

Introduction

In volume 40, *Barnboken* presents three articles on the theme of "Sensuality, Sensibility, Sexuality" as well as four other articles. Sexuality may not be a topic normally associated with children's and young adult literature, in particularly not with books for younger children. On the contrary, handbooks often suggest that literature aimed at children and adolescents is devoid of sexuality. Seeing as the World Health Organization (WHO) considers sexuality an integral part of being human, this is a rather peculiar attitude. Sexuality is more than the sum of our erotic lives, it is "a basic need and an aspect of being human inseparable from other aspects of life", and WHO stresses that this not only includes men and women but also children.

A closer examination shows that children's and YA literature, in its broad age span from picturebooks for babies to YA fiction, repeatedly returns to depictions of sexuality, often in the form of sensuality and sensibility. Fiction for children, too, explores the cartography of feelings in intimate narratives. This has, for instance, been revealed in queer readings such as Tison Pugh's readings of the Harry Potter books, which not only show how heteronormativity is reinforced in children's literature, but also expose the mechanisms at work in the depictions of sexuality.

A number of scholars have explored the issue of sexual innocence and the knowing child, highlighting how sexuality is used to draw the line between child and adult as a means of keeping the innocence of childhood intact. For instance, Anne Higonnet shows how often the innocent child body is sexualized in *Pictures of Innocence. The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (1998). Sexuality and sensibility are, and remain, central questions when it comes to how we understand child bodies, childhood and relationships between children and adults. These are particularly relevant issues in light of today's digital landscapes and the way they redraw the map.

What image of sexuality is maintained in Nordic children's and YA literature? Are there, perhaps, counter images? Nordic literature is generally considered progressive when it comes to depicting sexuality; the very idea of the Nordic is associated with openness in terms of things like nudity of sexuality. In her study of sexuality in YA fic-

tion in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality. Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013), Lydia Kokkola even excludes Nordic YA novels since they differ so radically from her Anglo-American material. The difference primarily lies in their attitudes to sex – when characters can have sex, and how – and in their views on the consequences of sexual acts, such as teen pregnancies.

In *Proggiga barnböcker. Därför blev vi som vi blev* ("Progg children's books. Why we turned out the way we did", 2010), Kalle Lind draws attention to the Swedish picturebook of the 1970s located at the epicentre of the sexual revolution, but much remains to investigate. How does the pedophile debate of the 1980s affect the limits of the children's book in terms of body and sensation? Is the children's book liberated or prudish? A comparison between the very explicit and instructive picturebooks characteristic of the 1970s that explained how the body works, including sexually – such as *Per, Ida & Minimum* (1978) by Grethe Fagerström and Gunilla Hansson – and contemporary picturebooks for toddlers where adult intercourse is hinted at – as in Stina Wirsén's *Vem sover inte?* ("Who isn't sleeping?", 2009) – suggests a similar attitude towards children and childhood in relation to sensibility and sexuality.

Sexuality is, of course, a particularly popular topic in YA fiction. Hans-Eric Hellberg – author of the Kram series (1973–2003), intended as pornography for children – has been succeeded by writers like Mårten Melin and Katerina Janouch. However, their approach is mild compared to Maria Marcus' Danish YA novel *Alle tiders forår* ("What a spring", 1977). In *Alle tiders forår*, the main character Ulla masturbates using a vibrator and even teaches her mother how to use one, which Mia Franck discusses in her study of sexuality in the Swedish YA novel, *Frigjord oskuld. Heterosexuellt mognadsimperativ i svensk ungdomsroman* ("Empowered innocence. Heterosexual developmental imperative in Swedish young adult fiction", 2009). While the contemporary YA novel is just as outspoken and erotically charged in its many depictions of sex as the YA novel of the 1970s, it also highlights sensuality and touch. However, the boundaries when it comes to younger children's sexuality are often stricter. In stories for younger readers, sexuality is often conveyed in terms of sensations and sensuality.

In recent years, norm criticism has flourished within children's literature, making norm criticism the new norm. Same-sex parents now occur in all genres, rainbow iconography is a common feature, and transgender characters are included in the stories. The fact that this trend in children's and YA literature so forcefully emphasizes sexuality calls for more research on the subject.

An ongoing discussion that exemplifies the consequences of norm criticism is the debate about whether instructive films on vaginas and penises have influenced the way children's bodies are described and portrayed in children's books. The Swedish word "snippa" (vagina), by analogy with the word "snopp" (penis), has become part of the Swedish vocabulary in recent years. As a result, books about vaginas and penises have become a genre of their own, culminating in 2015 with Tony Cronstam's picturebook *Snipp och Snopp – Lika eller olika?* ("Vagina and Penis – similar or different?"), where genitals were cast as the main characters in an equality-promoting, norm-critical story.

The sexuality theme in *Barnboken* begins with the article "Breast Versus Bottle. The Feeding of Babies in English and Swedish Picturebooks", where B. J. Epstein compares how British and Swedish picturebooks depict breastfeeding. She comes to the conclusion that breastfeeding and bare breasts primarily occur in stories about getting a new sibling or how babies are made. Epstein examines attitudes towards breastfeeding from a feminist perspective and points to discourses surrounding breastfeeding, femininity and nudity. She argues that breastfeeding and bare breasts often are depicted very discreetly, in particular in the British picturebooks. Discretion and provocation are key words closely linked to notions of physicality and sexuality, and they are crucial when it comes to understanding how this basic, every-day action is made invisible in picturebooks.

Much like breastfeeding, menstruation has long been made invisible. Now, however, we are in the midst of a menstrual revolution; previously hidden in the private sphere of girl's bedrooms, periods are now discussed and depicted publicly. This can be seen in everything from graphic novels and TV shows to visual art, and it is also reflected in children's literature. Drawing on feminist research on menstruation and girlhood studies, Tonje Vold examines how menstruation is depicted and explored in Norwegian children's and YA fiction in her article "'Jeg er en flekk'. Om menstruasjon og jentepubertet i nyere norsk barne- og ungdomslitteratur" ("I'm a stain. On menstruation and girls' puberty in recent Norwegian children's and YA literature"). Her readings of works such as Gro Dahle's and Kaia Dahle Nyhus' *Megzilla* (2015) show that menstruation forms an essential part of narratives about the girl body. The depiction of menstruation exposes body politics and draws attention to what it is like to be a girl today, at the same time as these books are instructive and offer guidance, in particular in a liberating feminist sense.

Maria Jönsson brings together literature for children and adults in "En röd ballong. Om sexualitet som åldersöverskridande erfarenhet i Kerstin Thorvalls mellanåldersböcker" ("A red balloon. On sexu-

ality as a boundary-crossing experience in terms of age in Kerstin Thorvall's children's novels"). Jönsson examines how sexuality and sensuality are portrayed in the Swedish author Kerstin Thorvall's children's books from the 1960s and 1970s. Using psychoanalytic feminism and queer theory, she shows how Thorvall depicts desire and pleasure in boundary-crossing ways in terms of age. Thorvall is known for her norm-breaking depictions of female sexuality and the article shows how this is reflected in her books for children, but here in the form of sensualism.

Body politics are also addressed in Malin Alkestrand's "Walking in Someone Else's Shoes. The Body Switch in the Engelsfors Trilogy". She examines the body switch motif in Sara Bergmark Elfgren and Mats Strandberg's *Eld* (*Fire*, 2012) by using approaches such as photograph theory and Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory. The figure of speech "walking in someone else's shoes" is made concrete through the body switch where five girls switch bodies with each other and experience different intersections, such as body size and social class. Alkestrand focuses on the girl witches' learning process and how it is shaped within the framework of fantasy.

The remaining three articles all bring up current topics within the field of children's literature. They cover the explosion of easy-to-read literature that can be seen as a response to the debate about reluctant readers and the decline in reading ability, as well as digital landscapes that offer new possibilities for interactivity as regards children's and YA literature. Anna Nordenstam and Christina Olin-Scheller address the growing number of Swedish easy-to-read YA novels in their interview-based article "Att göra gott. Svenska förlags- och författarröster om lättläst ungdomslitteratur" ("The will to do good. Swedish publishing houses and authors on easy-to-read young adult fiction"). The number of Swedish easy-to-read books published has increased in recent years, and the increase is motivated by democracy reasons such as everyone's right to literature and knowledge. Using Rita Felski's term *recognition* as their starting point, Nordenstam and Olin-Scheller discuss how effortless reading based on recognition is gaining ground at the expense of more challenging reading that helps young readers develop a broader reading proficiency.

Lena Manderstedt and Annbritt Palo examine how digital environments create new possibilities for the institutions of children's literature in "Unga läsare som litteraturkritiker online. En (skol)genre på rymmen?" ("Young readers as literary critics online. A (school) genre on the run?"). They discuss how young readers make their

voices heard online in reviews of children's books. The literary review, traditionally a formalized school genre, sheds its skin by turning into an interactive online review, which is discussed in relation to the overall development of literary criticism.

Digital storytelling requires new methods of analysis as well as new approaches. In "The Picturebook App as Event. Interactivity and Immersion in Wuwu & Co.", Lisa Nagel explores different theoretical approaches to a Danish picturebook app. Through the use of the theatre studies term *event* and theories on interactive digital reading and the reader's immersion in the reading activity, Nagel highlights the challenges involved in new reading practices and new media of storytelling.

Volume 40 of *Barnboken* illustrates the present state of the field of children's literature research. Not only does it involve diversified domains, such as sexuality studies, but also research on the infrastructure of the field of children's literature. The volume shows that children's literature research is in a dynamic phase where the different approaches cross-fertilize each other, inspiring ideas for new studies.

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