

B.J. Epstein

## Breast Versus Bottle

### The Feeding of Babies in English and Swedish Picturebooks

*Abstract: Breastfeeding is a natural act, and humans have evolved to feed their babies in this way. However, it is generally not depicted in English-language picturebooks. In this article, I analyse how babies and toddlers are fed in picturebooks and explore why bottle-feeding is the prevalent method, and then I compare this to a selection of Swedish-language picturebooks. This analysis suggests a number of salient points and areas for further exploration. First of all, breastfeeding of babies and toddlers is mainly only depicted in books that are either about new babies or that are about breastfeeding, and even when breastfeeding is seen in these works, the mother's breasts are often scarcely visible. The reason that breastfeeding is not often depicted in children's books seems to be because society is uncomfortable with seeing breasts except as sexual objects, and also because formula-feeding is more prevalent in Western society today. Breasts appear to be too sensual to be seen carrying out their primary evolutionary function.*

Keywords: breastfeeding, picturebooks, artificial feeding methods, breasts

Breasts: among other things, they can feed a baby and they can titillate an adult, but it seems that in some societies, they can only do one or the other. As Nodelman discusses, in reference to picturebooks, “[b]oys can be naked without their clothes on, whereas traditionally, naked girls are nude” (“Nakedness” 28). In other words, an image of a woman breastfeeding her child in a picture book may not be acceptable, because women (and girls) without clothes are always nude and sexualised, even if they are carrying out non-sexual tasks. In this article, I compare English-language picturebooks to a selection of Swedish picturebooks to explore how babies are fed and how this

reflects or comments on the society in which the books are produced. I take a feminist approach, arguing that breastfeeding is a feminist activity, and that women's breasts can be bare and naked in public – including in literature – without being nude. My findings suggest a number of interesting points. First of all, in English-language texts, the breastfeeding of babies and toddlers is mainly depicted in books that are either about new babies or that are about breastfeeding in particular, and even when breastfeeding is seen in these works, the mother's breasts are often scarcely visible. The reason that breastfeeding is not often depicted in children's books seems to be because society is uncomfortable with seeing breasts except as sexual objects, and also because formula-feeding is more prevalent in many Western countries today. The Swedish case, however, is different, in that breastfeeding appears to be the norm in the books I have analysed, although there is still some discomfort with female nudity.

Breastfeeding has, until recently, been the biological and societal norm; there is no room here to discuss wet-nursing and artificial milk, but it is worth pointing out that throughout history most babies have been breastfed or else they have simply not survived. But today, as Blakemore notes, "It's one of the most culturally powerful symbols out there: the image of a mother nursing her baby."<sup>1</sup> Breastfeeding is much in the news these days, with researchers and reporters contradicting and talking past one another. The BBC recently reported that not even 35% of babies in the UK are breastfed at six months old, and only 0.5% are given their mother's milk at 12 months (Gallagher). Meanwhile, *Time* magazine referred to the "breastfeeding wars" and argued that maternity leave was the problem (Luscombe), since women are not given enough time to be with their babies, including time to breastfeed. Others suggest that since infant mortality has decreased in Western society, we need not worry about breastfeeding versus formula-feeding, and we should instead focus on what makes mothers happy, rather than what makes babies healthy and the mother-baby relationship strong (e.g. Lee, 2–3 or Burt, Rasminsky, and Berman). A piece from breastfeeding organisation La Leche League discusses how many women perceive breastfeeding as a duty they are pressured to undertake, rather than as something they are encouraged and supported to do (Burbidge), and yet there are significant health benefits for breastfeeding mothers, although they are often unaware of them (Zimmerman).

At the same time, however, our society seems to view women's bodies as being primarily sexual; breasts are revealed in advertising,

films, or TV shows, while women who breastfeed in public are asked to cover up (for just one of many examples, see Tran 2014). Women are told it is more freeing for them if they do not breastfeed. Paradoxically, it is viewed as both feminist to breastfeed and feminist to not breastfeed. In short, breastfeeding, as an activity, a norm, and a barometer of social beliefs, is much in flux.

Below, then, I explore the depiction of breastfeeding and nudity in English and Swedish picturebooks, and suggest reasons why artificial milk and covered breasts are more acceptable than breastfeeding.

## Feminism Through Feeding

The way a woman's breasts are viewed and used is a feminist issue. There are multiple reasons why breastfeeding is now less common than formula-feeding in the UK, the US, and many other countries. While space constraints prevent me from analysing this topic in great depth, I want to briefly mention a couple of points that are relevant to the Western context and thus to the publication of the books discussed below (for further detailed information on the topic, see Jennifer Grayson's book *Unlatched*). The increases in industrialisation and the pressure to earn money, where more women were required to work for longer hours, away from their babies (Grayson 73), and also the medicalisation of pregnancy, birth, and childrearing could perhaps be said to have started this decline (Hausman 10; also see Van Esterik 111 and Palmer 28). The development of artificial milk was viewed as something scientific and correct, and women were encouraged to rely on a product developed by these men of science instead of the supposed unknown of their breast milk, in part so they could get back to work quickly; for some people, artificial milk is "considered to be an improvement on nature" (Maher 31).

Women in the West began to see breastfeeding as something that kept them tied to the home. Liberation discourse and the rise in feminism gave women the idea that feeding children artificial milk was freeing, because it was then a task that could be shared among a variety of people; in other words, feeding a baby was no longer solely women's work (Hausman 3). As Van Esterik discusses, however, in actual fact formula-feeding creates more work for women (183-90). Palmer writes that "[i]n the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were presented with an illusion of liberation through the artificial feeding of babies, only to find their breasts appropriated by men and popular culture." (3; also see 33 for more on how breasts are used to sell items to us). That

is to say that once breasts were “freed” from their role as nurturers of children, they were then given a new role, which was to tantalise and serve men.

Formula milk is, of course, an important alternative for those women who cannot breastfeed or for those babies who are unable to latch onto the breast or who have sick, dead, or absent mothers. However, it is well known that artificial milk does not have the same ingredients as breastmilk, does not offer the same nutrition or comfort, and is not individualised for each child the way breastmilk is (see e.g. Baumslag and Michels, Renfrew, Fisher, and Arms, or Wiesinger, West, and Pitman). In addition, as Hausman notes, “Breastfeeding as an act is no panacea for the subordination of women, but an examination of breastfeeding uncovers central feminist tensions around the meaning of women’s bodies, the authority of science, and the social value of maternity in contemporary culture” (ix). Van Esterik expands on this idea: “Women’s control over their own lives and bodies has much to do with the choices available to them for infant feeding. Their access to food, flexibility in scheduling and work load, and social support system influence their management of lactation or their decision to bottle feed. Ultimately, infant feeding choices relate to the position and condition of women, ideologically and economically, in different societies” (18).

The feeding of children is an issue for medical, cultural, and political reasons. And yet, breastfeeding is currently subordinate to formula-feeding in many societies. This is, I believe, reflected in how children’s literature depicts the feeding of infants and toddlers, and in turn this tells us something about society’s view of women’s bodies.

## Methodology

One would imagine that books for children generally feature any topic or issue that occurs in children’s lives. But I would like to briefly refer to my methodology here because I believe it relates to the taboo regarding breasts and breastfeeding in children’s literature.

To find books that include breastfeeding, I initially studied bookshelves and catalogues in libraries. For English-language books, I used the Norfolk library system, where the main Norwich library is considered the busiest public library in the UK (see Bury), since the collection is extensive, and for Swedish-language books, I visited Svenska barnboksinstitutet (The Swedish Institute for Children’s Books) in Stockholm, which is a public research library dedicated to children’s literature. I did not focus specifically on literary or high-quality texts or texts from a particular year, but rather I read

any book I could find that was about babies, especially new babies. My assumption was that such books would be more likely to show a baby being fed. I also looked for books that were about families, especially diverse families. I used a variety of search terms such as breastfeeding, attachment parenting, baby-carrying, and so on, as well as the equivalent Swedish terms, to try to find additional books. In the UK, I was generally not able to find books on the shelves that featured breastfeeding simply as a matter of course; instead, I had to get suggestions from mother groups and breastfeeding groups, such as the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers, on Facebook, via email, and in person, for books they knew depicted breastfeeding, and I had to look for books produced by publishers that are pro-breastfeeding, such as Pinter and Martin in the UK. Often, the books that did feature breastfeeding were not in the Norfolk library and had to be requested from other libraries or purchased. The few books that the library already had that included breastfeeding were in a separate "New Experiences" collection, as they tended to have storylines about a new baby joining a family. In other words, such books are thought to be only for young children who are getting a sibling and need to be prepared, rather than for children generally (see Epstein 2013 for an exploration of the issues surrounding the "New Experiences" section of the library).

In short, my method was to be open to any books that might show feeding, no matter the publisher, style, or quality, but the fact that breastfeeding was so difficult to find in English-language books is evidence of society's discomfort with it. Further evidence was found in the depiction of feeding in these works.

## The Prevalence of the Bottle: English-Language Books

I have not, as is already clear, systematically looked at every picture-book in English or every book from a particular year but rather analysed whatever I could find. Only 11 out of 28 books depicted exclusive breastfeeding (with around 1/3 of those books being translations), 6 showed exclusive bottle-feeding, and 5 had combination-feeding. An analysis of the words and images (following Moebius and Nodelman) suggests that not all is positive here. In my analysis, I pay special attention to the words used to describe breastfeeding, the position of the baby at the breast and the position of the mother-and-baby dyad on the page, how much of the breast was visible, the presumed age of the nursling, and so forth.

In English-language books, it is often difficult to tell if a baby is being breastfed or is simply being cuddled close. Of course, as people

are often at pains to point out, breastfeeding can be done discreetly (although as Wiessinger, West, and Pitman note, using a cover or blanket over a baby while nursing often just attracts more attention (145), and babies often kick them off), and the picturebooks that do feature breastfeeding bear – rather than bare – this out. For example, *Dogs Don't Eat Jam* (2011) by Sarah Tsiang is about an older sister who tells her newborn little brother what he needs to know for life. Her advice includes, “You’re learning to drink milk. You’ll learn to hold your head up and how to look around.” The picture shows a baby nestled into his mother’s chest, with her jumper artfully draped around his head; no skin is visible. The mother’s lap is also fully covered up by a blanket; mother and baby are so wrapped up that only their faces can be seen. Similarly, *My New Baby* (2009), which has an unnamed author, shows a baby breastfeeding in two pictures, and although there is a small line of skin visible between the baby’s head and the mother’s shirt, there is no areola, which one would expect to see if a baby is breastfeeding, and the skin could be taken to be part of the shirt or even part of the baby’s head. In both of the breastfeeding pictures, there is someone sitting next to the mother, so she and her nursling are not even necessarily the focus of the images (see Moebius 316–8 on the size and focus of images). Discretion is often key, at least when it comes to books that feature breastfeeding but do not have it as their main topic.

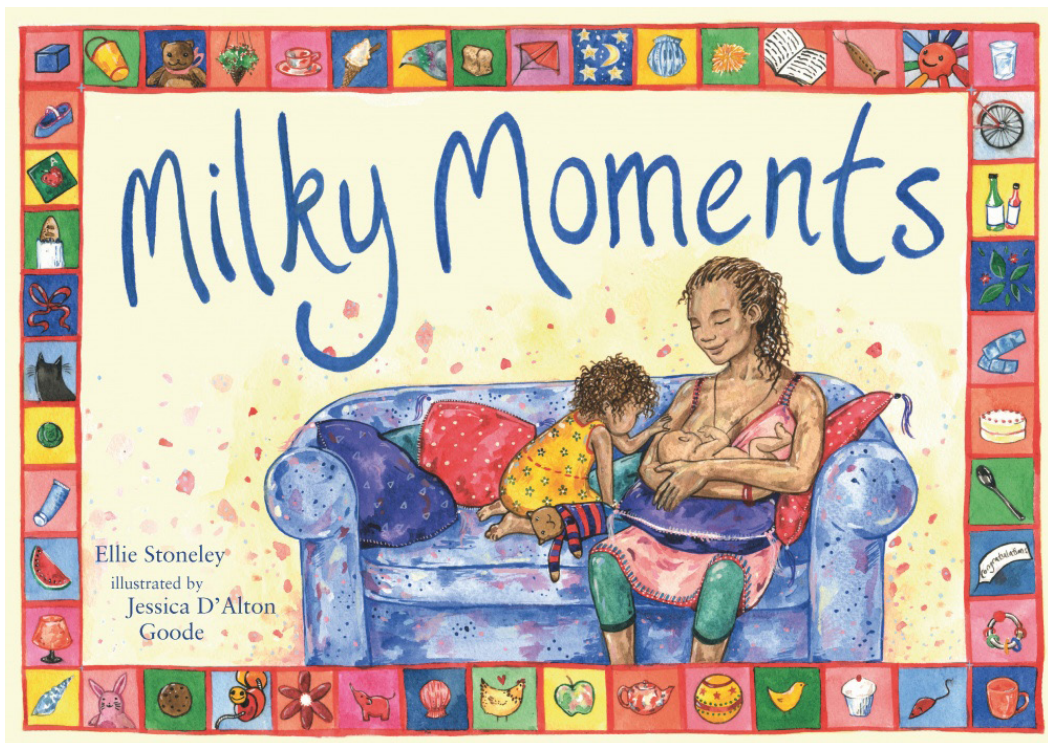
Intriguingly, one of the books that shows the most in terms of the breast being visible is also the book that is the most multicultural. Emery Bernhard and Durga Bernhard’s *A Ride on Mother’s Back* (1996) shows babies being carried around the world. In Guatemala, “Newborn Rosha snuggles in the folds of the shawl tied around her mother. She rides safe and warm, close to her mother’s body. Rosha nurses and sleeps, nurses and sleeps.” Rosha’s mother makes food, cooking a sort of flat bread, while Rosha breastfeeds in the shawl. And in Papua New Guinea, Gogomo is carried in a net dangling from his mother’s head; she only wears a small piece of cloth around her waist, so her two breasts hang clearly behind her son’s body. While there is no areola visible, due to the positioning of the babies in their slings, it is nonetheless clear from both the words (“nurses”) and the images (which show babies close to bare breasts) that these images are of breastfeeding, and the mothers and their babies are at the centre of each image.

The four most explicit breastfeeding books are published by Pinter and Martin, a publishing company that regularly produces pro-breastfeeding texts. Interestingly, three are translations. Mònica

Calaf and Mikel Fuentes' *You, Me and the Breast* (2011) is a translation from Spanish (though no translator is named), which perhaps suggests that some non-English-speaking cultures are more positive about breastfeeding. However, a study of Catalan-language children's books by Trias, Serrano, and Masvidal found that breastfeeding was not often featured. As the English summary of their research notes, "Forty-two percent of the 169 books selected showed images of breastfeeding; 12% of those referred to human breastfeeding, and the remaining referred to animal breastfeeding. Images showing formula feeding were present in 77.5% of the books." That is to say, few of the books showed breastfeeding at all and out of those that did, 88% depicted animals breastfeeding, not humans.

Each page in Calaf and Fuentes' book is about breastfeeding. For example, the text "When you came out of my tummy... the first thing you looked for was my breast" is accompanied by an illustration of the umbilical cord being cut and the baby feeding. Other images show breastfeeding in a variety of situations, such as in the swimming pool, or while exercising, or in the garden. The texts are calm and affirmative, such as "When you were breastfeeding, you were relaxed, happy and contented. We both love these intimate and special moments." The images show the areola quite clearly, which is indeed what one would see if the baby's latch were correct, and they often show the nipple itself, in scenes where the baby has his mouth open and is about to latch on. The areola and nipple are brown and prominent, while the rest of the mother's chest is white; there is no discretion here. The same can be said of Victoria de Aboitiz's and Afra's *The Mystery of the Breast* (2011) where breastfeeding is the focus of the words and images, and breasts, nipples, and areolae are all shown in the illustrations. In fact, there is one picture that shows clouds shaped like breasts, complete with areolae and nipples, and another where the breast is foregrounded, with a contented baby smiling behind it.

One of the publishers' few English-language originals is *Milky Moments* by Ellie Stoneley and Jessica D'Alton Goode (Ill. 1). Their work shows a mother-and-baby dyad breastfeeding in many locations: at the beach, on the sofa, on the bus, at play group, in a café, at the dinner table, and so on. The scenes are usually one of two types: either the mother-and-baby dyad are alone, breastfeeding and bonding, or else there is a larger group of people, usually women and children, socialising together, with breastfeeding happening at the same time. In either case, breastfeeding is depicted as an activity that brings mums and babies together and that can take place anytime,



Ill. I. Stoneley, Ellie. *Milky Moments*. ill. Jessica D'Alton Goode. Pinter & Martin, 2015.

anywhere. Breastfeeding is normalised in these images. Stoneley's and D'Alton Goode's work shows children of different ages breastfeeding, not just babies. There is no space here to explore the lack of diversity in regard to sexuality and age in books that feature breastfeeding, but it is interesting to consider how normative these works tend to be in general.

I would argue that it is important to show breastfeeding in picturebooks and for children and adults to see breastfeeding taking place throughout society, and likewise it could be beneficial to read a book where there is a plot and breastfeeding just happens to be one part of what the nurser and nursling do together. D'Alton Goode's images approach this, but the words do not. Indeed, an issue with books such as Calaf's and Fuentes' and Stoneley's and D'Alton Goode's is that they have no plot per se. They appear to exist solely to depict and promote breastfeeding. One of the very few books that does have a plot is *Katie Morag and the Dancing Class* (2007). In it, Katie Morag's mother is sitting nursing Katie's little sister in one image, with other adults standing near her, involved in tasks such as stirring food on



the stove (Hedderwick). The text on this particular page is about Katie Morag not wanting to take ballet classes, and no reference is made to breastfeeding. Indeed, many of Hedderwick's *Katie Morag* books show breastfeeding in the background while other activities are foregrounded in both words and pictures. What could be problematic is that the colours of the mother and baby are quite pale – yellow, white, grey, with a hint of orange – so the two blend together and are muted (Nodelman *Words* 60), which makes it potentially difficult to distinguish the two bodies and the activity of breastfeeding.

In many books, sometimes it is not even clear that the baby is or has been breastfeeding. For instance, in *Hello, Baby!* by Jorge Uzon (2010), there is the line “You just ate for the very first time.” The picture shows a baby being held close to a chest, but it could be a breastfed or bottle-fed baby. There is a hand holding the baby next to or under a sweater, but there is no sign of a breast and the baby's mouth is relaxed rather than in a breastfeeding position. Likewise, in *Cinnamon Baby* (2011), the text reads, “Miriam held the baby against her breast, but the crying continued. She jiggled it, sang to it, rocked it, walked it up and down and up and down the hallway. But still the baby cried.” In the image, Miriam is seen holding the baby against her chest, but no actual breast is visible, and neither the text nor the picture are explicit about whether this is breastfeeding or only cuddling, though breastfeeding would be an obvious way of soothing an upset baby.

There are a number of books that show both breastfeeding and bottle-feeding, often on the same page. One example is *Love That Baby* (2004) by Kathryn Lasky, which has pictures of babies being fed by breast and bottle on the same page. The main text says, “Yum. Eating is what babies do best. Newborn babies feed all the time, but they only have one kind of food – MILK! They either breastfeed or take a bottle or do both”, while around the pictures it has text that says “Newborn babies have to breastfeed – or drink from a bottle.” *Everywhere Babies* (2001) by Susan Meyers and Marla Frazee likewise says, “Every day, everywhere, babies are fed. –/by bottle, by breast, with cups, and with spoons,/with milk, and then cereal, carrots, and prunes.” A book featured in the library's “special needs” collection, *The New Baby* (1992/2005), shows the mother, Mrs. Bunn, breastfeeding the new baby (presumably what was a “bunn in the oven”) while on the same page the baby's older brother plays and the older sister is feeding a doll from a bottle. This play bottle-feeding undermines breastfeeding positivity; surely the little girl could have pretended to breastfeed as well, as breastfed children are wont

to do. And, of course, if bottle-feeding was going to be depicted, the boy could have just as well been doing it, since one of the arguments made for bottle-feeding is that both men and women can participate in it.

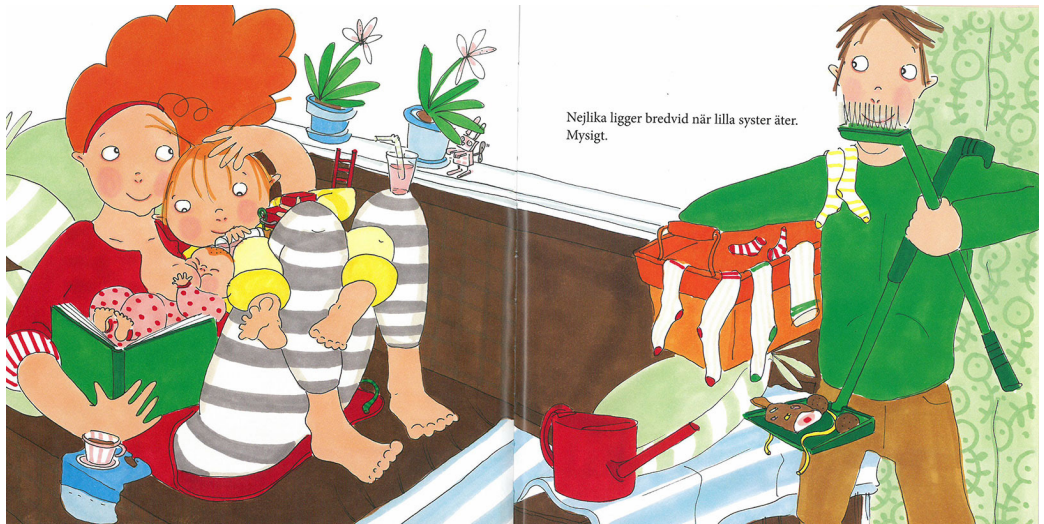
One could argue that it is realistic to show combination-feeding or only bottles, given the high percentage of artificial feeding in the UK and the US. But one oddity about bottles is that in some books, such as *Mr Super Poopy Pants* by Rebecca Elliot (2014) and *I'm Still Important!* by Jen Green (2000), the infants are depicted holding the bottles by themselves or the bottles are nearly as big or even bigger than the babies, which really emphasises the bottles. Maybe these bottles contain expressed milk, but that is never stated, and a reader – especially a child – is not likely to imagine that.

To summarise, then, most of the picturebooks that feature the feeding of infants are either books about families about to have new babies (which appear to be meant to teach and comfort older children who are soon to become big sisters or brothers) or they are books that are very explicitly pro-breastfeeding. The former books have a tendency to show breastfeeding and bottle-feeding in equal measure and/or they do not make it clear in the pictures that breastfeeding is taking place. The latter books tend to be plotless, focusing instead on normalising and celebrating breastfeeding in a positive manner. In all but the most breastfeeding-centric texts, breastfeeding is depicted discreetly, so much so that in many cases, it would be easy to miss or ignore the act. Possible reasons for this will be discussed below.

## **Here a Breast, There a Breast, Everywhere a Breast: A Comparison with Sweden**

As I had a shorter period of time in Sweden to analyse books there, I could not find or read as large a number in Swedish as I did in English. Still, the results are intriguing.

10 out of the 14 Swedish-language books I analysed show exclusive breastfeeding. I found one book that seemed to show containers of artificial milk, but because I was not absolutely sure, I have not included it. While my Swedish sample is smaller than my English one, it nonetheless suggests that more babies are breastfed in Swedish books. In Sweden, breastfeeding rates at 6 months are around 62% (either exclusively breastfeeding or in combination with other food), according to the National Board of Health and Welfare, which is clearly much higher than the figure of 35% in the UK mentioned previously (“Statistik om amning 2014”).



Nejlika ligger bredvid när lilla syster äter.  
Mysigt.

Ill. 2. Zetterberg Struwe, Hanna. *Nejlika och lilla lillasyster* [Nejlika and little, little sister].  
ill. Anna-Karin Garhamn. Rabén och Sjögren, 2008.

In many cases, the child being breastfed is a baby, and the story is about the older sibling's feelings about having a new baby in the house. Breastfeeding causes confusion or jealousy in the older child. A typical example is *Emma och lillebror* (*Emma and Little Brother*) by Gunilla Wolde (1975/1998). Wolde writes that Little Brother "likes to get food from Mum's breasts. But Emma doesn't like it when Mum feeds Little Brother. Then she wants to give him to some other lady. Then Emma wants to be a baby again so she can have Mum to herself."<sup>2</sup> When Little Brother is done eating, Emma decides she wants to be a big girl again, and she helps Mum change the baby's nappy. This acknowledges an older child's worries about being replaced and perhaps not as loved as the new baby. Similarly, *Nejlika och lilla lillasyster* (*Nejlika and little, little sister*) by Hanna Zetterberg Struwe and Anna-Karin Garhamn (2008) shows Nejlika wanting to participate in childcare, and perhaps to thereby be appreciated and needed by her parents, and getting upset when she cannot do the things she wants (Ill. 2). When she wants to feed her new sister ice cream, she is told that the baby does not eat ice cream. Instead, she is shown how she can sit with the baby while the baby breastfeeds, and she finds this to be "mysigt" ("cosy") and learns different ways of interacting with her sibling and her newly busy mother.

A few books show breastfeeding but do not remark upon it, such as *Ninna och syskengrodden* (*Ninna and the sibling sprout*) by Matil-



Ill. 3. Ruta, Matilda. *Ninna och syskongodden* [Ninna and the sibling sprout]. Natur och Kultur, 2016.

da Ruta (2016) or *Rida ryggen* (*Ride on back*) by Ida Therén and Z. Keller (2014), both of which depict a child breastfeeding in a sling (Ill. 3). Breastfeeding and baby-wearing are normalised through the images. Incidentally, Therén's books are published by Nära Förlag, a Swedish-language publishing company dedicated to attachment parenting.

Therén also produced a book solely about breastfeeding, similar to the Spanish books that have been translated to English, as discussed above. *Alltid tillsammans* (*Always together*) (2016) depicts a breastfeeding dyad, and they breastfeed in a number of different situations. For example, the child likes breastfeeding "mitt i naturen" ("out in nature"), when "ledsen" ("sad"), or in the bathtub. There are several especially interesting points about this book. First of all, the child, whose gender is not clear, and the breastfeeding parent look nothing like one another, in that the mother has red hair and is pale, whereas the child is dark-skinned and dark-haired; they do not look to be even related. No other parent is seen in the work, which might make a knowing reader wonder if, for example, the child was adopted and if lactation was induced; on the other hand, of course, not all parents

and children look similar, and perhaps it sends a positive message about the closeness that breastfeeding can bring no matter what the biological connection. Also, the book contains the only depiction of tandem-breastfeeding I have found in children's literature thus far. It says that breastfeeding is "Kul att dela med syster och bror" ("Fun to share with sister and brother"), and the image shows three children who look very different and have no obvious gender markers sitting on their breastfeeding parent's lap, having milk. Finally, *Alltid tillsammans* has a central pair of pages without words; the image is spread across the two pages and shows the dyad breastfeeding, only engaged with one another and not looking at the reader at all. This is a centrefold that works against usual ideas of a centrefold, in that it is a child and a parent breastfeeding, having an intimate moment that does not include or invite the reader in. It is a potent and poignant example of the power of breastfeeding.

A couple of books show both breastfeeding and what follows it, namely spitting up and excrement. It is interesting how detailed some of the descriptions are. For instance, in *Hej lillebror* (*Hi little brother*) by Elisabet Broomé and Cecilia Nordstrand Alin (2005), first baby Arne spits up his milk and has to have new clothes, and then he excretes. The story notes: "Baby poo is yellow and doesn't smell like poo. Do you know why? It's because babies only have milk from their mothers' breasts. But when Arne begins to eat real food, his poo will turn poeey brown and start smelling like stinky poo."<sup>3</sup> Despite the strange description of non-breast milk items being "real food", as though breast milk is not "real" or "food", this passage is informative and realistic. One could say that those adjectives generally describe Swedish picturebooks when it comes to breastfeeding and related matters.

As in English, there were a couple of examples of "new baby" books that do not show any feeding at all, such as *Lillasyster är ett monster* (*Little sister is a monster*) by Linda Pelenius (2012) or *Du ska få gröt och en lillasyster* (*You're going to get porridge and a little sister*) by Solja Krapu-Kallio and Anna Bengtsson (2016). As Maria Andersson discusses, Frances Vestin's book *Mummel. En ny människa* (*Mummel. A New Person*) (1970) includes the lines "[w]hen a baby has come out of the woman's stomach, the woman isn't needed anymore. Anyone can take care of the baby and like it"<sup>4</sup> (cited in Andersson, 13). This is perhaps meant to encourage gender equality in regard to childcare, but it also has the effect of suggesting that breastfeeding does not matter, and that the unique biological functions of a woman's body are unimportant. This book was published in 1970 and may reflect

feminist ideas from the time. At any rate, the lack of breastfeeding in these works is sometimes strange, in that often the works show other things that the new baby does, but on the other hand, they do not show artificial-feeding either.

As a final note of comparison, most of the pictures of breastfeeding in the Swedish-language books discussed in this article are both more accurate in terms of how they depict the way a baby is latched on, and they are also more explicit, showing more of the breast and areola (for example Broomé and Alin's book). Additionally sometimes they refer to the emotional effects of breastfeeding, such as mentioning the bonding between the breastfeeding mother and the baby (also in Broomé and Alin, where baby Arne gazes at his mother, or in Therén, where breastfeeding is said to feel so "skönt", or "pleasant/lovely").

In sum, based on my case study, I would suggest that Swedish books discuss and portray breastfeeding more often than English-language texts, which implies that Swedes, including Swedish authors and publishers, are more comfortable with breastfeeding as a concept and with the illustration of breasts in books for children. It is not surprising that a country with a longer, more generous maternity leave, and a more breastfeeding-normative culture, would be more likely to feature breastfeeding in picturebooks.

## Naked Versus Nude: Breastfeeding as Taboo

Although breasts and breastfeeding are not listed as societal taboos in Holden's *Encyclopedia of Taboos*, I would argue that in Western society today, breastfeeding is indeed a taboo, especially when in public. Palmer writes that "[t]hrough any part of a woman's body can be a focus of eroticism, our era is the first in recorded history where the breast has become a public fetish for male sexual stimulating, while its primary function has diminished on a vast scale" (2-3). And yet the West is apparently fairly alone in this view. As Grayson discusses, only thirteen cultures out of 190 analysed "commonly employ[ed] breast touching either before or during intercourse. And of the same 190, only thirteen indicated the size and shape of a woman's breasts as important to her sexual attractiveness. (Only three societies considered breasts erotic *and* integrated them into foreplay.)" (188-9, emphasis original). Palmer notes that in our society, since the breast is thought to be stimulating and useful as a marketing tool, we may have begun equating it to the genitals as a

site of sexuality (146–8). That may help explain the missing breasts in the English books; neither do we see bare genitals in most children's books, and especially not adult ones.

As noted above, when breastfeeding is depicted in the English books, if any of the breast is visible, it is simply a thin line of skin. In general, one does not see much of the breast, and certainly not the areola or nipple. The babies' heads tend to hide the nipple. Nipples may be seen as too sexual for children's books. For example, Palmer describes how children's author and illustrator Jan Pienkowski's picture of *Sleeping Beauty* was edited so the nipples were removed in the US version "even though in the illustration she had just given birth to her baby" (3). But even if publishers wanted to avoid the nipple, they could show more of the breast, or attempt to make it more obvious that babies are being breastfed in either the words or the pictures or both. The fact that they do not suggests they see the breasts as sexual rather than as the source of nourishment. In the Swedish books analysed here, the nipple and areola do not seem to be such challenging sites.

Perry Nodelman's article about nakedness in children's books focuses on the depiction of naked children. However, it seems from my research that many of his points hold true for the depiction of naked adults, particularly women's breasts, as well. Nodelman describes illustrations of naked children in literature as "androgynous naked torsos" with a "curiously sexless sensuality" ("Nakedness" 27). In his research, he finds that most naked babies in children's literature are male. His "theory is that we are so used to thinking of naked females as nudes that the only way we can look at a naked body innocently, without overtones of sexual titillation, even a baby's body, is to make the body a male body" ("Nakedness" 28). Nodelman continues, "That the naked young bodies in picturebooks are not without sexual significance is made clear by the almost total absence of female frontal nudity in the entire history of the genre" (ibid.). He calls our category for naked females the "pinup" and reminds us, as stated above, that girls are nude where boys are naked (ibid.).

I would like to suggest, then, that we see few bare breasts in children's literature for the same reason. In English-language cultures, we sexualise women's bodies to the extent that the historically normal act of breastfeeding – an act that female mammals have evolved to do – is not accepted as a subject for discussion or illustration in books for children. Even the books that have breastfeeding as their main topic often show breastfeeding taking place discreetly, with little of

the breast, and none of the areola, visible (with Swedish books and books translated to English as exceptions). We know that the literature made available for children was and is “fastidiously controlled by institutions such as the school, the increasingly privatized family, and the church in order to ensure that the literary experience taught the child the value systems of the society into which it was to be integrated” (Miller 128). It is not a surprise, then, that in a society where women’s breasts are considered to be sexual and for men’s pleasure, those breasts would not often be depicted in the non-sexual act of breastfeeding in illustrations.

Interestingly, in my analysis of these and other recent Swedish picturebooks, I found quite a few naked baby boys, with their penises depicted clearly (such as Stark and Wirsén, and Broomé and Nordstrand Alin), but no naked girls. So even though the Swedish books showed more acceptance of the naked breast, to the point that a breastfeeding mother is a centrefold in one of the works (Therén), female genitals seem one step too far, at least in contemporary literature.

An alternative reading of this absence is possible, though. Nodelman argues that males are active in the illustrations of children’s books, while females are passive and apparently exist to be gazed at (“Nakedness” 29; and cf. Mulvey on the male gaze). I wondered, therefore, whether not showing breastfeeding would be a way of fighting back against the idea of women as being subservient and inactive. If the illustrators mostly show females, and especially the mother characters, as busy, energetic, and full of motion, then perhaps they are deliberately attempting to depict women in multiple roles. In other words, since breastfeeding requires that a woman slow her movements, sit or lie down, and focus mainly on her infant or toddler, images reflecting this may suggest that women serve their children and are “creatures who must smile at those who have the right to look at them” (Nodelman, “Nakedness” 29). Unfortunately, this rather complex, challenging perspective does not seem borne out by the literature. Women in these books serve their children in other ways, including by giving them bottles of what is presumably artificial milk or spoon-feeding them other food, which men do not do in the illustrations, and women also frequently are shown to be sitting down. They hold their babies, rock them, clothe them, and otherwise put their children’s needs first. The women seldom seem to be active in other ways. All this suggests that we are comfortable with women fulfilling the traditional roles required by mothering, but that we are not comfortable with seeing the women’s breasts in the process of a breastfeed. Breastfeeding, then, is a taboo in Eng-



lish-language children's literature. Breasts are too sensual to be seen carrying out their primary evolutionary function.

## Conclusion

Palmer comments that "[i]t is now known that even in a rich country, a millionaire's baby who is artificially fed is less healthy than the exclusively breastfed baby of the most disadvantaged mother" (xv). Clearly, then, the topic of how to feed babies is an important one. And yet, as mentioned above, the percentage of women in the UK who breastfeed is quite low; Gallagher calls the UK's rate "the world's worst". So from the perspective of bottle-feeding being a societal norm today, it is not strange that bottles are seen more often than breasts in picturebooks, on television, on cards congratulating new parents and signs for baby-changing and baby-feeding areas, and as accessories for dolls, among other places (see, e.g., Burbidge, and Baumslag and Michels xxvi). There are obvious economic and cultural reasons why bottle-feeding has become more prevalent, and there are strong feminist – and other – arguments for fighting against this.

While terms such as "norm" and "normal" are complex and problematic, in this case, I would state that they are accurate. Breast milk is the biological norm for feeding babies and it is the cultural norm in the majority of the world's countries. And yet, authors, illustrators, and publishers do not seem to want to depict it in English-language books for children. The few children's books I have found that feature breastfeeding tend to be ones that are specifically about breastfeeding, or about baby-wearing or attachment parenting more generally. In other words, someone would have to already be passionate about breastfeeding to seek out these texts. A parent is arguably not likely to pick up a work such as *You, Me and the Breast* or *Milky Moments* if their child was not breastfed. In the Swedish books analysed in this article, however, the common method of feeding babies is by breast, and the plots of those books tends to focus on issues other than the breastfeeding itself.

A large part of the reason that breastfeeding is less common in English may be due to discomfort with breasts; as Nodelman writes, "I suspect that picture book artists avoid depictions of female nakedness simply because it is so hard not to turn female nakedness into traditional "nudity" ("Nakedness" 28). But another explanation is that as bottle-feeding has become more common and more accepted, it seems old-fashioned, and perhaps even anti-feminist, to feature breastfeeding. I would argue that not only is it healthier to promote

breastfeeding, but it is also a feminist issue. Van Esterik writes that “feminist goals, however envisioned, require a variety of core activities: political mobilization, legal changes, consciousness raising, and popular education to deal with women’s issues as they emerge” (69–79). Increased education leads to more breastfeeding (e.g. Van Esterik 90), and “[t]he only foolproof means of protecting breastfeeding is to ensure that every family, community, health worker, and policymaker has full access to factual, scientific, and unabridged information – both about the benefits of breastfeeding and also about the risks involved in foregoing the practice” (Jolly xv). Children’s literature can be seen as a form of education, and a way of normalising a topic, for both adults and children.

In my case study here, the statistics for breastfeeding in children’s books in English and Swedish match quite closely the statistics for breastfeeding in the respective cultures; these numbers can be increased, but it seems that the way to do so is through minimising the sexualisation of women’s bodies. Breastfeeding bodies need not be seen as nude, and the depiction of breastfeeding in children’s books is a feminist issue.

*Biographical information: B.J. Epstein is a senior lecturer in literature at the University of East Anglia in the UK. Her latest monograph is Are the Kids All Right? The Representation of LGBTQ Characters in Children’s and YA Literature, and she also recently co-edited Queer in Translation. B.J. is a translator from Swedish to English as well.*

## References

- Ahlberg, Janet and Allan Ahlberg. *The Baby’s Catalogue*. Penguin, 1982/2012.
- Baumslag, Naomi and Dia L. Michels. *Milk, Money, and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*. Other India Press, 1995.
- Bernhard, Emery and Durga Bernhard. *A Ride on Mother’s Back*. Harcourt, 1996.
- Blakemore, Erin. “The Cultural Expectations of Breastfeeding”, 2 February 2016, [http://daily.jstor.org/its-time-academics-pay-attention-to-breastfeeding/?utm\\_source=marketing&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=twittermorning](http://daily.jstor.org/its-time-academics-pay-attention-to-breastfeeding/?utm_source=marketing&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=twittermorning).

Broomé, Elisabet and Cecilia Nordstrand Alin. *Hej lillebror* [Hi little brother]. Opal, 2005.

Brown, Amy. *Breastfeeding Uncovered: Who Really Decides How We Feed Our Babies?* Pinter & Martin, 2016.

Burbidge, Anna. "Breastfeeding: How the Biological Norm became perceived as a Modern Day Pressure", 1 July 2015, <https://www.laleche.org.uk/news/breastfeeding-how-biological-norm-became-perceived-modern-day-pressure>.

Burt, Vivien K., Sonya Rasminsky and Robin Berman. "Doctor says: When it comes to breastfeeding, your health and happiness matter as much as your baby's", 3 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2016/03/03/doctor-says-when-it-comes-to-breastfeeding-your-health-and-happiness-matter-as-much-as-your-babys/>.

Bury, Liz. "Norfolk & Norwich Millennium tops list of most popular UK libraries", 11 December 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/dec/11/norfolk-norwich-library-most-popular-top-20>.

Calaf, Mònica. *You, me and the Breast*. ill. Mikel Fuentes. transl. not named. Pinter & Martin, 2011.

de Aboitiz, Victoria. *The Mystery of the Breast*. ill. Afra. transl. not named. Pinter and Martin, 2011.

Elliott, Rebecca, *Mr Super Poopy Pants*. Lion Hudson, 2014.

Epstein, B.J. *Are the Kids All Right? Representations of LGBTQ Characters in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Hammer On Press, 2013.

Gallagher, James. "UK 'world's worst' at breastfeeding", 29 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-35438049?SThisFB>.

Grayson, Jennifer. *Unlatched: The Evolution of Breastfeeding and the Making of a Controversy*. Harper, 2016.

Green, Jen and Mike Gordon. *I'm Still Important!* Hodder, 2000.

Hausman, Bernice L. *Mother's Milk: Breastfeeding Controversies in American Culture*. Routledge, 2003.

Hedderwick, Mairi. *Katie Morag and the Dancing Class*. Red Fox, 2007.

Holden, Lynn. *Encyclopedia of Taboos*. ABC-CLIO, 2000.

Jolly, Richard. "Foreword", in Baumslag, Naomi and Dia L. Michels, *Milk, Money, and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*. Other India Press, 1995.

Krapu-Kallio, Solja. *Du ska få gröt och en lillasyster* [You'll get porridge and a little sister]. ill. Anna Bengtsson. Alfabeta, 2016.

Lancet breastfeeding series, <http://www.thelancet.com/series/breastfeeding>.

Lasky, Kathryn. *Love That Baby*. Walker, 2004.

Lee, Ellie, Jennie Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth and Jan Macvarish. *Parenting Culture Studies*. Palgrave, 2014.

Lee, Ellie. "Introduction", in Lee, Ellie, Jennie Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth and Jan Macvarish, *Parenting Culture Studies*. Palgrave, 2014, pp. 1-22.

Luscombe, Belinda. "Why Do We Have the Breastfeeding Wars? Two Words: Maternity Leave", 29 January 2016, <http://time.com/4199721/why-do-we-have-the-breastfeeding-wars-two-words-maternity-leave/>.

Maher, Vanessa, ed. *The Anthropology of Breast-Feeding: Natural Law or Social Construct*. Oxford, 1992/1995.

Meyers, Susan. *Everywhere Babies*. ill. Marla Frazee. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001.

Miller, Alyson. "Unsuited to Age Group: The Scandals of Children's Literature", *College Literature*. Spring 2014, vol. 41, issue 2, pp. 120-40.

Moebius, William. "Picturebook Codes," in Janet Maybin and Nicola J. Watson, eds., *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Palgrave, 2009.

no author named. *My New Baby*. Child's Play, 2009.

no author named. *The New Baby*. Usborne First Experiences, 1992/2005.

no author named. "Statistik om amning 2014." Socialstyrelsen. <http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/publikationer2016/2016-9-19>.

Nodelman, Perry. "Of Nakedness and Children's Books", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. Spring 1984, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 25-50.

Nodelman, Perry. *Words about Pictures*. University of Georgia Press, 1988.

- Palmer, Gabrielle. *The Politics of Breastfeeding: When Breasts are Bad for Business*. Pinter and Martin, 1988/2009.
- Pelenius, Linda. *Lillasyster är ett monster* [Little sister is a monster]. Berghs, 2012.
- Renfrew, Mary, Chloe Fisher, and Suzanne Arms. *Bestfeeding: Why Breastfeeding is Best for You and Your Baby*. 3rd edition. Celestial Arts, 2004.
- Ruta, Matilda. *Ninna och syskongrodden* [Ninna and the sibling sprout]. Natur och Kultur, 2016.
- Sandberg, Inger and Lasse Sandberg. *Lilla spöket Laban får en lillasyster* [Little ghost Laban gets a little sister]. Rabén och Sjögren, 1977.
- Stark, Ulf. *En stjärna vid namn Ajax* [A star called Ajax]. ill. Stina Wirsén. Bonnier Carlsen, 2007.
- Stark, Ulf. *Lillasyster* [Little sister]. ill. Charlotte Ramel. Lilla Piratförlaget, 2016.
- Stoneley, Ellie. *Milky Moments*. ill. Jessica D'Alton Goode. Pinter & Martin, 2015.
- Therén, Ida. *Rida ryggen* [Ride on back]. ill. Z. Keller. Nära förlag, 2014.
- Therén, Ida. *Somna med mig* [Fall asleep with me]. ill. Linnéa Teljas Puranen. Nära förlag, 2015.
- Therén, Ida. *Alltid tillsammans* [Always together]. ill. Nathalie Ruejas. Nära förlag, 2016.
- Tran, Mark. "Claridge's hotel criticised after telling breastfeeding woman to cover up", 2 December 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/dec/02/claridges-hotel-breastfeeding-woman-cover-up>.
- Trias, Elisenda Isabel Serrano, and Rosa Ma Masvidal. "La lactància en els llibres per a nens i nenes de 0 a 6 anys English summary", *Pediatr Catalana*. 2003, issue 63, pp. 314–318.
- Tsiang, Sarah. *Dogs Don't Eat Jam*. Firefly, 2011.
- Uzon, Jorge. *Hello, Baby!* Groundwood Books, 2010.
- Van Esterik, Penny. *Motherpower and Infant Feeding*. Zed Books, 1989.
- Wiessinger, Diane, Diana West, and Teresa Pitman. *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*. 8th edition. Pinter & Martin, 2010.

Wirsén, Stina. *Du [You]*. Bonnier Carlsen, 2017.

Winstanley, Nicola, *Cinnamon Baby*. ill. Janice Nadeau. Kids Can, 2011.

Wolde, Gunilla, *Emma och lillebror [Emma and Little Brother]*. Natur och Kultur, 1975/1998.

Zetterberg Struwe, Hanna. *Nejlika och lilla lillasyster [Nejlika and little, little sister]*. ill. Anna-Karin Garhamn. Rabén och Sjögren, 2008.

Zimmerman, Rachel. "Study: Breastfeeding Even More Of A Health Issue For Moms Than For Babies", 9 September 2016, <http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2016/09/29/study-breastfeeding-moms-health>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many of the quotes and images, especially the examples from picture-books, do not have page numbers. Rather than repeat "n.p." each time, I will assume the reader understands that there is no pagination when page numbers are not listed.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Swedish are my own. The original reads: "tycker om att få mat ur mammas bröst. Men Emma tycker inte om när mamma matar Lillebror. Då vill hon ge bort honom till en annan tant. Då vill Emma bli bebis igen så hon får ha mamma för sig själv."

<sup>3</sup> The original reads: "Bebisbajs är gult och luktar inte alls så där bajsigt. Vet du varför? Jo, för att bebisar bara äter mjölken från mammas bröst. Men när Arne börjar äta riktig mat kommer bajset att bli bajsbrunt och börja luka bajsilla."

<sup>4</sup> The original reads: "När barnet har kommit ut ur kvinnans mage, behövs inte kvinnan längre. Vem som helst kan ta hand om barnet och tycka om det."