

Introduction: Norms of (Dis)ability in Nordic Children's and Young Adult Literature

Research concerning disability in children's and young adult literature is a growing field internationally but has not yet been explored in any sustained depth or scope in a Nordic context. At the same time, literature for children and young adults is increasingly portraying characters with disabilities and exploring norms about ability and disability. For example, the Swedish Institute for Children's Books maintain that representations of disability have become more frequent in the past decade (SBI Årgång 2019, 2020, 2023). In this theme of *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, we gather scholarly work that critically engages with norms of (dis)ability in Nordic children's and young adult literature.

The term (dis)ability indicates a system of norms that categorises and distinguishes between bodies and minds based on concepts of "disability" and "ability". Like gender, class, and sexuality, a (dis)ability perspective can draw attention to both marginalisation and privilege within this system of norms. This perspective highlights that norms of (dis)ability concern and influence both those who follow and those who deviate from norms, and illuminates how these categories are historically, culturally, and socially constructed. The parenthesis in the concept (dis)ability is used to demonstrate that the borders between these categories are under constant negotiation, while they simultaneously are each other's prerequisite (Schalk).

(Dis)ability in Children's and Young Adult Literature – A Growing Field of Research

International disability-oriented literary scholarship constitutes a well established and theoretically rich field, with foundational contributions by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, Ato Quayson, Alice Hall, Julia M. Rodas and Ria Cheyne. Their studies demonstrate how literary representations of disability are deeply entangled with processes of norm construction, cultural meaning-making and power. Likewise, research on children's and young adult literature from a (dis)ability perspec-

tive is an expanding field in an Anglophone context. Examples include Tanja Aho and Grit Alter's work on narrative erasure and disability normalisation in picturebooks, Danielle E. Price's study of speech and silence in contemporary children's literature, and historical approaches to disability in children's literature such as Dylan Holdsworth's research on how disability is governed in dystopian texts from the 1870s onwards. Moreover, Amanda M. Sandino focuses on speculative utopias in children's literature and depictions of disability, health, and normativity, while Abbye E. Meyer draws a parallel between adolescence and disability – both considered conditions to overcome – and analyses examples from children's and young adult narratives. Taken together, these studies showcase the width of current engagement with questions of (dis)ability in children's and young adult literature.

While Swedish children's literature has been studied in relation to other norms and positions such as class, ethnicity, age, and gender, (dis)ability has rarely been examined as an analytical category of its own or in sustained depth. Research on (dis)ability in Nordic children's and young adult literature remains scarce, exceptions include Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir's work on Icelandic material, Fanny Edenroth Cato's study of Swedish literature, Monica Reichenberg's research on Swedish storybooks ("Cultivating", "Images"), and Jenny Bergenmar's work on neurodiversity in Scandinavian young adult fiction. However, a majority of this research can be situated within the social sciences. Studies stemming from the humanities and studies anchored in children's literature research are still few and far between.

The articles in this theme of *Barnboken*

This theme of *Barnboken* includes five articles that focus specifically on Nordic children's and young adult literature.

Maggie M. K. Chan's contribution "[The Ethics of the Gaze: Representing \(Dis\)ability and Otherness in Mariangela Di Fiore and Hilde Hodnefjeld's *Elefantmannen*](#)" analyses the politics and ethics of disability representation. Using critical disability studies and gaze theory, the analysis establishes that *Elefantmannen* (*Elephant Man*, 2013) positions readers as both complicit in looking at the protagonist Joseph Merrick, and responsible for questioning the ethics of that act, through its interplay of visual and verbal narration.

Christian Lenemark's article "[Loss, Continuity, and Care: Inter-generational Perspectives on Dementia and Normativity in Three Contemporary Swedish Picturebooks](#)" links disability studies and

age studies as theoretical frameworks to analyse picturebooks that portray dementia through the eyes of grandchildren. He shows that the picturebooks both reproduce normative preconceptions of dementia and resist them, in particular through the child's mediating gaze and practices of care.

Vision is similarly central to Louise Almqvist's article ["Close your eyes and see': \(Dis\)ability, Animals, and Neoliberalism in Anna Höglund's *Barnet som inte kunde blunda*,"](#) a picturebook about a blind dog and a child who cannot close her eyes. Almqvist uses crip theoretical perspectives and human-animal studies to show how the picturebook ties the positions of children, animals, and disabled together in order to criticize able-bodied and human-centered ideas of agency as well as neoliberal subjectivity.

The complex relationship between subjectivity, voice, and social norms is at the core of Gustav Borsgård's article ["Good Girls: Silence, Speech, and Normality in Tove Jansson's 'Det osynliga barnet' and Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus' *Snill*."](#) Borsgård combines perspectives from critical disability studies and gender studies to show how norms of speech and silence function in the two narratives, and what notions of normality they reproduce and challenge.

Finally, perceptions of normality are also at the centre of Mårten Michanek's contribution ["För sjuk för skolan? Magont, motstånd och metaforer i nordiska barn- och ungdomsböcker om hemmasittare"](#) (Too sick for school? Stomachache, resistance, and metaphors in Nordic children's and young adult books about school refusers). The study points to a tendency in current Nordic literature to mirror societal discourse on school absenteeism and its causes but also concludes that children's and young adult literature questions or diverts from these descriptions.

The contributions show on the one hand how children's and young adult literature portrays and challenges norms about disability and ability, on the other hand how a disability perspective can make visible new aspects of children's literature. We hope that this theme will initiate and foster further connections between Nordic children's literature research and critical studies of (dis)ability.

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