

## Introduction: Conceptions of Girlhood Now and Then: “Girls’ Literature” and Beyond

What is a girl and what can a girl be? From an ongoing and seemingly endless interest in classic texts from Louisa M. Alcott’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Little Women*, to L.M. Montgomery’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century *Anne of Green Gables*, to contemporary stories like Suzanne Collins’ 21<sup>st</sup>-century *The Hunger Games*, fiction has provided an important tool to explore girlhood. In October 2020, the online conference “Conceptions of Girlhood Now and Then: ‘Girls’ Literature’ and Beyond” was organised by the Centre for Childhood Research in Literature, Language and Learning (CHILL) at Linnaeus University in Växjö, in collaboration with the Swedish Institute for Children’s Books in Stockholm, and Doctor Dawn Sardella-Ayres who holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge. Funded by Linnaeus University, Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Crafoord Foundation, the conference provided a venue for Nordic scholars and scholarship on girls’ literature and conceptions of girlhood in literature for a young audience to create a dialogue with international scholars and international research. The conference aimed to develop the research field both in terms of methodological and theoretical aspects as well as in primary text selection. The intersectional scope of the conference – with keynotes and papers that addressed, for example, body size and race as well as these power categories’ relationship to gender in a wide array of primary texts – further aimed to interrogate and problematise the concept of girls’ literature and girlhood from a norm-critical perspective. This special theme in *Barnboken: Journal of Children’s Literature Research* continues this conversation between Nordic and international scholarship via eight articles that explore girlhood and girls’ books from different angles.

Girlhood studies is today a vast research field, and it is, of course, impossible for us to do it justice in a short introduction such as this. We will focus on Swedish-language research but also discuss examples from North America and the United Kingdom. Before we turn to a brief discussion of scholarship on girlhood, a few words on how to define “girls’ books” are needed. In the Nordic countries the term “flickbok” (literally “girl book”) is often attributed to texts like Alcott’s and Montgomery’s novels. The “classic” girls’ book that de-

veloped roughly from the 1850s and onwards has for a long time been seen as a type of book that presents a traditional view on girlhood, where the goal is for the tomboy to mature into a young woman who will marry and become a mother. As seen below, a massive amount of research has shown that there is not only a great deal of ambivalence regarding gender representations in several of the novels that are labelled as classic girls' books, but also a great variety among books with this label.

As this is not the place for a more nuanced discussion on how to define a "girls' book," we use Julie Pfeiffer's definition from *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence* (2021) where she writes:

While the word "girl" in the world of girls' fiction has different meanings according to time period, class, race, and nationality, it usually refers to unmarried female-identified individuals under the age of twenty. The girls' book is a subcategory of children's literature, typically defined as books written with girls as an intended audience (as opposed to a more general category of books read by girls). (Pfeiffer 5)

This is, of course, a broad definition that does not capture the nuances of the different kinds of girls' books discussed in this *Barnboken* theme, but it provides a starting point.

## Swedish-Language Research: An Overview

Nordic scholarship on girls' books and girlhood is extensive. Some of that research is written in English, and thus available to an English-speaking audience, but many publications are written in the Nordic languages. In the following, we will first give a brief overview of the state of the art in North America and the United Kingdom, and then move on to an overview of the Swedish-language research field with a focus on research on young adult literature. There is not room for an extensive overview of all Nordic research, and therefore we have decided to present examples of Swedish-language research. We want to point out that non-anglophone countries, such as Germany, have also produced a lot of significant research on girls' literature.

Girlhood studies has expanded these past decades. *Girlhood Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal* has been an important tool for this development. It is crucial to note that this research on girls and the conception of girlhood, on "girl culture" and the girl as a consumer has not only developed quantitatively, but also become more

problematizing. If the early examples of research on girls mainly focused on the white, heterosexual, middle-class girl, the focus today is rather on girlhood from an intersectional perspective that correlates aspects like gender and age with ethnicity, class, body size, and other categories. An important name here is Claudia Mitchell, who for many years has been the editor of *Girlhood Studies* (see Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, *Seven and Girl*; Mitchell and Rentschler). Another important name is Nazera Sadiq Wright, who in several studies has critically analysed girlhood in connection with race, one example being her award-winning study *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (2016). During the conference “Conceptions of Girlhood Now and Then: ‘Girls’ Literature’ and Beyond,” we had the great pleasure to welcome Wright as one of the keynote speakers.

Within the field of comparative literature, the focus on girlhood studies has been important. In Sweden, the early examples of studies that discuss girls and girlhood are found within this field (see below), but we can also see a growing English-language research output, where one example is the collection *The Girl in the Text: Transnational Girlhoods* (2019) edited by Ann Smith, which discusses narratives on girlhood from around the world. There are, of course, studies on classic girls’ books (see Foster and Simons; Seelye; Sanders), but it is significant that *Girlhood Studies* did not dedicate a theme issue to girls’ books until 2017 (see Smith, “The Girl”). Since 2020, the journal has published theme issues on girl activism, the lives of girls and women during the Coronavirus pandemic, feminist activism against rape culture, what girlhood studies can be, black girlhoods, and “contesting and challenging inequities” related to girlhood (Mitchell, “Contesting” 1). The issue from spring 2020, “Text in/and Place,” focuses on different types of fiction, for example American and Canadian girls’ literature. The issue asks “critical questions about the ways in which conventional yet imaginative textual genres such as literature, film, and comics can sometimes line up in fascinating ways with the imaginative texts of space and place” (Mitchell, “Text” v). In North America and the United Kingdom, the interest in analysing girls’ books has developed alongside studies of children’s and young adult books from a gender perspective (Mallan).

In the Nordic countries, with Sweden as a prominent example, a critical research field interested in the girls’ book was born more than forty years ago, and there are a vast number of studies on both classic books for girls and more contemporary ones.<sup>1</sup> In the early Swedish-language studies, the girls’ book is discussed as a genre. Often the stereotypical labelling of these books as homogeneous,

conservative, and “uninteresting” is analysed and questioned (Ørving; Toijer-Nilsson and Westin; Czaplicka). There are early examples of studies that read books by Louisa M. Alcott and L.M. Montgomery from a feminist perspective (Åhmansson). In an important study from 1994, Boel Westin argues that the girls’ book

visualises the patriarchal society and how it affects women’s lives and the conditions they live under, it describes the path to a husband, marriage and a home, but at the same time, it rebels against these goals and values, and presents alternatives. (Westin 12)<sup>2</sup>

As more and more scholars argued that the homogeneous label of the girls’ book had to be challenged, this led to several studies of girls’ books in Sweden from different aspects. Books that had previously been seen as “unimportant,” since they are books about girl protagonists and marketed for girl readers, have been critically examined. Examples include 20<sup>th</sup>-century works such as Agnes von Krusenstjerna’s Tony books (Järvstad; Jakobsson, *Jag*), Astrid Lindgren’s early works (Nilson, “Kati”; Wistisen, “Uppbrott”) and Martha Sandwall-Bergström’s books about Kulla-Gulla (Heggstad; Söderberg, *Askunge*; Hübber; Jakobsson, “Att skilja”; Wistisen, “Urbana”; Ehriander and Söderberg). Nordic scholars, such as Mia Österlund and Mia Franck, have studied the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century young adult novel discussing how, for example, the girl protagonist’s possibility for agency is governed by ideas of gender and sexuality, and how many of these characters challenge these norms (Österlund, *Förklädda*; Franck, *Frigjord*), which exemplifies a tendency to read girls’ books in dialogue with feminist and intersectional theory.

From 2000 and onwards, Swedish scholars have studied the girls’ book from a variety of perspectives; from looking at a specific publisher within a cultural studies framework (Andræ), to focusing not only on different authors, but also on how their books have been read (see Ulfgard; Warnqvist, “Flickan,” “Flickans,” and “Under körsbärsträdet”). There are also studies that have analysed girls’ books from a broader perspective discussing the genre. Birgitta Theander has in two studies not only mapped the development of the Swedish girls’ book and investigated how, for example, education and work are portrayed and how the home is visualised, but also done an extensive survey of which girls’ books have been translated into Swedish (Theander, *Älskad* and *Till arbetet*).<sup>3</sup> In her latest study, Maria Andersson investigates early examples of Swedish girls’ books from 1832 to 1921. She examines, for instance, how citizenship and nation-

al identity are portrayed (Andersson). If the girls' book was virtually invisible forty years ago, due to an array of studies from the 1980s and onwards, the girls' book has now become a research object in its own right in the Nordic countries.

In the last decade, girls' book research in the Nordic countries has developed in dialogue with girlhood studies, where the Nordic research network *Flickforsk! Nordic Network for Girlhood Studies* has played an important part. This network has published two collections of essays (Frih and Söderberg, 2010; Söderberg, Österlund, and Formark, 2013), which analyse girls and girlhood from different perspectives. The girl protagonist and the intersection between girlhood studies and comparative literature are some of these (Söderberg, "Flickboksforskning"; Österholm, "Skeva"; Franck, "Skamlig"; Kåreland, "Hur kär"). By surveying some of the relatively recent Swedish-language studies, a few recurring traits can be identified. One is the need to return to classic girls' books and read them from a different perspective (see Hallberg; Nilson, "Om genus"), another is to analyse modern texts with a focus on power, where concepts such as intersectionality and tools such as queer reading and "skev"<sup>4</sup> are important. Maria Franck's and Maria Margareta Österholm's respective doctoral theses must be mentioned in this context (Franck, *Frigjord*; Österholm, *Ett flicklaboratorium*). More and more studies problematise power and girlhood in different ways, for example Maria Nilson's study of postfeminism in chick lit jr, Mia Österlund's exploration of modern visionary girlhood, Lena Kåreland's analysis of girl protagonists and violence, and Malin Alkestrand's studies of girl characters as mothers and murderers in young adult dystopian fiction (Nilson, "I am"; Österlund, "Visionär"; Kåreland, "Våld"; Alkestrand, "Adolescent" and *Mothers*).

To summarise, Swedish-language research on girls' books and girlhood in children's and young adult fiction is multifaceted and extensive. In this *Barnboken* theme, articles from this geographical origin are combined with research from other parts of the world, thereby establishing a beneficial dialogue between the Nordic and the international research fields.

## Conceptions of Girlhood Now and Then: The Articles of This Theme

In addition to creating a meeting ground for Nordic and international scholars, this *Barnboken* theme explores conceptions of girlhood in

classic girls' literature and other children's and young adult literature from different time periods and countries of origin. It also combines methods and theories from several research fields. Together, all these different aspects aim to explore conceptions of girlhood now and then from a multitude of perspectives.

Dawn Sardella-Ayres and Ashley N. Reese's article "Sisters, Bosom Chums, and Enemies: How Secondary Female Characters Subvert the Girls' Bildungsromane" analyses secondary characters in American and Canadian Bildungsromane from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They argue that the secondary characters present alternative paths to womanhood than the ones represented by the main characters. The secondary characters' coming-of-age journeys thus look different than the main characters' equivalents.

In their article based on disability theology, Julie Pfeiffer and Darla Schumm's "The Self-Possessed Girl in Golden Age Girls' Books," the understanding of silent girls as necessarily oppressed is interrogated and questioned. Using three classic examples of girls' books – Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872), Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880), and L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) – Pfeiffer and Schumm illustrate how silence can equal agency and empowerment for girl characters.

Whereas these first two articles focus on early, traditional girls' books, the third article highlights a more contemporary, but just as popular, girls' literature heroine: Nancy Drew. In the article "Kitty's kartografi: Platser, artefakter och agens i fyra Kittyböcker" (Nancy Drew's Cartography: Places, Artefacts, and Agency in Four Nancy Drew Mysteries), Elin Käck explores how Nancy Drew's status as a girl detective is connected to an exploration of places, artefacts, and spatial movements within the Swedish translations of four Nancy Drew novels: *Mystery of the Winged Lion* (1982) and the trilogy from 1992, consisting of *Swiss Secrets*, *Rendezvous in Rome*, and *Greek Odyssey*. Käck's article is the only Swedish-language contribution to the theme.

Conceptions of girlhood from the early 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century are explored and compared in Yan Du's article "Girlhood in Verses: The Role of Poetry in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* and Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*." The article focuses on the portrayal of the girl poet in the works of Montgomery and Acevedo. The girl poet characters' self-representation and self-expression are analysed in relationship to how girlhood is defined within the two primary texts.

Another article that discusses the confrontation between older and new understandings of girlhood is Jade Dillon's article "'I must have been changed several times since then': Exploring Camille Rose Garcia's (Re)-interpretation of Alice through the Disney Lens." Dillon examines Garcia's illustrations of *Alice in Wonderland* from 2010 and how they reinvent and interpret the traditional girl character Alice. She argues that the illustrations create grotesque versions of Wonderland, and that they highlight Alice's identity transformations.

Contemporary understandings of adolescent womanhood and their connections to food, sexuality, and hunger are analysed by Nicola Welsh-Burke in "I Like a Girl Who Can Eat: Female Hunger, Food, and Desire in Maggie Stiefvater's Wolves of Mercy Falls Series." By focusing on the female lycanthrope in Stiefvater's book series published between 2009 and 2014, and its relationship to the supernatural romance genre, Welsh-Burke interrogates how food and sexuality are depicted and interrelated with each other in texts that she views as part of the "romance web."

Food is also at the centre of attention in Åsa Warnqvist and Mia Österlund's article "Girlhood, Gazing, and Fatness: Towards a Joining of Fat Studies and Girlhood Studies through Gabriella Sköldenberg's Young Adult Novel *Trettonde sommaren*." Here, however, the authors focus on how the two teenage characters in Sköldenberg's Swedish novel view an older, fat, female character. By combining girlhood studies with fat studies, Warnqvist and Österlund demonstrate how concepts such as fat gaze, fat haunting, and thin normativity can be used to explore conceptions of girlhood and womanhood, thus utilising theoretical concepts from both research fields.

The final article of the theme, Louise Couceiro's "Empowering or Responsibilising? A Critical Content Analysis of Contemporary Biographies about Women," considers conceptions of girlhood and womanhood in nonfiction for a young audience. Couceiro focuses on collective biographies about women from 2016 and beyond: three books from Kate Pankhurst's *Fantastically Great Women* series, and the first and second volume of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, written by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo. Using the lens of popular feminism and poststructuralist feminism, the article investigates how the books may aim to empower young girls, but actually responsabilise them instead, by downplaying how patriarchal structures delimit women and girls' abilities to influence their own lives.

To summarise, the eight articles together offer a broad picture of what girlhood studies is and can be, what kind of primary texts can

be analysed, and what theoretical and methodological tools can be used to explore conceptions of girlhood. In this sense, they all contribute to an ongoing conversation about the future of girlhood studies, and by expanding this conversation beyond geographical areas and English-language research, new perspectives can be added to the arsenal of tools that girlhood studies scholars can choose to wield.

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## Notes

1 When gender studies started to emerge as an academic field in Sweden in the 1970s, this happened to a great extent within the humanities. Scholars in comparative literature, like Karin Westman Berg, were crucial for the introduction of gender theory and feminist theory in Swedish universities (Holm).

2 Original quote: "iscensätter det patriarkala som samhällsvärdering i sin syn på kvinnors liv och villkor, den beskriver vägen till man, äktenskap och hem, men den gör samtidigt uppror mot dessa mål och värderingar och visar på alternativ," our translation.

3 Theander is currently working on a third book about girls' literature.

4 See Hilda Jakobsson's article "Skev" for a discussion of this concept in English. In 2021, Hilda Jakobsson and Maria Margareta Österholm were the guest editors of an entire issue of the journal *lambda nordica* devoted to different aspects of queer and "skev." See *lambda nordica*, vol. 26, no. 4-2, 2021.

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