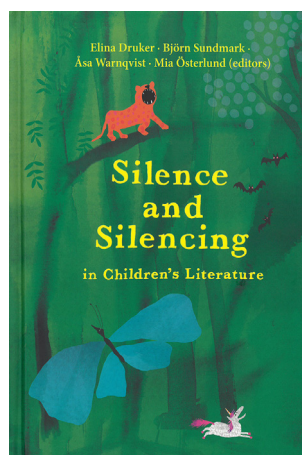


Review/Recension

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**SILENCE AND SILENCING
IN CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE**

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In children's literature, what is unsaid or omitted can be as important as what is said or included. The anthology *Silence and Silencing in Children's Literature* (2021) springs from the 2019 Congress of the International Research Society for Children's Literature in Stockholm, Sweden, the main organisers of which are also the editors of the book. The collection includes keynotes from the Congress and selected chapters based on conference presentations. The anthology centres around the complexity of *silence*, which can denote a state or an action. As the blurb says, the "concept of silence and silencing evokes questions of self in relation to others, of language and of communication, even of what it is that makes us human." Silence and silencing, then, are rich ideas to explore in the context of childhood and children's texts. As several contributors note, children have often been expected to be "seen and not heard." Furthermore, as Emma Reay reminds us in her excellent chapter on child protagonists in wordless video games, ideological constructions of childhood often hinge on the concept of the child's blankness. However, silence is more than lack of space or absence of noise. Rather, silence occupies space and is an important part of meaning-making, as Karen Coats effectively demonstrates in her chapter on blank spaces in children's texts. Silence and solitude can also be desirable states, as Boel Westin's chapter on Tove Jansson's Moomin books shows. Silencing, by contrast, is closely related to power and domination, and to giving and taking voice.

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This is a large anthology with nineteen chapters (not including the editors' preface and introduction) divided across five thematic sections, "Multiple Facets of Silence and Silencing," "Narrating Silence," "Addressing Aetnormative Silences," "Structural and Societal Silences and Silencing," and "Trauma and Traumatic Silences." Contributors draw on literary examples from a variety of countries and also show how texts can cross national, linguistic, and temporal borders. Silence and silencing are explored with reference to a range of different texts, including children's classics, lullabies, graphic novels, and video games, and employing a wide range of different theoretical and critical approaches.

The book cover may have presented a challenge to illustrator Linda Bondestam; how exactly does one illustrate silence and silencing? The cover illustration depicts animals in a green forest. On the back cover, two small monkeys bookend the blurb, while a braying donkey envelops the book's ISBN number. The front cover presents different aspects of animal sounds and silence. A leopard in a tree seems to be roaring, but could also be yawning, evoking the silence of sleep. A blue butterfly represents the noiseless flapping of wings, while bats illustrate ultra-sonic noise, which cannot be registered by human ears and is therefore read as silence. At the bottom, a small unicorn flees the scene. Such creatures of myth and imagination could be silenced by being consigned to non-existence, much like the invisible animals in Linda Bondestam and Ulf Stark's poetry picturebook *Djur som ingen sett utom vi* (*Animals No-one Has Seen Except Us*, 2016). Invisibility, then, can be a form of disempowered silence, as Boel Westin's discussion of Tove Jansson's "Det osynliga barnet" ("The Invisible Child", 1962) shows.

Throughout the anthology, issues related to problematic representation in children's texts are interwoven with the question of giving voice. When it comes to racist and stereotypical representation in children's literature, is silencing the solution? Is it sometimes better to create more noise and more debate, giving space for more critical voices? The editors discuss Temi Odumosu's presentation on colonial imagery and Maria Laakso's real-time reaction to this presentation in the form of a cartoon. By including Odumosu's keynote in its original format and Laakso's cartoon response, the editors aimed to "give space and voice to alternative academic formats" (19). It is a little jarring, therefore, when the editors go on to discuss the choice of Stina Wirsén as the artist who created the conference logo. As the editors point out, some of Wirsén's books have been part of a heated debate related to cultural and ethnic stereotyping in children's books.

The editors ask whether it is “mandatory for some visual voices to be silenced after such debates?” (19). Perhaps not, but given the wealth of illustrators in Sweden, one could question the choice to give voice precisely to those who have been criticised for representing the colonial imagery evoked in Odumosu’s presentation.

These issues related to representation and the “stickiness” of colonialism and stereotypes continue to surface in several of the chapters in the anthology, notably in the first chapter in the section “Multiple Facets of Silence and Silencing.” Vanessa Joosen’s contribution is a strong opening to the section and the anthology. In addition to exploring questions related to representation and censorship, this chapter also discusses the key concepts of silence, silencing, and voice in the context of the aesthetics, reception, and scholarly study of children’s literature. Drawing on recent winners of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, Joosen shows that children’s literature critics appreciate silence both as a theme and as an aesthetic practice. Joosen argues that the field of children’s literature seeks to give voice to a greater variety of authors and illustrators, while questioning the authority of oppressive voices. She points to the tension between celebrating narratives that promote giving voice to children and the long tradition of censorship of children’s literature. In the second chapter of this section, Boel Westin investigates silence in Tove Jansson’s Moomin books. Drawing on Annika J. Lindskog’s language categories “the unsayable” (which cannot be expressed in words), “the unsaid” (which could be spoken, but is not) and “the unspoken” (something not yet formulated in words), Westin explores the functions and meanings of silence in the Moomin stories from the perspectives of senses, feelings, gender, time, and nature. Silence, often depicted positively, emerges as a central concept in the Moomin universe. In the final chapter in this section, Robert A. Davis examines popular European and North American lullabies. The chapter explores different forms of silence and silencing, such as the liminal space between song and the silence of sleep, the figure of the preverbal infant who is “silenced” by the lullaby, the uneasy parallels between sleep and death, and the silencing of the (mostly) anonymous female creators and singers of lullabies.

The second thematic section in the anthology, “Narrating Silence,” consists of three chapters examining the ways in which silence and silencing – or, conversely, sound and voice – structure the narratives in children’s literature. The first is Anna Kérchy’s reading of Lewis Carroll’s Alice tales, in which the author demonstrates how the tension between “sound and sense” (88) in Carroll’s literary nonsense

invites playful reader interaction and reading aloud, thereby subverting conventional and “adult” literary representation and giving voice and verbal agency to implied child readers and authors. In the second chapter, which is perhaps one of the strongest chapters in the book in terms of theories of silence, Karen Coats considers silence as a formal quality of text and image in children’s books by examining the blank spaces between and around the words on a page. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, Coats analyses picturebooks, graphic novels, and poetry to show that the blank spaces, gaps, or moments of silence in children’s texts become metaphors for the ethical engagement between a reading self and other people. This engagement resists the reader’s desire to close the gaps in the text, instead allowing indeterminate, incomplete, and paradoxical meanings to flourish. The final chapter in this section is Ann-Sofie Persson’s reading of two Swedish children’s series about horses. Through the theoretical lenses of ecocriticism, animal studies, and posthumanism, Persson demonstrates that the horse in the stories alternates between being anthropomorphised or depicted as Other, regardless of whether the horse is the first-person narrator or whether there is a human narrator and focaliser.

The third thematic section entitled “Addressing Aetonormative Silences” comprises four chapters investigating the norms of adult/child hierarchies. In the first chapter, Emma Reay successfully combines research methods from games studies and critical theory from childhood studies and children’s literature studies to investigate connections between silence and childhood in two wordless video games in which the player controls faceless child avatars, who must remain silent and unseen to survive. Reay argues that these games challenge aetonormative hierarchies by drawing attention to and then subverting cultural and ideological constructions of children. Reay’s use of theory on constructions of childhood makes this chapter a particularly valuable contribution to the book. In the second chapter in this section, Sara Pankenier Weld argues that literature studies should move away from the “bifurcation of audiences” (154) and that literature for children and adults should be studied together to increase our understanding of both. Using the example of Russian writer Daniil Kharm’s, she examines the figure of the little old lady, a recurring character in Kharm’s fiction for children and adults. This marginalised figure becomes an embodiment of writing, standing in for Kharm’s own silenced authorship and marginalisation under the Soviet regime. In the third chapter, Lance Weldy posits Astrid Lindgren’s Karlsson on the Roof as a queer man-child character

who resists the traditional adult/child binary. Karlsson's queerness allows the child reader to notice the weaknesses of normative institutions, while appreciating the potential diversity of non-normative family structures. Finally, drawing on queer, feminist, and post-humanist theories, Kathleen Forrester examines the egg-switch trope from H. C. Andersen's *Den Grimme Ælling* (*The Ugly Duckling*, 1843) in the context of two contemporary children's picturebooks, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Justin Richardson, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole and *The Odd Egg* (2008) by Emily Gravett. In these stories, the egg becomes a site for exploring and challenging naturalised categories of kinship.

The third section, "Structural and Societal Silences and Silencing," comprises six chapters, starting with Temi Odumosu's keynote lecture on decolonising imagery. Odumosu explains the choice to present this in its original format, noting that her keynote deliberately used pauses to "create a shared space for reflection and rehabilitation – an effect that would be lost in translation if I were to adapt my presentation to the conventions of academic writing" (206). Reading this contribution was an unusual experience, especially because most of the images from the original lecture have been replaced by image descriptions. However, these visual omissions, as well as the verbalised "pauses" between each slide, do recreate a sense of anticipation that might also have been felt by Odumosu's original audience. Maria Laakso's chapter is a cartoon response to Odumosu's keynote, created while Laakso attended the keynote. As such, it interacts with some of the deliberate gaps in Odumosu's text and illustrates Laakso's emotional and intellectual engagement with Odumosu's lecture. For instance, the racist "golliwog" figure, which has been deliberately omitted from Odumosu's published contribution, in Laakso's cartoon becomes an uncomfortable recurring character, effectively illustrating Odumosu's concept of "cultural cloning" (229). Reading these two contributions in tandem has made me consider that academic anthologies should to a greater extent open up for contributions other than conventional academic articles. In the third contribution to this section, Andrea Mei-Ying Wu examines archival materials related to American children's writer Munro Leaf's 1964 trip to Taiwan. Wu discusses archives as sites for the construction of knowledge rather than neutral repositories of historical materials; selection of materials for archives inevitably involves silences and omissions. Herdiana Hakim's chapter investigates the depiction of Chinese Indonesians in children's literature published after the collapse of the authoritarian regime in Indonesia in 1998.

She shows that while several texts reproduce stereotypes, some are “counter-stories,” offering more nuanced portrayals of Chinese Indonesians. The final two chapters in this section deal with various forms of censorship. Faye Dorcas Yung reveals that children’s literature publishing in Hong Kong, far from enjoying the freedom of a free market economy, is in fact dominated by state-owned monopolies, with little space for local voices. Censorship by the Chinese Communist Party happens both at the editorial stage and when books cross the border from warehouses in China to publishers in Hong Kong. Joshua Simpon’s chapter addresses book banning and censorship of taboo topics in children’s literature as a form of silencing. It discusses the role of children’s and young adult literature in the political discourse on section 28, a series of laws across Britain that prohibited the “promotion of homosexuality.”

The anthology ends on a dark note with three chapters on “Trauma and Traumatic Silences.” The first two chapters by Anna Karlskov Skyggebjerg and Helen King discuss books about refugees and asylum seekers respectively, while Mateusz Świetlicki’s chapter deals with the Holocaust. Witness literature, as Skyggebjerg shows, attempts to speak for victims who cannot speak for themselves because they are too young, too traumatised, or dead. Her chapter on the refugee crisis in Danish children’s literature left me speechless and in tears; a testament to the power of literature to evoke empathy and speak for those who are silenced in the most brutal ways. Discussing Beverley Naidoo’s *The Other Side of Truth* (2000), which narrates the trauma faced by Nigerian siblings seeking asylum in Britain, King demonstrates that the site of trauma-healing can simultaneously be the site of social change. Silence can also be a way of representing the unspeakable. In a reading of Kathy Kacer’s *Masters of Silence* (2019), Świetlicki shows that, while silence may be the result of trauma, non-verbal articulation can become a coping mechanism and the most appropriate way of communicating grief and loss.

Unusually, this is an anthology in which the majority of contributions have already been published elsewhere, either in the theme on “Silence and Silencing in Children’s Literature” in *Barnboken: Journal of Children’s Literature Research* or in the special issue of *International Research in Children’s Literature*. The editors justify the publication of a separate anthology by arguing that a book represents a “more solid manifestation” of the 24th IRSL Congress (15). This decision could itself be linked to silence, silencing, and giving voice. As the editors write, as “academics and critics we always have to ask which

voices are heard, recorded, written, and published" (15). It could be noted that nonfiction is given less voice in this anthology; the scholarly focus is overwhelmingly on fiction. Nevertheless, having experienced how the different chapters in this anthology speak (or whisper, or shout) to one another, I agree that this collection is a needed and highly valuable scholarly contribution, and one which gives a stronger voice to the silences and silencing operating within the complex, varied, and sometimes paradoxical field of children's literature.

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