Ph.D. Åsa Warnqvist, The Swedish Institute for Children’s Books/Linnaeus University, Sweden & Associate Professor Mia Österlund, Åbo Akademi University, Finland:

Keynote: ”What about the Fat Girl in Fiction? Perspectives on Children’s Literature, Girlhood and Fat Studies”

The fat body is written into a number of discourses, often surrounded by stigmatizing notions. Fat studies show that fat bodies are part of structural contexts where enforced healthiness, medicalisation, and neo-liberal adjustment are prevailing paradigms (Rothblum & Soloway 2009; Kyrölä 2010; Tolv Hed 2017; Harjunen 2017). As is often the case with complex phenomena, these parallel discourses co-exist (Raisborough 2016; Flynn 2013).

Fat studies, with its roots in gender and queer theory, have highlighted fat as politics, social construction, and aesthetics (Kulick 2005; Rabinowitch 2008). However, Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay note that “fatness remains a relatively understudied category of oppression” (2009). This is especially true for children’s literature research. Lately the material turn has led to renewed interest in examining depictions of the body (cf Nikolajeva 2015; Beauvais & Nikolajeva 2017). Yet, fat studies has not entered the scene, and the combination with girlhood studies remains to be explored. While fat studies have been preoccupied with adolescent girls, studies in children’s literature focus on children’s bodies, and in the extension of these readings we address the embodiment of the girl child, as well as the girl’s gaze on adult bodies.

How fat operates in textual and visual narratives for young readers is at the core of our discussion. We study how bodies are negotiated and how fat girls’ or women’s bodies can be read in contemporary picturebooks, graphic novels, and novels. Our discussion of the interplay between fat and gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality aims to highlight how children’s literature studies, girlhood studies, and fat studies can be brought together. We problematize the underlying fat shaming and fat haunting that characterise many depictions of fat girls and women, and fat linked to aesthetic approaches such as the child’s gaze, size norms, hyperbole, resistance, norm-breaking, and grotesque. Illuminating how these approaches interplay or are played out, we read fat as a complex narrative in contemporary children’s and youth literature.

Referenser


