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# BODIES, GENDER AND MARGINALIZATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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# Editorial.
# Bodies, gender, and marginalization in children's literature

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*Guest editor for the theme Bodies, gender, and marginalization in children's literature*

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"Bodies, gender and marginalization in children's literature" is a special issue in *Analize - Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies*, a collaboration between the *Romanian Society for Feminist Analysis* and the *Research Environment of Children's Literature and Young Adult Fiction* at Stockholm University, Sweden. Special thanks are due to Arina Stoenescu, Lund University, a close friend of children literature writers from Romania, for facilitating the contact between the Journal's editors and Elina Druker, the guest editor of this special issue.

For Romania the theme of this journal issue is a premiere. If feminist and gender sensitive research has lately covered a diversity of subjects, the topic of the gender dimension of children literature has not been attentively approached in Romanian research. The present issue of the journal is therefore of utmost interest in Romania – and certainly in many other parts of the world. The children literature landscape has been diversifying lately. Today, we see a growing interest for both contemporary and historical children's literature, and an openness to accepting non-stereotypical or even anti-stereotypical stories that address the complex issues confronting young people today.

Authors of children's literature, taking good examples from countries with rich traditions of this kind (e.g., Nordic countries), are now more often embarking in the creation of less conventional, traditionalist stories and more challenging ones, stories that deal with difficult issues confronting the younger generations (violence, bullying, migration, reproductive issues, body shaming, etc.). They look at stories as ways of describing challenging experiences, how to cope with change, accepting and promoting it, and in this, they invite young readers to lean back on the old and find themselves in what William Bridges calls an 'emotional wilderness' (*Managing Transitions*).

In our turbulent times, children need more than ever support to cope with the new environments around them—for example, to adjust to the new gendered realities, to understand the fluidity of gender, to critically reflect on the over-visibility of some genders and the invisibilities of others in public narratives.

In this context, the present issue presents articles by five scholars working within the field of children's literature research in different European countries. The theme issue is the result of a cross-interdisciplinary collaboration between our research environments and brings together scholars working within both children's literature and gender and feminist studies.

Childhood and its representations in children's literature are here understood as complex and ambiguous. Despite different theoretical and methodological approaches applied by the authors, these articles express a shared scholarly interest in the physicality of children's bodies and their environment, but also how these bodies are used to question norms and expectations, both in children's fiction and in society at large. A common denominator for the articles is an interest in the materiality of the body, and how the physical body and its immaterial, fictional forms in literature for children and young adults can be understood and investigated. When turning our attention to children's bodies in literature for young audiences, structures like gender, race, sexual orientation and power hierarchies become crucial for our understanding of what is described and what kind of messages these depictions convey. The articles within this issue investigate a heterogeneous material that includes various investigations and portraits of children and their bodies within picturebooks, prose, and illustrated novels.

In their article "Depicting Fatness in Picturebooks. Fat Temporality in Malin Kivelä's and Linda Bondestam's *Den ofantliga Rosabel* and Anete Melece's *Kiosks*," Mia Österlund and Åsa Warnqvist suggest new ways of approaching bodies, and more specifically fat bodies, in children's picturebooks. Applying the queer-theoretical concept of '*fat temporality'*, the authors discuss how manifestations of fatness in picturebooks express temporality. They suggest that fat bodies – both human and anthropomorphic – can be used to question a normatively organized life span by, instead, applying the concept of queer temporality. The article shows that the studied contemporary picturebooks resist the predefined way of thinking about body norms, fat, and temporality.

As Österlund and Warnqvist demonstrate, the use of norm-breaking bodies is a complex issue, and is addressed in children's literature in various and sometimes contradicting ways. In Elina Druker's article "Vermin beings. Anthropomorphism and dehumanization in children's literature," blurred boundaries between human and animal are discussed, with a focus on animal and humanoid protagonists depicted as vermin. The use of vermin is often associated with dehumanizing imagery and rhetoric, and the metaphor has historically been used in different discriminatory contexts. The article investigates whether using small characters that can be seen as vermin in literature for children reflects or questions dehumanizing imagery. Furthermore, the characters both delineate and question the human body as opposed to the non-human body. Applying posthuman and critical animal theory, the article discusses how these miniscule bodies are used to express otherness, marginalization, and a lack of power, but, more importantly, how these characters draw attention to, and question, discriminative and dehumanizing images and rhetoric.

The concept of dehumanization is also central in Maria Andersson's article "The Making(s) of a Girl. Gender and Humanness in Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song*," where the author discusses the changeling motif with a focus on gender and humanness in Frances Hardinge's contemporary young adult novel *Cuckoo Song*. The author shows that the motif where a human child has been substituted by another being, and where, consequently, the world is described from the monster's point of view, juxtaposes the non-human with humans that have been represented as the "other" in Western society—like women, children, and foreign people. The article discusses how the narrative thus sheds light on practices of othering and the gendered, racialized, and age-specific norms of human life. Andersson's analysis points at a tradition in children's and young adult literature where anthropomorphic toys and other fantastical creatures are employed in order to examine issues of subjectivity, gender, and humanity.

Realistic fiction, however, has its own ways of highlighting bodies. Societal views on sexuality and sexual pleasure in young adult fiction are discussed by B.J. Epstein in her article "The (Lack of) Pleasures of Girlhood: The Masturbating Queer Girl in Young Adult

Literature." Epstein uses masturbation in queer young adult literature as her case study and argues that societal discomfort with masturbation, female sexuality in general, and lesbian sexuality in particular, combine to make queer female solitary sex an invisible and possibly taboo subject. While a wide range of sexual practices by young males (both heterosexual and queer) is common in English-language young adult novels, there are few explicit portrayals of young queer females exploring and appreciating their own bodies and sexual responses. The author argues that this lack does young queer women a disservice, teaching them shame and secrecy rather than healthy and confident sexuality.

As the articles in the theme issue demonstrate, literature for young audiences express ideas and norms about children's bodies, ideas that are historically ever-changing. Through their attention to the myriad fictive bodies in stories for children, whether big or small, human or non-human, organic or mechanic, they point at a muddling of categories, systems, and hierarchies.

This entire issue of our journal makes, in fact, a clear statement: stories are dynamic, constructed interactively with an audience and within a context. They are useful to entertain, but, at the same time, to illustrate, instruct, envision, help, feel and, not ultimately, provoke. Beyond bedtime stories there are also *wake-up stories*, and children all over the world need both. Some gendered wake-up stories have been under scrutiny in this special issue of the journal. Many others, from different cultural backgrounds, still wait to be scrutinized.

# Depicting Fatness in Picturebooks: Fat Temporality in Malin Kivelä's and Linda Bondestam's *Den ofantliga Rosabel* and Anete Melece's *Kiosks*

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**Abstract**

In this article, we analyze how fat bodies are written into two contemporary picturebooks, Finland-Swedish Malin Kivelä's and Linda Bondestam's *Den ofantliga Rosabel* (The Immense Rosabel, 2017), and Latvian Anete Melece's *Kiosks* (The Kiosk, 2019). They are representative of two prominent tendencies in contemporary picturebooks: the displacement of fat children's bodies and, depicted in their place, fat adult or animal bodies. We explore the depiction of fatness in relation to this lack of representation and show what narrative strategies enclose this absence. In contrast to earlier studies, we explore how fat-positive depictions are shaped. We use a theoretical approach new to picturebook studies, on how time and timelines put in relation to representations of fat produce meaning. Via the queer-theoretical concept *fat temporality* we discuss how manifestations of fatness in the two picturebooks express temporality. In *Kiosks* the fat temporality manifests a way of being in the world other than a normatively organized life span, and in *Den ofantliga Rosabel* queer paraphernalia simultaneously create a queer temporality and a queer utopia. The analyses conclude that both stories resist the predefined way of thinking about fat and time and that neither narrative centers on changing the person or the fat body. Instead, it is the protagonists' changed circumstances that lead to closure. However, the strategy of using anthropomorphization and fat adult characters in picturebooks aimed at children shows that fat is a complex issue, addressed in various and contradicting ways. The displacement strategies raise the broader question of how body norms and sizes are inscribed, and referred to, in contemporary picturebooks in general.

**Keywords:** *picturebooks, fat studies, fat temporality, Linda Bondestam, Malin Kivelä, Anete Melece*

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What do a cheeky, chubby pony in a stable and a dumpy, daydreaming salesperson in a kiosk have in common? In the vast landscape of contemporary European picturebooks, this pony and this salesperson are significant signposts for how fat characters are written into visual narratives. In this article, we turn to these two representations in order to exemplify how bodily norms are developed and how fat bodies are depicted in contemporary picturebooks. The two books – Finland-Swedish Malin Kivelä's and Linda Bondestam's *Den ofantliga Rosabel* (The Immense Rosabel, 2017, henceforth *Rosabel*), and Latvian Anete Melece's *Kiosks* (The Kiosk, 2019), the latter based on an animated short film with the same title that was released in 2013 – are representative of two prominent tendencies in contemporary picturebooks: missing fat child bodies and, depicted in their place, fat adult or animal bodies. The two picturebooks have been chosen from a broader corpus of books depicting fat characters within our ongoing research project "Body Politics and the Fat Child".[1] Our study differs from earlier research on fat in children's literature in that the material includes non-Anglo-American and non-Anglo-Saxon books. We also use a theoretical approach new to picturebook studies, on how time and timelines put in relation to representations of fat produce meaning.

Given the actual numbers of real-life fat children (World Health Organization, 2018),[2] one would expect an abundance of fat child bodies in children's literature to manifest diversity, but the fact is that fat child characters are vastly underrepresented in Western children's literature. This particularly applies to fat-positive depictions and depictions of fat protagonists and is connected to the medicalization and stigmatization of fat in general and fat children in particular. Fat studies scholar Katariina Kyrölä argues that this thin normativity reflects an internalized fear of fat characterizing Western society (2010; 2021). In accordance with previous research, we have concluded that fat children admittedly exist in children's literature, but as a rule they are subsidiary characters depicted in a negative and stereotypical way, usually used to ridicule, offer comic relief or caution within a health discourse where fatness is connected to different kinds of moral failures (see e.g. Webb, 2009; Flynn, 2013, p. 28; Averill, 2016; Warnqvist, 2017; Herrmann, 2018; Amato, 2019, p. 6).[3]

Fat studies scholar Anja Herrmann calls the general absence of fat bodies in picturebooks "missing bodies" (2018), an immense absence displaying a fundamental taboo

[1] The selection so far comprises of mostly contemporary Nordic picturebooks and picturebooks translated to Swedish collected via review work and our work with the Book Tasting at the Swedish Institute for Children's books, the August Prize jury, the Nordic Council Children and Young People's Literature Prize jury, and different working groups at the Swedish Arts Council. Through these different assignments we have read thousands of picturebooks during the 21st century.

[2] According to WHO's report *Taking Action on Childhood Obesity* (2018) there is an obesity "epidemic." "Childhood obesity is one of the most serious global public health challenges of the 21st century, affecting every country in the world," WHO concludes. According to the report, the "number of school-age children and adolescents with obesity has risen more than 10-fold, from 11 million to 124 million (2016 estimates)." WHO also estimates that an additional "216 million were classified as overweight but not obese in 2016," this including more than 38 million overweight or obese children under the age of five in 2017 (2018, p. 1). The idea of an "obesity pandemic" has, however, been challenged in lack of clear evidence supporting the claim of a general increase in weight or life-changing illnesses and mortality rates as a result of it (see e.g. Raisborough, 2016, p. 51).

[3] Two well-known examples of fat stereotypes are the depictions of Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl and Harry Potter's cousin Dudley in J. K. Rowling's bestselling book series (1997–2007) (see Webb, 2009; Warnqvist, 2017).

around fatness.[4] Our ongoing research on particularly Nordic picturebooks shows that fat children's bodies are constantly and consistently displaced. When fat characters occur, they are generally anthropomorphized animals or adults (Österlund, 2019; Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021). In this article, this tendency provides the frame of our analysis. We explore how manifestations of fatness are expressed in the above-mentioned picturebooks in relation to the lack of representation of fat children and show what narrative strategies enclose this absence. In contrast to earlier studies, however, we focus on fat-positive picturebooks with fat protagonists. In doing so, we go beyond the general stereotypes and explore how fat-positive depictions are shaped.

The intersection between fat studies and queer studies lays the ground for our approach to how fat is depicted in the chosen picturebooks.[5] Via the queer-theoretical concept *fat temporality* – here understood as a competing timeline which questions normative time through the presence of fat bodies – we explore how manifestations of fatness in picturebooks express temporality. In order to uncover how a fat temporality is utilized, we discuss antropomorphism and adulthood as two strategies used to depict fat bodies and thereby fill the space of the missing fat children in picturebooks. We are interested in what means – such as book format, narrative devices, and different aesthetical choices – and effects the creation of fat characters demands. Moreover, we ask what fat bodies in picturebooks stand for, and what temporal implications there are.[6]

The relationship between fatness and the social construction of time is a fruitful and pivotal intersection addressed from multiple angles, for example feminist and gender studies, critical race studies, disability studies, cultural studies, and queer studies. In children's literature research, fat temporality is not yet in broad use and our approach is therefore mainly informed by studies of the concept in other fields. However, some studies exist within the field, such as Michele Byers's study on fat futurity in the young adult novel, which stresses that the concept reveals how novels "carve out spaces in which fat bodies and their futures can be complexly imagined" (2021). In addition, Margaret Hass discusses tropes that govern fat teenagers' time (2018). As the concept of fat temporality is not used in earlier picturebook studies, our analysis paves the way for a completely new approach to this subject.

Based on our extensive reading of contemporary European, mostly Nordic, picturebooks, we can confirm that there is a fear of touch or even disgust surrounding the depiction of fat child bodies (see Herrmann, 2017, p. 16). Moreover, there is a range of strategies to avoid depicting fat children, primarily via different levels of displacement or smoothening strategies such as an overall aesthetic of roundness and use of perspective and proportion (Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021). On the surface, some of these strategies can be said to utilize different possibilities of visually depicting fat in picturebooks, but notably those depictions are highly dependent on thin normativity and linear timelines which limit the contribution to a disruption of normative conceptualization of bodies. Moreover, the term *fat* is almost never mentioned in these books.

[4] Herrmann draws on Casper & Moore, 2009, in her discussion of fat child bodies in picturebooks.

[5] See "What's Queer about Fat Studies Now?" (2021) by Allison Taylor for a critical exploration of how queer studies inform fat studies.

[6] Temporality is also a key concept in picturebook analysis with a specific terminology to describe how time is visualized (see Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, p. 139 ff.), but this is not how we use the term in this context.

Within fat studies, the term *fat* is used in order to avoid common euphemisms that make excuses for fat bodies (Wann, 1998; LeBesco, 2004; Wann, 2009; Parsons, 2016). Although the word "fet"/"fat" is actually used in *Rosabel*, the epithet in the title of this book is a typical example of such euphemisms. In this case, the word "ofantlig"/"immense" underlines both the size of the fat pony and her greatness in a transferred sense; she is a prototype girl power figure, therefore also metaphorically large.[7] In *Kiosks*, the body size of the protagonist is not commented on in the text – a typical strategy with the aim to manifest an inclusive and body-positivist approach (see Melece, 7 May 2019), but at the same time a displacement strategy. Apart from our tongue-in-cheek opening line in this text, we use the word *fat* to describe the protagonists in the two books under investigation.

**Fat Temporality and Picturebook Narratives**

Societal movements and activism such as body positivism have gained momentum during the last decades. An intersectional and material view on representation – in other words an approach building on aspects such as race, ability, class, and sexuality, as well as focusing on lived experiences of bodies – has also highlighted body size as an overarching category of structural oppression. Already in the 1960's, the Fat Acceptance Movement and Health at Every Size campaigned against the stigmatizing of fat bodies. Building on feminist and queer theory, the transdisciplinary field of fat studies challenges normalization, knowledge production, and the circulation of stereotypical body images. Fat studies enable us to think critically about fat and fat bodies while also making visible seemingly neutral structures and discourses that strive to normalization (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Rinaldi et al, 2021).

A key to understanding the complexities in depictions of fat and fat bodies is to study how fat and time interrelate and how fat existence and fat interventions cultivate temporal economies other than linear, capitalist, and colonial (Tidgwell et al, 2018). Elizabeth Freeman has coined the concept *chrononormativity* to explain how normative conceptions of time favor certain courses of time before others (2010). Studies of temporality emphasize that time is multiple and the term *radical polytemporality* acknowledges this idea of multiple courses of time competing (for instance courses of time connected to the home sphere, the nation, the political sphere and so on). Fat temporality is one of these competing courses of time which draws on the relationship between fat and the social construction of time. Often, but not always, fat temporality occurs in contexts where fat bodies are found, since fat bodies are considered to slow down normative time and break its chronology (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010; Helgesson, 2014).

Within fat studies, fat temporality is often connected to queer time.[8] Temporality is a central concept within queer studies to uncover the structural oppression where normative

[7] It is noteworthy that Malin Kivelä sought to reclaim and problematize the word "fat" also in the book's title. However, the intended title, *Rosabel – the fat pony*, was changed only by request of the Swedish publishing house in order not to offend readers (Kivelä, 24 August 2021).

[8] The concept of queer time has been theorized by, for example, Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010). See also, for example, Helgesson, 2014, p. 557. *Fat time* and fat temporality are used synonymously (see Tidgwell et al, 2018), but for the purpose of clarity we only use the term fat temporality in our analysis here. See

courses of time dictate a certain order of human living which forecloses certain bodies. The influence comes from Walter Benjamin's critique of linear time (1969). Queer studies have embraced this idea of time as a movement not necessarily forward moving, but containing wrinkles and folds, an image embraced by fat studies scholars since it reflects how the fat body with its folds of fat are conceived as a material expression of non-linear and non-normative time. Definitions of fat temporality often assume such physically anchored wordings (Tigdwell et al, 2018; Rinaldi et al, 2021).

As a queer-theoretical concept fat temporality is deliberately fluid and includes a spectrum of possibilities. The difference between queer temporality and fat temporality is that queer temporality signifies how norm-breaking temporality regulates bodies and vice versa, whereas fat temporality signifies how norm-breaking temporality regulates specifically fat bodies and vice versa. However, many fat studies scholars are vague in their definition of the term. They often draw on a critique of the idea of varying future prospects in relation to social constructions of time for certain bodies depending on their size or function, an idea in which slim bodies are favored and considered more viable. The linear orders of time asserted by health, normativity, and respectability discourses are then contradicted by fat temporality, which manifests alternative ways of being in that it disrupts normative hierarchies and bodily regimes. In fiction, fat temporality allows fat bodies to talk back to normative discourses and to question fat stigma and body shame (Tigdwell et al, 2018).[9]

As mentioned, a few studies on particularly young adult fiction use the concept of fat temporality within children's literature research, but the concept is new to picturebook studies and therefore we suggest our own definition.[10] By fat temporality we refer to a competing timeline which questions normative time through the presence of fat bodies. At the core of the definition is, in other words, the fat bodies' possibility to express fat temporality. The fat temporality is manifested both in fat, static bodies and in fat bodies in movement contradicting normative expectations on what a fat body can do from a social point of view (Tidgwell et al, 2018).

Following Tidgwell et al (2018), we also see timing and tempos in the narratives – in other words when something happens and at what pace – as crucial in the depiction of fat bodies in picturebooks. We also consider how sensorial experiences (touch, smell, and other sensory impressions), pleasures (something that feels enjoyable and rewarding), and timelines in new combinations together manifest an alternative way of being which disrupts normative bodily regimes. In our analysis this is connected to what the fat protagonists do, where they do it and how. In our material, for example, Rosabel confronts and overcomes thin normativity – manifested by the slim horses – by breaking out of limiting fences and expressing joy running outside of them, while Olga's situatedness inside the kiosk is characterized by the pleasure of sitting still and daydreaming, and at the same time oscillates between stasis and movement.

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also the concept *fattening of time* for the manifestations of a non-normative time (see Tidgwell et al, 2018, p. 122).

[9] See bell hooks, 1989/2015 for the concept of "talking back."

[10] Earlier fat studies within children's literature research have mainly focused on young adult fiction (see e.g. Quick, 2008; Younger, 2009; Webb, 2009; Flynn, 2013; Wedwick & Latham, 2013; Parsons, 2016; Amato, 2019, Byers, 2021; Hass, 2018). There are only a few fat studies of picturebooks (see e.g. Herrmann, 2018).

From the 1970's onwards, fat studies include a stronger direction towards visuality, manifested in a subfield called visual fat studies (Herrmann, 2017; Herrmann, 2018). A similar approach is mandatory for the study of picturebooks, where visual and verbal narration merge (see e.g. Doonan, 1993; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Not only do fat characters in picturebooks manifest bodily norms, but these norms are also embedded in, or comprise, fat temporality. In picturebooks, fat can be present on multiple levels and in both verbal and visual narration, even if, as pointed out above, euphemisms and smoothening strategies are common. As the analysis below will show, the visual manifestations in particular can expose and explore fatness in manifold and material ways. Moreover, the picturebook format and narrative conventions are utilized in the depiction of fat figures and fat temporality, for example via carvings, as will be discussed below (see also Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021).

Nicole Ann Amato, who examines the representation of fat female bodies, states that fat bodies in graphic novels have yet to be systematically studied and that graphic novels have the potential to disrupt thin normalization since the nature of visual narration is suited for complexity (Amato, 2019, p. 4). This can certainly be claimed for picturebooks as well, where there is not yet a systematic analysis of how the fat trope is present.

The study of fat in a feminist or queer-theoretical context has undergone several shifts since Susie Orbach declared that "Fat is a feminist issue" in her catchy phrase from 1978; an axiom within feminist studies, yet feminist scholars advocate clearly different views on fat, from early studies where fatness is considered a coping mechanism for gender inequality, and an unconscious desire to hide from heteronormative sexuality, to an overarching societal structure of fat haunting or overall internalized fear of fat (Hartley, 2010; Kyrölä, 2010; Saguy, 2012; Erdman Farell, 2021). What we discuss here, fat temporality, is a queer-theoretical way of interpreting fat, where fatness is reclaimed via temporality, gurlesque aesthetics,[11] and other means of opposition to normalized timelines, creating a fat-friendly temporality.

## *Rosabel* and *Kiosks*

In both *Rosabel* and *Kiosks*, the fat is the very precondition for the plot and its development. In *Rosabel*, the core narrative is a story of bullying where the fat is the cause of alienation. The fat pony Rosabel is teased by the other horses and overlooked by the rider of her dreams, causing her to dream of an existence where instead of being bullied, she is chosen and important. The solution to her problem follows a classic storyline in children's literature (see e.g. Reimer, 2008): the protagonist goes out into the world (or, possibly, experiences the events as a dream), gets a taste of life outside of her own limited sphere, makes new discoveries and has new experiences while also finding a friend who does not judge her because of her appearance or body shape. Returning home, she has reconciled with both her body and her situation.

[11] As a queer concept the gurlesque, coined by Lara Glenum and Arielle Greenberg in 2010, refers to reimagination of girly and feminist traits, as well as with disruptive moments: "The concept of the *gurlesque* is an aesthetic mixing of feminism, femininity, cuteness and disgust (grotesque and cruel) and a gurlesque aesthetics combines feminism and queer theory with depictions of sweetness and disgust on both a narrative level and in the queer ideas on doing gender that the novels encapsulate" (Malmio & Österlund, 2016, p. 14).

The plot of *Kiosks* follows a similar pattern, although here the protagonist relocates to a new place after her adventure rather than returning, a consequence of the fact that in *Kiosks* it is the very location that is the issue. The narrative is driven forward by events that can be described as carnevalesque or comical, also common strategies in children's literature, as well as in depictions of fat characters (see e.g. Shieff, 2001; Stukator, 2001). The salesperson Olga is unable to leave her location due to her fatness. She is stuck in the kiosk and this spatial limitation makes her sad. It is not until the kiosk is turned upside down that Olga discovers she can simply pick it up and walk away with it, as if it were a big coat. A dog running around her feet causes her to fall into the river, kiosk and all, and she is swept away by the current, the kiosk now functioning as a boat. Olga ends up at sea and after a few days she reaches the island of her dreams. Still inside the kiosk, she relocates to the beach and starts selling ice cream.

Apart from the overall adventure pattern the two stories may seem different at first glance, but they have a lot of things in common, not least the fact that both Rosabel and Olga deal with the situation by dreaming, a central aspect to the analyses to follow: Rosabel dreams of being the star among the horses and of being chosen; Olga reads travel magazines and dreams of faraway lands.

## The Picturebook Format and Spatial Modes

Fat bodies in picturebooks mark an intersection of discourses, surrounded by stigmatizing structural norms. As is often the case with complex phenomena, the figuration of fat bodies is situated in the midst of competing discourses (Flynn, 2013; Raisborough, 2016). In both *Rosabel* and *Kiosks* parts of the narratives include episodes or elements which can be regarded as stereotypical depictions of fat protagonists – for instance, Rosabel comfort eats carrots after a "rotten day"[12] – but when looking at how time is conceptualized in the books, other patterns emerge. Temporality and the discussion of fatness are addressed in quite different ways in the two books, but in both cases it is linked to spatial position, an aspect which unfolds already on the covers of the picturebooks.

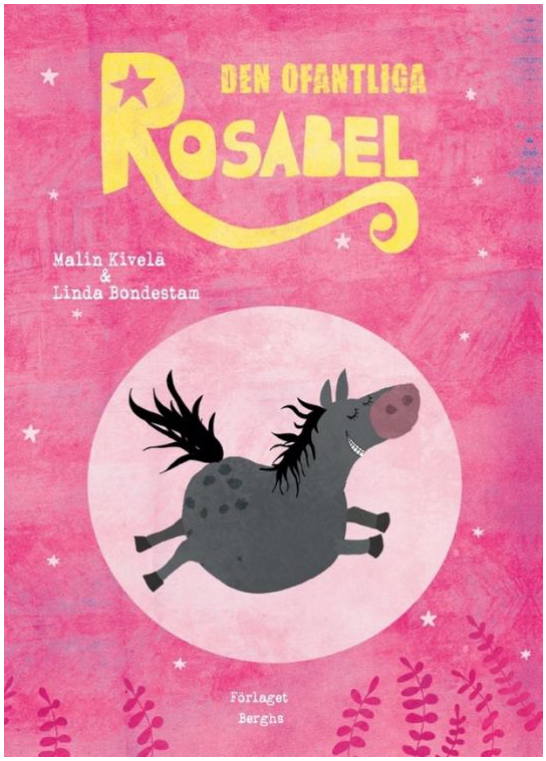
Both picturebooks have a carving on the book's cover, enabling the reader to see part of the image on the front pastedown and title page respectively. In both cases, these images center the main character of the book, thus underlining fatness as a material entrance to a fat temporality. However, the covers depict the fat bodies in quite different ways, connected to the shape of the carvings, round in one case and square in the other. In their multimodal analysis/visual grammar of images, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen point out that angular versus curved shapes carry opposite meanings: round shapes are often attached to something positive, such as nature or infinity, while square shapes indicate order, entrapment or oppression (2006, p. 54 ff.).[13] These meanings permeate the covers of the two books.

Rosabel is shown in full figure through the round-shaped hole of the carving on the book's pink cover, jumping and smiling contentedly in free space. The round shape of the

[12] Original quotation: "rutten dag." Quotations from the picturebooks lack page numbers throughout, since neither picturebook includes page numbers.

[13] Picturebook studies also provide thorough discussions of materiality and spatiality connected to our discussion of round and rectangular form (see e.g. Doonan 1993; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001, Painter et al, 2013, Painter, 2018).

carving as well as the stars enclosing Rosabel function as a spotlight, amplifying the impression that Rosabel is confident and in effect the star of this book. The cover image and title of the book both emphasize motion, free space, and the expansion of possibilities (see *Picture 1*).




Picture 1. The round shape of the carving in the cover amplifies mobility and that Rosabel is the star of the book. From *Den ofantliga Rosabel* © Förlaget/Linda Bondestam, 2017.

The carving on the equally pink cover of *Kiosks* is square and mimics the kiosk window, hence the choice of the rectangular shape. It shows Olga sitting in her armchair while eating a cookie and reading a travel magazine with a dreamy expression on her face. Unlike the round shape surrounding Rosabel, Olga is not seen in full figure. The square carving shows only parts of her body, leaving the top of her head, large parts of her arms, and her body from the waist down hidden from view behind the cover. This narrative device inverts the concept of "headless fatties," a visual representation of fat bodies without heads coined by Charlotte Cooper (2007). The headless fatties emphasize the fat person as an anonymous representation which causes anonymization and depersonalization.[14] In Olga's case, it is not her head but most of her fat body that is hidden by the frame, emphasizing that she is not a representation but a person. However, the square carving also gives the impression that Olga is cramped in the kiosk. Turning the page, the front pastedown reveals Olga in the kiosk's equally cramped interior. In this small space Olga is surrounded by packed shelves and a floor covered with boxes of crisps, bottles, and different kinds of sweets. This multitude of goods manifests a capitalist assemblage where consumerist and self-control discourses intersect: it presupposes a control of eating which, as we will show later on, is questioned in the narrative as part of the norm-breaking discourse. The only space available for Olga is the one she seems to imagine, dreaming herself away to far-off places. At the same time as the cover of *Kiosks* highlights Olga as a person and

[14] Our larger material show that the "headless fatties" device is often used as part of a visual child perspective in Nordic and European picturebooks, focalizing from the child's view, but since the picturebooks studied here lack child protagonists this convention is not present.

not merely a representation of a fat figure, it thus also emphasizes immobility, cramped space, and limitations (see *Picture 2*).

Picture 2. The square carving and the image of the front pastedown emphasizes immobility, cramped space, and limitations. From *Kiosks* © Liels un mazs/Anete Melece, 2019.

As Elina Druker has pointed out in her discussion of Tove Jansson's groundbreaking work with carvings and perforations in *Hur gick det sen?* (*The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My*, 1952), the holes in the pages also disrupt a linear narrative and render temporality open and manifold (Druker, 2008, p. 81). Through their use of carvings, Bondestam and Melece allude to this possibility of temporal disruption. Thus, these fat protagonists are already from the beginning located within a temporality in flux.

As the descriptions show, the carvings on the covers display quite different depictions of how the two protagonists occupy space as well as two very different spatial modes or positions. In both cases, however, the narrative questions and contradicts this first impression. The body-positivist cover of *Rosabel* turns out to be a reflection of the protagonist's fantasies for coping with a reality of bullying, connecting the story to the structural norms linked to fatness, while the stereotypical depiction of the fat body's immobility on the cover of *Kiosks* is contradicted by the themes of travel and relocation that dominate the narrative. In both cases, the contradictions are connected to how temporality is expressed in the narratives.

## Fat Temporality in *Kiosks*: Slow Tempo and a Non-linear Time

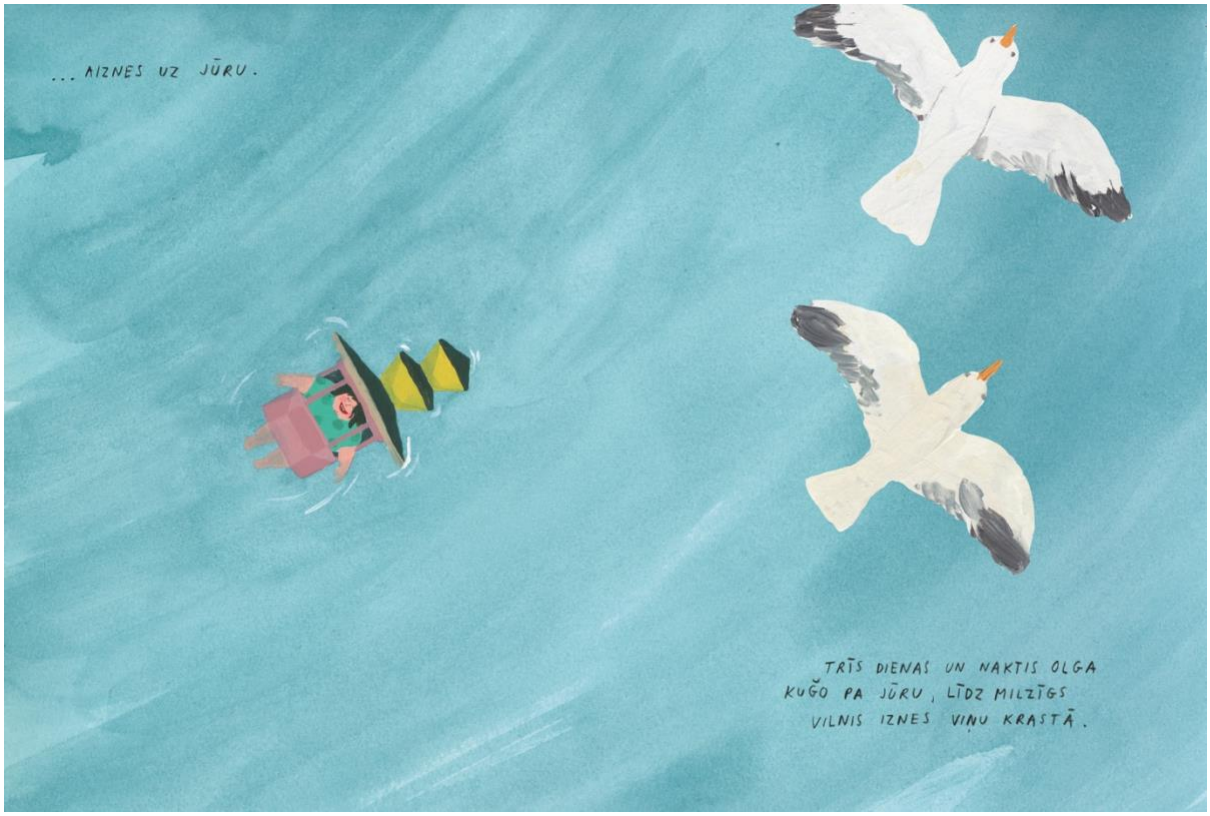
Normative time signifies a view on time which favors normality and a certain chronological life span, connected to concepts such as maturation, reproduction, and progress (see, e.g.,

McFarland et al, 2018). This is embedded in what Elizabeth Freeman defines as chrononormativity: "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (2010, p. 3). According to Catherine Jefferey, fat undermines chrononormativity, in other words fat bodies interrupt expected and normalized temporality and create a failure or a collapse of normative timelines (2019). Fat bodies can disrupt and make visible the chrononormative order merely by existing. They are considered to be altering or slowing down time by, for example, sitting still or lying down.

The stories of Rosabel and Olga both resist the predefined way of thinking about time and especially Olga's body manifests the chrononormative interruption. The fat temporality in *Kiosks* manifests itself both by a slow tempo and a non-linear time. Temporality is primarily built by the busy tempo of the city, with a steady flow of cars, exposing the parallel lifelines of the kiosk customers and passers-by (see *Picture 3*). Every day seems like the other, repetitive, but the slow time of Olga's fat and immobility marks a different pace than the outside world. Olga slows down time, first by sitting still in her kiosk fantasizing about a different location and second by surrendering to circumstances when falling into the river and letting the sea take her wherever it wants (see *Picture 4*). The sea voyage goes on for three days and three nights, until a wave casts her ashore on the island. Olga's pleasant journey can be seen in the light of Anja Herrmann's discussions of the visual analogies between marine mammals and fat women (2017).[15]

Picture 3. In *Kiosks*, the slow time of Olga's fat and immobility marks a different pace than the busy tempo of the city. From *Kiosks* © Liels un mazs/Anete Melece, 2019.

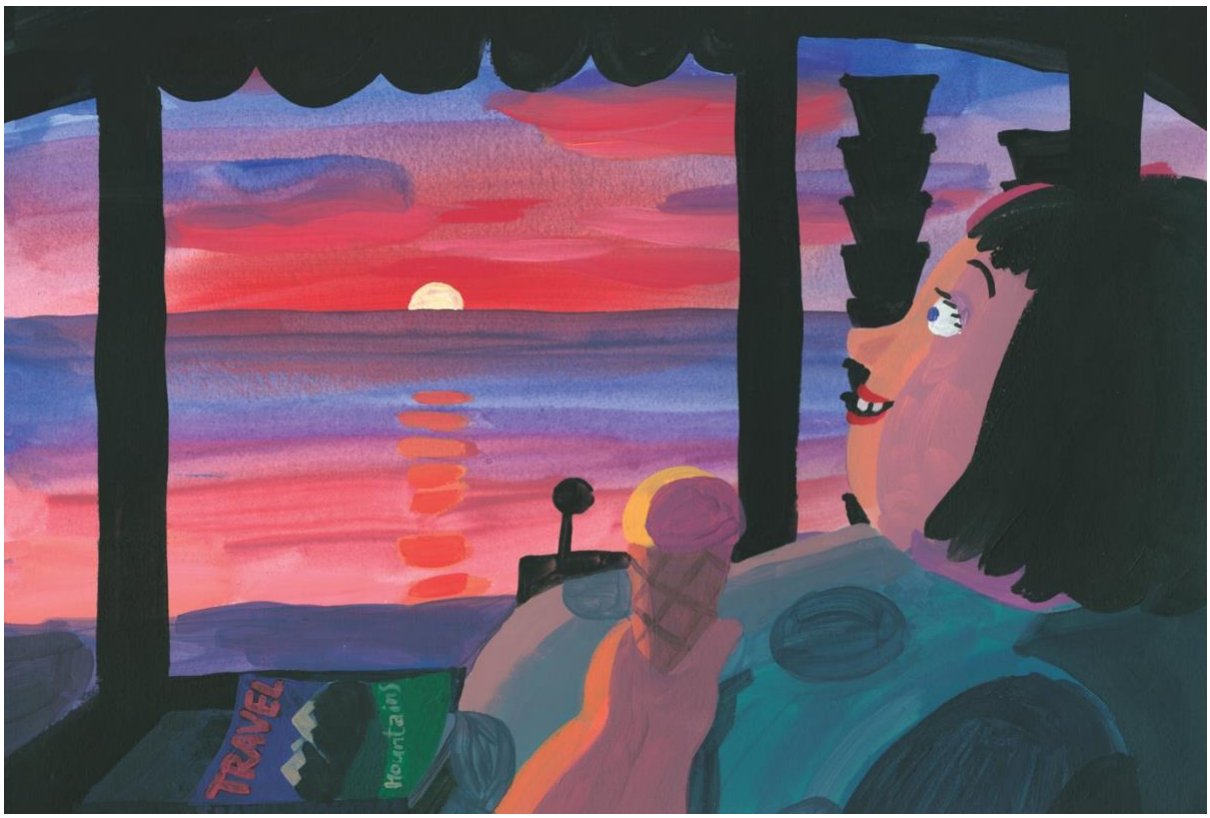
[15] Herrmann also points to the frequent visual strategy of mermaiding of fat bodies, in other words the association of the fat female body to both mermaids and mammals (2017).




Picture 4. Olga slows down time by surrendering to circumstances when falling into the river and letting the sea take her wherever it wants. From *Kiosks* © Liels un mazs/Anete Melece, 2019.

The emphasis on circular and non-linear time in *Kiosks* is underlined by the narrative pattern in the picturebook. It starts and ends with Olga relaxing in her kiosk watching a sunset (the first in a magazine and the second on the island) and having a snack (see *Picture 5*). Olga's eating of cookies, crisps, and ice cream in the beginning and end of the story emphasizes the circular composition and is easily read as comfort eating, a concept often associated with fat bodies, but also embedded in the discourses of fat as a feminist issue and thus enclosing a subversive potential (Saguy, 2012). The latter is manifested also in *Kiosks*, where the story destigmatizes and normalizes snacking and at the same time questions comfort eating as an appropriate term for Olga's relationship to food altogether. In the beginning of the story, it is made clear that Olga is sad because she can't leave the kiosk, but the text specifically states that she seeks her comfort in travel magazines and not the bag of crisps she is eating from. This is confirmed in the end of the story when Olga looks out on the sunset smiling while eating an ice cream. Olga eats crisps and ice cream not as part of the comfort-seeking act, but as a matter of fact. Eating and sweets are also related to an ethics of care expressed in the story through Olga's caretaking in relation to the kiosk customers. In both the beginning and the end of the narrative there is a spread containing a sequence of scenes of Olga exercising her ethics of care when taking care of her customers, first in the city and then on the island. Such actions of care no longer apply merely to traditional mothering but stand for a politics of empathy grounded in feminist ethics that stresses embodiment, situatedness, diversity, and the intrinsic sociality of subjectivity and care for others (Trites, 2018; Daly, 2019). Thus Olga's actions express what can be interpreted as a feminist ethics of care, and moreover becomes an important part of the circular composition, further emphasizing the fact that the issue in the story is not Olga's

fatness or that she is stuck in her kiosk working as a salesperson. Olga's relationship to snacks and the caregiving nature of her relationship with her customers show that neither of these aspects is the source of Olga's melancholy as they do not change during the course of the story. Neither Olga nor her customers comment on her fatness and Olga is content living and working in the kiosk. The heart of the matter is the place and Olga's need to relocate from the gray city streets surrounding her kiosk to the tropical beach with its colorful sunsets.




Picture 5. *Kiosks* starts and ends with Olga relaxing in her kiosk watching a sunset, emphasising a circular and non-linear time. From *Kiosks* © Liels un mazs/Anete Melece, 2019.

Another element in the story which underlines the circular composition and the fat temporality is the pattern on Olga's dress and nightgown. On the dress, big green dots against a turquoise-green bottom stress both Olga's connection to the sea and the greener environment she longs to, as well as connect the narrative to an overall aesthetics of roundness. Herrmann discusses the visual analogies of roundness, such as polka dots, as a sign of how fat females must perform fatness (2017). According to Katy Kelleher, the polka dot is a distinctly gendered pattern often appearing in queer culture, with a variety of cultural associations pointing to its different subversive powers. The dots themselves emphasize acceleration and disorientation, accentuating their inherent queer temporality, but as Kelleher concludes they can also be interpreted as symbols of energy and change, movement and infinity (2018), all aspects relevant to unpacking Melece's aesthetical choice of the dots on Olga's dress.

Olga's story also connects to the discussion within fat studies of who has a future, which is also underlying in the concept of temporality. "Today, fat bodies are often maligned of as having no future at all," Tidgwell et al concludes (2018). In *Kiosks*, the discussion of fatness and future is addressed through fat temporality. By staying in her kiosk, Olga refuses normative

embodied experiences and a normatively organized life span. Instead, the story manifests "other ways of being in the world" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1) as successful, as emphasized by the different temporal aspects, political dimensions, and aesthetical choices analyzed above.

**Rebellious Fat in the Queer Temporality of the Stable**

In *Rosabel*, a linear narrative about bullying is layered with a dream or fantasy narrative. Time is mainly altered through Rosabel's fantasies, which appear as a possibility to disobey normative notions of time and body size. As a fat girl horse Rosabel occupies a common trope, the stable associated with horse books, but relocated to picturebook format. The fat horse is a clear-cut example of the displacement strategy, since the use of an anthropomorph allows for the depiction of a fat childlike figure.

Drawing on tropes from horse books, *Rosabel* depicts rivalry based on bodily appearance. The slim horses with fancy names referring to looks, like Iza Belle or Pinkyslim, tease Rosabel, who comes across as clumsy. Her fat body fails her in comparison to the thin normativity of the other horses when jumping obstacles. Rosabel is depicted as fat both in comments by others, by herself, and visually. "Heavy and fat! Heavy and fat! Agile as a dead jellyfish!"[16] the other horses neigh when bullying her. Not only the cover carving frames the depiction of fat; the back cover also underlines fatness, but in another way. Below the statement "For ponies that go their own way"[17] three thin horses fly effortlessly over obstacles, while Rosabel stands behind them, reduced in size on the page, metonymically referring to the obstacles that surround the fat body (see *Picture 6*). Kivelä's text is unusually explicit and comments on fat repeatedly: "I am fat,"[18] Rosabel states in a way that mimics the practice in fat studies, avoiding euphemisms. Nested in a strikingly normative setting, fat haunting is expressed throughout this picturebook, as when the mother figure of the story, Margaret, fails to accept Rosabel's fatness and clings to the common euphemism: "No not at all. You are only a bit chubby. And strong." Yet, her reply to Rosabel's complaint "But I'm not even pink!" points to a possibility of an alternative: "But you could be?"[19] The dialogue implies both a gurlesque aesthetics and a fat temporality, both in contrast to the highly normative setting.

In creating fat temporality, the picturebook draws on gurlesque aesthetics, defined as a playful liaison between conflicting girlhood tropes, resulting in combinations of pink practices and darker undertones (Glenum & Greenberg, 2010). Even the widespread Finnish phenomenon of tweenies riding hobby horses is represented, thus strengthening the connection to girlhood (Rask, 2018).[20] Moreover, the pony's name, Rosabel, contains the word "rosa," in Swedish both a girl name and the word for the color pink. It is also a telescope-word consisting

[16] Original quotation: "Tung och fet! Tung och fet! Smidig som en död manet!"
[17] Original quotation: "För ponnyer som går sina egna vägar."
[18] Original quotation: "Jag är fet."
[19] Original quotation: "Det är du inte alls. Du är bara lite mullig. Och stark. […]" / "Men jag är inte ens rosa!" / "Men du kan bli?"
[20] See Berry, 2019 for a description of how Finnish tweenies invented hobby horse dressage. Selma Vilhunen's documentary *Hobbyhorse Revolution* displays tweenies who discover their agency while crafting and riding hobby horses, nowadays a widespread phenomenon associated with girl power as it stands for a girlhood built on independence and playfulness. Hobby horse activities are aligned with the gurlesque in uniting a pink aestetics in combination with strength.

of pink (“rosa”), and rebel (“rebell”), while “bel” also refers to the French word “belle,” beautiful. Rosabel performs a rebellious, body-positive liberation from the original setting by disrupting both bodily and temporal expectations.

Picture 6. Rosabel’s failure to jump over obstacles metonymically refers to the obstacles that surround the fat body. From *Den ofantliga Rosabel* © Förlaget/Linda Bondestam, 2017.

Rich with girl power, the timeline of the book alters a gray and dusk stable reality through pink, rainbow-themed dreams. The latter blur and situate these parts of the story in the borderland between dreams and liberatory daydreams. The interplay of grayness and pink is similar to that of *Kiosks*. Initially, a dream of rainbows with Rosabel in a leading role expresses fat temporality by introducing an alternative timeline (see *Picture 7*): "It is her, / Rosabel, / the others follow. / She, Rosabel, / the rainbow waves. / A queen package, / a rocket of sparks / and a leap!"[21] Echoing the empowering attitude in Finland-Swedish modernist poet Edith Södergran's poem "Vierge moderne" (1916), Rosabel is called "Queen of everything," a saying also evoking a queer phrasing (see Urban Dictionary, 2011a; Witt-Brattström, 2011). In a dreamlike episode the Princess, a rider with pink hair, enters, but she always chooses other horses such as Raingirl or Pinkyslim, until one night when Rosabel is picked. The girl rides her standing on her back, alluding to prototype feminist girls like Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking, also standing on horsebacks. Thus, girl power imagery merges with a queer narrative strategy into an alternative fat temporality, a queer utopia, unsecuring what is real and what is dream in the story: the recurring references to rainbows, unicorns, and other queer paraphernalia simultaneously create a queer temporality and a queer utopia (Jones, 2013; Tang, 2019).

Picture 7. A dream of rainbows with Rosabel in a leading role expresses fat temporality by introducing an alternative timeline. From *Den ofantliga Rosabel* © Förlaget/Linda Bondestam, 2017.

[21] Original quotation: "Det är hon, / Rosabel, / de övriga följer. / Hon, Rosabel, / regnbågen böljar. / Ett drottningpaket, /en gnisterraket / och ett språng!"

The concept of *queer utopia* has a strong connection to body normativity as it refers to the ambition to "craft queer spaces where heterosexist discourses cease to regulate bodies" (Jones, 2013, p. 2). Fat temporality in picturebooks is part of a manifestation of such queer utopias. In her dream Rosabel wears heart-shaped sunglasses, has rainbow-patterned hooves and mane, and a unicorn accompanies her. The visual narration references My Little Pony. Taken together these are queer-associated paraphernalia, and components of a queer utopian space soaked with fat temporality. Consequently, the back pastedown consists of a dreamlike Pride parade with horses of different shapes, the majority My Little Pony-associated fat ponies, and a unicorn.[22]

Picture 8. Rosabel experiences freedom from bodily norms and hierarchies when befriending a hedgehog-like creature outside the stable.
From *Den ofantliga Rosabel* © Förlaget/Linda Bondestam, 2017.

After the dreams, which establish a profound fat temporality, Rosabel finds a kindred soul outside of the stable. When befriending this hedgehog-like creature, Rosabel is literally liberated as the two escape the paddock (see *Picture 8*). The creature, with its catalyst

[22] Both My Little Pony and unicorns are strikingly complex. Unicorns, common fairy tale creatures, are present in children's literature classics such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Harry Potter*, as well as part of a queer vocabulary, then a swinging term referring to a single woman interested in meeting couples (Urban Dictionary, 2011b). The excessive use of allusions that are part of both children's culture and queer practices renders the narrative open and fluid. One context does not close out another, such as the Brony-fandoms surrounding My Little Pony. On the contrary, the openness contributes to making fat temporality manifest (see Hautakangas, 2015).

potential, carries queer traits and repeatedly avoids gendering. When Rosabel asks what the creature is and what name it carries, the reply is nonsensical, with an assemblage of letters: "≈qΩ□263ıhæf÷çøéœπ‹." The only thing that the creature confirms is their friendship, and thus freedom from bodily norms and hierarchies.

The back pastedown shows four more fat ponies confirming a queer utopian timeline. By embracing her fatness, Rosabel has liberated herself from narrow gender expectations and performed a fat temporality consisting of an existence outside of the fence as well as outside of normative body expectations accompanied by gendered expectations on both looks and behavior. The slim horses who formed a girlhood trope of mean girls (see Flanagan, 2009), are outruled by Rosabel's fat existence and, by extension, by her fat temporality.

## Conclusion

Since the mid-2000s fat studies has emerged as a transdisciplinary field, in the last decade also within children's literature studies; yet this is still novel ground in picturebook studies. Moreover, the liaison between the queer theoretical concept fat temporality and picturebook analysis is an even less researched area. With our article, we suggest this new and fruitful direction as a means to address the many taboos surrounding the depiction of fat in picturebooks. Given both real life discourses on fat and prevailing stigmas surrounding fatness, considering the imperative for more diverse children's literature, we consider the merge of fat studies and picturebooks studies a productive way of updating research with more nuanced analyses of body size. Not only do fat studies observe how tropes regarding body size and weight intersect with categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; the context of a late capitalist neoliberal gender regime has also been scrutinized as the body positivity movement has lifted fat empowerment and fat acceptance, often via queer theory.[23] Here much can be done also within picturebook studies.

As girlhood scholars have questioned the trope of the strong girl, fat studies scholars question empowering paradigms such as "riot not diet," and the reliance on a strong and independent ideal. Instead, they emphasize a radical self-acceptance and self-love, including acceptance of pain and failure (Herrmann, 2017, p. 17). While Olga in her kiosk manifests such radical self-acceptance, in Rosabel a prototype girl power figure and a queering of girlhood merges. Both picturebooks portray the ending as happy, as the experience of something new – friendship and a new location, respectively – has changed the protagonists' outlook on their existence. Thereby, the narratives do not center on changing the person or the fat body. Instead, it is their changed circumstances that lead to closure.

As we have shown, fat temporality is a key device in depicting fat in picturebooks. As mentioned initially, fat is frequently renegotiated, and often told via visual understatements such as merely a hint of chubbiness, but in the two picturebooks analyzed here, fat is addressed in various, complex, and possibly contradicting ways linked to the queering of time. However, both books are also examples of the manoeuvre to avoid the fear of touch in depicting fat children. The picturebook makers use classic children's books tropes and narrative patterns to

[23] See *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (2021) where for example Hannele Harjunen discusses fatness and the consequences of neoliberalism and Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor provide an overview of fat studies scholarship.

tell these stories directed toward child readers, but the strategy of avoiding fat children and instead using anthropomorphization and fat adult characters erases fat child bodies and renders them "missing bodies" (Herrmann, 2018).

We are fully aware of the fact that these are merely two examples, and we therefore avoid further generalizing from such a small sample, although plenty more examples exist in our larger material (see also Österlund 2019; Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021). As fat is an understudied category in children's literature, there is room for studies that explore fat in relation to, for instance, gender, age, and different national contexts of the publications of the books. For example, our larger material suggests that fat male bodies as a rule are depicted in other ways than female bodies like the fat girl pony and the fat adult woman discussed here (see, e.g., Fjeldberg, 2020). As we have shown, the tendency to avoid depicting fat child bodies results in the appearance of other fat figures and serves as an arena for a complex handling of fat.

The displacement strategies thus raise the broader question of how body norms and body sizes are inscribed in, and referred to, in contemporary picturebooks. As for Olga and Rosabel, we can conclude that they have a future with their fat. Rosabel's queer possibilities allow her to stand above the fat-shaming rhetoric of the other horses, whereas Olga continues her work as a caring ice cream seller, but now in her preferred location. Elsewhere we have discussed a slight slant towards the inclusion of fat child bodies in Nordic picturebooks, although still surrounded by a fear of touch (Österlund, 2019; Warnqvist & Österlund, 2021). The future will tell if fat-positive picturebooks really dare to depict fat, be it the fat of children, adults, or horses.

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# Vermin beings: Anthropomorphism and dehumanization in children's literature

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**Abstract**

In this article, I will discuss depictions of vermin in order to investigate what these portrayals signify in stories for children. Vermin are here defined as animals or insects that are considered harmful or a nuisance. I will examine what the use of the motif signifies in books for children and will specifically study stories where vermin are used to describe an experience of otherness, discrimination, or dehumanization. I am specifically interested in stories where the boundaries between animal and human are blurred or critically investigated. I have therefore chosen to discuss a small selection of children's stories with animal or humanoid protagonists depicted or described as vermin. Considering that dehumanizing imagery and metaphors have historically been used to evoke the moral emotion of antipathy or discrimination in different cultural contexts, I have chosen to discuss texts from different eras. Besides a contemporary picturebook, which functions as the starting point for my discussion, two stories from post-World War II years and two novels from the 1960s are examined. In my analysis, I am interested in investigating whether literature for children reflects, or possibly questions, dehumanizing imagery concerning animals, and how this is done in the texts. As a theoretical standing point for the analysis, I will apply children's literature research and posthuman theories that investigate size and power and, more specifically, dehumanizing metaphors and images. The article aims to discuss how insects, mice and rats in these children's stories are used as expressions for otherness, but also how they are used to question ideas concerning dehumanizing rhetoric. While doing so, these small characters point at a muddling of categories, of different systems and hierarchies of bodies, big and small, organic and mechanic, human and nonhuman.

**Keywords**: *dehumanization, vermin, animal characters, miniature, human-animal studies, posthumanism, illustration*

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Shaun Tan's picturebook *Cicada* (2018) is a story about a cicada who works as a data entry clerk in an office. The protagonist, who is bright green and has large, black, compound eyes, and a wide, inexpressive face, is being systematically discriminated. His wage is so low that he can't afford an apartment, and since he is not human, he is denied promotion and is not allowed to use any of the resources available, or even use the office restrooms.[24]

The Cicada's small body provides a strong contrast to the human surroundings, which are drawn in shades of gray, in repetitive, angular shapes. Despite the Cicada's marginalized position, the story is told entirely from his perspective, the images focusing on him, placing the humans in the periphery. They are often depicted with their backs turned, walking away, or cropped out of the illustrations. A sense of alienation is not only expressed through the illustrations, but also through Cicada's short, halting sentences:

> *Cicada works in tall building.*
> *Data entry clerk. Seventeen year.*
> *No sick day. No mistake.*
> *Tok tok tok!*

Tan's story offers multiple interpretations. It can be read as a description of mistreatment of migrant workers, of racism and discrimination, or as a narrative about colonial experiences, where the insect body stands for otherness.[25]

Tan's picturebook also demonstrates how insects and small animals have since ancient times had a central place in fables and literature for children. They have been used as symbols and metaphors, as cautious examples, warning signs, or moral lessons. In this article I will discuss depictions of vermin, here defined as animals or insects that are considered harmful or a nuisance, and that should be controlled or exterminated. I will examine what the use of the motif signifies in books for children and will specifically study stories where vermin are used to describe an experience of otherness, discrimination, or oppression. My focus lies on the ideological and moral implications expressed through the use of tiny characters, but also in the kind of artistic and narrative potential the motif proposes. And while my material consists of stories of anthropomorphic animal or humanoid characters, I am particularly interested in stories were the boundaries between animal and human are blurred and critically investigated. I have therefore chosen to discuss a selection of children's stories with animal or humanoid protagonists that are depicted or described as vermin. In a wider cultural context, metaphorical use of vermin as part of dehumanizing rhetoric has historically been used to evoke ridicule, antagonism, and discrimination.[26] Applying Nick Haslam and Michelle Stratemeyer's

[24] I refer to the protagonist as a "he" because of the costume the character is wearing, which is similar to the male characters' costumes in the story. However, it should be noted that the character's gender is not indicated in the story.

[25] As previous research has shown, insects and other arthropods have often been used as a trope of colonialism and are a recurrent motif in literature that explore colonial experiences. See, for example, Christopher Hollingsworth, *Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature*, (University of Iowa Press: Iowa, 2001), and Evan Maina Mwangi, *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

[26] Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An integrative review" in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(3), 2006, 252-264. Goff et al. "Not yet human: Implicit knowledge, historical dehumanization, and contemporary consequences" in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, No. 2, 2008, 292–306.

definition, dehumanization is here understood as "the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human," a process that involves both individuals and groups.[27]

Picture 1. © Shaun Tan, *Cicada.*

[27] Nick Haslam and Michelle Stratemeyer, "Recent Research on Dehumanization" in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2016, 11: 25–29, 25.

In order to investigate how characters that are described as vermin in children's literature can be understood, and how the motif has been used during different time eras, I have chosen a selection of stories that in different ways use the motif of vermin in a thought-provoking or politically encaging way. Besides Shaun Tan's already presented contemporary picturebook *Cicada*, I have chosen illustrated novels from the post-World War II years and from the 1960s: Bengt Anderberg's *Niklas och Figuren* (Niklas and the Figure, 1950), Mary Norton's *Borrowers* (1953), George Selden's *The Cricket in Times Square* (1960), and Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child* (1967).

As my first example, *Cicada*, demonstrates, these stories present animals in such a way that the reader is invited to interpret them as metaphors for humans, or as representatives for specific groups of individuals. I am interested in investigating whether literature for children reflects, or possibly questions, dehumanizing imagery concerning human-animal relations and how this is done in the texts. In order to discuss the motif of the vermin, but also human-animal relations, I have deliberately chosen books where the protagonists are not necessarily animals, but, instead, inanimate or humanoid characters treated as animals. What I find interesting in this context is how the notion of vermin, something (or someone) who is seen not only as a nuisance but also as undesirable and despised, is applied in these stories.

As a theoretical standing point for my analysis, I will apply posthuman theories that discuss anthropomorphism and dehumanizing rhetoric and images. Studying the way animal protagonists are anthropomorphized and, in turn, how tiny humanoid protagonists are depicted or treated as animals, points at a complex human-animal relationship that has moral implications. Furthermore, different hierarchies and a discourse of species is activated in these stories. I will therefore discuss how speciesism, the practice to favor certain animals over other, is applied in this context. [28]

The diminutive size of most vermin is essential in this discussion as well. The popularity of different kinds of small protagonists in children's literature – insects, mice or even rats – can be explained by a message that is often expressed: even the small and powerless can prevail and survive despite overwhelming difficulties. But the motif also raises several questions. As Lynne Vallone states, both animal fables and traditional fairy tales establish size conventions and subvert them, since the tiny characters are often described as weak but cunning, and the gigantic as brutish and violent.[29] This kind of dynamics is also evoked by Perry Nodelman who points at the use of small size as an expression of decisiveness and determination in children's literature: "when these small beings prevail over insurmountable odds, as they always do, they represent a potent version of the wish-fulfillment fantasy: the very small can triumph over the dangerously large, the very powerless over the exceedingly powerful".[30] Questions about size, power and agency in children's literature are also connected to adult-child power relations and how these are reflected in animal stories. By discussing the liminality of the vermin beings, which are often placed in the periphery of the human world, it

[28] Cary Wolfe, *Animal rites: American culture, the discourse of species, and posthumanist theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003), p. 7. For a discussion about speciesism in children's literature specifically, see Kelly Hübben, *A genre of animal hanky panky? Animal representations, anthropomorphism and interspecies relations in The little golden books* (Stockholm 2017), chapter 1.

[29] Lynne Vallone, *Keywords for children's literature,* second edition, (New York: New York University Press 2021), 172.

[30] Perry Nodelman, *The pleasures of children's literature* (New York 1995), 199.

is my objective to examine the ways in which size and power in human–animal and adult–child relations are manifested in these stories.

## In the Aftermath of World War II

There are multiple examples of miniature worlds and tiny protagonists in children's literature during the post-World War II years, a tendency that has been seen as a way to articulate a general sense of insecurity and vulnerability.[31] A classic example of liminal, humanoid characters is Mary Norton's novel *Borrowers* (1952), illustrated by Diane Stanley. The miniscule characters depicted in the novel series live hidden from the human world and "borrow" things to survive. Their existence is based entirely on their reliance on humans, a dependency which previous research has seen as a trope to describe the authority that grownups have on children, "echoing the situation of children in the company of adults", as Jerry Griswold states.[32] But Norton's portrayal of the Borrower's symbiotic life style has also been described as complicated, "grotesque" and parasitical.[33] *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* describes the story as "a parable about parasitical dependence of the rentier class (Borrowers) on those who are the means of production (the "human beans" upstairs)".[34] As Madelyn Travis suggests, Borrowers have no valued role in the society; they are politically and economically powerless and literally invisible to the world.[35] Besides applying class perspective on the novel series, it has also been seen as a portrayal of homelessness and as a parable of persecution of different minorities during World War II.[36] I would therefore like to take a closer look at the way the Borrowers are depicted in the novel and discuss how and why associations with parasites is expressed in the story.

The Borrowers home could be considered a miniature world inside a human world. Their home is decorated with small items, scraps and toys from the human house, and therefore becomes a reflection of it in miniature. Here, Susan Stewart's definition of the miniature as a nostalgic description of childhood in her influential work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993) offers an interesting counterpoint for the discussion.[37] Stewart sees the miniature as "a metaphor for the interior space and time of the bourgeois subject," which suggests that small miniature worlds function as separate, nostalgic and sheltered spaces.[38] Stewart writes: "The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulateable, version of

[31] Elina Druker, "Berättelser om flykt. Miniatyren som samhällskritik." In *Mångkulturell barnoch ungdomslitteratur. Analyser* (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur 2017), 205-208.
[32] Jerome Griswold, *Feeling like a kid: childhood and children's literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006), 62.
[33] Caroline C. Hunt, "Dwarf, Small World, Shrinking Child: Three Versions of Miniature" i *Children's Literature*, 1995:23, 115-136, 126.
[34] Humphrey Carpenter & Mari Prichard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1999), 76.
[35] Travis 2007, 188.
[36] Deborah Cogan Thacker & Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature: from Romanticism to Post Modernism*, 2002, 131. Hunt, 115-136, Madelyn Travis, "Mixed messages: The problem of class in Mary Norton's Borrowers series" In *Children's literature in education.* 2007(38):3, 187-194.
[37] Susan Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, second edition (Durham: Duke Univ. Press 1993), xvii.
[38] Stewart, xvii, 69.

experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination".[39] This kind of idyllic sentiment of the miniature as a precious, "timeless and uncontaminated" place, is a core image in the novel, as the family strives to survive and to create a secure home.[40] At the same time, their existence is constantly threatened – in fact, we are told that they are the last family of the Borrowers species left in the building and that all other Borrowers have "emigrated" (that is, they have died or disappeared). The family is therefore closely connected to humans, both through their parasitical lifestyle, but also through their mirroring of the human world.

Not only the characters' lifestyle but also their behavior and bodies are repeatedly described with verbs connected to vermin. The main protagonist, Arietty, and her father go often to look for things to "borrow" in the human house. During one of the scavenging trips, she watches her father running across the floor and is suddenly struck by how small he seemed: "Arietty saw him scurry across the sunlit floor. Swiftly he ran – as a mouse runs or a blown dry leaf" (56). The description of size and scale is suddenly slightly detached and expresses an idea of marginalization. The same detached perspective is articulated in the illustration, where the character's miniscule size is accentuated.[41] The tiny characters (in this scene not larger than the printed letters on the page) are placed at the margins of the illustration. In other illustrations the characters are depicted hiding among grass, leaves, and even trash, or trying to disappear among human artefacts, like vases and porcelain figures.[42]

A double perspective, where the human world collides with the world of the Borrowers, is already established on the endpapers of the novel, depicting the turning point in the story, where a human boy finds the family's nest-like home under the floorboards. Stanley's illustration shows how the tiny family and their home are abruptly exposed by the boy, left defenseless and in a state of shock. The image describes the staggering difference in size between the (gigantic) human boy and the family and demonstrates the vulnerability of their situation. This remarkable key image is also connected to the ending of the story, where the family is discovered by the housekeeper Mrs. Driver:

> *And then she shrieked, loud and long. She saw movement: a running, a scrambling, a fluttering! She heard a squeaking, a jabbering, and a gasping. Little people, they looked like, with hands and feet … and mouths opening. That's what they looked like … but they couldn't be that of course! Running here, there, and everywhere. […] "A nest! A nest!" she shouted. "Alive and squeaking!"* (127)

The association with a rat's nest established on the endpaper is repeated here, and is further emphasized by a sudden blurring between human-animal categories. While the Borrowers are never defined as human in the novel, in this scene they are also deprived of their language. They are portrayed with words connected to non-human sounds, "a squeaking, a jabbering"; their movement, uncontrolled and frantic, is associated with animals. Their mouths are open, but no intelligible words are expressed. The scene is, of course, described through the

[39] Stewart, 69.
[40] Stewart, 66.
[41] For a more detailed analysis of the illustrations, see Druker, 205-208.
[42] See for example illustration of the characters running through a large hall p. 56-47 or hiding among artefacts on a mantle piece p. 36-37.

housekeeper's perspective, when she sees what she believes is a nest of rats, but the episode also points at the family's lack of voice in the human world and their position of otherness.[43]

The tiny protagonists and their nomadic lifestyle depicted in Norton's novel series articulates a sense of defenselessness and vulnerability that can be seen in relation to a general sense of insecurity in the post-war years.[44] In fact, Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb have seen the constant threat of extermination in the story as a parable of Jewish persecution during the World War II.[45] This explanation is supported by the final chapters, where a rat-catcher is hired to exterminate the nest, "to smoke them out" (145). The housekeeper explains the rat-catcher's method: "He puffs this stuff in and they come running out. At least that's how it works with rats. But first, he says, you have to block up all the exits..." (146). Although the Borrowers manage to escape the house through an opening created by the human boy, the family is forced to leave their home. The smell of gas is described in detail in the final pages of the novel, making everyone in the building nauseous for days.

**Dehumanizing Imagery**

As Mary Norton's novel demonstrates, the choice of small anthropomorphic characters – in this case, humanoid characters *thought to be* animals, more specifically, rats – can be understood within a "discourse of otherness" where the Other is understood and described not only as different, but also as inferior.[46] What we see here is a muddling of boundaries between the human and the animal. In fact, the hybridity of the humanoid characters in Norton's novel confuses strict species boundaries. Describing the characters as parasites can therefore be understood in relation to dehumanizing rhetoric and imagery in general, where humans are described as insects or animals – a rhetoric that has been used in different acts of ethnic, national or religious discrimination across time.[47] Persecution and extermination of European Jews during the World War II is one of the most blatant examples of this. As Haslam has shown, it is one example of many points in history where metaphors such as insects, parasites, vermin or garbage have been used about minority groups or ethnicities to evoke moral emotion of disgust. This kind of imagery has been used to promote a "them-versus-us" attitude between groups of people.[48]

Another novel published in the years after World War II that uses anthropomorphism with moral implications is Swedish Bengt Anderberg's novel *Niklas och Figuren* (Niklas and the Figure, 1950), with illustrations by his wife Astrid Anderberg. While Norton's novel can be considered a children's literature classic, Anderberg's story, which has somewhat of a cult status in Sweden, has not received international attention. The story depicts a young boy Niklas and his friend, a fantastic creature named Figure. Figure is a small humanoid character who

[43] Travis, 188.
[44] Druker, 205-208.
[45] Thacker & Webb, 131. Druker, 208.
[46] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin 2003/1979), Introduction.
[47] David Livingstone Smith, *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others* (New York: St. Martin's 2011).
[48] Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An integrative review." In *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(3), 2006, 253.

has a tail and lives in a tree. But despite human behavior and mannerism, he has trouble reading, writing and understanding numbers or abstract concepts.

In a short but significant scene in the beginning of the novel, Anderberg sends a strong message of tolerance that is then conveyed throughout the story. Here, the protagonist meets a retired policeman who enjoys gardening, and whose goal is to create perfect order in his garden. The policeman has put up prohibition signs that forbid playing football, picking flowers, or walking on the grass. But he also forbids most animals and insects (who, of course, cannot read) to enter the garden. The placards forbid animals to aimlessly cross the garden paths, to visit certain plants, flower beds or earth mounds and, most importantly, to interfere with other species. Instead, the different species are separated from each other. Spiders are especially detested: ”Spiders not allowed! and ”Spiders are unwanted here!” (25), the signs state.[49] When detected, the spiders are immediately taken into custody and put in small cages in ”a prison” in the tool shed. We are told that the spiders ”were devastated and had many times intended to move from the garden altogether. But they had so many childhood memories there that they stayed anyway and tried to hide whenever they saw the police” (25-26).[50]

Anderberg, who was a famous author and poet, wrote several socially critical novels for adults. He was also an outspoken pacifist[51], and the scene in *Niklas och Figuren* can be seen not only as a protest against violence and discrimination, but also as a direct comment to the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. The policeman’s signs resemble anti-Semitic signs like ”Juden sind hier unerwunscht” (Jews are unwanted Here) or “Juden verboten” (Jews forbidden), which were used to gradually limit Jewish citizen’s freedom of movement in society during the 1930s and onwards. Similar kinds of antisemitic signs were on a couple of occasions used even in Sweden, which caused a public outrage and led to new legislation against incitement against ethnic groups in 1948.[52] Although antisemitic symbols were rare in Sweden, dehumanized expressions were used in Swedish right-wing publications and public debates.[53] Anderberg’s story raises critical questions about norms and societal expectations on individuals, especially those placed on children, but the scene in the policeman’s garden can also be understood as a blatant anti-military and anti-discriminatory commentary, an allegory in miniature.

How, then, should we understand the use of animal fables, associated with different animal and insect species, in relation to Anderberg’s novel? And how is the seemingly absurd hierarchy between these insect species constructed? The humorous and, at the same time, uncanny portrait of the retired policeman’s garden is clearly based on associations with dehumanizing terminology and oppression tactics of the time. But the description of the garden, divided into controlled sections for different species, could also be seen as a minuscule apartheid system. How, then, is the hierarchy between species constructed? It is noteworthy

[49] My translation: ”Ej för spindlar!”, ”Spindlar äga ej tillträde!”, Anderberg, *Niklas och Figuren,* 25.
[50] My translation:”De stackars spindlarna var alldeles förtvivlade och hade många gånger tänkt flytta från trädgården helt och hållet. Men då hade så mycket barndomsminnen där att de stannade kvar ändå och försökte gömma sig när de fick syn på polisen.” Anderberg, 25-26.
[51] Per Arne Tjäder. ”Bengt Anderberg”, *Litteraturbanken*. 2021.10.22.
[52] Antisemitic signs were used by Einar Åberg’s bookstore in Stockholm in 1941. The law against incitement against ethnic groups from 1948 in Sweden was initially called ”Lex Åberg”.
[53] Mikael Byström, *En broder, gäst och parasit: uppfattningar och föreställningar om utlänningar, flyktingar och flyktingpolitik i svensk offentlig debatt 1942-1947*. Diss. (Stockholm: Stockholm University 2006), 183, 190.

that while the policeman considers the spiders to be vermin, he tolerates ants in his garden. According to him, they are resilient, can walk long distances in lines, and do so quickly and properly: ”they knew what they were doing” (26), he states happily.[54] Unlike spiders, who roam around the garden ”aimlessly”, the ants stand for order and discipline, efficiency, and resilience. The image of the ant who stands for virtues of hard work and collaboration is already used during antiquity, in stories and fables about social animals.[55] As Nina Goga notes, ants are often described as a self-organizing machine.[56] The practice that favors certain species over other based on species membership is common in fables, and in children's literature in general. In her doctoral thesis about the ethical dimensions of anthropomorphism in picturebooks, Kelly Hübben proposes that this kind of anthropomorphized animals can provide the reader with new insights, not only regarding the very nature of the human-animal relationship, but regarding ”the moral implications that follow from depicting species in terms of difference and hierarchy.”[57]

Furthermore, the image of the organized and disciplined ant has also been used to express opposite ideas, as an expression of blind compliance to a certain norm, behavior or culture. Consequently, descriptions of ants as disciplined and well-trained soldiers have been used to express pacifist ideas in various post-war eras.[58] Anderberg's novel can be understood within this tradition, as can be Swedish Gustav Sandgren's *Det stora myrkriget. En saga för barn och vuxna* (The great ant war. A fairytale for children and adults, 1948). Both stories are aimed at children (and possibly adults) and can be seen as critical commentaries to violence and wars.

As previous research has shown, dehumanization has been closely connected to discrimination, violence and genocide during different historical eras.[59]An analysis of anthropomorphism offers a way to investigate and understand the complex messages depicted in these children's stories. In his use of the insect metaphor, Anderberg implements the fable tradition, but his choice of insect species is also connected to the discriminatory, dehumanizing imagery of the 1930s and 1940s, which he uses in the opposite manner – to criticize narrowmindedness, racism and oppression. According to Haslam, dehumanizing functions as a precondition of violence, preparing people for the idea of oppressing another group and to justify violence when doing so.[60] I propose that what Anderberg does in his novel is to reclaim this kind of dehumanizing imagery by using it, instead, as a humorous, anti-discriminatory method.

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[54] My translation: ”Det enda djur som denne verkligen hade fått ordning och reda på, som han sade, var myrorna. [---] De visste var de gjorde”. Anderberg, 26.

[55] Even bees have since ancient times used to represent social order, as in Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714) or Waldemar Bonsel's *Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer* (1912).

[56] Nina Goga writes that ants' capability for labor and organization is emphasized in different kind of literary genres, and even used in entomological literature. When ants are described, their well-functioning and intricate social organization is often commented on initially, a quality that has become an established “introductory topos” in depictions of ants. Goga, *Gå til mauren: om maur og danning i barnelitteraturen* (Kristiansand: Portal 2013), 60.

[57] Hübben, chapter 3, see also p. 223-224.

[58] Goga, 70-71.

[59] Goff, 292–306.

[60] Haslam, 255.

**Muddled Anthropomorphism**

Russell Hoban's novel *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) is a thought-provoking and dark story about two discarded toy mice. The father and child, attached to each other through their hands, are broken and thrown in the rubbish, and so they set out on a journey to find a new home. They come to a dump, inhabited by different insects, rats, shrew, and frogs. It is a harsh society, run by Manny Rat, who "smelled of darkness, of stale and moldy things and garbage" (27-28). Placed in the periphery of the human world, the small characters are described as helpless and powerless. The fact that the story mostly takes place in a junkyard is significant as well. The characters live on trash and rotten food, but they also kill and eat each other. In fact, the rats treat the other animals (and other rats) as a commodity. Dubious or morally questionable characters in stories for children are often recognized by transgressive eating habits.[61] This includes food items that are considered non-foods in the Western culture, such as trash or contaminated foods.

The junkyard with insects, rats and broken toys is a hostile environment, outside human society and yet tightly connected to it, since it is created by humans and built by discarded material and food from the human world. Although most of the characters in the junkyard would be considered vermin, this society has a clear hierarchy between species and a regime based on violence. Everyone is aware of the system that favors certain animals over others. This "balance of nature" is explained to the mouse child by a hawk who attempts to eat him: "It's like a beautiful pyramid , with a lot of juicy mice and chipmunks down at the bottom and a hawk up on the top. Naturally the hawk eats up the mice and the chipmunks. That's how it is. I eat and you get eaten" (134). The awareness of this species hierarchy is, again, constant throughout the story. At the same time, this young mouse is also a child; therefore, his status is lower than all other characters in the story. As Hübben points out, both speciesism and ageism often intersect in children's literature; for example, when children are compared with (young) animals, or when animals are presented as stand-ins for children.[62]

The latter is especially interesting in Hoban's novel; since the mouse and his child are discarded toys, their animal/toy position poses a challenge to the nature-culture divide described in the novel. As Stewart points out, the toy world presents a projection of the world of everyday life, but it also raises questions about the relation between materiality and meaning: "We are thrilled and frightened by the mechanical toy because it presents the possibility of a self-invoking fiction, a fiction which exists independent of human signifying process."[63] Although mechanical, these fictional animals are alive and become "self-winding"; their battered animal/toy bodies represent both the cultural and the natural. In her *Animal land: the creatures of children's fiction* (1974), Margaret Joan Blount emphasizes the fragility of these toy mice, comparing their slowly disintegrating and eroding tin bodies with human aging.[64] For the other animals in the novel, the Mouse and his son are considered either entertainment or workforce, but they are also seen as raw material that can be taken apart. They are considered to be outside the "balance of nature." "They're almost animal-like!", a mole announces when

[61] Hübben, 178.
[62] Hübben, 10.
[63] Stewart, 57.
[64] Margaret Joan Blount, *Animal land: the creatures of children's fiction* (London: Hutchinson 1974), 186, 189.

watching the two mice perform in a theatre play (80), while the hawk who tries to eat the mice is appalled by their existence and their ”taste of rusty tin” (135).

Here, the use of anthropomorphism becomes complex and confusing. Human attributes are not clearly projected onto these fictional animals, and yet, their animal status is questionable. As Hübben proposes, anthropomorphism ”is not a straightforward projection of human properties onto fictional animals. It is complex, confuses boundaries, and can't be resolved by solely relying on dichotomies.”[65] Thus, the discarded tin mice are occupying a liminal position in multiple ways, as anthropomorphized artefacts and as animal figures.

In a similar way, small characters are used to portray an otherness in the middle of a lively city in George Selden's *The Cricket in Times Square* (1960), with illustrations by Garth Williams. It is a story about a mouse, a cricket, and a cat who live in a drainpipe at the Times Square subway station, a story that has not gained much scholarly interest. When the cricket is introduced for the first time, he is literally dug up and saved from under ”a pile of waste papers and soot” at the subway station (8). What is revealed is “a little insect, about an inch long and covered with dirt. It had six legs, two long antennae on its head, and what seemed to be a pair of wings folded on its back […]. Gradually the dirt that had collected on the insect fell away. His true color was still black, but now it had a bright, glossy sheen” (8-10). It is noteworthy that while the child protagonist, who finds the cricket, deeply cares for his pet, the insect isn't considered valuable by others until its extraordinary musical talent is discovered. The cricket becomes famous and starts earning money by performing at the subway station; thus, he becomes visible for others and profitable for its human owners.

In both Selden's and Hoban's novels, the choice of small anthropomorphic protagonists is significant and symbolically charged. They are usually invisible to humans and raise questions of our ability to see unwanted individuals or disagreeable parts of urban society, or our lack of interest in doing so. In a similar way to Tan's insect character, the small and alien body of the cricket stands out as the recognizable Other, and invites a revised perception that can serve as a way to transform or critically describe everyday places. But even here, experience of size is always connected to scale, and while the animal protagonists are the main characters in this novel, they are still described in relation to the human body.[66] This is especially striking in Garth Williams' illustrations in *The Cricket in Times Square*, which constantly vary in focus. When human beings are included in the illustrations, focus oscillates from the small protagonists to the human bodies – thus making the animal bodies even smaller. As Vallone states, exceptionally big or small bodies make visible “differences and divisions that exist between people, including those of race, religion, and culture. Visual and verbal representations of size difference encourage the child reader to picture and explore the nature and resolution of prejudice against the 'other.'”[67] The illustrations constantly shift from the human world's size and proportions to a perspective that accommodates the animal's size.[68] When illustrating only animal characters and their surroundings, this is, instead, done with

[65] Hübben, 223.
[66] Stewart points out that the human body functions as the base for ”conventions of symmetry and balance on the one hand, and the grotesque and the disproportionate on the other” and thus, the basis for what is understood as ”big” or ”small. Stewart, xii.
[67] Vallone, 173.
[68] Similar technique is used by Garth Williams even in other animal stories, for example in his illustrations to Miriam Norton's *The Kitten Who Thought He Was a Mouse*, 1951.

close-ups, often in confined spaces – inside a drain pipe, a shoebox, or even a matchbox.[69] As I have already mentioned, similar fluctuations in focus between the micro and macro perspectives takes place in Diana Stanley's illustrations in *Borrowers*. A division between human and animal, the miniscule and the gigantic, is constructed both verbally and visually, and through the interaction between words and images.

**Size, Movement, and Mobility**

Size, language, and also bodily movement are significant in all of these stories. In Tan's *Cicada*, the illustrations often show the protagonist standing still or sitting by a desk, the ill-fitting suit (with four sleeves) hiding his actual body shape. Similarly, the organized and controlled movements of ants (walking in straight lines) in Anderberg's novel are depicted as something one can have control over. It isn't until in the end of Tan's *Cicada* that bodily movement is depicted as free, joyful and unrestricted. In other examples discussed in this article, the characters are continuously moving, shifting places or fleeing, thus creating a sense of movement and rootlessness. Again, this kind of constant mobility is used to emphasize a pattern of movement associated with insects or small animals. The humanoid characters in *Borrowers* are "running," scrambling" and "fluttering;" they "scurry across" floors and move lightly as "a blown dry leaf." In *The Cricket in Times Square*, the characters "dart out across the floor;" they "scuffle," "jump," "leap," "whisk" and "creep". Even the characters in *The Mouse and his Child* are constantly mobile, but their movement is described as more bothersome and restricted, as the Mouse and his son tread through mud and snow tenaciously, trudging through rubbish and filth, in crowded tunnels and dark alleyways.

In all of these cases, a lack of order and direction is part of the small character's otherness in relation to the human world.

There is also a significant difference in describing a singular insect or a group of animals or insects. The scene in *Borrowers* where the family is discovered is a telling example of this. They are depicted by the housekeeper as a group of creatures that move frantically and uncontrollably as a collective, "a nest." Discussing depictions of rats in art, cultural history, and literature – from *The Pied piper* to Beatrixe Potter's *Two Bad Mice* –, Jonathan Burt discusses how groups or clusters of insects or animals have historically been associated with overcrowding, unsanitariness, and lack of control.[70] Similarly, in her study about how representations of animals have expressed changing social conditions, Linda Kalof has shown how freely roaming animals, like masterless stray dogs, have often been seen as a threat, as "visible sources of disorder, out of control and unsanitary."[71] Both these examples also demonstrate the complexity of associations and attitudes towards animals and how they have changed through different times and in various social and cultural contexts.

When discussing anthropomorphic animals in children's literature, I would like to propose that this kind of wider contemporary cultural practice, including cultural history, art, popular culture, and rhetoric images, should be considered. There is a substantial continuity between these different contexts and between different types of texts and images, including

[69] Compare, for example an image of a busy street, p. 31, and the animal friends in a drain pipe, p. 121.
[70] Jonathan Burt, *Rat* (London: Reaktion 2006), 10, 19.
[71] Linda Kalof, *Looking at animals in human history* (London: Reaktion Books 2007), 88.

children's literature. In *Picturing The Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* (2001), Steve Baker discusses animal imagery in popular culture and emphasizes that "[a]ny understanding of the animal, and of what the animal means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation."[72] This kind of wider context of cultural history and this complexity concerning animal representations is expressed in my material, where the animal story itself offers resistance to universal and historically fixed associations and symbolism.

**The Non-Human Body**

Several of the anthropomorphic protagonists portrayed in the studied children's books are powerless in relation to the human world. They are not distinctly categorized as either children or grown-ups, human or animal, and could thus be seen as representations of the child's otherness from the adult. They are, however, given an unexpected possibility to describe the human society critically, from a non-human perspective, and to convey this altered point of view to the reader.

Tan's *Cicada* expresses a Kafkaeskque tension between the human and the animal, a tension that is ultimately expressed through the insect body. Like the other white-collar workers in the office, Cicada is dressed in a grey suit, a black tie and black dress shoes. However, although dressed as everyone else, he sticks out. His clothes seem too big and he reminds slightly of a child; in fact, he is portrayed both as childlike and animalistic. As a child playing dress up, he is wearing human clothes to mimic his surroundings. Mimicry – imitating and acquiring the knowledge, abilities or attributes of the colonizer can, according to Homi Bhabha, function as a resistance strategy and offer a "double vision" which questions ruling constructions.[73] Although dressed in a human costume and working harder and more effectively than his human colleagues, Cicada still stands out as the recognizable Other. In this way, he both reveals and shatters the discursive system that constructs him as a subordinate: "the observer becomes the observed and 'partial' representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence," Bhabha states.[74] By accentuating the character's large, black eyes and inexpressive face, Tan destabilizes the dynamics of who is observing and who is being observed.

In the final episode of *Cicada*, the main character slowly climbs to the roof top and molts from his previous body. In this stunning scene of rebirth, the Cicada now emerges as a red insect with two pairs of membranous wings, leaving his human clothes and his exoskeleton behind. He leaves the human world and joins a swarming mass of cicadas. An ontological rupture between animal and human, natural and cultural, is suddenly evident.

The tension between different cultures, or culture and nature, is also emphasized through the fragmentary language. As Maria Lassén-Seger has shown, Shaun Tan often investigates language barriers, silence, or broken communication in his books.[75] In *Cicada*, the

[72] Steve Baker, *Picturing the beast: animals, identity and representation*. [New ed.]. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2001), 4.
[73] Homi Bhabha sees mimicry as "double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority", Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge 1994), 126.
[74] Bhabha, 127.
[75] Maria Lassén-Seger, 2017, 252.

poetic, fragmentary text, formed in sections of four short lines, is placed in the middle of a white surface on the left side of the double spread. On every double spread the block of four lines are finished with the sentence: "Tok Tok Tok!" It isn't until we reach the end of the book, that this line is separated from the text as the lonely protagonist is finally united with others:

> *Cicada all fly back to forest.*
> *Sometimes think about human.*
> *Can't stop laughing.*

Placed on a page of its own, the rhythmic sound "Tok Tok Tok!" is included for the last time, now explained as laughter, an explanation that suddenly changes the way the story and the character can be understood.

Picture 2. © Shaun Tan, *Cicada.*

Cicada not only abandons his human clothes, but also human movement (walking on two legs), and is instead depicted flying high above the rooftops. The character is, for the first time, described not as an individual, but as part of a group. Suddenly, the mentioning of the 17 years of employment at the beginning of the story gets an explanation. Periodical cicadas spend most of their lives as underground nymphs, and emerge after 13 or 17 years, swarming in large numbers.[76] The final illustration, with the soaring, red cicadas, moving together in the sky, depicts a hopeful, joyous image. Finally, a nature scenery takes over, creating a harsh contrast to the grey, geometric pattern used on the initial endpaper. This ordered design, which is

[76] Kathy S. Williams & Chris Simon,"The Ecology, Behavior, and Evolution of Periodical Cicadas". *Annual Review of Entomology*. 1995.Vol. 40:269-295.

repeated in different ways throughout the book, as office cubicles, stairs and corridors, is here replaced with a wild, vibrant and colorful image of nature.

Apart from the rudimentary narrative possibilities these anthropomorphic protagonists offer, it is, nevertheless, evident that the motif of vermin, and diminutive characters in children's literature generally, often have moral or ideological implications. "Visual and verbal representations of size difference encourage the child reader to picture and explore the nature and resolution of prejudice against the "other," Valone writes.[77] While some of the stories discussed in this article have happy endings, as Nodelman suggests, the worlds depicted, and the underlying messages conveyed, are certainly not always hopeful and optimistic. Instead, the small protagonists, living in periphery of the human world, can be read as critical depictions of otherness that tell alternative narratives and offer open endings.

When reading these children's stories with liminal anthropomorphic characters, I have found that the small protagonists – living in small spaces under floorboards, inside walls or drainpipes – are connected to ideas about the "domesticated" and secure miniature worlds, but also work in the opposite way. While nostalgic notions might be present, these anthropomorphic characters are not shielded; nor do the stories offer the reader a peaceful retreat. Instead, they are connected to their contemporary reality and take stance, engage and criticize. Through their liminal positions, the fictional animals, insects and humanoids, defy and redefine their roles and purposes in the stories. In opposite to the motionless and protected miniature, they are placed *outside,* at the periphery of the human world. They are made invisible and stripped of value; and, at the same time, they are given a voice, and used to convey something important to the readers.

Whether published during the post-war periods or at the beginning of the 21st century, the stories discussed in this article convey a critical voice through anthropomorphic bodies that suggest a changed vision and a revised perception. They can be seen as variations of the animal fable, commenting on the social, economic, and political changes and developments of their time. Cicada's very form, which on a surface level mimics a human office worker, or the tiny tin mouse who dreams of freedom and autonomy, challenge the nature-culture divide. Their bodies become a meeting place for both the natural and the cultural, two contexts that can't be separated without losing significant information. They provide a perspective that is not necessarily human-centered, where "we" is set apart from "them." Instead, these tiny insects and animals lead to a muddling of categories, systems and hierarchies of bodies, big and small, organic and mechanic, nonhuman and those struggling to free themselves from anthropomorphic notions. These narratives for children use dehumanizing images and rhetoric, historically connected to discrimination and racism, but do so in order to reclaim these metaphors. Instead, images of and associations with insects, mice, rats or arthropods – animals that in many cultures are seen as a nuisance or evoke negative emotions – are used to convey something important. The dehumanizing rhetoric images, which today are still applied in different acts of political, ethnic, or national oppression, are used here to tell new stories about hope, justice, and tolerance.

[77] Vallone, 173.

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# The Making(s) of a Girl: Gender and Humanness in Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song*

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**Abstract**

A common trend in modern fantasy literature for children and young adults is to describe the world from the monster's point of view. Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song* (2014) explores what it means to be a girl from the perspective of a changeling. In the article, I analyze the changeling motif with a focus on gender and humanness. The article shows how non-normative femininity and the non-human are intertwined in the depiction of the changeling. The girl's feeling of otherness is portrayed through her unruly and makeshift body that threatens to betray her by falling apart or taking control of her actions. Only by moving beyond restrictive notions of girlhood and affirming the non-human, can a resolution be achieved. The changeling in *Cuckoo Song* juxtaposes the non-human with humans that have been represented as the other in Western society, like women, children, and foreign people. Thus, the narrative sheds light on practices of othering and the gendered, racialized, and age-specific norms of human life. Through an exploration of the effects of dehumanization, Hardinge's novel devises a post-human ethic underlining all creatures' right to life.

**Keywords:** *Frances Hardinge, young adult literature, changeling, femininity, non-human*

In a popular nineteenth-century nursery rhyme, little girls are said to be made of "[s]ugar and spice and all things nice",[78] thus delineating an ideal of feminine sweetness and docility. Girls in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature were regularly met by similar expectations. Girlhood classics such as L. M. Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872) and L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) depict a sprightly protagonist who struggles with her temper, flighty imagination, talkativeness or perceived lack of beauty and neatness. These and other books for girls explore a common difficulty to live up to "sugary" girlhood norms.[79] A different and possibly less palatable recipe for a girl is put

[78] Iona Opie & Peter Opie, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 101.

[79] See e.g. Shirley Foster & Judy Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-readings of Classic Stories for Girls* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Peter Stoneley, *Consumerism and American Girls' Literature, 1860–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Michelle Ann Abate, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

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forward in Frances Hardinge's *Cuckoo Song* (2014). The central character Trista is "made of sticks and papers and bits and bobs and thorns and painted eyes".[80] Unbeknownst to her, she is a changeling put in a family as a replacement for their daughter. Trista's memories of a previous life and sense of self are fragmented. While striving to maintain an appearance of normalcy, her queer behavior frequently bewilders her family and herself. Just like her counterparts in many classic books for girls, Trista is trying to make sense of her surroundings and how to fit in.

Frances Hardinge is a contemporary British author of fantasy for children and young adults. Many of her novels are narrated by female characters, who suffer from othering or social invisibility. For example, *A Face Like Glass* (2012) features a heroine that is literally an outsider in her culture and *The Lie Tree* (2015), recipient of the prestigious Costa Book of the Year Award in 2015, explores the restricted agency of girls and women in Victorian England. In these and other stories by Hardinge, contemporary discourses on power, gender, age, and race are de-familiarized and interrogated through narratives that take place in fantasy worlds or in the past.[81] *Cuckoo Song* is set in England in the 1920s and merges elements of historic fiction, fairy folklore and the gothic. This kind of "hybrid genre fusion" is characteristic of both Hardinge's novels and contemporary young adult literature.[82] Trista, too, can be described as a hybrid character. As a lifelike doll made of twigs, she transcends binaries such as animate and inanimate, human and non-human, nature and culture. Her liminal position also enables her to pass between the human city and the fairy world of the Besiders. The experience of being a girl is formulated through these intersections.

In this article, I will analyze the changeling motif in *Cuckoo Song* from the perspectives of gender and humanness. Hardinge's literary method often involves making metaphors or abstract phenomena concrete. In *A Skinful of Shadows* (2017), the protagonist carries other people's souls inside her, illustrating how she is torn between conflicting wills, while the tree in *The Lie Tree* feeds off lies and can only prosper in darkness. It is destroyed when exposed to light, just as shedding light on a lie will rob it of its force.[83] The changeling motif in *Cuckoo Song* similarly gives a tangible form to adolescent fears, in the words of Geoffrey Miles, "of being an outsider, a misfit, an alien in the family or in the normal adult world".[84] Miles reads

[80] Frances Hardinge, *Cuckoo Song* (London: Macmillan Children's Books, 2018), p. 116. Further references to the novel will be given within parentheses in the main text. Trista is successively called Triss, not-Triss and Trista in the novel but for the sake of readability I will consistently call her Trista. I will also refer to the family she is placed in as *her* family, since that is how they are described in the main part of the novel. This, however, partly conceals the scrambling of identities and family relations that is at the heart of the changeling motif.

[81] Cf. Blanka Grzegorczyk, *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, chap. 5;
Geoffrey Miles, "Cuckoo Songs: The Changeling as Hero," in *New Directions in Children's Gothic: Debatable Lands*, ed. Anna Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2017), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, 32–50; and Elizabeth E. J. Gilbert, "The Lures and Limitations of the Natural Sciences: Frances Hardinge's *The Lie Tree*," in *Representations of Science in Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Human and Temporal Connectivities*, ed. Nina Engelhardt & Julia Hoydis (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central, 133–150.

[82] Gilbert, "The Lures and Limitations," 133. See also Rachel Falconer, *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary Children's Fiction and Its Adult Readership* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Proquest Ebook Central, 2–9.

[83] Lydia Kokkola, "Critical Plant Studies and Children's Literature," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. Clémentine Beauvais & Maria Nikolajeva (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 278.

[84] Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 33.

the changeling as a metaphor for a teenager but gives less attention to the changeling as an embodied and gendered being. However, as Trista's process of animation makes clear, being alive is depicted as a corporeal experience in Hardinge's novel, regardless of the body consists of leaves and thorns or flesh and blood. The changeling's physical make-up simultaneously serves as a reminder of traditional representations of women and children as closer to nature than men.[85] Trista is at odds with and struggling to gain control of her unruly body that threatens to revert to the forest material it is made of. By focusing my discussion on the depiction of an embodied femininity, I wish to explore the makings of a girl.

**Female Scripts**

The 1920s was a time of great transformation and Hardinge's novel utilizes the conflicts of the interwar period as a backdrop for Trista's identity quest. As Miles has pointed out, the thematic centrality of change is implied by the pun at the core of the narrative: "the *changeling* is a figure of *change*".[86] *Cuckoo Song* deals with different reactions to modernity and the characters' handling of historical as well as personal transformation. Hardinge combines historic detail of the 1920s and folklore into a narrative where the vagaries of the modern world and the fairy realm overlap. Fairy stories have often described fairies as creatures of a distant past and suffering in modern times. This idea is incorporated into the novel but, as suggested by Miles, with a twist. Although the Besiders have lost their old haunts in the age of science and exploration, they flourish in the new types of uncertainties that have also been produced by urbanization, industrialization, and the ensuing break with tradition.[87] In particular, the war has generated different gendered scripts. A new generation of women has come forward and they are described in the novel with an allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929): "Once they [women] kept to their pretty little paths and didn't step on the grass. But those that worked in the farms and factories during the War have a taste for running their own lives now, haven't they? So, all their menfolk are panicking. Frightened. *Uncertain*." (230)[88] Fairies and independent women both become representations of otherness in *Cuckoo Song*, and they intersect in the guise of the changeling girl.

Hardinge builds on gendered aspects of fairy folklore and its associations between women, children and changelings. According to Carole G. Silver, nineteenth-century England was virtually obsessed with fairies and changelings. Newspapers and courts reported of cases where women and children had been injured or killed by practices of exorcism. Fear of changelings became the focal point of "Victorian anxieties about difference, race and class".[89] Children or human women in liminal states, like brides and recent mothers, were the ones most

[85] See e.g., Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Sidney I. Dobrin & Kenneth B. Kidd, "Introduction: Into the Wild," in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, ed. Sidney I. Dobrin & Kenneth B. Kidd (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 4–7.
[86] Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 46.
[87] Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 41, 44.
[88] In the beginning of Woolf's essay, a woman walks on the grass of a university and is redirected to the gravel path, since only scholars are allowed on the turf. She uses this scene to discuss the ideological and physical obstacles intellectual women faced in contemporary society.
[89] Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), ProQuest Ebook Central, 60.

at risk of being abducted by fairy people.[90] In *Cuckoo Song*, the communities of Besiders and humans differ in many ways but share an androcentric power structure. All chief agents in the beginning of the story are males while girls and women get caught in their quarrels. One Besider, called the Architect, is constructing new homes for his people. He has asked a fairy doll-maker, the Shrike, to create Trista in order to replace Triss, a human girl whose father has angered the Architect by breaking a building contract. Another human, Mr. Grace, whose wife has been killed by a changeling, becomes involved in the search for Triss and attempts to stop the Besiders from establishing themselves in the human city. In this messy entanglement of individual disputes and competing aspirations, girls and women become the victims but also the means for males to reach their goals.

Contemporary gothic fiction for children and young adults are often told from the "monster's" point-of-view and changeling stories are no exception.[91] Changelings have traditionally been seen as an embodiment of difference. Human children whose behavior or appearances altered in inexplicable ways were suspected of having been taken by fairies and replaced by an imp or animated log.[92] In modern narratives, the focus has shifted from the parents' dread of an alien child to children's fear of not belonging or the transformative experience of adolescence. Miles argues that *Cuckoo Song* takes the theme of alienation one step further by not revealing Trista's identity as a changeling in the text or paratexts until one third into the narrative, which enhances the protagonist's and the reader's confusion.[93] Trista suffers from memory lapses, hears mysterious voices in her dreams and her body seems strange: "It felt as if there was a vast expanse of her, weighted down with rocks, and it was a surprise to see herself stretched out as a normal-sized lump under the counterpane and blankets." (2) The experience is markedly physical. There is a dislocation between how she experiences and sees herself. The sense of estrangement is emphasized by descriptions of the body as a formless "expanse" or "lump", as if she is a being who is trapped in a foreign element.

In fairy folklore, the changeling is characterized by, among other things, gluttony, fretfulness, and a malicious spirit.[94] Hardinge's novel explicitly associates such behavior with deviations from a female norm. Trista seems to be at the mercy of her body that appears to have a will of its own. To her and her family's horror, she is ravenous and feels as if there was "a raw gaping chasm at her core" (16). Apart from copious amounts of food, she secretly devours dolls, clothes, jewelry, and magazines in an attempt to "*seem normal*" (60) by not overeating in front of her parents. The demands on girls to be thin and have a tiny appetite were as insistent in the early twentieth century as they are today. Bursts of anger were also chastised. A good girl was supposed to keep control of her body and her mood, and this morale was often repeated in books for girls and advice manuals of the period.[95] When Trista's father admonishes her for throwing a temper tantrum after not being allowed to satiate her hunger, he stresses that

[90] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 59–87, 149–183.
[91] Anna Jackson, "New Directions in Children's Gothic: Debatable Lands," in *New Directions in Children's Gothic: Debatable Lands*, ed. Anna Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2017), Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete, 4–5 and Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 33.
[92] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 59–87.
[93] Miles, "Cuckoo Song," 33 and 41.
[94] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 60–62.
[95] Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), chap. 2.

her actions are unfeminine: "'That sort of behavior was not something I expected from my Triss,' he said softly. 'My Triss is a sweet, quiet, well-behaved girl. She doesn't stamp and scream at the dinner table.'" (74) Her mother, too, declares her to be "a wild thing" (125) with a ferocious expression that should not be "in the face of my little girl" (125). The sweet little family girl is contrasted with a savage creature that is something other than a human child. By not affirming her parents' notion of docile femininity, Trista can neither be a proper girl nor their daughter.

Trista's attempts to behave in accordance with her family's expectations expose gender as a performance. In Judith Butler's words, gender is materialized through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being".[96] Rather than being the expression of an inner, natural core, Trista's self is performed by repeating gestures that may make her pass as a girl. She is acting "how-to-be-Triss" (18) and her "Trissness closed in around her again, like cold, damp swaddling clothes" (64) but she constantly gets the words and movements slightly wrong. Being Triss is a role that does not suit her and neither, as it turns out, does it fit the real Triss. Any deviations from what her parents wish her to be is viewed as physical signs of illness and indirectly punished by the removal of things she enjoys or enforced stillness. Triss' display of giddiness or attempts at independence were pathologized by her parents and resulted in visits to doctors. Trista, too, describes her feelings of disorientation in medicalized terms, as physical illness, insanity or being not normal: "*I'm ill, I'm mad, I'm horrible, I have to get better.*" (78) Her parents take her on a virtual tour of doctors where contemporary psychoanalytical theories of repressed memories and female hysteria are introduced, thus alluding to the medicalized discourse on femininity of the time.[97]

The changeling functions as a catalyst within the family and reveals that all members are playing their parts in a dysfunctional drama, where Triss is supposed to be the good, sensitive girl and her younger sister Pen is cast as the black sheep.[98] The performative aspect of gender and family life is further underlined by the frequent use of similes mentioning paper, books, and scripts when describing Trista. She is literally depicted as a scripted being, powered by diary extracts and objects invested with the real Triss' memories. In the beginning, the name Triss feels familiar "like a book falling open on a much-viewed page" (1) and Trista performs the expected story. The changeling's borrowed identity and fluid subjectivity is displayed through the changing of names, representing different stages of selfhood: Triss – not-Triss – Trista. As is shown by the different designations, she is defined by her likeness to or difference from another girl that she both is and is not. In the same way, all family members keep up their roles out of habit or need. The parents' retelling of memories is described as "family folklore, recited […] in a solemn, ritual fashion" herding the girl's recollections "into the neat pens of their stories, until she no longer knew what she actually remembered" (83). In a final confrontation with her parents, when Trista exposes their lies, she feels as if she "had ripped out the remaining pages of the script, and had fallen off the ragged edge of the paper" (146). There is no going back to the old tales after that. The whole family have been repeating parts

[96] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.
[97] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and Culture in England, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
[98] Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 43.

that they have grown out of, exposing the hollowness behind the respectable and harmonious facade.

The ideal of the sweet family girl is challenged both within the family and in society in *Cuckoo Song*. Whereas Trista's family has tried to stop time and the girls from growing up to avoid having to face their son's death in the war, his fiancé Violet has been transformed into a brazen modern woman. She has cut her hair, started smoking, wears knee length skirts and enjoys jazz, which are all tell-tale signs of the 1920s flapper.[99] Their mutual love of jazz creates an association between the new women and the Besiders. A fondness for music and dance also distinguishes fairy people and changelings in folklore.[100] The new woman of the fin-de-siècle was characterized by a greater visibility, independence, and mobility.[101] In Hardinge's novel, Violet is constantly in motion, riding through town on her motorcycle. Her vagabond life turns out to be another effect of fairy magic, which strengthens the link between Besiders, modernity and new women. If Violet stays more than a few hours in the same place, her surroundings grow cold and it starts to snow. The enforced movement, however, proves to be a lifestyle that suits her: "it turns out I love speed, motion and change too, without them I go stir crazy" (400). Her ability to embrace instability and transformation makes her open to the peculiarities of the fairy world as well as to bonding with estranged beings in human society, such as the rebellious Pen, traumatized war veterans or a changeling.

Violet becomes Trista's chief helper in her struggle to avoid being captured and to find the kidnaped Triss. There is a rapport between the two, based on the fact that they have both been designated as female others by their families and society. Through Violet, the parallel between Trista's alienation as a changeling and the experience of regular family girls exceeding established norms is made clear:

> *I know, you woke up one day and found out that you couldn't be the person you remembered being, the little girl everybody expected you to be. You just weren't her anymore, and there was nothing you could do about it. So your family decided you were a monster and turned on you." Violet sighed, staring out into the darkness. "Believe me, I do understand that. And let me tell you – from one monster to another – that just because somebody tells you you're a monster, it doesn't mean you are.* (294)

Feeling like or being compared to a monster is yet another way of describing deviant femininity but, as is evident from the quote, this idea is also challenged. Several of Hardinge's novels describe how affirming that which makes the central character different and even shunned by the community, turns out to be the key to personal or communal salvation. According to Elizabeth Gilbert, accepting the metaphorical inner monster in *The Lie Tree* becomes "an act

[99] Abate, *Tomboys*, chap. 6.
[100] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 75 and 168.
[101] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), chap. 6; and Sarah Wintle, "Horses, Bikes and Automobiles: New Woman on the Move," in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin de Siècle Feminism*, ed. Angelique Richardson & Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 66–78.

of liberation and empowerment" for the protagonist.[102] The exploration of different female scripts in *Cuckoo Song* brings about a similar reconsideration of the boundaries between proper and improper femininity but also between the human and non-human.

**The Beauty of the Beast**

*Cuckoo Song* belongs to a tradition in children's and young adult literature that employs toys coming to life and other fantastical creatures to examine issues of subjectivity, gender and humanity.[103] Such fantasy narratives, according to Zoe Jaques, lend themselves to post-human interrogation: "By imagining 'beings' as operating beyond bodily or environmental constraint, children's fiction […] can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a 'post-human' world."[104] The stories contain playful explorations of and alternate ways of relating to the more-than-human by blurring or exceeding conventional boundaries. Dolls coming to life operate in "a liminal space between inanimate object and living subject".[105] While looking like a human, the doll's existence is grounded in the non-human material of its form. A doll body can be more or less agile and endurable than organic flesh, depending on what it is made of. Nor does the puppet grow old and die in the same way as humans. It simply ceases to exist when its corporeal substance is destroyed or its energy source runs out.[106] Children's stories about toys coming to life have traditionally been used to explore the characteristics of humanity. As Jaques has pointed out, narratives about animated dolls both mimic and parody notions of humanness. They comment "not only on the border between the human and the inhuman but also on those binaries by which humanity is restricted".[107] Dolls come to life according to gendered, age-specific human scripts and in, for example, Carlo Collodi's classic *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), the metamorphosis of the wooden puppet into a real human boy contrasts ideas of amoral, animalistic boyhood with the humanness of the responsible and productive adult male.[108] As this example makes clear, such stories also examines the establishing of boundaries within humanity and processes of dehumanization.

Hardinge's novel utilizes a range of images to examine the non-human, that at the same time address a fear of otherness. As Miles has observed, Trista is frequently described in terms

[102] Gilbert, "The Lures and Limitations," 143. The monstrous feminine is a familiar trope in both feminist theory and children's literary studies, from the seminal Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) to modern interpretations of YA horror stories, e.g. June Pulliam, *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014).

[103] See e.g. Lois R. Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis and Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Beverly Lyon Clark & Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[104] Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

[105] Anna Panszczyk, "The 'Becoming' of Pinocchio: The Liminal Nature of Collodi's Boy-Toy," *Children's Literature* 44 (2016): 192, Project MUSE.

[106] Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive*, 24–33; and Jaques, *Children's Literature*, 209–214.

[107] Jaques, *Children's Literature*, 214.

[108] Jaques, *Children's Literature*, 213–219; and Panszczyk, "The 'Becoming' of Pinocchio," 212–216.

of holes and disintegration, which serves as a metaphor for the fragmented modern subject.[109] Her shattered sense of self is embodied in the amalgam material and continuous break-up of her "makeshift body" (317). According to Lois R. Kuznets, a central concern of toy narratives is anxiety about being "real", defined as being "an independent subject or self rather than an object or submitting to the gaze of more powerfully real and potentially rejecting beings".[110] Being real is here closely associated with a humanist concept of the individual, as an autonomous, unified subject grounded in a common human core.[111] In *Cuckoo Song*, experiences of fragmentation and hybridity are in a similar vein connected with the non-human and initially regarded as abnormal or monstrous. Supernatural occurrences and non-normative behavior are intertwined. When Trista's dolls start to talk, they mirror her fears of not belonging and being abnormal, screeching "Who do think you are? This is *my* family" and "You're not right!" (22) In panic, she breaks the doll and the whole experience makes her feel "like a monster" (24) and murderer. Trista is trying to tell herself that the magical events are not real and by ignoring them everything will return to normal. However, the insight that she is merely an animated doll and not the girl she has believed herself to be, also brings the realization that in the eyes of society, her family and herself "[s]he was the monster" (118). The confrontation with her otherness forms the basis of a new agency and a defiant affirmation of being: "Even if I'm not Triss, I'm still real! I'm still somebody, even if I don't have a name!" (119) Thereby, the narrative challenges the humanist subject's prerogative of being real and launches an exploration of the more-than-human.

The animated doll in *Cuckoo Song* is not a toy and in contrast to Pinocchio she is never transformed into a human, but she exists in a similar liminal condition as the lifelike puppet. Trista's hybrid character consists of a physical frame made from dead plant material that has been animated by Triss' human memories and emotions. Her non-human origin is revealed when she loses control or parts of herself. Strands of hair turn into leaves, cobwebs come out of her eyes instead of tears and she grows thorns under threat. The semblance of humanity vanishes and the organic fragments that she is made of reassert themselves. Humanness, like gender, is exposed as performative and must be kept under tight reins. As long as Trista primarily identifies with humans, the plant material inside her seems to have an agency of its own, ripping through her and moving the body as if she was possessed:

> *Not-Triss rolled on the bench, laughing with the creak and thrash of a forest in a gale. She laughed until the windows rattled and the flames of the hearth dipped and quivered. Words came from her mouth, but they were not hers, nor could the voice that spoke them be mistaken for human.*
>
> > '*Oh, we are the leaves of the Perspell wood*
> > *That grew before old London stood*
> > *Yet never have we seen a sight so strange*
> > *As eggshell stew pots on the range.'* (165)

[109] Miles, "Cuckoo Song," 42–43 and 48. Miles suggests that T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925) functions as a central intertext in *Cuckoo Song*. Both works comment on the spiritual hollowness of interwar society and the trauma of the war experience.

[110] Kuznets, *When Toys Come Alive*, 2.

[111] Cf. Robyn McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity* (New York: Garland Publishing 1999), 4–7.

This incident takes place when Mr. Grace exposes Trista as a changeling, using a test of cooking food in eggshells familiar from folklore.[112] Whereas the test in traditional fairy stories forces the changeling to reveal its true form, it underlines Trista's hybridity in Hardinge's novel. The scene describes how the leaves take over her body and speak of ancient times before Trista existed, thereby playing with traditional binaries such as body and mind, nature, and culture. There seems to be a rift between the material frame and the human consciousness, where her feral side embodies raw emotion, likened to storm, noise and wilderness. When an anguished Trista lashes through the town, she lets out a wail "that was not one a human girl could have produced. In it she heard the splintering lament of wind-felled trees, the steel cacophony of gulls, the whining note at the heart of the storm" (118). Her voice sounds of natural forces, expressing feelings of sadness and rage, while simultaneously codifying these emotions as unfeminine and inhuman.

Fairies have traditionally been related to primordial, amoral nature. In nineteenth-century England, they were considered to be a savage folk bent on mischief and unable to feel compassion. In Silver's words, "they lacked the civilized virtues, behaving like children (the Victorian 'little savages') or like the mob".[113] The Besiders, too, can be malicious and show little care for human suffering. Although at least the Architect and the Shrike are capable of intellectual feats and magnificent craft, the majority seem to be driven by primitive urges. They act like a mob "with hard, childlike and multicolored" (213) eyes when they encircle, pinch and taunt Trista and her sister Pen. Afterwards the fairy children are compared to animals: "Drop a wounded bird into a box of kittens … and what you see will not be pretty. They are just doing what they do." (224) The Besiders may act cruelly but it is out of instincts rather than vicious intent. Even if they are living in a city, the fairy people are far from civilized according to human norms. Their presence triggers similar instincts in Trista and sets "her blood alight" (296). Her non-human body responds to their kinship.

The realization that she is not human liberates Trista's mental and physical faculties, simultaneously generating a reevaluation of monstrosity. As she becomes aware of her non-human origin, her surroundings take on a new shape: "It was as if she was letting herself see with her true eyes for the first time, no longer trying to convince herself that everything looked normal." (120) Rather than primarily being a subject of fear, the non-human brings an array of possibilities. Trista notices that her physique is stronger and more supple than human limbs, and she learns how to use the thorns to her advantage. When joining in a nightly fairy pursuit, she experiences feelings of comradery and elation:

> *Trista gave chase, trusting to instinct, toe and claw. She felt her hair stream with each leap, the wind chilling her clenched teeth. Her heart beat hard but did not seem to matter, like a loose oddment rattling in a forgotten drawer. […] Occasionally she caught a flash of lichen-colored eyes, or teeth bared in a grin of fellowship. She tasted snowflakes and realized that her mouth was open, that she was laughing.* (376)

[112] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 65; and D. L. Ashliman, "Changelings: An Essay," last modified 1997, accessed June 14, 2021, https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/changeling.html#eggshells.
[113] Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples*, 150.

Relying on her feral side allows Trista to perform exhilarating feats. The non-human is still associated with physicality, instinct and emotion but it is no longer a threat to her sanity or sense of self. Nor is monstrosity merely the other or opposite of humanity. It is a different state of being, defined by its own terms. The liminal stage between human and non-human becomes an empowering position, that lets Trista see the world from a double perspective: "The thorny part of Trista's heart gave a skip of malicious satisfaction. She could not help it. But there was another part of her that watched him with sadness and pity. She could not help that either." (326) Trista is still divided between different impulses, but the two sides co-exist and allow a wider range of emotion. Unlike the fairies in folklore, she is capable of both spiteful anger and compassion.

*Cuckoo Song* deals with common themes in books for young adults such as growing up, coming to terms with your family and finding your place in the world. Robyn McCallum has argued that the majority of children's and young adult literature "valorize the capacity to act independently of social restraint and, in doing so, assume humanistic concepts of individual agency".[114] Trista's final confrontation with the Architect is described as an opportunity to take action on her own and find her authentic self: "*Now there's nobody to judge me, to tell me about myself. Nobody to impress, nobody to disappoint. Now is the time I found out who I am.*" (372) When no longer being held back by other people's expectations, a true core can be unraveled. Hardinge's novel problematizes the notion of a unique and unified self through the changeling motif, but at the same time maintains the importance of self-discovery as if there is a true self that can be known. The climatic end scene hinges on Trista having something that is solely her own to stop the disintegration of her body:

> *But what did she have that was hers? Her hair was leaves, her body fragments of another's life. Everything she had was borrowed […]. She was litter and leavings, not a person in her own right.*
>
> *"But I am a person!" she wailed, the room throwing back derisive echoes. "I'm real! I am! I have a name!"* (393)

Once more she asserts her personhood, and her sense of self is tied to having a name of her own. This self, however, can hardly be said to be unified or even entirely human. The name forms the center, loosely holding together a being of fragments, leaves and loans. In a parallel to Pinocchio, Trista does become a real girl, but she broadens the notions of girlhood, humanity and possibly even realness in the process.

**A Post-Human Ethic**

The reassessment of gender and humanity in *Cuckoo Song* simultaneously involves a reconsideration of a dichotomous world view, often encoded into the battle between good and evil in the fantasy genre. According to Margery Hourihan, the narrative pattern of traditional fantasy and adventure stories serves a conservative agenda by naturalizing patriarchal and imperialistic power formations. These narratives underscore the supremacy of the male, white, autonomous, and rational hero, while at the same time supporting a dualistic understanding of

[114] McCallum, *Ideologies of Identity*, 257.

the world with clear boundaries between men and women, human and animals, and good and evil. [115] Many modern fantasy novels work both within and against the traditional hero story, altering the conventional hero markers as well as the narrative arc.[116] In *Cuckoo Song*, Trista's hybridity lets her shift between a human and non-human outlook on the world. Her dual position conveys a more complex moral understanding and the realization "that good men sometimes did terrible things" (170). The main conflict in the novel is not between good and evil, or human and non-human. It is between people who divide the world into sharp opposites and those who tolerate more fluid boundaries.

The changeling juxtaposes the non-human with humans that have been represented as the other in Western society, like women, children, and foreign people. Thereby, the narrative sheds light on practices of othering, and the gendered, racialized and age-specific norms underlying human life. The main adversary of the fairies is the rational Mr Grace, who has many of the hero's characteristics described by Hourihan.[117] Whereas the Besiders are "in-between folk" (228), Mr. Grace cannot grasp the physical hybridity or varying moral of the fairy people. He is a tailor and scissors, the tools of his trade, represent his dualistic mindset: "scissors are really intended for one job alone – snipping things in two. Dividing by force. Everything on one side or the other, nothing in between." (218) His world view reflects the patriarchal and anthropocentric values that Hourihan found in many conventional fantasy and adventure tales. To Mr. Grace, there is a clear-cut division between good and bad creatures. While many of the other characters develop an ability to see the world from more than one side, he is set in his view of changelings and fairies as callous monsters. Mr. Grace dehumanizes Trista, calls her "it" and claims that "it doesn't feel pain the way we do; it doesn't feel fear. However much it screams, none of it is real" (170). Trista's panic when he tries to throw her on a fire strongly contradicts his claim. To Mr. Grace, Trista and the Besiders represent absolute otherness and they need to be annihilated for the greater good of society. When faced with his disdain, Trista once more becomes "the miserable child-monster" (381) and she cannot be anything else in his eyes. Her dealings with the Besiders, in contrast, are based on a feeling of recognition. They share the experience of being treated like monsters. Although Trista still finds the Besiders "terrifying", she acknowledges the possibility that "some of them were harmless, or helpless, or stupid, or just too young to realize what they were doing" (224). She no longer sees them as an indefinable evil mob but as a group of individuals, capable of both good and bad.

Through the resolution of the struggle, the narrative formulates a post-human ethic underlining all creatures' equal right to life, based on a shared capacity for suffering and fear of extinction. The conclusion of *Cuckoo Song* sees humans and fairies enter a reluctant truce,

[115] Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 15–38.
[116] See e.g. Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero,* chap. 5; Leah Phillips, "Mythopoeic YA: Worlds of Possibility," in *Beyond the Blockbusters: Themes and Trends in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction*, ed. Rebekah Fitzsimmons & Casey Alane Wilson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), ProQuest Ebook Central; and Caitlin Herington, "'You Wish to Have the Curse Reversed?' Traditional Narrative Motifs of Gender Reconfigured in Bujold's *Chalion* Novels," in *Biology and Manners: Essays on the Worlds and Works of Lois McMaster Bujold*, ed. Regina Yung Lee & Una McCormack (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 55–70.
[117] Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero*, 58–106. Miles, "Cuckoo Songs," 45–46, compares Mr Grace to a traditional monster hunter, in particular to Van Helsing in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

enabling the survival of both groups. This does not involve an assimilation of the other or the elimination of difference. Although the novel is set in interwar Britain, it can also be seen as a comment on the ongoing migrant crisis in Europe, which began the same year as the novel was published. The Besiders arrive in Trista's town by boat and live in "a refugee camp" (222). Reading the Besiders as a direct metaphor for contemporary refugees, of course, is not unproblematic, considering the fairies' non-human and supernatural characteristics. Such an interpretation run the risk of confirming stereotypes of foreign people as irredeemably alien or less civilized. When discussing the relation between fantasy literature and real-life events it is, as Anna Jackson has stressed, important to consider "the limits of allegory".[118] A fantasy creature will at least partly follow the logic of the literary tradition and, in the case of Hardinge's novel, a fairy will still primarily be a fairy. At the same time, the depiction of the Besiders as refugees raises more general questions of the human capacity to live with or tolerate difference, and the need to acknowledge the others' right to be. Even if the Besiders disappear from view, they remain in a secret space in the newly constructed railway station in the city, as if to emphasize the strangeness, instability and movement at the center of human life.

In the final confrontation with the Architect, Trista shows what she is made of. By pretending to be a meek, frightened girl she tricks her adversary into letting down his guard, while her supple and briary body allows her to escape his assault. It is her experiences of both worlds and her ability to utilize this double knowledge that brings about the feat. Only by going beyond binaries and adding some thorns to the sweet recipe of girlhood can a happy ending be reached. In a parallel to the Besiders, though, Trista is not fully integrated into the society that has previously shunned her. She and Violet are still outsiders, but their vagrant lifestyle is now a choice affirming the inevitability of change:

> *"We're like ghosts," she said aloud, feeling sad. "The real world goes on – jobs and families and newspaper stories – and we're outside it."*
>
> *"No, we're not," said Violet, with surly defiance. "They're the ghosts. […] Trying to cling to the past, to the way things were, pretending nothing has changed. Everything changes and breaks and stops fitting […]."* (408–9)

The patchwork changeling and the new woman will keep haunting everyday existence on their motorcycle, blurring borders and challenging stasis. And that, in the final words of the novel, is wonderful.

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[118] Jackson, "New Directions," 8.

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# The (Lack of) Pleasures of Girlhood: The Masturbating Queer Girl in Young Adult Literature

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**Abstract**

Who experiences pleasure? How does this reflect or reinforce societal views on sexuality? These are the questions I explore in this article, using masturbation in queer young adult literature as my case study. I argue that societal discomfort with masturbation, female sexuality in general, and lesbian sexuality in particular combine to make queer female solitary sex an invisible and possibly taboo subject in young adult literature. Since literature can reflect society and show readers possibilities for their lives and futures, it is especially concerning that while young males – both heterosexual and queer – are depicted in English-language young adult novels as enjoying a whole range of sexual practices, including onanism, there are few explicit portrayals of young queer females exploring and appreciating their own bodies and their sexual responses. I argue that this lack does young queer women a disservice, teaching them shame and secrecy rather than healthy and confident sexuality.

**Keywords:** *females, LGBTQ literature, masturbation, sexuality, young adult literature*

Who experiences pleasure? Who deserves to? How does this reflect or reinforce societal views on sexuality? And why does this matter? These are the questions I set out to explore in this article, using masturbation in queer/LGBTQ[119] young adult literature as my case study. Here, I argue that societal discomfort with masturbation, female sexuality, and lesbian sexuality in particular combine to make queer female solitary sex an invisible and possibly taboo subject in English-language young adult literature. The lack of queer female masturbation in literature then reinforces the societal ideas about female sexuality, and especially queer female sexuality. In other words, I would suggest there is a negative feedback loop here.

Literature, especially that dedicated to younger readers, matters and must be investigated in part due to the messages it proffers readers about their lives and selves, both current and future. If young women are shown through literature that their sexual habits, proclivities, or identities are unsatisfying or shameful, then they will perhaps learn to believe

[119] There is not enough space to discuss my usage of the term "queer", so I will just note that I find it a helpful umbrella term that covers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, polyamorous, asexual, kinky, intersex, and other aspects of sexual identity, gender, and practice other than heterosexual and cisgender. It is a term that many find challenging and even upsetting, which I acknowledge even while I prefer to (re)claim it as a strong and beneficial word. I also at times use LGBTQ in this article, mainly for the sake of variety.

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that (see, for instance, Nagoski 2015: 158-61 on the moral, media-based, and medical messages in current society about women and sex and their effects on females). No one is born believing that their body or taking pleasure in it is something to be ashamed of; children and young people are taught this by adults, including through media, and it is not an easy task to learn to counteract such beliefs (sere Nagoski 2015: 160 and 327, among others). I would suggest that society as a whole, and literature in particular, owes young people more. We should encourage all young people to accept their bodies and to take pleasure in them, and we should particularly be concerned about the way girls feel about their bodies, especially given recent increases to depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and other such issues among young females. I do not mean that everyone should be forced to masturbate, if they do not want to; rather, I am suggesting that we should support all children and young adults to accept and appreciate their bodies as those bodies are, and that this may include taking sexual pleasure from their bodies.

As shown elsewhere (Epstein 2013a and 2013b), female sexuality and male sexuality are depicted differently when it comes to sexual interactions with one or more other people. Male characters in literature have abundant sexual experiences of varying types, while in the few cases I have found in my research where females have experiences at all, those interactions are depicted as clumsy, shy, and awkward, and/or they are scarcely described and simply fade to black (in other words, the reader is told that the characters start kissing or touching, and then the scene ends). Much of this, I have argued in previous research, is based on societal views of female sexuality versus that of males, and also on a continuing discomfort with the very idea that women can and do experience strong sexual feelings and satisfying sexual encounters. This difference between views of male sexuality and female sexuality is heightened when it comes to queer people; gay men are seen as hypersexual and unable to be monogamous, while gay women are depicted as suffering from lesbian "bed death", the idea that two women in a relationship may be sexual together initially but then will inevitably lose interest and desire (see Epstein 2013a for more on this). In this article, I look specifically to solitary sex – masturbation – in order to see if the situation is similar. My hypothesis was that masturbation would appear less frequently than partnered or group sex in my corpus for the obvious reason that society is less accepting of and comfortable with it as compared to partnered sex. Furthermore, I was also curious to know whether queer female characters would be shown as having a stronger or weaker sex drive; on the one hand, queer females are often seen as masculine and butch, which would imply a societal belief in a more dominant sexuality, while on the other hand, queer female sexuality is frequently viewed as being solely or primarily for the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975) and for male pleasure (some claim that female same-sex sexual behavior turns men on). Research shows that women in same-sex relationships have more satisfying sex lives, if satisfaction can be measured by orgasms (see Frederick et al. 2018), but what about young queer women engaging in solo sex, as depicted in literature?

While it is true that literature for children and young adults has developed in significant ways in the past few decades and that certain topics that were once considered "remarkable", as John Rowe Townsend puts it (Townsend 1990: 276), no longer are, it appears that some taboos still remain. Joel Taxel writes, "This 'new realism' [i.e. starting in the 1960s] contributed to the erasure of longstanding taboos as authors broke dramatically from the conventions of previous generations by exploring themes that previously were deemed unacceptable (e.g., drugs, alcoholism, sex, and violence)." (2002: 146) Although it is now

commonplace to find young adult novels about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise queer characters (LGBTQ) (see Epstein 2013b for more on this), I would contend that there are some taboos remaining, including queer female sexuality and especially in regard to solitary pleasures.

In short, in this article, I offer a brief history of masturbation, noting in particular that there has been little research on either children's masturbation or queer masturbation, not to speak of the combination of the two, then explore a number of English-language young adult novels in order to show the absence of queer female solitary sexual pleasure. I suggest that this absence reflects and reinforces current societal views in English-speaking countries.

## A Brief History of Masturbation

Before analyzing the literary texts, it is worth providing a short overview of the history of masturbation in Western society, especially in regard both to children and to queer people, in order to have a foundation for understanding the impact of this on the writing of literature about and for LGBTQ young adults.

Masturbation has, at various times, been considered to be anti-Christian (and therefore anti-Western society), anti-social, and/or otherwise dangerous and threatening. Laqueur notes:

> *Three things made solitary sex unnatural. First, it was motivated not by a real object of desire but by a phantasm; masturbation threatened to overwhelm the most protean and potentially creative of the mind's faculties – the imagination – and drive it over a cliff. Second, while all other sex was social, masturbation was private, or, when it was not done along, it was social in all the wrong way: wicked servants taught it to children; wicked older boys taught it to innocent younger ones; girls and boys in schools taught it to each other away from adult supervision. Sex was naturally done with someone solitary sex was not. And third, unlike other appetites, the urge to masturbate could be neither sated nor moderated. Done alone, drive only by the mind's own creations, it was a primal, irremediable, and seductively, even addictively, easy transgression. Every man, woman, and child suddenly seemed to have access to the boundless excesses of gratification that had once been the privilege of Roman emperors.* (2003: 210)

In short, onanism has traditionally been seen as unacceptable in our society, and perhaps it could be said that avoiding it altogether or learning to stop doing it is viewed as being part of the process of becoming socialized as an adult. Besides that, there are also other issues related to masturbation. For instance, Bennett and Rosario discuss how masturbation was seen as particularly problematic for men, since it could waste semen, which was, according to Christian church views, intended solely for the production of children (1995: 3-4); this led me to the potential hypothesis that male characters in literature would be less likely to be described as engaging in onanism, although this is not borne out by my corpus, as discussed below.

In regard to young people, Stengers and Van Neck state how parents were told to use ideas such as pride and self-respect as ways of enforcing the idea that masturbation was wrong, and also that it was suggested they tell children that "a certain part of their body is the seat of virility" and thus should not be disturbed or touched (2001: 161). Obviously, "the seat of

virility" is the penis; female masturbation was often scarcely mentioned in material on the subject, perhaps because girls and women were viewed as less naturally sexual in any case. But though the focus may have been on males, particularly adult ones, this does not mean that masturbation was allowed or encouraged for children and young adults.

Stengers and Van Neck also note how masturbation was viewed by many as medically dangerous for children, so prevention was required; suggestions for prevention include sports, swimming, and other vigorous activities that would wear out and distract young people (2001: 9-10); diet (2001: 11); and even inventions and tools (2001: 12-13, 71), often tortuous ones. They add that the language used to refer to masturbation – terms such as "bad habit", "vice", and "sin" – along with talk of cures (2001: 162-3) and even threats, such as parents threatening to cut off boys' penises and hands (2001: 147), also served as preventative measures. In extreme cases, parents resorted to surgical interventions: "what stand out are the operations and instruments that were inflicted upon the young. A surgical operation was the supreme weapon against inveterate masturbation, in the case of girls as well as of boys. To the modern sensibility, it often appears – incorrectly – as if the surgeons approached the topic with certain sadism." (2001: 110) In short, one should teach children that this "seemingly innocent entertainment was, in fact, both deadly and profoundly demoralizing." (Laqueur 2003: 233) This attitude could be one of the reasons why masturbation was scarcely seen in literature for young readers until quite recently.

Then things changed in the West. In the past century or so, Freud's view of sexuality, particularly childhood sexuality, has had an impact. Freud thought masturbation "was the foundational form of sexual expression, perfectly natural and appropriate at an early stage of development" (Laqueur, 2003: 71), and yet he also felt it was "necessary to give up in the process of becoming a properly functioning adult. It was the site of the great struggles through which sexuality was channeled by civilization; and conversely, failure to manage it became the prototype for all other sorts of failure." (ibid.) In other words, masturbation was acceptable for young people and perhaps viewed as a necessary practice stage (cf. Brenot 1997: 46), but it was also considered to be problematic. To continue to masturbate despite growing older – although there seems to have been no clear consensus on the exact appropriate age for giving up masturbation, adolescence in general is the approximate time period – would have been seen as evidence that the masturbator lacked control, was not reproductive in the acceptable way (i.e. heterosexually, with the outcome being children), and was uncivilized. As Laqueur sums it up, "Adolescence, in particular, became the crux, a fraught time between "natural" infantile autoeroticism and its sad holdover into maturity, the period when masturbation went from being a sign of "budding sexuality" full of promise to being an indication that its practitioner was unable to have a proper love object and, more generally, to make peace with the demands of society. One's relation to masturbation tracked precisely one's willingness to go with the flow of the civilizing process." (2003: 73-4) In short, masturbating beyond adolescence was wrong and implied a problem with the immature onanist.

Although this modern view holds that masturbation is a natural stage for children (Laqueur 2003: 73) and despite the fact that masturbation is obviously a sensible way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, clearly many are still uncomfortable with the concept. Jill Lepore writes about how "[i]n 1994, [US] Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders was asked, at an AIDS forum, whether it might not be a good idea to discuss

masturbation with children. 'I think that it is something that's part of human sexuality and it's part of something that perhaps should be taught,' Elders said. 'But we've not even taught our children the very basics.' Elders was forced to resign." (2010: 92-3) For even suggesting that masturbation was natural and could be part of sex education, Elders lost her job. And yet, Moore and Rosenthal, among others, discuss how wide-spread masturbation is among young people. They write that "[m]asturbation is the most common source of orgasm in teenagers of both sexes and the source of a boy's first ejaculation in two out of three cases" (2006: 15) and they say that "young girls begin to masturbate at an earlier age than boys (on average about age 12 compared with age 14) but fewer girls than boys admit to this practice" (2006: 16). All this is to say that even if some adults believe masturbation to be inappropriate, shameful, or wrong, it is nonetheless a common practice.

Perhaps the issue is that we see masturbation as a stage, but not one that should be spoken much about in polite company, and that it we consider it a stage that must be moved through swiftly and in a certain way. As Stengers and Van Neck sum it up, "In the case of youth – children and adolescents – it is of course admitted that masturbation is normal. Yet, once the adolescent stage is over, normality in the eyes of many, undoubtedly in the eyes of most, can mean only one thing: heterosexuality. Masturbation, on this level, has not managed to join the ranks of normal sexual pleasures that are recognized as such." (2001: 174) Young people apparently need to learn that they can get joy from sex, but only a brief sort of education, followed by regret and shame, from masturbation (Stengers and Van Neck 2001: 71); I would question whether this is the message that both male and female young people receive from society or through literature.

The link between "normal sexual pleasures" and heterosexuality is unsurprising given Freudian ideas of sexuality, but it is interesting that little research has been done on the connections between different types of "deviant sexualit[y/ies]", as Stengers and Van Neck put it (2001: 92). If masturbation is seen as deviant and so is queerness, and if scholars recognize and analyze connections between sexuality and power and society (cf. Bennett and Rosario, 1995: 2), why is there so little research carried out specifically on queer masturbation? Laqueur's extensive work mainly refers to heterosexuals and to males, and when he does reference homosexuality, it is to male homosexual contexts, such as bathhouses and wanking clubs (2003: 413). He does, however, comment that "masturbation was seen in the company of homosexuality, but it was at least as often observed with hyper-heterosexuality – for both men and women, boys and girls – as well as with no sexuality at all, a sort of epicene sloth. It was the first step toward sexual excess and sexual degeneracy of all sorts" (2003: 260). This is a dichotomy: masturbation is both excessive and not enough, and perhaps societal views of female sexuality explain why there is little discussion of girls and women masturbating. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work perhaps can be said to have begun to change some of this, through her suggestion that people who think about and work on masturbation are also interested in lesbian and gay studies and/or feminist studies. She writes:

> *This makes sense because thinking about autoeroticism is beginning to seem a productive and necessary switch-point in thinking about the relations–historical as well as intrapsychic–between homo- and heteroeroticism: a project that has not seemed engaging or necessary to scholars who do not register the antiheterosexist pressure of*

> *gay and lesbian interrogation. Additionally, it is through gay and lesbian studies that the skills for a project of historicizing any sexuality have developed, along with a tradition of valuing nonprocreative forms of creativity and pleasure; a history of being suspicious of the tendentious functioning of open secrets; and a politically urgent tropism toward the gaily and, if necessary, the defiantly explicit.* (1991: 135-6)

In other words, connecting onanism and homosexuality, and queerness more generally, may open up useful avenues for understanding power and sexuality in society. In turn, I would add, increasing the attention paid to the non-norm – both queers and females – could mean beginning to explore female masturbation.

In short, despite the research on masturbation in history generally, there has been little research carried out that focuses on queerness and masturbation, or on children and masturbation, and even less that connects all three topics, especially while analyzing literary texts. In the next section, I do precisely that, with the aim being to understand what literature reveals about the way we understand queer young people's sexuality today, especially in regard to self-pleasure.

**Queer Examples from Literature**

Laqueur writes that "masturbation becomes an experience of self-esteem or self-love, a form of personal autarky that allows each of us to form relationships with others without losing ourselves. What the philosophers had regarded as the surest road to ruin has become for some a road to self-realization, the nearest thing we have in our day to the Hellenistic care of the self but now available not only to the leisured gentleman, as it was in antiquity, but to everyone democratically." (2003: 22-3) With this positive modern view of masturbation and the concept that young people should learn about masturbation (Lepore 2010), one would think that masturbation would be "available…to everyone democratically" (Laqueur 2003: 22-3) in young adult literature. Unfortunately, as the examples below show, this is not the case.

In young adult novels, teenage gay males masturbate, and this is described frankly and openly. For instance, in Perry Moore's *Hero*, Thom, the main character discusses his rules for looking at porn and masturbating. One rule is "there couldn't be anyone in the house when I did it. The last thing I needed was to get caught jerking off to an oiled muscle stud." (2007: 40-1) Though Thom does not want to get caught, which is understandable, he is not ashamed about what he is doing. He is also very clear about what he likes (i.e. "an oiled muscle stud"), which suggests that he accepts his preferences.

Additionally, besides acceptance of the mere fact of male masturbation, there are frequent mentions of tissues when young queer men masturbate. For example, in *Naomi and Ely's No Kiss List* by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, there is a scene with Ely masturbating. This is summarized as follows: "Mono-hand maneuver…Discard Kleenex under bed." (2008: 29) Similarly, In Robin Reardon's *Thinking Straight*, Tyler regularly masturbates. Several times he does so while pretending to be praying. For example:

> *I grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on my desk...I knelt there, facing the corner like some naughty kid doing time-out, thinking of Will.*

> *I closed my eyes. I must have looked very penitent with my brown going into knots as I imagined running my fingers down the side of his naked body, seeing the wicked grin on his face that turned slowly into something else, his mouth and eyes half-open as my hand explored other parts of him. With my other hand, the one not touching Will, I undid my belt—only not just in my imagination. I stopped and listened carefully, then undid the button. Oh so slowly I pushed the zipper down, tooth by anxious tooth, until I was touching both of us—me and Will, at least in my mind—one hand for each.*
>
> *My ears strained for anything like a quiet footfall, a voice in the distance, the creak of a door. Nothing. I bent my head. And I pulled.*
>
> *Fortunately, I'd gotten very good at keeping quiet doing this at home. It's true my breathing was a little—well, raspy. But other than that, the only thing I heard was in my mind, when Will came, that rich "ah" sound he makes at the very end. And a little grunt of my own. I gritted my teeth and clamped my lips shut so I would be as silent as possible.*
>
> *I got the tissues into position just in time.* (2008: 55-6)

These descriptions are quite blunt and accepting: "jerking off", "[m]ono-hand maneuver", and "pulled". The men know what to do, are describing in open terms doing it, and they clean up the evidence with tissues. The young men in these novels, and other LGBTQ YA works in my corpus, often have active sex lives with other young men while also enjoying autoeroticism. Masturbation, here, is not a stage but rather part of a lively, varied sex life. Sex on their own is not depicted as a stage before sex with a partner or as an embarrassment; rather, it is just part of their sex life.

On the other hand, the situation is quite different for young females in these works. In my large corpus of LGBTQ young adult novels (Epstein 2013b), there were very few examples of sex between two young women, and almost no descriptions of gay teenage females masturbating.[120] One of the rare masturbation scenes is one that might not actually be onanism at all. In *Gravity* by Leanne Lieberman, there is a mention of the main character, Ellie, putting a pillow between her legs (2008: 180), but there are no details beyond that and it would be easy for a reader to misinterpret the scene; it takes an educated or experienced reader to guess that Ellie is enjoying the feel of the pillow rather than using it for, say, the comfort of her legs or back while in bed.

And that is it. That is the single example I found in all the LGBTQ YA books I looked at that featured something that could be considered to be female masturbation. As noted, I found plenty of examples of male masturbation, and many sex scenes, although significantly more for males than for females, with more openly depicted actions.

This clear lack leads to a number of questions. Do people believe that teenage girls do not masturbate? Do people believe that lesbians/bisexual females do not masturbate? Do readers not want to read about it or at least do publishers believe that readers do not want to or

[120] Interestingly, when Julie Burchill's *Sugar Rush* was adapted into a TV show, the first scene showed Kim masturbating with an electric toothbrush; this was not in the original YA book. See Juffer for more on vibrators and why the "insistence on the naturalness of female sexuality" created a resistance to such implements, which may impact on their portrayal in literature (1998: 83-4). Perhaps female sexuality is more acceptable, even desired, in TV shows as a way of attracting viewers, but this subject is beyond the scope for this article.

should not read about it? Masturbation is considered by some to be important to women's liberation. As Laqueur notes, "masturbation was embraced first by the women's movement and then by various parts of the male gay movement as a practice in the service of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo…Sex with oneself came to stand for autonomy, even autarky. It was not reprehensible or frightening but liberating, benign, and attractive." (2003: 75, and see Murphy 2004 for more on the women's movement and the importance of women seeing and understanding their genitals.) One would thus think that contemporary texts that show young women liberating themselves from "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1980) would thus consider including masturbation, in part also as a way of breaking away from the shame girls and women have traditionally been taught to feel about their bodies and their sexuality. And yet, Brenot comments, "Female masturbatory love, solitary or Sapphic, has recently found its literary expression with more difficulty than the male confession, partly because of a certain reticence on the part of publishers." (1997: 61) Why, then, are publishers more "reticent" about females? I will return to this point below.

These few examples are representative of LGBTQ young adult novels; that is to say, the queer males masturbate, and engage in other sexual activities, and the queer females tend not to. The next question is whether this is the same in YA works that feature non-LGBTQ young people. This point of comparison will help clarify if the issue here is with women's sexuality in general, or queer females' sexuality specifically.

**Straight Pleasure**

It is not just queer males who get to enjoy themselves in young adult literature; straight young men do too. Melvin Burgess is a popular YA author who regularly includes supposedly (or, at least, until recently) taboo topics, such as drugs and sex, in his works. Burgess's controversial *Doing It* (2003) is about three teenage boys and their first sexual experiences. Masturbation appears frequently in the book (2003: 106, 157, 215, 256, etc.), along with other sexual activities. In the book, the penis is nicknamed "Mr. Knobby" and he is practically a fully-fledged additional character. This is one example of Mr. Knobby enjoying masturbation: "I have reason to believe that Mr. Knobby is going to be very good at sex. You see, he *likes* it so much. Whenever there's a spare minute, there he is, asking for a hand. And since he's my best friend I'm always only too happy to oblige. In the bath, in bed. In front of the computer screen. I live in terror of the computer going wrong and someone sending it in to be fixed." (2003: 215-16) Again, as with Thom in one of the earlier examples, Jonathon here shows no compunction about his masturbatory habits, though he does worry about being discovered, perhaps through the pornographic material on his computer. Jonathon also calls himself "Mr. Knobby's personal trainer and physiotherapist" and says, "I'm giving him plenty of massage and exercise – not so much as to wear him out, of course – just enough to keep him on form, so to speak." (2003: 256) This is humorous and accepting of male sexuality; the penis has to be exercised, and it enjoys being exercised.

This can be compared to another of Melvin Burgess's works, *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, where the female protagonist, Sandra, enjoys sex with males, especially once she has been turned into a dog. Unfortunately, despite her sex-positive ways, she refers to masturbation simply as "having a diddle" (2001: 52). The single reference to masturbation in *Lady* is when

Sandra says, of another dog who she worries might have been a human before, "Imagine, if he'd been a person all along. The things he'd seen me do in the privacy of my own room! You know what I mean – having a diddle down there. It made me blush from my nose to my tail. Oh really!" (ibid.) Sandra is embarrassed about masturbation and does not even use any sort of term for her genitals (like Mr. Knobby for the penis), whereas the boys in *Doing It* gleefully and regularly masturbate and do not show the same sort of shame, even though Jonathon does admit to being worried about someone inspecting the contents of his computer. Sandra does not suggest that her vulva or clitoris need to be exercised, nor does she feel that a love for masturbation implies pleasure in her body and sexual pleasure more generally.

Although these are just two examples by the same author, they are typical of the male-female divide in young adult literature and arguably in society, and I do not have the space here to offer many more examples of straight depictions.[121] Interestingly, *Lady* has a parental advisory regarding explicit content on the cover, while *Doing It* does not, despite them both being about sexual feelings and experiences. Similarly, when I studied copies from the Norwich, England, library, which is the busiest library in the UK (Norfolk County Council website n.d.: n.p.), *Lady* also had a library stamp inside the book, which states: "This book is recommended for older teenagers." (2001: n.p., emphasis original), while *Doing It* had no such stamp. Both books contain a variety of sex scenes, although, as already made clear, *Doing It* has much more masturbation, and yet just the novel with a female character seems to be considered explicit and only appropriate for "older teenagers", although I should acknowledge that some reviewers were very critical of the sexual content in *Doing It*. Anne Fine, for instance, claimed that if they are exposed to that novel, "[y]oung girls will be begging their parents to send them to single sex schools. Reading this will put many off dating for years." (2003: n.p.) In other words, Fine is concerned about girls reading about boys' sexual thoughts and experiences, and not about boys doing so; this again seems to emphasize our culture's protective stance towards girls' sexuality.

Laqueur notes that "for girls the process [of masturbation] was especially treacherous, because their early rehearsals were for the wrong show. In becoming adult, they had to give up not only masturbation but also the kind of orgasm procured by their infantile efforts. Giving it up meant, in this account, giving up clitoral for vaginal sexuality, fantasies of active masculinity for the reality of passive femininity." (2003: 72) Perhaps, then, writers and publishers are reluctant to show female masturbation, because they worry that it encourages young women to do something that is ultimately unproductive or, rather, anti-reproductive.[122] Laqueur writes, "Shame had to be mobilized to make young people, especially girls, behave chastely and modestly." (2003: 231) This can be extended in particular to queer females, who are not likely to be reproductive with males, and who therefore should be doubly shamed, and

[121] Some people consider Caitlin Moran's novel *How to Build a Girl*, with its frank descriptions of straight teenage sex and masturbation, to be a young adult novel, but it is not categorised as such by most libraries or bookstores, as far as I can tell.

[122] In fact, research shows that the uterine contractions caused by a woman orgasming can help move the sperm upwards, so the female orgasm could be said to be essential to reproduction. Furthermore, the clitoral nerves are larger than previously assumed, and a clitoral orgasm is not easily separated from a vaginal one. In other words, the idea that a clitoral orgasm is lesser than a vaginal one is incorrect, and the concept of clitoral sexuality being immature is simply inaccurate.

who perhaps are to be encouraged to be heterosexual instead of queer. If this is the case, then readers of young adult novels certainly could be said to be getting the idea that masturbation is shameful for girls. So, the question remains: why is shame being "mobilized" in literary fiction?

**Girls Don't Do It?**

There are multiple potential reasons why female masturbation is distinctly absent from YA literature. One might be the widespread belief that women simply are not as sexual as men are; this is of course cultural and not scientific. This may also relate to the historical belief, stemming from Freud, that there are "two types of female sexuality: one mature, adult, satisfied and vaginal; the other infantile, fixed on auto-eroticism and clitoral." (Brenot, 1997: 46) Being told, and subsequently believing, that autoeroticism is "infantile" may make women less likely to talk about masturbation or even to allow themselves to do it. Furthermore, if society believes this is a correct understanding of women's sexuality, then authors and publishers would potentially be reluctant to feature masturbation in young adult literature, for fear of encouraging young females to masturbate and to have an "infantile" and thus "wrong" sexuality.

Another issue is the erroneous idea that women do not in fact masturbate because of their anatomy; as Margolis puts it, "The concealed position of the vagina and clitoris is in stark contrast to the more obvious and convenient placement of the penis. A clitoris can be aroused without its owner, if she is not attuned to its moods, knowing it; it is less easy to ignore an erection. Men are, as a result, the more likely to masturbate and become aware of the possibilities of sexual pleasure." (2004: 27) This seems rather ridiculous, as it suggests that women are not aware of their bodies, or that hormones or thoughts do not lead them to think in sexual ways, or indeed that females do not experience clitoral erections.[123] Also, the fact that females in same-sex relationships are more sexually satisfied than females in opposite-sex relationships (Frederick et al. 2018) implies that women are in fact very "attuned" to the female body and know how to give it pleasure; here, masturbation would be an incredibly useful tool for learning how to find and give satisfaction.

Despite a) the way masturbation has been viewed as a challenge to society and an act of "individual liberation" since the 1920s in different social circles (Laqueur 2003: 361), and b) the progress brought about by the women's movement and the feminist promotion of masturbation as a form of "self-knowledge, self-discovery, and spiritual well-being" (Laqueur 2003: 78) and as a way of training women's bodies to respond to touch (Laqueur 2003: 399, 403), masturbation, it appears, is still seen in rather limited and limiting way, particularly for women, and perhaps especially in young adult novels that feature queer young women. One could argue that for some women, especially queer ones, masturbation could offer freedom from male-focused sexuality, and yet as evidenced by the concept of training, it is nonetheless often seen "as the means to a healthy heterosexual life" (Laqueur 2003: 492), and not simply as means to a healthy sexual life, hetero or not.

[123] See Irigaray (1980) for the seminal – or perhaps I should say clitoral, to remove the male-oriented reference to semen – implication that women's labia are always touching, always caressing the clitoris, so girls and women would always be aware of their bodies.

If female masturbation solely led to a "healthy heterosexual life", one might expect to see it fairly regularly in young adult literature, at least in YA novels that feature sex scenes of one kind or another along with heterosexual characters. If literature can be educational and teens turn to novels to learn about sex (see Reynolds 2007: 122, among others) then this is simply just one more aspect of sexual knowledge. But the lack of straight female masturbation perhaps does not bear this out. On the other hand, if it is true, as Laqueur claims, that "masturbation is *the* act through which women signaled their rejection of the normative sexual order" (2003: 372, italics original, and cf. 403), then one might expect to see more masturbation in YA novels that feature non-heterosexual young women. These queer girls and young women, one could argue, are rejecting the "normative sexual order" and masturbation is one way of doing this, perhaps especially since masturbation may focus on the clitoris and not on the vagina, so is not necessarily good "practice" for penis-in-vagina sexual activity, if indeed practice is desired or needed at all. Unfortunately, however, as the examples above have shown, this is not the case either, and masturbation is worryingly absent from YA novels with female LGBTQ characters, even though it is common in YA novels with both straight and queer male characters. Other research should consider the depiction of masturbation in literature for older readers, and also in non-English-language literature.

Bennett and Rosario note that "nineteenth-century critics themselves warned that anti-onanism literature–even the most censorious might prematurely ignite the erotic imagination of innocent children." (1995: 8-9) Perhaps even now, in the twenty-first century, we are still concerned that literature – whether anti-onanism or, on the contrary, featuring masturbation and perhaps deemed pro-onanism – might "ignite the erotic imagination" of young readers. Of course, as already explored, it is easy to find YA novels with male masturbation, so the conclusion here might be that we are especially worried about "ignit[ing] the erotic imagination" of female readers. In short, young women's sexuality appears to be too challenging to be written about or described in full detail in young adult novels, whereas young men are allowed a whole range of sexual expression. Girlhood is thus portrayed as being more innocent and less sexual than research reveals to it actually be (as in Moore and Rosenthal), and this depiction in literature may misinform young male readers and, more importantly, negatively impact on the young women reading these works.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have given examples from my larger corpus of a number of young adult novels with queer female and male protagonists and compared this to young adult novels with straight female and male characters, in order to understand queer girls' sexual agency and experiences, as depicted in literature, and how this might reflect the world young queer girls live in today. In short, YA literature does not appear to show female characters masturbating, although both queer and straight male characters regularly do so. This missing sexual action from literature both reflects and strengthens the powerful Western ideas a) that females are not as sexual as males and b) that masturbation is an inappropriate activity for young women. In turn, this is likely to increase any feelings of shame, confusion, or wrongness that young women might feel about their sexuality in general and their masturbatory behavior in particular. Although this is

a problem for all young females, I would suggest that it is especially worrying for young queer females, who already also receive negative messages about their sexuality.[124]

Laqueur notes that "[p]otentially autarkic solitary sexual pleasure touches the inner lives of modern humanity in ways that we still do not understand. It remains poised between self-discovery and self-absorption, desire and excess, privacy and loneliness, innocence and guilt as does no other sexuality in our era" (2003: 420). Young adult literature suggests that society is uncomfortable with queer female sexuality, specifically "autarkic solitary sexual pleasures", and therefore with queer young women being self-sufficient and confident about their sexualities. It is time for this to change in society at large, and one way of doing so would be to feature masturbating queer girls in young adult literature, and to allow and encourage queer women to find pleasure in their own bodies.

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[124] This is a limited article, of course, so I can only suggest that other scholars review the situation in other languages, in order to determine whether this is an English-language issue or a more widespread one.

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