

## Introduction: Children's Literature Reviews – How, Where, and by Whom?

Children's literature reviews are one of many central components in the professional children's literary ecosystem. It is difficult to imagine a vibrant, challenging, or even groundbreaking literature for young people without it being part of an ongoing public critical conversation about literary quality, topicality, child perspective, reading experience, the literary work's place in a tradition of children's and young adult (YA) literature, and more. In today's digital information society, children's literature reviews – like all literary reviews – have taken on new forms across a variety of digital platforms. At the same time, their place in print media, such as daily newspapers and cultural journals, is no longer guaranteed. In several parts of the Nordic region, the 21st century has seen a decline in established, knowledgeable, and comprehensive coverage of children's and YA literature in the cultural sections of Nordic newspapers. This is partly due to an increase in the number of published titles, which has reduced the proportion of books reviewed, and partly due to limited space for reviews competing with other content. For example, Finland's largest Finnish-language daily newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, now limits itself, by its own account, to four collective reviews and a few individual reviews of newly published children's and YA books per year (Perera). The situation in the 2000s can be somewhat paradoxically summarized as a general marginalization of literary reviews in newspaper cultural sections, but an increased breadth and diversity of actors in new media and on new platforms (Samuelsson 105–110).

### How is Research on Nordic (Children's) Literature Reviews Doing?

What does research on literary reviews in general, and children's literature reviews in particular, look like? To understand the conditions, ideals, and frameworks of children's literature reviews today, it is necessary to look back at the field's origins, formats, and criteria, since reviews are context-bound by freedom of the press legislation, cultural climate, and journalistic conditions (cf. Westin). Therefore,

the research tends to be historically retrospective and nationally oriented. The theories and concepts most often used are drawn from literary sociology (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu's field theory) and include approaches from reception aesthetics, media archaeology, and discourse analysis. Methods range from close reading and qualitative content analysis to digital methods that generate broader quantitative measures of review frequency, visibility, and content. It is common to combine these two methods, allowing for both broad perspectives and analytical depth.

Children's literature reviews are generally not included in overarching Nordic or national studies of literary reviewing practices, which is why separate studies have been and remain necessary, as the research landscape in the Nordic countries still varies greatly. In Sweden, Lena Kåreland (*Gurli Linders barnbokskritik, Traditionalist och smakdomare*) and Boel Englund together with Kåreland have thoroughly mapped the microhistory of children's literature review practices through key critics such as Gurli Linder and Eva von Zweigbergk. A historical overview of Swedish children's literature reviews is also included in the newly published monumental work *Den svenska barn- och ungdomslitteraturens historia 1-2* (The history of Swedish children's and young adult literature 1-2, 2024), edited by Boel Westin and Åsa Warnqvist. In Finland, Päivi Heikkilä-Halttunen and Paula Havaste have described Finnish-language children's book reviewing practices. As for Swedish-language children's literature reviews in Finland, pioneering work has been done through articles and shorter overviews, mainly by Marita Rajalin ("Barnboken och kritiken," "Utan pjösk och pjoller"), and this knowledge is currently being compiled and expanded in the ongoing overview project *Den svenska barnlitteraturkritiken och -forskningen i Finland* (Swedish-language children's literature research and reviewing practices in Finland), also known as *Tippelill* (2022-2027), at Åbo Akademi University, involving Mia Österlund, Maria Lassén-Seger, and Julia Tidigs.

Norway also lacks a comprehensive study, but pioneering efforts exist in the form of chapters in broader overviews (Hambro; Mjør) and scholarly articles (Vold; Goga, "Det sublime og det skjønne," "Bildebokkritikken og det naive"; Christensen-Scheel). While Linda Hambro calls for research on "the invisible child," which she claims children's literature reviews are (199), Karin Beate Vold argues that all literary reviews - including children's literature reviews - should be explored in the same manner. In connection with the aesthetic turn in children's literature reviewing practices, Nina Goga

discusses evaluative criteria such as the sublime, the beautiful, and the naive, whereas Boel Christensen-Scheel highlights the lack of visual literacy in picturebook criticism. Danish research on children's literature reviews is also relatively limited and, since Sven Møller Kristensen's article "Børnebogen kunstnerisk set" (Children's literature critics' aesthetic criteria, 1969)<sup>1</sup>, has focused on examining the evaluative criteria that characterize Danish children's literature reviews (see e.g. Reinholdt Hansen). Nina Christensen, in turn, discusses the values within children's literature reviews based on whether they are oriented toward the sender, the literary work, the receiver, and/or the context.

Based on existing studies, we know that the development of children's literature reviewing practices in the Nordic countries largely follows similar overarching patterns, even though local differences naturally occur. When children's book publishing was established in the early 1800s, reviews in the daily press were still sporadic and concentrated around the Christmas season in larger collective reviews where critics tried to identify the best titles in what was perceived as a "flod av böcker," a flood of books (Kåreland, "Barnbokskritiken" 406). During the 20th century, a group of more professionalized children's literature critics gradually emerged, although the field throughout the century was characterized by domain struggles, varying (and especially in early reviews, high) quality standards, debates about appropriate and inappropriate reading with elements of moral panic, and recurring discussions about literary ideals and what constitutes the so-called "goda barnboken," the good children's book (cf. Kåreland, "Barnbokskritiken" 406–414).<sup>2</sup> That critics at the time adopted a morally normative stance toward the literature they reviewed was not unique to children's literature. As Lina Samuelsson notes, critics at the time were "literature's gatekeepers, prosecutors, and judges. [...] In constant opposition to new literature. [...] Literary reviews were meant to protect the public from reading immoral or otherwise inappropriate books" (29).<sup>3</sup> In Sweden, children's literature underwent a radical renewal in the 1940s, which also affected literary reviewing practices as a new generation of authors and critics adopted ideals that clashed with those of earlier traditionalists (Orlov, Kåreland, and Westin 239–242). The radical culture debates of the 1960s and 1970s, especially around the pivotal year 1968, also had consequences for children's literature reviewing practices, which during this time increasingly focused on the functions, values, and societal relevance of children's and YA literature. From the 1980s onward, attention shifted more toward the expression, themes, and

aesthetics of children's and YA literature (cf. Birkeland, Risa, and Vold 614–618; Druker, "Kultur" 608–609).<sup>4</sup>

With the 21st century came the changing conditions for children's book reviews, as already noted above, with cutbacks in printed daily newspapers and new digital channels for reviews in the form of podcasts, websites, and social media (Druker, "Efter millennieskiftet" 737). In recent decades, we have seen the emergence of new digital spaces for expert reviews of newly published children's and YA literature. Some well-established examples of such online review fora include the Norwegian web portal *Barnebokkritikk*, the Danish web portal *Bogbotten*, the Swedish online magazine *Bazar Masarin*, and the Finnish blog *Lastenkirjahylly*.<sup>5</sup> Book podcasts and BookTok also represent influential arenas today, where both experts and laypeople can share knowledge and discuss new children's and YA literature.

### Can Everyone Be a Children's Literature Critic?

So how does one become a children's book critic? What knowledge is needed or assumed? Are educators, reading promoters, cultural journalists, (children's) librarians, (children's) literature experts, or young people themselves best suited for the task? Reviewing children's and YA books has always been a concern for many, often very different, stakeholders. The demand for a professionalized body of critics in the latter part of the 19th century correlates with a desire for greater visibility and understanding of children's and YA literature itself. And even though a certain professionalization emerged during the 20th century and beyond, the community of critics remains notably diverse in terms of background, interests, and literary perspectives. At times – such as in the late 1960s and early 1970s – when the adult-authoritative view of children and youth, including their literature, began to be questioned, more voices were raised advocating for children and young people to have their own voice in the critical conversation. Since the 1990s, more people have had the opportunity to share their opinions about books and reading experiences online. From a power and democracy perspective, the broadening of critical perspectives is welcome. At the same time, there is a need to distinguish between non-commercial reviews, book recommendations, and commercial marketing, and to continue supporting and ensuring the future of expert children's literature reviewing practices. The Swedish Institute for Children's Books, for example, has been offering recurring short courses in writing children's book reviews since 2018.

Today, the core of reviewing practices still consists of “descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations of one or more new works” (Samuelsson 155).<sup>6</sup> In professional literary reviews of children’s literature, the critic’s view of children’s literature inevitably comes into play through questions such as: Who is the critic addressing? How should an adult critic evaluate a book for a different target audience? Is it taboo to speculate about child readers in children’s literature reviews – and if so, why? This is often regarded as problematic, even though no one questions that most of the books being reviewed are written by adults for children. A fruitful way to approach the age and experience gap between authors/publishers/critics and the target audience is to study how the child reader is portrayed in reviews, or which child perspective(s) in the work the critic highlights (Lassén-Seger). In summary, the eternal questions of children’s literature are brought into sharp focus in the study of children’s literature reviews.

### The Articles in This Theme of *Barnboken*

With this theme on children’s literature reviewing practices, we aim to build on existing research efforts by continuing to fill some of the gaps in the field. The challenges for this area of research still seem to lie primarily in the need to survey large amounts of material that are variably accessible in physical or digital archives. Additionally, theorization within the field is fragmented, and methods vary.

From the articles within this theme, we can identify two clear trends in approaching children’s literature reviews. As already noted, one is to use a large corpus and digital, quantitative, and comparative methods to find answers to broader questions. The other is to apply qualitative methods through close reading and analysis of selected reviews. These methods are often combined, as they complement each other – one offering a broad overview, the other depth. In this theme, a combined approach is primarily used in the article by Lina Samuelsson, Daniel Brodén, Jonas Ingvarsson, and Aram Karimi on the discursive orders of Swedish children’s literature reviews compared to literary reviews in general, and in the article by Marcus Axelsson and Berit Grønn on consecration markers in Nordic picturebooks.

Literary-sociological perspectives on children’s literature reviews are applied in several articles but are most evident in those addressing reviews in the service of commercialization – for example, through the aforementioned consecration markers or in Emilie Owens and Sonali Kulkarni’s article on BookTok videos. Also, several

contributions highlight the power relations and structures that are maintained and/or challenged within children's literature reviews when young people are given the opportunity to evaluate and discuss the literature aimed at them. In addition to the article on BookTok videos mentioned above, Tove Sommervold and Christina Olin-Scheller take such a perspective in their study of young people's evaluations of easy-to-read fiction, whereas Kristoffer Jul-Larsen examines how humour is addressed in the reception of Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking books in Norway and Sweden. The articles within this theme, described in more detail in the next section, all demonstrate the wide range of interesting approaches and new insights that studies of children's literature reviews can generate today – from a deeper understanding of literary reviews in a changing digital media landscape, to the conditions of children's literature seen through data-driven literary methods, to children's literature reviews in the service of consecration and marketing, and to new insights into how both adults and young people evaluate children's and YA literature, past and present.

Emilie Owens and Sonali Kulkarni's contribution, "[Sound Memes on BookTok: Understanding Affect in the Platformised Reviewing of Young Adult Books on TikTok](#)" is grounded in current research on how digitalization affects the dissemination, reception, and evaluation of children's and YA literature on new platforms such as BookTok. The article examines three selected BookTok videos that use sound in different ways to evaluate the books being presented. Owens and Kulkarni are particularly interested in analyzing and discussing how young readers demonstrate and communicate literary competence "through an emotional relationship to the text," arguing that this way of expressing value "pushes at the boundaries of existing reviewing practices in new and significant ways" (11).

Tove Sommervold and Christina Olin-Scheller also explore how young readers evaluate literature. In their article "[Der det er bilder så kan man slappe litt av': Ungdommers vurderinger av lettlest skjønnlitteratur](#)" ("Where there are pictures, you can relax a bit": Young people's assessments of easy-to-read fiction), they examine young people's reviews of easy-to-read materials in the shape of a novel, a graphic novel, and a poetry collection. Their study shows that "there is a tension between easy-to-read language on the one hand and demanding content, themes, or narrative form on the other" (Sommervold and Olin-Scheller 17).<sup>7</sup> A particularly interesting finding is that books combining text and image can be challenging for readers who do not engage in "a slow, reflective, and distanced

reading with immersion in the images and in the interplay between words and images in the iconotext" (18). It may well be that children and young people are not always as visually literate as we assume, which is something we should consider when supporting their development as critical readers.

Lina Samuelsson, Daniel Brodén, Jonas Ingvarsson, and Aram Karimi's article, "[Barnlitteraturkritikens ordning: Recensioner av barnlitteratur i svenska dagstidningar och bloggar 2006 och 2016](#)" (The order of children's literature criticism: Book reviews of children's literature in Swedish newspapers and blogs in 2006 and 2016), takes a broad approach to 21st-century Swedish children's literature reviews, comparing their characteristics with those of general literary reviews. Their study shows that reviews in the 2000s – both of children's books and other fiction – have shifted from being aesthetically oriented to becoming increasingly occupied with ideological and normative concerns. They also note "that there appears to be significant differences between reviews of children's literature in daily newspapers and in blogs" (Samuelsson et al. 17),<sup>8</sup> an interesting result suggesting that the new formats of children's literature reviews also bring changes in content.

Marcus Axelsson and Berit Grønn's article "[Kritikk og barnelitteratur: En kvantitativ og kvalitativ studie av konsekrasjonsmarkører](#)" (Critique and children's books: A quantitative and qualitative study of consecration markers), investigates the use of review quotes and children's literature awards mentioned on the covers of Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish picturebooks. Their study shows that a relatively low percentage of the examined picturebooks include consecration markers, and that the practice varies in scope between the Nordic countries. They also find that quotes from established critics in major newspapers are most cited, though there is a growing openness to including quotes from other sources such as book bloggers.

Kristoffer Jul-Larsen's article, "["En obotlig surgurka": Litteraturkritikkens vurderinger av humoren i Astrid Lindgrens Pippi-bøker i Sverige og Norge](#)" ("An incurable grouch": The critical assessment of humour in Astrid Lindgren's Pippi books in Sweden and Norway), delves further back in time than the other articles in this theme, studying and comparing the reception of the Pippi Longstocking books in Norway and Sweden, with a particular focus on how their humour was assessed. Jul-Larsen's humour-critical analysis shows that the Swedish reception "prioritized the work's overall aesthetic value over immediate amusement," whereas in Norway "there were no such reservations. All of Pippi's antics were

wholeheartedly loved, without moral, aesthetic, or linguistic objections" (15).<sup>9</sup> In addition to highlighting the differing – and even contradictory – views on the role of humour in children's books among reviewers, the article illustrates how children's literature critics constantly operate within a field of tension where aesthetic, literary, pedagogical, psychological, and emotional aspects are negotiated.

Regardless of theory or method, all the articles within this theme demonstrate that the fascination with children's literature reviews – whether written yesterday or today – lies largely in the values and judgments they express. In this way, children's literature reviews – regardless of their form – serve as a rich source for understanding the conditions, development, and societal relevance of children's and YA literature. What do we do with a children's book if we cannot show it? In the public discourse of literary reviews, children's and YA literature is seen, read, and heard.

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## Notes

1 In a later edition from 1974 the chapter is titled "Vurdering af børnebøger" (The evaluation of children's books).

2 This is confirmed by preliminary results from the *Tippelill* project.

3 All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated. The original quote is: "litteraturens grindväktare, kriorättare och domare. [...] I ständig opposition mot den nya litteraturen. [...] Litteraturrecensionerna skulle skydda publiken från att läsa osedliga eller på andra sätt olämpliga böcker" (Samuelsson 29).

4 This is also confirmed by preliminary results from the *Tippelill* project.

5 See [barnebokkritikk.no](http://barnebokkritikk.no), [boglobotten.dk](http://boglobotten.dk), [issuu.com/bazarmasarin](http://issuu.com/bazarmasarin), and [lastenkirjahylly.blogspot.com](http://lastenkirjahylly.blogspot.com).

6 Original quote: "beskrivningar, tolkningar och värderingar av ett eller flera nya verk" (Samuelsson 155).

7 Original quote: "det eksisterer et spenningsforhold mellom lettlest språk på den ene siden og krevende innhold, tema eller framstillingsform på den andre" (Sommervold and Olin-Scheller 17).

8 Original quote: "att det verkar finnas väsentliga skillnader mellan recensioner av barnlitteratur i dagspress och i bloggar" (Samuelsson et al. 17).

9 Original quotes: “satte verkets helhetlige estetiske verdi foran den mest umiddelbare forlystelse” and “slike baktanker. Der ble alle Pippis påfunnelstet helhjertet, uten moralske, estetiske, eller språklige anfektelser” (Jul-Larsen 15).

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