

The Bestest Children of the World – Introduction

I am going to say something about why we are here. Something about why we, the lecturers at the Department of Scandinavian Studies and the Department of Finno-Ugristik, six months ago decided that it would be a great idea to do a seminar about controversial Nordic children's literature. And also something about why we decided to name the seminar 'The *Bestest* Children of the World'.

Nana as an example

I am going to take a Danish children's television show from the nineteen-eighties as starting point. In Denmark widely popular and beloved television show called "Nana", we follow a six year old girl and her family in their everyday life through six episodes. Her mother is a doctor, her father is unemployed, and they live in a nice house in a typical Danish suburb.

During the six episodes, the parents prove to be somewhat unable to live up to their responsibility. In one episode, they almost neglect registering their daughter for school. And later on, Nana, the girl, is often too late for school due to various incompetences of the parents. In another episode, the parents unintentionally make out and have sex in front of their child, and in the final episode, they forget their daughter at the Christmas school play, leaving her for hours hanging in some contraption from the ceiling dressed up as an angel. Although the child obviously loves her parents in spite of their faults, a running gag in the series, is that the protagonist, regularly is asked by strangers, after some embarrassing incident caused by her father: "Is that your father?" to which she always, after a brief consideration, lies and answers "No. Not really." The child is fully aware, that her parents, who were supposed to teach their daughter the basic rights and wrongs in life, cannot really live up to those values themselves, and she is therefore ashamed of her parents. However, in Denmark, this TV-show is widely beloved and esteemed both by parents and children, and recently, it has been voted the best Danish children's TV-Series of all times by the viewers of the Danish ORF.

Last year I showed the TV-series to my students here at the university of Vienna. And during a written test the students had the opportunity to express their thoughts about the TV-show, and about what makes parenting and education good or bad. It turned out, that the Austrian students, in contrary to Danish viewers, had widely different opinions about the TV-show. The students answers are roughly divided into two equally large, opposing groups, one group finding the TV-show offensive and extreme, one group embracing the realism and warm-heartedness of the show.

Allow me to quote a few sentences from some of the students' reflexions:

"I find, that the TV-series is about a crazy child with neglecting parents. I hope this is not a realistic depiction of life in Denmark. The parents forget their daughter at the play at school, they have sex in front of her, and the mother even once lets her daughter stay at home faking to be sick instead of bringing her to school."

I find it particularly interesting that this student seems to find it an even greater neglect, that the child bunks off, than that the parents have sex in front of her. As if attending school was the most important thing in the life of a child.

Another student stated:

"The teachers are not good because they are unable to assert their authority towards the misbehaving children. In the episodes we have seen, the children do not learn anything useful, because they are undisciplined."

In the other group of students, reflexions like the following occur:

”I find this a very realistic and heartwarming depiction of a normal family. Although a lot of things do not work out the way they were supposed to, everything is right all the same. Especially the unemployed father and the child have a very strong and important bond between them. I think that literature and movies can either show the world the way it ought to be, or the way it really is. The last way may not be as edifying or educating as many parents would like, but I think that it is important for the children to see world the way it is.”

Another student adds to the picture:

”The episode, in which they all pretend to be sick and stay at home together to read comics instead of going to school and to work, shows just how important the parents find it to spend quality time with their child. And I think that it is intended to show, that there are values in life that are more important than the everyday notions of right and wrong.”

Thus, it became quite clear, that there was an evident subtext in the TV-series, showing an alternative set of values to ”everyday notions of right and wrong” as the student called it, and it also became clear, that while some students were able to register this subtext, others simply didn't have an ear for it.

Another example: In one of the episodes, Nanas school class goes on a field trip with their teacher to study tadpoles and the reproduction of the frog in it's natural habitat. In the woods, two of the boys, instead of looking for tadpoles, find a used condom, and ask everyone what it is, they have found. The teacher is put in a flurry and claims stuttering that it is a balloon, whereto one of the boys answer, what can only be translated to: ”The hell it aint. It's a goddamn condom. And there's something in it, aint there?” The teacher is saved by another child, who claims to have seen a troll, and just as the teacher grasps the opportunity to moralise about how imagination should not be used to make up silly stories about trolls, a troll, unseen by the children, waves at her from a shrubbery near by.

The story, of course, is not trying to teach kids, that trolls do exist, but besides underlining the irony, that a teacher wanting to teach the kids about reproduction cannot find it in herself to talk about a condom, the incident shows, that the teachers trying to teach the kids common sense can be mistaken and even try to keep children from the truths they mean teach them, and also that the misbehaving, swearing kids, can be every bit right in their genuine, no-nonsense approach to the world. True to the set of values put forth in the TV-series, the same kid that swears about the condom is later seen together with the protagonist basing what seems to be a sincere and lasting friendship by having a farting contest.

Values in Classical and Controversial Children's Literature

Why is the Nordic children's literature conceived of as controversial? Well, in Scandinavia and Finland it is not. At least since my generation, the Nordic children and their parents have been exposed to children's literature, that – both what subjects and educational set of values concern – has left the nest and deals with harsh realities in the everyday life of children. But the children's literature written in German still seem to have a strong inclination towards teaching children classic ideas of right and wrong, and much children's literature written in Scandinavia and Finland is still deemed to be too controversial to be translated into German.

The Norwegian author Jens Børneboe, wrote some sixty years ago in the postscript to his acclaimed novel ”Jonas”, that criticises the Norwegian educational system:

”The educational system can be seen as an expression of the cultural policy and picture of the human being of the ruling class. Not the human being, the pupil, sets the measure for the education, but the endeavour to educate the pupils to concur with the ideology of the nation.”

One of our basic theses, when we planned out this seminar, was that the Nordic children’s literature is deemed controversial because it does not strive underpin the streamlining of the children carried out by the classic educational system. Classical, old-fashioned children’s literature often set out to teach the children about right and wrong. We are setting forth the proposition that the controversial children’s literature is the counterpart to what Bjørneboe calls ”the display of force carried out by the educational system”. Not that the controversial children’s literature is not trying to educate or edify the children, but more that the controversial nordic children’s literature sets a different measure for good and bad.

This raises the questions: Has a considerable part of the Austrian students become so streamlined in their upbringing, that they are missing out on something important?

Another illustrative example, that always baffles Scandinavian teachers teaching in Austria, including myself, is, that whenever Austrian university students are given a written assignment, they always ask you how many words they are supposed to write. When you have done your best to give the students an interesting and relevant problem to solve, instead of focusing on finding a solution or providing genuine answers, they are always desperate to know the number of words they must write to do well. And many of the students really then write the required 800 words about something and are done with it, feeling home free because they complied to the rules set forth by the teacher. The students are so used to an educational system that sets forth rules, that are not to be questioned, that they are left baffled, when they are to provide a genuine solution to a problem instead of producing a specified length of text.

What Makes Children Good? ...

In this seminar, we are going to make ourselves acquainted with works of Nordic authors, whose works have all in some way or another been deemed controversial by readers or publishers. But the works of Gro Dahle, Pia Lindenbaum, Salla Simukka, Kim Fupz Aakeson, and Jon Gnarr also seem to have another thing in common. They all have a different notion about what good children are, that the one set forth in classical children’s literature.

... And Why the Bestest Children?

Well, let’s take a brief detour to Iceland. When the financial crisis had brought the Icelandic economy to its knees, a lot of people lost their faith in the good of the system. Jon Gnarr then founded a political party called ”The Best Party” to satirise the political system, and entering the race for mayor of Reykjavík, Jon Gnarr promised to get the dinosaurs from Jurassic Park into downtown parks, free towels at public swimming pools, a “drug-free Parliament by 2020” – and he swore he would break all of his campaign promises. In their promotional video, he and his fellow party members sung this out to Tina Turner’s ”Simply the best”. To make the metrical foots fit they were, however, forced to sing: ”We’re the best. The bestest of all the parties.” But then something strange started happening: His campaign began to succeed, and, surprisingly, the bestest party won the election, and Jon Gnarr became the Mayor of Reykjavik. The obviously childish approach, setting aside traditional values (and grammar), appealed greatly to the voters, who were sick of the failures of the ruling class and its political system. Something seemed genuine about the childish, impertinent approach.

In Jon Gnarr's trilogy, which he calls a "fictional autobiography", he tells a story about a child deemed a misfit, since he does not fit to the measures set forth by the educational systems, by the parents of other children, or any authority. The trilogy becomes a sort of bildungsroman. The books are not children's literature, but the books add something valuable to the picture of the child in nordic literature.

So, why the 'bestest' children of the world? Because Jon Gnaar, the misfit became mayor of Reykjavik and saved the world. The proposition, that perhaps the best children are exactly the **bestest** children, with all of their seeming flaws, seems to have long been embraced in the Nordic children's literature.

Concluding remarks

A wonderful thing about the task of opening a seminar, is that you get to ask a series of clever questions and put forth a bunch of promising propositions, without having to provide any answers. Somehow this fits great with the current motto of the University of Vienna, celebrating it's 650th birthday: "We've been asking the questions for 650 years." I do not know who came up with this slogan, but it kind of makes you wonder, if it isn't about time someone got around to providing any answers. Which brings me back to the reason, we are making this seminar. Were not just looking to ask clever questions. Were looking to provide genuine answers. I am not going to do so, but I am confident, that the lectures and presentations of the coming two days are going to give us som no-nonsense answers about the real problems that controversial Nordic children's literature seems to take so much more serious than most children's literature written in German. Therefore, without further ado, I am going to give the word to my valued Norwegian colleague, Elisabeth Lyngedal, who will introduce our Norwegian guests.