

## Introduction

Martha Sandwall-Bergström (1913–2000), born in Nävelsjö in the county of Småland, will always be associated with her girl protagonist Kulla-Gulla. A Swedish “Goody Two-shoes,” “Kulla-Gulla” has in much recent writing become synonymous with striving, middle class, Swedish women. Such emblematic use of Kulla-Gulla points to her staying power, at least with the generation who grew up reading Sandwall-Bergström’s books. According to Eva Söderberg the good and sensible Kulla-Gulla, has over time become part Cinderella, part Madonna, part feminist. Due to this transformation, Kulla-Gulla has become a productive figure in girlhood research on art – the girl as a trope and a catalyst. The sister field of research on middle aged women investigates among other things how memories of girlhood and the formative power of girlhood are integral to being a middle aged woman. These emerging research fields show that Sandwall-Bergström’s classic books have continued relevance.

In a review of Cecilia Hagen’s *Kulla-Gullas lilla lila* (2013) – an “acerbic ABC for middle aged women,” according to the blurb – Ann-Charlotte Altstadt (*Aftonbladet* 2013.03.08) demands that Hagen stop using Kulla-Gulla in her books. Altstadt is opposed to Hagen’s appropriation of the proletarian and revolutionary potential of Kulla-Gulla. Instead, Hagen’s Kulla-Gulla represents the ambitions of well-to-do women in their forties, while the class context is passed over, according to Altstadt. Kulla-Gulla points to a revolutionary utopia by making the symbolic journey from the croft to the manor, from “Poor-Sweden” of the croft to the manor where Kulla-Gulla eventually rules and revolts, becomes peripheral in Hagen, for whom she is made to stand for an erroneous, despised girl ideal. But is it that bad to be both good and able? And is it difficult to portray girls as revolutionaries?

Despite the melodramatic framing Kulla-Gulla is more than a Goody Twoshoes, and because of the centennial she is being scrutinized and debated. The current focus on childhood poverty and the ongoing dismantling of the welfare state unfortunately makes Kulla-Gulla highly topical. In today’s debate the books’ social pathos naturally invite reader’s to partake in a discussion of class. For decades the Kulla-Gulla books were regarded as dated “series books,”

something that distressed the author. Even today Kulla-Gulla is a controversial figure. For some readers the period traits are worrying: “the 1950s spirit embarrasses me, bordering on the harmful, writes Åsa Anderberg Stollo, who herself portrays contemporary, down-and-out young people in her writings (*Sydsvenskan* 2012.2.20).

Sandwall-Bergström has eventually been rediscovered by critics and undergone a reappraisal. The Martha Sandwall-Bergström Society was formed in 2012. It is currently led by Eva Söderberg whose Kulla-Gulla study, *Askunge, madonna eller feminist? Kontextuella läsningar av Martha Sandwall-Bergströms Kulla-Gullasvit* is to be published by The Swedish Institute for Children’s Books (2014).

It may seem astonishing that *Kulla-Gulla* was published the same year as Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking*, but it says a great deal of the range and breadth of children’s publication in the 1940s with its new and more psychologically incisive perspectives on childhood and children’s literature. Elisabeth Christofferson’s (1919–2011) cover illustrations to *Kulla-Gulla* provide a case in point. As Ulla Lundqvist has pointed out Christofferson’s images do have distinct address. But at the same time their inherent sentimentality make them less innovative than Ingrid Vang Nyman’s modernist *Pippi*.

Martha Sandwall-Bergström is not a critical *terra incognita*. Since the 1980s different aspects of the Kulla-Gulla-series (primarily) have been brought up, from eating habits and dress to markers of modernity and the rural Småland setting. The international girls’ book context of Kulla-Gulla has also been noted. Most notably, however, it is the proletarian tradition that has been identified; it reaches back to Moa Martinsson and Vilhelm Moberg and shows her as a visionary and utopian author like Elin wägner and Alva Myrdal, intent on creating new conditions and a new society.

This special issue of *Barnboken* contains readings of Sandwall Bergström’s work: the role of animals, the urban landscape and masculinity. Kelly Hübben employs an ecofeminist stance in her article “Animals and the unspoken. Intertwined lives in Martha Sandwall-Bergström’s Kulla-Gulla series.” Hübben shows how gender and nature are linked when Kulla-Gulla’s proximity to animals undermines power structures and resists anthropocentric normativity. Ultimately Hübben argues that *Kulla-Gulla* presents a biocentric utopia, that is, a vision in which man and nature is integrated.

In her analysis of Sandwall Bergström’s *Oscarsson* trilogy (1952–54) Lydia Wistisen focuses on urban spaces, and representations of the staircase in particular. The working class’ struggle against cramped and unsanitary living conditions present a sharp contrast to

the modern urban ideal of cleanliness. With the help of Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space, which links the concrete space with the characters' perceptions and fantasies of it, Wistisen shows how the urban space with its streets and department stores can be a liberating influence on the girl protagonist, Majken Oscarsson, Kulla-Gulla's urban counterpart.

Hilda Jakobsson develops earlier masculinity research on Kulla-Gulla by focusing on the representation of manly and unmanly bodies. With the help of theories of intersectionality Jakobsson discusses class and body in relation to masculinity. Jakobsson shows that "true" love is realized in a manly body, while "false" love is relegated to an unmanly body.

The range of Martha Sandwall-Bergström's girl characters is great; beyond their common sense capability and orderliness her girls are both revolutionary and visionary. Martha Sandwall-Bergström's classic girls' books continue to offer new reading affordances. *Barn-boken* welcomes further critical articles on her work.

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