

Sara Pankenier Weld

“A Precocious Little Mother with a Child’s Face”

A Maternal Ethics of Care in Martha Sandwall-Bergström’s Kulla-Gulla Books

Abstract: Although Astrid Lindgren’s Pippi Longstocking captured international attention, Martha Sandwall-Bergström’s contemporaneous Kulla-Gulla books (1945–1951) were beloved by generations of readers, despite being discounted as girls’ books or considered insufficiently feminist by critics. A retrospective view, however, reveals that the Kulla-Gulla series offers something more radical than it may seem: it not only reflects twentieth-century Swedish social democratic values of the time and a utopian feminist social model (Toijer-Nilsson; Heggstad, Värld; Nilson) grounded in early Swedish feminist thought, but also, despite the heroine’s own orphaned and motherless state, espouses a maternal ethics of care, which positions the books as pathbreaking still today in a wider global context. The orphan heroine’s assumption of responsibility for effectively motherless children and her rejection of her own elevation from poverty to privilege – until the children she mothers are taken care of also – embody collective responsibility for the vulnerable. Continually emblemized by the heroine, this ethics of care gradually expands to encompass care for other vulnerable figures in the community and finds embodiment in other exemplary characters as well. Key plot points, major characters, and the overall narrative arc demonstrate the books’ radically inclusive and feminist social model and deliver its message of social reform to a young audience.

Keywords: Martha Sandwall-Bergström, Kulla-Gulla, maternal, ethics, care, feminist, social reform, utopian, gender, motherhood

©2024 S. Pankenier Weld. 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. 47, 2024 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v47.935>

In the year 1945, which marked the breakthrough of modern Swedish children's literature, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump* (*Pippi Longstocking*) took Sweden and the world by storm. However, Martha Sandwall-Bergström's award-winning *Kulla-Gulla* (*Hill-Gulla*), which was published the same year, and the book series it inaugurated¹ were quietly beloved by generations of readers in Sweden and beyond. Translated into 12 languages, including English,² the *Kulla-Gulla* books form "part of the most borrowed book series," second only to Astrid Lindgren, so they have been influential reading for young people for a long time (Nordenstam). They were reissued and staged in 2020 for their 75th anniversary.

Despite being at times discounted as girls' books or considered insufficiently progressive by contemporaneous critics, a retrospective view from the twenty-first century reveals that the *Kulla-Gulla* series may offer something far more radical than it might seem. It not only reflects twentieth-century Swedish social democratic values of the time and a utopian feminist social model, as scholars have argued in a Swedish context (Toijer-Nilsson; Heggstad, *Värld*; Nilson), but also, as I will argue here, despite the heroine's own orphaned and motherless state, espouses a maternal ethics of care, which both grounds the books in early Swedish feminist thought and positions them as pathbreaking still today in a wider global context. The orphan girl Gulla's assumption of responsibility for effectively motherless children and her rejection of her own elevation from poverty to privilege – until the children she mothers are taken care of also – embody an ethics of care and collective responsibility for the vulnerable. As this article will show, key plot points, major characters, and the overall narrative arc of the *Kulla-Gulla* books serve to demonstrate the books' radically inclusive and feminist social model and deliver their message of social reform to a young audience that might be influenced by the values and positive examples they present.

Martha Sandwall-Bergström's original series of 7 *Kulla-Gulla* books, which were published in 1945–1951 and later reissued as 12 books, including a prequel, in 1965–1968 and 1972, detail Gulla's growth from childhood to young womanhood. As an exemplar of a maternal ethics of care, who is herself, paradoxically, a hybrid of mother and motherless child, Gulla not only assumes responsibility for the children in her charge and an ever expanding number of other vulnerable individuals in the community. She also leads the way, by example, to a better future where all are responsible for all, for the good of all children, and promotes care for all who are weak,

vulnerable, or dependent, showing that care goes beyond the family to encompass all society. In so doing, the Kulla-Gulla books recover, revitalize, and synthesize older strains in the women's movement in new ways, where the collective motherliness of early twentieth-century Swedish feminist thinking meets motherhood studies and an ethics of care theorized in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Ultimately this radical vision expands beyond the initial model of Gulla herself and begins to redeem all of society by encompassing all who are vulnerable in its ambit.

Kulla-Gulla's Feminist, Social, and Political Context

In her 1900 book *Barnets århundrade* (*The Century of the Child*), Ellen Key famously declares that the twentieth century will be the century of child (Key). Her view of women's and motherhood's crucial role in society, or "sammällsmöderlighet" (collective motherliness), also connects the well-being of women and children (cf. Åkerström and Lindholm). Following the early leadership of thinkers like Key, Fredrika Bremer, and others, twentieth-century Sweden made enormous strides not only in women's rights and equality, but also in improving the well-being of children. In a political sphere, the establishment of the Swedish welfare state in 1932 and its expansion from 1945 to 1975 dramatically reduced poverty by the 1970s, especially among the elderly and for families with children. Initially conceived of as "folkhemmet" (people's home) in an important speech by Per Albin Hansson in 1928, the Swedish welfare state linked society, state, and community with a model of the home where all contribute and look after one another, while equality, consideration, cooperation, and helpfulness prevail "i det goda hemmet" (in the good home; Hansson, qtd. in Ullström 13). The Swedish model of the people's home thus conceives of society as a family under one roof, so to speak. Social democratic welfare ideology also found reflection in Swedish literature for young people (Ullström). This political context contributes to the visions of community, home, and family and social responsibility in Martha Sandwall-Bergström's Kulla-Gulla book series, which were written during a period of the expansion of the Swedish welfare state, as well as being inspired by feminist thinking.

Maternal ideals inspired by early feminism also appeared in early twentieth-century literature for children. For example, Sun-Kyung Choi argues that Jeanna Oterdahl, influenced by Key, Bremer, and Emilia Fogelklou, uses motherhood both as a rhetorical strategy

and as a way to think about society. Sandwall-Bergström's models of motherhood and maternal ideals thus figure within a collective feminism and engage earlier work by women thinkers and writers, even as her work points toward a not yet realized utopian future. The Kulla-Gulla series thus proves deeply rooted in Swedish feminist thought and literature; nonetheless, certain aspects make the books stand out. Maria Nilson notes that the Kulla-Gulla books address overarching societal problems, while the heroine tries to make the world better by disassembling the patriarchal system and replacing it with something more equitable, while also showing empathy for vulnerable groups. Thereby Gulla becomes a poster child for the Swedish welfare state (Nilson 27). Ying Toijer-Nilsson also identifies the feminist potential of the text, noting the strong portraits of women in Sandwall-Bergström's writings and that women's power and dogged patience always win in her books, while male methods, like rage and the whip, fail (109). Eva Heggstad points out that the Kulla-Gulla books show not only women's strength by staying close to their core values, but also their capacity to change the ruling order, since they represent a struggle over the right to rule over the region and which principles should govern it (*Värld*). Other recent scholarship has taken new approaches to the Kulla-Gulla series from the perspective of gender, offering points of contact with this article, such as Hilda Jakobsson's analysis of men and the body, and Eva Söderberg and Erika Lunding's investigation of clothing and power. This article builds on work by these scholars in its investigation of a maternal ethics of care in the Kulla-Gulla books, which relates to the utopian feminist social vision it offers.

Although they were at times considered insufficiently progressive by contemporaneous critics (Söderberg, "Flickbok," "Hjältinna" 12), later scholars have reconsidered the Kulla-Gulla books in feminist and radical contexts. A historical and gendered devaluing of care might also be reflected in criticism of the Kulla-Gulla books in certain time periods and their dismissive categorization as girls' books. The critical reception of popular and beloved children's books with caring girl heroines thus may be a casualty of a kind of discriminatory devaluing of an ethics of care being disparaged not only by gender, but also by age, as in the doubly derogatory air surrounding "girls' books." Indeed, Birgitta Theander has noted that girls' books addressed social problems more than noted by earlier critics and researchers. Interestingly, children's own appreciation of these books have resisted such criticism all along, although their views also have been discounted.

Mothering and a Maternal Ethics of Care

The idea of an ethics of care as a normative ethical theory forms part of a cluster of theories developed by feminist thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (1982) developed ideas around care in response to shortcomings she identified in Lawrence Kohlberg's theorization of the stages of moral development (cf. *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, 1981), which, in her view, insufficiently accounted for the place of empathy and compassion because of an imbalanced gender sampling. The theoretical concept of a care-focused feminism advocated by Gilligan, Nel Noddings in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), and others, also critiques how caring is socially engendered, being assigned to women and consequently devalued. In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), Joan Tronto notes how socially and culturally constructed gender roles assume care to be mainly the task of the woman, thus depriving care of the power to take a central role in moral theory. Care-focused feminists instead regard women's capacity for care as a human strength. Ethics of care thus forms a basis for feminist theorizing about maternal ethics and recognizes caring as an ethically relevant issue, while asserting that care should be the social responsibility of all genders.

Care also has a social and political component theorized in recent decades. Virginia Held, in *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (1993) and *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (2006), endorses care as social and political and suggests that care provides a route to realizing better societies as well as better treatment of distant others. Tronto identifies the ethical qualities of care as being attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness, as well as collective responsibility. Like Held, Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) encourages societal shifts to prioritize children's vulnerabilities and the perspectives of mothers as necessary correctives to moral and political neglect of policies to ensure the well-being of vulnerable people in relationships requiring care.

As Adrienne Rich describes in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) and Ulla Holm develops in her feminist and philosophical *Modrande och praxis: En feministfilosofisk undersökning* (Mothering and praxis: A feminist philosophical investigation, 1993), "mothering" refers to care practices associated with motherhood regardless of gender or role. Likewise, in *Maternal Thinking*, Ruddick refuses to define mothering as specifically

female and insists it is sex-neutral, asserting in the preface to her 1995 edition that “Anyone who commits her or himself to responding to children’s demands, and makes the work of response a considerable part of her or his life, is a mother” (Ruddick xi–xii). By these key definitions in motherhood studies, Gulla certainly qualifies as a mother and engages in “mothering,” as do other characters, regardless of gender or age, in the later books.

“A Precocious Little Mother with a Child’s Face”

Set in the early 1900s, roughly half a century before the first books were written, the book series about the orphan girl known as “Gulla,” or by her nickname “Kulla-Gulla” (Hill-Gulla), shows why social reforms were needed by depicting the hardships faced by impoverished tenant farmer families in an agrarian setting. Throughout the book series, an ethics of care is manifest in multiple dimensions. It continually extends still further in its reach and finds reflection in ever more exemplary characters, as will be detailed in later portions of the article. First, however, it is demonstrated in Gulla’s care for the effectively and then actually motherless Karlberg children, including her attention, concern, and sense of responsibility toward the children in her charge. For them she serves as a kind of foster mother, or maternal proxy, despite her own young age. Later it becomes manifest in her extension of her care to other vulnerable individuals in her community and finally is shown by the embodiment of the same ethics of care by other characters who serve as exemplary models in the books and the more compassionate future she will build as she inherits a leading role in managing things in the community. This better version of the future, which exists beyond the bounds of the book series, thus also represents a utopian feminist social model based on care.

In the book series, Gulla proves more of a mother figure for the children she cares for than their actual mothers do – by supporting and guiding children whose mothers cannot, due to absence, disease, or infirmity, for example. In *Kulla-Gulla*, which was the first book to be written, the account of the orphan Gulla’s new life working for the impoverished Karlberg family, comprised of an abusive alcoholic father, a diseased mother by the name of Ellen, and their many children, ends with the father departing to bring the mother to the hospital, from which she will never return. Recognizing the mother’s state of distress and difficulty in leaving her children, duties, and animals, Gulla responds with care and compassion

and, despite the fact that she has been treated unkindly by Ellen, prioritizes the well-being of the departing mother and that of the children. She volunteers a promise to Ellen, where she assumes responsibility for the children Ellen is leaving behind:

Gulla gick fram till Ellen, tog hennes hand och såg henne rakt i ögonen. Hennes röst var allvarlig och högtidlig, ty det var ett stort löfte, hon avgav. – Du ska inte va orolig, Ellen, sade hon, barna tar jag hand om. Di ska bli väl tillsedda. Dä ger ja dej mitt ord i pant på. (Sandwall-Bergström, *Kulla-Gulla* 119)

(Gulla went up to Ellen, took her hand and looked her straight in the eyes. Her voice was serious and formal, because it was a significant vow she was making. “You don’t have to be worried,” Ellen, she said, “I will take care of the children. They will be well taken care of. I give you my word.”)³

Throughout the books, Gulla honors this vow to be like a mother to the Karlberg children.

As Ellen is carted away to the hospital, the narrative shares what Ellen sees looking back on the children being left behind:

Då såg hon barnen stå där med Gulla, lillungen på armen, de andra omkring, redan samlade som i mors beskydd – en brådmogen liten mor med barnansikte. (Sandwall-Bergström, *Kulla-Gulla* 120)

(Then she saw the children stand there with Gulla, the little one on her arm, the others around, already gathered like in their mother’s protection – a precocious little mother with a child’s face.)

This final vision captures Gulla’s paradoxically hybrid status as both child and mother, as she stands surrounded by Ellen’s children, who are now symbolically adopted by the orphan Gulla they already had come to trust and love due to her care. The book concludes with Gulla, in her new role, comforting the abandoned children with her “smala flickansiktet lysande av ömhet” (narrow girlish face glowing with tenderness) by saying “Käre alle gullebarn, aldri bryter jag mitt löfte” (All dear sweet children, never will I break my promise; Sandwall-Bergström, *Kulla-Gulla* 121). This formulation, using the affectionate prefix “gulle,” signifying sweet, cute, or made of gold, before the word “barn” (children), also reflects Gulla’s nickname, so that she affectionately declares the children to be her children, as it turns out, forever.

Gulla eventually is discovered to be the long-lost granddaughter of the wealthy landowner Sylvester, which sets the stage for a typical rags-to-riches or Cinderella story (cf. Söderberg, "Flickbok"). However, the Kulla-Gulla series does not simply celebrate the good fortune of one child deemed worthy of elevation from poverty by class status, which would reinforce inequality and an unjust system. Instead, the books offer a critique of the Cinderella story, as Gulla refuses to be content with privilege and a more fortunate lot unless the unrelated children, for whom she serves as a foster mother, also get what they need. Through Gulla's fierce, loyal, and ever-expanding ethics of care, the Kulla-Gulla series offers a radical vision of social reform, which eventually goes beyond the individual situation or family unit to encompass all of society.

In the third book, *Kulla-Gulla håller sitt löfte* (Hill-Gulla keeps her promise, 1965), the landowner Sylvester finally recognizes the orphan girl laboring for one of his tenant farmers as his granddaughter. He asks Gulla if she would like to come and live with him at his estate Höje (The Heights) and "bli min lilla flicka och växa upp till en fin liten dam...?" (be my little girl and grow up to be a fine little lady...?; Sandwall-Bergström, *Löfte* 60). Remembering her promise to Ellen and her own commitment to the children in her charge, Gulla replies,

Ja tror dä skulle va som att komma till himlen, sade Gulla och rösten skälvde litet, men än så länge kan ja inte tänka på dä... Ja har lovat att sköta om barna, tills Ellen kommer hem. (Sandwall-Bergström, *Löfte* 60)

(I think that would be like going to heaven, said Gulla and her voice shook a little, but for now I can't consider it... I have promised to care for the children until Ellen comes home.)

Gulla's response demonstrates the maternal responsibility she has assumed for the Karlberg children. An idealized figure, she here prioritizes her commitment to care for these effectively motherless children over her own right, as a truly motherless child, to finally be adopted by her own relation and embark on a life of privilege and comfort. In this way she cares more for the "other" than for herself and places her role as "mother" above her role as "child," which she, in fact, has never really experienced, due to the hardships of her life as an orphan. This key moment in the Kulla-Gulla series, which tests the strength of her vow, can be read as a manifesto for a maternal ethics of care. Gulla's actions and choices embody and concretize not only the values of the Swedish social democratic welfare state

and people's home but also her collective motherliness. Her example forcefully asserts that granting privileges to one child is insufficient if other children are left behind. Instead, all children must have their needs met, while she herself is prepared to take maternal responsibility for others.

In the subsequent book *Kulla-Gulla vinner en seger* (Hill-Gulla wins a victory, 1965), Gulla has lost her memory as a result of a traumatic experience that nearly claims her life and now lives on the estate of her grandfather. However, she finds her life inexplicably empty until she suddenly recovers the memory of the Karlberg children whom she loves, for whom she feels responsible, and from whom she had been separated. She immediately gathers them from their miserable situations, not unlike her own situation initially, and brings them back with her to her grandfather's estate, declaring that she "hittade plötseligen dä som jag tappat bort... den del av mej själv som ja förlorat" (had suddenly found what I had lost... the part of myself that I had lost; Sandwall-Bergström, *Seger* 125). She elaborates, "ja hittade min själ igen... ja kom plötseligen ihåg att ja va Kulla-Gulla också... inte bara Gunilla Beatrice Fredrike" (I found my soul again... I suddenly remembered that I am Kulla-Gulla also... not just Gunilla Beatrice Fredrike; 125). She thus reassumes her role as foster mother for the children, reconnecting with her maternal ethics, and her "soul," as she has recollected her responsibility for these children. Her grandfather looks at "den trasiga, smutsiga, eländiga barnskocken" (the tattered, dirty, miserable cluster of children) with distaste and replies, "Och nu tar du dig friheten komma till mig med alla dessa..." (And now you take the liberty of coming to me with all of these...). But Gulla, undeterred, insists, "Jaa, viskade Gulla, di måst va, där ja ä" (Yes, whispered Gulla, they must be where I am; 126). In this confrontation, which is the third such confrontation in his life, Sylvester realizes that he risks losing her, like her mother before her, so he finally gives way: "Välkomna, mina barn, sade han, stig på in... detta är ert hem" (Welcome, my children, he said, come on in... this is your home; 127). Gulla thus uses her grandfather's love for her as a key to open his home for the children she loves and cares for, achieving a hybrid status as both child and mother, while Sylvester is compelled to become a kind of grandfather figure to her adopted "children" as well. At the same time, the sense of collective responsibility for others that she has conjured in her grandfather, who opens his home, not only represents the Swedish people's home, but also an ever-expanding collective motherliness that Gulla cultivates in the books, through her own principles and example, and her impact on others.

Radical Extensions of Collective Motherliness

As the series progresses, ever more children in distress are included under this continually expanding umbrella, even as Gulla's capacity to do good is enhanced by her increased privilege. Moreover, additional characters start to demonstrate the sort of maternal ethics exemplified by Gulla, in contrast to other oppositional figures who represent other standpoints, such as the fierce horseback-riding Regina, who are ultimately defeated or reformed. The books thus proffer a radically inclusive model that not only repudiates inequality and injustice in the historical past and reflects social democratic values of the time, but also mirrors a radically utopian feminist vision of social reform (cf. Heggstad, "Fru Marianne" 99) that taps into an older Swedish feminist ideal of collective motherliness and reflects a more recently conceptualized ethics of care, motherhood, and inclusivity that resonates in new ways in the twenty-first century.

In these ways, Sandwall-Bergström's refashioning of a typical rags-to-riches or Cinderella story disarms early critiques leveled at it for its conservatism. Seen in this light, it is not un-feminist or conservative, but rather radical and feminist in how it forcefully asserts the value and importance of inclusive care and collective motherliness. Although herself a motherless child, Gulla represents an almost hagiographic apotheosis of care and mothering that extends to all of her charges and beyond to other vulnerable community members as the stories go on. Despite a resemblance to religious models and apparent loyalty to traditional ideas of femininity, the Kulla-Gulla books thus prove more radical than they might seem at first. Unlike Pippi Longstocking who has surprising strength and outmaneuvers even the circus strongman, Gulla does not simply adopt typically masculine values or characteristics, like physical strength, or continually assert her independence. Instead, Gulla stands for and offers a reaffirmation of traditionally feminine and maternal values around care, dependency, and interdependence. Through her character, interactions, and the plot, the Kulla-Gulla books thus offer a deeper feminist critique, on a far larger scale, of historic inequality and the entire patriarchal system that sustains it, from a vantage point that does not reject the feminine or maternal, but instead asserts it far more forcefully, as in more recent strands in feminist thinking.

These books advocate for the value, power, and potential of the ethics of care embodied by the young girl at the center of the narrative, while positing, through her example, a better and more humane alternative for the future, if the model she provides were to be ex-

tended more broadly within the community. Throughout the books, Gulla does not question her own values, but instead stays true to her nature and slowly transforms society around her to better reflect the values to which she firmly holds. In so doing, she expands the scope of her ethos and her influence on society as she gains an increased social consciousness and, with the assistance of other figures who share her values, helps to transform her surroundings. In this sense, the Kulla-Gulla series can be seen to radically propound the value of care and collective motherliness that asserts the rights of all children, and of all who are vulnerable, to have their needs met. It thus offers a future-oriented vision of social reform (cf. Heggstad, "Drömmen" 241), as was being sought in the Swedish social welfare state in the mid-twentieth century, but also goes further.

Ethics of Care in a Broader Social Sphere

For Gulla, as a part of her collective motherliness and growing social consciousness, the same ethos of care expands, over the course of the books, to apply beyond the adoptive family group to vulnerable outsiders as well. Maria Nilson raises the question of whether this is fully realized in Sandwall-Bergström's work. However, Gulla's humane, respectful, and appreciative treatment of Dal-Pelle, a social outcast who is feared and deemed a dangerous "other" by everyone else, shows that her compassion, care, and respect extends beyond her immediate community, the familiar, and what is deemed socially acceptable by her community (cf. Hübber 8–9). The contrast between how Dal-Pelle is treated, and the positive and negative outcomes that result, serve to reinforce the message of the book and the superiority of Gulla's value system and mode of being, while also holding up a mirror to reflect her good qualities. Indeed, Gulla's interactions with others often serve to demonstrate her character and reinforce the rectitude of her value system.

Gulla embodies a model of inclusivity and compassionate care for the disabled in another extension of her social consciousness. In Eva Feder Kittay's seminal article about "The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability" (2011), she notes that all human beings are subject to periods of dependency, while people without disabilities are only "temporarily abled," calling for a vision of society able to account for inevitable dependency relationships between "unequals" in order to ensure that both carer and cared for have a fulfilling life (Kittay). This inclusive model acknowledges the dependency life stages of infancy, childhood, and old age, as well as infirmity, disease, and disability.

Interestingly, Gulla demonstrates compassion and caring for all of these categories of dependency during the course of the book series.

In this regard, Sandwall-Bergström writes from a distinctly maternal perspective, since she herself was the mother of a disabled child. Eva Söderberg notes how the author's concerted aim to instill compassion was related to her experience as a mother, citing a 1950s debate about girls' books where the author defended her heroine's goodness and noted that her own daughter will depend on others for her whole life. Thus Sandwall-Bergström hoped her books would awaken compassion in young readers (Söderberg, "Hjältinna" 13). As Söderberg points out, the Kulla-Gulla books also include such a dependent child in the priest's youngest daughter Esther, who is met in a compassionate and inclusive spirit by leading characters. In this sense the author's own maternal ethics motivates the books' overall emphasis on compassion for all, regardless of vulnerability by age, infirmity, disability, or disadvantage – as well as its vision of social reform. Her pathbreaking example of inclusivity thus also may be situated within a collective motherliness examined here. For Sandwall-Bergström it is not the individual who must adapt, but rather society that should transform itself to meet the needs of all individuals, since, as the books' ethics of care espouses, all are responsible for all.

In the final books in the Kulla-Gulla series, the values espoused by Gulla find a shared masculine embodiment in the principles and actions of the radical student and socialist Tomas Tomasson. In *Kulla-Gulla och Tomas Torpare* (Hill-Gulla and Tomas Crofter, 1968), when the poor tenant farmer Sammel has fallen ill, Tomas has a keen enough sense of responsibility to ask the landowner Sylvester, "om torparen mister sitt torp, vad blir det då av honom och barnen?" (if the tenant farmer loses his farm, what will happen to him and the children?; Sandwall-Bergström, *Tomas* 102). Sylvester answers, "Det är torparens ensak" (That is the crofter's problem; 102), reflecting a lack of responsibility. But Tomas thinks differently and assumes Sammel's duties as a tenant farmer and cares for his children until he returns from the hospital. His atypical actions not only mirror Gulla's own with respect to the Karlberg children, but also go further, since he has neither previous ties or bonds with these children in need, nor any commitment to their parent to care for them.

Through the example of Tomas, Gulla's ethos becomes abstracted, dissociated from her sole example, and made more widely applicable, even as the model she promulgates finds new influence through Tomas, which thus demonstrates the transferability of her

value system. Tomas has a transformative impact on the community when he exemplifies an ethics of care in taking responsibility, on his own, for a homestead and home full of children. He too can be seen to engage in “mothering,” as defined above. As Söderberg observes, he is a strong, tender, and empathic man, and a modern father figure, guided by the same “omsorgsetik” (ethics of care) as the books’ heroine (Söderberg, “Poeten” 116). Tomas helps Gulla to achieve a wider reach, as she expands her private beneficence and aspires to deeper social change, even in the face of frustrations, which they face together. In this way these efforts for the well-being of the collective, move from a private to a public sphere and from individual actions to collective ones.

By the end of the series, Gulla rejects a sanctioned suitor of high class and social standing, whose actions have forecast that he would be a callous and abusive landlord. His actions already resulted in the death of a child, representing a clear moral touchstone in the cosmology of the books, while Tomas’s first act in the community is to save one of Gulla’s foster children from harm. Rejecting the corrupted Cinderella narrative this false suitor might have offered, Gulla instead chooses Tomas as a life partner, showing that she prizes character, virtue, and values over wealth, class, and social standing. Her choice also shores up the ethos espoused throughout the books, since Tomas embodies the same values. Their partnership and implied future impact on the community thus demonstrates the transformative potential of the maternal ethics that Gulla – and Tomas alongside her – represents.

Tomas’s efforts and masculine example of taking responsibility for all effectively show a new path forward for the entire community. He thus helps elevate others through the force of his positive example and spread Gulla’s ethos more broadly. Together, Gulla and Tomas promise to accomplish social reform in their own gentle way, thus answering the question posed by the book *Kan en social revolution ske med fredliga medel?* (Can a social revolution occur by peaceful methods?) that Tomas was reading when Gulla first encountered him. In some ways, the fact that Tomas proves more broadly impactful in the community capitulates to gender norms. Yet this aspect of the final books in the series may also represent Sandwall-Bergström’s rebuttal to gendered critiques of the novels, since Tomas’s example serves to universalize her books’ ethos.

Interestingly, in the denouement of the series, a different sort of gender reversal is accomplished than that of Pippi and the circus strongman. Tomas displays the same ethics of care that Gulla

demonstrates, so that the adult male hero reflects the admirable qualities of the young heroine associated here with mothering and care. This asserts the universal value of principles espoused in the book's utopian feminist vision. It also demonstrates that the ethical example of care embodied by Gulla transcends gender, age, or any single individual. In this way, the end of the series illustrates that "collective motherliness" and an ethics of care is transferable and transformative for all. The books thus offer Sandwall-Bergström's vision of a just and better model for society. They expansively demonstrate what any person should do as part of a decent society, thereby recalibrating social ethics according to a feminist utopian vision.

Conclusion

Ultimately then, despite having been at times viewed as conservative or insufficiently feminist, the Kulla-Gulla series can be seen to offer a radically utopian vision based on a maternal ethics of care, mothering, and inclusivity that advocates for compassion and meeting the needs of all vulnerable individuals. Sandwall-Bergström's vision ultimately proves to be more aligned with modern feminism in reevaluating and reasserting traditionally feminine social and societal contributions around care. Drawing on earlier feminist thought in Sweden and beyond, its value system also resonates with more recent feminist scholarship on mothering, motherhood studies, and an ethics of care, so modern approaches to motherhood studies and an ethics of care also may be seen to revitalize older feminist strains of thought.

Sandwall-Bergström's Kulla-Gulla series offers a vision of the future that aspires to reform all of society according to a collective motherliness and ethics of care for which Gulla serves as a model *par excellence*. The Kulla-Gulla books thus make their own contribution to envisioning, and thereby helping to realize, a more compassionate future, through the transformative potential of books for young audiences. In the end, then, Pippi Longstocking's singular superhuman strength may offer a less empowering example for young readers than Gulla's collective ethics of care; it does not just hoist up a strongman or bullies to teach them a lesson, but lifts up all members of society for the greater good. Moreover, children can aspire to the values of compassion and care it espouses within their own real lives, while also contributing toward the betterment of society around them, if inspired to do so by Martha Sandwall-Bergström's utopian feminist vision of the future presented by a fictional depiction of a girl in the historical past.

Biographical information: Sara Pankenier Weld is a Professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies and an Affiliate of the Comparative Literature Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, US. She specializes in childhood and children's literature across national and disciplinary boundaries, with a particular focus on Slavic, Scandinavian, and North American literature, children's literature, and picturebooks, and has authored three books, with a fourth in progress.

Notes

1 The later publication of 12 Kulla-Gulla books, which are the texts referred to in this article, are, in sequential order: *Kulla-Gulla på Blomgården* (Hill-Gulla at Flower Farm, 1972), *Kulla-Gulla* (Hill-Gulla, 1965), *Kulla-Gulla håller sitt löfte* (Hill-Gulla keeps her promise, 1965), *Kulla-Gulla vinner en seger* (Hill-Gulla wins a victory, 1965), *Kulla-Gulla på herrgården* (Hill-Gulla at the estate, 1966), *Kulla-Gulla löser en gåta* (Hill-Gulla solves a riddle, 1966), *Kulla-Gulla i skolan* (Hill-Gulla at school, 1967), *Kulla-Gullas första bal* (Hill-Gulla's first ball, 1967), *Kulla-Gullas sommarlov* (Hill-Gulla's summer vacation, 1967), *Kulla-Gulla och Tomas Torpare* (Hill-Gulla and Tomas Crofter, 1968), *Kulla-Gulla finner sin väg* (Hill-Gulla finds her way, 1968), and *Kulla-Gullas myrtenkrona* (Hill-Gulla's myrtle crown, 1968).

2 Among other translations of the book, *Kulla-Gulla* was published in an English translation by Joan Tate under the title *Anna All Alone* (1978), along with *Anna at Bloom Farm* (1978), *Anna Keeps her Promise* (1978), and *Anna Wins Through* (1979). Throughout this article I employ my own translations of texts originally written in Swedish.

3 Translations from the *Kulla-Gulla* books are literal translations that do not attempt to render the local dialect distinctively recreated by Martha Sandwall-Bergström when including speech by laboring classes.

Works Cited

Choi, Sun-Kyoung. *Kraften att älska, makten att tjäna: Religion, emancipation och den kvinnliga skapande kraften i Jeanna Oterdahls sagor, 1908–1927*. PhD dissertation, Umeå University. Två förläggare bokförlag, 2017.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Hansson, Per Albin. *Tal vid remissdebatten i riksdagens andra kammare den 18 januari 1928*, www.svenskatal.se/tal/per-albin-hansson-folkhemstalet. Accessed 15 May 2023.

Heggstad, Eva. "Drömmen om det goda samhället – Anne Vildkatt, Kulla-Gulla och fröknarna von Pahlen." *Konsten att berätta för barn*, edited by Anne Banér, Centrum för barnkulturforskning, 1996, pp. 231–244.

---. "Fru Marianne och Kulla-Gulla: Ideal eller avskräckande exempel." *Från handskrift till XML: Informationshantering och kulturarv*, edited by Kerstin Rydbeck, Uppsala universitet, 2002, pp. 91–105.

---. *En bättre och lyckligare värld: Kvinnliga författares utopiska visioner 1850–1950*. Symposion, 2003.

Held, Virginia. *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

---. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Holm, Ulla M. *Modrande och praxis: En feministfilosofisk undersökning*. Institutionen för filosofi, 1993.

Hübber, Kelly. "Animals and the Unspoken: Intertwined Lives in Martha Sandwall-Bergström's Kulla-Gulla Series." *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, vol. 36, 2013, doi.org/10.14811/clr.v36i0.149.

Jakobsson, Hilda. "Att skilja äkta kärlek från falsk: Manliga och omanliga kroppar i Martha Sandwall-Bergströms Kulla-Gullaserie." *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, vol. 36, 2013, doi.org/10.14811/clr.v36i0.150.

Key, Ellen. *Barnets århundrade*. Stockholm, 1900.

Kittay, Eva Feder. "The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability." *Ratio Juris*, no. 24, 1 March 2011, pp. 49–58.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*. Harper & Row, 1981.

Nilson, Maria. "Är Kulla-Gulla svensk? Om flickböcker, nationell identitet och det moderna Sverige." *Kulla-Gulla och alla de andra: Martha Sandwall-Bergström 100 år*, edited by Helene Ehriander and Eva Söderberg, Linnaeus University Press, 2015, pp. 11–29.

Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. University of California Press, 1984.

Nordenstam, Anna. "Martha Majken Birgitta Sandwall-Bergström." *Svenskt kvinnobiografiskt lexikon*, March 8 2018, skbl.se/en/article/MarthaSandwallBergstrom.

- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, 1976.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. 1989. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Sandwall-Bergström, Martha. *Kulla-Gulla*. 1965. Bonniers, 1985.
- . *Kulla-Gulla håller sitt löfte*. 1965. Bonniers, 1981.
- . *Kulla-Gulla vinner en seger*. 1965. Bonniers, 1986.
- . *Kulla-Gulla och Tomas Torpare*. 1968. Bonniers, 1986.
- Söderberg, Eva. "Kulla-Gulla – flickbok och hjältepos." *Barnboken: Journal of Children's Literature Research*, no. 2, 1995, pp. 4–15.
- . "Poeten, pojken och prinsarna: Manlighetsproblematik i Martha Sandwall-Bergströms Kulla-Gullasvit." *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2003, pp. 105–117.
- . "Kulla-Gulla – småflickornas hjältinna." *Parnass*, no. 3, 2019, pp. 12–13.
- Söderberg, Eva, and Erika Lunding. "Plagg och kamp! Om klädernas plats och funktion i Martha Sandwall-Bergströms Kulla-Gullasvit." *Flickboken och flickors läsning: Flickskapande nu och då*, edited by Helene Ehriander and Corina Löwe, Makadam förlag, 2022, pp. 222–246.
- Theander, Birgitta. *Älskad och förnekad: Flickboken i Sverige 1945–65*. PhD dissertation, Lund University. Makadam, 2006.
- Toijer-Nilsson, Ying. "Martha Sandwall-Bergström." *De läses än: Porträtt av elva svenska barnboksförfattare*, edited by Carl-Agnar Lövgren, BTJ, 1980, pp. 99–113.
- Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 1993.
- Ullström, Margaretha. *Folkhemsideologi i svensk ungdomslitteratur: En 1900-talsstudie*. PhD dissertation, Åbo Akademi University. Åbo Akademis förlag, 2022.
- Åkerström, Ulla, and Elena Lindholm, editors. *Collective Motherliness in Europe 1890–1939: The Reception and Reformulation of Ellen Key's Ideas on Motherhood and Female Sexuality*. Peter Lang, 2020.