

Mitt liv som Ulf

2001

När mamma var indian

2002

Göran och draken

2002

Fullt med flugor I klassen

2003

Min vän Percy, Buffalo Bill och jag

2004

Märklin och Turbin

2005

Kanel och kanin

2006

En stjärna vid namn Ajax

2008

Jul I stora skogen

2012

Ett syskon från yttre rymden

2013

En liten bok om kärlek

2015

Lillasyster

2016

Djur som ingen sett utom vi
2016

Awards (a selection)

Nils Holgersson plaketten 1988

Astrid Lindgren Prize 1993

Deutsche jugendliteraturpreis 1994

Heffaklumpen 1995

August prize 1996

Gullspiran (for exceptional contribution to Swedish film) 2008

Schullströmska priset 2012

Kulla-Gulla-priset 2016

The Author and His Works

In 1984, Ulf Stark won the Bonniers Junior Publishers competition for a book for young readers which gave the readers hope and the courage to face life. His contribution, *Dårfinkar och dōnickar (Nutcases and Norms)*, fulfilled all the criteria of the competition to the very last letter, and he had written a consummate novel for the young with well composed and exciting intrigues. The jury's judgement included: "The story is boldly and finely balanced between the most profound seriousness and crazy humour. The perspective of the narrative, seen through Simone's eyes, is used effectively and the book provides many fine and well placed opportunities to portray sex role patterns in early puberty. *Nutcases and Norms* is a generous book with a great sense of joie de vivre."

This was by no means Ulf Stark's first book, but he was nonetheless unknown to most people. He first published *Ett hål till livet (A Hole to Life)*, a collection of poems for adults in 1964, when he was twenty. This was followed by two more adult books, *Sophämtarna (Refuse Collectors)* in 1966 and *Skärgårdsliv (Island Life)* in 1967. Eight years later came two books for children, *Petter och den röda fågeln (Peter And The Red Bird)* and *Petter och de upproriska grisarna (Peter And The Rebellious Pigs)*. Then he was silent – until he won this competition with a book the critics at once fell for and young readers immediately took to their hearts. Today there is hardly anyone in Sweden who does not know who Ulf Stark is. His books have been filmed for television and the cinema, are constantly reprinted, constantly borrowed from libraries, have become objects of learned analysis, and he often goes to schools to talk about writing and books.

"Humour and courage to face life" are words often used about his books. "Sorrows in warm colours" is another characteristic of his writing, used by Dr Ulla Lundqvist in her analysis of Swedish books for young readers from the 1960s to the 1990s, *Tradition and Renewal* (1994). "He wants to lure out dazzling life" was the headline of an interview with him in *Opsis Kalopsis*. They are words which say a great deal

about Ulf Stark's work. He writes books which are funny, never dodging strong feelings or difficult experiences. His feeling for life is never so strong as it is when in the proximity of death, whether of a beloved dog who is dying, as in *Hunden som log (The Dog That Smiled)*, or a grandfather as in *Nutcases and Norms* and *Kan du vissla Johanna (Can You Whistle Johanna)*.

He is never sentimental.

"I think grief has to be included so that the joy is clear," he has said. "If one is to provide courage to face life, one has to be able to show that this person has courage and fights because there's something to fight against."

He also succeeds in something few children's authors do, writing books which feel contemporary so that schoolchildren of today recognise themselves and their surroundings. And all this without for one moment resorting to the ingratiating use of time bound young jargon.

Seriousness through craziness

Nutcases and Norms is a story about exchanging role and identity. The girl Simone is twelve and together with her mother she moves to a new place and starts in a new school. There they think her name is Simon and she at once adopts the role of a boy, which naturally creates interesting complications. A girl in her class falls in love with her, and she becomes friends and competes in reckless exploits with one of the boys in her class.

Simon/Simone's mother is a nice but self-absorbed artist, who has fallen in love and moved in with Yngve, who according to Simone is a drip, a deadly type, a norm. Grandfather, her mother's father, also joins the family and he is so old, he is soon going to die. He plays the cello and is a great life-artist. Simone loves him and he appears as the great happy nutcase. When the time comes for him to die, he stages his farewell party in the garden for all his friends with music and good food. His farewell becomes a tribute to life, joy and love.

Nutcases and Norms can be regarded as a story of Simone's route to adulthood, and to the insight that the world is not unambiguous, not divided into wonderful nutcases and dismal

norms, although even the most dismal norm has a tiny nutcase inside him, if only he dare let it out.

According to Ulf Stark himself, it is a book on "friendship and hatred, love and grief". About how you become your own person in the shadow of a crazy and self-absorbed mum. About how you see seriousness through the craziness and discover a tiny bit of the truth through the lies." *Nutcases and Norms* has been filmed for Swedish television in six half hour episodes. Danish Rumle Hammerich directed it and the series was broadcast for the first time at the turn of the year 1988-89. It was a great success and was watched by both adults and children. It also became the introduction to a lengthy and fruitful co-operation between Ulf Stark and Rumle Hammerich, which has resulted in several international film prizes.

Facets of class differences and step families

Låt isbjörnarna dansa (Let Polar Bears Dance), 1986, has also been filmed by a Danish director, Birger Larsen, and was shown in cinemas in Scandinavia. That, too, is about identity and changing roles. In the first person, Lasse tells about when his mother suddenly left his father and moved in with a dentist. Lasse has to go with her, and finds it difficult to adapt to the dentist's middle-class environment. He misses his own father, who is a "polar bear". This is an allusion to the fact that he works in an abattoir and cuts up pigs in a cold store, but also to a certain emotional awkwardness. He has few words for his emotions and is a somewhat silent person. He plays old Elvis Presley songs, which have to express what he feels. However, this does not mean he is without emotions or doesn't like his son. The relationship between them is close but taciturn. Lasse is no genius at school but that does not worry his father.

"He seemed almost pleased I was no good at school, that everything went wrong, and I hated that place just as he had once hated it. We were the same sort. We sat there as close as we could get and watched the evening flicker past, two foolish, pure hearted robbers."

That is what Lasse thinks after a parent-teacher meeting at school. But for the dentist, Lasse's bad school reports are an annoying

element, and he makes a bet that he will make Lasse into the best pupil in the class. Lasse complies and also succeeds, before his instinct for survival and integrity make him skip the last, decisive test. At the end of the book, he returns to his biological father. He has chosen fellowship with his father rather than money and the "posher life" with the dentist.

Ulf Stark has deliberately written a Pygmalion story and set it in the reality of present day Sweden. Readers can be just as irritated by and angry with the dentist as they can with Professor Higgins, but Ulf Stark does not make him unambiguous. In the end, the dentist realises he has driven Lasse too far and understands his protests.

Let Polar Bears Dance can be read in many ways, as a story of class differences, a tale about children of divorced parents provided with a new family and half siblings, as a funny school story or a humorous story full of situations to laugh at.

A Wife for Dad

Sixten, which came out in its first version in 1987, has in a way much in common with *Let Polar Bears Dance*. Here, too, is a boy as the main character, his parents are divorced and he is living with his father, who over-protects him. *Sixten* is also a funny book with serious foundations.

It was published as an easy-to-read book for beginner readers, and as such it is almost brilliant. It is not easy to write a genuine book in seventy sparsely set pages, but Ulf Stark has succeeded so well that you totally forget it is adapted for beginner readers. Sixten and his friend Jonte decide to get hold of a new wife for Sixten's father, so that he has something else to think about apart from what Sixten is up to. It is a decision which leads to many amusing complications. They scan the newspaper lonely hearts columns and constantly despair, until finally they make contact with the signature Dancing Feet, whom they invite to dinner back at home with Dad. When the young lady rings the bell, Dad mistakes her for someone who has come to repair the washing machine. In a swirling foam of detergent and flying washing machine parts, they find each other. It looks as if Sixten's cunning has at last succeeded.

When *Sixten* was to be filmed, Ulf Stark re-wrote the book, so a new, slightly different and more detailed version was published in 1994. But it still has the same warm humour and lightness, and it is still just as popular among child readers. The film, directed by Swedish Catti Edfeldt, ran for several months in Stockholm's cinemas and was a great family film.

On friendship and faith

Ulf Stark grew up in a suburb outside Stockholm, the son of a dentist who ran his practice on the ground floor of the house. The family lived on the first floor, Ulf and his brother and their housewife mother. He writes about his childhood in *Min vän Percys magiska gymnasstikskor* (*My Friend Percy's Magical Gym Shoes*), in which the main character is called Ulf. It is a book for slightly younger children than *Nutcases and Norms* and *Let Polar Bears Dance*. A breakneck story rooted in a realistic setting and with perfectly ordinary boys as the main characters. Ulf's best friend is called Percy. He has a pair of tatty gym shoes, which his gym teacher no longer approves of. Percy then deceives Ulf into believing they are magical.

'M-A-G-I-C-A-L, quite simply,' he said.
'Why the heck do you think I'm so good walking along the beam? Why do you think I can fight? Why do you think I'm so happy?'

'Is it your shoes?' I said.

'Cor, you're a clever one,' said Percy.

'But promise you won't tell anyone.'

'D'you think I'm stupid?' I said.

Then Percy got up. He patted my shoulder. Then he spat on the floor and went out of the changing room with those magical springy steps of his.

In a very uneven barter transaction, Ulf acquires the gymshoes. And lo, it works! Ulf is transformed from a nice, well brought up, rather timid boy, who can't walk on the beam, into a reckless, cheeky and brave hooligan.

The whole course of events is seen through Ulf's eyes and is told in the first person with an apparent naivety which reveals far more of the children's internal relations, their lives and families, their emotions and thoughts than a boy

of Ulf's age would consciously be able to tell. It is very skilfully done. And funny!

Percy's Magical Gym Shoes has also been filmed for Swedish television. *Min vän shejken i Stureby* (*My Friend the Sheik of Stureby*), a sequel to the story of Percy, is coming out in the autumn of 1995.

Whistle on my grave

Can You Whistle Johanna, 1992, has also been filmed for Swedish television as well as dramatised and performed on the stage at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Sweden's national theatre. In this, too, Ulf speaks in the first person and now his friend is called Berra. Berra is jealous that Ulf has a grandfather, but he hasn't. They find a grandfather at the old people's home, a lonely man who is pleased suddenly to have a "grandchild". Together they do the things grandfathers and grandchildren should do together, have coffee, play cards and scrump cherries. A warm relationship grows between the boys and the old man and they really do gild his last days. Grandfather tries to teach Berra to whistle and says: "Next time you come, I want to hear you whistling". "Yes, you will," said Berra. "I promise."

But it takes time for Berra to learn and when the boys at last get to the old people's home, Grandfather is gone.

He runs right up to the door.

'I'm here now,' he calls as he opens it.

But when we look inside, he's not there.

Nor is the gold watch, the stuffed bird or the picture of the lady in the blue hat.

The bed is made. And there's a smell of soap in the room.

On the day of Grandfather's funeral, Berra puts on his best clothes and both the boys go to the chapel.

Then you go up and put flowers on the coffin. Berra and I are last. We bow. And Berra puts Gustavsson's rose on the very top. He stays there, although I pull at his arm.

'Now I'm going to whistle,' he says. 'Just you wait until you hear it.'

Berra whistles so that it echoes round the chapel. He whistles Can You Whistle Johanna.

'What did it sound like?' he asks once we're outside.

'Smashing,' I say. 'You can be pleased now.'

'I am,' says Berra.

Co-operation with Anna Höglund

Can You Whistle Johanna is richly illustrated in colour by Anna Höglund. Anna and Ulf had co-operated previously on the picture book *Jaguar* (*The Jaguar*), 1987. Ulf Stark received the Nils Holgersson Plaque and Anna Höglund the Elsa Beskow Plaque in 1988 for *The Jaguar*. These awards are made annually by the Public Library Association of Sweden and can be regarded as the most prestigious of children's book prizes. For *Can You Whistle Johanna*, they have both received the German Jugendliteraturpreis.

The Jaguar is a story in verse about a little boy who is turned into a jaguar when he is about to go to sleep and he goes out into the jungle of the big city, where he has a great many alarming adventures before he is turned back into a little boy again and tucked up in bed by his mother and father. A tender hearted bedtime story told by someone who knows exactly how much danger and how much security there has to be in a story of that kind.

The Jaguar has been performed by the Long Nose Puppet Theatre at Stockholm City Theatre.

In 1994, Ulf Stark and Anna Höglund produced another picture book together called *Liten* (*Little*). It is about how Tomas' father, wondering what it was like to be small and be able to play again, has his wish fulfilled. He wakes up one morning the same size as his son and they have a fantastic day together before everything goes back to normal again.

Versatile writing

Ulf Stark has also written a horror story for young readers in the spirit of Stephen King, *Karlavagnen* (*The Big Dipper*), 1989.

Maria Bleknos (*Maria Pale-Nose*), 1985, for younger children has a six year-old girl as its

main character and is about her fear of a woman who is to babysit for her.

The Dog That Smiled is an easy-to-read book about a beloved dog who is very ill and has to be put down. Its young master and his friends want to give the dog a really happy day before it is too late, so they take him with them to the tivoli. It has previously been published in an anthology and was filmed in 1989 by Rumle Hammerich.

Ulf has written stories for use in schools and has published books for beginner readers. He has also written film scripts from his own books.

In everything he writes, grief and joy appear side by side. And humour, which often comes from his logically keeping of the perspective of the child or the teenager. He describes inner emotions with the help of external courses of events and with humorous exaggerations. There is a constant demand for humorous books in Sweden, funny books that makes you laugh. Ulf Stark's books are funny. You often laugh when you read them and at the same time they have a serious base which means they provide very much more than a moment of enjoyable reading. A little aid to understanding what is incomprehensible in life, in fact. And a delight in existing.

Birgitta Fransson

President of the Swedish section of IBBY,
Children and Juvenile Book Council



Sixten and his father
From *Sixten*, Swedish edition 1987