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Sharing Maternal Fantasies

Reading *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* as an Alter-Tale to the Good Mom Myth

Abstract: Adult characters in children's literature often remain in the "blind space", Vanessa Joosen observes (Adulthood). Whereas this is true for a lot of children's books, there are also picturebooks that focus on mothers, often designed as tributes to motherhood. Within this array of books on mothers, however, some offer a more nuanced portrayal of motherhood than others. Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld (Meanwhile in My Imaginary World, 2018) by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge shares a mother's imagination with the readers. The mother's inner world is connected to shared pleasures, which are easily considered to be "childlike". By using a mother's perspective in a picturebook intended for children and adults Bjärbo and AdBåge create an intergenerational experience. Furthermore, the depicted scenes can be understood as an alter-tale to the myth of the good mother that propagates self-sacrifice and total responsibility for the wellbeing of the child. Through the evocation of alternative ways of mothering, stories of simple ways of resistance are told in the picturebook. Building on concepts and insights from sociology, age studies and children's literature studies and the textual and visual analysis of Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld, I reflect on the way picturebooks have the affordances to create an intergenerational understanding of daily situations and, by doing so, could contribute to breaking the good mom myth.

Keywords: picturebooks, motherhood, childness, kinship, age studies

Long before they reach the age of motherhood, women are confronted with norms and expectations about how to be a “good” mother.¹ Modelled differently throughout times, cultures, and even within European countries, the “good mother” in western, contemporary societies is expected to be selfless, emotionally present, and responding to “natural” needs like breast-feeding (Badinter). Even though “the Swedish model is the vanguard of European family policies”,² with considerable efforts made to reassure work-life balance and gender equality, Swedish and other mothers are not freed from the ideals of the “good mom” (Badinter 134). This “new momism and intense mothering demand that mothers at all times place their children’s needs and desires before their own” (Åström 114). Guides, workshops, television series, podcasts and all kinds of expert or lay advice perpetuate this “good mom myth”, an unattainable and ever-changing idealisation of mothers (e.g., Douglas and Michaels; Rose). Children’s literature likewise reproduces ideas on motherhood and mothering: “Images embedded in and reinforced through book-related toys, TV series, films and picture books establish scripts and schemas for mothering that children come to expect and mothers strive to enact” (Fraustino and Coats 12). Reading books to young children, we spread the ideas we may be struggling with; not only affirming these norms and expectations to ourselves, but also sharing them with the next generations.³

At the same time, mothers try to voice their own, often differing experiences, assembling alternative discourses of what it means to be a mother. Motherhood memoirs like *A Life’s Work* (2001) by Rachel Cusk or *Mothers, Fathers and Others* (2021) by Siri Hustvedt have become popular, as well as blogs like *Mumsnet* or *Project Mama* that communicate various perspectives on being a mother. Such narratives may create, what Jane Bennett labels, “alter-tales” to the hegemonic discourse on motherhood: counterstories that are “not invaders of the major tale” (8) but highlighting particular moments and experiences.

In this article, I explore how picturebooks fit into the felt need to “unmask motherhood by documenting the lived reality of mothering” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 3), and how they do so in a format that does not remain caught up within a community of mothers but is rather shared across generations. Building on the concepts of childness (Hollindale) and the childlike (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*), as well as on picturebook studies and motherhood studies, I argue that showing that “children and adults are akin to one another” (Gubar

453) could contribute to the deconstruction of dominating ideologies and become the starting point of intergenerational dialogue.

Indeed, alter-tales complicating too limited constructions of motherhood may be spread much earlier than at the age of motherhood, amongst others in children's media. Together with other texts aimed at (new) mothers, children's picturebooks can be considered "paratexts of parenting" that "offer scripts for mothers to follow in order to realize a cultural ideal" (Coats and Fraustino 108). While "[p]opular picture books, especially those about mother-child relationships, contribute to the subliminal construction of desire for the traditional good mother" (Fraustino 218), several other picturebooks can be found in which child focalizers attest to "the fact that their mothers have lives beyond the family" (Joosen, "Look" 149).

To make my hypothesis more concrete, I explore how the Swedish picturebook *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* (Meanwhile in My Imaginary World) may help disrupting the image of an ideal mother through the usage of childness, "the quality of being a child" (Hollindale 47). This book from 2018 by author Lisa Bjärbo and illustrator Emma AdBåge is described as "en kärleksförklaring till dagdrömmandet och fantasin (och till vardagen, som inte är så pjåkig den heller" (a declaration of love to daydreaming and fantasy (and to everyday life, which is also not that bad)).⁴ As the front cover indicates, readers follow a mother daydreaming while sitting in her kitchen with two children (image 1).

Together with the messy table and loose linework, the handwritten title induces a sense of imperfection. Alongside daydreaming, this turns out to be an important element in fighting the idealisation of motherhood. Indeed, "no mother can live the idealized perfection of the mask of motherhood, to unmask oneself is to 'out' oneself as a flawed, if not failed, mother" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 4). After a brief overview of the representations of mothers in picturebooks, and the way these may affect cultural scripts, I turn to a textual and visual close analysis of *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* to show how it addresses both adults and children in challenging the "good mom" myth.

Mothers in Picturebooks

Alongside, and drawing on, motherhood studies, children's literature scholars have reflected on motherhood as well (e.g., Alston; Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki; Fraustino and Coats; Joosen, *Adulthood*, "Childlike Parents", "Look"; Trites) although to a lesser



Image 1. Cover. From *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* (2018) by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge. © Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge.

extent than one would expect, especially given the “vital role literary mothers play in books for young readers, as they of course do in actual children’s lives”, as Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats rightly point out in the introduction to their edited volume *Mothers in Children’s and Young Adult Literature* (2016) (4). Since norms and expectations regarding motherhood are an example of the cultural scripts and schemas people start building during childhood, we need to be aware of how these are inscribed in children’s literature.

Scripts and schemas are memorized bundles of information that determine expected sequences or categories. As John Stephens argues, they can be affected by fiction: "Because narrative both evokes scripts and schemas and has a capacity to modify their components, readers may develop a new cognitive map that interrogates their internalized ideology" (141). While ideologies of children's books are often examined with a children's audience in mind, I would like to stress the effect maternal portrayals in children's literature may have on mothers reading together with their children (see also Bullen and Nichols).

In their recent overview of maternal representation in Spanish picturebooks, Giulia De Sarlo, Elena Guichot-Muñoz, and Coral I. Hunt-Gómez found that the characterization of mothers is (slowly) becoming more complex, no longer limited to "a universal experience of self-denial", with some of the books under study giving "a genuine voice to mothers and allow[ing] them to shape - together with their children, specifically their daughters - an identity in constant transformation and redefinition" (217). Dorina K. Lazo Gilmore shows how "[m]others from ethnic minority backgrounds depicted in children's picture books reject the mainstream 'good mother' model and prove more multidimensional, serving as a different mothering example for the future" (97). Indeed, the "good mom myth" is strongly entangled with white, middle-class, heterosexual culture (Kawash), which could explain why "minority mothers are better equipped to defy the myth of the 'good mother'" (Gilmore 109). Often, feminist aims clash with the portrayal of a trustworthy, protecting mother. Referring to Daniel Greenstone's reading of the *Olivia* picturebooks (2000–2006) by Ian Falconer, Roberta Seelinger Trites notes that "within feminist literature for the young [...] mothers are either subsumed by the act of mothering, or they live in conflict with their children, especially if those children are daughters" (149). Reflecting on the portrayal of Olivia and her mother, Trites concludes that "it's easier to be a six-year-old-feminist than it is to be a feminist mother" (149).

Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld, the case-study of this article, fits within the tendency to create picturebooks that acknowledge "the ambivalence of maternal feelings" (De Sarlo et al. 217). In accordance with the progressive tradition within the Nordic picturebook, other Swedish picturebooks likewise present a more complex representation of mothering. For example, Pija Lindenbaum's *När Åkes mamma glömde bort* (When Owen's Mom Breathed Fire, 2006) tells the story of a mother's depression; the classic series around *Alfons Åberg* by Gunilla Bergström (first published in 1972, and still available) shows

that (single) parenting can be uptaken by fathers as well; while the more recent series on *Olle och Bolle* by Charlotte Lannebo and Ellen Ekman (2017-) shows how tough single mothering can be. However, none of these books has an adult focalisor, which I consider to be an important go-between in creating empathy for the mother.

A Children's Medium as Go-Between?

When taking a very conservative stance on the medium and on childhood, using a picturebook to discuss motherhood could be considered as an appropriation of a children's medium for adult concerns. One may judge that the ambiguous feelings around motherhood should not inflict on a child's need for attachment. While "[t]he secure-base schema of the mother/child dynamic is one that is often challenged in children's literature" through "'bad' mother figures" (Palkovich 178), the idea endures that "good" mothering is "child-centred and time-consuming" (Sutherland 312). Indeed, as Vanessa Joosen has pointed out with reference to Anthony Browne's *My Mum* (2005), many children's books portraying family, and, more particularly, mothers, are "presented as a child's laudation of [their] mother" that "can easily be interpreted as a normative model for good motherhood" ("Look" 148).

Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld taunts this representation, not only by offering a more nuanced portrayal of the mother, but also through its use of a first-person narrator and focalisor who is the mother herself. This complicates the usual perspective offered by children's books that typically starts from the child: while the chosen wording in *My Mum* by Browne "stresses the child's perspective in depicting his mother" (Joosen, "Look" 149), the interplay of the adult I-narrator and "camera-eye" pictures of the mother in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* does not favor a single perspective. In fact, in my opinion, what makes this book so powerful is its invitation to shared reading and conversation, stretching the identification options of an adult focalisor to children.

First, *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* can be considered as a crossover picturebook, appealing to both children and adults (Beckett). According to the author, it is aimed at readers aged 4 to 104 (Bjärbo, "Tjuvtitt"). This distinguishes the picturebook from a growing group of picturebook narratives "seen from the new mother's perspective [...] about the ups and downs of motherhood" (Ommundsen 228-229). Second, the story of the mother in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* shows similarities to life writing in its evocation of lived experiences. While

there are no paratextual or documentary indications of an autobiographic background (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2007), readers who follow Lisa Bjärbo's blog and Instagram page *Onekligen* (Undeniably) can easily trace relations between her persona as a mother and the daydreaming presented in the picturebook. The value of the picturebook is not in its authenticity, but rather in the way that readers can relate to the slice of life that the narrative offers. Indeed, the narrative depicts more or less generic fantasies, recognisable for several mothers (and fathers or other caregivers) and children alike, as I will develop in the next section.

Even so, the use of the mother as the central character in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* invites readers to focus on the disparities between the way motherhood is personally experienced and socially represented. Literary narratives with a focus on the mother's perspective and personal experiences could help broadening limiting representations of motherhood and translate motherhood into individually performed and experienced mothering (Podnieks and O'Reilly). Significantly, the (lay) reviews that are to be found online mostly follow the summary provided by the publishing house and focus on daydreaming as a central element, without mentioning the adult focaliser. Exceptionally, one reviewer (Viktoria) declares the book to be "ett riktigt fint mammaporträtt" (a really wonderful portrait of a mother) and refers to her own children to judge to what extent child readers may develop "förståelse för att mammor också kan tänka och vilja saker. Att mammor tydligen också kan vilja låtsas" (an understanding that mothers may also think and want things. That mothers apparently may also like to play pretend). In what follows, I explore how the affordances of the text and illustrations prompt readers to reflect on motherhood and mothering.

Opening Motherhood through Childness

Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld opens: "Det här är jag. Så här ser jag ut." (This is me. This is what I look like) (Bjärbo and AdBåge).⁵ Right above this single line of text, a drawing in blue lines shows a middle-aged woman sitting at a table. The opposite page portrays her in more detail and in full colour, sitting at the same table, looking into the eyes of the viewer, her chin resting on her hand, an unfinished meal in front of her – the readers meet this woman in the midst of daily life, which she seems happy to share (image 2).

The following spread shows her again, now dressed up in a superman-like costume, the iconic S on the breast replaced by an



Det här är jag. Så här ser jag ut.



Image 2. The mother as/and I-narrator. From *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* (2018) by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge. © Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge.

“M”, suggesting that this mother is akin to a superhero. Just one sentence is placed over the illustration: “Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld” (Meanwhile in my imaginary world), which can be interpreted as her dreaming of being a supermom. This sequence is repeated five times, showing respectively the narrator’s food, chaos, kitchen, view, and day, and the imagined equivalents (image 3-4), resulting in a final page where the reader is addressed: “Så här ser de ut. / Mina världar, mitt liv. // Vad gör du i din låtsasvärld?” (That’s what they look like. / My worlds, my life. // What do you do in your imaginary world?).

The sparse text – one line per double page – and the illustrations demand to be filled with details. These gaps invite readers of different ages to share their expectations, and thus challenge the naturalised discourse on motherhood – or, more broadly, adulthood. Starting from daydreaming, Bjärbo anchors her picturebook in what some consider to be a foundation of childhood: “the young need to daydream – engage in wakeful story building – more than grown-ups do” (Griswold 24). Actually, this activity can be considered as an example of what Peter Hollindale coins as “childness” in *Signs of*



Det här är mitt kök. Samma som jämt.



Image 3. The kitchen. From *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* (2018) by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge. © Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge.



Image 4. The kitchen in the mother's imaginary world. From *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* (2018) by Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge. © Lisa Bjärbo and Emma AdBåge.

Childness in Children's Books (1997): "a composite made up of beliefs, values, experience, memories, expectations, approved and disapproved behaviours, observations, hopes and fears which collect and interact with each other to form ideal and empirical answers to the question 'What is a child?'" (76).

Tellingly, the imagined moments drawn in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* tie in with what current Western society considers to be typically "childlike" wishes, like eating a huge dessert at the restaurant, allowing cute, cuddly dogs to empty the plates (maybe even as an alternative to doing the dishes), or going to the swimming pool. Indeed, the childlike is often understood to be concerned with desire, indulgence and imagination (Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*). Except for one illustration in which the mother is resting on a bench, her children are always part of the imagined world – and even in that picture, a stack of plates suggests that the children are nearby. The woman seems to be dreaming of alternative ways of parenting, to the satisfaction of both children and adult. As such, the picturebook invites a shared exploration of what a good day may look like. It acknowledges possibly differing needs and opens theory of mind-exercises towards people of other age groups, in this case, the mother. In other words, young readers are invited to train their ability in attributing desires and emotions to the character of the mother (see Nikolajeva).

Throughout the book, readers are implicitly asked to take several perspectives: while the text is always narrated by a nameless I, in the pictures that I is identified as the mother, and the illustrations switch between an internal and external perspective. Actual life is pictured as focalised by the mother, while the imagined world is seen through an external observer. As Perry Nodelman points out, such illustrations play with "the subjectivity of a first-person narrator and the distanced objectivity of third-person pictures" ("The Eye and the I" 29).

Both text and image stress the parallelism of daily life and imagined life, that are depicted as equally valid, if not "real". As to the illustrations, there are no differences in the use of colour, gutters or drawing style, which may be challenging for younger readers who are still acquiring the distinction between reality and imagination – especially since the imagined scenes could happen in reality. This is stressed by regularly using the same setting in real and imaginary life: the messy kitchen, kitchen table and kitchen bench remain the same, as do the (thirsty) plants and (a lack of) decoration. The imaginary world is no longing for "another world". It takes place in the same space but other things happen – which could again be read as a critique of the "good mom" myth, as will be discussed in the next part.

While Hollindale recognises childness to be “shared ground [...] between child and adult” (47), he does not explore the reverse option, that is, how childness may help to answer and question what an adult is like. In *The Hidden Adult* (2008), Nodelman hints at this twofoldness of children’s literature as a discourse that contains elements of childhood as well as adulthood. Children’s literature, he says, “open[s] a discourse about what children are, about how they are different from adults, and about the relative merits of the different qualities” (22), a claim that Joosen further develops in *Adulthood in Children’s Literature* (2018) through the examination of how adult characters are represented “in plain sight” (7).

As opposed to many children’s books, the adult in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* does not reside in the margins of the story, to which parents are often consigned to allow their children the chance to grow and develop independently. Instead, the story opens up some of what Joosen calls the “blind space” of adulthood, aspects of adult life and psychology that many children’s books do not address (*Adulthood*). The mother is central and her narration about a shared imagined world stresses that children and mothers have needs and wishes in common. Indeed, applying the kinship model allows us to acknowledge that “development is not always linear” (Gubar 454).

What remains in the blind space here is not the adult, nor the moments she wishes for, but the cause for her daydreaming. In the diary-like entries on the left pages, small line-drawings in blue ink, the mother mostly looks sad and tired – revealing an experience of mothering that is often kept out of sight in children’s books that idealise motherhood. On the right pages, “autodiegetic pictures” that show what the narrator sees (Nodelman, “The Eye and the I” 5) disclose the daily life of the I-narrator without compromise. AdBåge’s loose and slightly cartoonish drawing style, reminiscent of sketches found in artists’ diaries, contributes to the portrayal of a flawed, realistic daily life. The reading parent, and especially the reading mother, is invited to identify with the narrator – an identification that is not immersive or total, but that offers a reference point for reflection and comparison; an antidote to many of the gleaming happy-family pictures shared via social media, and – as I will come back to – also via some children’s books.

Transforming Good Motherhood

Even though the adult narrator in *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* engages in imagining childlike activities, she does not resemble other famous

adult protagonists, such as Dr. Dolittle, extensively discussed by Nodelman (*The Hidden Adult* 19, 30–32, 43–46, 50). Next to her openness to imagination and childlike activities, the mother is shown to take up her responsibilities. She prepares food for her children, is clearly aware of the need to clean the kitchen afterwards and to do meaningful activities with her children, such as swimming. Indeed, she is not a “dissonant mother”, disrupting the expectations attached to the figure of the mother (Palkovich 182). The split between reality and fantasy does not run parallel with the split between a “good” and “bad” mother, as is, for example, the case in Neil Gaiman’s story *Coraline* (2002) (Palkovich). Yet, by focusing on the ordinariness of daydreaming – small escapes from daily life – Bjärbo creates an alter-tale to motherhood around the supposedly “childlike” coping strategy of imagining a different identity for yourself. It shows to children that adults are not always satisfied with the life they are living, and that they share ways to engage with the world around them with children.

Several elements of the picturebook work together to undermine the pressure of “good motherhood”. First, the drawing style differs from what is generally experienced as “cute”, an aesthetic category often entangled with feelings of tenderness (see Ngai). The curvy lines and soft colours of the pictures tick some of the cuteness boxes, but as a whole the illustrations refuse to be treated as innocent. AdBåge has been praised for her personal and original style in her earlier books, and the way she creates a vivid and detailed portrayal of daily life (Svensk biblioteks-förening). Her illustrations allow for imperfection, which is particularly appreciated in relation to the female body, as one reviewer on Bokus points out: “Fint att se en vanlig typ av mammakropp illustreras utan ‘retuscheringar’ med” (Good to see a regular kind of mom-body that is illustrated without “modifications”). This “representation of the adult body [...] enclosed in body positivity” is part of a larger tendency in recent Swedish picturebooks (Svenska barnboks-institutet 12).⁶ Secondly, the meal they are eating, pasta with sausage and ketchup, is not the kind of healthy, freshly cooked meal a “good mother” would serve her children. Food is seen as an indication for good motherhood, both in broad societal considerations and in children’s literature (Alston 111–123). Thirdly, these imperfect elements are also present in the imagined world, which make them even more meaningful. Just like the actual world, the mother’s “låtsasvärld” (imaginary world) contains “failures” – no perfect body, an untidy kitchen, etc. Lastly, the activities shown in the mother’s imaginary world are not available

to everyone: eating ice cream, going on a holiday, and swimming (even at the public swimming pool) require some financial freedom. As mentioned before, the “good mom” myth is entangled with class and race, with “poor and working-class mothering practices [...] commonly denigrated as bad mothering” (Kawash 980). By locating precisely these activities within the imaginary world and by portraying a kitchen and environment that do not clearly signal a middle class-setting (which could be done, for example, by showing typical design furniture, a big garden, etc.), *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* ties in with a class-awareness that has been noticed in several other recent Swedish picturebooks (Svenska barnboksinstitutet 12).

The mother’s daydreaming is not oriented towards a “perfect” life but is presented as a healthy coping mechanism that offers short escapes from the actual mothering tasks. As a matter of fact, the total devotion of time, energy and availability that goes together with the “good mom” myth, is unattainable (Badinter). In that sense, the daydreaming of the mother can be interpreted as performing “failure”, which is central to Jacqueline Rose’s view on motherhood, and “should not be viewed as catastrophic but as normal” (27). When compared to the way failing is portrayed in mommy blogs, the differences are clear. *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* offers a slice of life, but does not judge the mother, whereas bloggers and their readers regularly “defin[e] their actions through bad mother discourses”, and as such “unveil a number of standards which mothers are judged by” (Lehto 665).

Picturebook tributes to motherhood, such as the earlier mentioned Browne’s *My Mum* or Aurore Petit’s recent *Une maman c’est comme une maison* (*A Mother Is a House*, 2019), do not mention failure at all. In Petit’s book, on each double page the mother is compared to reliable, reassuring things – a “motor”, a “cocoon”, an “isle”, a “melody” – showing the mother and her baby in full harmony. Even when the mother engages in other things, like resting or reading, she remains close to the child and allows it to play (literally) on her.⁷ The final page describes her as being “like a house”, showing how the child walks off, by then knowing she offers a firm base to come back to. By comparing the mother to a house that feels like home, this picturebook demonstrates a key metaphor that is spread through children’s literature (Alston). Picturebooks of this kind are often presented as gifts for mothers(-to-be); they reinforce the “good mom myth” precisely at a time when mothers are building a relationship with their child and struggling to balance societal expectations of motherhood with their own needs and desires (Miller).

Again, *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* offers alternative ways of parenting and doing household chores and invites readers through one last question to compare these alternatives to their own imaginary worlds. The book does not give clear answers as to which options are preferred, although the closing pictures indicate that both children and mother are happy with their life as it is: the mother is lying on the bench with the two children crawling upon her. They are picking chocolate pops straight out of the box and sharing them.

Multiple interpretations are possible: one could say that the book propagates child-centred parenthood, where children are allowed to act according to their needs, exploring food, connecting with pets, enjoying swimming etc. Guilt could be felt in the interplay between actual and imagined world: good mothering is often understood to include activities that help developing skills, like swimming. One could just as well state that the book shows a mother caught up in herself, neglecting the children around her. Indeed, Bjärbo attests on her blog “Att mamman väcker så starka känslor. Har hittills hört att hon är rolig, tokig, galen, äcklig, dålig på att städa, cool och att hon ‘verkar ta bättre hand om hundar än om sina barn’” (That the mother stirs such strong emotions. Have heard so far that she is fun, nuts, crazy, disgusting, bad at cleaning, cool and that she “seems to take better care of dogs than of her children”) (“Tjuvtitt”).

These reactions testify to the way the book asks readers to fill gaps and give meaning, building on the scripts and schemas they have internalised (cf. Stephens). The openness of the picturebook and the narrator’s explicit invitation to have a conversation about imaginary worlds touches upon a wish that is inherent to children’s literature, symbolised by “the celebration of readerly gaps in picturebooks”, that is “a desire to trigger *unpredictable responses* branching out from that line of reflection” (Beauvais).⁸ In *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld*, these gaps strengthen the affordances, and maybe even hope, of the picturebook to create an alter-tale that subverts contemporary dominant discourses on motherhood. Through the presentation of alternative scripts of mothering, mothering is presented as consisting of several possibilities. They show that mothers are not always able to offer their “perfect” or wished-for version of the day, nor need to be available every single moment. Through the usage of “childlike” wishes and an adult narrator and focalisor, *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* creates two possible modes of identification, that is, “categorical”, through a shared identity or social role – the mother – or “situational”, through shared experiences – here “childness” (Hogan 206).

Conclusion

“Performing bad motherhood is a survival strategy, not a revolution,” Mari Lehto concludes after her analysis of four Finnish mommy blogs. She continues: “mothers find themselves being criticised both for absorbing the directives of intensive parenting and rejecting them” (669). The ambivalence she traces runs through children’s literature as well: together with disruptive portrayals of parents, other adults show the expected behaviour (Joosen, “Childlike parents”), so that well-known scripts are never entirely dismissed.

Even though I consider *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* to have the affordances to act as an alter-tale, a similar ambivalence can be found in this picturebook. On the one hand, one could say that *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* adheres to “good” motherhood, or “intensive mothering” by allowing children to be constantly part of the mother’s imagined world. Indeed, the picturebook does not show what happens to the adult character when she is not mothering, but narrates what happens “samtidigt”, at the same time. On the other hand, by showing that the mother often dreams of other things while doing these mothering tasks, the book invites children to orient theory of mind towards their parents and mothers in particular. Moreover, by focusing on seemingly childlike pleasures, such as eating a huge ice cream or cake covered with sweets, going to the swimming pool or having dogs around to “do the dishes”, the book disrupts the idea of adulthood as consisting of “serious things”, and creates kinship across generations.

Through its combination of the adult perspective and the childlike that resides in the desire for abundant pleasure and the willingness or even ability to surrender to imagination, *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* has the power to create an alter-tale – not necessarily a revolution, but a meaningful addition to the scripts and schemas installed and questioned through picturebooks. In their plea for more “radical children’s books”, Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel acknowledge the role imagination can play: “Imagination may not be inherently radical, but it does teach us to improvise, invent, and ask questions” (467), as this picturebook does.

As argued before, asking readers to share a mother’s “childlike” fantasies about alternative ways of parenting, could create an inter-generational discussion on what it means to be a “good mom”. While a daydreaming mother may not be as present as the “good mom” myth prescribes, pointing out the commonality with a child’s imagination bridges generations and may decrease the perceived distance.

Through their depiction of various adult characters, children's books can inspire "young and adult readers alike in their attempts to create the kind of adulthood they would like to perform (or not), whether in the present or in the future" (Joosen, *Adulthood* 210). This holds especially true for more specific ideas on motherhood.

Elsewhere, I have argued that expectations regarding children's literature and other children's media may limit their affordances for creating intergenerational understanding. The idea that children's literature communicates childness may limit readers' attention to the experiences and remarks that fit within their understanding of childhood. With *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* as well, reviewers frame the narrative within children's experiences and focus on daydreaming as the central theme (e.g., Viktoria). Nevertheless, several readers point to the "funny fact" that it is the mother sharing her daydreams and fantasy in the picturebook, and not a child (e.g., Barnboks-familjen; Carolina). Apparently, this focalisor shifts expectations. Such minor changes are important, as this kind of cognitive dissonance demands to be resolved and will prompt readers to rethink their expectations about daydreaming as being childlike or, in reverse, about the mother as being in charge all day.

The way parenting is portrayed in children's fiction – even though imaginary – can have an impact on adult readers (Bullen and Nichols). Tributes to motherhood may strengthen the dominant discourse on motherhood and expectations related to intensive mothering. However, as *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* demonstrates, picturebooks also have the affordances to create an intergenerational understanding of daily situations and could thus contribute to breaking the "good mom myth". The interplay of words and images, as well as the gaps in the story can function as a canvas for creating and exchanging our own narratives. Therefore, acknowledging the entanglement of constructions of childhood and motherhood in children's literature is an important move forward towards an intergenerational understanding of and alter-tales to motherhood and mothering.

Biographical information: Frauke Pauwels is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. As part of the project "Constructing Age for Young Children" she studies adaptations of Dutch children's books. In her doctoral dissertation she explored the representation of scientists and technologists in contemporary fictional and nonfictional children's literature. She is published in several journals, among which Children's Literature Association Quarterly and De Spiegel der Letteren.

Notes

1 Mothers are the focus of this article, but I want to underline that I deem other caregivers equally valid in fulfilling this role. This article is written as part of the research project “Constructing Age for Young Readers” (CAFYR) funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the program of Horizon 2020 (grant agreement No. 804920).

2 Original quote: “le modèle suédois est l’avant-garde des politiques familiales européennes”. My translation.

3 I am deliberately using “we”, to stress my awareness that I, a mother of three, am not able to read and think about motherhood without including my lived experiences.

4 All translations from Swedish to English are my own.

5 *Samtidigt i min låtsasvärld* is unpaginated.

6 Original quote: “gestaltningen av vuxenkroppen [...] omgärdad av kroppspositivism”.

7 The insistence to be always available as a parent is exemplified in the recent publication *Horizontal Parenting: How to Entertain Your Kid While Lying Down* (2021) by Michelle Woo and illustrator Dasha Tolstikova, that reinforces its relation to childhood through the colourful illustrations and oblong format, as if it were a picturebook for children.

8 Beauvais’ article is unpaginated.

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