Panel 10: Examining Norms

Hilda Jakobsson, “Skewed” Endings and “Lifelines” in Classical Girls’ Books and Beyond

In novels for girls from early 20th century a recurring theme is that of girls becoming women in encountering and choosing a male partner who they are going to marry or in fact marries. This tends to be a part of a happy ending of a novel or series of novels.

The Swedish author Agnes von Krusenstjerna (1894–1940) debuted with two novels (1917/1918) about girls growing up in encountering love and sexuality, which were perceived as girls’ books, even though they were not published as such. They both adhere to the frequent pattern in the girls’ literature tradition mentioned above. Her subsequent trilogy (1922–1926) about the young, noble girl Tony, was compared to the same genre but considered unsuitable to its girl readers due to its explicit depictions of sexuality and mental illness and furthermore depicts love in a different fashion than the previous novels.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ending of the Tony trilogy in comparison to the endings of classical girls’ books from late 19th and early 20th century, which in different ways thwart reader’s expectations that the heroine will make a right choice in love and that the novel will end happily. I draw upon queer temporality theory, especially by Jack Halberstam, which I combine with Scandinavian “skev” theory (In a Queer Time and Place, 2005; The Queer Art of Failure, 2011). “Skev”/skewed (meaning approximately crooked, warped and lop-sided) is a Scandinavian variation of queer that I use to discuss “skeva” endings and how they are linked to the “life schedule” or, to use another term, “lifeline” (Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, 2006; Halberstam, 2005; Maria Margareta Österholm, Ett flicklaboratorium i valda bitar, 2012). I argue that “skeva” endings and the lifeline of the protagonist are intrinsically linked together.

Hilda Jakobsson has a doctoral degree in literature since 2019 and presently works as a teacher in child and youth studies, Stockholm University. Her dissertation is about the Swedish author Agnes von Krusenstjerna’s early works, her depictions of girls becoming – or not becoming – women in encountering love and sexuality, as well as her relationship to the girls’ book genre. Jakobsson has published an article on the Swedish girls’ book series Kulla-Gulla and presented several papers on the subject of girls’ books. Furthermore, she has taught children’s and young adult literature. She is particularly interested in depictions of love and sexuality, queer and intersectional theory.

Marianna Koljonen, Girls’ Ambivalent Presence in Animal Rights Oriented Children’s Literature

In this paper, I examine the representation of human and nonhuman girls in animal rights oriented children’s books (AROC).

According to various studies and statistics, women feel more empathy towards nonhuman animals than men. Women form the majority of vegetarians and vegans, and the largest growing
group of vegans consists of young women, reaching 25% of the age group. Women volunteer for animal shelters and animal advocacy groups more often than men. Girls are also the main target group of horse and dog books, popular genres for young readers tracing back to Anna Sewell’s equine liberationist not-children’s book Black Beauty (1877).

However, in AROC books that focus on veganism, boys are predominant both in number and agency. In my sample of 31 books centering around vegan identity of child(like) characters, nine books have female protagonists. In the case of childlike main characters, usually predators or fictional monsters, none of the protagonists are female. On the other hand, books with female characters tend to discuss many diversity issues, such as ethnic diversity (out of four non-white characters, three are girls) and diverse family backgrounds (out of four single parent families represented in the books, three have female protagonists). Thus, male characters are considered neutral and are used to normalize veganism whereas girl protagonists vindicate diversity.

In AROC books in general, nonhuman animals are predominantly male except for cows and hens who are depicted as mothers mourning for the loss of their babies. Girlhood is practically nonexistent in animal kingdom apart from Esther the Wonder Pig, a real-life sow and the main character of a children’s picture book by the same name (2018). Esther is portrayed as a stereotypical modern girl who loves cupcakes and pink sunglasses. Her anthropomorphized girlhood challenges the concept of pigs as filthy and stupid animals but also celebrates nonconforming girlhood in terms of body normativity and appreciates girlhood as a permanent, rather than liminal, state.

Marianna Koljonen is a doctoral student at the University of Helsinki. She explores the ethics of meat in the tradition of Western children’s literature from a critical animal studies viewpoint. In published articles, she has discussed vegan children’s literature and the animality of animals reared for food. She is a secretary to the Finnish section of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People), an active member of the Finnish Critical Animal Studies network and of a vegan parenting group in Helsinki. She has previously worked as a teacher and in animal rights campaigns and instructs humane education.

Anna Nordenstam, Girls! A Study of the Representation of Girls in Swedish YA-Easy Readers

Easy readers, a text type for children and young adults has expanded radically in Sweden during the last ten years. The target groups for the YA-easy readers used to be young people with reading disabilities, but nowadays they are also read by newly arrived refugees and reluctant readers (Nordenstam and Olin-Scheller 2018). An earlier study (Nordenstam & Olin-Scheller 2017), based on a selection of easy readers published between 2006–2015 showed that the YA-easy readers were rather stereotype according to gender. The girl characters were portrayed in a passive way, they were taking care of the social relations, and they were often exposed for violence or other assaults. For the boy characters, the opposite was the case. They were active, had hobbies and used violence. Thus, the YA-easy readers were seen as a new form for “girls’ literature”.

Since 2017, with the #MeToo movement (Case & Craig 2020), we have had an intense discussion about gender, sexual harassment in the society, and at the same time an ongoing...
debate about the refugee crises. The hypothesis of this paper is that the last three years YA-easy readers are less gender stereotype while they are picking up themes from these debates. Are the girls more variously represented today? Are the Swedish girls portrayed in another way than the newly arrived girls? Who are the main intended readers? The material of this paper consists of all YA-easy readers, published by the publisher houses Nypon, LL, and Hegas, except the fantasy books, from 2016–2019. The easy readers are analyzed from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 2003, los Reyes & Mulinari 2005) and by focusing on different kinds of girl representations (Österlund 2005, Nilsson 2013).

Anna Nordenstam is Professor in Comparative Literature at University of Gothenburg and Professor in Swedish and Education at Luleå University of Technology. Nordenstam has written extensively in the field of children’s literature. Her latest publication is “Women’s Liberation: Swedish Feminist Comics and Cartoons from the 1970s and 1980”, European Comic Art, vol. 12, no. 2, 2019 (together with M. Wallin Wictortin).


The fashion model is a highly visible presence within contemporary culture. Models are featured in fashion shows, magazines, television programmes, websites, and wherever fashion and female beauty imagery are present. Melania Trump, the current First Lady of the United States, is presented as a former model on the US government website. Dress, behaviour, and fashion play important roles within fiction, including in girls’ series books. From Louisa May Alcott’s novels Little Women, Little Men, and Jo’s Boys (1868–1888), Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew books (1930-) to contemporary series such as Gossip Girl (2002–2011) by Cecily von Ziegesar, Airhead (2008–2010) by Meg Cabot, and Geek Girl (2013–2017) by Holly Smale, series books have evolved and remained popular over the last 150 years. What girls wear and how they look have been important aspects of the genre. Books aimed at girls and young women are historically connected to fairy tales, religious fiction, and education, and have been important in setting standards of behaviour for girls and young women. The fashion model became a frequent role model in girl culture in the 1960s, and her influence has grown over the years. As the chapter explains, in girls’ novels, fashion has been more important than romance. The methodological approach of this study is literary and cultural content analysis; it emphasises a sociological and historical viewpoint to understand the role of the fashion model, then and now; fashion cities; female beauty culture; and notions of female achievement as depicted in Janey Scott’s four 1961 girls’ series of novels, entitled Sara Gay Model Girl.

Erika Lunding is a writer/independent scholar with a B.A. in General and Comparative Literature and an M.A. in Fashion Studies, both Stockholm University. Former research librarian at Kungl. Biblioteket/the National Library of Sweden, Stockholm (Poster Collection). Member of PCA/ACA, Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association. Member and Independent Scholar Representative of International Girls’ Studies Association (I.G.S.A). Research focus on fashion and the modelling profession as portrayed in girls’ series books.