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# The Queerness of the Man-Child

## Narcissism and Silencing in Astrid Lindgren's Karlson on the Roof Series

*Abstract: The literary man-child character can function as a subversive agent within the text to expose traditional ideologies and suggest alternate possibilities. Much beloved in Sweden, Karlson from Astrid Lindgren's Karlson on the Roof trilogy (1955–1968) represents this kind of man-child character in texts for children, particularly through his queerness. The trilogy illuminates Karlson's queerness by contrasting him with the normative reality of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Stockholm through his trademark narcissism, primal desires, and illogical or fallacious rhetoric that often invokes silence from children and adults within the story. Through the lens of Jack Halberstam's queer subcultures, Karlson can be appreciated as a specific kind of literary man-child character that necessitates a legitimated queer visibility. This visibility is cultivated by his non-normative belief system and buttressed by his resistance to being silenced or kept secret from this normative world. Furthermore, Karlson's queerness fuels his charisma, making him popular because of his behavior, not despite it. Ultimately, his queerness as a man-child character disrupts traditional boundaries and delineations of the child/adult binary and allows the child reader to witness the vulnerabilities of normative institutions while also appreciating diversity in non-normative family structures.*

**Keywords:** queer subcultures, narcissism, man-child, rhetorical silencing, Karlson on the Roof trilogy, Astrid Lindgren, paleocortex, neocortex, neoteny

In his discussion about queer theory, Fabio Cleto notes, “Queer thinking thus promotes a sabotage [. . .] of the manifold binarisms (masculine/feminine, original/copy, identity/difference, natural/artificial, private/public, etc.) on which bourgeoisie epistemic and ontological order arranges and perpetuates itself” (15). In other words, Cleto considers how “queer,” both as a noun and a verb, reconfigures or questions our socially constructed ways of living in, navigating through, or co-existing alongside traditional society. Astrid Lindgren’s character Karlson from her *Karlson on the Roof* trilogy (1955–1968) could be analyzed as a subversive agent of quite a few different binaries, including the natural/artificial.<sup>1</sup> As a person with a button on his stomach that operates a propeller on his back that allows him to fly, Karlson represents what Boel Westin describes as a “technobody,” which differs from Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg and refers more to “the technologized body or the body as an engineering product” (133).<sup>2</sup> Westin also describes Karlson as “a character that moves freely between different zones and positions: between earth and sky, between child and adult” (140)<sup>3</sup>; Karlson’s mobility between child and adult informs the focus of this article on one specific binary – child/adult – and how Karlson subverts this binary as a queer literary white man-child character.

A white man-child character can serve several functions within a text, providing comic relief and opportunities for adventure, instilling wonder, offering social commentary, or combining all the aforementioned while befuddling characters and readers through unusual behavior, speech patterns, and rhetoric. Karlson embodies this kind of queer man-child character because he defies categorization from the normative world through his many unconventional facets: the separated space he inhabits on the roof, his diminutive appearance, his self-important psychosocial persona, his bizarre interpersonal communications, and his scandalous antisocial behavior. Throughout the series, Karlson violates traditional expectations of social interactions, familial ties, physical and verbal courtesy, and proper decorum regarding other people’s property, time, and needs. His queerness as a man-child becomes illuminated by his position as someone who inserts his queer persona into the normative reality of Lindgren’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century Stockholm. Through the lens of Jack Halberstam’s queer subcultures, Karlson’s queerness can be appreciated as a manifestation of a specific kind of literary man-child character in texts for children.

But as Westin points out, Karlson evokes a mixed response such as “disgust, wonder and passion” (130), polarizing both the characters

within the story and the readers outside the book.<sup>4</sup> Karlson's disruptive presence solicits frustration, but it also includes a positivity that cannot be ignored; instead, his narcissism and primal desires can be appreciated as a legitimated queer visibility reinforced by his positive self-worth that is cultivated by his non-normative belief system in a queered space on the roof, and is buttressed by his resistance against himself being silenced or kept secret from this normative world. Ultimately, his queerness as a man-child character disrupts traditional boundaries and delineations of the child/adult binary and allows the child reader to witness the vulnerabilities of normative institutions while also appreciating diversity in non-normative family structures.

### The Karlson on the Roof Series

Karlson, a much beloved character in Sweden, first appeared in 1955 when Lindgren published *Lillebror och Karlsson på taket* (*Karlson on the Roof*), followed by two sequels: *Karlsson på taket flyger igen* (*Karlson Flies Again*) in 1962, and *Karlsson på taket smyger igen* (*The World's Best Karlson*) in 1968. Karlson's story has been turned into a Swedish live-action film in 1974 as well as "[a]n animated feature film and TV series comprising 26 episodes" in 2002 ("Karlsson 2002"). Also, he is hugely popular in Russia, as evidenced by two Russian animated films about Karlson from 1968 and 1970.

The Karlson series is primarily focalized through Smidge, the youngest child in a family of five in Stockholm. Karlson himself is a "very small, round, determined gentleman" (Lindgren, *Roof 2*) who can fly with the help of a button on his stomach that operates a propeller on his back, and he lives in a little house hidden on top of the roof of the building where Smidge lives. Unfortunately, no one in his family believes that Karlson exists until the final chapter, when Karlson attends Smidge's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday party and Smidge's father instructs his family to keep Karlson a secret. The majority of the first book covers Smidge's many adventures with Karlson, which largely involve pranks, verbal contests or other schemes for Karlson to acquire sweets, and also flying with Karlson to his house on the roof and exploring the nearby buildings. The other two books in the series continue both Karlson's pranks and adventures with Smidge, as well as the running theme of trying to keep Karlson's existence a secret from people in Stockholm. The final book escalates this theme when the local newspaper offers a 10,000 kronor reward for Karlson's identity. However, Karlson receives the reward by turning himself in,

and the story concludes with Smidge and Karlson alone on the roof, with Smidge thinking “that maybe the real fun was just about to start” (Lindgren, *World’s Best* 213).

## Working Definitions of Queer, Child, Adult, and Man-Child

To enunciate the queerness of a man-child, I tentatively define and connect crucial terminology. Cleto’s description of queer theory suggests that “queer” is a complex, slippery term. For this chapter, I investigate the richness of “queer” more broadly, specifically in relationship to how it contrasts with traditional, normative institutions that relate to identity and family. David M. Halperin writes,

As the very word implies, “queer” does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. (Halperin 62)

In the context of this discussion about man-child characters, “queer” can be implemented as a contrast to normative expectations about behavior based on age.

Marking the queerness of the man-child as it relates to traditionalist views on age requires quickly contrasting a child from an adult and a man-child, but defining terms like “childhood” and “adult” can be challenging. In her entry on “Childhood” in the second edition of *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (2021), Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes its fluidity when she says that

Childhood may be widely recognized as a life stage that stretches from birth until the taking on of adult competence and responsibility, but its meanings are formed by the particulars of each historical and social situation, and the stories we tell about them. (Sánchez-Eppler, *Keywords* [2nd ed.] 38)

Childhood varies by time and context, especially in terms of adult expectations about children’s behaviors and rites of passage, and the significance of phrases like “adult competence” is worth remembering when analyzing Karlson.

In the first edition of *Keywords for Children’s Literature* (2011), Sánchez-Eppler notes that “chronological age – gauged in years, not skills or activities – has gradually become a bulwark of identity” for

childhood (38). Victoria Ford Smith comments on this same notion of age as a marker of identity in her entry on “Adult” in the second edition, noting that

the adult remains a flexible and remarkably resilient antonym for the child, reinforced by legal norms such as ages of consent and political participation that mark (arbitrarily) a young person’s acquisition of the rights and responsibilities associated with maturity. (Smith 1)

Thus, children can tentatively be defined by age groupings in conjunction with socially constructed laws about minors and their generally agreed upon notions of a child’s psychosocial development, allowing for category overlap between childhood and adolescence because laws protecting minors typically provide distinction between the childhood and adulthood binary, which can relegate certain adolescents to the childhood category, depending on the age of the individual, state and federal laws, and the particular act in question. But defining an adult by its opposite can be slippery, too: Smith mentions maturity and responsibility as two markers generally identified in adults, which Smidge exhibits more than Karlson. However, Smith also considers and questions other societal expectations of adults, such as “economic independence [and] self-sufficiency” (3), which Karlson technically does possess, while Smidge does not.

In contrast to the fluid connotations of the term “child,” Smith notes that “we often accuse adults of acting like children – an insult that registers adulthood’s precariousness” (3); indeed, this insult signals that “man-child” is usually considered a derogatory term. He may go by different names, descriptions, or terminology, such as Peter Pan Syndrome (Feurman), “manolescent” (Winter), or man-baby. *Urban Dictionary* defines a “manchild” as “[a]n adult male who still possesses psychological traits of a child” (Cavendish). However, a man-child character can also be lovably flawed, considered annoying by the audience and fellow characters, but still worthy of attention.<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, a man-child character could be considered as queer in the sense that he does not fulfil normative expectations about adult male behavior with regards to emotional or psychosocial competencies.

## The Man-Child in Texts for Youth: A Queer Subculture

In a modern Western economy historically governed by the privilege of white patriarchy, “man-child” evokes the possibility of marked-

ly different connotations if applied to white characters compared to characters from racial minorities. Further, white man-child characters in texts for adults are generally assumed to be sexually active with women, and, by extension, participatory in a heteronormative family community. My discussion in this article considers representations of the white man-child character in texts produced for children, which necessitates contextualizing Jack Halberstam's definition of "queer" from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) into this conversation about Karlson: "non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6). I will initially discuss "sexual identity" and "embodiment" as I concentrate on white man-child characters in children's texts, and because one popular hallmark of (or myth about) childhood relates to its innocence or absence of sexual exposure, I will also situate Karlson's queerness as a children's literature figure within the scope of Halberstam's conversation and queer theory.

In *Theory for Beginners: Children's Literature as Critical Thought* (2020), Kenneth B. Kidd first lists four ways that "queer theory for kids" is similar to "academic queer theory," and four ways it is not (113). Kidd can be helpful to understanding how to apply Halberstam's queerness to a children's text as he notes that queer theory for kids "[t]ends away from explicit engagement with questions of sexuality and sexual identity, especially in genres targeting younger readers" (113). One significant way for the white man-child in texts for children to avoid "explicit engagement with questions of sexuality and sexual identity" while still maintaining queer status is either through little-to-no mention in the text about their sexual or romantic desires or through their embodying some kind of arrested development with regards to their emotional, psychosocial, physical, or sexual maturity. This subset of the white man-child population in texts for children can be considered what Halberstam calls a "queer subculture" (152). Halberstam speaks of the connection between "queer subculture" and "new considerations of time and space," specifically regarding "the decisions that queer people make about where to live, how to live and how to recraft relationality itself" (152). For Halberstam, occupied space becomes an important point of inquiry when considering queerness, especially in how space connects to Halberstam's discussion of queer temporality, which scrutinizes "normative narratives of time" that have been inscribed (152) - the importance of growing up and creating family units - into the very fabric of our society as a default ideology.

According to this narrative, the normalized expectation is that children will turn into a grown-up on a prescribed timeline. Instead, Halberstam calls for “queer life modes that offer alternatives to family time and family life” (153) and examines how queer subculture “challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood” that expects children to “transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction” (153). Though Halberstam’s original conversation about subcultures examines diversity on a broader scale, his paradigm of queer subcultures can be helpful to better understand how the subset of white man-child characters in children’s texts, specifically Karlson, functions outside of the traditional family unit, instead residing (literally) outside of the normative community and operating on his own terms, schedule, psychological perspective, and hierarchy of wants. My reference to queerness throughout this discussion, then, is multivalent, recognizing the general non-normative qualities of Karlson while also arguing for ways in which he fits into this queer subculture of an already queer group of man-child characters.

Vivi Edström’s study of Astrid Lindgren offers an important behavioral profile of Karlson. For example, Edström describes him as an “inventive bossy playmate” who will dramatically threaten to leave if his demands are not met, and as someone “who lives out all his instincts” (135). Karlson’s “instincts” can certainly be connected to other relevant terms that pertain to his primal outbursts, motivations, and queerness. More importantly, Edström quotes Lars Bäckström’s descriptions of Karlson as being “an infantile adult, totally self-absorbed, alternating between the greatest self-satisfaction and self-pity” (135), as well as being a “childish adult” (136). Clearly, such phrases as “infantile adult” and “childish adult” align with my use of the word “man-child” and reinforce Karlson’s queerness.

Similarly, Tomasz Zarębski’s article from 2020 also contributes to this conversation. Though he focuses on Karlson “from a Wittgensteinian perspective, looking at how his language games constitute the representation of otherness,” his use of the word “otherness” can be substituted with “queer” for my analysis because he notes that “what constitutes the domain of the unusual, can be called the otherness.” Moreover, Zarębski’s character descriptors of Karlson’s sociopathy resemble Bäckström’s, especially when he refers to Karlson’s “overbearingness and megalomania” and notes that Karlson is “malicious rather than ironic.” These character descriptions indicate that scholars have noticed Karlson’s non-normative behavior on a psychosocial level.

In *Man-Child: A Study of the Infantilization of Man* (1970), David Jonas and Doris Klein argue that contemporary man is the result of regressive evolution. While the text's overall thesis requires critical scrutiny, one of its claims can serve as a lens through which Karlson's non-normative psychological positionality in his queer subculture can be better appreciated by understanding the relationship between the man-child Karlson and the child-protagonist Smidge. Jonas and Klein discuss the dichotomy between the brain's paleocortex and the neocortex. They believe that "the older paleocortex, which governs our instinctual behavior, is being superseded with increasing rapidity by the intellectualizing neocortex" (333). Jonas and Klein note that "In the normal adult the neocortex responds to inferences, innuendos, connotations, implications, nonverbal communication, and suggestions" (41). They also point out that, "Among the functions the neocortex has taken on is the one of evaluating what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate behavior" (125). Put simply, the paleocortex represents instinct and impulse, while the neocortex governs discernment and nuance. Applying this paradigm to the Karlson trilogy, Karlson as a man-child represents the paleocortex form of social interaction, highlighted by his self-involvement, lack of empathy for others' needs, and push for overall queer visibility; while Smidge represents the neocortex as someone who appreciates complex social courtesies, normative standards, and is constantly concerned for Karlson's well-being.

### Queer Karlson: A Character Analysis from Man-Child to Narcissist

Much of Karlson's charisma can be attributed to what makes him queer: his ability to fly; his short stature, which causes Miss Crawley the housekeeper to assume he is Smidge's classmate (Lindgren, *World's Best* 63); his living alone in a small, hidden house on the roof of the building where Smidge lives, away from the normative family community; and especially his psychosocial non-conformity of prioritizing himself when interacting with others. Dr. Shannon Tapia notes that "the term 'Man-Child' has become the urban dictionary lingo to describe what we in the medical profession refer to as Narcissism," and I argue that this narcissism is a necessary manifestation of queer Karlson's paleocortex perspective.

Karlson's paleocortex-driven obsession through satisfying his instinctual needs could be deemed consistent with Narcissistic Personality Disorder ("Narcissistic"). This disorder is characterized by

“[a] pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy” (669). Under general circumstances, characterizing someone as narcissistic can be stigmatizing, but connecting Karlson’s narcissistic tendencies to his paleocortex-driven way of life could be helpful to understanding how this specific version of a man-child operates in the queer subculture of a text for children, especially in the ways he rejects what Halberstam calls the “normative narratives of time” (152) in favour of focusing excessively on himself rather than selflessly or altruistically creating and participating within a normative family unit. Karlson’s queer behavior can be distilled into three diagnostic criteria of narcissism: grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy.

First, his grandiosity can be observed when Karlson is introduced in the very first chapter of *Karlson on the Roof*. Smidge notices Karlson, described by Lindgren as a “little man” (7), flying past his bedroom window several times before Karlson initiates conversation and enters Smidge’s bedroom. Smidge thinks Karlson “seemed rather childish for a grown-up man” (Lindgren, *Roof* 8). However, Karlson describes himself as “a handsome, thoroughly clever, perfectly plump man in my prime” (9). The descriptions and dialogue about his physical stature fuel the ambiguity about Karlson’s identity within the adult-child binary, especially because his actual age is never revealed.<sup>6</sup>

Karlson’s self-awareness highlights his narcissism when he begins telling Smidge that he is the “World’s Best” at whatever happens to be the topic of conversation at that moment in the story. In the first chapter alone, he describes himself or is described by the narrator as the “world’s best stunt flyer” (Lindgren, *Roof* 7), the “world’s best motor mechanic” (13), and also the “world’s best steam engine driver” three times (9, 11). However, Lindgren provides the reader with a tragic/comedic clash between Karlson’s sense of competency and Smidge’s reality when Karlson causes the steam engine to explode (11). Nevertheless, this “World’s Best” attitude continues throughout the trilogy and serves as one of his main catchphrases. His sense of self-importance certainly emphasizes his paleocortex-driven perspective of impulsively praising himself for who he thinks he is.

Second, Karlson’s need for admiration also connects with his paleocortex perspective. One such occasion happens in Chapter 2 of *The World’s Best Karlson*, titled “Karlson Remembers It’s His Birthday.” Earlier in this chapter, Smidge has decided not to accompany his parents on a cruise so that he can protect Karlson from any potential kidnappers interested in the reward money. In this scene, Karlson vi-

sits Smidge late at night to tell him that it is his birthday. Even though Smidge reminds him that he just had a birthday, Karlson reasons that he doesn't have to "stick with the same old birthday all the time" (Lindgren, *World's Best* 38). Smidge eventually understands Karlson's non-normative thinking pattern, and realizes Karlson has an ulterior motive as he has a specific birthday present in mind: "Then it dawned on Smidge what Karlson really wanted – his pistol! [. . .] It was the world's smallest toy pistol and the world's best, too" (41). Lindgren's word choice in her narration of Smidge's thoughts indicates a complex bond between Smidge and Karlson by the third book, especially with the usage of Karlson's superlative catchphrases to describe Smidge's pistol as "the world's best" (41). Moreover, this gift satisfies an immediate paleocortex-driven need for helping Karlson sleep: he reasons the pistol can help him motivate the imaginary sheep to jump the fence (43).

Although Karlson questions the limitations of traditional birthdays as an ulterior motive to take Smidge's gun, his behavior could be considered in light of Halberstam's discussion of "queer time," which he defines as "specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). Of course, birthday celebrations are not relegated only to normative family institutions; however, this kind of celebratory ritual, especially in children's texts, can be used to indicate approaching rites of passage for children, including ages of independence or responsibility, as they progress to adulthood. For Karlson, birthdays may be important for receiving gifts, but he is also not tied to this ritual's strict temporality and operates on his own queer time, especially as an ambiguously-aged man-child in the series. This birthday scene further cements Karlson's disregard for normative family structures by illustrating the strong bond between Smidge and himself.

Third, Karlson's lack of empathy is arguably his most startling and memorable character quality. This lack of empathy is largely reflected through his impulsive and destructive behavior, such as in the first chapter of *Karlson on the Roof* when he wants to play with Smidge's toy steam engine. First, he accidentally sets fire to the bookcase holding the steam engine, but he calls it "a mere trifle" when Smidge worries about getting in trouble over it (Lindgren, *Roof* 10). Shortly afterwards, his damage streak continues when he likely contributes to the steam engine exploding. Smidge cries at this outcome, but Karlson laughs at the excitement of it all, adding that Smidge shouldn't worry because Karlson has many steam engines up at his house (11).

Smidge is captivated by this notion; however, the more that Karlson talks about his steam engines, the more the number changes. He first claims he has “thousands up at my place” (11), and Smidge becomes even more puzzled upon hearing for the first time that Karlson has a house on the roof. Karlson affirms Smidge’s question about his house but says “there must be at least a few hundred” steam engines. Smidge is entranced at the idea of Karlson’s house and wants to see it: “It sounded such a wonderful idea: a little house up on the roof, with Karlson living in it” (12). But then Karlson qualifies the number of steam engines again: “I haven’t counted exactly how many I’ve got left, but there are definitely several dozen” (12). The reader suspects that Karlson is as reliable a character as he is empathic, but this grandiose description of Karlson’s house enchants Smidge as if it were a queer utopia that he desperately wants to visit.

Thus far, I have considered Karlson’s queer subculture by contrasting his non-normative narcissism against normative family structures, or the self-absorbed paleocortex versus the considerate neocortex. As Halberstam argues, “Subcultures, however, suggest transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation” (154). Karlson belongs in this queer subculture because he does not consider himself a part of the traditional community of Stockholm and therefore does not owe any person in this normative community special consideration. As the series progresses, Smidge manages to verbally admonish some of Karlson’s more outlandish actions, but overall, Smidge remains devoted to Karlson, and the trilogy ends with Smidge being resigned to accepting Karlson’s paleocortex-driven behavior as part of what makes Karlson special, with Lindgren concluding in a positive way that “There was never any peace if you were Karlson’s best friend” (Lindgren, *World’s Best* 211). This thought indicates a heartfelt friendship between the two, based on Karlson’s queer terms and not dependent on normative structures of family.

### Queer Karlson’s Narcissistic Rhetorical Strategies of Silencing

Rhetoricians note that rhetorical listening can be a useful strategy when trying to find common ground about a disagreement with someone. The term “rhetorical listening” is attributed to Krista Ratcliffe, who argues that the phenomenon “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” (17). Given the narcissistic behaviors of Karlson, it can be deduced that Karlson operates in a manner that is the complete op-

posite of rhetorical listening: rhetorical silencing. Cheryl Glenn notes that silence is not inherently a weapon: “silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible. It can mean powerlessness or emptiness – but not always” (4). In the concluding section of this article, I explain how Karlson’s use of silence on a macrolevel represses normative restrictions of his queer visibility. However, the following examples from Karlson demonstrate that silence can be, as Glenn notes, “a means for exerting control and managing the situation” (32). To use the words of Glenn, Karlson oftentimes as “the dominant party must wield silence as a means to press the subordinate into taking on the burden of silence” (32) so that Karlson may satisfy his paleocortex urges, even if it means silencing Smidge or others momentarily.

As a man-child, Karlson’s rhetorical silencing stems from his narcissism, which is fueled by his paleocortex desire for constant attention and food. As Anne Malewski notes, “The trilogy’s essential food moments show Karlson creatively acquiring food, challenging adults and generally being insatiable” (108). His queerness through gluttony manifests primarily in the form of faulty (non-normative) logic, which oftentimes silences or subdues Smidge as Karlson mostly achieves success in tricking, cheating, or guilt-tripping food away from Smidge. To better illustrate how Karlson rhetorically silences as a way of fueling his narcissism as a queer man-child, I briefly analyze two scenes.

#### *The Toffee Argument*

In Chapter 4 of *Karlson on the Roof*, “Karlson Makes a Bet,” Lindgren creates a unified chapter with a sustained theme about the power of words. Smidge’s mother asserts that words – instead of violent actions – should be sufficient to solve conflicts. Later in the chapter, however, Lindgren subverts this notion. Karlson visits Smidge’s bedroom, announcing that he has a temperature and that he wants Smidge to act like his mother figure and take care of him. Immediately the reader can appreciate the queerness of a man-child asking a 7-year-old to be his mother. What is more, Karlson has a very prescriptive vision for how he is to be nursed back to health, which includes being given sweets and also money for bravely wearing an itchy scarf. After Smidge returns from buying him sweets, Karlson flies Smidge up to his place on the roof. Upon entering Karlson’s house for the first time, Smidge experiences some disappointment when he discovers that Karlson has not been entirely truthful about past statements, such as his claim to have many spare steam engines that he could use to replace the one he broke in Smidge’s room upon their

first encounter. Despite this revelation, Smidge seems enraptured by Karlson's separated place outside the normative community and is eager to help him recover from a sickness that Smidge doubts is even real. What follows is a series of bets about Karlson's rehabilitation that demonstrates how Karlson's greed and queering of the binary of logical/illogical rhetoric silences Smidge into submission.

For example, Smidge wins the first bet because Karlson's temperature has not gone down after taking his own medicine concoction, but Karlson demands the chocolate anyway, claiming that Smidge is a "horrid little boy, sitting there expecting chocolate just because I've got a temperature" (Lindgren, *Roof* 67). Smidge, powerless to refute Karlson's fallacious use of *argumentum ad misericordiam* (Fulkerson 115-119), gives him the bar of chocolate "reluctantly" and without any words (Lindgren, *Roof* 67). Determined, Smidge continues to participate in the bets, trying different variables or terms, but Karlson's rhetoric of silencing does not operate rationally. At one point, Karlson suggests they share Smidge's remaining sweets; discovering Smidge has three, Karlson immediately eats one of them, arguing that three cannot be divided equally by two. After Karlson tricks Smidge out of the remaining two sweets, the narrator notes that "Smidge said nothing" (72).

The final exchanges between the two in this chapter illustrate Karlson's ability to navigate his faulty reasoning to his benefit while silencing Smidge into submission. Karlson reminds Smidge that he was never given a five öre piece "for wearing the itchy scarf" that Karlson had mentioned earlier in his fantasy description of convalescing (Lindgren, *Roof* 73). Smidge rationally responds that Karlson has not worn a scarf to earn that kind of reward; however, Karlson notes that he does not own a scarf, but if he did, he would have worn it and received the five öre piece. Karlson's final appeal for attention and satisfying his own desires in this chapter comes in the form of an illogical argument: "Should I be made to suffer because there isn't a scarf in the house, do you think?" (74). In other words, Karlson blames the absence of the scarf and not himself for not fulfilling the agreement. Lindgren does not give Smidge any dialogue in response to this plea. Instead, the last sentence of this chapter simply describes Smidge giving Karlson "his last five öre coin" (74).

Chapter 4 serves as one of the more unified chapters in this series and subverts both the superior merits of rhetorical listening as well as the normative family structures. When Smidge faces rhetorical silence by losing a series of bets to Karlson, he concludes that his mother's advice about talking through arguments was flawed:

“sensible discussions were no use at all for deciding who was right” (Lindgren, *Roof* 72). The series of bets in this chapter could hardly be described as “sensible,” but rather as indicative of another trait of Karlson’s narcissism: being “interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends” (“Narcissistic” 670). In this instance, he uses Smidge for chocolate and motherly attention and, as a queer narcissistic man-child, rejects normative familial binaries to satisfy his needs by tailoring faulty non-normative arguments against a child to his benefit.

#### *Manipulating Rhetoric for Karlson’s Appetites*

As seen thus far, Karlson uses his queer rhetoric to silence and to serve his primal, man-child needs for food and attention as part of his overall queer sensibilities. The final book, *The World’s Best Karlson*, includes a second example of rhetorical silencing, this time with an authority figure, where Karlson identifies a fallacious argument to get what he wants and reinforce his narcissistic lack of empathy. In Chapter 5, “Karlson Does Some Tasty Tirritation,” Smidge insists that Karlson stay hidden from both Uncle Julius and Miss Crawley (Lindgren 100), but Karlson appears and demands that Miss Crawley, who is looking after Smidge while his parents are away on a trip, give him a drop scone. Miss Crawley, angry with Karlson, wants Smidge to “answer yes or no to a simple question” (114): did Smidge’s mother say she was supposed to feed Karlson? Smidge is presented with an ethical dilemma of either being honest to the vicarious family-authority figure or placating his charismatic man-child friend.

After Smidge hedges answering the question twice, Miss Crawley bluntly demands he answer yes or no, deeming that it should be easy to give that kind of response. Karlson disagrees and identifies Miss Crawley’s use of the fallacy that rhetorician Andrea Lunsford and her co-authors would describe as the either-or argument (433). To prove his point, he asks her a particularly tricky question of his own: “Have you stopped drinking brandy first thing in the morning?” (Lindgren, *World’s Best* 114). Douglas Walton would call this an example of both a fallacious complex and loaded question. It is complex because “the presupposition is a conjunctive proposition,” and it is loaded because “it has a presupposition that the respondent is not committed to” (Walton 381). In this case, Miss Crawley has not agreed to the suggestion that she drinks brandy in the morning, and no matter how she answers, she cannot win against Karlson’s trick question. She realizes this and is silenced: “Miss Crawley gave a gasp and seemed to be about to choke. She tried to speak but couldn’t get a word out” (Lindgren, *World’s Best* 114).

Smidge suggests that an affirmative answer to Karlson's question will help, but this makes Miss Crawley angry at him, so he tries to rectify the situation by saying "No, no, she *hasn't* stopped" (Lindgren, *World's Best* 114). Unfortunately, this only makes things worse: Karlson retorts that "Drunkenness leads to nothing but misery" (114), which prompts her to succumb to Karlson's rhetorical silencing. She cannot speak but instead "gave a sort of gurgle and sank down onto a chair" (114–115). When Smidge verbally recognizes Karlson's question as rhetorically faulty, Karlson tells Miss Crawley, "Silly you, now you can see that a yes or no answer won't always work . . . give me some drop scones!" (115).

This scene again reinforces Karlson's ability to rhetorically silence and undermine the normative authority through his use of queer reasoning. Karlson's complex, loaded question succeeded in rhetorically silencing Miss Crawley in the moment, and his demand for scones serves as another "interpersonally exploitative" example of his narcissistic behavior to satisfy his gluttony ("Narcissistic" 670). These examples of Karlson's non-normative logic show how he silences members of the normative world of Stockholm for his own amusement, especially when those people intend to silence Karlson or prevent him from satisfying his own pleasures.

### The Charisma of Queer Karlson's Function as a Narcissistic, Silencing Man-Child

Given Karlson's consistent narcissistic impulses throughout the series, the reader may wonder why Smidge finds Karlson endearing. Zarębski labels Karlson "one of the most problematic figures in Astrid Lindgren's oeuvre." Edström argues that Karlson "is unique in his limitless selfishness and self-satisfaction, a figure who primarily wants to satisfy his own desires. [. . .] He is possessive, tyrannical, boastful, and untruthful" (138). Yet, even though Karlson proudly displays his narcissism again and again, Smidge at times responds to Karlson's behavior almost in a maternal manner, protesting in a minimal capacity, expressing concern over his well-being as a guardian, but overall finding himself enamored with him. True, there are moments in the series where Smidge resists certain man-child tactics of Karlson, specifically in the second and third books after Smidge has developed a bond with him. For instance, he tells Karlson to be quiet while they watch Miss Crawley on TV (Lindgren, *Flies Again* 178), he urges Karlson to stop playing with his mother's "elegant cake plate" and throwing it in the air (*Flies Again* 179–180),

and he even tries to dissuade Karlson from shooting his toy pistol and disturbing the neighbours (*World's Best* 67). But most of the time, Karlson does not listen to the admonitions.

Despite these pockets of resistance to Karlson's rhetorical silencing and lack of empathy for others, Smidge overwhelmingly accepts Karlson as he is. As mentioned earlier, Karlson's charisma can be traced to his queerness, and one way to appreciate that charisma is through Smidge's positive responses to Karlson's presence and action. From the beginning, Smidge is described as the lonely, youngest child in a family unit without someone to connect with (Lindgren, *Roof* 5-6); naturally, he is enchanted by the queerness of Karlson as an opportunity for friendship. Despite Karlson breaking his toy engine in the first chapter of *Karlson on the Roof*, Lindgren notes in the second chapter that "Smidge suddenly found himself longing for Karlson" (17). In this same chapter, Karlson's infectious charisma inspires Smidge to engage in what I call "sassy mimesis," where he mimics one or more of Karlson's verbal or physical mannerisms, such as when "Smidge flicked his fingers in the same superior sort of way as Karlson had done, to make Mum understand that the bookcase episode really wasn't anything to make a fuss about" (16). While this mimesis does not convince his mother, it shows the reader the immediate effect Karlson has had on Smidge's internalization of Karlson's queer persona.

Smidge's affection for Karlson can also be witnessed when he laughs at his actions, whether they be pranks on Miss Crawley or Uncle Julius (Lindgren, *World's Best* 121), or an outrageous pillow fight (89), or Karlson's general outlook on life (213). But the poignant scene at the beginning of Chapter 5 of *The World's Best Karlson* effectively relays the adoration Smidge has for Karlson:

But it was still strange how quiet and dull and sort of grey everything went as soon as Karlson wasn't there. However difficult it was to keep him in order, Smidge still always missed him when they were apart. (Lindgren, *World's Best* 95-96)

Metaphorically speaking, Karlson has brought color from his queer spaces into Smidge's grey, normative world and has ignited a desire within Smidge for more of that queerness. This desire for more color, for more Karlson, for more queerness connects to what Kidd notes about the similarities between "academic queer theory" and "queer theory for kids," specifically in points 1 through 3 that address subverting "the normal and normative" (113). In point 3, Kidd notes

that in both fields queer theory “[a]pproaches topics from surprising angles, takes unpredictable twists and turns in content and form. It surprises and delights, if sometimes vexes” (113). This description sounds strikingly similar to how scholars like Westin and Edström have described Karlson, whose enigmatic queer persona pushes against normativity in unique ways thanks to Lindgren’s creating a queer man-child who “surprises and delights, if sometimes vexes” Smidge on a consistent basis with his narcissistic, rhetorical silencing.

But, as Glenn notes, silence and silencing can serve positive, “meaningful” purposes, too (14). Throughout this book series, Karlson’s narcissistic, paleocortex, rhetorical silencing can be viewed on a macrolevel as a way of pushing back against the normative world trying to silence, hide, or impede his queer visibility. Whenever a character from the normative world stands in his way in terms of potentially having fun, satisfying his wants, or enjoying his freedom, Karlson interprets that as a violation of his foundational identity. In *Karlson Flies Again*, Smidge’s parents are upset at the news that Karlson has returned because he is wild and disturbs the normative family structure; consequently, Smidge is forced to promise not to tell anyone about Karlson’s presence (Lindgren 44–46). But Karlson’s queer presence cannot be silenced. This tension between Karlson’s queer presence and potential upheaval of the normative world continues in *The World’s Best Karlson* when Smidge and his family again try to silence and hide Karlson for his own protection against those seeking the reward money. Instead, Karlson silences any normative, institutional logic against him because he does not operate on the same terms as those in normative spaces. By the end of the series, Karlson has revealed himself to the world as the UFO in an ultimate act of queer visibility to prevent his own queerness from being silenced. Collecting the reward money about his own identity powerfully reveals that Karlson can function in the real world on his own terms.

As the last chapter reveals, Smidge allows Karlson to have the last word of the book as a way of showing an appreciation for Karlson’s queer, primal behavior. And Smidge is not the only one enamored with Karlson. The official Astrid Lindgren website notes that Karlson “is the most popular character of them all [in Russia]. With his irreverent attitude toward the establishment, he probably had a very important function to fill in the former Soviet Union” (“Karlsson”). In fact, according to the website, the Soviet Ambassador in Stockholm once told Lindgren that at one time, the Bible and *Karlson on the Roof* were two books likely to be found in most houses in Russia.

Why is Karlson loved by so many readers when he consistently loves only himself? Perhaps Karlson's queerness inspires more visibility of others who also resist normative traditions. Olga Maeots notes that Karlson was so popular in the Soviet Union because "Lindgren's book, without being didactic, proved that one should first of all be himself, that every person should be respected for his or her individuality" (22). This was a revolutionary idea, and certainly, Karlson's character exudes such a queer individuality that gives himself (and others) permission to go for what he wants without fear of consequences from the normative world.

Maeots' comments about how Karlson inspires authenticity connect well with Zarebski's argument for the redemptive value of Karlson's playful use of language. Zarebski argues that Karlson's persona "helps the reader open [up] to otherness, to see how it might be to deal, or live, with someone who either plays by different rules, or who pointedly breaks the rules of ordinary language games." If "otherness" is still considered synonymous with my use of the word "queer" in this discussion, the metaphorical implications of queer diversity that Karlson offers to a child audience can be appreciated. In this sense, Karlson embodies queer possibilities, wish fulfilments, and futurities. As Edström points out, Karlson

exemplifies the dream of power, the desire for pleasure, the wish to fly, the need to challenge and do exactly as we like, our wish to be the biggest and most beautiful in the world. In him, all this is made visible. (Edström 138-139)

This desire to fly and possess the strength to resist conforming to normative reproductive expectations connects well with Halberstam's comment that

queer subcultures offer us an opportunity to redefine the binary of adolescence and adulthood that structures so many inquiries into subcultures. Precisely because many queers refuse and resist the heteronormative imperative of home and family, they also prolong the periods of their life devoted to subcultural participation. (Halberstam 161)

While Karlson's presence may be officially known to the mainstream heteronormative world by the end of the series, he remains a queer man-child with no intention of compromising his self-awareness or separated living arrangements on the roof. His narcissism and silencing of those who are against his own needs for queer visibility and

attention guarantee an indeterminate, prolonged time participating within the queer subculture of white queer man-children.

When discussing Lindgren's more famous literary character, Pippi Longstocking, Maria Nikolajeva notes that "Adapting the favorite concept of queer theory, normativity, to the issues of children's literature, we can say that Pippi questions adult normativity" (68). In a similar manner, Karlson complicates societal expectations of adult-child interactions through his narcissistic lack of social courtesies that highlight his queer relationship to the normative world. Karlson's version of a man-child character accentuates his primal needs that govern his actions throughout the narrative, which includes a need for attention and queer visibility through his trademark narcissism, even if that means rhetorically silencing Smidge and adults in the process. Consequently, his paleocortex-driven behavior, amplified by his queer logic, invites Smidge to both appreciate and silently question the social structure he himself inhabits. Man-child characters are popular because of their unconventional behaviors, not despite them. As such, Karlson's narcissism makes him an extremely popular and memorable queer literary man-child in texts for children, and I think Karlson himself would agree with that statement.

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## Notes

1 All of my references to titles, character names, and spellings are from the Oxford University Press English translations from 2008 and 2009.

2 I would like to thank Elina Druker who translated parts of Westin's article into English for me. I would also like to thank Elina for recommending that I research Karlson in the first place as part of my interest in man-child characters. Original text: "den teknologiserade kroppen eller kroppen som en ingenjörprodukt."

3 Original text: "en varelse som svävar fritt mellan olika zoner och positioner: mellan jord och himmel, mellan barn och vuxen."

4 Original text: "avsky, förundran och passion."

5 A few contemporary man-child examples from USA TV could include Andy Dwyer in *Parks and Recreation*, Jim Hopper from *Stranger Things* who was called a "manbaby" ("Chapter Seven"), and a version of Pietro Maximoff from *WandaVision* who was labelled a "man child" ("All-New").

6 Mia Österlund discusses the phenomenon of *queer aging* in connection to Alf Prøysen's Mrs. Pepperpot series, specifically "the awkward feeling of not being at ease with the age you biologically occupy" (35). Karlson's age ambiguity might be another way of thinking about *queer aging*, not because Karlson is at odds with his own physical and biological persona, but because Smidge and other normative characters around him are challenged to mentally process how and where Karlson fits on the child-adult spectrum.

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