

from:

Jagger Jagger

Frida Nilsson

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translated and introduced by

Kate Lambert

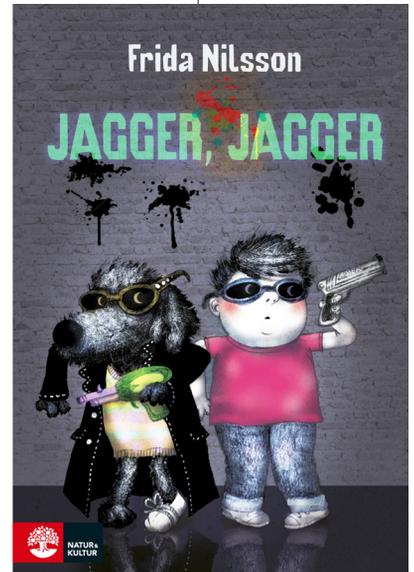
Frida Nilsson won the Astrid Lindgren Prize in 2014, the award citing her 'fantastic sense of what it is to feel different'. Her series of books about Hedvig draw on her own childhood growing up in the countryside, while others, including *Jagger Jagger* contain more surreal, fantasy elements. *Jagger Jagger* was published in 2013 and was nominated for Sweden's August Prize. Like Frida Nilsson's earlier children's books *Apstjärnan* and *Jag, Dante och miljonerna*, *Jagger Jagger* has exclusion and isolation as its theme. Bullied by the other children in his block of flats, eight-and-a-half-year-old Bengt has decided he would rather stay indoors, until one day he encounters a homeless dog, Jagger, who wears a leather coat and lives in a skip, and together they embark on a course of revenge.

The following extract, from the beginning of the book, describes their first meeting.

Me

My name is Bengt. The summer I was eight and a half, I was best friends with a dog whose name was Jagger Svensson. Sometimes I wonder if that whole summer was really true or if it was just a dream or something. When I think about it now, everything seems so strange. But at the time I was just caught up in it all.

The block of flats I lived in was grey and it had six floors. Outside there was a wooden roundabout and a bench and a pine tree and a shed for the bins. Quite a lot of people lived in the block, thirty-two adults and four



Jagger Jagger, Natur & Kultur, 2013

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children and little babies. The children usually played outside in the summer, but I didn't.

It wasn't that I didn't want anyone to play with, because I did. I wanted it so much that I nearly went crazy sometimes, and once I actually did go properly crazy. I sat on the floor in my room and suddenly I started howling and hitting my head as hard as I could. Mum and Dad came running. They had to hold onto my arms and Mum kept asking 'What is it, what is it?' over and over again.

'If only I wasn't so disgusting,' I said, and cried.

Then Mum cried too and said I wasn't disgusting at all and Dad said she was right. But it didn't matter what they said because it wasn't them who decided who was allowed to play and who wasn't.

Anyway, these were all the things that were disgusting about me:

My tummy (fat)

My arms (chubby)

My legs (chunky)

My chin (flabby)

My hair (thick)

And one time down by the roundabout Astrid said I smelled of onions as well.

Astrid and Allan and Gustav. That's what they were called, the other kids in the building. They did annoying things to me quite often. Once they put cornflakes through my letterbox. Another time they threw my football in the river and it was a new football too, with flames on. Once they smeared mud on my bike seat so my bum was brown when I rode it. And once they said I had real breasts but then I said 'Stop it!' and I think that was a good thing to say.

This day I'm going to talk about was a day in the middle of June. Mum and Dad had already gone to work when I got up.

There was a note on the draining board. It said *Take the rubbish out Bengt! xxx!* It was Mum who had written it. She was always wanting me to go out and do things. Buy some milk or get some fresh air or pump up my bike tyres. There was a note on the draining board nearly every morning.

If it was up to me, I'd rather stay indoors until I was thirty. I wanted to tape up the letterbox too really, but it would probably have made the postman sad. And Mum said it was good for me to go out because you never knew with the kids in the block. You never knew, they might have changed. That's what she thought anyway.

I changed into shorts and a top and ate two sandwiches. Then I ate another sandwich and drank a glass of milk. Then I looked at the draining board again.

The note was still there.

Then I sighed, tied up the rubbish bag and went out into the stairwell.

All the doors looked the same. Like square, staring eyes. When I got to the front door I stopped and put my nose up against the glass. Astrid and Allan and Gustav were outside. They were sitting on the roundabout as usual.



I may as well say a bit about what they looked like. Astrid had brown hair and earrings. Allan had red hair and big eyes. Gustav had fair hair and then nothing special really. No one was disgusting though.

I opened the door and went out quite quickly.

'What are you doing?' asked Astrid.

I didn't answer. Sometimes when they say things and I answer, they say I WASN'T TALKING TO YOU! so it isn't very easy to tell.

'He's taking the rubbish out,' said Gustav.

Allan laughed.

'What are you doing that for?' asked Astrid.

'Because I've got to,' I mumbled.

Astrid got up and came running towards me.

'What's in the rubbish?' she asked, pulling at the bag.

'Let go!' I said. 'It's just rubbish.'

But Astrid pulled harder. She said she wanted to know if it was rubbish with lots of butter and grease and disgusting stuff in it.

'No it isn't,' I said. My cheeks were burning red. At least I couldn't see that they were but I felt it. I pulled and pulled and Astrid pulled in the other direction and in the end the bag burst and everything fell out on the ground.

Astrid put her hands over her mouth and screamed. Allan and Gustav screamed too. They thought it was super-disgusting and super-funny at the same time. All three of them came up really close and looked at the rubbish while I picked up bits of macaroni and coffee grounds and kitchen roll and ran to the bin shed.

Then I ran back again and picked up more things. A chicken bone and an apple core and a yucky plastic thing that had had pork fillets in it.

'Yuuuuck! That's disgusting!' shouted Astrid. 'And anyway, didn't you know there are rats in the bin shed?'

'Nah,' I said.

'There are,' she said. 'They bite.'

I swallowed a big, horrible lump in my throat. I didn't know if it was true or if she was making it up.

'I hate rats,' said Astrid.

'Why?' asked Gustav.

'I don't know, I just do,' said Astrid. 'Don't you?'

'No,' said Gustav.

'No,' said Allan.

'No,' I said.

'I wasn't asking YOU!' said Astrid.

Then I picked up some bits of fried potato and ran with them to the bins and then I ran out as quickly as I could so I didn't get my feet bitten off.

Allan was acting tough in front of Astrid. He said he liked rats. He even thought they were cute. If he ever met one, he'd kiss its tail! Astrid screamed so much that my ears were about to explode.

'I'm going in now,' I said. I was sweating. It was hot outside, the grass by the edge of the river was brown and the pine tree had lost its needles. It was almost as if our part of town had been in the oven too long or something.

But just as I had gone up the steps to the door, Astrid shouted 'Stop!'

A disgusting shiver ran through my body. She was good at sounding angry.

'What is it?' I said.

Apstjärnan (Me and Gorilla), 2005, and *Jag, Dante och miljonerna* (Me and Dante at the Dump), 2008, were published by Natur & Kultur.

The author's latest book is *Ishavspirater* (Arctic Pirates), 2015.

A review of *Apstjärnan* with a translated extract by Fiona Graham has appeared on the SELTA blog, <http://www.selta.org.uk/my-mumas-a-gorilla-a-so-what.php>

Astrid stuck her little finger out. She was pointing at something. A pea.

'You missed that,' she said.

'I don't care,' I said.

But then all three of them turned into police officers or something. They ran over and stood in front of me, blocking my way to the door.

'Pick it up!' said Astrid.

'No,' I said.

'Pick it up and go and throw it away! It's disgusting if it stays there!' said Astrid.

'No,' I said.

'All you say is no, no, no all the time. Can't you say anything else?'

'Yes,' I said.

Then Astrid sighed and said I was annoying. She started pulling at my top and trying to force me to go back. It was as if there was a machine in my body telling me to do hundreds of different things at once. To run away, for example, and to hit Astrid, for example, and to just start shouting like a maniac, for example. But in end I did what she wanted and picked up the pea.

I walked towards the bin shed. My tummy hurt, everything felt superbad. But I had to throw the pea away. Allan and Gustav and Astrid were still standing in front of the door, they wouldn't let me past if I didn't. And just when I'd lifted the lid off the rubbish bin and thrown in the little pea with a *plop*, I heard massive giggling behind my back and then the door shut with a bang. It was pitch-dark.

I tried to open it but someone was holding it shut. I heard them dragging something heavy. It went *clunk* and after that the door was completely impossible to open.

'Have fun!' shouted Astrid and then they must have run away.

I banged and banged and banged on the door.

'Come baaaaaack!' I shouted. 'Let me out!'

But no one came. Through the chink in the door I could see it was the heavy, green garden bench that they had put in front of it.

Then I sat on the floor and cried. Sometimes it felt as if there was a rat sniffing at my feet and then I had to kick and shout as much as I could. Then I cried again.

It was probably several hours. Outside it was boiling hot but not in the bin shed. I was shaking all over. My bum felt hard and cold like concrete.

Finally there was a clattering noise outside the door.

'What sort of nonsense is going on here?' someone spluttered.

I dragged myself up. Through the chink in the door I could see it was Qvist. She was really old and lived up on floor 3.

'Mrs Qvist! Help me!' I shouted. 'It's Bengt!'

'Who?' said Qvist, hitting the bench with her stick. That was what the clattering noise was.

'I live in the flat downstairs! Take the bench away so I can get out!' I shouted.

Qvist sniffed.

'If you've dragged the bench over here, then you'll have to drag it back again yourself!' she snorted and then she took her stick and her rubbish bag and walked off.



'It wasn't me who put the bench here, can't you see that?' I yelled, but she didn't hear me.

First Encounter

Even more hours passed. In the end it wasn't just my bum that felt like concrete, it was all of me. Including my brain. I couldn't think, just freeze. I wasn't afraid of the rats any more. There weren't any. Astrid was deranged and idiotic and stupid. And so were Allan and Gustav. I wished they didn't exist. No, that wasn't it, I wished I didn't exist. That would be better. Then there would be one less disgusting fatty on the planet. And then Mum wouldn't have to be so sad because she had a son that no one wanted to play with.

Then suddenly, when I'd almost fallen asleep, I heard a scraping noise outside the door. At last someone had come to take the bench away! I stood up with my heart racing. I almost started crying again because I felt so sorry for myself.

'Open it!' I shouted, 'Open it now!!!'

'I am doing!' someone answered. Their voice was out of breath.

It wasn't Qvist.

And it wasn't Astrid or Gustav or Allan either.

It wasn't anyone I knew.

After a while the door opened.

There was a dog standing outside. He was wearing a grubby long-sleeved jumper in pastel colours. It almost came down to his knees. On his paws he had shoes he had made out of newspaper.

'What are you up to?' he said.

I didn't answer. I felt a bit scared. Dogs can be even more dangerous than rats. Not all of them, I mean, but some of them. Mum had read in the paper about dogs that rip people's faces off, just like that.

The dog grabbed a bag on wheels that he had parked behind him. It was one of those tartan bags that grannies put their shopping in. He wheeled it into the bin room and lifted the lid off the bin.

The first thing he found was a little pea. He held it between two grubby claws and looked at it carefully. When I saw that pea again I was so horribly sad. I couldn't help it. I was suddenly crying so much the tears were running down my cheeks.

'If you want to be left alone ...' said the dog.

'I don't want to be left alone!' I said. My voice was squeaky with tears. 'Has everyone gone crazy?'

'What do you mean crazy?' asked the dog crossly.

'It wasn't me who put that bench there! It's actually quite easy to work that out!'

'Obviously,' said the dog, putting the pea in the bag on wheels. 'But you might have had a friend who helped you.'

'Ha!' I shouted. 'Ha-ha-ha-haaaa!'

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing! Nothing in the whole world is funny and I don't have even one tiny useless friend!'

'Well that's no reason to get angry with me!'