

Mareike Stoll

What Are You Going Through?

Practices of Care, Emotional Literacy and Visual Literacy in Jöns Mellgren's *Sigrid och natten*

Abstract: Jöns Mellgren's Sigrid och natten (Sigrid and the Night, 2013), is a tale of grief and post-traumatic stress, but also – and more importantly – a tale of care and healing. The article's aim is to show how the book offers narrative-visual access to social emotions (such as love and grief) and mental states (such as depression), which are usually not yet accessible to a young audience through their own experience. These social emotions and mental states are made tangible in different ways through the multimodality and materiality of the picturebook, and by the particular dialogical reading situation that the picturebook warrants. Picturebooks are consequently understood as part of visual literacy training and, explicitly in this context, of the acquiring of "emotional literacy" (Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks" 114). The article argues that Sigrid och natten provides a training ground for visual and, in particular, emotional literacy. Three leitmotifs are examined in Sigrid och natten, namely lighthouses, colors, and hands, and one particular question is used as an analytical tool: "what are you going through?" (Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking" 596). The theme of mothering is connected to the hand and the lighthouse in particular. Regarded in a larger context of practices of care, a form of mothering takes place, for instance, in the reading situation (the reading aloud) of the book by caretakers/readers. The concept of visual literacy is influenced by Walter Benjamin's theory on picturebooks, while cognitive criticism, reader-response theory, and a material and visual studies approach provide the theoretical framework for the reading of Mellgren's picturebook.

Keywords: embodied reading practice, emotional literacy, visual literacy, picturebook reading, Jöns Mellgren, Sara Ruddick

©2023 Mareike Stoll. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), permitting all use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. Any included images may be published under different terms. Please see image captions for copyright details. Citation: *Barnboken – tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning/Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, Vol. 46, 2023 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v46.833>

Jöns Mellgren's *Sigrid och natten* (Sigrid and the Night), published in 2013, is a multimodal artistic picturebook that tells the story of Sigrid who meets the personified Night.¹ Through this unusual encounter both protagonists are confronted with a task of repair. While Sigrid seems to be suffering from sleeplessness and grief, Night's hiding causes problems in the exterior world. The sun does not set and the day cannot come to a close. As a result, nobody can go to sleep. The whole city thus experiences sleep deprivation caused by continuous exposure to light. This calls for a corrective intervention by Sigrid – who is used to sleeplessness because she served as a lighthouse guard for decades – to restore the world's acceptable equilibrium. Sigrid pampers and takes care of Night, who at the beginning is of infant size. By Sigrid's act of care, the world's harmony of day and night, of activity and sleep, are restored and Night assumes its all-encompassing size again to span the sky. In the end, everyone – including Sigrid – can go to sleep.

The article's aim is to investigate how Mellgren's book evokes emotional engagement and empathy in the reader with all the resources that the multimodal picturebook as a complex artistic and dialogical medium offers. Following Maria Nikolajeva's approach of cognitive poetics (Nikolajeva "Emotions in Picturebooks", "What Is It Like"), I take Mellgren's *Sigrid och natten* as a case study to examine emotional literacy. Feelings of isolation as well as practices of care are of particular importance here: how are these abstract concepts and notions made tangible for young beholders? Colors, symbols, the page layout, and synergetic interaction of text and images all create the multitude of meaning-making opportunities that address various audiences (Arizpe, Farrar and McAdam). The concept of an embodied reading practice is crucial to my understanding of picturebooks, as it helps explain how we access the (emotional) content and meaningful surplus of images in bookform (Stoll, *ABC der Photographie*, "Don't Judge a Book"). Speaking of embodied reading emphasizes the materiality of the book (as carrier) and how the interaction of hand, mind and book is used to grasp the multilayered possibilities of meaning to make sense of the work. This is closely connected to visual literacy, as well as to the dialogical co-reading situation which the picturebook most likely warrants (Arizpe, "Picturebooks and Situated Readers" 127). In the context of emergent literacy, I understand the cognitive and emotional aspects involved

in the co-reading situation as an extension of practices of care, even mothering (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer 4).

In the article, I include mothering as a particular practice of care that is tied to empathy (Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking"). The analysis investigates three leitmotifs in *Sigrid och natten*: constellations of colors, lighthouses and hands. As I will show, lighthouses and hands are used as symbols of mothering in Mellgren's picturebook, and they help us understand how practices of care can be made tangible for young audiences, whereas constellations of colors are considered the connective tissue that helps create the context for making understandable isolation and nurturing situations respectively. Consequently, the theme of motherhood is touched upon in the larger context of practices of care. Indeed, I understand "mothering" primarily as a practice of care that creates connection, a practice which any individual can enact – regardless of gender.

Contemporary picturebooks, especially in the Nordic countries, provide us with rich material of mothers and mothering. By taking into account ambivalent notions of motherhood, which may include gender non-conformative mothers, and representing them in images and words, picturebooks can contribute to an understanding of our own time (see e.g. Österlund). Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats assert that representations of mothers and of mothering in children's literature, examined with a variety of analytic tools, will allow us to uncover some of the manifold layers that the role as "mother" entails (Fraustino and Coats). In this article, I am not looking at representations of mothering or mothers in a strict sense, but instead at practices of care that constitute *a form* of mothering. Enveloped into the narrative of Mellgren's book are practices of care towards Night and towards Sigrid, that both protagonists extend to each other through the fluid positions as caretaker and care recipient.

"What are you going through?" is the central question in *Sigrid och natten*. This question, intriguingly, is not spelled out but only tacitly asked by the gesture of a hand consolingly put on another hand, as if to signal: "There, there. I am here. I will listen if you want to talk." This scene constitutes the story's climax. In my reading of Mellgren's book, I use the question as a tool to unpack the complexity of meaning that the narrative executes with the help of colors, symbols, page-design and haptic material. Furthermore, "what are you going through?" is at the core of Sara Ruddick's feminist-philosophical understanding of "maternal thinking", a particular form of care ethics ("Maternal Thinking" 596). Ruddick describes "mothering as a work out of which a distinctive thinking arises"

(*Maternal Thinking* 40), and further specifies this particular work as an “attempt to protect, nurture and train” a child (*Maternal Thinking* 26). She goes on to explain that “although most mothers have been and are women, moterhing is potentially work for men and women” (*Maternal Thinking* 40) or non-binary and transgender individuals.² I understand Ruddick’s “maternal thinking” as arising out of the practice of mothering precisely as an act of care-giving, which in my understanding is detached from gender and age. I focus on Ruddick’s question “what are you going through?” to examine a practice of care that uses inquiries to help the care recipients reflect on, find words for and get through their hardship. Since this question is an invitation to narrate, it might also mirror the reading situation, inviting a conversation about the book’s story. In the article, the question functions as a theoretical concept that explores the emotional connection to practices of care and motherhood. *Sigrid och natten* also reflects on mothering by creating the potential for (co-)reading which can be viewed as a form of nurturing and a possibility to develop (emotional) literacy, when examined through the lens of cognitive poetics (Nikolajeva, “Emotions in Picturebooks”, “What Is It Like”), situated reading (Arizpe, “Picturebooks and Situated Readers”) and a new material approach to picturebooks as things that are perceived through an embodied reading experience; the books are held and handled in their tactile quality.

My understanding of picturebooks is based on the interaction of text, image and the book as thing, as well as on the richness of connections, connotations, and meaning that this interaction produces. Importantly, picturebooks are usually handheld, and the visual and verbal narrative elements are activated by a voice reading the text out loud (or indeed simply told by heart as very young children will do, if they have heard the text being read a number of times). My starting point is the concept of visual literacy informed by Walter Benjamin and his notion of the picturebook as a work of art, that opens like a stage and invites the young audience to “step inside” to perceive the story with all their senses and imagination (“Aussicht” 609). This is encouraged precisely by the materiality and tactility of the book as an object that encourages embodied reading practices (Stoll, *Schools for Seeing, ABC der Photographie*, “Don’t Judge a Book”). The materiality of the book and its tactile quality are thus of importance to my analysis of picturebooks, in line with the more recent material turn in picturebook studies (Field; Beauvais and Nikolajeva 3–4).

Part of a larger cultural argument for the importance, necessity and power of multimedial picturebooks, is that they can play a vital

role in the development of cognitive and emotional faculties, not just for young audiences (Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks" 116-117). Complex and dialogical picturebooks celebrate layers of meaning-making and a multitude of details that compose a rich bigger picture. More recently, empirical and neuropsychological studies seem to confirm what picturebook scholars have believed all along: that "complex picturebooks are beneficial for young readers' cognitive-affective development because they offer the brain something to work on" (Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks" 114). This article examines one picturebook's capacities to communicate on various levels in order to highlight the potential for visual and emotional literacy, even empathy.

Constellations of Colors: Meaning and Emotion

How does Mellgren's picturebook depict isolation and fatigue, and how are these made accessible and tangible also to a young audience to encourage emotional literacy? The book's first double-page provides us with an answer (see image 1). By the use of colors and the visual juxtaposition of exterior total to a close-up of the interior room, these first two pages immediately convey the disconnect between the sleeping city and Sigrid being awake in her apartment. The first page in Mellgren's *Sigrid och natten* shows us the protagonist's house from the outside, whereas on the right-hand side of the spread we see the interior of Sigrid's living room.³

The two pages are set in hues of purple and orange, thus working with primary color contrasts. The left-hand page shows a dark night sky, a tall building and at the very top of this building, like a tower, there is a small lit window with the protagonist's profile in outline. Only the yellow rectangle on the upper right-hand side suggests that someone is awake, especially in contrast to the rest of the picture which is set in dark tones and with no visible trace of awake living beings. The story we are about to see and hear, we conclude, takes place inside the yellow window, accentuated for us by the primary and secondary color contrast and complementary colors.

We read Sigrid as female not only by her name, but also because of what she wears – a skirt of sorts that older women typically wear – and because her upper body has breasts. Sigrid resembles a human being though her head is similar to that of a badger and her hands have only four fingers. By her slightly hunched posture, she is further marked as elderly. Already here, on the first page, we sense that there is something wrong with Sigrid, because she is awake



Image 1. The book's entrance sets the stage: color contrasts guide the young readers to grasp the emotional state of the protagonist. From *Sigrid och natten* (2013) by Jöns Mellgren. © Jöns Mellgren.

while everybody else seems to be asleep. She is accentuated in her solitude by the color of her window: all the other windows are black rectangles, indicating the absence of light and inhabitants. Our main character, however, is wide awake, sitting high above the city in her yellow window which resembles the lamp in a lighthouse. The opposite page is dominated by yellow, brown and orange hues, creating a warm juxtaposition to the page on the left. The contrast of light and dark is emphasized both in the verbal and visual composition of the page. The words "stormlyktan" (hurricane lamp) and "något mörkt" (something dark) (Mellgren) evoke (slightly uncanny) connotations that complement those juxtapositions and contrasts created by visual means.⁴ These pages transport us to the main character's world at the end of a night and they underscore the tension between night and day, sleep and the deprivation thereof, by contrasting exterior and interior spaces on opposite pages, and by choosing words that connote negative emotions even to a young child, such as "beskt" (bitter) (Mellgren). Our second protagonist, Night, is introduced on the following page, only depicted in outline. Hence

Night is presented as an abstraction with no features or indications of a face. It is a non-binary character in dark blue, signaling that this creature is a living being of sorts but also a little strange and perhaps uncanny. Sigrid and Night are thus visually set apart through the use of details and color, but they are also perceived as bound to one another by their spatial proximity.

It is this constellation of colors and the particular mood of the first two pages that underscores the juxtaposition of light and darkness, which allows us to understand that there is an imbalance. This tension structures this particular double-spread visually but also the narrative as a whole. Mellgren constructs the book to give us clues about isolation and otherness by introducing warm and light colors that are compared to colder and darker ones. Gesturing to the dark of night as affecting the exterior with cold and isolation, Sigrid's space at the beginning is bathed in colors that envelop and protect her, we intuitively grasp. Metonymically we transfer this protection and embrace that the colors and the interior space suggest onto her as a character, and turn her into a figure who might be able to protect, envelope and nurture.

Making accessible and tangible the feelings of isolation, sleeplessness and themes of love and grief for a young audience, entails depicting emotions which are usually not yet fully accessible to them through their own experience. In Mellgren's book, this is achieved mostly by evoking moods by means of colors and color contrasts. As seen in image 2, for example, the pages in the book where danger, grief or isolation are depicted, are kept in one particular color range, mostly in purple and blue hues. The multimediality of the picturebook enables the communication of complex emotions in a multitude of ways to young readers, because they are quite capable of understanding the meaning and symbolism of colors, or the significance of details by the spatial position on the double-page (Arizpe, "Picturebooks and Situated Readers"; Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks").

The ambiguity, that is so often used in picturebooks to convey emotional states (cf. Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks"), creates an openness that allows the child to interpret, appropriate and fill it with what they know. What we "know," of course, can be different every time we read such a book because we alter and deepen our understanding of it. We might just see a yellow window in the upper right corner of a picture, surrounded by a sea of blue and purple that is recognizable as a city. We could also see this yellow window tapping into the iconology of lighthouses and isolation. Benjamin has,

in his study of picturebooks, underscored that artistic picturebooks rich in color usually encourage children to engage in immersive and embodied reading practices. In their imagination, he asserts, they enter the book like a stage and become fellow actors to the characters, which he attributes in particular to the nurturing “glow” (“Aussicht” 609) or “riotous colors of the world of pictures” (“Glimpse” 226). The book works as a “stage” (“Aussicht” 609), in particular, if we keep in mind that books are held while they are read to children. When being read the book is seldom flat like a plane, but instead resembles a 120° corner that invites the beholders to perceive and grasp the spatial aspects even more.

The Lighthouse as a Symbol of Care-Giving and Isolation

Within the colorful space of the book, the lighthouse is central to the story of Sigrid and the Night. In itself, of course, the form of the lighthouse is often read as phallic and thus a symbol of dominance. However, in the constellations and references that the book creates, the lighthouse becomes a symbol of care or mothering. It is an essential element of the story and exists on the threshold of light and darkness. After suffering shipwreck, Sigrid becomes a lighthouse guard. The foundation of sleeplessness for the lighthouse guard is based on the caring for others, by tending to the light that is supposed to save the lives of people at sea. The guard is on duty at night to ensure that the lighthouse offers orientation and guidance through treacherous waters on the coast in order for seafarers to avoid shipwreck. In any or all of these elements, a symbolic parallel to notions of mothering might be found.

The spread in image 2 shows us Sigrid and Night seated in the darkened apartment, with a poster on the wall, which is framed in warm hues of yellow, brown and orange. The poster depicts the elephant Olof – who survived the shipwreck with Sigrid and was her loved one – and a younger Sigrid dancing on his back. A miniature lighthouse and a hurricane lamp are resting on the mantelpiece in front of the frame. On the right-hand page, the actual lighthouse with Sigrid in its bright center at the top is depicted, while on the rock at the bottom we see the huge skeleton of an elephant, signifying Olof’s death. In this scene that constitutes the climax of the narrative, Night, without any words, asks Sigrid what she is going through by putting a hand on hers and becomes a partner in listening. With this simple touch, Night encourages Sigrid to tell her story which we read and see on the right page: “Och Sigrid berättar för Natten vad som hände.



Image 2. The climax of the story, where Night places a hand on Sigrid's as if to ask "What are you going through?". From *Sigrid och natten* (2013) by Jöns Mellgren. © Jöns Mellgren.

Att Olof blev sjuk, och att inga mediciner hjälpte. Hon flyttade upp i fyrtornet. Natt efter natt, år efter år, satt hon vaken i ljuset från oljelampan" (And [she] tells Night what happened: that Olof got sick and that no medicine could help. She moved up into the light house. Night after night, year after year, she sat awake in the light of the gas lamp) (Mellgren). On this spread, where the symbol of the lighthouse is prominently depicted as both light and dark, the hand is tied to an embodied form of remembering, healing and simultaneously to the function of language as a remedy. Through this placing of the hand, Sigrid is being cared for while still looking after Night. As both protagonists of the story are conceptualized as caretakers as well as recipients of care, at this threshold moment in the story, the fluidity of care positions comes into view. As such, it opens up the narrative to (playfully) appropriate and adapt practices of care.

As a former shift worker of sorts, Sigrid suffers from the insomnia many caretakers of the community know well. However, now that she is not a lighthouse guard anymore, she still cannot fall asleep: "Nu går fyren på el, och det behövs ingen som vaktar den längre.

Men jag har vant mig vid att ha det ljuset. Jag har inte sovit en blund på trettio år" (The lighthouse works on electricity now and nobody needs to guard it anymore. But I got used to having it light. I haven't slept a wink in thirty years) (Mellgren). At this point in the story, Sigrid has arrived at a crucial moment in her storytelling. Having revealed the loss of her beloved friend and lifepartner Olof and that she has previously suffered a traumatic event that almost killed her, she indicates that she was pushed into isolation and depression by also losing a meaningful occupation. At work she was able to take care of something that needed tending: the symbolic light of the lighthouse. This detail in the story also provides a vague historical anchoring by telling us that machines have replaced human beings as lighthouse guards (although Sigrid is not strictly "human," as we have seen above). The duty in service of the greater seafaring community can be viewed as a parallel to other professions of care. To think that losing this job could also be a liberation is to underestimate the motivation and sense of fulfillment in being there for others, and to look out for their safety. The fact that Sigrid has not given up the practice of being on guard at night, is precisely what allows us to read her as suffering from psychological pain.

Woven into this story of the lighthouse is the thread of aging. With the introduction of electricity and remote operability, Sigrid is of no use anymore. She thus faces the fate of many elders in our society. Her insomnia and depression seem to be linked to the sense of being discarded. This feeling is tied up with a particular female fate: Sigrid is past the biological age of giving birth herself. Since we have identified her as both "aged" and "female", she has moved into the grandmother generation while being the lighthouse guard. The retirement could, of course, be a blessing; a time and place to find solace and sleep at night. For this to happen, we understand, she first needs to heal. She needs to be given a literal and metaphorical space – she needs to be listened to – so that she can finally find the words that will enable her to let go of her grief, and go to sleep.

On the last double-spread of the narrative, Sigrid is tucked into bed by two gigantic hands – which we understand to be Night's hands – one holding a blanket and the other placing her gently in bed. Alluding to the cover and the first page, the circle of the narrative comes to a close. This scene, however, also speaks to an older group of readers, the caretakers reading the book to a young audience, as it doubles the daily ritual of caring for children and putting them to sleep. The lighthouse thus acquires a different meaning. In her honest reflections on motherhood, novelist Rachel Cusk describes a sense of loss, if not trauma, connected to her lack of sleep as a



Image 3. The last double-spread in the book. From *Sigrid och natten* (2013) by Jöns Mellgren. © Jöns Mellgren.

caretaker in the early months of parental duties. In a chapter entitled “A Valediction to Sleep”, she writes about the night:

I thirst for the privacy and solitude, for the oxygen of day’s lung, night. Instead, the hours of darkness are a bleak corollary of those of light, an unpeopled continuum in which I remain on duty, like a guard in a building from which everyone has gone home. (175)

Mellgren’s book touches on this “continuum of solitary care” and offers a place of healing for the primary caretakers of young children, who are involved in the co-reading of this story and may recognize the experience of being on guard at night. For them, too, *Sigrid och natten* can be a tale of healing as it restores the faith that, eventually, night will become a time of “privacy and solitude” again.

On the threshold between interior and exterior, between individual and collective, the narrative addresses the issue of sleep as an uninterrupted and healing state that some have access to while others – for various reasons – do not. For the book as a whole, the leitmotif of the lighthouse is as much a figure of isolation as a signal of caretaking.



Image 4. Cover. From *Sigrid och natten* (2013) by Jöns Mellgren. © Jöns Mellgren.

Hands: Material, Embodied and Tactile Reading

The hands, so prominently displayed on the cover, are crucial in my understanding of emotional literacy in *Sigrid och natten*. They are used as a leitmotif in the images of the narrative, employed in key moments of the story as a symbol that encapsulates caregiving. Already the cover indicates that the book is a story about two forces, symbolized by the evenly juxtaposed planes of colors (blue-black-orange and orange-red-yellow respectively). When we look more closely, we find that the cover describes a moment of protecting and safe-guarding: two gigantic hands carefully pick up a female figure and an umbrella, both dangling dangerously on the top of a

tall building – yet we understand that they are brought to safety by these hands.

Moreover, the hands function as a connection between the book and the reader/ beholder, thus encompassing the hands of the young audience and a caretaker/ reader facilitating the investigation of the book's multimodal content and material form. These collective hands set in motion the narrative progression, as they turn the pages. When so doing, the hands quite literally create a connection to the themes of empathy, compassion and touch that the story opens up, as they explore the material and haptic aspects of the book during a dialogical and embodied reading experience. The hand facilitates grasping concepts of literacy in picturebooks and the acquisition of emotional and visual literacy. In stimulating picturebook design, pageturning in particular is used to activate the hand and mind of the child (cf. Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks" 113). While pageturning as an embodied response is linked to the hand, the colors and visual juxtapositions on the page help create access *to* and understanding of the emotional content of the narrative.

Mellgren's book constructs a space through its page layout, the sequence of images, the technique used to create the pictures and the colors employed. It places special emphasis on the paper by integrating the white of the page as a part of the room while at the same time foregrounding the materiality of the book we hold in our own hands. Thus, *Sigrid och natten* highlights how picturebooks create both a literal and metaphorical space. The literal space is the "architecture of the page", as I wish to call it, which trains our visual understanding of books and allows us to read the page simultaneously as flat and simulating a spatial dimension. The metaphorical space is the space of our imagination, the space that opens up inside our minds when reading, listening to and beholding a picturebook. Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer has underscored the importance of reading aloud to children with regard to linguistic and cognitive development, language acquisition and literacy of the child listeners and child beholders (4–5). Reading aloud has also been deemed important in the development of visual literacy in particular (Mjør). I argue that this is tied to the space in the book that opens up through Mellgren's picturebook design. It is a space that becomes an invitation to use our imagination to step inside the book (Benjamin, "Aussicht"). Elina Druker argues that especially the technique that Mellgren is using, collage, was used as early as in the 1930s to encourage children to relate to the book's content, precisely because it "was thought to allow children points of entry to the text,

emphasizing their own imaginative participation" (49). By explicitly employing the resources of the picturebook to create a universal set of images and entry points for the imagination, Mellgren tells a story about how finding language and listening can help us heal.

In my reading of Mellgren's book, the symbol of the hand is consciously employed in relation to the reading situation as a form of nurturing, in contrast to a sense of spatial separation or isolation. When Night and Sigrid are depicted in an intimate moment of storytelling (see image 3), a detail of this page connects the material aspects of the book to emotional literacy. We see mostly planes, as if in a darkened room where we can only make out the traces of the two bodies. Upon looking closely, however, we see that there are fine lines cut into the paper indicating where Sigrid's body is. It is as if we can trace these lines in the paper with our fingers. Thus, the symbolic hand of Night placed consolingly on Sigrid's hands connects to our own hands and our experience of paper while holding the book and feeling it. As an example of material situatedness, the grasping of what empathy means might be encouraged here quite tangibly. Keeping in mind that this is the climax of the book where, in my interpretation, the question "what are you going through?" is tacitly asked, this material detail invites our touch and, by doing so, underscores the idea that touch is a practice of care connected to listening and the carving out of a space for empathy to emerge.

The hands are a symbol of consoling touch, of connection, of being held and protected on a physical level, that are tied to maternal thinking. They are also a reference of scale. In the beginning, Night is not much bigger than Sigrid's hand, but in the end she fits into the hand of Night. On the final spread in the book, Sigrid is gently held by Night. She has fallen asleep in Night's palm and is about to be tucked in and covered with a blanket, as the left hand seems to signal (see image 3). An image of protection and safety, this page self-reflexively reminds us of the book's cover, but also of the first double-page. Sigrid's dream is depicted on the right-hand side, where she is reunited with Olof. In an image that is floating in the middle of the page, we see the two of them. They are surrounded by the white of the page, which alludes to the fact that it is an image of a different order and that it is either a memory or a dream image.

When looking more closely, we find that Sigrid is young in this picture. She is thinner and sits more upright, which by contrast makes the hunched version of Sigrid appear old. The book's ending signifies an emotional closure and that a healing has occurred, as the ability to fall asleep and dream also seems to entail the capacity

to remember happiness. Moreover, the colors that were earlier used to signal danger and a sense of darkness, are now connected to the restorative and peaceful sleep while others might be on guard for Sigrid. This is indicated by the fact that there are yellow windows in the neighboring houses while she can close her eyes. Adult readers understand that Sigrid's depression and her inability to sleep for "thirty years" are connected to her experiencing time in a different way than less isolated minds will. At the beginning of the narrative, she seems to be trapped in a paradoxical continuous light that is, in truth, a dark place. The repetitive and cyclical light of the lighthouse, however, is a steady force guiding those through the dark who see it from afar.

Mellgren's narrative poetically interweaves the individual with the collective and the familiar with the slightly magical and strange. *Sigrid och natten* allows us to explore feelings of loss, grief and isolation with diverse age groups and very different audiences because it offers a tale of healing. The Swedish phrase for "looking after" or "attending to" is, not by accident I believe, linked to the hand: "ta hand om" connects us to the empathy that can reside in the hand.

Conclusion

Sigrid och natten is a multimodal and haunting meditation on the healing capacities of maternal thinking and attentive love. Following Nikolajeva's concept of cognitive poetics, and in particular her ideas of "emotional literacy" in picturebooks ("Emotions in Picturebooks"), I have analyzed *Sigrid och natten* as a case study to show how emotions like grief and traumatic experiences can be made tangible for a young audience who most likely has not experienced these emotions themselves. By depicting isolation and sleeplessness, experiences which can be likened to sitting in a lighthouse when nobody needs it, Mellgren's book portrays one character's feeling of a world "out of sync". In its material manifestation as a picturebook (and artwork) Mellgren's book is what Nikolajeva with Roland Barthes calls a "writerly", dialogical book (Nikolajeva, "Interpretive Codes" 40). It invites preliterate listeners, readers-in-training and caretakers/readers to practice maternal thinking (both of Ruddick's texts are thus entitled), which can be tied to the literary competence of attentive listening, and the development of visual and emotional literacy as well as empathy. This is particularly important when studying and analyzing picturebooks, as neurotypical children acquire theory of mind and then begin to develop the capacity for

empathy around the age of four. This is precisely around the age, when picturebook reading is at its most intensive (Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks" 116). Picturebooks are consequently understood in this article as part of visual literacy training (cf. Raney). By explicitly including the acquiring of "emotional literacy" (Nikolajeva, "Emotions in Picturebooks"), the article has focused on the leitmotifs of lighthouses, colors and hands to underscore the connection to an emotional imagery of more abstract concepts such as feelings of isolation, tensions between individual and collective experience, and practices of care, respectively. By placing emphasis on the symbolism of lighthouses, colors and hands, Mellgren's book tells a larger, more meaningful tale of healing and repair that is accessible also to the very young audience that is primarily addressed. Furthermore, by describing fluid relations between caretakers and care recipients, the book explores concepts of mothering although motherhood itself is not depicted nor discussed. *Sigrid och natten* playfully encourages readers of all ages to engage in practices of care towards each other by simply putting a hand on another's hand and to listen actively. I thus argue that the function of the question "what are you going through?" in Mellgren's book is an iteration of mothering. It is in this question that emotional literacy comes to the fore.

Precisely because this question in *Sigrid och natten* is not spelled out but made tangible in the leitmotif of the hand and in the interplay of collage technique, narrative and image sequence, it helps us better to understand how the picturebook can encourage emotional literacy. To make sense of the book's climax and to decipher the emotional content it conveys, our hands, minds and voices are invited to investigate every detail of the book as a material thing and the complex interaction between image, text and narrative as a whole. Picturebooks as a form of art consequently develop the notion of books as a place where we can develop and foster emotional literacy and social skills. As Nikolajeva writes, somewhat triumphantly:

Literary scholars seem to have finally received justification for their academic pursuit from sceptical colleagues within the natural and social sciences. We can claim that reading fiction is beneficial because it enhances our cognitive, emotional and social skills. Children's literature, then, might be a good implement for training children to become responsible and empathetic members of society. ("What Is It Like" 26)

Picturebooks constitute a most productive beginning to a life that is spent reading and being touched by fiction and other people's emo-

tions. Picturebooks, such as Mellgren's, develop our understanding of the book's sophistication and their intended audiences' level of sophistication by encouraging them to think, in the words of Lauren Child, "very deeply" and "powerfully about things" (quoted in Styles, Arizpe and Noble 167). Indeed, *Sigrid och natten* tells us that picturebook reading offers ways of healing, if we embrace the embodied practices that come along with it: practices of holding and opening-up, of care and nurturing, of thinking about possible meanings, of asking questions and of listening.

Biographical information: Mareike Stoll is a Research Associate at Weißensee School of Art and Design, Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin as part of the Cluster of Excellence "Matters of Activity: Image, Space, Material." She holds a PhD in German Studies from Princeton University (2015). Her dissertation "Schools for Seeing: German Photobooks between 1924 and 1937 as Perception Primers and Sites of Knowledge" was awarded a research prize by the DGPh (German Association of Photography). The resulting book was published in 2018 as ABC der Photographie: Photobücher der Weimar Republik als Schulen des Sehens. Stoll is currently preparing a second book on contemporary picturebooks, and has most recently co-edited the volume Architectures of Weaving: From Fibers and Yarns to Scaffolds and Skins (2022).

Notes

1 *Sigrid och natten* was translated by Anita Shenoi and published as *Elsa and the Night* with Little Gestalten in Berlin in 2014. All quotations in English refer to this edition. The author acknowledges the support of the Cluster of Excellence "Matters of Activity: Image Space Material" funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2025 – 390648296. I would like to thank Dr. Vreni Hockenjos, Dr. Barbara N. Nagel, Amelie Ochs and the editors as well as the peer-reviewers of *Barnboken*, for their stimulating and generous feedback on earlier versions of this article.

2 Ruddick explains that "although men can be mothers ... in most cultures ... they are fathers... not simply the male counterpart to mothers" (*Maternal Thinking* 42). For a recent investigation of Ruddick's work in this context, see Mary J. Moran. Part of the complex reasons to favor the term "mothering" rather than referring to "caretakers" in general is that the term acknowledges undervalued structures associated with women, as Moran writes, "mothering receives a lower level of respect than many jobs" because it "gets caught in a misogynist feedback loop" (186). Moran importantly points out that Ruddick by her word choice risks "idealizing mothers, reinforcing limiting stereotypes about them, and excluding those who cannot be or choose not to be biological or adoptive mothers" (186).

3 I am consciously using the collective-singular “we” to encompass all readers, however individual they may be in their chosen identity and levels of sophistication, with particular regard to extending the caretaker’s role to include a form of “mothering” and childcare, while reading to the young audience.

4 *Sigrid och natten* and *Elsa and the Night* are unpaginated.

Works cited

Arizpe, Evelyn. “Picturebooks and Situated Readers: The Intersection of Text, Image, Culture and Response.” *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature*, edited by Clémentine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 124–135.

---. “Understanding Children’s Responses to Picturebooks through Theory and Research.” *Children Reading Pictures: New Contexts and Approaches to Picturebooks*, edited by Evelyn Arizpe, Kate Noble, and Morag Styles, 3rd ed., Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2023, pp. 151–163.

Arizpe, Evelyn, Jennifer Farrar, and Julie McAdam. “Picturebooks and Literacy Studies.” *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 371–380.

Arizpe, Evelyn, Kate Noble, and Morag Styles, editors. *Children Reading Pictures: New Contexts and Approaches to Picturebooks*. 3rd ed., Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2023.

Beauvais, Clémentine, and Maria Nikolajeva. “Introduction: Where Have We Come From? Where Are We Heading?” *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature*, edited by Clémentine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, pp. 1–9.

Benjamin, Walter. “Aussicht ins Kinderbuch.” 1926. *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV.2, edited by Tillman Rexroth, Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 609–615.

---. “A Glimpse into the World of Children’s Books.” Translated by Edmund F.N. Jephcott. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 226–235.

Cusk, Rachel. “A Valediction to Sleep.” *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*. Picador, 2001, pp. 175–193.

Druker, Elina. "Collage and Montage in Picturebooks." *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 49–58.

Field, Hannah. *Playing with the Book: Victorian Movable Picture Books and the Child Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Fraustino, Lisa Rowe, and Karen Coats. "Introduction." *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*, edited by Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, pp. 3–24.

Kümmerling-Meibauer, Bettina. "Introduction." *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 1–8.

Mellgren, Jöns. *Elsa and the Night*. Translated by Anita Sheno, Little Gestalten, 2014.

---. *Sigrid och natten*. Natur & Kultur, 2013.

Mjør, Ingeborg. "Being a Guide into Picturebook Literacy: Challenges of Cognition and Connotation." *New Directions in Picturebook Research*, edited by Teresa Colomer, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, and Cecilia Silva-Díaz, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2010, pp. 179–189.

Moran, Mary Jeannette. "'The Mother Was the Mother, Even When She Wasn't': Maternal Care Ethics and Children's Fantasy." *Mothers in Children's and Young Adult Literature: From the Eighteenth Century to Postfeminism*, edited by Lisa Rowe Fraustino and Karen Coats, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, pp. 182–197.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Emotions in Picturebooks." *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks*, edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2018, pp. 110–118.

---. "Interpretive Codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks." *New Directions in Picturebook Research*, edited by Teresa Colomer, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, and Cecilia Silva-Díaz, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2010, pp. 27–40.

---. "What Is It Like to Be a Child?: Childness in the Age of Neuroscience." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 50, 2019, pp. 23–37.

Raney, Karen. "A Matter of Survival: On Being Visually Literate." *The English and Media Magazine*, vol. 39, 1998, pp. 37–42.

Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking", *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Routledge, 1997, p. 583–603.

---. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Beacon, 1995.

Stoll, Mareike. *ABC der Photographie: Photobücher der Weimarer Republik als Schulen des Sehens*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018.

---. "Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover: Aenne Biermann's 60 Photos", *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies, Special Issue: Rare, Bound, Cheap, Inserted – The Evolution of Photobooks*, vol. 28, 2022, pp. 1–14.

---. *Schools for Seeing: German Photobooks between 1924 and 1937 as Perception Primers and Sites of Knowledge*. 2015. Princeton University, PhD Thesis.

Styles, Morag, Evelyn Arizpe, and Kate Noble. "Epilogue: What Children Have Taught Us about Reading Pictures." *Children Reading Pictures: New Contexts and Approaches to Picturebooks*, edited by Evelyn Arizpe, Kate Noble, and Morag Styles, Routledge / Taylor & Francis, 2023, pp. 164–167.

Österlund, Mia. "'Se så söt du blir i den här': Maktkamp, generation och genus i Carin och Stina Wirséns bilderböcker." *Barnboken – tidskrift för barnlitteraturforskning*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2011, pp. 4–17, doi.org/10.14811/clr.v31i2.61.