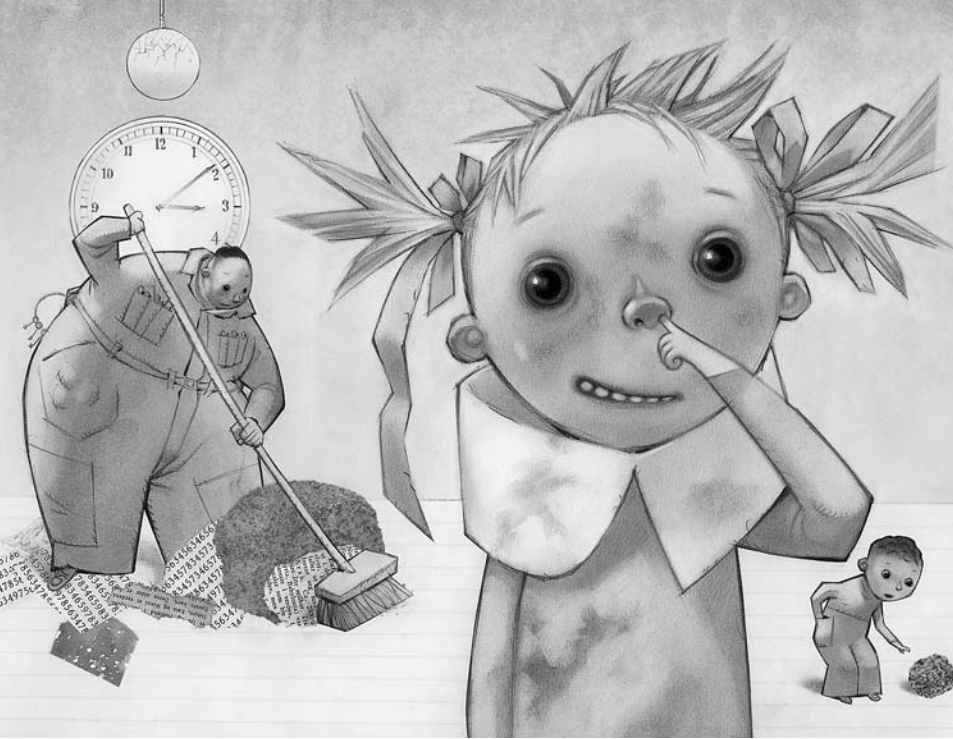


Childhood in a multicultural society? Globalization, childhood, and cultural diversity in Norwegian children's literature

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Ommundsen examines the field of Norwegian children's literature for the presence of cultural attributes with interesting results.

An alligator named Johannes Jensen works as an executive of cer at the Oslo tax of ce. He feels dif erent, but doesn't know why. Maybe it is because he wears a bow tie while his colleagues wear ties? Johannes Jensen tries to go to work dressed with a tie, but he still feels dif erent. In the verbal text he wonders about why he feels dif erent. It is the Oscar-winning illustrator Torill Kove's humorous pictures which suggest an answer to the reader. The pictures show that the bow tie is not the main reason that makes Johannes Jensen stand out, but the fact that he is an alligator, while all the others are human beings. In this way the dif erent modalities of the text are interdependent on one another for the creation of meaning.

The interplay between picture and verbal text in the picture book, or what Hallberg (1982) calls the "ikonotekst," creates a tension between Johannes Jensen's experience of reality and reality seen through the eyes of the reader. *Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes* [*Johannes Jensen feels different*] (2003) is a complementary picture book, where words and pictures fill in each other's gaps (Nikolaeva and Scott 2001, 12). An example that demonstrates this is seen when Johannes Jensen is having his breakfast. Even when Johannes Jensen sits alone, eating his breakfast, he feels dif erent, the verbal



Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes (2003) by Henrik Hovland and Torill Kove (ill.). Oslo: Cappelen Damm. ["Perhaps it's my bowtie that makes me feel different, Johannes Jensen thinks. None of the others has a bowtie."]



Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes (2003) by Henrik Hovland and Torill Kove (ill.). Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

text tells us. Not strange, really, as we can see pictures of humans both on the cereal box and in the newspaper. *Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes* focuses on the theme of being and feeling different and representing a minority, in this case an alligator in a society dominated by human beings. The problem at hand, Johannes Jensen's existential search for identity and interdependence, is common to all mankind. Both children and adults can easily identify with Johannes Jensen. The book is written just as much for adult readers as for child readers, marketed as all-ages-literature¹, and published in two different formats: a big edition for children and a mini edition for adults.

What is happening in Norwegian children's literature?

In Norway, new picture books push the limit of what children's literature can treat and which devices to use. According to Maria Nikolajeva (Nikolajeva 1996) children's literature comes of age: "It grows more literate, with complex, polyphonic structures." Some examples from late modern children's literature can shed light on this process. Not long ago, both war and violence were

taboo subjects in picture books for smaller children. Until 2007, only three Norwegian picture books about war had been published, in 1946, 1970 and 2001 respectively.² Recently, however, a number of translated picture books about the cruelty of war have been published. *Den lange, lange reisen* (1995) [*The long, long journey*] is Ilon Wikland's story about her childhood in Estonia during the war and her dramatic escape to Sweden. *Albert Åberg og soldatpappaen* (Bergström 2006) [*Alfie and the soldier daddy*] was published simultaneously in Swedish and Norwegian in 2006. Albert's new friend, Hamdi, has a father who has been a soldier. The two boys play war and watch war on television and on computer games. Their war toys and daily life war experiences are contrasted with the father's real war experiences. Swedish *Albert Åberg* [*Alfie Atkins*] is one of the best-selling picture books in Norway. Library statistics show that this is the most read picture book on war in Norway ever, still on the top of the list two years after it was published.³ Not

surprisingly, this popular book cleared the way for others, so that war can no longer be said to be taboo in Norwegian picture books for children.⁴ In our globalized world, television brings war and violence into

our homes on a daily basis, and not even the most privileged children can live through childhood without the knowledge and fear of war.

These examples mentioned show that children's literature is affected by globalization and changes in society and that a national literature, in this case Norwegian children's literature, is affected by literature from other countries. The turn to a more dramatic body of children's literature, that includes books on war for younger children, mirrors a society where war and tragedies from all over the world travel all the way to Norway where they affect everyone's lives. According to the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, we all share the same globalized world, a "risk society." (Beck 2006) In a risk society we all are dependent on one another and share the same challenges. We live in a risk society in which the threat of terror knows no borders:

"(...) the cosmopolitan outlook means that, in a world of global crisis and dangers produced by civilization, the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival" (Beck 2006:14)."

I wanted to find out whether this is also generally true for childhood in Norway. To what extent have the old differentiations between us and them, national and international, lost their validity in Norway? Is it possible to find a new cosmopolitan attitude in Norwegian children's literature? "Multiculturalism" is a popular word these days, but how is multiculturalism really pictured in Norwegian children's literature? Is Norwegian childhood a childhood in a multicultural society? In short: How do globalization and today's focus on cultural diversity affect Norwegian children's literature?

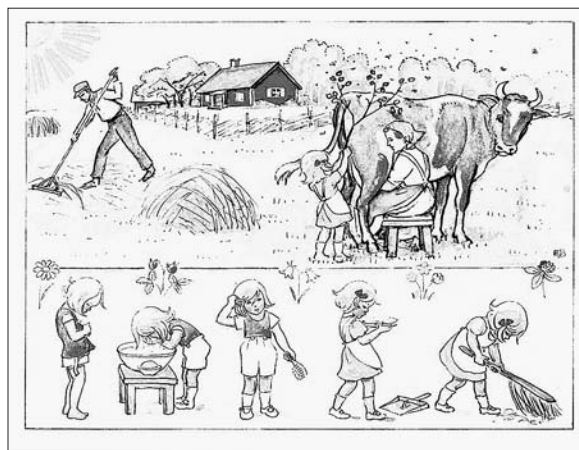
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Cultural encounters in Norwegian children's literature

Two different types of cultural encounters can be found in contemporary Norwegian children's literature. On the one hand, we can observe the cultural encounter between child culture and adult culture. Contemporary children's literature mirrors how the relationship between adult and child has gone through dramatic changes. The shifting borders between child culture and adult culture, with its significant effects on both childhood and adulthood, can be shown in two examples. To illustrate how the picture of the ideal child has changed, we can compare two popular picture books about good girls. In Elsa Beskow's picture book *Duktiga Annika* [*Clever Annika*] from 1941, the main character Annika is a typical representation of the ideal child of the time, at least for

girls. This is how she is presented to the readers: “Annika was very kind and clever. She could wash herself and comb her hair, get dressed and button up all the buttons in her blouse. She could help her mum with everything, set the table, do the dishes, and remove flies from Mairos [the cow] when mum was milking.”⁵ *Duktiga Annika* is a symmetrical picture book, with two mutually redundant narratives (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). The pictures confirm the statements in the verbal text, showing pretty little Annika helping her mother, buttoning up her blouse, washing, combing, setting the table, and cleaning the floor. The relationship between pictures and verbal text is frictionless.



Duktiga Annika (1941) by Elsa Beskow. Stockholm: Bonnier.

Sixty-one years later, Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus play with the ideal girl in the picturebook *Snill* [Kind] (2002). The main character Lussi is so kind, good, clever, and quiet that one day she suddenly disappears into the wall. She literally blends into the wallpaper.⁶ To emancipate herself from the tradition and the ideal of good girls, Lussi has to find her own voice and scream and shout until the wall breaks down, so that she can walk out of the wall. The new ideal child she represents is a dirty, uncombed, but happy girl, with a finger in her nose and an enormous appetite. The ideal of today is no longer to be good, but to be visible. Thus one should not be quiet and subordinate, but scream out and protest. It

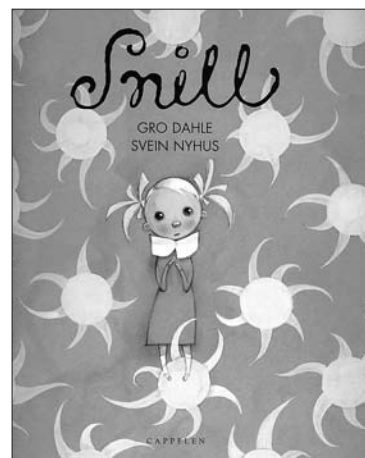
is no longer important to be clean with neatly combed hair, but to be happy. Furthermore, focus has moved from the collective: the family helping one another, to the individual. While

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Annika helps and is also helped by her mother, Lussi is a responsible child, but she is not responsible for anyone or anything but herself and her own happiness.⁷

Snill is a counterpointing picture book with two mutually dependent narratives (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001). Several times, the pictures and the verbal text provide a counterpoint to one another, offering two different versions of the story. This complex, polyphonic and multimodal structure challenges the reader to decide which one to believe in. *Duktiga Annika* and *Snill* demonstrate how children’s literature changes and develops, both in form and content, mirroring the society in which it is written. While the child in 1941 both respected and relied on her parents, the child in 2002 has to take responsibility for her own life and save herself.

The picture of childhood and the relationship between child and adult has undergone great changes, as we can easily see when



Snill (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus (ill). Oslo: Cappelen.

reading literature. To what extent can the same be said about the ethnic and religious cultural encounters in books? Does children’s literature in Norway reflect a change toward a more multicultural society?



Duktiga Annika (1941) by Elsa Beskow. Stockholm: Bonnier.

Ethnic and religious cultural encounters

The other type of cultural encounter to be found in contemporary Norwegian children's literature is the cultural encounter between Norwegian majority culture and minority cultures represented by alternative ethnic groups and people of varying religious beliefs. How are Norwegian childhood and cultural and religious diversity pictured in Norwegian children's literature? Does contemporary Norwegian children's literature mirror a shift from a monocultural society towards a multicultural society? *Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes* (2003), *Den lange, lange reisen* (1995) and *Albert Åberg og soldatpappaen* (2006) are all examples of children's literature which thematize cultural encounters and how it feels to represent a minority, either as an alligator, as a refugee, or as the child of a refugee. In his book *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006), Ulrich Beck calls for cosmopolitan openness to otherness:

“What do we mean, then, by the “cosmopolitan outlook?” Global sense, a sense of boundarylessness. An everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions. It reveals not just the “anguish” but also the possibility of shaping one's life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture. It is

simultaneously a skeptical, disillusioned, self-critical outlook” (Beck 2006: 3).

How does Beck's cosmopolitan vision fit into Norwegian society? My analysis of Norwegian children's literature shows that it does not fit in at all. The cosmopolitan view is represented in big cities and thus hardly in Norway at all. There is only one big city, Oslo, with about half a million inhabitants. A study of places in literature shows that Norwegians typically are concerned with roots and feel bound to places; where one comes from is of great importance and closely related to one's identity. This tendency is shown in children's literature, where rural life traditionally has dominated, while city-life or life in the capital of Oslo only rarely has played any part in the stories. In short, we are a nation of farmers and fishermen, inhabiting places no one would believe anyone could live (to quote the title of one of the most

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popular Norwegian television programs which in turn quotes a traditional Norwegian children's song, “Der ingen skulle tru at nokon kunne bu”).

We have to turn to literature in translation to find children's literature that, by its treatment of ethnic cultural encounters, moves borders both in terms of theme and devices. In 2006, the same year as *Alfie and the soldier daddy* was published, *The boy in the striped pyjamas* (*Gutten i den stripe pjsjamasen*) (Boyne 2006) by the Irish author John Boyne was published in Norwegian. This very strong story about the cruelties of the Second World War, the division between us and them, and the importance of being on the right side of the fence, created a debate about what children's literature is or should be. No doubt the novel pushed the limits as to how children's

literature can touch upon difficult subjects. A less radical example is the translated novel, *Does my head look big in this?* (2006) (*Ser hodet mitt stort ut med denne?*) by the Australian author Randa Abdel-Fattah (2007). This novel thematizes religious identity, cultural encounters, and how it is to be a Muslim girl in Australian society. Given the lack of Norwegian immigrant-novels, the novel got quite a lot of attention when it was published in Norwegian in 2007.

Liquid limitlessness

The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2000) uses the idea of “fluidity” as a metaphor to grasp the nature of the present phase in the history of modernity. He calls it “liquid modernity,” as it is beyond order and system. Anthony Giddens (1991) uses the terms “high modernity” and “the late modern age” to describe this new phase in the history of modernity. Giddens shows how late modern society is marked by individualism whereby everyone must be responsible for his or her own life, constantly constructing his or her own self-identity.

Bauman’s “liquid limitlessness” and Giddens’s individualism and construction of self-identity are easily found in contemporary Norwegian children’s literature (Ommundsen 2008a). My Ph.D. thesis⁸ shows

Bauman’s “liquid limitlessness” and Giddens’s individualism and construction of self-identity are easily found in contemporary Norwegian children’s literature.

that contemporary children’s literature mirrors late modern society and the globalized world in which it is written. But does it also mirror multicultural society? In my research on existential questions (and answers) in Norwegian children’s literature, I was surprised to find that, even though there is a strong tendency to write children’s literature about existential questions, there exist only a very few examples of children’s literature reflecting alternative religious perceptions of reality (Ommundsen 2010). Looking for religion in Norwegian children’s literature, the most striking result is the absence of religious beliefs other than Christianity and secularism. To find more than a few examples of alternative religions, we have to look to literature from abroad. Typically, most of the examples of ethnic and religious cultural encounters are not Norwegian, but from translated literature. Perhaps Norwegian children’s literature mirrors the reality in which most Norwegian children and authors live? According to religious historian Hanne Nabintu Herland, Norway is an unusually monocultural society: “A country with about 96% ethnic Norwegians can probably not be said to be a multicultural country” (Herland 2007). Herland points out that Oslo is the only exception, with its “ghettoes of immigrants.”

Postcolonial theory focuses on minorities and marginalized groups. “The sympathies and interests of postcolonialism are thus focused on those at the margins of society, those whose cultural identity has been dislocated or left uncertain by the forces of global capitalism—refugees, migrants who have moved from the countryside to the impoverished edges of the city, migrants who struggle in the first world for a better

life while working at the lowest levels of those societies” (Young 2003, 114). According to postcolonial theory, with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) as an essential contribution, Western attitudes towards the Orient focus on differences and picture the Orient as the irrational “Other.” Even in countries with a rich tradition of children’s literature, it can be challenging to find literature with which children of other ethnic and religious backgrounds can identify. My research shows that two religious traditions dominate Norwegian children’s literature. On the one hand, an implied Christian perception of reality and view of humanity stands strong led by several acclaimed authors (Jostein Gaarder, Bjørn Sortland, Harald Rosenløw Eeg, among others). On the other hand, secular traditions also stand strong. The lack of other religious traditions is in itself interesting. There are very few examples from Norwegian children’s literature reflecting the multicultural-- and alternative religious-- Norwegian reality from the inside.⁹ Why are there so few examples of cultural encounters to be found? As suggested, one reason may be that Norway still is a monocultural country in our globalized world with 96% of the population making up the majority group. The immigrants mainly inhabit Oslo, which can be said to be the only multicultural city in Norway. Another special feature is the strong position Christianity still has in Norway, compared for instance to Sweden.¹⁰ Norway still has a Lutheran State Church, of which 83% of the population are members.¹¹ Globalization promotes an increasing awareness of religion (Ommundsen 2010). Most probably globalization will also result in other religions being reflected in Norwegian children’s literature, even if multicultural Norway is limited to Oslo.



Johannes Jensen følger seg annerledes (2003) by Henrik Hovland and Torill Kove (ill.). Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

Blurred borders and the advantage of a big tail

The fluid borders in literature mirror the fluid borders in society (Bauman 2000). The way Norwegian childhood is mirrored in contemporary children’s literature, it is a childhood influenced by late modernity (Ommundsen 2006; Ommundsen 2008a). Cultural encounters can take place between a majority culture and other ethnic groups, between child culture and adult culture, but also in the meeting between city life and rural life. The picture of the late modern Norwegian childhood is thus not clear. It is impossible to give a clear picture of late modernity. Late modernity is ambiguous; it is a simultaneity of diversity.

The alligator Johannes Jensen tries hard to change his natural characteristics to avoid feeling different. Realizing that none of the others

Cultural encounters can take place between a majority culture and other ethnic groups, between child culture and adult culture, but also in the meeting between city life and rural life.

have a tail like his, he tries to bind it up between his legs, so that no one can see it. But it hurts sitting on his tail, and it is difficult to walk with his tail between his legs. He falls down in the street, and is sent to the hospital. To help him in his identity crisis, the doctor, doctor Fjeld, asks him to think whether there might be anything positive about having a tail like his. Is it possible to feel different and at the same time think it is okay? “Johannes Jensen thinks and thinks. Tails are good to steer with when you practice swimming on your back, he thinks. He even says it aloud.” (my translation) Gradually Johannes Jensen develops a cosmopolitan outlook that tolerates diversity. On the Norwegian national day, the 17th of May, he dresses up his tail with a big 17th of May ribbon, thinking that being different is “just fine.” Sometimes solutions can be just that simple in the world of children’s literature.¹²

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- ¹ For a definition of and discussion on the term all-ages-literature, see Åse Marie Ommundsen: "Fiction for all ages? All-ages-literature" as a new trend in late modern Norwegian children's literature" in *An Invitation to Explore. New International Perspectives in Children's Literature*, ed., Laura Atkins, Nolan Dalrymple, Michele Gill, Liz Thiel (Staf ordshire: Pied Piper Publishing, 2008). [originally published as "All-alder-litteratur. Litteratur for alle eller ingen?" in *Kartet og terrenget. Linjer og dykk i barne- og ungdomslitteraturen*, ed., Kari Sverdrup and Jon Ewo (Oslo: Pax, 2006)].
- ² Ragna Breda: *Lisemor i krig og fred* (1946), Philip Newth: *Den aller største kanonen* (1970) and Hans Sande: *Fuglejenta* (2001).
- ³ The Albert Åberg-books are on the top of the library lists. At 8.1.2008 all the four books on top of the list were Albert Åberg-books at the Deichmanske library. *Albert Åberg og soldatpappaen* was the 4. most borrowed book. <http://www.deich.folkebibl.no/kikkhullet/kikkmestut-b.html> Accessed 08.01.2008. At 03.08.2009 there were seven Albert Åberg-books among the top fifteen most borrowed books, with *Albert Åberg og soldatpappaen* as number twelve. <http://www.deich.folkebibl.no/kikkhullet/kikkmestut-b.html> Accessed 03.08.2009.
- ⁴ There has been published several picture books on war since 2007, for instance Tor Åge Bringsverd: *Ruffen og det hemmelige havfolket* (2007) and Tone Gleditsch Stabell: *Ulvedager* (2007).
- ⁵ In my translation.
- ⁶ The motif of the invisible child can be found in earlier books, as in Tove Jansson's *Det osynliga barnet* (1950). Other intertextual links to women disappearing into the wall is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899) and Patrice Kindl's *The Woman in the Wall* (1997). Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *The Wolves in the Wall* (2003) is probably inspired by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus *Snill* (2002).
- ⁷ See Ommundsen 2004a and b for an analysis of *Snill*.

- 8 *Litterære grenseoverskridelser. Når grensene mellom barne- og voksenlitteraturen viskes ut* [*Literary Boundary Crossings: Erasing the Borders Between Literature for Children and Adults*] (Ommundsen 2010)
- 9 Exeptions are Walid Al-Kubaisi *Sinbads verden* (1997), with its opposite “white mythology”(Young 1990), and Hege Newth Nouris *Hvorfor gråter ikke hunder* (2002). Actually, it looks like this situation is just about to change. In the autumn 2009, just after I presented my paper at the IRSL-conference in Frankfurt, some interesting children’s books with a multicultural perspective were published in Norway, like Imram Haq’s picture book and film *Skylappjenta* [Little Miss Eyeflap] (2009).
- 10 According to the American sociologist Phil Zuckerman (2008) Scandinavian society is “A society without God”. His research is on Denmark and Sweden, which he finds to be “The least religious countries on earth”. In Norwegian children’s literature, a Christian perception of reality still stands strong. See: “A world of permanent change transformed into children’s literature: the post-secular age reflected in late modern Norwegian children’s literature” (2010).
- 11 At 01.01.2008. www.kirken.no Accessed: 08.01.2008. At 01.01.2009: 80,7 %. <http://www.kirken.no/?event=doLink&famID=230> Accessed 03.08.2009.
- 12 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 19th biennial congress of IRSL in Frankfurt, August 2009.

Ningeokuluk Teevee, one of the most well-known of the Kinngait, Nunavut (Cape Dorset) artists working in the tradition of Inuit art, has written and illustrated a simple, yet elegant book. This story of a young Inuit child’s daily life with her Grandmother is autobiographical and tells of the clam digging adventure offered by a low tide. The graphite and colored pencil illustrations beautifully capture the atmosphere of the beach and the marine life introduced. The bilingual text, in Inuktitui and English, is a fine introduction to a script that is not Roman. The book includes an illustrated glossary of sea creatures, as well as a pictorial map of Baffin Island. This unique title may be used to expand children’s thinking about how people live and work both in a family and in the world.

Jeffrey Brewster



Ningeokuluk Teevee

Alego

Illustrated by the author

Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009
 Unpagged
 ISBN: 9780888999436
 (picture book, 4–8)