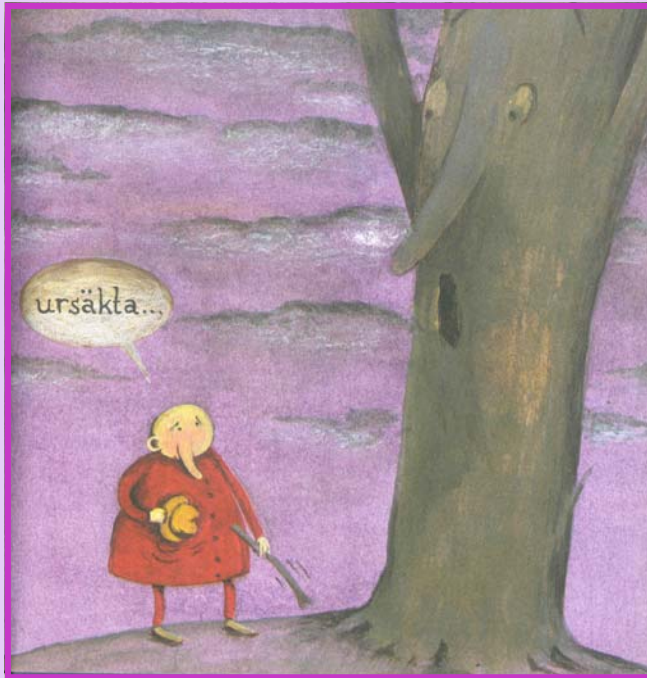


## GREEN TALES FOR NORDIC KIDS

NORDIC CHILDREN'S BOOKS  
ABOUT NATURE WRITTEN AND  
ILLUSTRATED BY WOMEN



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NOVEMBER 3 — DECEMBER 31, 2004  
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LECTURE: "Kids, Trolls, and the Environment in the  
Picture Book World of Elsa Beskow," by  
Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams, Tues. Nov. 9, 6-7 pm,  
in Suzzallo Library's Allen Auditorium

## Nurturing the Natural: Children and the Environment in Nordic Picture Books

*Green Tales for Nordic Kids* explores the relationship between children and the natural world as presented in picture books by Nordic women writers and illustrators. The exhibition, developed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in conjunction with the exhibition *Nordic Cool: Hot Women Designers*, looks at books from all five of the Nordic countries as they present a unique understanding of the benefits of growing up in harmony with nature.

The Nordic countries extend great efforts to create a balance between themselves and their environment, which is often exemplified in their arts. Readers of any age who experience the literature for children from these countries will witness a seemingly effortless meeting of the great outdoors with what is typically thought of as "indoor" life: a family taking up residence in the roots of an old tree; a forest creature brushing her hair and wearing jewelry; an elephant, a penguin, and a princess enjoying a jazz club together. This oft repeated theme of blurring the line between indoors and out serves to create a great sense of comfort within the reader for her/his natural surroundings and encourages the child who grows up reading these stories to develop a healthy love and respect for the natural world.

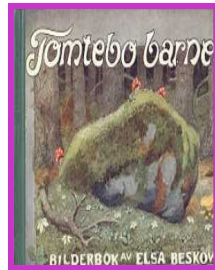
Personification of animals aids in creating worlds where indoor and outdoor life become interchangeable. In Nordic picture books fuzzy trolls wear top hats and write memoirs while bears in suits and dresses argue, fly away on vacation, and return home again with gifts for each other. It

is the innate humanness of the animals in these works that fosters a feeling of esteem in the reader, allowing them to view animals as beings worthy of regard and to treat them as such. By being raised with a sense of value for animals and their habitat, Nordic children develop a lifelong appreciation of their environment.



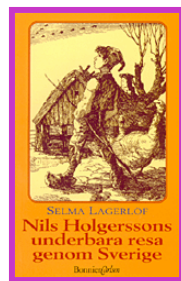
Increasing children's sense of ease with the natural world is not a recent ideal for Nordic writers.

Swedish author and illustrator Elsa Beskow (1874-1953), who specialized in the theme of the relationships between children, animals, and the forest, published her first book in 1897. Her 1901 work *Puttes äventyr i blåbärsskogen* (*Peter in Blueberry Land*) introduces readers to a regular human-sized boy who has a list of chores to complete, but is unable to do so until he befriends a group of wee folk living in the forest. Beskow's story and stunning Art Nouveau illustrations show readers that a wonderful world of adventure and enchantment wait for them in the forest, if only they will take the time to notice it.



Beskow's 1910 work *Tomtebobarnen* (*Children of the Forest*) further exemplifies this message. The main characters of *Tomtebobarnen* are a tiny forest family living in the roots of a tree. As the tree thrives from the family's care, the family thrives from its bounty. Beskow's more than thirty children's books relate to this theme, advising young readers to live in harmony with nature so that they can experience all of its wonders and reap its many bounties.

Beskow and her fellow writers brought the children's picture book to a great height both as literature and as art, ushering in an idyllic period in Swedish children's literature. Children's picture books became so esteemed in Sweden that in 1906 the government commissioned Nobel Laureate Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940) to write an official Swedish children's book. The book, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*), follows a young boy as he flies through Sweden on the back of a giant goose learning about his country's geography, environment, and culture. It was originally intended to be a school text for nine-year-olds, but has since become a book of international renown for readers of all ages, translated into over thirty languages.



After World War II a new generation of children's authors created a golden age in Nordic literature, one highly

influenced by these early Swedish picture books that grew to reflect a more modern relationship between humans and the natural world. Perhaps the most well-known of these authors is the internationally beloved Swedish author Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002). In 1941, while confined to her bed with pneumonia, Lindgren's daughter Karin asked her mother for stories about Pippi Långstrump (Pippi Longstocking), making up the name on the spot.



Pippi lives quite contentedly with her horse and her friend Mr. Nilsson (the monkey) in her house, the Villa Villekulla. Mr. Nilsson, confidant and companion, dresses in blue pants, a white shirt, and a white straw hat, and greets visitors with a tip of the hat. While Pippi's human friends, Annika and Tommy, at first find a carrot-haired girl living alone with her "pets" to be quite strange, they grow to love her and admire her ways. Her sense of freedom and her comfort with the sea and land quickly wins them over, as does her love and respect for her animal friends. Pippi herself is a taste of wild freedom come indoors, and it is this untamed naturalness that makes her such a refreshing neighbor. Growing up on the ocean has given her the opportunity to maintain a sense of innate freedom that becomes a gift to all that know her.

Lindgren's works draw from her own childhood in the rural town of Näs, where her parents raised her to feel secure, but also to feel comfortable roaming the countryside in freedom, playing as she wished. It is this message of love balanced with freedom and comfort in nature that Lindgren shares in her works.

A contemporary of Lindgren's who was likewise influenced by the early Swedish picture books was writer and illustrator Tove Jansson (1914-2001), a Swedish-speaking Finn who first gained notoriety for her anti-Nazi political cartoons featuring a creature called Moomintroll. After the war Jansson kept little Moomin going in a series of thirteen children's books, the first published in 1945.

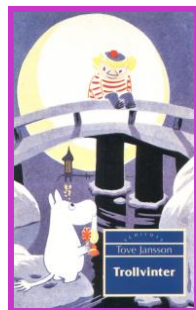
This charming character of Jansson's design looks very much like a stylized hippopotamus with a good deal of

personality, yet lives in an elegant Victorian mansion with his Moominmamma, Moominpapa, and his girlfriend the Snork Maiden. The family enjoys picnics with homemade raspberry juice and jam, and singing and dancing with their friend Snufkin (who looks decidedly human). They even have a summerhouse and often go boating. Yet the Moomins, for all their humanlike qualities, dine each autumn on spruce needles and then hibernate the winter through, balancing out their indoor human-selves with their outdoor animal-selves; the two coexisting quite peacefully.

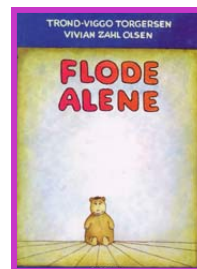
The survival of the Moomin family ultimately depends upon their relationship with each other, with Moominvalley, and its many residents (including Fillyjonks, Hattifatteners, Mymbles, Little My, and the Groke), whether similar or dissimilar to them. The stories emphasize the interdependence that beings have on their surroundings and that a successful life is one of partnerships.

In *Trollvinter (Moominland in Midwinter)*, published in 1957, little Moomintroll is awoken early from his annual hibernation to find the cruelest winter in years visiting his valley. Miserable creatures, lonely and hungry in the cold, stumble into his valley and, while he worries about what Moominmamma will say when she wakes, he pulls every last jar out of the jam closet to feed them. The comfort that Moomintroll takes from the bounty that nature has provided for his family and the visitors exemplifies a feeling prevalent in post-war Finland that with life's trials come opportunities to appreciate what one does have. Moomin sees the hard side of life, but that simply causes him to revel in the gifts that he finds in nature and in his friends.

The idea of a loveable troll that perhaps looks unusual yet has decidedly human characteristics is prevalent in the children's literature of many Nordic countries. Iceland's Guðrún Helgadóttir writes of Flumbra, the troll maiden who while quite ugly and wretched to look upon is filled with kindness and love; Denmark's Christina Brandt tells stories of pointy-eared pixies who dance with polar bears while



preparing for Christmas; while the illustrations of Norway's Vivian Zahl Olsen portray the beloved bucktoothed troll Flode wandering through the city clad in an aviator's cap and striped scarf. This personification of otherworldly beings that come from the forest is an enchanting method of building up excitement for exploring the land. Who knows where readers will find such ethereal playmates of their own?

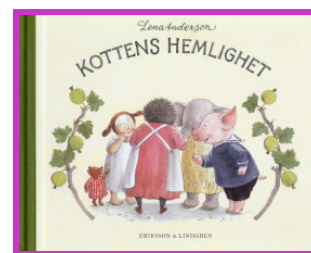


Contemporary Nordic children's picture books continue the search for an ultimate balance between humans and nature. Sweden's Lena Anderson (b. 1939),

often called a modern Elsa Beskow, illustrated the popular book *Linnea i Målarens Trädgård (Linnea in Monet's Garden)*, written by Christina Björk in 1984. The story follows little Linnea and her neighbor Mr. Bloom as they travel to Giverny to explore the landscape that encouraged Monet to paint his famous water lilies series. This book, which has sold over 700,000 copies in the US alone, encourages readers to have a healthy curiosity about nature and an appreciation of its aesthetic value.



*Kottens hemlighet (Hedgehog's Secret)*, written and illustrated by Anderson in 2000, follows Hedgehog as she seamlessly welcomes her friends Elephant, Pig, Teddy Bear, and Lottie the little girl into her forest home. All of the varied animals and the human girl are treated as equals in her world, again fostering a sense of comfort and normalcy between humans and their animal friends thus furthering the sentiment that what you find waiting for you in the natural world is positive and soothing.



Danish writer and illustrator Dorte Karrebæk (b.

1946) also follows the theme of living in harmony with nature, but she does so with a humorous bent. Her 2004 book *Lille frøken Buks og de små sejre* (*Little Miss Custard and the Small Triumphs*) follows a nervous little girl away from the stresses of modern living into the sanctity of a life surrounded by giant flowers. Little Miss Custard is “a cowardly girl./Scared of the sky and the sea./Of day and of night./Of dogs and birds and/cars on the road./But the flowers – she/wasn’t scared of them./Not in the least.” The flowers Little Miss Custard visits are quite huge and she feels safe enough with them to climb their stems and curl up in their blossoms for a leisurely nap thus demonstrating the need for balance between a hectic and nerve-wracking contemporary life with slow, calming interludes with nature.



While many present-day Nordic writers focus their stories on a need for nature and the peace it has to offer, Swedish writer and illustrator Anna Höglund (b. 1958) sends a much firmer message to readers in her 1991 book *Först var det mörkt* (*First It Was Dark*). The book shows a careless man breaking a branch off a tree. Much to his surprise the tree cries out in pain and calls for help. Höglund wants her readers to remember that the forest will metaphorically feel pain if it is hurt and when the land is injured, we all suffer for it; a symbol that does well to express, in the language of a child, our ever growing need to protect the natural resources that we so dearly rely upon.

In all its many manifestations, the theme of respecting the environment and all the good it offers humans is greatly entwined in Nordic literature for children. The works are filled with the unexpected: penguins try to win a sled race; a little girl takes tea with a crocodile; an elderly woman forced to move from her farmhouse into a small apartment turns the roof of the building into a garden complete with farm animals. These tales affirm the theme that the natural world is a good, safe, comfortable place for humans to live and play, and that our animal friends are just that: comrades and peers. Furthermore, the children growing with these stories take their messages to heart and do in fact learn to coexist more peacefully with the natural world.



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Cover Image: Anna Höglund from *Först var det mörkt...*