

Introduction: Motherhood and Mothering

Lilli står helt stille.
Hører att det knirker i gulvet over henne.
Lilli hører tyngden av skrittene
og spenner nakken.
Pusten sitter fast i halsen
Kanskje hon bare ska snu?
Trekke sig forsiktig bakover?
Löpe ut døra?
Bli med Eline hjem?

Men det er for seint nå,
For Dragen er i trappa,
og Dragen setter flammeblikket i henne.
– Drittung, hveser Dragen
og puster mørke ut i gangen,
puster skygger over veggene.
(Dahle and Nyhus)

(Lilli stands completely still. Hears the floor creak above her. Lilli hears the weight of the footsteps and her neck tightens. Her breath catches in her throat. *Maybe she should just turn around? Carefully leave? Run out the door? Go to Eline's? But it's too late now, because the Dragon is coming up the stairs, and the Dragon fixes her with its fiery gaze. – You little shit, the Dragon hisses and breathes darkness into the hallway, breathes shadows across the walls.*¹

A mother is different from a father. When the Norwegian picture-book artists Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus wrote *Dragen* (The dragon, 2018) about an unpredictable, unreliable mother, *female violence* was their point of departure. Their earlier picturebook *Sinna man* (*Angry Man*, 2010), where the father carries a raging monster – “sinna man” (the angry man) – within, had come to be widely used by social services. But there was also a demand for a corresponding story for children who had experienced violent mothers. That story had to be different.

A mother is different from a father. Soft Moominmamas, tired mothers of wild babies, mothers struggling to get by on child support. Nordic children's and young adult literature includes

©2025 M. Nauwerck, T. Haglund. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), permitting all use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. Any included images may be published under different terms. Please see image captions for copyright details. Citation: *Barnboken – tidsskrift för barnlitteraturforskning/Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, Vol. 46, 2023 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v46.1015>

endless representations of motherhood and functions as a mirror of contemporary society. In the beginning of the process with this theme for *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, we did a survey of all Swedish picturebooks published in 2021, focusing on depictions of mothers, as part of the Swedish Institute for Children's Books' annual Book Tasting.² We found stressed-out mothers being stuck on a hamster wheel, hurrying to preschool, and sorting out sleep routines, mothers with ME and epilepsy, or simply burnt out, knocked out, and unresponsive on the sofa. But also idealized, present mothers pushing swings and building panda castles, whose red stretchmarks are transformed into tiger stripes in the child's eyes. And many, many mothers reading aloud to their children (Nauweck and Haglund, "Tigermammor och tröttsjuka," "Barnböckerna hymlar inte").

The Mother: A Conflicted Role in Contemporary Society

"Motherhood" refers to the experience of being a mother, but it is also a concept in motion that for the past decade has gained a range of new and contradictory meanings. Alternative family formations, biotechnology, and changing views of gender and gender roles are factors that complicate motherhood, disassembling it into different forms of reproductive and emotional work and linking it to more subjects. The theoretical term "mothering"/"modrande" (Rich; Holm) refers to the care practices associated with taking care of a child and which for instance include nursing, feeding, bathing, putting to sleep, minding, comforting, carrying, singing – and reading aloud. Historically as well as today there is, of course, a strong connection to biological motherhood. At the same time, the exceptions in the form of other-mothers (Grahm; see also Collins; Yu) have an equally long history through wet-nurses and foster mothers, nursemaids and nannies, siblings and grandparents. The contemporary ideal of equal parenting advocates that mothers and fathers should be equally involved in the mothering of the child. While this is still not the case in practice, it is evident that mothering as a general term for caring for children is not without controversy, and in some contexts it can be perceived as misleading, gender conservative, and exclusionary. What distinguishes mothering from care in more general terms? What distinguishes it from "fathering"? Is a present father doing the care work of parenting, such as Alfie Atkins' father, best described as a "mothering" father? What are the benefits of not primarily associating motherhood with the female experience and

body? What is lost? These questions point into the future, but are to some extent illuminated through this theme's focus on mothering.

The continued need to discuss parenthood as a gendered experience is clearly reflected in contemporary adult literature about becoming and being a mother. These narratives have developed into a distinct genre – including biographies, essays, novels, poetry, and graphic novels – and coexist with other mother-focused accounts, often biographical or autofictional, such as those found in blogs and on social media (Mustosmäki and Sihto; Lehto). While the stories within this genre may be sprawling, as a whole they clearly demonstrate that motherhood is a conflicted role in contemporary society. This is also reflected in recent motherhood studies of mum guilt, baby fever, claustrophobia within the nuclear family, mothers leaving their children, and mothers regretting their motherhood (Fahlgren et al.; Wahlström et al.). Previously depicted primarily through the eyes of the adult child, mothers increasingly emerge as subjects in literature (Williams). Viktoria Myrén's novel *I en familj finns inga fiender* (In a family there are no enemies, 2010) is one of many 21st-century books for adults where motherhood is explored from within, and where the narrating mother does not shy away from negative or destructive thoughts and feelings:

Jag visste att jag gjorde fel, ändå skrek jag åt dem: "Jag orkar inte, jag blir galen, sluta klänga på mig." Små händer som drar i mig, är överallt, fastnar i mina kläder och inte släpper taget, ropar: "Mamma, mamma sluta!"

"Ge fan i mig!"

Små, små händer runt halsen, hundratals händer runt halsen och jag får inte luft. (Myrén 56)

(I knew it was wrong, still I yelled at them: "I can't do this, you're driving me crazy, stop clinging to me." Tiny hands pulling at me, everywhere, getting caught in my clothes and refusing to let go, shouting: "Mum, mum, stop it!" "Get the hell away from me!" Tiny, tiny hands around my throat, hundreds of hands around my throat and I can't breathe.)

In several of these depictions of motherhood for adults, becoming and being a mother is described as the dissolution of identity, enforced isolation or, as in Myrén's case, even as torture (see Björklund). What happens when motherhood instead is portrayed through the lense of children's literature? Children's and young adult literature has often been at the forefront when it comes to picking up societal

tendencies. This is also noticeable in the depiction of contemporary aspects such as rainbow families, class differences, mental illness and burnout, as well as the attentiveness towards the feelings and world of the child which is associated with intensive motherhood. At the same time, there is a key distinguishing aspect related to the perspective and addresses of children's literature, which becomes evident when Myrén's pressured mother and her inner monologue are contrasted with Dahle and Nyhus' frightening dragon. Children's literature generally uses the experiences of children as its point of departure. It exists within the double system maintained by more or less hidden adult producers and consumers, but it will always have to negotiate the presence of its defining target group, the child reader. Sometimes it can generate radical and, for the adult conversation, alienating expressions; the child perspective can, for example, function as a means of foregrounding children's interests above those of adults. However, this does not mean that children's literature is subversive by default. The child subject, the child perspective, and children's literature can of course be adapted to suit adult aims which, in turn, can be pedagogical and aesthetic as well as ideological and opinion-forming.

The intersection of children's literature research and motherhood studies – primarily focused on adult contexts and literature aimed at adults – inspired this theme on motherhood and mothering in Nordic children's and young adult literature. We were seeking to uncover how contemporary debates on motherhood influence children's and young adult literature. What happens to the depictions of mothers and mothering when the perspective and the address shift to the child? Is children's and young adult literature always loyal to the child? What are the implications of the mother, in addition to being a literary character, also being the target group and co-reader, and sometimes the author?

Ideal Mother, Mummy Monster or Good Enough?

The relationship between children and mothers is a central motif in children's literature, making motherhood a recurring topic in both Nordic and international research. While "mother" and "mothering" are broad and multifaceted concepts, they are also closely intertwined with childhood – a theme that naturally occupies a central place in children's literature. Motherhood is therefore often explored in relation to broader conceptual frameworks such as power, temporality, care ethics, gender, and norm-critical

perspectives. Among the past decade's international research projects on motherhood and children's literature, Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats' anthology *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism* (2016) deserves special mention. The anthology was preceded by a special theme co-edited by Fraustino and Coats in the journal *Children's Literature in Education* (2015). Vanessa Joosen's extensive project *Constructing Age for Young Readers* (2019–2024), where she argues for an increasing exchange between fields such as childhood studies, age studies, and children's literature research, also demonstrates the potential in interdisciplinary approaches. Moreover, Joosen advocates paying attention to the adult experience and knowledge that is out of focus in children's literature. That some things are hidden, implied, or left out can be a consequence of the fact that children often are the focalizers in children's literature, but it may also be an active choice in order to conceal what is considered unsuitable or irrelevant from the child reader. If one's aim is to understand depictions of mothers and other adults in children's literature, then this "blind space" presents a fruitful area for investigation (Joosen, *Adulthood*, "Look").

The research mentioned above is part of the formation of an international field, where Anglo-American perspectives still dominate. Nordic children's literature about motherhood and mothering calls for its own contextualisation within the traditions of Nordic children's books and the Nordic societal context. Nordic children's literature research has pointed out both overlapping and culturally distinguishing aspects of how mothers are addressed and represented. The latter applies, for instance, to reproduction and breastfeeding (Andersson; Epstein), the concepts of concentrated baby-time and good intimacy in government-distributed baby books (Österlund and Lassén-Seger), rainbow families (Heggestad), and competent children with incompetent parents (Hermansson). The ways in which Nordic norms and ideals are reflected in children's literature, combined with a tradition of radicalism and aesthetic complexity that, for example, influences which topics can be broached, provide an evident complement to the images of motherhood and mothering that have characterized the international discussion so far.

A recurring focus in earlier research has been the investigation of the ideal mother. What does this ideal look like today? Sharon Hays has described the contemporary Western norm where mothers are urged to invest time, money, and energy in the care and upbringing of their children in terms of "intensive mothering." The prioritization of motherhood is framed as a personal choice – one available

also to the independent, modern woman. This form of motherhood demands knowledge, awareness, effort, and time; it is an area in which women can excel. Today, social media provides an arena for conversations about motherhood and for displaying curated images of maternal success. Through well-composed photos, an idealized motherhood of love and cuddles is depicted, where the children wear matching outfits and where pregnancy, breastfeeding, and sleepless nights seem to leave no visible trace on the mother's body or mental health. In contrast to these polished depictions, an alternative narrative has gained traction: the so-called unfiltered mum life, which today is almost as common in social media. Here, mothers instead display their messy homes and stretchmarks, offering each other understanding and validation in the difficult, but still always wonderful, work involved in being a mother.

How might these narratives be understood in relation to children's literature? They both function as socializing calls to mothers, but they differ in that children's literature goes by way of the child reader and more specifically children's literary genres. One striking example is so-called "fetus fiction," in which the unborn child directly addresses the parent with various requests that may include, for instance, the woman's obligations towards the fetus during pregnancy and expectations of consuming that which babies of today are viewed as needing (Abate). Another example is the "I love baby and baby loves me"-books (Fraustino), a category of picturebook common in the commercial mass market. These books typically revolve around the mutual affirmation of love between mother and child, with read-aloud sessions functioning as acts of affection within the mother-child relationship.

The counterpart to the ideal mother is, of course, the mummy monster - the dragon figure frequently found in a genre particularly prominent in the Nordic context: the artistic, ambitious all-age or crossover picturebook, which often centres on dysfunctional adults and explores power dynamics between children and parents (Beckett; Ommundsen, *Litterære grenseoverskridelser*, "Billedbøger"). A third alternative is the more nuanced "human" mother who can express ambivalent feelings about motherhood, while still being "good enough" (Fraustino). In a Swedish context, she could be represented by Kerstin Thorvall's everyday-realism depictions of mothers, where Thorvall, for instance, employs role reversal as a device to make children empathize with the perspective of the mother, the adult (Kärrholm). What is more, the "good-enough" mother is heavily advocated in Thorvall's trailblazing opinion piece "Bor alla

barnboksförfattare i Tomtebolandet?" (Do all writers of children's books live in Tomtebolandet?³), where she shoots down the stereotypes of traditional Swedish-language children's books and calls for a mother

som då och då är ganska trött och irriterad och inte är rund och glad och skiner rätt som solen. Som dessutom har ett jobb vid sidan av och tycker om det jobbet. Men som tycker om sina barn i alla fall. (Thorvall; see also Kärholm)

(who now and then is rather tired and annoyed and not round and happy and beaming like the sun. Who on top of it all has a job on the side and likes that job. But who likes her children all the same.)

This text anticipated the 1970s turn towards children's literary social realism, but also feminist projects and changing gender roles on a societal level, which would come to characterize Nordic children's literature and not least the realist young adult novel depictions of parents during this period (Vuorio).

How have the portrayals of mothers since been influenced by societal developments? When it comes to Swedish fiction for adults, it appears that the Nordic model – with extended parents' insurance and childcare – is especially significant for the depiction of motherhood (Björklund). For a large portion of society, this model has enabled a more equal form of parenting with the expectation of both parties being able to combine family and career. But the fact remains that women still shoulder a larger part of the responsibilities involved in taking care of the children and the house. This creates a situation where women are subjected to double sets of demands: They should on the one hand live up to contemporary, intensive motherhood ideals, and on the other, have career ambitions, interests, and a social life outside of their home. In a Swedish-language context, terms such as "livspussel" (life puzzle), "småbarnskaos" (toddler chaos), "mamma-skuld" (mum guilt), and the feeling of not "being enough" are common phrases linked to how these double roles of mothers are negotiated. The ambivalence is clearly visible in contemporary children's literature, where the ideal mother is still highly present. The ideal mother of today, however, is not one who is busy cleaning, baking, and cooking, but rather one who, despite an accelerating everyday life, manages to monitor her child with attention and devotion as well as optimize its potential (Haglund and Nauwerck).

If children's literature's specific contribution to the broader conversation about motherhood is its focus on the child subject, the child

perspective, and the child reader, this raises an important question: is it truly a space where mothers can be represented as subjects? On the one hand, it seems as though the subjectivity of the mother in contemporary children's literature often is pushed into the background in favour of the subjectivity of the child. From a feminist perspective, there is something disturbing about the fact that the children's literary tradition of standing up for the child is not directly opposed to the moralizing "But think of the children" – on the contrary, it can confirm the patriarchal structure where women's needs and agency outside of the role of mother are set aside with reference to the child's best interests.

On the other hand, the literature examined within this theme often displays a complex image where adult address and agency are present but expressed in more indirect ways. It also shows how literature can function as a meeting-point for children and adults by drawing attention to the interests and desires they share. At the same time, opposing interests are perhaps more common, seeing as this area of conflict forms the theoretical core of children's literature. As Maria Nikolajeva recently argued in an afterword with the telling title "The Case of the Evil (Step)mother, or the Impossibility of Intergenerational Solidarity" (2021), the clash between generations is the driving force of children's and young adult literature. These differences can hardly be reconciled, but they can be explored. While children's literature may be bound to side with Snow White, utilizing perspectives drawn from motherhood studies can help us recognize that the evil stepmother, too, had her reasons.

The theme "Motherhood and Mothering" spans across two volumes (46 and 47) and includes thirteen articles by writers from Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States. Ideal motherhood and its connections to contemporary motherhood ideology forms a visible trace throughout the contributions, while other recurring topics include the ethics of care, eternal mother myths, the agency of mothers, and the role of children's literature in a broader social context.

Frauke Pauwels' article ["Sharing Maternal Fantasies: Reading *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* as an Alter-Tale to the Good Mom Myth"](#) focuses on a picturebook from 2018 by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma Adbåge that is unusual in being told from the perspective of a mother. Through childlike reveries, the mother temporarily escapes the monotony of everyday life. The fantasies depict how the mother role and her interactions with her children could be different and more enjoyable. Pauwels reads the mother's imaginary world as a

counter-narrative to the self-sacrificing mother ideal, but also as a space where generations can meet; the fact that the child and the adult unite in their experiences of fantasy and reveries can open up for conversations about what a good mother really is.

The child's imaginary visions of ideal motherhood also play a central role in Mar Sánchez Fernández' contribution on Jacqueline Wilson's book series about the foster child Tracy Beaker, "[We Are the Beaker Mums': The Influence of New Momism in the Tracy Beaker Series.](#)" It includes the mother figures of both the early books – *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1991), *The Dare Game* (2000), and *Starring Tracy Beaker* (2006) – and the later ones, where Tracy herself has become a young mother, *My Mum Tracy Beaker* (2018) and *We Are the Beaker Girls* (2019). The article investigates the portrayals of mothers in the book series based on contemporary motherhood ideology and class-related stereotypes, such as "the celebrity mum," "the welfare mother," and "the supermum." Sánchez Fernández demonstrates that norms surrounding motherhood and female sexuality are both confirmed and challenged in Wilson's works, while at the same time identifying a change over time in how the later books offer more progressive depictions of working-class mother identities.

The horse story provides another venue where the self-sacrificing mother ideals of today can be questioned. In the article "[När vi rider tillsammans känns hon mer som en kompis än som en mamma': Modersvariationer i tre hästbokserier av Pia Hagmar](#)" ("When we ride together, she's more like a friend than a mum": Mothering variations in three horse story series by Pia Hagmar), Helen Asklund, Lena Manderstedt, and Ann-Sofie Persson analyze motherhood and mothering in three of Hagmar's horse story series, the books about Klara (1999–2008), about Millan (2012–2014), and about Juli (2019–2021). The three series all problematize and challenge the ideal of the good mother in several ways, for example by relating it to the ideal of the good horse person. Caring for others – that is, children and horses – is something that these roles have in common, and the passion for horses often unites mother and daughter in these books. Asklund, Manderstedt, and Persson make visible how these contexts open for a more friend-like relationship where the mother also can be more than a mother.

Cecilie Takle's contribution "[Det som ikke vises: Om Busters mor i bok og på film](#)" (That which is not shown: Buster's mother in the book and on screen) sheds light on the evolution of a specific mother figure over time. Using adaptation analysis, she examines three versions of the mother in Bjarne Reuter's *Busters verden* (*Buster's World*,

1979) and the screen adaptations *Busters verden* (1984) and *Buster Oregon Mortensen* (2021). In the book, Buster's mother comes across as a victim of violence and abuse, whereas she is placed in a more neutral and obscure role in the TV series from 1984. In the later film version, the family dynamic has been re-written and the violent elements have been removed. Instead, it depicts an affectionate relationship, allowing space for humour. Takle shows how these different portrayals can be linked to the societal context, but also to the different media and their conditions in terms of child address and child perspective.

Two of the articles within the theme reach beyond the book covers, focusing on the mother as addressee and target audience within the dual system of children's and young adult literature. Here, the picturebook is analyzed in relation to marketing, opinion-forming, and therapeutic purposes. Jana Rüegg and Lisa Grahn turn to the growing phenomenon of celebrity picturebooks in "[Super-Charlies mamma: Offentliga mammor, vuxet tilltal och parasociala relationer i samtida svenska bilderböcker](#)" (Super-Charlie's mum: Public mothers, adult address, and parasocial relationships in contemporary Swedish picturebooks). The article discusses picturebooks written by three Swedish celebrities and influencers: Margaux Dietz, Marie Serneholt, and Camilla Läckberg. By analyzing the double address in the books' paratexts and content, Rüegg and Grahn demonstrate how the adult addressee is constructed as having knowledge of the authors' real lives. This parasocial relationship between celebrity and adult reader is crucial to how the authors' public personas are transformed into literary mother figures and, with the help of the symbolic capital of (children's) literature, used to strengthen their personal brands.

Tuva Haglund and Malin Nauwerck's article "[Bakom den leende masken: Sårbart modrande i samtida bilderböcker om surrogat-mödraskap och sjukdom](#)" (Behind the pretty mask: Vulnerable mothering in contemporary picturebooks about surrogacy and illness) also focuses on the adult addressee of the picturebook, especially in relation to the shared situation of reading aloud. The picturebooks explored in the article can be described as niche books, with an explicit pedagogical aim. While these books generally convey sentimental and clear-cut messages to the child reader, their address on an adult level is more complex. The adult experiences of surrogacy arrangements and illness involve a vulnerability in relation to mothering that the books respond to by offering validation and affirmation through mirroring. The article argues that these pedagogical books need to be understood in relation to an adult con-

versation about motherhood where the positive associations of good mothering in children's literature serve as a foundation for their use in opinion-shaping and therapeutic contexts.

Symbolic representations of mother figures are analyzed in several of the contributions to the theme. These include Elisabeth Hovde Johannesen and Julie Nordahl's "[Mat og måltid som symbol for modring: En analyse av bildebøkene *Mor* av Kim Fupz Aakeson og Mette-Kirstine Bak og *Stripekalven* av Marit Kaldhol og Justyna Nyka](#)" (Food and meals as symbols for mothering: An analysis of the picturebooks *Mor* by Kim Fupz Aakeson and Mette-Kirstine Bak and *Stripekalven* by Marit Kaldhol and Justyna Nyka). The article focuses on two crossover picturebooks where motherhood is linked to, for instance, obesity and sexuality. In the picturebooks, four female characters aspire to the role of the mother, and mothering is depicted as double-edged, not least through the challenges that result when the child does not want to accept the care offered by the mother. Hovde Johannesen and Nordahl investigate in what ways food and meals interact with the portrayal of these non-normative mother figures. In the end the ability to feed the child and herself – rather than biological motherhood – is the crucial factor deciding who gets to do the mothering.

Inger-Kristin Larsen Vie and Tove Sommervold also delve into symbolic depictions of motherhood in contemporary picturebooks. The article "[Når mor blir et dyr: Om transformerte mødre i to skandinaviske bildebøker for barn](#)" (When mothers become animals: Transformed mothers in two Scandinavian picturebooks for children) focuses on the transformation from mother into animal, more specifically a mother dragon in Pija Lindenbaum's *Når Åkes mamma glömde bort* (*When Owen's Mom Breathed Fire*, 2005) and a hedgehog in Kari Saanum and Gry Moursund's *Pinnsvinmamma* (*Hedgehog mom*, 2006). The analysis uses the child's perspective as a point of departure, whereby the mothers' guise can be interpreted as a form of fantasy play where the power balance between mother and child is temporarily suspended. Through this transformation, the books also allow for a problematizing of the self-sacrificing mother ideal. Larsen Vie and Sommervold demonstrate how the animal guise enables the crossing of boundaries, permitting the mother to voice female frustration and momentarily absolve herself from the responsibility of caring.

Mareike Stoll's contribution "[What Are You Going Through? Practices of Care, Emotional Literacy and Visual Literacy in Jöns Mellgren's *Sigrid och natten*](#)" centres on the visual narration of the picturebook. The article explores the theme of caring in *Sigrid och*

natten (Sigrid and the night, 2013) by focusing on three leitmotifs – the lighthouse, colours, and hands – and a question – “What are you going through?” – that Stoll uses as an analytical tool. Stoll works from the premise that the act of mothering in the sense of protecting, nurturing, and teaching can be understood as an ethics of care in a broader context. She highlights the mothering situation of reading aloud as especially important for the child reader’s ability to develop visual and emotional literacy.

Sara Pankenier Weld also takes her theoretical cue from the ethics of care and mothering. In [“‘A Precocious Little Mother with a Child’s Face’: A Maternal Ethics of Care in Martha Sandwall-Bergström’s Kulla-Gulla Books,”](#) she argues for a more radical reading of the Kulla-Gulla series that acknowledges the feminist visions forming part of the socio-political welfare models of the 20th century. The maternal ethics of care is embodied by Kulla-Gulla who repeatedly insists on a collective responsibility for society’s vulnerable individuals. Gradually this ethics is expanded from the foster siblings to other key characters. By following a trace of caring and mothering, Pankenier Weld shows how the Kulla-Gulla series convey an inclusive and feminist socio-political model of society.

The historical perspective resurfaces in three other articles, which in different ways bring the mother myths of older traditions into dialogue with contemporary children’s and young adult literature. In [“Rävjägaren och pärlemor: Moderskap och biologi hos Kitty Crowther”](#) (The fox hunter and the mother of pearl: Motherhood and biology in the works of Kitty Crowther), Thomas Sjösvärd examines biological aspects of motherhood in two of Kitty Crowther’s picture-books, *L’enfant racine* (2003) and *Mère Méduse* (2014). In both works, the symbolic language revolves around the organic; the roots, the living hair, the mussel, and the jellyfish are used as images for the relationship between mother and child. By drawing attention to the intertexts and the metaphorical dimensions of the images, Sjösvärd demonstrates how Crowther’s books evoke a motherhood discourse on fertility and pregnancy that is anchored in fairy tales and myths, but at the same time can be linked to modern-day debates on adoption as well as attachment theory and overprotective parents.

Peter Kostenniemi’s contribution [“Mödrar som mördar: Mylingen, änglamakerskan och modrandet”](#) (Mothers that murder: The myling, baby farmers, and mothering), probes the dark sides of motherhood through contemporary children’s stories about baby farmers and the myling. As a historical figure, the baby farmer is the woman who in exchange for money took in unwanted children

and abused them to death, while the folklore figure of the myling is the ghost of a child secretly killed by its mother. Kostenniemi shows how old notions of baby farmers and the myling are both maintained and developed in contemporary children's and young adult literature, where they also can offer critical perspectives on conceptions of motherhood. Even though the child murderers represent the polar opposite of good motherhood – that is, a form of “anti mothering” – the women's guilt is nuanced when their circumstances are viewed from a broader societal perspective.

The final article of the theme is Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed's [“Astrid Lindgren and the Nightingale's Song.”](#) The nightingale motif is traced from the tales of ancient Greece via the fable and Romantic writers, to Lindgren's story “Spelar min lind, sjunger min näktergal” (“My Nightingale is Singing,” 1959), where the main character sacrifices her spirit for the sake of art and beauty. The mythical lineage that Schottenius Cullhed follows centres on the mother whose grief after losing a child transforms her into a nightingale. The article argues that “Spelar min lind, sjunger min näktergal” can be read as a modern interpretation of the nightingale myth, where the focus shifts from the grieving mother to the child, whose own agency and sacrifice enable the transformation of human suffering into art.

As the thirteen articles of this theme indicate, the discussion of mothers and mothering in children's literature is wide-ranging across genres and eras, while recurring aspects create visible focal points. These include motherhood as a gendered experience, mothering as care work with ideological and political implications, and the question of what positive and negative motherhood and mothering really means. It is our hope that this interdisciplinary theme can illustrate the continued relevance of motherhood studies to children's literature research, as well as the relevance of children's literature research to motherhood studies.

Theme editors

*Malin Nauwerck (PhD in Comparative literature,
The Swedish Institute for Children's Books)*

*Tuva Haglund (PhD in Comparative literature,
The Swedish Institute for Children's Books and Uppsala University)*

Notes

1 English translations of all quotes, unless otherwise indicated, were made by Hanna Liljeqvist.

2 The Book Tasting is an annual event at the Swedish Institute for Children's Books, where the previous year's children's and young adult book releases are presented through statistics and analysis. The event also features themed lectures that offer an in-depth exploration of specific topics. In 2022, Nauwerck and Haglund examined motherhood in picturebooks in their lecture "Tigermammor och tröttsjuka."

3 In Thorvall's article, "Tomtebolandet" represents the idyll of the idealized mothers, as Thorvall found it depicted in the works of authors such as Elsa Beskow, Tove Jansson, and Astrid Lindgren. The term "Tomtebolandet" alludes to Elsa Beskow's picturebook *Children of the Forest* (1910), with the Swedish title *Tomtebobarnen*.

Works Cited

Abate, Michelle Ann. *No Kids Allowed: Children's Literature for Adults*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

Andersson, Maria. "Från stork till spermabank: Sexualupplysningslitteratur för barn 1965–2014." *Samlaren*, vol. 136, 2015, pp. 5–37.

Beckett, Sandra L. *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages*. Routledge, 2012.

Björklund, Jenny. *Maternal Abandonment and Queer Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Swedish Literature*. Cham, 2021.

Coats, Karen, and Lisa Rowe Fraustino. "Performing Motherhood: Introduction to a Special Issue on Mothering in Children's and Young Adult Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 46, 2015, pp. 107–109, doi.org/10.1007/s10583-015-9247-1.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

Dahle, Gro, and Svein Nyhus. *Dragen*. Cappelen Damm, 2018.

Epstein, B. J. "Breast Versus Bottle: The Feeding of Babies in English and Swedish Picturebooks." *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, vol. 40, 2017, pp. 1–22, doi.org/10.14811/clr.v40i0.269.

Fahlgren, Margaretha, and Anna Williams, editors. *Mamma hursomhelst: Berättelser om moderskap*. Gidlunds förlag, 2018.

Fraustino, Lisa Rowe. "The Apple of Her Eye: The Mothering Ideology Fed by Best-Selling Trade Picture Books." *Critical Approaches to*

Food in Children's Literature, edited by Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard, Routledge, 2009, pp. 57–72.

Fraustino, Lisa Rowe, and Karen Coats, editors. *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*. University Press of Mississippi, 2016.

Grahn, Lisa. *Jernbanans mödrar: Moderskap och berättande i Sara Lidmans Jernbaneepos*. PhD dissertation, Uppsala universitet, 2022.

Haglund, Tuva, and Malin Nauwerck. "Är Bagarmossen det nya Tomtebolandet? Idealiserat moderskap och medelklassstiltal i den samtida, svenska bilderboken." *Nordisk litteratursociologi i nytt ljus*, edited by Ann Steiner and Karl Berglund, Avdelningen för litteratursociologi, 2024, p. 235–261.

Hays, Sharon. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Yale University Press, 1996.

Heggestad, Eva. "Regnbågsfamiljer och könsöverskridande barn: Bilderbokens nya invånare." *Samlaren*, vol. 134, 2013, pp. 222–250.

Hermansson, Kristina. "Inkompetenta vuxna och kompetenta barn: En framträdande tematik i 2000-talets skandinaviska bilderbok." *Tidskrift för litteraturovetenskap*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, pp. 21–34.

Holm, Ulla. *Modrande och praxis: En feministfilosofisk undersökning*. Daidalos, 1993.

Joosen, Vanessa. *Adulthood in Children's Literature*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

---. "'Look More Closely', Said Mum': Mothers in Anthony Browne's Picturebooks." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2015, pp. 145–159, doi.org/10.1007/s10583-015-9253-3.

Kärrholm, Sara. "Trötta mammors försvarare: Familjevärderingar i Kerstin Thorvalls bilderböcker från 1970-talet." *Barnlitterært forskningstidsskrift*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 178–191, doi.org/10.3402/blft.v2i0.5838.

Lehto, Mari. "Bad Is the New Good: Negotiating Bad Motherhood in Finnish Mommy Blogs." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, 2020, pp. 657–671, doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1642224.

Mustosmäki, Armi, and Tiina Sihto. "'F*** this shit' – Negotiating the Boundaries of Public Expression of Mother's Negative Feelings." *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2021, pp. 216–228, doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1921844.

Myrén, Viktoria. *I en familj finns inga fiender*. Ordfront, 2010.

Nauwerck, Malin, and Tuva Haglund. "Barnböckerna hymlar inte om dåliga föräldrar." *Svenska Dagbladet*, 29 April 2022.

---. "Tigermammor och tröttsjuka: Närvarande och frånvarande föräldrar i 2021 års bilderböcker." *Bokprovning på Svenska barnboksintitutet: En dokumentation: Årgång 2021*, Svenska barnboksintitutet, 2022, pp. 12–14.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "The Case of the Evil (Step)mother, or the Impossibility of Intergenerational Solidarity." *Intergenerational Solidarity in Children's Literature and Film*, edited by Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques, University Press of Mississippi, 2021, pp. 231–246.

Ommundsen, Åse-Marie. "Billedbøger mellem læsere: Kontroversielle billedbøger i Norge og Danmark." *Passage. Tidsskrift for litteratur og kritik*, vol. 31, no. 75, 2016, pp. 29–48, doi.org/10.7146/pas.v31i75.24164.

---. *Litterære grenseoverskridelser: Nar grensene mellom barne- og voksenlitteraturen viskes ut*. PhD dissertation, Universitetet i Oslo, 2010.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1976.

Thorvall, Kerstin. "Bor alla barnboksförfattare i Tomtebolandet?" *Expressen*, 29 June 1965.

Vuorio, Pia. *Problemföräldrar kan ni vara själva! Föräldrar och familjedynamik i svensk ungdomsbok 1968–1979*. PhD dissertation, Åbo Akademi, 2025.

Wahlström Henriksson, Helena, Anna Williams, and Margaretha Fahlgren, editors. *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

Williams, Anna. "Mamma hursomhelst: Röster ur samtidslitteraturen." *Mamma hursomhelst: Berättelser om moderskap*, edited by Margaretha Fahlgren and Anna Williams, Gidlunds förlag, 2018, pp. 13–26.

Yu, Li-Yin. *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2005.

Österlund, Mia, and Maria Lassén-Seger. "Baby-tid: Tidslighet i moderskapsförpackningens bilderböcker." *Vill jag vistas här bör jag byta blick: Texter om litteratur, miljö och historia tillägnade Pia Maria Ahlbäck*, edited by Jutta Ahlbeck, Judith Meurer-Bongardt, Julia Tidigs, and Maria Österlund, Föreningen Granskaren, 2020, pp. 163–182.