

A feeling of nature in contemporary Norwegian picturebooks

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ABSTRACT

This article examines and discusses how children's literature, in particular four contemporary Norwegian picturebooks in which maps are provided, may help readers to connect, combine and relate their aesthetic reading experiences to their outdoor activities and, through this interrelation, develop or strengthen a feeling of nature that is necessary if one is to become an ecocitizen, aware of the need for a sustainable society. The analysis is informed by ecocriticism (Glotfelty 1996; Garrard 2012), and by writings that focus on the aesthetic representation of the idyll (Gifford 2014), the theory of literary maps (Goga 2015) and the theory of outdoor education (Presthus Heggen 2015). The investigation contributes to the research on nature in children's literature undertaken by the research group, Nature in Children's Literature and Culture (NaChiLitCul) at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.¹

Keywords: Norwegian picturebooks – Maps – Feeling of nature – Outdoor activities – Ecocitizen

Un sentimento di natura in albi illustrati norvegesi contemporanei

Il saggio indaga le modalità attraverso cui la letteratura per l'infanzia, in particolare quattro albi illustrati norvegesi contemporanei che contengono delle mappe, possono aiutare il lettore ad entrare in contatto, combinare e legare le proprie esperienze estetiche di lettura con le attività outdoor. Questa interrelazione permette di sviluppare e rafforzare un sentimento della natura, necessario per coloro i quali vogliono diventare ecocittadini, consapevoli del bisogno di investire in una società sostenibile. L'analisi si regge sulla teoria dell'ecocriticismo (Glotfelty, 1996; Garrard, 2012) e su studi che si focalizzano sulla rappresentazione dell'idillio (Gifford 2014), sulla teoria delle mappe letterarie (Glotfelty, 1996; Garrard, 2012) e sulla teoria dell'outdoor education (Presthus Heggen, 2015). Questa analisi rappresenta un contributo alla ricerca sulla natura nella letteratura per l'infanzia, che è stata intrapresa dal gruppo di ricerca Nature in Children's Literature and Culture (NaChiLitCul) presso la Western Norway University of Applied Sciences di Bergen.

Parole chiave: Albi illustrati norvegesi – Mappe – Sentimento della natura – Attività outdoor – Ecocittadino

¹ The research group has its own research blog: <http://blogg.hvl.no/nachilit/>

Introduction

Berghaller et al. (2014, p. 262) stress the fact that “the ecological crisis is not only a crisis of the physical environment but also a crisis of the cultural and social environment”. According to Sørensen & Fugl Eskjær (2014, p. 16), the main contribution to the research on our changing environment provided by the humanities is related to the examination of how our conception and interpretation of the concepts of nature and environment frame political and administrative actions. It is reasonable to claim that these conceptions and interpretations of nature and climate develop in early childhood and that various aesthetic impressions, such as those provided through children’s literature, influence the formative processes.

The main objectives of the NaChiLitCul project are to map out and critically analyze the representations of nature in children and young adults’ literature, and explore how the interaction of children and young adults with literary texts and outdoor didactic practices may shape an environmental awareness. In response to the identified need for such a critical analysis, the NaChiLitCul research group has developed a matrix in relation to which all examples are analyzed and compared (Fig. 1).

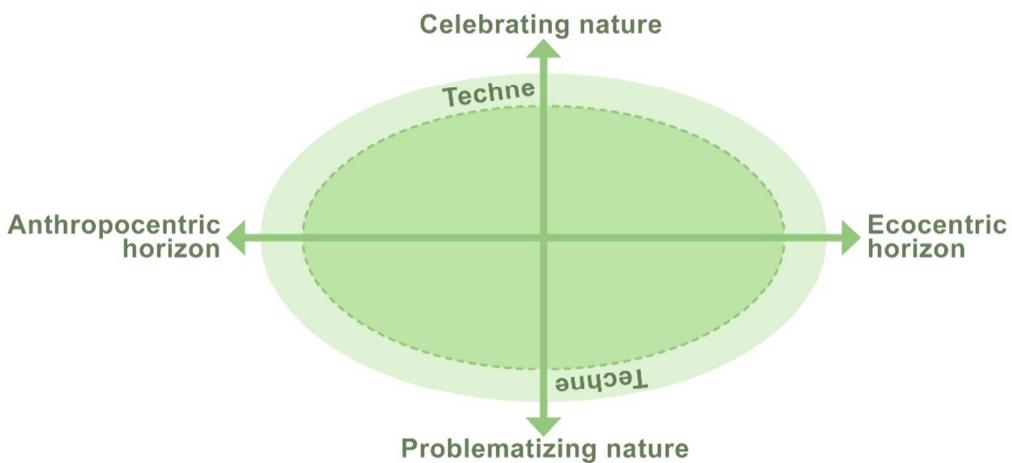


Fig. 1 - The Nature in Culture Matrix

The matrix takes the form of a system of coordinates, in which cultural expressions can be discussed in relation to a vertical continuum ranging from a celebration to a problematization of nature, and a horizontal continuum ranging from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective on nature. Anthropocentric is here understood in accordance with Quinn et al. (2015) as “human-centered (...) conferring intrinsic value only to humans, with non-human entities viewed as only instrumentally valuable” (*ibid.*, p. 894) and ecocentric, or ecosphere-centred, as emphasizing “the intrinsic value of the interrelated ecological system of

which humans are part” (*ibid.*, p. 895). In addition to these two axes, the matrix is circumscribed by a third dimension, that of *techne*. The concept of *techne* is taken from rhetorical theory and is here understood as the art of shaping and manufacturing: an “intentional crafting of self, world, and society” (Boellstorff, 2015, p. 55). The dimension of *techne* signals the fact that all children and young adults’ texts are already mediated, hence crafted, representations of nature.

In short, when applied to the selected picturebooks and picturebook maps considered in this article, that is *Tambar er et troll* (2010, *Tambar is a troll*), *Tambar og sjumilsstøvlene* (2012, *Tambar and the seven-league boots*), *Kubbes album om alt* (2013, *Kubbe’s album about everything*) and *Ulla og Bendik bygger by* (2015, *Ulla & Bendik build a city*), literary maps should be conceived as crafted or constructed representations of the world, or of a specific, often fictional, geography (Goga 2015)². The way the illustrator, or literary cartographer, has chosen to represent the world is always grounded in layers of previous maps, and of visual and verbal depictions of nature, landscapes and various beings found there. Key questions to ask may be: which topographical and cartographical forms and features are highlighted, which colors are dominant, and how is nature marked by culture and the opposite?

Mapped environment

The selected maps are all part of the book’s endpapers, that is they are part of the reader’s entrance to the book, their first encounter with the places where the stories are set. In addition, all three maps may be characterized as parts of local geographies, that is the geography of the main character(s). In particular, this is true to the series about Tambar and Kubbe. While Tambar is a mix of an unreal creature that is part of nature, a troll, and an everyday child living in an ordinary condo, Kubbe (log in English) is literally, as a piece of wood, part of the mapped wood. In Ulla & Bendik build a city, the children question the city; feeling estranged from their neighborhood, they consider everything “grey, narrow, rigid and boring” (Johnsen, 2015)³. They want to change their surrounding in such a way that they can engage and interact with it; that is, “climb the trees, paddle the canoe, swim in the water, climb the ladders, bicycle in the streets, play at the roofs” (Johnsen, 2015).

² *Tambar is a troll* is the first and *Tambar and the seven-league boots* is the fifth book in the Tambar series written by Tor Åge Bringsværd and illustrated by Lisa Aisato. At the present moment the series includes 9 volumes and is planned to include another two books. *Kubbe’s album about everything* is written and illustrated by Åshild Kanstad Johnsen and is the third book about Kubbe, a series or literary concept including also an literary app and an interactive play app. Kanstad Johnsen is also the author and illustrator of *Ulla & Bendik build a city*.

³ All translations of the four picturebooks are mine.

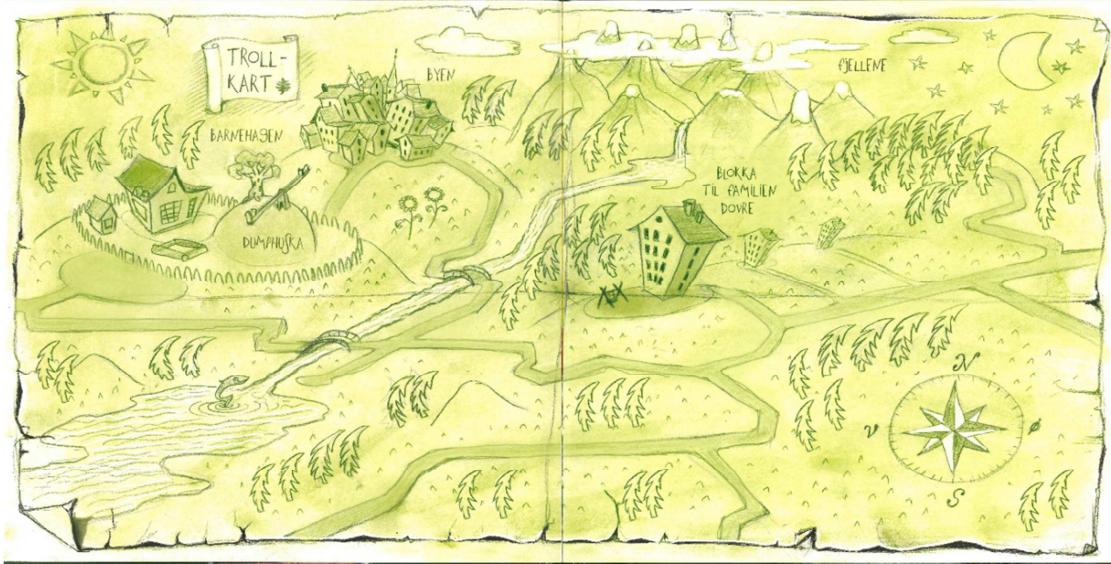


Fig. 2 - Bringsværd, T. Å., & Aisato L. (2010). *Tambar er et troll*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

The map depicting Tambar's neighborhood expands from book to book. The first map (Fig. 2) displays a close up of the area around the condominium where he lives with his mother and father, and the kindergarten he attends. Woods, mountains and water (a waterfall, a river and a lake) dominate the surroundings. The map in the fifth book, *Tambar and the seven-league boots*, exemplifies how the map expands in accordance with Tambar's extended experiences with places and various beings (Fig. 3).

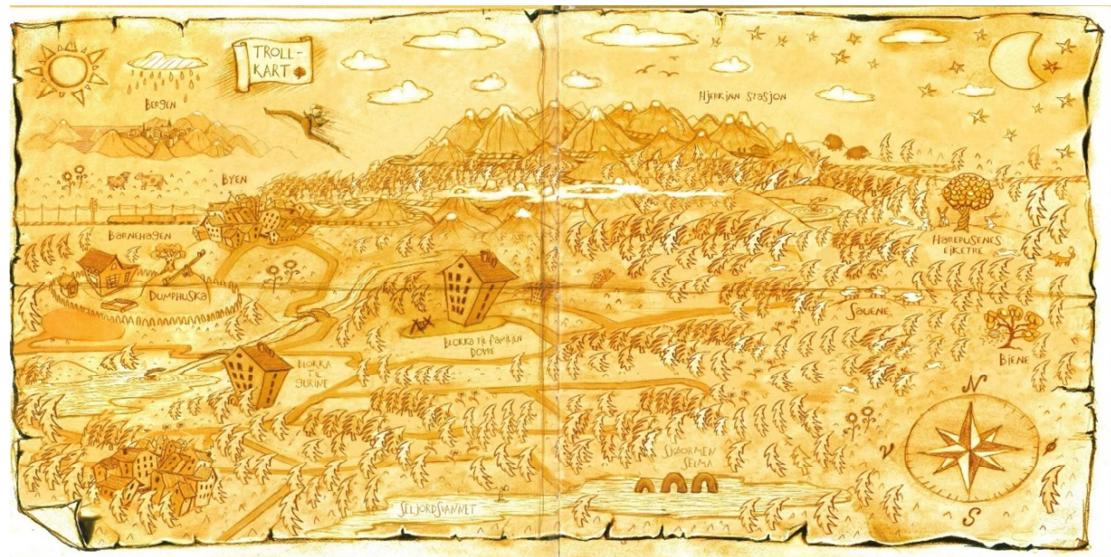


Fig. 3 - Bringsværd, T. Å., & Aisato L. (2012). *Tambar og sjumilsstøvlene*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

An observant reader will note that Tambar's knowledge about the wood has increased; he has met a hare, some bees and a small flock of sheep. He has also travelled both north and south, where he probably saw a sea serpent. Tambar seems to acquire knowledge about life through his exploration of his surroundings. Following Tambar through reading the books, also gives the reader an opportunity to follow him as he explores and ponders new features of the nearby nature and environment. For that reason, these maps are worthy of further consideration, an examination of what their environments looks like, what conception of nature they transmit, and how Tambar interacts with them.

While Tambar's world is built and extended from one book to the next, the universe of Kubbe is presented in bits and pieces to those following his adventures in the books. Although parts of Kubbe's home ground and natural surroundings may be familiar from the stories in previous books in the series, *Kubbe's album about everything* is the only book provided with a map of his local geography (Fig. 4).

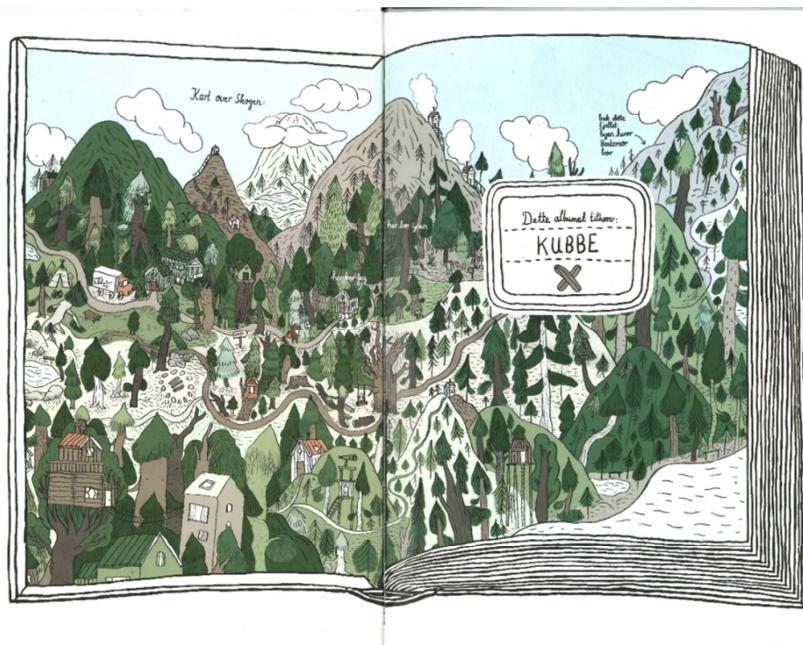


Fig. 4 - Johnsen, Å. K (2013). *Kubbes album om alt.* Oslo: Gyldendal.

The fact that Kubbe lives in the middle of woods, and is himself a cut off from the woods, is somehow curious; that is, it makes him simultaneously an organic part of the woods and the place itself, and extraneous to it. Since the book, as announced in the title, is an album, the map functions more like an overview of the various places Kubbe visits or searches in order to collect objects and experiences. Take the double spreads about his friend Gran (spruce) as an example; one may claim that – by reading about how Kubbe met Gran, about his personal qualities and moods, and about the inside of Gran's home – the reader can turn to the map to get a picture of the distance between the homes of the two friends and how they interrelate geographically. Since many of the items and experiences collected by Kubbe in his

album are closely related to his surrounding, it seems relevant to question his perception of them as evident in the way they are depicted and arranged by Kanstad Johnsen, and how this arrangement may influence the reader's own perception of and involvement with their own neighborhood.

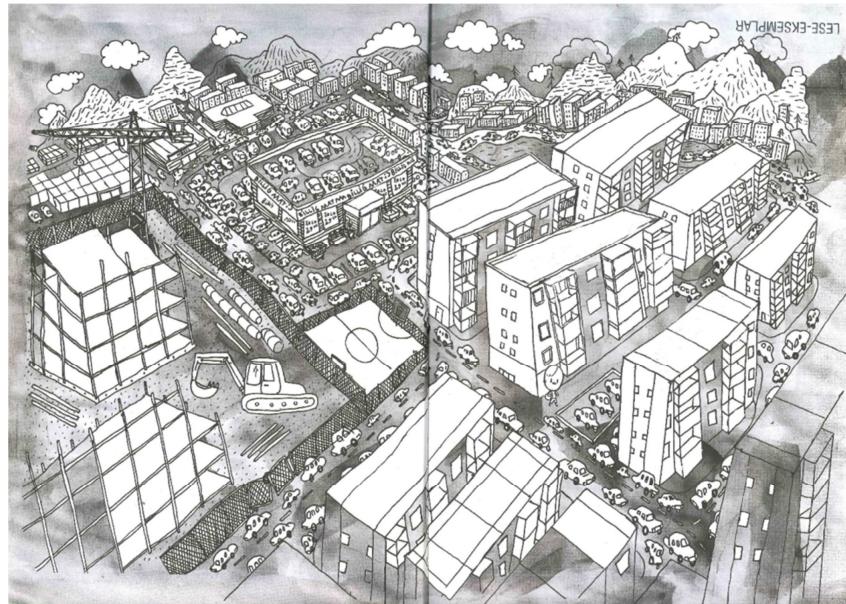


Fig. 5 - Johnsen, Å. K. (2015). *Ulla og Bendik bygger by*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

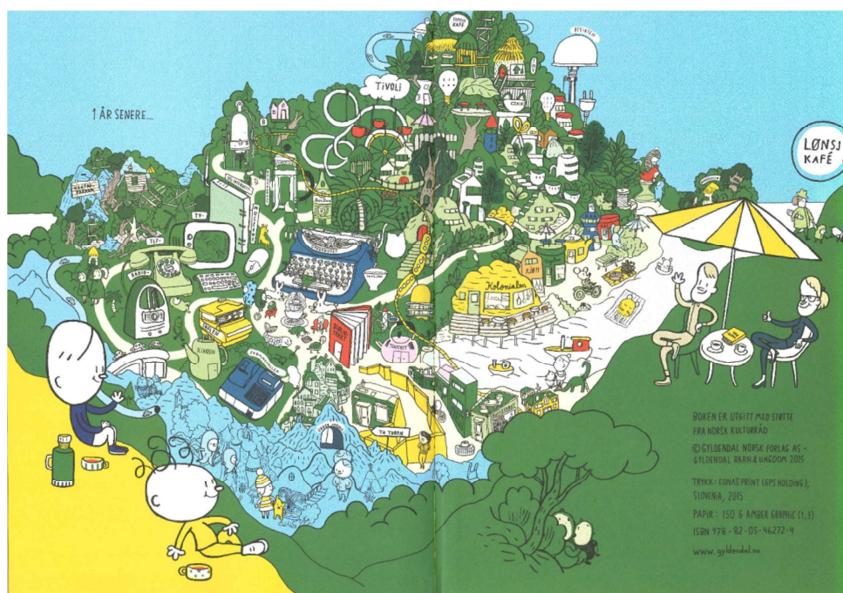


Fig. 6 - Johnsen, Å. K. (2015). *Ulla og Bendik bygger by*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

The third example differs from the others in that the maps on the front endpaper (Fig. 5) and the back endpaper (Fig. 6) are not the same. This difference is due to the environmental initiatives that the two protagonists of the book have implemented and completed. *Ulla & Bendik build a city* also differs from the other picturebooks considered here in its approach to nature and man's environment. While the books about Tambar and Kubbe seem to convey a rather confident and idyllic impression of the character's home ground and natural surroundings, the book about Ulla and Bendik is all about the character's dissatisfaction with their grey, urban environment, and their vigorous (in particular Ulla's) struggle to transform it into an enjoyable, vital and colorful city. This struggle and change may also qualify the book, as the only one of the three, for classification as what Massey and Bradford (2011) have termed environmental literature; that is

texts which thematize contemporary ecological issues – reflect shifting global agendas and predict future possibilities. One of their primary functions is to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow by positioning readers as ecocitizens, dedicated both to sustainable development in the local sphere and also to global responsibility. (*ibid.*, p. 109)

Ulla & Bendik build a city fits this description in its occupation with the treats of urban pollution, and its response to this through the two children's imaginative efforts to re-establish or recreate a place where it is possible to obtain a feeling of nature.

A feeling of nature in the Norwegian preschool and school curriculum

In her research on Norwegian preschools and sustainable development, Marianne Presthus Heggen (2015) found that what is called "a feeling of nature" seems to be understood as a condition characterized by an active and positive attitude towards nature. Heggen claims that, in their efforts to foster a sustainable attitude, preschools place particular emphasis on the need to develop in children such a feeling. She also recognizes that, even though sustainable development is understood to be based on four equally important pillars – ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainability, and good governance – most preschools understand the fostering of sustainable development primarily in terms of knowledge about practical, ecological daily life (Heggen, 2015, pp. 118-119).

The Norwegian curricula for both preschool and school emphasize the importance of children's personal experiences in nature in outdoor activities, and their experiences with literature as an arena for imaginative skills as well as language skills; however, only the preschool curriculum clearly relates these two field. The learning area "Nature, environment and technology" in *The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of*

Kindergartens states that, in order to achieve the aim for children “to begin to understand the significance of sustainable development”, the staff must promote an understanding of sustainable development through words and actions, and select literature and activities that promote such an understanding”. In addition, they are to “use the local neighborhood so that children can observe and learn about animals, fish, birds, insects and plants” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011).

The Norwegian quality framework, including The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in Primary and Secondary Education and Training, is organized according to school subjects and further specified in competence aims for year two, four, seven and ten. Since the primary reader of the selected picturebooks is probably a child of three to eight, I have chosen to focus on the relevant competences in the curricula for natural science and Norwegian after year two. Relevant competences mentioned in natural science include the pupil’s ability to “ask questions, talk and philosophise about experiences in nature and man’s place in nature”, to “carry out activities in nearby surroundings to learn about nature and converse about why this is important”, and to “describe and discuss our senses and use them deliberately during indoor and outdoor observations and activities” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013a). This is all very well and supports Geir Grimeland’s (2016) claim that, to the Norwegian school governance, knowledge about sustainability is limited to the field of natural science (*ibid.*, p. 86).

It is less obvious at first sight how the competences specified in the Norwegian subject curriculum are relevant to the development of a verbal and visual awareness for nature. Nevertheless, one may claim that some of the subject aims could supplement the competences specified for natural science. After year two, some of the relevant competence goals specified in Norwegian include the ability to “talk fluently about events and experiences”, “put own feelings and opinions into words”, “describe own experiences of texts using words, drawings, songs and other aesthetic forms of expression”, “use own knowledge and experience to understand and comment on the content of texts they read”, and “discuss how words and images work together in picture books and other visual media” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013b). All of these competences could support, as well as justify, a teaching aim that focuses on developing future eco-citizens.

The process by which children integrate with nature and achieve a sustainable development is often described as climbing the environmental staircase (Heggen, 2015, p. 123). The environmental staircase consists of the following steps: experience with nature, observation, active dialogue, reflection, action (that displays how children may influence their own environment). I am interested in how preschool and primary school children’s experiences with both outdoor activities in nature and (indoor) activities with literature may provide a sustainable awareness that involves all four pillars. How can literature be included in the environmental staircase? Could reading picturebooks that are provided with maps help children climb the staircase? Could picturebook maps stimulate children to wonder about nature and consequently become aware of the wonders of nature?

Since, in my opinion, many aspects of our experience with nature are not simply a pure, raw, untouched, open-minded experience, but also a product of inherited cultural concepts of nature and figures of thought. For this reason, I think that, by carefully choosing the books we read with children, we may help to draw their attention to images and layers of previous human experience in relation to their surroundings. In my opinion, the first step on the environmental staircase, therefore, should be a dialectic experience of both nature in literature, and art and nature as it appears outside on their very doorstep. Along with observation, dialogue and reflection, I think children should be encouraged to achieve an understanding of nature through experiences with both roaming maps of nature and their everyday environment. I also think that part of the reflective process should be children's own expressions of nature, through their own drawing/mapping of a wood, a playground, a neighborhood.

In the next section of this article, I examine more closely the landscapes depicted in the actual picturebook maps. I demonstrate how the overall impression of the landscapes can be discussed in relation to the concept of idyll and pastoral, and I question whether these landscapes may develop in children a love for and an awareness of nature.

Too much idyll?

A striking similarity between the maps depicting Tambar and Kubbe's surroundings is the dominance of some specific cartographic features: woods, mountains and various water sources (waterfalls, rivers, lakes). We find all of these features in all the three books, but perhaps emphasized in different ways. We like to think that woods, mountains and coastlines, rivers, and waterfalls are typical aspect of Norwegian nature. I am not sure it is that easy. Such ingredients are also always associated with a much more common depiction or representation of nature that is termed idyll or pastoral. Hence, it would be more precise to call these landscapes idylls, and perhaps suggest that they are a distinctively Nordic version of an idyll. It should be noted that the cityscape depicted on the front endpapers of *Ulla & Bendik build a city* does not contain any of these feature, but perhaps, from a metaphorical perspective, one may suggest that the roads are rivers, the buildings are mountains and the cars are trees in the woods. Instead of being elements of a pastoral idyll, they are elements of a future dystopia that is close at hand.

Aslaug Nyrnes (2017) has examined the pastoral idyll as a literary common place (topoi) relevant the study of nature representations in children's literature. She refers to Ernst Robert Curtius' assertion that the ideal landscape is a rhetorical common place that holds together our contemporary way of thinking about nature. From this, it follows that visual and verbal depictions of landscapes in literature and art are not new creations every time they occur, but the various depictions are a matter of technique and style. Nyrnes also summarizes the main pastoral ingredients: a grove, spring water, green meadows, mountains in the

background, grazing sheep and a shepherd or herder. There may also be fruits of different kinds: apples, olives and grapes (Nyrnes, 2017). In addition, as Gifford notes, other benchmarks of the pastoral are the sense of “idealization, nostalgia, and escapism” and the “defining pastoral momentum of retreat and return” (Gifford, 2014, p. 18). Together, these elements depict a harmonious and friendly coexistence between man, animals and plants, which in turn could be a suitable backdrop for activities intended to achieve a feeling of nature. However, this may also be a disturbing backdrop since such images are constructed ones, perhaps not rooted in any real place. This is probably also the reason why the pastoral idyll is a much disputed and challenging form in the field of ecocriticism. According to Garrard, the question is whether the pastoral is “wedded to outmoded models of harmony and balance” (Garrard, 2012, p. 65). Or whether “pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” as Gifford claims, relaying on Laurence Buell (Gifford, 2014, p. 17). Gifford’s main objective is to argue that, even if the pastoral is a problematic figure or concept when confronted with environmental concerns, it is still relevant to produce new version of the pastoral; that is, to produce post-pastorals which do not so much transcend the problematics of the pastoral as explore them, seeking not a stable, complacent form of harmony in the human relationship with nature – our species’ relationship with its home planet in its macro and its micro ecologies – but seeking a dynamic, self-adjusting accommodation to “discordant harmonies”. (Gifford, 2014, p. 28)

What kind of pastorals are the mapped environments of Tambar, Kubbe and Ulla and Bendik? To use Gifford’s concepts (2014, p. 24), a preliminary suggestion is that the map of Kubbe’s woods represent a sentimental pastoral, while Tambar’s mapped neighborhood may be an example of the so-called complex pastoral, including both nature and culture elements, and Ulla and Bendik’s new city is an urban post-pastoral.

Kubbe-idyll

Understood as a sentimental pastoral, Kubbe’s woods are a place of peace and harmony hardly touched by man. Kubbe plays a crucial role to the woods. He is the main inhabitant, but he is also the one who takes care of it and thus acts as a sort of shepherd or forest ranger who knows the secrets of the winding paths and the nooks and crannies of the wood. Being a piece of wood, Kubbe is an integrated part of the woods, and based on the position of his home in the middle of the map, he is perhaps also the center of the woods and the world. Thus, mapping the woods means mapping Kubbe and the mapped woods may be understood as a kind of portrait. A closer examination of the other inhabitants, the trees, also gives the impression that some of them are alive in a human way. Some branches seem like arms, some stains in the bark seem like eyes, and crowns look like hair and heads.

The map offers small hints of another world outside the woods. To the left, there is a lorry, and the text printed on it reads “oldefar” (great-grandfather). To the right, there is a

text that reads “behind this mountain: the city where Granny lives”. These signs of another world reinforce the impression that the woods are a retreat, a place with another pace than the city. The paths are narrow, unsuitable for cars, or life in general, travelling at high speed. The lack of speed also gives an impression of silence, of tranquility.

For readers as well, engagement with the mapped wood of Kubbe may offer a kind of retreat from the business of their everyday life and from their daily, more or less urban, environment. To engage with literature itself can also be considered a retreat.

In terms of the matrix, and as a first step on the environmental staircase, an encounter with this picturebook may provide the child reader with a harmonious, celebrating view on nature, combined with a slightly anthropomorphic view on the life of the woods. In addition, identifying with the character of Kubbe, may serve as an open invitation to interact with nature themselves.

Tambar-idyll

The idylls of Tambar and Kubbe have a lot in common, such as the harmonious combinations of woods, water and mountains, and the character’s possible role as shepherds. However, Tambar’s world is not static, but enlarged, enriched and changeable, and it is more strongly influenced by the world around. For this reason, it fits better with the notion of a complex pastoral; that is, a pastoral in which “the machine is already in the garden”. Although there were signs of city and cars in the Kubbe-map, the separation between city and nature is less marked in the maps depicting Tambar’s world. Tambar himself lives in a condo, a railway crosses the landscape, and the life of Tambar may be described as divided between his kindergarten (institutionalized garden) on the left, his condo in the middle, and the woods where his family retreats every Sunday on the right.

While Kubbe literally is a piece of the woods itself, Tambar’s character is more ambivalent. He pretends to be an ordinary child hiding his identity as a troll, a creature of nature and a stranger to the culture of man. On Sundays, Tambar and his parents use to

go on a trip to the wood. Because when they are far away from all roads and paths they can throw off their cloths and be as trolley they want. (Bringsværd & Aisato, 2010b)

When in the woods, but also during excursions to the mountains of his ancestors or to the lake and home of another nature-culture creature (the sea snake in Seljordvannet), Tambar explores nature, but also his own identity as a troll, as nature-culture.

Every excursion allows him to explore bits and pieces of his mixed or complex nature. He questions and reflects upon what he sees and learns, and through the various encounters, he creates a place in which he can position himself, gaining confidence about himself as a troll and learning to cope with this in a modern world. His encounters with nature, with the hare, the bees and the sheep, are all pastoral ingredients, and serve to make him aware of his ability to understand, to listen and to speak to nature. This insight makes it easier for him to engage with nature and to understand nature as a helper, rather than something he has to control and hide.

In terms of the matrix, Tambar's ambivalent nature-culture identity, and his ability to cope with human society and communicate with animals, positions him slightly toward an ecocritical awareness on the horizontal axis; and his struggle to understand and accept his troll-identity may shift him from a slightly problematizing position towards a more celebratory attitude towards nature.

Reading the books in the Tambar-series as a first step on the environmental staircase may develop in the reader an openness towards outdoor activities in nearby surroundings and help them to "observe and learn about animals, fish, birds, insects and plants" (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011), as emphasized in the kindergarten framework and the national curriculum for primary school. A dialogic approach to reading may also help children to "ask questions, talk and philosophize about experiences in nature and man's place in nature" and to put into words their own opinions and feelings of nature. If identifying with Tambar, the child reader may experience the complexity of the nature-culture dichotomy and perhaps also question whether man himself may be intertwined with nature, and conclude that it is not a question of either/or. Preschool and primary school teachers could perhaps also understand the potential these books offer to reflect upon how man can listen and respond to nature; that is, develop children's sense of environmental ethics.

One may question the celebratory local geographies of Kubbe and Tambar, on the grounds that they are in line with the idea of an idyll, and one may question the sort of 'feeling of nature' that maps like the one of Kubbe's woods and Tambar's world are striving to develop. Is it too much of an idyll – too little fear (or realism)? I wonder if it is fruitful to try to depict, insist on or re-establish idylls – idylls that perhaps never really existed – or if it is more constructive to try to activate and empower children's capacity to imagine a sustainable future based on our actual surroundings. Perhaps this is the quest Åshild Kanstad Johnsen is suggesting that the readers embark on when she, in her last book, has left Kubbe and instead chosen Ulla and Bendik to reflect upon their surroundings.

Ulla and Bendik-eco-future idyll

The map on the front endpaper depicts a grey cityscape crowded with cars and multi-storey buildings, and a grey mountain barrier in the background. Only a few, tiny trees are visible

here and there. A little to the left of the center, the only human being, a boy, is visible. Probably the boy is Bendik.

This rather sad, perhaps polluted and almost dystopian place is the point of departure for the book's story. Ulla's arrival in the city resembles the arrival of a strange child (or *fremde Kind*). Her background is uncertain; she claims to have come from the jungle, or "more like a city in a jungle" (Johnsen, 2015). A city in sky-high trees where one has to swing on lianas to get to school. As a typical strange child, she is playful, curious and challenging (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 1994). She questions the established picture of the world and wants to build the city again. It takes some effort to convince Bendik, depicted as a rather introverted and artistic child, that his own drawings of cities are feasible (Fig. 7). Bendik's drawings depict crowded and organic places inhabited by children at play. One of the drawings is clearly reminiscent of Kubbe's animated woods.

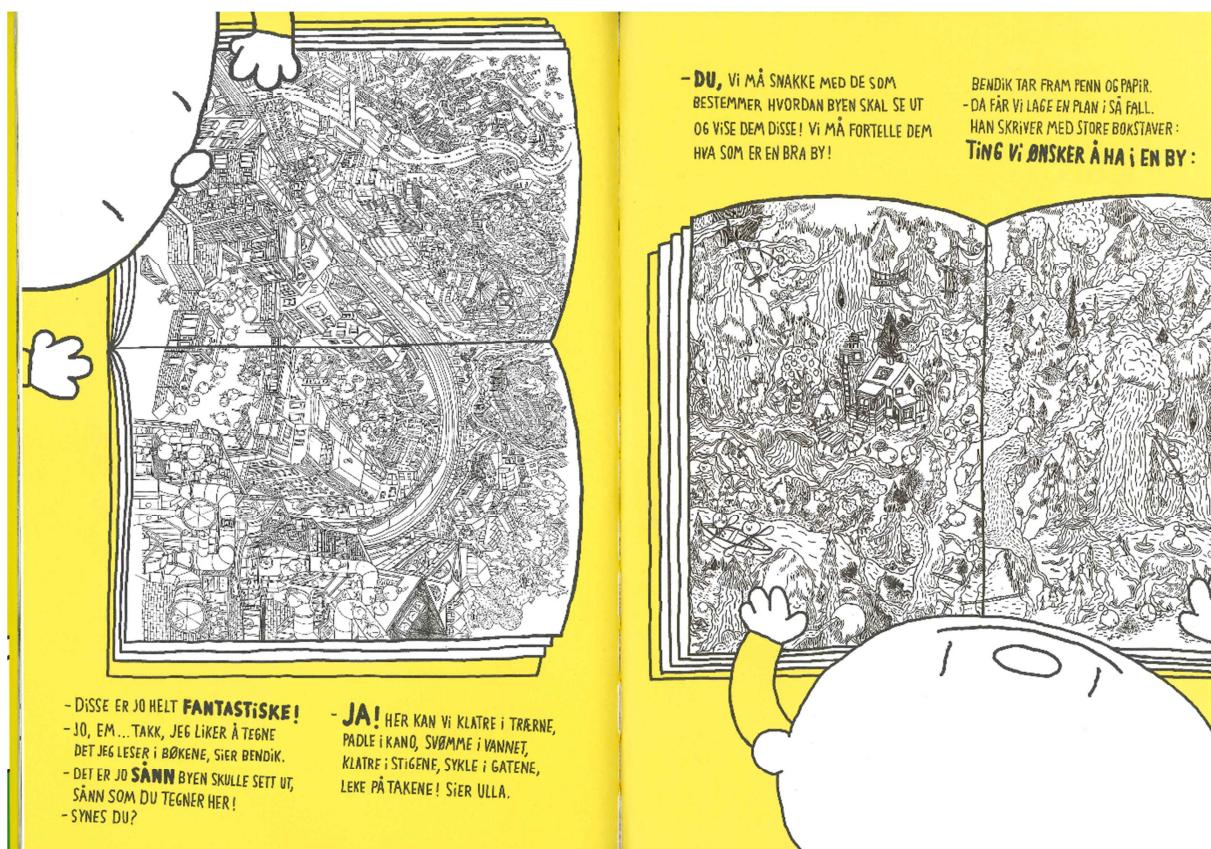


Fig. 7 - Johnsen, Å. K. (2015). *Ulla og Bendik bygger by*. Oslo: Gyldendal.

Encouraged by these drawings, Ulla dictates a list to Bendik of the "Things we wish to have in a city", which, according to Ulla are

nooks and crannies (...) houses in different heights and shapes and they shall **not only** be grey. And we shall have many secret rooms and fantastic places! And fountains! (...) and many tall trees with houses and huts, bridges here and there. And the cars can drive in the air, in tubes! And we have to have circus! And fun fairs! (Johnsen, 2015)

The next day they start building a model of this future city. They take the finished model to the city planners, and although it takes a while, they convince them to implement their plan – and a year later, their dream comes true. The result is a mix of idyll reminiscences and eco-futurism, or a colourful, organic and sustainable eco-future idyll, a post-pastoral landscape; that is, a place that extends beyond “the limitations of pastoral while being recognizable in the pastoral tradition” (Gifford, 2014, p. 26).

Unlike Kubbe and Tambar, Ulla and Bendik are not shepherds protecting or looking after their neighborhood, but city planners, or ecocitizens, problematizing their surroundings and displaying an agency of their own. Readers are invited to adopt their ecocentric position and to climb the environmental staircase to the final step – that is, to take action and to become engaged in their local geography and question its sustainability. Encouraged by the picturebook, children may model their own future cities, or suggest improvements to their own neighborhood and present them to the local authorities. In this way, children may experience how all the four pillars – ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainability, and good governance – are crucial for sustainable development.

Concluding remarks

Although the picturebook about Ulla and Bendik is the only one that proves to be an example of environmental literature, and of climate literature as defined by Gregers Andersen (2014), all three picturebooks have been examined in accordance with the key question posed by Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*: How is nature represented in children and young adults’ literature? Through close readings of the picturebook maps, I have also addressed other ecocritical questions raised by the material, such as: What part does the physical setting play in the plot?; are the values expressed in the texts consistent with ecological wisdom?; and What cross-fertilization is possible between children and young adults’ literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, art, history, education and ethics?

I have found that, while the picturebooks about Kubbe and Tambar may help or support readers to establish or develop the feeling of nature that is crucial to their future care and responsibility of their environment, the picturebook about Ulla and Bendik also has the potential to socialize young people into the responsible and empathetic adults of the future. This picturebook may provide them with what Andresen (2014) called a critical and

imaginative potential, which implies that the reader is alarmed and spurred to self-examination and self-criticism, but also sees the possibilities of the future.

Teachers and educators have to constantly navigate through the piles of children's literature offered to them. Which one should they chose if they are to guide young readers along the path to become the ecocitizens of the future, the one about Kubbe, about Tambar or about Ulla and Bendik? I would recommend the solution chosen by Winnie-the-Pooh, when asked whether he liked honey or condensed milk on his bread: both, please – or in this case, all three.

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