

Introduction

Narratives of Children's Literature Around 1968

We like to think of the 1970s as the decade when Swedish children's literature became political. However, when later critics began sketching the most significant changes in children's literature of the period the verdict was harsh. The tidal wave had changed. Now the critics turned against the demand for socially oriented realism, and questioned the aversion towards imagination and fantasy which, it was argued, had characterized Swedish children's literature since the late 1960s. An illustrative example is found in an article written by Ronny Ambjörnsson in the summer of 1981, in which he attacked the alleged dominance of the socio-realistic norm in the 1970s, and argued for another kind of children's literature. In Ambjörnsson's view, it was clear that Göran Palm's call for more realistic literature in the early 1960s had become a major influence for the writers of children's books. In light of this, Ambjörnsson states that the children's literature of the 1970s had turned anti-idyllic and realistic at the expense of imagination and fairy tales (R. Ambjörnsson).

In short, Ambjörnsson claimed that the fairy tale genre was "banned" from children's literature during the 1970s, and he argued that this entailed undesirable effects for the reading child. In his view, the insight into societal problems strived for in socially oriented children's books did not necessarily lead to liberation or change, it could just as easily result in resignation. Moreover, he argued, there are important aspects in life that cannot be described in the language of realism. Ambjörnsson's negative perception of the 1970s exemplifies an attitude that has underwritten much of what has later been said about what is, in fact, one of the most significant and interesting periods in the history of modern Swedish children's literature. It has also contributed to the well-known narrative that to this date has dominated our understanding of the period. This narrative produces a schematic image of the 1970s as the period that on false grounds dismissed fairy tales, idyllic representations, and fantastic stories because they were too conservative and by extension obscured capitalistic power relations in society. In retrospect, this negative image of the 1970s obviously filled a certain need for subsequent critics and

historians, as it gave the 1980s a contrasting identity, constituting a more developed decade of imagination, fairy tales, and individual liberalism.

The narratives of the 1970s often emphasize the breakthrough of progressive left-wing ideas and everyday realism. However, as Lena Kåreland notes, this type of publishing only forms a small part of the children's literature of the period (33). At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that even among the unmistakably political or socially oriented literature of the period, it is not hard to find books that make use of genres playing with fantastical or magical elements. This is an important observation as it contradicts the idea that realism overshadowed other forms of writing completely. In other words, politically engaged literature does not necessarily mean the exile of imagination and fairy tales. Rather, as the contributions in this issue of *Barnboken* on the theme of "Nordic Children's Literature Around 1968" demonstrate, imagination and non-realistic modes of writing played an important part in the different aesthetic and political directions taken by the writers of children's literature and film during the period.

In an international context, the years around 1968 are often considered to be a time of experimentation and radical fantasy (Heywood; Haiven and Khasnabish). According to this view, the positive function assigned to imagination and experimentation around 1968 is in many ways a celebration of its capacity to liberate citizens from what was seen as the oppression of modern capitalism in an industrial society. This was true also in Sweden, as a number of Swedish children's books writers made use of fantastic and fairytale-like genres in order to influence and liberate their readers. A case in point is Gunnar Ohrlander and Helena Henschen's classic *När barnen tog makten* [When the children seized power] published in 1969, where an aesthetics of liberation and unbridled fantasy is employed in the name of an anti-systemic revolution (Widhe, "Counter-Indoctrinations" 4; "Max Lundgren and the Development of Children's Rights" 37). Following this, the long-standing historical conception of childhood as a time of free imagination and play gave the concept of the child and the writing of children's literature a unique role in the politicized years around 1968.

The view that the aesthetics of fairy tales and imagination were revived in the late 1970s, and that it eventually secured its supremacy during the 1980s, was soon established. Some critics even claimed to be able to name the exact year of the genre's return; 1977, when Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance*

of *Fairy Tales* (1977) was reviewed by Per Wästberg in an article in Sweden's largest newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. Similarly, in the mid-1980s Lars Wolf defended the fairy tale against presumed enemies, and proclaimed Bettelheim to be its liberator. The same year as Bettelheim's book was discussed in the Swedish press, a number of articles were published that criticized what was perceived as the dominant attitude towards fairy tales and imagination during the 1970s. For instance, an article titled "Slut på vardag och pekpinningar: nu är sagan här igen" [No more everyday life and moral statements: the fairy tale is back], published in *Svenska Dagbladet* in the winter of 1977, described the dawn of a new era in the history of children's literature.

In retrospect, it is safe to say that this shift in attitude is described as quite rapid and fundamental. In 1977, reading and writing fairy tales was suddenly accepted again, but "a few years ago, almost all new children's books depicted children in high-rises, children at preschool, children with single mothers, children with divorced parents [...] The books were dominated by facts and everyday life, often with a political undertone" ("Slut på vardag och pekpinningar"). The idea of a new turn towards imagination around 1977 was further reinforced by Gunila Ambjörnsson in her article "Behövs de blåa elefanterna?" [Do we need the blue elephants?] in *Dagens Nyheter*, which raged against all "super boring high-rise books" and asked whether it was time to return to fantastic stories again (G. Ambjörnsson, "Behövs de blåa elefanterna?").

It is not difficult to see how the Swedish narrative of the years around 1968 has taken shape. Kerstin Thorvall's article "Bor alla barnboksförfattare i Tomtebolandet?" [Do all children's book writers live in fairyland?], which questions children's literature written in the vein of Elsa Beskow and calls for more contemporary and socially oriented children's books, played an important role. Another essential point of reference is Lennart Hellsing's dictum that we need more fairy tales closely linked to children's own reality, "that depicts our own place and time, with cars instead of wagons and football stars instead of knights" (38). In addition to this we have the critical debate on Astrid Lindgren's fairytale-like *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* [*Brothers Lionheart*], which was attacked from different flanks in the autumn of 1973, for example by a children's literature group in Gothenburg. In a high-pitched contribution to the debate they demanded Lindgren's novel "should not be permitted" because it was dangerous, dishonest, and simplifying (Berg et al.). Finally, a critical text of particular importance in this context is Gunila Ambjörnsson's *Skräpkultur åt barnen* [Thrash culture for the children] from 1968, which

had an unprecedented influence on the debates on children's literature and children's culture during the final year of the 1960s and well into the 1970s. However, Ambjörnsson herself does not seem to have defended a rejection of imagination as escapism altogether.

Imagination and Everyday Realism

The debates on children's literature and culture in Sweden during the 1970s have been thoroughly examined from a number of different angles (Strandgaard Jensen; Weinreich; Janson; Gustafsson; Rönberg; Lind; Kåreland; Kjersén Edman). When the years around 1968 are outlined, it is often stressed that words like "realistic" and "political" were given positive connotations, whereas children's literature with absurdist or fantastic elements is said to have been criticized for its escapist and conservative content. But there are also attempts to give a more nuanced picture of the years around 1968. Vivi Edström's classic *Barnbokens form: en studie i konsten att berätta* [Form in children's books: a study in narrative art] from 1980 is an early example of this, as she notes that the fairy tale was popular during the 1970s, and that its logic of action could be used in travesties with political and social aims (22). Lena Kjersén Edman is another critic pointing out that the writer Hans Peterson resisted what he perceived as the schematic demands on realism and political commitment during this period (113). But even if we take these important contributions into account, research on the years around 1968 and the 1970s has largely failed to acknowledge the extent to which the socially oriented and politically informed children's literature covered a diversity of genres and used modes of representation other than realism.

The fantastic and utopian function of literature was, in fact, brought forward as a productive alternative already in the years around 1968. In this context, Herbert Marcuse, an esteemed philosopher of the 68 movement, gave imagination a significant role in the political pursuit of a new social and economic order. The belief that imagination was too important to reject was also present in Sweden during the late 1960s and the 1970s, for example, in Artur Lundkvist's articles "Till fantasins försvar" [In imagination's defense] samt "År svartsynen försvarlig?" [Is the pessimism justified?]. Around this time, the importance of imagination and the fantastic genres is also addressed by writers like Lennart Hellsing, Astrid Lindgren, Harry Kullman, and Gunila Ambjörnsson. The latter discuss it in their contributions to the progressive anthology *Läsning för barn: orientering i dagens barnlitteratur* [Books for children: a survey of contemporary children's

literature] (1971): "Resor i rumden" [Travels in space] and "Propaganda, indoktrinering, värderingar" [Propaganda, indoctrination, values].

New Perspectives on 1968

Taken together, the following articles on the theme "Nordic Children's Literature Around 1968" in this issue of *Barnboken* exhibit the wide range of texts published for children during these years. They also indicate that the historical narrative of children's literature and culture during the years around 1968 needs to be revisited and thoroughly re-examined, and that the aesthetics of imagination, play, and the child's experience is partly formed in a political context.

This is evident in Lydia Wistisen's article "Leken i antropocen: skräpestetik i Barbro Lindgrens *Loranga, Masarin och Dartanjang* (1969) och *Loranga, Loranga* (1970)" [Play in the anthropocene: waste aesthetics in Barbro Lindgren's *Loranga, Masarin och Dartanjang* (1969) and *Loranga, Loranga* (1970)], which examines the ideological and aesthetic dimensions of the trash motif. Barbro Lindgren's *Loranga* books have been seen as a typical example of how the years around 1968 not only produced socially realist books based on a political agenda, but also escapism and nonsense. But as Wistisen points out, Lindgren's nonsense may not be as politically innocent as it would seem at first glance, prompting her to ask what the reader is to make of a snoring giraffe lying with its head in a tin can. Can the snoring perhaps be linked to the political climate around 1968? Wistisen's observation that Astrid Lindgren's idyllic Bullerby stories lack any traces of trash, whereas Barbro Lindgren's *Loranga* universe is full of thrash, is used as a starting point for a discussion on how play and laughter also can inspire a commitment to change. Wistisen's article raises an interesting question: How can the *Loranga* books' celebration of fantasy and chaos be interpreted in the light of the radical fantasy's attack on societal norms in terms of human relationships and what is considered valuable?

In "Exporting the Nordic Children's '68: The Global Publishing Scandal of *The Little Red Schoolbook*", Sophie Heywood and Helle Strandgaard Jensen outline the events surrounding the publication of the Danish children's book *Den lille røde bog for skoleelever* [*The Little Red School Book*] (1969) written by Bo Dan Andersen, Søren Hansen and Jesper Jensen. The book was quickly translated and published in different languages, not only in the Nordic countries, but also in Belgium, Finland, France, Great Britain, East Germany, Greece, Iceland,

Italy, and the Netherlands. Heywood and Strandgaard Jensen draw attention to the fact that the book, which was aimed at students aged ten years and upwards, spoke to a younger target group than the one usually associated with the youth rebellions around 1968. In their article, *Den lille røde bog for skoleelever* becomes an example of how radical ideas were spread across the European countries during this period. In this manner, they place the Nordic debate on children's literature, children, and childhood in a larger international context. Their article also emphasizes that *Den lille røde bog for skoleelever* taps into the rights discourse that surrounded the discussion of children around 1968, and which was also expressed in children's literature. It is worth noting that the reception of the book in the Nordic countries differed quite markedly from its reception internationally. While influential voices in the Nordic debates on culture were largely positive, making the book part of the discourse of change prominent at the time, the discussion of the book in other European countries was more heated and morally indignant.

In the article "Slåss mot alla orättvisor: Katarina Taikon och föreställningen om barnets rättigheter runt 1968" [Fighting all injustice: Katarina Taikon and the concept of children's rights around '68], I highlight how the portrayal of the power relations between children and adults, and the views on children's rights, were given a specifically political meaning around 1968. During the 1960s, Katarina Taikon established herself as a human rights activist fighting for the rights of the Romani people. In the late 1960s and during the 1970s, she wrote the Katitzi series (1969–1982), foregrounding both the Romani people and children as marginalized groups in society. In my article, I demonstrate how her less well-known children's book *Niki* (1970) depicts a group of children's playful yet serious attempts to rebel against the narrow-minded adult world always in charge. The rebellion in the book has a political dimension, and it thereby becomes part of the antisystemic discourse of change prevalent at the time. Consequently, *Niki*, like many other children's books, aimed ideological and moral critique against a number of different injustices perceived as intertwined. The antisystemic discourse of change around 1968 was often aimed at what was seen as the capitalist overconsumption and pollution caused by the Western welfare state. It was also aimed at suppressive power structures more generally; between Western countries and other parts of the world, between men and women, between adults and children, between the privileged and the underprivileged, and so on.

Malena Janson's article "Kjell Gredes *Hugo och Josefin*: ett barnkulturellt uttryck i samtiden och en barnfilm för framtiden" [Kjell Grede's *Hugo and Josephine*: an expression of children's culture of its time and a children's film of tomorrow] examines Kjell Grede's film debut from 1967 based on Maria Gripe's books about Hugo and Josephine. Janson demonstrates that the film can be seen as characteristic of its time in several respects, but also radically innovative. The film reflects ideas central to the debates on children's culture around 1968, and challenges the traditional conventions of Swedish children's film. The film, Janson argues, makes use of an impressionist style that conveys the inner state of the protagonist, thereby diverging from earlier children's films and foreboding a new type of children's film that would come to have its breakthrough in the 1970s. Janson interprets the vague time references in Grede's film as a portrayal of an emotional state rather than a series of events organized in chronological order. The film thereby goes against the children's film ideal of the time and the narrative style that characterized both Swedish and international children's film up until the late 1960s. Janson describes this filmic mode as "the child's realism". Janson's article therefore suggests that the attempts to depict the child's perspective and the child's experience of the world – which in many children's books published around 1968 also involved a politically relevant reevaluation of the child's way of thinking and acting – also can be found in Grede's children's film.

Finally, Lisa Källström's article "Pippi och utopin: en omslagsbild i den västtyska studentrevoltens kölvatten" [Pippi and utopia: a cover illustration in the wake of the West German student revolution] addresses Astrid Lindgren's position in West Germany around 1968. Using the publishing house Oetinger's exclusive edition of the collection *Pippi Langstrumpf* released in connection with Astrid Lindgren's 60th birthday as a starting point, Källström discusses Lindgren's ambiguous position as a children's writer during this period. On the one hand, her fantastic and unruly story of Pippi Longstocking was seen as inspiring young readers to liberate themselves through fantasy. On the other hand, left-wing critics considered the Pippi stories escapist reading, which encouraged irresponsible behaviour. At the same time, Källström emphasizes that fantasy was important to the left-wing movement during these years, and that utopia came to play a particularly significant role. By analyzing the covers of some of the Pippi books published in West Germany during this period, she draws attention to the subversive potential of these publications.

It is true that Astrid Lindgren is not a typical writer of the years around 1968, and as mentioned earlier, she became a target for Swedish critics and children's literature scholars during this period. At the same time, Lindgren's portrayal of Pippi Longstocking's unconventional lifestyle and anti-authoritarian attitude was in line with much of the radical spirit of 1968. The radical imagination of children's literature around 1968 can, in fact, be said to take part in the liberation from perceived societal oppression, much in the same way as Mah-Jong clothes, happenings, theatre and dance. Therefore, it can be concluded that although the realist mode of representation played an important part in the aesthetics of children's literature and culture around 1968, anti-authoritarian imaginations of freedom and change were also present in different ways (Heywood 21 f.; Widhe, "Counter-Indoctrinations" 8 f.).

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Guest editor of the theme

"Nordic Children's Literature Around 1968"

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