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Loss, Continuity, and Care

Intergenerational Perspectives on Dementia and Normativity in Three Contemporary Swedish Picturebooks

Abstract: This article examines how dementia is represented in contemporary Swedish picturebooks. Drawing on disability studies and crip theory, the analysis explores how these narratives negotiate dominant cultural norms surrounding cognitive ability, aging, autonomy, and personhood. Particular attention is given to how dementia – often characterized by its "invisible" nature – is made intelligible to a young audience through the interplay of text and image. The study focuses on three picturebooks: Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan *(Lovis Anchovy and the forgetting, 2017) by Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg;* Farfars trädgård *(Grandpa's garden, 2022) by Ebba Forslind; and* Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar *(Grandma's memories fall out but she's still here, 2023) by Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall. Each book presents dementia through the eyes of a grandchild, a narrative strategy that positions the child as a mediating figure. While adult characters in these picturebooks often adopt a biomedical framing aligned with what dementia narrative research terms the "loss of self" narrative, the child protagonists frequently mobilize a "still the same person" perspective, foregrounding relational continuity despite cognitive decline. Through close readings, the article demonstrates how these picturebooks simultaneously reproduce and resist normative assumptions about dementia. They highlight emotional continuity, empathy, and imaginative connection, yet also risk reinforcing ageist and dementist tropes by portraying the grandparent as dependent, infantilized, or disconnected from reality. At the same time, the analysis suggests that norm-challenging gestures often reside in the child's mediating gaze and practices of care, which shift attention from cognitive correctness to relational presence.*

Keywords: Swedish picturebooks, dementia, disability studies, crip theory, dementism, aging, intergenerational relationships, cognitive difference, norm critique, representation, norms of disability

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In recent decades, dementia has emerged as an increasingly prominent theme across various cultural forms, including novels, autobiographies, films, and graphic narratives. Despite this growing attention, the condition remains strongly marked by taboo. Within the realm of picturebooks, scholars have highlighted the challenges involved in portraying dementia in ways that are both accessible and meaningful. One key difficulty lies in the condition's "invisible" nature. Since its symptoms are not immediately perceptible, it becomes particularly difficult for young children to understand what it means to live with dementia (Simonhjell 140; Caldwell et al. 119).

This article investigates how dementia is represented in three Swedish picturebooks intended for children aged three to six: *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan* (Lovis Anchovy and the forgetting, 2017) by Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg; *Farfars trädgård* (Grandpa's garden, 2022) by Ebba Forslind; and *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* (Grandma's memories fall out but she's still here, 2023) by Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall. All three portray dementia from the perspective of a grandchild – a narrative strategy commonly employed in picturebooks on dementia aimed at younger readers (Chen 31). The three titles were chosen because they illustrate distinct narrative and visual approaches to making dementia intelligible: *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan* depicts a child's first encounter with cognitive change prior to diagnosis; *Farfars trädgård* foregrounds relocation to institutional care and the role of environment; and *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* offers an unusually sustained portrayal of advanced dementia, including visualizations of altered perception. Together, these books enable a comparative analysis of how norms of cognition, aging, and personhood are reproduced and contested in contemporary Swedish picturebooks.

In examining these works, the analysis is guided by the following questions: What textual and visual strategies are employed to render dementia comprehensible for this age group? How do these portrayals reflect broader cultural norms surrounding health and illness, as well as prevailing ideas about childhood and old age? More specifically, how do they engage with dominant dementia discourses that often reduce individuals with the condition to dehumanizing stereotypes – such as likening them to zombies or the "living dead" (see e.g. Behuniak; Schweda and Jongsma)? The study explores whether these picturebooks reinforce or challenge such normative framings,

and considers how they contribute to contemporary understandings of dementia in childhood contexts.

Theoretically, the article is grounded in disability studies, particularly its social constructivist orientation, which emphasizes how ableist norms shape dominant conceptions of normalcy, functionality, and autonomy (Goodley). While disability studies has traditionally focused on physical impairments, there is growing recognition of the need to address cognitive conditions such as dementia (see e.g. Fraser; Shakespeare et al.; Sandberg and Ward). From this perspective, dementia – like disability more broadly – is not viewed solely as a medical or biological condition, but as something produced and shaped by cultural, institutional, and social frameworks that privilege certain cognitive and physical abilities. Within this broader theoretical context, scholars have also begun to identify and critique the specific prejudices tied to dementia, sometimes conceptualized as *dementism* (Hydén and Rahman 114). The term highlights how cultural narratives and representational patterns frequently stigmatize or infantilize people with dementia, thereby sustaining normative hierarchies of cognitive ability. In this sense, dementism can be understood as a dementia-specific form of ableism, intersecting with ageism and other discourses of decline.

The analysis is also theoretically informed by crip theory, which interrogates how normative assumptions about ability are upheld, reproduced, and occasionally disrupted within disability contexts. Crip theory interrogates the mechanisms through which bodies and minds are disciplined, categorized, and regulated, while at the same time affirming the generative potential of those subject positions typically labeled as deviant, dysfunctional, or impaired. Rather than framing such differences as deficits to be corrected, crip theory understands them as sites of resistance, creativity, and alternative ways of relating, knowing, and being (McRuer).

In what follows, a disability studies perspective is used to identify how cognitive normalcy and autonomy are socially and institutionally produced as norms, while crip theory guides the analysis of moments in which the picturebooks resist these norms by privileging relational presence, emotional continuity, and imaginative co-existence over cognitive correctness. Together, these perspectives enable a critical reading of how the selected picturebooks both reproduce and unsettle dominant understandings of dementia through the interplay of text and image.

Picturebooks, Dementia, and Aging

In Sweden, research on picturebooks and illness remains limited and has yet to address dementia specifically, instead focusing on other mental and somatic conditions (see e.g. Haglund and Nauwerck; Lenemark). Within Scandinavian scholarship more broadly, a few studies have engaged with the topic. Nora Simonhjell, in her analysis of two Norwegian picturebooks, notes that while the texts adopt a didactic tone and contain stereotypical portrayals, they also gesture toward a more inclusive and open-ended approach, for example, by not presenting memory loss exclusively in negative terms (146). Peter Simonsen, in his study of three Danish picturebooks from a caregiving perspective, emphasizes how these works avoid ageist or reductive representations. Instead, they affirm altered cognitive states, suggesting an accepting, even appreciative, view of dementia (240).

Internationally, interest in picturebooks about dementia is somewhat more developed, but still limited, and often situated within the broader context of studies on dementia narratives aimed at adult audiences (see e.g. Zimmermann, *Diseased*, *Poetics*; Maginess; Falcus and Sako; Bitenc; Garrigós). Some studies have identified recurring tropes and patterns in how dementia symptoms are depicted (Sakai et al.), while others have examined the conceptual metaphors used to represent individuals with dementia (Creten).

Several scholars, including those whose work most closely informs the present article, have taken a more qualitative approach, analyzing how dementia is depicted through the interplay between text and image. A particularly relevant example is Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako's study of picturebooks about dementia published in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Japan. In their analysis, memory loss is often framed as a threat to familial cohesion, a perceived risk that is commonly addressed through the idealization of the grandparent–grandchild relationship. In turn, they suggest that these books emphasize the strength of intergenerational bonds and highlight the child's capacity to creatively adapt to the cognitive and emotional shifts brought on by the illness. This theme also resonates in the Swedish picturebooks analyzed in this article, where dementia disrupts intergenerational relationships and prompts the child protagonists to find ways of bridging the growing gap between themselves and their grandparents.

In further work with Elizabeth F. Caldwell, Falcus and Sako analyze ten picturebooks from a health communication perspective (Caldwell et al.). A central question in their study is how these books

position themselves in relation to two culturally dominant narratives of dementia: the "loss of self" narrative, which conceptualizes dementia as a progressive erosion of personal identity, and the "still the same person" narrative, which emphasizes continuity of self despite cognitive decline. The authors argue that the picturebooks they examine present complex, and at times contradictory, representations that reflect "the polyvocal nature of dominant and emerging discourses of dementia in society" (Caldwell et al. 108). This observation constitutes a key point of departure for the present article's analysis of how the selected Swedish picturebooks either reinforce or challenge dominant understandings and norms surrounding dementia.

Another notable contribution is Shih-Wen Sue Chen's analysis of two Chinese picturebooks about dementia. Chen demonstrates that, despite the books' pedagogical intentions, they nonetheless "reflect ageist tropes and infantilise the person with dementia" (40). Her findings underscore the challenges inherent in avoiding norm-reinforcing representations, even when the aim is to promote empathy and understanding, an issue that also emerges in the picturebooks discussed in the following analysis.

As this brief overview illustrates, international research on picturebooks about dementia intersects with scholarship in children's literature that adopts an age studies perspective. A key figure in this area is Vanessa Joosen, whose work on representations of adulthood and aging in children's literature – particularly *Adulthood in Children's Literature* (2018) – is especially pertinent. While Joosen does not focus specifically on dementia narratives, her discussion of dominant cultural narratives surrounding aging is highly relevant. One such narrative is the stereotypical "decline narrative," which shares many features with the "loss of self" discourse commonly found in dementia representations. Central to this narrative is the notion that "growing old is depicted as an unpleasant ride downhill, marked by pain and loss, with death looming at the bottom" (Joosen 181). However, Joosen also notes that in the context of children's literature, such narratives are often "outweighed by narratives that add an element of progress to the construction of old age" (182). From an age studies perspective, then, we encounter a tension similar to that observed in the aforementioned dementia research on picturebooks, between stories that reinforce dominant cultural norms and stories that challenge them by offering counter-narratives.

A central aim of this article is to investigate how the Swedish picturebooks under discussion negotiate this tension. The analysis

begins with *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan*, which serves as a point of departure for the subsequent discussions of *Farfars trädgård* and *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar*. In each case, the focus lies on how dementia is portrayed through the interplay of text and image, how the picturebooks relate to the "loss of self" and "still the same person" narratives, and the role played by the child protagonist in mediating and responding to the illness.

Loss, Closeness, and Recognition

Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan unfolds over the course of a single day. The story begins with a boat journey to the archipelago island where six-year-old Lovis is to celebrate her grandfather's seventy-second birthday. Unlike previous visits, this marks her first encounter with a cognitively altered grandfather.

Already on the second spread, Lovis senses that something is different. During the boat ride, she overhears her father and his siblings voicing concern about their father's increasingly erratic behavior. "Har ni också märkt att han har blivit vimsigare på sistone?" (Have you also noticed that he's been more confused lately?; Estling Vannestål and Hellberg),[1] her father asks, prompting recollections of odd incidents. Aunt Lena describes how he composted freshly caught herring, and Uncle Patrik recalls a phone call during which their father confused his granddaughter Julia with a cat. These anecdotes reflect a common pattern in dementia-themed picturebooks, where behavior that diverges from normative expectations of old age is construed as symptomatic of illness (Caldwell et al. 120), illustrating how cognitive normalcy operates as an implicit normative standard.

The adults' unease is conveyed visually through anxious expressions, raised eyebrows, and exchanged glances of concern. Their dialogue betrays a discomfort with the father's deviation from expected norms. Lena's comment about the discarded herring is prefaced by a sigh, which signals emotional strain and reinforces a binary distinction between health and illness, normality and deviation. The sigh also subtly positions Lena as more rational and competent than her aging father.

While the conversation echoes stereotypical assumptions about dementia in old age, it is notable that no formal diagnosis has yet been made. The siblings agree that something is "fel" (wrong) with their father, but they defer to medical authority to define what that is:

> Han har fått en tid för att göra ett test hos doktorn nu, säger Lena. Så snart får vi i alla fall veta vad som är fel. (Estling Vannestål and Hellberg)
>
> (He's got an appointment for a test with the doctor now, says Lena. So soon we'll at least know what's wrong.)

This reflects the legitimizing role of diagnosis within ableist frameworks, where cognitive deviation becomes intelligible primarily through medical authorization.

In contrast stands Lovis's child perspective, which persistently counters the adult framing of her grandfather. Though she does not openly challenge the adults, she inwardly questions the assumption that something is wrong. Like many children, her understanding of illness is grounded in somatic terms. She knows that old people can get sick – "Att deras hjärtan inte kan slå för alltid" (That their hearts can't beat forever) – but reasons that her grandfather's "hjärta är lika stort som havet" (heart is as big as the sea), and therefore nothing can be wrong. She clings to this conviction as tightly as she grips the boat's railing.

The first glimpse of her grandfather at the dock seems to confirm Lovis's view: "Farfar ser inte alls sjuk ut. Han ser precis ut som vanligt" (Grandpa doesn't look sick at all. He looks just like usual). This moment underscores the challenge that dementia poses for young children's understanding, since it is invisible and not outwardly legible, thereby unsettling expectations that impairment must be visually or bodily marked.

As the story progresses, the didactic impulse to render dementia intelligible to the child reader becomes more pronounced. The strong intergenerational bond between Lovis and her grandfather is tested by increasingly visible signs of cognitive change: he calls her by the wrong name, forgets his age, lashes out emotionally, becomes aggressive toward baby Julia, and misplaces his glasses. As discussed by Erin Y. Sakai and her colleagues, these symptoms reflect common narrative elements in dementia picturebooks.

Visually, the story reinforces a familiar metaphor informed by dementism: the person with dementia as akin to a young child (Creten 47). The grandfather wears a bib at dinner – the only one aside from baby Julia – and his insistence on reading gift tags without his glasses prompts Lovis to think of her friend's toddler brother who says "kan fälv" (do it myfelf; Estling Vannestål and Hellberg).

His lack of insight into his condition is emphasized visually through closed eyes, a symbolic gesture of inwardness or unawareness.

The pivotal realization for Lovis regarding her grandfather's cognitive decline occurs during the baking of the birthday cake, a scene that undermines his identity as the island's master baker. He uses the wrong technique and mistakes salt for sugar in the whipped cream (see image 1). The horrified expressions of Lovis and her cousin Jacob underscore the gravity of the moment, as does the grandmother's emotional breaking point – until then, she has tried to mask or compensate for her husband's decline.

The subsequent spread depicts Lovis comforting her grandmother, who hides her face in her hands beneath an autumnal tree. In this scene, Lovis assumes a caregiving, adult-like role, which aligns with Joosen's argument that picturebooks often, as in this case, illustrate the invisibility or passivity of the middle-adult generation (189–190). The autumn motif – yellowing leaves, trees shedding – serves as a metaphor for the grandfather's cognitive decline, echoing imagery frequently found in picturebooks about dementia (Simonhjell 142; Creten 40, 52). Having now witnessed the symptoms herself, Lovis finds the courage to ask what is truly wrong with her grandfather.

Image 1. Baking goes wrong. From *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan* (2017) by Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg. © Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg (text), and Sanna Hellberg (illustration).

Her grandmother explains that they believe he has a condition called dementia, marking the first explicit use of the term in the narrative. Until this point, the story has focused on symptoms; now, a tentative diagnosis is offered, not by a doctor, but by the person who knows him best. She explains that "[m]an blir … lite annorlunda. Man säger konstiga saker. Och glömmer bort, mer och mer" (you become ... a little different. You say strange things. And forget, more and more; Estling Vannestål and Hellberg). While this account aligns with the decline narrative, Lovis's follow-up question reframes the scene: "Men du tycker om farfar ändå, va?" (But you still love Grandpa, right?). Her grandmother's affirmative response shifts the narrative from one of loss to one of enduring love and emotional recognition.

The emotional turning point is disrupted when they return to find the grandfather missing. This moment draws on the common dementia trope of disorientation and wandering (Creten 47). Yet the focus quickly shifts to the children's initiative. While the adults search near the house, Lovis and Jacob run to the grandfather's former bakery. There they find him, having gone to replace the ruined cake.

This scene offers a redemptive portrayal. Despite his cognitive impairment, the grandfather is granted agency. The illustration of him riding his three-wheeled moped, smiling with pride and accompanied by Lovis and Jacob, conveys dignity, determination, and connection (see image 2). It offers a powerful counterpoint to earlier, dementism-inflected portrayals of helplessness and dependency.

However, the picturebook does not conclude on this triumphant note. In the final scene, as the family gathers for coffee, the grandfather once again reveals his confusion: "Skål och gott nytt år!" (Cheers and Happy New Year!; Estling Vannestål and Hellberg), he exclaims, spilling his coffee. The adults' silence reflects discomfort, perhaps embarrassment. But Lovis immediately responds: "Skål och gott nytt år på sjuttiotvåårsdagen, farfar!" (Cheers and Happy New Year on your seventy-second birthday, Grandpa!).

As the book's final line, Lovis's response is deeply significant. Rather than correcting him or drawing attention to his disorientation, she meets him in his reality with empathy and imagination, allowing interaction to take place without requiring cognitive coherence. Read through a crip-inflected lens, this moment foregrounds relational presence over cognitive accuracy, a gesture that aligns with Joosen's observation that children's literature often celebrates the imaginative child as a foil to the rational adult (196).

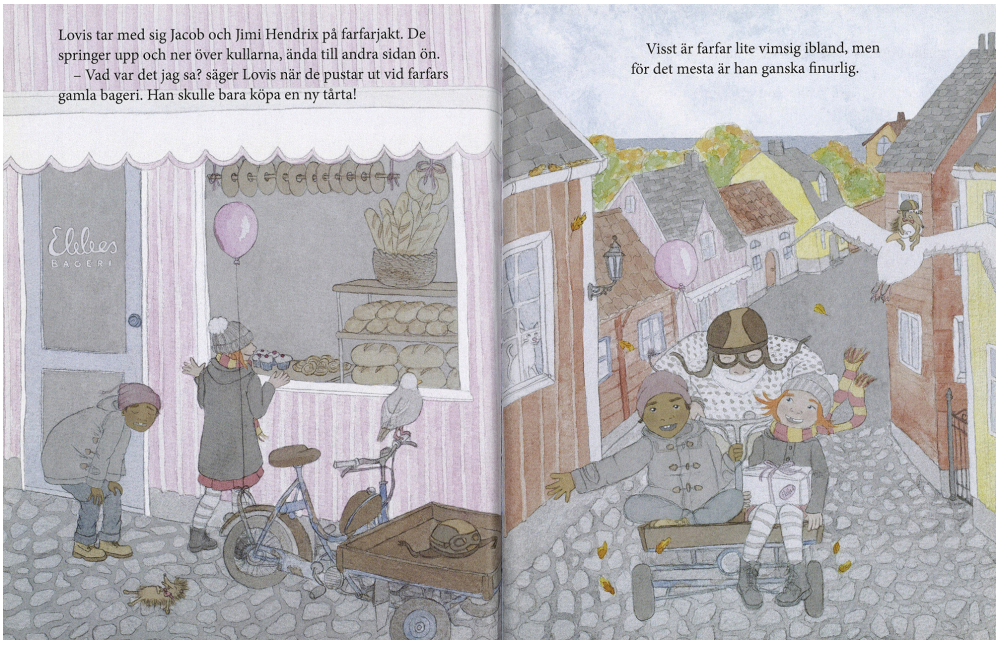

Image 2. Finding Grandpa. From *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan* (2017) by Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg. © Maria Estling Vannestål and Sanna Hellberg (text), and Sanna Hellberg (illustration).

The Norm-Challenging Child

Farfars trädgård and *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* differ from *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan* in that the grandparents' dementia is foregrounded from the outset. *Farfars trädgård* opens with a depiction of the young girl Dahlia walking together with her grandfather in his flourishing garden, rendered in lush, green tones. As in *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan*, the strong intergenerational bond is immediately emphasized. Here, the garden functions as a metonym for the healthy, capable grandfather who has cultivated and maintained this idyllic, Edenic space.

However, this image is quickly disrupted on the following spread, where the narrative shifts to the grandfather's paranoid conviction that someone – presumably thieves – has stolen his wallet. From the adult perspective, represented by Dahlia's father, it is simply a case of forgetfulness. Yet Dahlia questions this rationalization: "Men varför skulle farfar vilja lägga sin plånbok under soffan?" (But why would Grandpa want to put his wallet under the sofa?; Forslind). As in *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan*, we encounter a clear tension between the adult interpretation and the child's alternative framing of dementia-related behavior.

This tension intensifies with the depiction of the grandfather's move to a care facility. A temporal leap occurs between the second and third spreads, but its exact duration remains unspecified – a narrative ambiguity that may reflect the adult belief that children should be shielded from the gradual deterioration associated with dementia (Sakai et al. 588). The rationale for the move, which centers on his inability to cook, clean, or tend the garden, aligns with the "loss of self" narrative and illustrates how autonomy and selfhood are measured against ableist expectations of functional independence.

In the accompanying illustration, the father appears carrying a moving box, while Dahlia holds a flowerpot with red dahlias (see image 3). Their gazes are directed toward the grandfather, who stands with his back to them, grasping the gate and looking out at the garden. His reluctance to leave is thus subtly emphasized. The physical and emotional distance is further underscored by the page layout: the grandfather occupies the left-hand page, Dahlia and her father the right, separated by the book's gutter. As Megan Dowd Lambert observes, the gutter in picturebooks is not merely a production constraint but may also serve as a powerful "visual and physical barrier" (30). In this case, it materializes the emotional separation between generations brought about by increasing

Image 3. Leaving the garden behind. From *Farfars trädgård* (2022) by Ebba Forslind. © Ebba Forslind.

dementia. Meanwhile, in the text, the father adopts a pragmatic, explanatory tone, reassuring both Dahlia – and himself – that institutional care will keep her grandfather safe if he falls or forgets to turn off the stove. Dahlia, echoing Lovis's earlier skepticism, protests: "Men han har väl aldrig ramlat? Han har väl inte glömt någonting, i alla fall inget viktigt?" (But he's never fallen, has he? And he hasn't forgotten anything, at least nothing important?; Forslind).

This friction resurfaces later, in another conversation about the care home. Again, the father adopts a practical stance: "Det känns tryggt och maten verkar faktiskt god" (It feels safe, and the food actually seems good). The term *tryggt* (safe) carries a dual meaning here, implying not only the grandfather's security, but also the father's relief at no longer bearing sole responsibility for caregiving, thereby framing institutional care as a normative response to cognitive difference. Dahlia, by contrast, focuses not on logistics but on existential questions: "Tänk om farfar aldrig mer kommer ihåg vem jag är?" (What if Grandpa never again remembers who I am?). Her concern arises from a recent visit during which her grandfather fails to recognize her. For Dahlia, memory and recognition, not safety or care routines, are paramount.

The father's attempt at comfort relies on a mechanistic explanation of dementia, commonly found in picturebooks (Caldwell et al. 123), in which the brain is depicted as the faulty organ. He assures Dahlia that her grandfather still remembers her, but adds that "det kommer andra tankar emellan […] och andra minnen också" (other thoughts get in the way […] and other memories too; Forslind). Dahlia counters with a more childlike and imaginative interpretation. Perhaps her grandfather's memory loss is simply a result of a long, eventful life, and the fact that there is just too much to remember.

With her father's support, Dahlia decides to help her grandfather by creating a memory list of the most important things he must not forget. The list includes Dahlia, her father, the deceased grandmother, and the garden. Facts such as where the wallet is or how many legs a spider has are, in her view, not all that important. As is often the case in picturebooks about dementia, Dahlia, in her role as a child, takes on the position of a "holder of memory" (Caldwell et al. 125), placing greater value on emotional and relational continuity than on factual or practical information.

In addition to the memory list, shown in childlike handwriting, another key gesture exemplifying Dahlia as a norm-challenging agent is her effort to persuade the nurse, Maria, to transform the care home's barren courtyard into a space reminiscent of her

grandfather's garden. Dahlia suggests that the sterile, impersonal environment may be contributing to his memory loss. From a disability studies perspective, this shift in focus from individual impairment to environmental context is particularly significant. Unlike her father, Dahlia identifies the surroundings rather than impaired biological brain functioning as the source of the problem.

The act of transforming the courtyard also serves to restore her grandfather's agency, which was lost when he was removed from his garden. As Dahlia argues, he is the one who knows the most about gardening, so naturally he should be involved. This resonates with Falcus and Sako's observation that gardening in dementia picturebooks often symbolizes the maintenance of intergenerational relationships (190). However, in *Farfars trädgård*, it remains unclear whether the grandfather takes part in the transformation. The final spread does not depict him gardening. Instead, Dahlia is foregrounded, watering flowers with her grandfather's red watering can, while Maria carries a potted plant. In the background, the father and grandfather are shown embracing. The prior emotional and generational distance appears bridged. The fact that the father is holding a green plant suggests that Dahlia's gardening project has also restored the relationship between father and grandfather, passing the gardening interest not only to the grandchild but back to the son.

Textually, however, the story reaffirms the "loss of self" narrative. Dahlia's father warns her that the memory issues will persist and likely worsen, despite the unpredictability of the prognosis. He describes the brain as a labyrinth where Grandpa sometimes gets lost, which is a conceptual metaphor often used in dementia narratives for children (Creten 49). Yet, as in *Lovis Ansjovis och glömskan*, it is the child who gets the final word, a narrative reversal that, as Peter Simonsen notes in his analysis of Danish dementia-themed picturebooks (223), repositions the child as the pedagogical figure.

The book's closing words are Dahlia's: "Vi ska hjälpa honom att hitta och vi ska minnas åt honom" (We'll help him find his way, and we'll remember for him; Forslind). This echoes the concept of *memorial personhood*, which emphasizes the collective responsibility to sustain the identity of those living with dementia when they can no longer do so themselves (Fraser 144). Dahlia's statement, functioning almost as an ethical appeal to both child and adult readers, offers a norm-critical alternative. Rather than excluding or diminishing people with dementia, it affirms their right to remain visible, valued, and included within shared memory practices through the active empathy and presence of others.

Connection, Care, and Love

Already in the title *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* (Grandma's memories fall out but she's still here), the tension between the "loss of self" narrative and the "still the same person" narrative explored in the previous two picturebooks is made explicit. The story centers on the child protagonist Ebbe and his experience of his grandmother's advancing dementia. At the same time, the title encapsulates the book's core message: that despite the progression of memory loss, she somehow remains herself. This duality is reinforced typographically: the first part of the title is printed in a standard font, with the final "t" seemingly falling off the line – a visual metaphor for cognitive decline – while the second part appears in cursive handwriting, symbolizing continued subjectivity and personal presence.

In keeping with this conceptual framework, *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* not only portrays the grandmother's altered behavior from the grandchild's point of view – including difficulties with daily routines, forgetfulness, and temporal disorientation – but also visualizes her distorted perception of reality from a subjective, internal perspective. Already on the opening spread, her confused musings about meatballs and stork beaks are rendered visually by storks circling her head, searching for meatballs. In the following spread, her growing confusion is illustrated as spiraling red lines, resembling unraveled yarn, emanating from her graying head. The narrative thus does not merely depict symptoms but visually translates her lived experience of cognitive change, inviting the reader into her perceptual world and challenging biomedical framings that reduce dementia to cognitive deficit.

A particularly poignant example of this occurs later in the story, when the grandmother's condition has worsened to the point where she can no longer remain at home. Her decline is symbolized in an image showing her walking without pants along a meandering path that leads to the care facility, an echo of the grandfather's relocation in *Farfars trädgård*. From Ebbe's perspective, however, her dementia-related behaviors are not immediately seen as negative, a stance echoed by Simonhjell (146). In one scene, for instance, she gives him ten pieces of candy believing them to be eggs and crackers, much to his delight. This moment underscores the possibility of pleasure and connection, even in altered cognition.

Nevertheless, the mechanistic understanding of dementia resurfaces here as well, expressed through the voice of Ebbe's father:

> Pappa säger att det är en sjukdom som gör att farmor glömmer det mesta. Han förklarar att våra minnen har en egen plats i huvudet och där är det sjukt hos farmor. (Galli and Sjöwall)
>
> (Dad says it's a disease that makes Grandma forget most things. He explains that our memories have their own place in our heads, and that's where something is sick in Grandma.)

This explanation reflects what Martina Zimmermann identifies as a biomedical framing that pathologizes cognitive difference and reinforces normative distinctions between healthy and impaired cognition (*Poetics*).

The decline narrative is further reinforced when the father states that dementia is incurable and progressive and will eventually cause the grandmother to forget her family entirely. Ebbe does not contest this explanation directly, but he nuances it by comparing her memory loss to his own experiences. He notes that he remembers recent events, while things further back, like being a baby, are forgotten. This line of reasoning implicitly challenges fixed binaries between normal and pathological memory and resonates with recent disability theory, which views cognitive variation as part of the broader spectrum of human experience.

Like Lovis and Dahlia, Ebbe is also deeply invested in sustaining his bond with his grandparent. He devises imaginative strategies to counteract her forgetfulness: he raises his voice to help her remember, and, following a child's logic that memory might "escape" from an overloaded head, places a blanket over her head to preserve a pancake recipe. These actions express not only a desire to protect her identity but also a deeply emotional and relational resistance to the distancing effects of dementia, foregrounding connection beyond expectations of cognitive consistency. This contrasts with the more rational, resigned attitude taken by his father.

One of the story's most significant moments is a spread where Ebbe, in pajamas, sits looking out a window (see image 4). Opposite him, the image evokes his inner world: an autumn tree swirls in a storm, framing his grandmother's face in a vortex of falling leaves. The accompanying text poses a profound philosophical question: "Finns farmor kvar när alla hennes minnen är borta?" (Will Grandma still be there when all her memories are gone?; Galli and Sjöwall). This echoes Dahlia's existential concern in *Farfars trädgård*, but here the focus shifts from recognition to ontological continuity: is identity even possible without memory?

Image 4. Dementia and identity. From *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* (2023) by Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall. © Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall.

This moment functions as a turning point. After it, Ebbe's attempts to preserve his grandmother's memories intensify. As in the picturebooks analyzed by Falcus and Sako, he constructs a memory box, which can be seen as "a creative practice that links child and grandparent, enabling the child to bring the grandparent back to him/her" (194). Within the narrative, the box serves both as a practical memory aid, and as a symbolic act of emotional preservation.

Yet, despite these efforts, the grandmother's decline continues. In contrast to many dementia-themed picturebooks, which tend to avoid portraying the more severe stages of the illness (Falcus and Sako 195), *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* offers an unflinching depiction of advanced dementia. The narrative ultimately leans into the "loss of self" model, emphasizing the irreversible nature of memory loss and identity dissolution. Ebbe's wish to make a difference is set against a progression that neither love nor creativity can halt.

And yet, the story concludes not in despair, but in quiet reconciliation (see image 5). Ebbe appears to have reached a place of emotional

resolution. Though his grandmother no longer recognizes him, he remains present, choosing relational proximity over retreat. His final line – "Bättre att ha en farmor utan minnen än ingen farmor alls" (Better to have a Grandma without memories than no Grandma at all; Galli and Sjöwall) – offers a powerful counter-narrative to the decline narrative. The closing image, where Ebbe sits on her lap and they gaze deeply into each other's eyes, mirrors a common motif in picturebooks about dementia, identified by Falcus and Sako (196): they often end with an embrace between the child and the cognitively impaired grandparent.

This final scene foregrounds emotional presence and relational continuity over cognitive capacity. In this sense, the book's most norm-challenging, crip gesture lies in its affirmative answer to Ebbe's philosophical question. It contests the dominant trope of the person with dementia as a hollow shell or "living dead," instead insisting on an enduring humanity rooted not in memory but in emotional connection, care, and love.

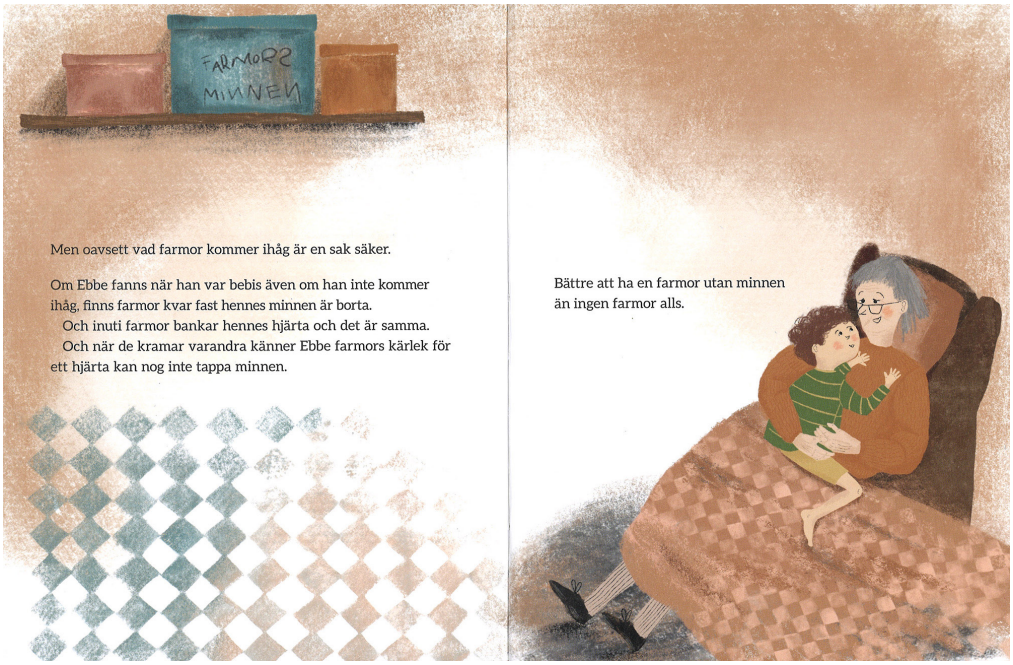

Image 5. Reconciliation. From *Farmors minnen trillar ut men ändå finns hon kvar* (2023) by Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall. © Sara Galli and Annie Sjöwall.

Conclusion

The three picturebooks analyzed in this article offer distinct yet interconnected approaches to how Swedish children's literature engages with the complex realities of dementia. Across these narratives, the child emerges as a central figure who challenges dominant frameworks for understanding the condition. Empathetic and imaginative, the child protagonist confronts the adult world's predominantly biomedical, and often stereotypical, portrayals of cognitive decline. While adult characters typically frame dementia through a "loss of self" narrative, the children adopt a "still the same person" perspective, resisting reductive definitions and working to sustain emotional bonds and recognize the enduring personhood of their grandparents.

The analysis thus both confirms and nuances patterns identified in previous research on dementia in picturebooks. Like earlier studies, it shows how these narratives oscillate between "loss of self" and "still the same person" framings, and how the child is positioned as an empathetic mediator. At the same time, the Swedish material examined here suggests more clearly that the norm-challenging potential of these books is often displaced from the grandparent with dementia onto the child, whose care, imagination, and relational practices become the primary site of resistance to ableist and dementist norms.

Notably, in line with this pattern, the child rather than the person with dementia enacts what crip theory identifies as a disruption of normative expectations about disability, shifting agency away from the disabled subject traditionally emphasized in the theory. In these picturebooks, the grandparent with dementia is largely confined to conventional representational patterns, while the child becomes the lens through which illness, cognition, and relationality are reimagined. This displacement affirms children's emotional and ethical capacities yet simultaneously limits the voice and agency of the person with dementia, who appears primarily through the child's gaze.

This narrative strategy may also have ambivalent implications for young readers. On the one hand, it can be experienced as empowering, since the children are portrayed as capable participants in navigating dementia. On the other hand, these representations could be seen as romanticizing the child's role, depicting them as able to navigate complex emotional terrain with remarkable sensitivity and maturity. Although such portrayals may serve pedagogical aims, they

simultaneously establish subtle normative expectations on child readers, suggesting that empathy, adaptability, and emotional labor should arise naturally, even in the face of difficult circumstances.

Taken together, these picturebooks expose the inherent difficulties of representing dementia to a young audience without reinforcing the very norms they seek to subvert, a dilemma also noted by Chen and Simonhjell, among others. While they clearly aim to challenge ableist paradigms, they nevertheless reproduce ageist tropes and forms of dementism that equate cognitive difference with infantilization, unpredictability, and incapacity.

As Caldwell and her colleagues point out, these contradictions can be understood, in part, as a consequence of the limited metaphorical and narrative resources available to authors – resources shaped by prevailing cultural discourses on aging, dementia, and cognitive decline (119). In other words, in attempting to depict an illness that is largely invisible, picturebook creators must rely on existing narrative conventions, which are themselves frequently steeped in normative assumptions. In this regard, the three Swedish picturebooks about dementia examined here underscore a central representational paradox: to resist a norm, one must first make it visible – yet in doing so, one risks reaffirming it through the very language and imagery one seeks to contest.

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Notes

1 All translations of Swedish quotations are my own. The three picturebooks are unpaginated.

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