

## Introduction: Aesthetics and Pedagogy

“What does a child think of this?” That is a question you may get when describing an interesting children’s book to adults – it may be at a dinner party, a lesson, or a research seminar. In mid-leap, when you are just about to explain how brilliant and cleverly designed a new picturebook by, for example, Eva Lindström is, the query puts you off your stride. Although the question may be valid, it interrupts the explication and draws the attention from the work to an imagined reader. Then, as an enthusiastic children’s literature scholar, you easily become frustrated. Because even if the question is asked out of curiosity and with good intentions, it is still based on the preconception that children and adults experience literature differently, and that the intended reader of children’s literature restricts how we can approach the work.

As a teacher or researcher, it is easy to start wriggling a little impatiently when these types of queries occur. You might say that you do not know but that the book may still be interesting. Then you try to return to the work and point out elements such as the specifically funny humour, the way the literary characters interact or the importance of the gazes for the visual narrative.

That people ponder upon what a child’s reading experience might be is not surprising. Through all times, children’s literature has been affected by notions that adhere to the child for better or for worse: What is a child? What may the child become? How should adults regard the growing and impressionable young person? The first written literature for children was clearly meant to educate and cultivate the child – it consisted of religious texts, primers, and other types of instructional literature. Thus, the history of children’s literature is closely intertwined with the history of educational ideas. The processes that contributed to the separation of aesthetics from pedagogy started as early as the Romantic era and, in Swedish literature, in the middle of the nineteenth century (Kümmerling-Meibauer; Widhe). However, it is not until the twentieth century that children’s literature has seriously tried to escape the pedagogical context. We are writing “tried”, since children’s literature has never constituted an autonomous literary field (Boëthius).

Modern children's literature research has also been informed by this history of separation. Children's literature scholars have experienced, just like the illustrators and authors of the field, that they have had to struggle for their research objects to be recognized as genuine artistic works, deserving to be studied in their own right from aesthetic rather than pedagogical angles (see e.g., Westin).

*Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature* is one of the few fora that has functioned as a refuge for people who appreciate picturebooks, children's poems and children's novels as art forms. The journal has explicitly been committed to the aesthetic dimensions of children's literature, which has made it difficult for scholars focusing solely on didactic aspects or literary education to get recognition for their perspectives. This can be explained by the fact that children's literature to a much greater extent than adult literature has been met by pedagogical expectations and, therefore, aesthetic issues have often been pushed into the background (Cross; Weinreich). At the same time, this approach too has flaws – partly because it risks maintaining a division between pedagogy and aesthetics that may not be a given, partly because it does not consider the specific ways in which children's literature works as an aesthetic object (Reynolds; Beauvais; Nordenstam and Widhe; García-González, Casals Hill, and Véliz). For would it not be reasonable to view the didactic orientation as a necessary aspect of children's literature aesthetics? Already the "children" in children's books implies a pedagogical adaption. Could it be the case that the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy is, in fact, an essential part of children's literature rather than a threat to its identity (Nikolajeva)? We believe that at least from the Romantic era, children's literature has been characterized by aesthetic as well as pedagogical adaptations to an imagined child reader, and these adaptations have been made in a systematic manner. This imagined reader is different from an adult person and is, moreover, assigned not only age but gender, ethnicity, class and so on. The fact that children's literature addresses one or several implied audiences, in short, informs the artistic design in specific ways at different times. These are some of the reasons why we have initiated the theme "Aesthetics and Pedagogy" in *Barnboken*.

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From the perspective of the history of philosophy, it is also problematic to consider the aesthetic expression of an artwork as separate from an imagined reader. "Aesthetics" stems from the Greek word "aisthētis," which means perception from the senses. It is only in modern times that aesthetics has become associated with the "fine arts". Although these are essential, the concept of aesthetics has a

wider reach – on the most fundamental level it concerns perception and how we experience the world through our senses. Approaching the aesthetics of a work involves studying artistic devices and expressions, but it also inevitably encompasses how the work captures the readers' attention and activates their perception and experiences. Such a phenomenologically inspired concept of aesthetics is important to consider, in our view, not least for children's literature scholars. It corresponds to what we believe to be the specific manner in which children's literature affects the addressee. Children's literature often, more or less explicitly, strives to engage the reader's senses and sensory experiences.

Here, we would like to recall John Dewey and his appeal to release art from the museums. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey stresses that aesthetic experiences are grounded in everyday life and sensations, and he makes the case for an alternative understanding of art. He advocates a view where sensuousness and emotions are the source of aesthetic experiences. For Dewey, experiences of art give life purpose and meaning. Art does not exist on a higher plane of reality. Instead, it is the experience of the material world that is communicated through the artistic form. This viewpoint perforates the conception of art as autonomous or separate from other areas of life. An aesthetic experience is not intrinsically different from ordinary experience but stems from everyday existence. The aesthetic experience is not absolute but extends in time, it has a temporal and dynamic structure. It takes time, but it also has a beginning and an ending in time. Therefore, it is possible to say that I had an aesthetic experience, then and there, that took place in my time and grew.

Using sight, hearing and feeling to engage, what Lennart Hellsing once called, "the sensation of life itself" is to affirm art as a meaning-making practice, grounded in physical and temporal experiences (Elam and Widhe; Jönsson, "Klocktid"). Art or literature does not make human beings good or bad, but it enriches, expands, intensifies, and sustains life as a tangible experience. *Mio, my Mio* (1954) is an example of a book that achieves all this, while simultaneously striving to lead the reader to a certain space and view of life. In the works of Astrid Lindgren, it is seldom possible to separate aesthetic and pedagogic dimensions. This holds true for Pija Lindenbaum and many other children's book authors and illustrators as well. The question of the relation between aesthetics and pedagogy may also convey direct or indirect claims of artistic value and originality. This is the deeper meaning of Hellsing's conviction that all pedagogical art is bad art – and that all good art is pedagogical (25).

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Hence, the background to the theme “Aesthetics and Pedagogy” was that we wished to discuss aesthetics from disparate perspectives, historicize separation processes and different types of dichotomies, and provide a space for writers from diverse disciplines to examine the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy in new ways. The theme’s point of departure was the idea that pedagogical questions do not need to be conceived as a hindrance for aesthetic concerns but as an inextricable aspect of the mode and conditions of children’s literature – as well as the other way around. Serious studies of children’s literature from a pedagogical angle must include paying attention to aesthetic dimensions. Several of the contributions to this theme take an open-ended approach to the artistic expressions of children’s literature and explore what pedagogical and didactic questions the works themselves ask through their aesthetic design (cf. Jönsson, “Litterär didaktik”).

The origin of the theme was a workshop about the relationship between pedagogy and aesthetics organized at Umeå University in 2021. The participants investigated the connection between aesthetics and pedagogy in specific works and examined what shapes the interdependence could take. The goal with the workshop was to think about the relation between aesthetics and pedagogy without viewing it mainly as a source of conflict. We wanted to find productive entry points to the relationship without getting caught up in phrases like “area of tension” or “problem.”

The theme extends over two volumes and includes eight articles from Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Ireland. It begins in *Barnboken 2022* with Siobhán Callaghan’s [“Reimagining Blighty: Historic Aesthetics and Pedagogy in Emma Carroll’s \*Letters from the Lighthouse\* and Lucy Strange’s \*Our Castle by the Sea\*”](#) which examines the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy in two historical novels for children from the 2010s, depicting life in Britain during the second world war. The article contends that the novels’ subversion of idealization and nostalgia serves an aesthetic-pedagogic function. Both novels give a nuanced portrayal of wartime life, but they also negotiate socio-political ideas pertaining to the time of the books’ publication in Britain.

This is followed by Heidi Höglund’s and Katrina Åkerholm’s [“Utrymme för det obestämbara: Den komplexa bilderboken i litteraturundervisningen”](#) (Allowing Space for Undecidability: Complex Picturebooks in Literary Education). Their starting point is that young readers should confront rather than be protected from

complex works. Höglund and Åkerholm discuss the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy by analyzing the depiction of undecidability in Maija and Anssi Hurme's *Skuggorna* (The Shadows, 2018). An education that focuses on the undecidabilities of the picturebook rather than trying to pin-point its meaning, may open the way for aesthetic concerns and allow readers to remain in the questions and the undecidability that the work offers.

The third article is Hanna Järvenpää's ["Interpretation, Negotiation, Play. A Multiple Case Study of Playful Reader Engagement with an Augmented Reality Picturebook"](#). It explores three families' playful use of the Finnish augmented reality (AR) picturebook *Mur, eli karhu* (A Bear Called Mur, 2016) by Kaisa Happonen and Anne Vasko. Järvenpää notes that even if the children in the families have good technological skills, they have difficulties in interpreting and navigating the multimodal and interactive text. Furthermore, the article shows that parents' and children's joint reading of digital texts requires that the adult readers have a substantial aesthetic, pedagogical and technological knowledge and, in addition, they must have an understanding of children's digital play and gaming.

In the fourth article of the theme, ["Tänk om Egon tar min cykel. Konflikten som estetisk-pedagogisk nod i Pija Lindenbaums bilderboksberättande"](#) ("What if Egon takes my bicycle": Conflicts as Aesthetic-Pedagogical Nodes in Pija Lindenbaum's Picturebooks), Olle Widhe explores the rhetorical relation between aesthetic design and pedagogical address. In Pija Lindenbaum's picturebooks, the reader can experience the narrative conflict and the feelings it inspires without explanations from the adult world. The dynamics between text, image, and medium allows the reader to get into contact with the conflict as an organizing and emotional force. With inspiration from Harmut Rosa, he suggests that reading can be described as a potentially transformative resonance and that the conflict functions as the aesthetic-pedagogical node of the narrative. The conflict invites empathy and distance, emotion and engagement, and leads to insights into transformed relationships.

The fifth article ["Som om det aldri har skjedd. Skjønnlitterært arbeid med verdien tilgivelse på 5.-7. trinn"](#) ("As if it never happened": Fictional Work with Forgiveness as a Value amongst 5th-7th Graders) by Siri Hovda Ottesen and Aasfrid Tysvær, examines how pupils aged 10-12 discuss Stian Hole's picturebook *Garmanns gate* (Garmann's Street, 2008). The design of the visual narrative turned out to be important for the pupils' understanding of the characters and their moral choices. It was mainly the pictures that triggered the

emotional reaction to Hole's depiction of guilt and the presentation of forgiveness as an emancipatory power. At the same time, the investigation shows that the teacher has a pivotal role in enabling the pupils to gain insights and understanding through reading.

Louise Almqvist's ["Sveriges första barnbok med hen'. Normkritik och didaktik i Kivi & Monsterhund"](#) ("Sweden's First Children's Book with They": Norm-Criticism and Didactics in *Kivi & Monsterhund*) starts off the continuation of the theme "Aesthetics and Pedagogy" in *Barnboken 2023*. Almqvist explores the reception of explicitly didactic children's books from norm-critical publishing companies and goes on to problematize the opinions on pedagogy and aesthetics expressed in reviews. She points out that norm-critical literature should not be perceived as homogenous or rejected as uninteresting from a literary point of view. Through the example of *Kivi & Monsterhund* (Kivi and Monsterdog, 2012) by Jesper Lundqvist and Bettina Johansson, she shows that the ambivalence and ambiguity of the work create an aesthetic complexity which both transgresses and embraces different norms.

In the seventh article ["Svordomar och lärdomar. Vikten av svordomar i Ulf Starks Rymlingarna och Oskar Kroons Överallt och ingenstans"](#) (Swearing and Learning: The Importance of Swear Words in Ulf Stark's *Rymlingarna* and Oskar Kroon's *Överallt och ingenstans*), Sofia Pulls highlights swear words in children's literature. She shows that swearing may function as a literary and aesthetic device, while simultaneously having a pedagogical purpose. Pulls asks herself how swear words affect what is being told and how, as well as how they influence the reader's understanding of the two novels' possible themes. The answer is that swear words may be attributed a prominent literary function, while their ambiguity leads the reader to specific interpretations and possible meanings in a way that intertwines aesthetic and pedagogical aspects.

The eighth article ["Estetiken i praktiken. Om relationen mellan estetik och pedagogik vid läsning av Lisen Adbåges Samtidigt som"](#) (Aesthetics in Practice: About the Relationship Between Aesthetics and Pedagogy When Reading Lisen Adbåge's *Samtidigt som*) by Anna Lyngfelt and Camilla Björklund concludes the theme. They examine the relationship between aesthetics and pedagogy through the study of preschoolers' conversations about the picturebook *Samtidigt som* (At the Same Time As, 2017). The pupils' responses made clear that the visual narrative of time and simultaneity attracted their curiosity and engagement. It was, primarily, the pictures that



evoked the pupils' thoughts about time. The depiction of what happens and what may happen, the tension between what Lyngfelt and Björklund designate the predictable and the unpredictable, invites a game of thoughts that becomes important for the pupils' abstract understanding of time.

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In our experience, children's literature runs the risk of falling prey to pedagogical, educational, or possibly even political demands when learning, societal issues, and development come into the picture. The articles in this theme, however, demonstrate how productive it can be to systematically explore the fundamental relationship between the pedagogical and aesthetical dimensions of children's literature. Similar initiatives have been taken elsewhere and it is tempting to imagine that a new, dialectical, and multifaceted approach to the relation between aesthetics and pedagogy is becoming established (cf. Öhman and Jönsson). The conference "Aesthetic and Pedagogic Entanglements" arranged by the International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL) in 2021 is one example since the congress expressed an inquisitive desire to examine aesthetical and pedagogical connections in children's literature.

Opposite tendencies are also found in the field though, which could be seen at the latest IRSCL conference "Ecologies of Childhood" in 2023. There, an aesthetic understanding of pedagogical issues was pushed to the limit but from a different premise. Several presentations stressed the importance of children's books taking environmental responsibility, shaping future citizens, and engaging in ecocritical pedagogy. Other contributions mentioned the value of eco-conscious literature for children to help them develop "ecological literacy". Such views of children's literature are justified, but a too narrow focus on the pedagogical functions of literature tends to lose sight of the aesthetic experience. Pedagogical aspects are, of course, an important part of what makes children's books relevant when children are contemplating the main societal issues. However, viewing children's literature from a pedagogical perspective should not entirely overshadow aesthetic concerns. Children's literature is an aesthetic field that allows readers to seek new understandings of hidden contexts both outside and within themselves. We need to be able to approach questions of learning and growing without forgetting that the pedagogical orientation is inextricably linked to the specific artistic expressions and functions of children's literature. Thus, in this theme we are working on the premise that the

pedagogy of children's literature emerges as a part of its aesthetics, and it is our wish to highlight resonances between these aspects rather than furthering division and friction.

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