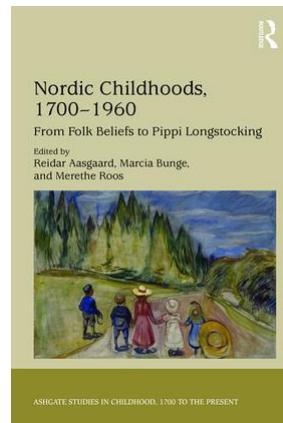


Review/Recension

REIDAR AASGAARD, MARCIA
BUNGE & MERETHE ROOS (eds.)
**NORDIC CHILDHOODS
1700–1960**
**From Folk Beliefs to Pippi
Longstocking**
New York/London: Routledge, 2018 (367 pp.)



Nordic Childhoods 1700–1960: From Folk Beliefs to Pippi Longstocking is part of Routledge's "Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present" series, which currently includes thirty five volumes. The series, according to its website, "recognizes and supports innovative work on the child and on literature for children and adolescents that informs teaching and engages with current and emerging debates in the field," and part of this review compares how well *Nordic Childhoods* fits into this series and its mission. *Nordic Childhoods* claims to address a perceived gap in current literature – that there exists no comprehensive, interdisciplinary work that links the histories of the Nordic countries from 1700 to 1960 with the history of children and childhood in that region, and certainly none in English (3). This claim is misleading at best, given the number of works that tackle Nordic childhoods, for example *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education: Philosophy, Research, Policy, and Practice in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden* (2006) edited by Johanna Einarsdottir and Judith T. Wagner. Given the broad geographic, national, and temporal range of the present volume, one wonders if this goal is reasonable, fruitful, or even possible, and in fact, most of the articles represent works specific to a particular national experience. The book's "interdisciplinarity," furthermore, derives from a collection of articles by authors from a variety of disciplines in the various Nordic countries, most of which are not intrinsically interdisciplinary, and, critical to the core mission of the series, most of which do not focus on the child or on childhood.

©2019 JoAnn Conrad. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Barnboken - tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning/Barnboken - Journal of Children's Literature Research, Vol. 42, 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v42i0.413>

A brief survey of the origins of this collection provides some insight into the ways in which it skirts the issue of childhood for the most part, leaving it an unexamined concept. The editors identify the current volume as part of the larger project from 2013–1017 “Tiny Voices from the Past: New Perspectives on Childhood in Early Europe” (xv), and indeed *Nordic Childhood*’s editors were also among the eight participants in this project. This is significant because it sets the tone and orientation of the book. This Norwegian project originated in the History of Ideas section within the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas (IFIKK) at the University of Oslo, and this volume is overwhelmingly contributed to by Norwegian scholars. Dominant, too, is the influence of the History of Ideas, which in itself tends to silence any and all “tiny voices.” Additionally, since the project dealt with material from the 5th century BC to the 12th century AD, it is difficult to see its connection to the current volume which is concerned with the modern period. In 2014, IFIGK also hosted a conference entitled “Nordic Childhoods 1700–1960: Perspectives on Continuities and Changes,” and, given the similarity of the conference title with that of the volume currently under review, one would be forgiven for assuming that the book derives from the papers given at the conference. Out of the 19 contributors to this volume, eight of them were not part of the 2014 conference, and these contributors seem to have been added to make the volume more Nordic, less Norwegian in emphasis, and to include work from scholars who directly deal with issues of childhood, in particular children’s literature. The overall effect of this apparent Procrustean effort is jarring.

The book is divided into three sections. Part 1 – “Spheres of Life: Home, Church, and Society,” is the most general in scope. With its generalized and redundant historical overview, this section reveals the origins of the project in the intellectual history of pre-modern Scandinavia and is only superficially related to childhood studies. Ørnulf Hodne, the Norwegian folklorist, begins the section with “The Child in Norwegian and Scandinavian Folk Beliefs,” in which he reiterates his previous work from various historical folklore collections and the archives of the *Norsk Folkeminnnesamling* (NFS) with slight adjustments to fit the theme of childhood. From these materials, collected by earlier folklorists and also avid local pastors, all determined to highlight “superstitious” beliefs as the territory of the past and the rural, Hodne unproblematically extrapolates pre-modern attitudes about children, whereas his material is more closely reflective of attitudes concerning human interactions with the su-

pernatural. The following two articles, Ingrid Markussen's "The Household Code: Protestant Upbringing in Denmark–Norway from the Reformation to the Enlightenment," and Kristin B. Aavitsland's "Let the Little Children Come to Me: Representations of Children in the Confessional Culture of Lutheran Scandinavia," both address the social impact of Lutheranism in Scandinavia. Markussen focuses on Luther's catechism as the primary means by which institutional patriarchy was reinforced in the family, focusing almost exclusively on the sixteenth and seventeenth century, only referencing the 1814 Danish new school law and a redirection of educational focus in her conclusion (55). Aavitsland approaches the same period and the operations of patriarchy through an examination of religious images and family portraits. It is an interesting yet incomplete picture since these were the self-select images of the rich and powerful, intent on maintaining their own status within the patriarchal system. There is much overlap and redundancy in these two chapters, and although they both argue that in order to understand the period under consideration in the volume (1700–1960) we must know the earlier foundations, two articles seem perhaps one too many. Anu Lahtinen's "Education of Children in Rural Finland: The Roles of Homes, Churches, and Manor Houses," examines "local parish records . . . court cases, records of school children, early newspapers, and family records of local mansions" (77), to "examine the role of literacy in children's upbringing in southern Finland from the pre-modern era to modern times" (76). The period under consideration and her focus on children align her chapter much more with the stated aims of the volume. Indeed, she is the first author to ask "Who, in the first place, was considered a child?" a seemingly obvious question that nonetheless is not articulated until page 78. The final chapter included in Part 1, Anette Faye Jacobsen's "Children's Rights and Duties: Snapshots into the History of Education and Child Protection in Denmark (ca. 1700–1900)," serves as a transition to Part 2 in that it keeps a historical overview while focusing on what she calls "snapshots," that is particular moments in that history that signify a shift in attitudes towards the meaning and legal status of "the Child" and associated shifts in children's rights in Denmark. As in the previous chapters, she reiterates the role of Lutheranism and the family in the early modern era, but she ends with an examination of the twentieth-century emphasis on the state's role as opposed to that of parents with regard to the rights and well-being of children.

Parts 2 and 3, "Children's Development: Formation, Education, and Work," and "Literature: Children's Books, Fairy Tales, and Nov-

els,” respectively, contain more granular case studies focusing on issues pertaining to childhood in a more recent, and thus national or regional context. The core of the book seems to revolve around legal concepts of the child, education, and the development of the concept of children’s rights in tandem with the concept of “the Child” itself. This is accomplished most emphatically in Part 2, with most of the articles in this section written by those working in the field of childhood. With the inclusion of articles from contributors outside of the initial project, the volume achieves its Nordic inclusiveness: Bengt Sandin’s “Educating Poor, Rich, and Dangerous Children: The Birth of a Segregated School System in Nineteenth-Century Sweden,” Ólöf Gardarsdóttir’s “Sheep, Fish, and School: Conflicting Arenas of Childhood in the Lives of Icelandic Children, 1900–1970,” and Ketil Lenert Hansen’s “Educational Policy and Boarding Schools for Indigenous Sami Children in Norway from 1700 to Present.” These, in addition to others on education policy and material from Norway, Sweden and Denmark give a broad glimpse into the condition of childhood in early modern Scandinavia. Ellen Schrumpf’s article “Children and Their Stories of World War II: A Study of Essays by Norwegian School Children from 1946,” is singular in that it focuses on material created *by children* in their own words – a unique and fascinating perspective. In the final article in Part 2, “In Song We Meet on Common Ground: Conceptions of Children in Songbooks for Norwegian Schools 1914–1964,” Eiliv O. Olsen investigates the under-researched school songbook, focusing on three editions of Mads Berg’s *Skolens sangbok* from 1914, 1949 and 1964. As it deals with a children’s book, this article rightfully should have been placed in Part 3 with its focus on literature. Instead, its placement in the section organized around child development not only illustrates the rather haphazard organization that pervades the entire volume, but also forces Olsen to make broad claims that cannot be substantiated by the limited data in her survey. She claims that this one book gives insight into “overall conceptions of what it meant to be a ‘good Norwegian child’” (220), but given the social changes in Norway in the 50 years between the first edition and the final, revised edition, this reviewer was left wondering how the expectations of the Norwegian child changed over time and how those changes might have been reflected in the material. Instead Olsen chooses to focus on those songs that were retained over the three editions, songs which she then refers to as “canon.” The subsequent addition of 20 new English songs in the 1964 edition seems not to problematize her overall claim that the songbooks provide the building blocks of a Norwegian sensi-

bility, while her cursory comparison of *Skolens sangbok* to Swedish songbook, *Nu ska vi sjunga* (1943), and the Danish *Højskolesangbog* (1894) provide little in terms of a true comparison, given that they are both from such different contexts and directed at such different audiences and different age groups. Much more helpful would have been a comparison of Norwegian material published during the various years of the songbook's editions to provide a more appropriate context from which to speculate on reflections of Norwegianness in children's materials.

From the volume's subtitle – “From Folk Beliefs to Pippi Longstocking” – one might infer that the volume's primary focus was literary, but this is only the focus of Part 3, which has the feel of a hastily patched together afterthought. The shortest section, it is also the most disjointed. While some of the chapters pertain to childhood, many elements of these have long been in circulation, while other chapters have no relevance to this volume at all. The initial chapter by Merethe Roos, one of the editors of the volume and participant in the original project, entitled “Children, Dying, and Death: Views from an Eighteenth-Century Periodical for Children,” exemplifies this tendency. Examining “stories from the sick bed, death notices, obituaries, [and] didactic texts” (242) that appeared in the Danish children's periodical *Avis for Børn*, Roos seeks to uncover changes in the “child's role in the family and the child-adult relationship” (243), arguing that the more modern notion of the “competent child” can be applied to this period in the eighteenth century. Given that the periodical under review was only in circulation for three years as well as the formulaic and constructed nature of newspaper death notices, it is more likely that these items provide a window into changing attitudes towards death itself, rather than an indication of the changing attitudes toward the child and the family. Maria Tatar's chapter “Incandescent Objects and Picture of Misery: Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales for Children” is the most puzzling and ill-suited of all the chapters in the entire volume. As her work does not deal with either the Nordic or with childhood, and with so much extensive Andersen scholarship available, one wonders why this article, which speaks about a handful of Andersen's fairy tales in the most generic and uninformed ways, was included at all.

In addition to Olsen's article in Part 2, only two other articles deal specifically with children's books, and are thus relevant to the readers of *Barnboken*: Olle Widhe's “Inventing Subjectivity and the Rights of the Child in Nineteenth-Century Nordic Children's Literature,” and Åse Marie Ommundsen's “Competent Children:

Childhoods in Nordic Children's Literature from 1850 to 1960," and, as with Olsen, both Widhe and Ommundsen claim that the Nordic "competent child," far from being a modern concept, can be discerned in a variety of earlier works. Widhe argues that children's books from a child's perspective, those which highlight the child as subject, occur "relatively early" (267) in Scandinavia in comparison to other European countries, and not with the books of Astrid Lindgren in the twentieth century. As examples of earlier child-centered writing, Widhe cites the work of H.C. Andersen, Jørgen Moe, Zacharias Topelius, and Olof Fryxell, thus dutifully rounding up a truly Nordic crew. Widhe's organizing thesis is that these authors, in depicting children at play, demonstrate not only a child's perspective, but evidence of the competent child. The problem with this analysis is that all of these authors were not only invested in imprinting a nationalist ideology, but their works are also didactic and infused with overtones of Christian morality – hardly a child's point of view. In conclusion, Widhe claims that children's literature can "show how morally significant power relationships between adults and children have emerged and changed in the Scandinavian context" (280), and yet the material analyzed is from one specific period – the first half of the nineteenth century, so that change over time is impossible to examine. Ommundsen, describing the competent child as "autonomous, active, robust, and responsible figures" (285), seeks to demonstrate that rather than being a modern phenomenon, this figure, that of the "competent, free and close to nature" child (186) figured in children's books from the middle of the nineteenth century. She selects Jørgen Moe's *I Brønden og I Tjænet* (1851, also discussed by Widhe), Dikken Zwigmeyer's *Vi Børn: Inger Johanne, 13 Aar Gammel* (1890), and, somewhat incongruously, Elsa Beskow's *Duktiga Annika* (1941). The last inclusion from the Swedish author/illustrator seems an overt attempt to satisfy the Nordic theme, as both Moe and Zwigmeyer are firmly established in the Norwegian canon. Claims concerning early evidence of the competent child falter across such expanses of time and space, and Ommundsen's argument is the most persuasive when discussing the extraordinary Inger Johanne. As problematic as some of the assertions are, even more so are the outright errors throughout the article. For example, Ommundsen refers to *Norsk billedbog for børn* (1888) as "the first Norwegian picturebook for children" (283), but surely C.F. Diriks' *Lille Anne* from 1868 challenges this assertion. The final article is Karin Nykvist's "The Small People in the Big Picture: Children in Swedish Working-Class Novels of the 1930s," which describes a new form of working-class novel in

Sweden that, in depicting poor and often orphaned children, make a direct link to the Social Democrats' notion of *folkhem*. Nykvist limits her argument to novels of the 1930s and to Sweden in particular, and because it is not attempting to argue the book's Nordic thrust, nor the broad, sweeping time period, it is more effectively argued to be related to a particular social trend. She thus also complexifies the portrayal of children in these novels as ambiguously both competent and dependent.

There are some good articles within the collection, but as a whole it suffers from overreach and overgeneralization. The period encompassed, from Martin Luther to Astrid Lindgren, and the rapidly shifting national and regional identities within that sweeping period would much better have been addressed in separate volumes. The pretense of the title is that the chapters are unified in their addressing the constructs of "the Child" and the Nordic, but these are anachronisms that cannot make the stretch to the sixteenth century. As most of the articles deal with issues well prior to the twentieth century, the volume fails to deliver on its promised time range. Mired in the pre-modern, even the use of Nordic seems anachronistic. Additionally, most of the articles do not address the Nordic at all but are discussions of national phenomena, and the imperative to include "the Nordic" in many summaries is in fact jarring and works to highlight the absence of the very phenomenon suggested in the title.

JoAnn Conrad
Professor of Anthropology and Folklore
California State University