

Images of girlhood in contemporary Finland-Swedish fantasy for children and young adults

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Abstract: This paper explores gender in two contemporary Finland-Swedish fantasy narratives, in which girls coming of age struggle to overcome personal difficulties and societal restrictions in order to find their own voice and place in society: Henrika Andersson's children's novel *Emma Gloria and the Living Premonitions* (2006) and Maria Turtschaninoff's YA novel *Arra: Legends from Lavora* (2009). These stories illustrate that gender is of topical interest in Finland-Swedish literature for the young and that new ways of depicting how to grow from girlhood into womanhood are being continuously explored.

Key words: Finland-Swedish children's literature, fantasy literature, coming-of-age, gender, girlhood

The yearly publication of Swedish-language¹ books for children and young adults in Finland has been fairly small in numbers, both in a national and international perspective. Apart from the 1960s and 70s when only 2-3 titles were published/year (including all categories from picturebooks to YA novels), the number of titles since 1945 has varied between 10-15/year (see Lehtonen & Rajalin, 1984; Nikolajeva, 2000a) with a slight increase at the turn of the century. There is, however, a long tradition of fantasy within Finland-Swedish children's literature (see Orlov, 1999; Nikolajeva, 2000a, Lassén-Seger, 2008) and, interestingly, about half of the books published from 2000 onwards contain traits of fantasy.

In this paper I shall explore two recent Finland-Swedish fantasy narratives, in which girls coming of age struggle to overcome personal difficulties and societal restrictions in order to find their own voice and place in society. The fictive girls' processes of maturity are obviously gendered, since societal expectations on how to grow up a girl or a boy clearly influence literary depictions of young people coming of age (see Trites, 2000; Österlund, 2005; Mallan, 2009) The chosen books address a varied readership from children to young adults: Henrika Andersson's children's novel *Emma Gloria och de Levande Varslarna* (*Emma Gloria and the Living Premonitions*, 2006) and Maria Turtschaninoff's YA novel *Arra: Legender från Lavora* (*Arra: Legends from Lavora*, 2009).²

¹ Swedish-speaking Finns constitute a linguistic minority in Finland where Swedish is the mother tongue of about 290,000 people or about 5.5% of the total population (according to official statistics for 2006).

² All translated titles and quotes from the Finno-Swedish books are my own.

Learning languages that do not exist – girlhood under pressure

Finno-Swedish writer Henrika Andersson's *Emma Gloria and the Living Premonitions* features a prepubescent girl who moves in between the real and an imaginary world. After her parents divorce, the border joining the two worlds has become increasingly fragile. Frightening supernatural beings that she calls Living Premonitions appear, usually when she is alone at home, and she keeps them at ease by performing magical rituals. Fantasy literature often invite multiple readings as magical (as if the supernatural events actually take place) or rational (as if the supernatural incidents result from the protagonist's hallucination, dream or vision). For fantasy theorists, such as Tzvetan Todorov (1973) and Rosemary Jackson (1981), such ambivalence is an essential trait of "pure" fantasy.³ *Emma Gloria* plays upon both hesitation and ambivalence since it invites (at least) two parallel readings: the supernatural events can be perceived as really happening within the frame of the story, yet also as caused by the young girl's emotional crisis.

Emma Gloria, called Emma for short, is at a stage in life when everything seems to fall apart. At home, her single mother, whom she is very close to, is absorbed by her work and her lover(s). At school, Emma is at the mercy of a group of girls called "the Archangels", who strengthen their own bond by arbitrarily including and excluding Emma from their gang. Both mother-daughter relations and girl friendships are typical gendered motifs explored in female coming-of-age stories (Crew, 2000; Österlund, 2005; Franck, 2009). In *Emma Gloria* the agonies of the young protagonist, who tries to understand adults and to find ways of fitting in with her peers, are communicated through powerful metaphors such as learning systems that keep changing (Andersson, 2006: 71, 80) or languages that do not exist.⁴

Emma's solace is to remove herself through ritual autosuggestion into a world she calls "the other side". It is a secondary world of eternal spring where her trustworthy friend Cecilia lives. But as the pressure and uncertainty increase in Emma's life, fear intrudes also into the safe haven of her secondary world. Cecilia says: "It is the world expanding. The borders have opened and begun to let unknown powers pass through. The other side is no longer as protected as it used to be" (Andersson, 2006: 31). The horrific figure of Kalamara and her pack of werewolves now threaten to invade both Emma's worlds.⁵

³ According to Todorov ([1973] 1975: 33), "pure" fantasy features the protagonist's, as well as the reader's "hesitation" towards the explanation of supernatural events as rational or magical, whereas Jackson (1981: 155) perceives subversive fantasy as originating in suppressed desire. For a further discussion of these theorists in relation to fantasy for children see Lassén-Seger (2006).

⁴ The book begins with the quote "You must learn languages that do not exist".

⁵ Andersson alludes to the werewolf motif, so popular in fantasy for the young in the 2000s, in hallucinatory scenes where Emma believes that the adults around her have turned into Kalamara's werewolf accomplices.

The structure of the novel contributes to blurring the border between the real and the imaginary. Since the novel is written in first person, readers perceive events only through the eyes of the protagonist-narrator. Emma feels that (physically and mentally) “you can be in many places at the same time”, yet she is also aware that Cecilia “is not FOR REAL” (Andersson, 2006: 114, 104). Whereas the latter comment may guide experienced readers towards a psychological explanation of events, the supernatural incidents are always portrayed as emotionally credible from Emma’s point of view. Emma may be read as neurotic, but she keeps seeking comfort in her make-believe friend and truly fears that Kalamara is out to get her mother and that most adults cannot be trusted.

Andersson’s *Emma Gloria* is an original contribution to Finno-Swedish children’s fantasy. The novel is a rich psychodrama in which the author uses fantasy elements to envision a painful coming-of-age experience for a young girl who grows out of the safety of childhood into early teenage disorientation and a growing understanding of the complexities of life. Emma has to face her fears and feelings embodied by the Living Premonitions and Kalamara, which are powerful symbols of complex emotional states.⁶ The novel compares with modern complex psychological fantasy for children, such as e.g. Maria Gripe’s *Agnes Cecilia* (1981) and Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002). Moreover, *Emma Gloria* is specifically a story of how to grow up a girl and come to terms with societal expectations on proper girl behaviour. In the process, Emma has to find her anger and confront her fears. In order to do so, she has to give up her submissive alter ego “Polli”, which is a name she calls herself when she strives to be nice, obedient and pleasing others. The novel also explores other typically gendered motifs such as the mother-daughter relationship and Emma’s relations to girl peers, both her make-believe friend Cecilia and the gang of girls at school. The insight that her mother has flaws, as well as needs and longings of her own, is hard to come by:

Still, grown-ups did what they wanted at the same time as they made up fairy tales with happy endings. The world was so much more than what was visible. There were holes and cracks, mirrors or doors everywhere leading off to the other side. (Andersson, 2006: 85)

The realisation that the Archangel’s motto, “for a more beautiful world”, is not so much a means of helping others as a means of putting others down, also hurts (Andersson, 2006: 48-49). In the end, Emma has to face the real sadness behind her regressive fantasy of Cecilia’s perfect world. A promise of a true friendship is, however, found in another outsider at school, the shy, well-behaved and musical boy Sandor, who, like Emma, neither meets gender expectations nor cares very much about doing so.

⁶ The Living Premonitions are comparable e.g. to the Dementors in Rowling’s Harry Potter-novels.

Subverting the romance plot – girlhood interrogated

In Maria Turtschaninoff's YA fantasy novel *Arra* the girl protagonist struggles even more visibly with reconciling her past, handling her own strength and assuming her position in society. Being an unwanted, youngest girl child of a poor rural family, Arra barely survives a childhood of neglect and degradation. Whereas *Emma Gloria* takes place in a contemporary urban Finno-Swedish milieu, Arra is set in an archaic preindustrial society – a land called Lavora – typical of high fantasy. Arra's story of neglect and abuse is horrific, yet from the outset of the novel readers know that she will rise from rags to riches since the novel introduces itself as the retold legend of "Arra the mute", who later in life "lay the foundation of Lagora's wealth" (Turtschaninoff, 2009: 11).

Fantasy set in a mythical world is not very usual among Finland-Swedish literature for the young in the 2000s. This is, on the one hand, remarkable, since two of the greatest authors of Finno-Swedish children's literature, Tove Jansson and Irmelin Sandman Lilius, so successfully created their own imaginary mythical worlds. On the other hand, the lack of predecessors may result from the very fact that these two canonical authors dominated the field for such a long period of time (Lassén-Seger, 2008). However, contemporary Finno-Swedish writers who choose to write fantasy of any kind, appear to do so with more obvious gender-consciousness and greater focus on the coming-of-age of individual protagonists.

As in Andersson's novel, mother-daughter relations as well as relations to other girls and women are at the heart of *Arra*. But whereas Emma's and her mother's relationship deepen and evolve, Arra has to adapt to a life without a mother's tenderness. Life for the poor is hard and Arra's bitter mother's world wisdom is that "those who cannot help themselves shall have nothing" (Turtschaninoff, 2009: 21). Arra's disadvantage is her outsider's position in the family and in the village at large. Her silence awakens fear and repulsion among the superstitious villagers and having been ignored and reared without human contact, she can neither speak nor fend for herself. Like several female mythical characters before her, Arra finds refuge in nature (see Pratt, [1981] 1982; Lassén-Seger, 2008). She is a feral child raised in the wilderness and nature rewards her with the gift of hearing, understanding and merging with the natural elements.⁷

The tale of Arra's coming-of-age has a very out-spoken emancipatory thrust. The initially mute girl is forced by circumstances to "grow down" rather than "grow up" (see

⁷ Arra is also a gifted artist. Pouring her suffering and longing into the baskets, fabrics and tapestries she weaves, Arra produces sensuous artefacts coveted by others.

Pratt, [1981] (1982). She tries to make herself invisible to avoid other people's scorn, but, like Emma, she suffers from a lack of power over her own feelings. The consequences, in Arra's case, are dire. Involuntarily unleashing a fire, her childhood home burns down and her parents die. Orphaned and homeless she is taken into town to live with her sister Evia. But the abuse continues and Evia ruthlessly exploits Arra's weaving talent for her own greed. A turning point in Arra's life comes when she saves prince Surando's life, secretly befriends and falls in love with him. Similar to Arra, Surando is caught in circumstances he seems unable to control. Lavora is occupied and Surando is used by his own father as a pawn in a political game. Still, he encourages Arra to speak and as "[s]he told the prince her life's story" she also "created herself and made herself visible" (Turtschaninoff, 2009: 144). Thus, in order to mature, Arra has, both metaphorically and literally, to acquire a voice of her own and assume visibility.⁸ Still, the novel would not be emancipatory unless the traditional motif of romance was subverted. Arra loses herself in her adoration for Surando at first, but comes into her own when she manages to put her romantic interests aside, reconnects with her powers to merge with nature, and then uses them to end the war and save the kingdom. Significantly, she does so by using her voice, singing and chanting the earth into submission. With its strong female protagonist and attention to a gender-conscious take on the coming-of-age plot pattern, *Arra* thus places itself in the tradition of emancipatory fantasy, such as e.g. the latter parts of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea*-sequence (1968-2001) and Lene Kaaberbøl's *Shamer's*-chronicles (2000-2003). Typical of such high fantasy stories is the ability to portray utopian and liberating views of gender transgression (Nikolajeva, 2000b).

Concluding remarks

The general prevalence of fantasy within Finland-Swedish literature for the young can be sought in overall national characteristics of this minority literature. Over the years, metaphors such as "a cramped room", "a melting ice floe" and "a duck pond" have been used to characterise a sense of Finno-Swedishness also reflected in the literature produced (Franck et al. 2010). Fantasy traits, including the creation of mythical worlds, can be seen as part of the efforts of a minority literature to express its in-betweenness and need to create a sense of distance (Lassén-Seger, 2008).

But in what sense are the books discussed here Finno-Swedish other than the fact that they are Swedish-language books published in Finland? *Emma Gloria* is set within

⁸ See Franck (2009) on the relevance of voice and silence in coming-of-age YA novels featuring girl protagonists.

contemporary society and so it includes everyday experiences for a multi-lingual child, such as the difficulty of mastering the majority language Finnish. As for *Arra*, which is set in a mythical world, it contains Finland-Swedish markers only in a linguistic sense. In fact, both novels contain such linguistics markers: from everyday colloquial Finno-Swedish expressions in *Emma Gloria* to the archaic and poetic expressions used in *Arra*. These stories were, however, mainly selected in order to illustrate that gender is of topical interest in Finland-Swedish literature for the young. The books are connected in that they tell coming-of-age stories about girls. In doing so they problematise issues of gender, depict situations of gender entrapment, interrogate gender stereotyping and envision incidents in which stereotypical gender roles are transcended. Moreover, they show that gender is at the heart of the literary motif of growing from girlhood into womanhood and that this motif is being continuously explored in Finno-Swedish children's literature.

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