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"Close your eyes and see"

(Dis)ability, Animals, and Neoliberalism in Anna Höglund's *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*

Abstract: Disability has become increasingly visible in literature over the past decade, particularly within children's and young adult fiction. According to the Swedish Institute for Children's Books, representations of disabled children have become more common in conventional fictional narratives about growing up, falling in love, or acquiring superpowers. The institute has also identified a rise in both fictional and non-fictional books addressing neuropsychiatric diagnoses, offering information about and strategies for coping with them. A picturebook that both participates in this trend and diverges from its dominant patterns is Anna Höglund's Barnet som inte kunde blunda *(The child who could not close her eyes, 2020). The book's protagonist has an unrecognized disability, and all characters are depicted as animals. Drawing on crip theory and previous research on (dis)ability, animals, power relations, and social norms in children's literature, the purpose of this article is to analyze the function of – and relationship between – representations of (dis)ability, animals, and societal norms in Höglund's picturebook. The analysis demonstrates that* Barnet som inte kunde blunda *aligns the positions of children, animals, and disabled subjects to critique the ways in which the Western capitalist system marginalizes difference. This picturebook further complicates and destabilizes established (dis)ability tropes, presenting difference not as a detachable trait or an obstacle to overcome, but as a narrative necessity and a positive resource. The article concludes that* Barnet som inte kunde blunda *articulates a pronounced social critique, particularly by exposing the causes and consequences of injustice in relation to (dis)ability and by emphasizing the need for collective, rather than purely individual, change.*

Keywords: picturebooks, blindness, neurodivergence, visual impairments, crip theory, capitalism, Anna Höglund, norms of disability

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Disability has become increasingly visible in literature over the past decade, particularly within children's and young adult fiction. According to Svenska Barnboksinstitutet (the Swedish Institute for Children's Books), representations of disabled children have become more common in conventional fictional narratives about growing up, falling in love, or acquiring superpowers. Svenska Barnboksinstitutet has also identified a rise in both fictional and non-fictional books addressing neuropsychiatric diagnoses, offering information about and strategies for coping with them. High sensitivity – typically understood as a personality trait rather than a medical diagnosis – has likewise gained prominence within Swedish children's literature. It is often portrayed in more indirect ways within the books, while being explicitly highlighted by the publishers in the paratexts (Svenska Barnboksinstitutet 16–17).

The growing presence of disability in Swedish children's literature can be understood as part of a broader trend to promote diversity and to interrogate various forms of normativity (Druker 741). Many of these narratives follow established patterns: disability is frequently framed either as an individual obstacle to overcome or as a marker of difference that remains largely detached from the narrative's central conflicts (Edenroth Cato; Jönsson, "Normer"). A picturebook that relates to this trend while diverging from these dominant patterns is *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* (The child who could not close her eyes, 2020) by the critically acclaimed Swedish author Anna Höglund. It centres on an orphaned child who is unable to close her eyes and is cared for by a blind dog. Both protagonists can thus be read as disabled. However, the child's unrecognized disability, the fact that all characters are portrayed as animals, and the narrative structure itself distinguish this picturebook from more conventional representations of disability in children's literature. These features make *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* particularly productive for analysis from a (dis)ability perspective.

Maria Jönsson has argued that Höglund's narrative seeks to counter isolation and disconnection, among the characters as well as the readers, by reaching towards alternative temporalities and communities ("Klocktid" 165). Her analysis identifies a form of social critique directed at consumer society and articulated through the book's handling of time. Building on Jönsson's insight, the present article extends the discussion by examining how this critique intersects with representations of (dis)ability.

Drawing on – and contributing to – research on (dis)ability and animals, norms and power relations in children's literature, this

article analyzes *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* through crip theoretical perspectives that render normative constructions of able-bodiedness and neurotypicality, as well as their disruptions, visible (McRuer 2; Walker). The term *(dis)ability* is used to designate the "system of social norms which categorizes, ranks, and values" people based on the concepts of ability and disability, and to foreground the two concepts' mutual dependence (Schalk 1). *(Dis)ability* is thus used as an overarching term that includes both marginalized and privileged positions, much like race, gender or class, while *disability* designates a historically variable category within this larger system. The purpose of the article is to analyze the function of, and the relationship between, representations of (dis)ability, animals, and societal norms in Höglund's picturebook.

Crip Theory and Critical Disability Studies

The central idea within crip theory, as formulated by Robert McRuer, is that able-bodiedness and able-bodied identity commonly are perceived as a natural order and a neutral non-identity (1). With inspiration from queer theory, crip theory aims to question this able-bodied order: how it has been constructed, naturalized, and embedded in our economic, social, and cultural relationships – and how it could be changed. McRuer especially criticizes the current neoliberal era for equating being a free individual to having an able body to sell on the labour market (8), and for celebrating difference while paradoxically being "characterized by more global inequality and raw exploitation and less rigidity in terms of how oppression is reproduced (and extended)" (3). Able-bodiedness is understood as something imperative and performative, but also "intrinsically impossible to embody" (30). Nick Walker additionally describes neurotypical behaviour as a performative, learnt behaviour (181). Paying attention to the able-bodied and neurotypical order as well as its deviations is considered to have a subversive, disruptive potential.

Crip theory emerged within critical disability studies, a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on cultural aspects associated with disabled identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and representation (Siebers 5–6). For example, Lennard Davis claims that disability is a function of the concept of normalcy, and part of a project to control and regulate the body, propelled by economic and social factors (2–3). Davis also notes a tendency for disability to be invoked in literature as a metaphor – for example,

"blindness has been adopted by Western culture as a metaphor for insight" (106). These metaphors are often distant from the actual lives of disabled people or the embodied experiences of disability and reinforce a tendency to denigrate disability.

In this article, crip theoretical perspectives are used as a lens through which *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* is closely read. The focus is on how (dis)ability is constructed, enforced, and/or disrupted in the picturebook's iconotext. The theoretical perspective also helps to recognize how (dis)ability is embedded in social and economic relationships, of which the relation between child and adult as well as between human, animal, and society are of particular interest in the article. Previous research about (dis)ability and animals in relation to social and economic norms in children's literature is used to support the analysis. Crip theoretical perspectives are apt to grasp how various norms are correlated and contested, but the article's central focus on (dis)ability as well as its critical and social constructivist's starting points inevitably mean that other aspects of this picturebook are overlooked.

(Dis)ability and Neoliberalism within Children's Literature

International research on (dis)ability in children's and young adult literature has repeatedly shown that disability is often framed as an individual problem to be overcome (Dowker 2). Such representations frequently downplay visible markers of difference (Aho and Alter), and tend to lack ethnic diversity or a sense of local cultural specificity (Ayala). More recent studies have, however, begun to identify more complex narrative strategies. Abbye Meyer demonstrates that when disability is paired with adolescence, narratives often produce compelling and ambivalent arcs that complicate disability tropes and metaphors, and challenge the harmful messages they may otherwise reinforce. Amanda Sandino similarly argues that while contemporary speculative fiction for children continues to draw on earlier ableist tropes – such as the cure-narrative – it also increasingly "present[s] difference as something perhaps essential to the heroine's experience" (31).

Within a Swedish context, Fanny Edenroth Cato shows that children's books explicitly portraying neurodivergence became increasingly common during the 2010s (53), often published by self-proclaimed "norm-critical" publishers. In these books, the protagonists' deviation from the norm is frequently transformed into a form of competence or talent: by identifying with a medical diagnosis,

difference becomes something positive, intelligible, and potentially advantageous (64). The books analyzed by Edenroth Cato closely resemble the later wave of titles about neuropsychiatric diagnoses identified by Svenska Barnboksinstitutet. While these narratives contribute to visibility and recognition, they also risk reinforcing a model in which disability is managed, stabilized, and rendered socially acceptable through individual adaptation.

Maria Jönsson's research on self-proclaimed norm-critical children's literature further complicates this picture. Analyzing narratives about love, Jönsson shows that many such texts employ markers of diversity primarily on a representational level, without allowing them to affect the narrative structure or central conflicts ("Normer" 26). The potentially subversive force, she concludes, lies not in representation alone but on the narrative level. In this respect, "norm-critical" children's books often resemble the more traditional narratives identified by Svenska Barnboksinstitutet, in which disability appears more frequently without fundamentally altering narrative logic. This tendency can also be situated within a broader contemporary focus on ecological, social, and economic sustainability in Swedish children's literature (Druker 741). While social problems have re-entered the field, the emphasis is often placed on making readers aware of inequality rather than on depicting its structural causes and material consequences (753).

A central concern of crip theory is precisely to expose how (dis)ability is entangled with economic structures, particularly neoliberalism. Sean Connors and Roberta Seelinger Trites argue that within neoliberal thought, "*structural* problems – for example, racism and poverty – are recast as *individual* problems […] ostensibly attributable only to their own individual failures" (9). They further contend that young adult literature often normalizes neoliberal logic through an emphasis on *competition* and *individualism* at the expense of interdependence, as well as through narratives of *exceptionalism*, in which success within a neoliberal economy is framed as the result of innate talent rather than structural advantage (13). According to Connors and Seelinger Trites, neoliberalism in literature also depends on *erasure*: entire groups may disappear from representation, or oppressive ideologies may be treated as if they no longer exist (15).

Children's Literature and its Animalistic Others

Animals are a recurring presence in children's literature, a phenomenon often explained by the adult tendency to perceive children as

animalistic others. Within this critical tradition, animal figures have been understood as part of a broader process of socializing and disciplining children through the establishment of adult normativity (Nodelman 151; Nikolajeva 8). The frequent conflation of children and animals has thus been interpreted as a way of positioning children as less rational, less civilized, and closer to nature than adults.

Piia Posti describes how animal characters in contemporary Swedish adventure and travel narratives can function as a form of camouflage that obscures the discursive equation of children with animals. According to Posti, the distance created by animal characters may support the child reader's exploration of the unfamiliar, while simultaneously reinforcing notions of otherness (194). Maria Lassén-Seger similarly demonstrates that children's literature often associates animality with either innocence or deviance. In these narratives, the "good and innocent child" is endowed with access to a lost, authentic view of life, whereas the "evil and uncivilized child" must be corrected and disciplined to become a proper adult subject (114). Animality thereby becomes a signifier for immaturity or deviance – qualities that require regulation.

More recent research has challenged these anthropocentric assumptions by drawing on posthuman theory and human-animal studies. Scholars have increasingly questioned the hierarchy that positions animals as lesser beings and children as not-yet-adults. Within children's literature studies, this shift has prompted a re-evaluation of the power relations embedded in representations of animals and their relation to human characters. Björn Sundmark, for instance, shows how Eva Lindström's picturebooks decentre the human perspective by foregrounding animal-human relationships based on reciprocity and shared vulnerability. Rather than treating animals as symbolic stand-ins for humans, Lindström's dogs are sometimes portrayed precisely as dogs, whose lack of verbal language creates alternative forms of communication and companionship (15).

A parallel development can be observed in age studies, which have complicated adult normativity and the hierarchical relationship between adults and children in children's literature. Vanessa Joosen points out that portrayals of adult characters often reveal an understanding of adulthood as constrained by rigid dichotomies between childlike and adultlike traits. In addition, she notes that working adults tend to be represented as emotionally limited or unfulfilled, whereas retired elders are often depicted as happier, more idealistic, adventurous, and closer to childhood (98). While such representa-

tions destabilize simple notions of maturity, they nevertheless risk preserving adult hegemony, according to Joosen (208).

While previous research has examined how animal figures in children's literature reinforce or challenge adult normativity, this article extends the discussion by bringing (dis)ability into direct conversation with animality. Rather than treating animals primarily as metaphors for childhood or as devices for negotiating emotional distance, the analysis explores how animal representation in *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* relates to the social and economic production of (dis)ability. By reading animality, childhood, and disability as mutually constitutive categories, the article highlights how this picturebook destabilizes entrenched hierarchies not only between adults and children or humans and animals, but also between able-bodied and disabled subjects.

A Capitalistic Society and Its Outcasts

Barnet som inte kunde blunda opens with a scene in which a dog discovers an abandoned child on a rubbish dump. The two then live together in a makeshift shelter at the dump until the dog decides that it is time for the child to "[g]å i skolan, ta ett jobb eller vad det nu är folk gör" (go to school, get a job, or whatever it is that people do"; Höglund).[1] The child takes employment as a window cleaner at the city's head office and moves into the cleaning closet. Exposed to the loneliness and sadness of the people she encounters, the child becomes increasingly distressed and asks the dog how to close her eyes. The dog replies that only the praying mantis knows.

The child's subsequent journey through the city makes explicit the social hierarchy and economic logic governing this fictional world. While looking for the praying mantis, the child gets directed to "han där uppe," "chefen" (him up top, the boss; Höglund), a lightbulb-shaped figure that assigns her to sewer duty. A giant praying mantis finds the child and urges her to find its sister Sepia. Sepia, an enormous pink octopus that lives in the sewers, states that the child indeed *can* close her eyes and gives her an inkhorn. The child then wants to sleep in the dark rather than to go back up to town. It is only through the dog's intervention, following a green ball of yarn left behind by the praying mantis, that the child is brought back home. After sleeping beneath a knitted green blanket that has mysteriously appeared, she is finally able to close her eyes. The following morning, she comes to see what had been present all along: an abandoned house beyond the rubbish dump, which becomes their new home.

Image 1. The dog finds the child. From *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* (2020) by Anna Höglund. © Anna Höglund.

Both protagonists are visually marked as impaired from the outset. On the opening spread (image 1), the child appears swaddled in white bandages, lying in a banana box on the outskirts of a hyper-industrialized city, while a dark, hooded figure hurries away in the background. The dog is depicted wearing black glasses and white head bandages, carrying a white cane and bags of rubbish. The parallel visual markers emphasize their shared vulnerability as homeless and orphan. At the same time, the dog's dark glasses mirror the child's pitch-black eyes, visually linking their respective impairments and foregrounding a relational understanding of disability. On the following spread, this connection is made explicit in the verbal narration: the dog is blind, while the child sees "allt" (everything) because she cannot close her eyes.

The way in which the child's vision is introduced as both a disability and an exceptional ability highlights the mutual dependence of the concepts of disability and ability, as well as the instability of the boundary between them (Schalk 1). Here, disability does not function as a fixed attribute, but as a condition that is contingent upon social context and economic demands. This becomes particularly evident when the picturebook's setting is read as a neoliberal

dystopia. The city is depicted as dominated by dark and grey tones or flooded with harsh artificial yellow light radiating from the head office and its boss. "The man up top" in this society does not refer to any god, but to a man that controls labour. The characters that populate the streets, ranging from recognizable animals such as dogs or foxes to various undefinable creatures, are all walking upright with screens suspended in front of their eyes, seemingly exhausted, sad, and isolated.

Deviations from the work-centred, able-bodied norm are excluded from this society. Those who cannot work, like the child and the dog, are literally discarded among the rubbish or into the sewers. Although the dog attempts to socialize the child into the prevailing order by encouraging her to do "what people do," the child's inability to close her eyes to others' suffering renders her unfit for inclusion. She is categorized by the boss as "missanpassad 3:graden" (maladjusted 3:degree; Höglund), signalling how economic productivity operates as a primary criterion for social value. *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* thus illustrates how disability is not merely an individual condition, but actively produced through economic systems that enforce normative standards of functionality and usefulness (Siebers 6; Davis 2–3).

What ultimately enables the child to close her eyes is not discipline, cure, or adaptation, but care. The assistance she receives from the dog, the praying mantis, and the octopus introduces a counterlogic grounded in interdependence. After this moment of transformation, the pictorial palette gradually shifts: the harsh artificial lighting gives way to natural hues of blue and orange, and the final spread depicts a repaired house surrounded by trees, flowers, and vegetables (image 2). Rather than re-entering society, the protagonists form an alternative community at its margins. The verbal text states that "[b]arnet och hunden jobbade med lite olika saker. Och de delade fortfarande på allting som de hittade" (the child and the dog worked with different things. And they still shared everything that they found; Höglund).

The circular composition of *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* reinforces this critique. It begins and ends with the discovery of an abandoned child, but also with the act of storytelling itself, as the child is shown writing a book. The story also begins on one side of the rubbish dump and ends on the other, as shown by the pictures, which highlights the contrast between the dystopian society at the beginning of the picturebook with the utopian community at its end. The narrative thereby resists linear, capitalist notions of progress and produc-

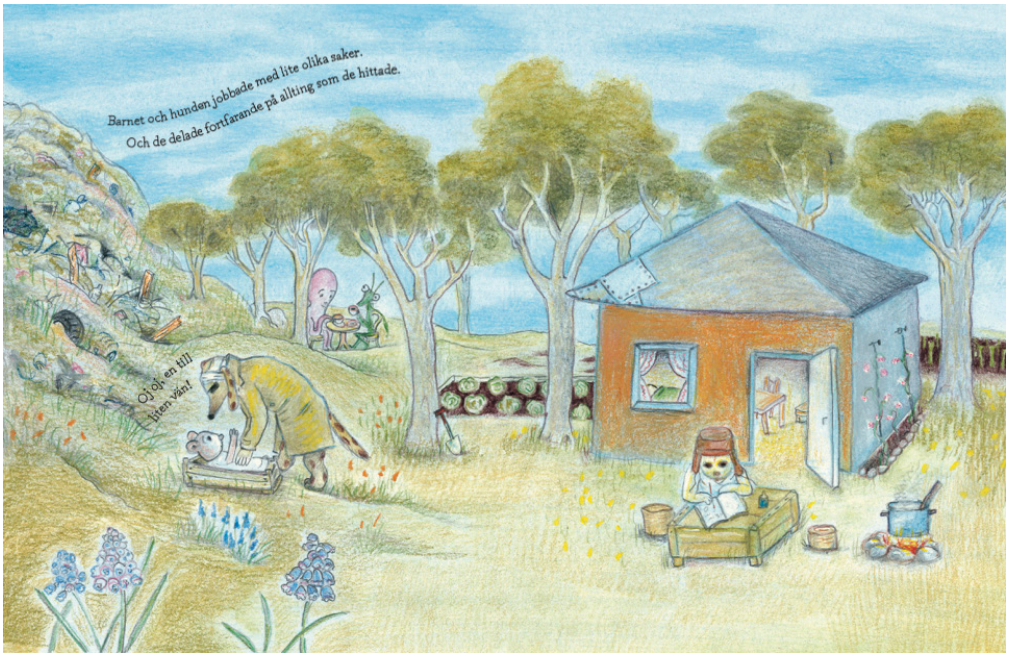

Image 2. The final spread of *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* (2020) by Anna Höglund. © Anna Höglund.

tivity, gesturing instead towards cyclical time and collective care as alternatives (Jönsson, "Klocktid"). In doing so, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* exposes the work-centred, able-bodied order not as natural or inevitable, but as historically contingent and oppressive – and invites readers to imagine social change grounded in mutual responsibility rather than individual performance (McRuer 1).

Uncivilized Children and Disabled Animals

The fact that all characters in *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* are visually depicted as animals or animal-like figures, while simultaneously inhabiting a recognizably human city and engaging in wage labour, may initially be interpreted as a familiar narrative strategy within children's literature. Such animal representations are often understood as a form of camouflage that renders difficult social realities more accessible to child readers by creating emotional and cognitive distance (Posti 194). From this perspective, animality serves to soften an otherwise bleak narrative of poverty, exclusion, and social control.

However, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* complicates this reading through its persistent differentiation between visual and verbal modes of characterization. While the child is visually portrayed as animal-like, she is consistently referred to in the verbal narration as "barnet" (the child) or "hon" (she), whereas her caregiver is designated explicitly as "hunden" (the dog). This asymmetry encourages identification with the child while maintaining a degree of distance from the adult caregiver. The animal camouflage consequently appears to be directed less towards the child reader than towards the adult reader, who is more likely to identify with the adult figure in the narrative. Furthermore, as Elina Druker notes, homelessness remains a rare motif in contemporary Swedish children's literature (753). Its inclusion here therefore disrupts the neoliberal tendency to erase socially marginalized subjects (Connors and Seelinger Trites 15). Portraying a homeless adult as a dog may render this otherwise unsettling figure more palatable to adult readers, as homeless animals are far more normalized in cultural representation than homeless humans.

At the same time, the animalization of characters can be used to diffuse questions of ethnicity and cultural specificity (Posti 193). The city is depicted as a universal, abstract space, largely detached from local or national markers. While this lack of specificity could be read as a limitation, particularly given previous critiques of disability narratives that exclude local culture (Ayala), the visual language of *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* counterbalances this abstraction. Helpful characters are rendered as visually distinct and vividly coloured animals, whereas the city's inhabitants are depicted as grey, indistinct figures. This picturebook thus reverses conventional associations: animality is linked to individuality, relationality, and care, while "civilized" urban life is associated with uniformity, isolation, and emotional impoverishment.

In this way, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* both invokes and unsettles the discursive equation of children with animals. The adult citizens of the city appear more civilized than the child and her animal companions, in the sense that they work and follow societal norms. While the narrative does not entirely escape associations between animality and primitiveness, it actively questions the assumption that being "uncivilized" constitutes a deficiency in need of correction. Instead, diversity becomes a crucial component of the alternative community formed at the conclusion of the story.

Portraying a blind character as a homeless dog may risk reinforcing longstanding stereotypes of disabled people as unfit for work,

socially marginal, or uncivilized. Historically, impairment has often been associated with vagrancy, criminality, and life on the social margins (Quayson 3–5). However, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* complicates such associations by introducing alternative representations. The dog's aunt, who shares the same species, occupies a respectable position as a doorman at the city's head office. Here, disability does not correlate to animal status; instead, it emerges as a potential cause for exclusion within a work-centred society.

Rather than reinforcing derogatory stereotypes, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* exposes the mechanisms through which disability becomes a reason for exclusion and explores the consequences of that exclusion – an approach that remains relatively uncommon in contemporary Swedish children's literature (Druker 753). The narrative foregrounds how visual impairment renders the dog unemployable and dispensable within the dominant social order, while simultaneously showing the dog to be fully capable of caring for both itself and others outside of society. Disability is revealed as a relational and situational condition, produced through economic and social structures rather than something residing inherently in the body or needing to be cured.

On a narrative level, the anthropocentric hierarchy that places respectable citizens above uncivilized outcasts is further challenged through the figures of the praying mantis and the octopus. Both animals are culturally associated with predation and monstrosity, and both are outcasts within the story's urban world. Yet they are portrayed as colourful, attentive, and ethically responsive – qualities notably absent from the city's more human-like inhabitants. Together with the dog and the child, these figures form a community grounded not in productivity or conformity but in mutual care and interdependence. While the dog and the child are homeless in a societal sense, both when sleeping on the rubbish dump and later squatting in an abandoned house, they are also shown to have more of a "home" than the other characters, questioning the "homeless" label and the importance of owning property over mutual care.

Although the characters' animal forms undoubtedly function as a means of representing human behaviour, this strategy does not position children – or animals – as lesser others in relation to an adult, human norm (Nodelman 151; Nikolajeva 8). Instead, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* insists on difference as a productive resource, gesturing towards reciprocity and shared creaturehood in a manner reminiscent of the picturebooks analyzed by Sundmark (15). The dog is not portrayed as a contented, retired elder, but as a working-age

adult excluded from productivity. The distinction between child and adult is therefore not grounded in value or capability, but in differing needs for care at different life stages.

The child's and the dog's needs ultimately converge: both require safety, belonging, and relational support rather than economic independence – as envisioned on the final spread (image 2). By envisioning aging not as a linear movement towards individual autonomy, but as a process that enables interdependence, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* challenges dominant narratives of maturation and adulthood (see Joosen 98). In doing so, it further reveals how (dis)ability is deeply entangled with social, economic, and age-based power structures, reinforcing the narrative's broader critique of neoliberal normativity.

Visual (Dis)ability, Neurodiversity, and Collective Change

Blindness is partially mobilized as a metaphor for insight in *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*. The dog is repeatedly shown to find what others overlook or deem worthless and explicitly states that "det är inte bara ögonen man ser med" (it is not only the eyes that one sees with; Höglund). The octopus similarly instructs the child to "blunda och se" (close your eyes and see), again paralleling the child's and the dog's visual disabilities – while also framing them as something that enables a particular insight. As Davis notes, blindness has long been employed in Western literature as a metaphor for inner vision or moral clarity, a trope that often distances the representation from the lived experiences of disabled people and risks reinforcing derogatory attitudes towards disability (106). While the portrayals of the dog and the child are undeniably far removed from quotidian experiences of visual impairment, these explicit comments nevertheless invite reflection on the cultural overvaluation of eyesight and visual control.

This critique is reinforced visually through repeated depictions of the city's inhabitants wearing head-mounted contraptions that hold screens directly in front of their eyes. These devices blur the boundary between able-bodiedness and impairment, suggesting that vision itself is mediated, constrained, and regulated within this society. The apparent distinction between disabled and able-bodied subjects is thereby destabilized, raising questions about why certain capacities – particularly visual efficiency – are valued over others, such as emotional attentiveness or the capacity to care for others.

The child's condition is introduced ambivalently from the outset. She is described as "seeing everything" while simultaneously being unable to close her eyes. The same trait is thus framed both as an exceptional ability and as a disability. While the title and narrative arc initially appear to position her condition as something that must be overcome, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* complicates this framing by leaving the nature of her impairment unexplained. Since an inability to close one's eyes is not a recognized medical diagnosis, the condition may be read figuratively – as a psychosomatic response akin to selective mutism – or metaphorically, as an inability to shut out the overwhelming demands of the external world.

Within a (dis)ability-centred reading, the child's condition can also be interpreted as a metaphor for neurodivergence, such as high sensitivity, ADHD, or autism. In this interpretation, her heightened perceptual openness becomes a possible cause of her abandonment rather than merely its consequence. Such a reading resonates with Edenroth Cato's analysis of children's books about neurodivergence, in which the outside world is portrayed as intrusive and overstimulating, and neurodivergent characters are constructed as particularly empathetic and emotionally perceptive (54). In these narratives, diagnosis often functions as a means of rendering difference intelligible and socially manageable, enabling characters to reframe deviance as competence (60–63).

In *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*, however, no diagnosis is offered. While the child may be understood as highly sensitive, her condition remains strange, unresolved, and resistant to categorization. This ambiguity opens the narrative to competing interpretations. On the one hand, the story can be read as a neoliberal narrative of adjustment, in which the child learns to regulate her excessive sensitivity to become more functional, more neurotypical, and better adapted to social expectations. From this perspective, the final spread – depicting the child writing a book while the dog raises another orphaned infant – risks resembling a neoliberal ideal of productive self-realization, in which artistic labour and care work are reframed as individual entrepreneurial success (Connors and Seelinger Trites 13).

On the other hand, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* persistently resists a purely individualized reading of change. Although the child's ability to close her eyes coincides with a shift in emotional well-being, this change is inseparable from transformations in her social environment. The alternative community formed by the child, the dog, the octopus, and the praying mantis operates according to

a fundamentally different logic – one based on mutual dependency, shared resources, and collective care rather than competition or productivity. Writing, in this context, does not appear solely as a means of disciplining emotion or performing neurotypical behaviour (Walker 181), but as one among several practices embedded in a collective mode of living.

Walker emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between neurodivergent traits that are integral to a person's relationship with the world and those that an individual might wish to change or alleviate (38–39). While the child is undeniably happier after learning to close her eyes, the narrative remains ambivalent about framing this change as a cure. Her difference continues to function as a source of insight and ethical responsiveness, enabling her to perceive suffering that others ignore. It is precisely this capacity that makes the alternative community possible.

From the perspective of the city's authorities, the child is perceived as an "evil and uncivilized" subject in need of discipline (see Lassén-Seger 114). However, the narrative aligns her instead with the trope of the "good and innocent child," endowed with access to alternative ways of seeing and valuing the world. In doing so, it destabilizes the binary opposition between the innocent and the deviant child. Disability – and difference more broadly – becomes neither solely a deficit nor a source of exceptionalism, but a relational capacity shaped by social context.

The child's disability makes her special. The characters making up the community are also marked as different, being the only ones in the story with bright colours, as opposed to the other citizens' bleakness. This might be said to reinforce norms of neoliberal exceptionalism (Connors and Seelinger Trites 13). Nevertheless, many of the coloured objects in this picturebook, such as the child's blue trousers or the green blanket, are tokens of care rather than talent or competition. One could therefore argue that the characters are made colourful not so much by individual exceptionalism as by collective care.

The dog partly functions as a guide (dog) for the disabled child, such as when leading her out of the sewers. That would, however, not have been possible were it not for the green ball of yarn that the praying mantis leaves behind, which the child urges the dog to hold on to. The dog, in turn, is unable to see or lead her to the abandoned house. Rather, the relationship between the dog and the child is more like that of a child and an adult caregiver. But instead of growing up to gain independence in terms of a job, money, and her own home,

the child's aging enables interdependence between them, where they care for, guide, and help each other – thus imagining another path than the expected individualistic one.

Clare Barker's observation that disabled difference is constructed simultaneously as stigma, wonder, limitation, and resource is particularly apt here (4). *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* mobilizes familiar tropes of disability and cure, yet ultimately redirects their narrative momentum towards collective rather than individual transformation. Difference is not eradicated, but becomes the basis for imagining another way of living together – one that challenges neoliberal norms of normalcy, productivity, and independence, and instead affirms interdependence as a social and ethical ideal.

Conclusion

In *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*, the child's and the dog's visual impairments mirror one another and form the basis of their companionship. Their shared deviation from an able-bodied norm places them outside the social order of the story's fictional society, which is depicted as a capitalistic, work-centred dystopia largely devoid of cultural specificity. Within this society, social value is defined through productivity and functional conformity, rendering those who cannot participate economically disposable. Against this backdrop, the child, the dog, the octopus, and the praying mantis mobilize their respective forms of alterity to form an alternative, utopian community grounded in mutual care.

Throughout *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*, the visual narrative significantly expands upon the verbal text, particularly by providing additional information about the characters' species, impairments, and social positions. The illustrations reinforce the stark contrast between the grey, mechanized city and the colourful, relational community at its margins. This distinction visually underscores the book's critique of an able-bodied, work-centred social order and strengthens the opposition between systemic exclusion and collective belonging.

While *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* does not represent the lived experiences of either disabled people or animals in a realistic sense, it deliberately employs disability as a central narrative function. As previous research has pointed out, the metaphorization of disability often risks reproducing derogatory perspectives (Davis). However, Höglund's picturebook destabilizes the boundary between disability and ability by presenting the child's condition as both a limitation

and a source of perceptual and ethical insight. The dog's capacity to care for others, contrasted with the urban citizens' reliance on visual technologies, further calls into question which capacities society recognizes as valuable and which it renders invisible.

Disability is ultimately framed as a potential resource rather than merely an obstacle. The alternative community that emerges at the end of the narrative is made possible not through cure or normalization, but through shared vulnerability, interdependence, and care. In this respect, *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* resonates with recent children's literature that conflates and complicates (dis)ability tropes and presents difference as essential to narrative meaning rather than as an incidental attribute (Meyer; Sandino 31).

Höglund's picturebook also draws on, and simultaneously challenges, long-standing associations between children, disabled subjects, animals, and notions of being uncivilized or primitive. Although the use of animals may initially recall anthropocentric and adult-normative conventions within children's literature (Nikolajeva 8; Nodelman 151), the dystopian portrayal of society shifts the critical focus away from animality itself. Instead, these positions are brought together to demonstrate how a capitalist economic system marginalizes differences, particularly those unable to function according to normative standards of productivity.

Being "uncivilized," much like being disabled, is thus partly reconfigured as a positive resource within this picturebook. By questioning entrenched dichotomies – human/animal, adult/child, able/disabled, good/evil – the narrative challenges the anthropocentric and adult-normative logic underpinning Western capitalism. In contrast to the patterns of contemporary children's books about disability identified by Svenska Barnboksinstitutet – that could be said to either celebrate difference without altering narrative structures or frame impairment as an individual problem to be overcome (Jönsson, "Normer" 26; Edenroth Cato 64) – *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* exposes the structural conditions that produce exclusion and insists on collective change.

Anna Höglund's picturebook can be situated within a broader artistic movement in contemporary Swedish picturebooks that explores uncertainty, vulnerability, and ecological sustainability (Åkerholm; Wistisen). Nonetheless, what distinguishes *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* is its explicit and sustained social critique. By foregrounding the causes and consequences of injustice in relation to (dis)ability and by envisioning alternatives based on care rather than productivity, this picturebook articulates a powerful critique of

neoliberal normativity. Whether such structural investigations of disability and collective transformation will become more common in children's literature remains an open question – but *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* offers a compelling example of what such narratives might achieve.

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Notes

1 All quotes from *Barnet som inte kunde blunda* (2020) are translated by the author of this article. The picturebook is unpaginated.

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