
ABSTRACT

The publishing of norm-critical children’s literature is a relatively new literary phenomena in Sweden. This article aims to map the new literary niche in relation to ideological and cultural contexts.

The main questions are: how are emancipatory ambitions manifested? Where do these ambitions leave the addressee? What norms are being (re-)presented, challenged and/or consolidated, and by what means?

The analysis shows a shift in the output of publishing houses away from more explicitly norm-critical books that convey a pronounced pedagogy of tolerance in their presentation of same sex couples or alternative ways of doing gender, towards a less explicit questioning of norms and less family-oriented approach. Hence, there is an ongoing reorientation away from an initial emphasis on individualistic aspects and free will towards motifs like poverty, migration and death.

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Keywords: children’s literature, picture books, norm critique, intersectionality
In 2007, a new phenomenon surfaced in the Swedish book market. Two small publishers that labelled themselves 'norm critical' were established: Olika, and Vilda. Since then, further publishing houses with similar agendas saw the light of day, such as Sagolikt, and Vombat, both established in 2008. They have generated what seems to be a new niche in children’s literature, a niche that we will henceforth refer to as norm crit.

According to an article by Maria Jönsson (2017) on norm-critical children’s literature, the books published by these outlets express an ambivalent view of children: »On the one hand, children are innocent and free and should be encouraged to maintain this liberalality towards differences among people. On the other hand, children need to be trained in practicing this freedom.« Our article advances this analysis by studying a wider selection of norm-crit picture books. The emphasis on picture books provides an opportunity to analyse not only textual, but also visual and visual-textual or iconotextual discourses. We examine the paradoxical child discourse in more detail, but also shed light on other profound contradictions and paradoxes in the norm-crit literary field. From an intersectional perspective, we analyse selected books in their norm-critical context and investigate how the publishing houses address potential (adult) customers, but also what happens when the (supposed) norm-critical agenda is incorporated into picture books aimed at children and grown-up readers alike. As this literary field establishes itself, equal treatment work in schools and other institutions is becoming oriented towards a norm-critical pedagogy. An increasing awareness of norms and stereotypes can also be seen in the field of children’s literature in general. Before concluding this article, we will discuss these changes by highlighting some examples of picture books released by publishing houses that have not presented themselves as norm critical.

In order to deepen understandings of norm-critical children’s literature, we consider cultural and ideological contexts, and elucidate connections to the Swedish gender equality project as well as to a new liberal paradigm. Our main questions are: how do emancipatory ambitions manifest themselves, whether
on the level of representation or of narrative? Where does this leave the addressee? And what norms are being (re-)presented, challenged and/or consolidated and by what means?

Norms may marginalize and violate, yet we cannot do without them. In a dissertation examining a Swedish preschool with a pedagogical model that explicitly deals with norms, Klara Dolk reiterates an inherent contradiction: while scrutinizing norms and normativity, a norm-critical discourse simultaneously sets ideal normative standards. In our analysis of literature, we consider the consequences of this. That is, how picture books simultaneously question and (re)produce normative and ideal standards.

Inspired by Norman Fairclough’s (1992) critical discourse analysis, we scrutinize how norm-critical intentions and especially discourses of freedom and individuality are expressed in publishing houses’ promotional material as well as in the picture books themselves. Critical discourse analysis examines ideological attitudes in discourses that may appear to be neutral as well as in more explicitly ideological discourses. Whereas previously, critical discourse analysis mainly focused on texts, it is now also being utilized in studies of the ideological aspects of images and visual-textual material. In line with Fairclough, we focus on the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of discourse. This means that our analysis shares in some respects the norm-critical perspective that the publishing houses claim to take. As we will discuss later though, the explicitly norm-critical approach of the publishing houses actually seems to avoid contradictions rather than acknowledging or even embracing them.

The literary material consists of a selection of Swedish picture books published between 2008 and 2016. The analysis deals with several titles, but specifically focuses on four picture books published by three explicitly norm-crit publishing houses: Olika, Sagolikt and Vombat. The titles are Kalle med klänning (2008) [Kalle with a dress], Jag vill ha baklava (2010) [I want baklava], Prinsessan Victoria (2014) [Princess Victoria], and Vulkanen och kalven som Po räddade (2016) [The volcano and the calf that Po saved]. The article is part of a more comprehensive study of a relatively new field in Sweden: the norm-crit publishing of children’s literature.

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**CRITIQUE OF NORM-CRIT PUBLISHING**

During 2008, there was an intense debate in Sweden regarding norm-critical children’s books. Literary scholar Eva Heggestad commented on this debate in her article »Regnbågsfamiljer och könsöverskridande barn« [»Rainbow families and transgendered children«]. As Heggestad shows, the debate was anchored in an older conflict between didactic/ideological and aesthetic aspects; a dichotomy that has been and still is a...
central part of the debate of children’s literature. The point of
departure this time was comments made on Swedish television
by Lotta Olsson, editor of the children’s literature review in
the major Swedish daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, and Per
Gustavsson, author of children’s literature. Gustavsson is
probably best known for his picture books about brave, not
very traditional but very pink princesses who play hockey or
rescue princes. Both Olsson and Gustavsson condemned norm-
crit publishing as such, leading to a debate in *Dagens Nyheter*
that continued in other media as well. The old dichotomy
between didactics/ideology and aesthetics was rekindled.\(^8\)

Making another approach to this polemical debate, literary
scholar Sara Kärrholm then called for both new ideas and good
stories. She reminds us of what, according to her, is a forgotten
premise of children’s literature: »[N]ot all political children’s
literature is radical and all children’s literature is after all
ideological.«\(^9\)

Reading the debate from a critical discourse perspective, we
find an interesting similarity in the two main standpoints of
the debate, namely that both sides share a concern for freedom.
Lotta Olsson and others representing an ‘aesthetic’ view claim
that children’s literature ought to be a free artistic domain.
Commentators representing the ‘ideological’ view, in this case
editors and authors connected to norm-crit publishing houses,
champion a children’s literature capable of setting the young
reader free. In the light of Kärrholm’s comment quoted above, it
could be argued that this dichotomy is based on false grounds,
since all literature has some ideological implications. Still, the
dichotomy is kept alive in the debate, as contradictory ideas of
freedom are exploited.

In a book chapter on norm-critical children’s literature,
Maria Jönsson compares selected norm-crit children’s books
with a picture book by Anna-Clara and Thomas Tidholm, *En
som du inte känner* [One you do not know] (2010), published
by one of Sweden’s leading children’s literature publishing
houses. Yet according to Jönsson, by adopting an innovative,
experimental narrative form, the latter title challenges domi-
nant norms much more radically than the self-labelled norm-
crit picture books. With an emphasis on the mode of narrative,
Jönsson claims that the ambitions of the norm-critical
publishing houses tend to result in a less radical pedagogy
of tolerance. They might broaden the range of representation.
However, given their often uncritical repetition of dominant
narrative standards, they are incapable of questioning social
norms in a more radical manner. Still, we might add that
neither the images nor the text in Tidholms’ book question
the binary gender model. It is stated verbally that one of the
characters is a girl and that the narrator is a boy. Visually, the
characters are depicted according to different gender models,
but their behaviour cannot be considered clearly gendered though the boy is the one asking questions trying to figure out who the girl is.

Our study confirms that the majority of self-proclaimed norm-critical picture books are characterized by more or less traditional narrative modes that relate to such topics as family life, unfold in chronological order and incorporate symmetric word-picture relations. Even more notable than this literature’s traditional form are its ideological aspects. We find that these picture books frequently reproduce an individualistic discourse that envisages emancipation exclusively on an individual level. As Klara Dolk has pointed out, the norm-critical approach is in itself contradictory as it simultaneously questions one set of norms at the same time as establishing another. Our analysis of the norm-critical phenomenon, both in terms of marketing material and picture books, in the wider context of the Swedish gender project and new liberalism reveals some interesting paradoxes.

Before we go into detail concerning the literary material, we consider the norm-critical project in the socio-cultural and ideological contexts in which these publishing houses were established in Sweden during the 2000s.

THE NORM-CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Norm-critical perspectives were established in Sweden in the early 2000s, in opposition to the discourse surrounding the pedagogy of tolerance. The latter refers to pedagogic equality work that highlights prejudices by pinpointing what is regarded as deviant so as to change the attitude of the majority and make them tolerant towards »the Others«. In contrast to which, norm critique is interested in how social standards and norms are created, and therefore focuses on processes in which otherness is (re-)produced. Unable to disrupt inequality, tolerance discourse can at its best soften its effects: »while norm-critical discourse intends to shed light on and change unequal power relations, the consequence of the others [the tolerance discourse and the new authoritarian discourse] is that they cover up and consolidate relations of power«, as Maria Rosén argues in an article on norm-critical pedagogy. According to Elisabet Langmann and Niclas Månsson, by focusing on the production of an individual’s identity, norm-critical equal treatment work in the Swedish education sector presupposes and thus reproduces a classic modernist idea of the subject. By positioning some bodies as the norm and others as challenging the norm, the dominant norm-critical discourse produces bodies that do not belong in either category. Hence, these bodies become what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls strangers, which means further marginalization and exclusion.
We will come back to the question of how these contradictions and inherent tensions are manifested in selected case studies.

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**THE PUBLISHING HOUSES: MARKETING STRATEGIES AND SELF-PRESENTATION**

In just a few years, Olika, Sagolikt and Vombat have become well-established publishing houses oriented towards norm criticism. Their publications attract media attention. Often, libraries now devote discrete spaces to norm-critical literature, albeit labelled in different ways (e.g. »Rainbow families«) and many preschools use norm-critical text books in their equal treatment work.

Of the three publishing houses mentioned above, Olika is the most successful and also the most active regarding promotion and marketing strategies. Before opening in 2006, the editor contacted gender researchers for comments on Olika’s forthcoming books. The publisher’s website states that researchers were consulted but no names are mentioned. Olika publishes various picture books, young adult novels, easy reading literature and textbooks. One of the publishing house’s slogans reads: »Throw out stereotypes – throw in possibilities.«

Besides the Olika publishing house, the company also consists of Olika Education and Olika Production. Olika offers its services to companies intending to develop marketing strategies and products with a norm-critical orientation. Olika cooperates with several authors and illustrators who are more or less well known. This makes their output more heterogeneous than Vombat’s and much more heterogeneous than Sagolikt’s, where the editors themselves write and illustrate all of the publisher’s books.

A success story, according to Olika, is the manual *Give your Child 100 Opportunities instead of 2: On gender traps and gender trouble in daily life* (2009), written by Kristina Henkel and Marie Tomičić. According to Olika, the book sales amount to over 10,000 copies. The publication is also used as a textbook in different educational settings, whether geared towards parents or preschools.

In 2015, Olika published *Norm creativity in preschool: On norm critique and forms of equal treatment*, written by editor Karin Salmson and social worker Johanna Ivarsson. The book contains recommendations that mainly address preschool teachers. It employs the kind of child discourse on which Jönsson comments in her article, namely the view that children ought to be protected by not being informed about certain facts: »The longer children remain unaware of social norms, the better«. Precisely how this
statement is to be understood is an open question. However, from this viewpoint, knowledge might harm the supposed innocent child – an idea rooted in Romanticism. What is of course implied is a literature without stereotypes or any expression of ideal social standards that might be exclusive or violent. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, an articulation (be it textual or visual) cannot help but to some degree reproduce dominant discourses, even when challenging them. This makes a literature completely free of stereotypes a utopian dream rather than a realistic goal to strive for since both literature and the reception of it is socially embedded. Literary characters and narratives might of course be more or less gender-specific, more or less stereotyped. An articulation might also be comprehended in different ways in different social context, depending on the specific readers and the specific reading situation. Children’s uses of literature can differ from the one intended, something that may undermine the intended pedagogical outcomes of the norm-critical literary project. This means that the particular uses of the titles published might run counter to the explicit intentions of the publishing houses.

Olika’s major literary break-through is associated with the publishing of *Kivi och monsterhund* (2012) [*Kivi and monster dog*], a rhyming picture book written by Jesper Lundqvist and illustrated by Bettina Johansson. The book is sometimes referred to as the »hen-bok« in Swedish, since it was the first children’s book to use the gender-neutral pronoun ‘hen’ (a gender-neutral fusion of the Swedish feminine pronoun ‘hon’ [she] and the masculine pronoun ‘han’ [he]). This pronoun was relatively new in 2012 and the book helped spark an intense debate about gender, partly in relation to children’s literature. In Sweden there had been picture books containing gender-neutral protagonists before, such as Siri Reuterstrand’s and Jenny Wik’s nine volumes about the child Ellis (2007–2009). But no one had used the word ‘hen’. In *Kivi and Monsterdog*, there are a raft of innovative linguistic constructions and neologisms: »Mappor och pammor morbroster Jin,/en bryssling, en marfor, en halvkvartskusin,/små parvel pysor och storebröstrar!« In this way, the literary text undermines the gender-biased system as well as dominant discourses of family, though the (extended) family remains a motif. Johansson’s pictures show various human and other hybrid living beings who are impossible to categorize in terms of gender. A sequel book was published in 2013, *Kivi och goraffen* [*Kivi and the goraffe*], with a closely related story and, in 2016, *Kivi och drakbrakaren* [*Kivi and the dragonclasher*] was launched. Though norm-breaking in several respects, the protagonist is presented in line with current individualistic norms. Kivi is depicted as a very determined child who is competent in getting, or rather
making others helping him/her get what he/she wants. The outcome is never exactly what Kivi expected though, but rather an untamed amalgam of different species. There is also an activity book with the character Kivi and the books are, among other titles by Olika mentioned in this article, included in a so-called ‘preschool package’, which contains several picture books, textbooks and reading manuals.

Another norm-crit publishing house in the field of children’s literature in Sweden is Sagolikt, which was established in 2008. Sagolikt is run by the editors Anette Skåhlberg and Katarina Dahlquist. All books published thus far are written by Skåhlberg and illustrated by Dahlquist.

Sagolikt’s self-stated vision is just like Olika’s: to break and transform norms. Sagolikt’s homepage presents what is at once a norm-critical agenda and a marketing text as well:

--- Break the norms

It is we, the adults, who must give all children the best opportunity to look at the world in an uncritical way. All children bear the prejudices we give them. Children are as broadminded as we allow them to be. Everybody ought to be loved, regardless of their gender, age, appearance, race or religion. We think that it is very important for children to be children for as long as possible. It is important that the fairy tales children read by themselves or listen to give them what they need to become empathic and open-minded adults.19

It is worth noticing that the publishing house argues that all children should have the opportunity to develop an »uncritical« approach to the world. The editors aim to contribute in this respect by letting children remain children »for as long as possible«. This is in line with the shift that Hugh Cunningham (2005) connects with a tendency in the West, beginning in the late 20th century and continuing today, that children and childhood itself are regarded as being in need of protection.20 According to Sagolikt’s vision, children ought to be protected from existing prejudices and inequality, rather than becoming aware of them and thus learning how to handle them in a critical but constructive way.

The third publishing house analysed in this article is Vombat:

--- Vombat publishing house is a small publishing house that thinks big. Our founding assumption is the notion that all human beings have equal value. Our primary target groups are children and young adults from 2 to 18 years of age. Our books aim to show various aspects of the lives of children and young adults in a norm-creative way. Quality, humour and warmth accompany diversity
and things that sometimes depart from what is expected.
We want all children who read our books to identify with,
mavel at, have their thoughts challenged by and maybe
even conquer new worlds.21

As mentioned in the quotation, diversity, representation and
identification for all children are invoked. In this text, the
challenging aspect of literature is highlighted. Hence, Vombat
aims to bring the reader both self-recognition and challenges.

Vombat wants its literature to function in »a norm-creative
way«, whereas Olika stresses its aim »to throw out stereo-
types«. Sagolikt publishing house intends to »break the norms«
and make it easier for children to choose for themselves whom
they want to be. In contrast to Olika and Sagolikt, Vombat’s
explicit ambition connects to discourses of representation,
recognition and challenge.

--- KALLE WITH A DRESS: NORM CRITICAL OR
NORM CONSOLIDATING?

Kalle med klänning [Kalle with a dress] by Anette Skåhlberg
and Katarina Dahlquist is a popular picture book from 2008,
published by Sagolikt. The book, and its sequel Kalle som Lucia
[Kalle as Lucia], (2009), are commercial successes according to
the publishing house, with reprints of both titles selling out.22
The theme of boys deviating from masculine norms was also
treated later in strikingly similar titles published by Olika:
Konrads klänning [Konrad’s dress] (2014) and Konrad lussar
[Konrad is Lucia] (2014), both written by Åsa Mendel-Hartvig
and illustrated by Caroline Röstlund.

One of the paratexts in »Kalle with a dress« is Anette
Skåhlberg’s motto: »It is you who decide whom you want to be.«23
This, together with an advertisement for another picture
book published by Sagolikt, is placed on the cover page, before
the story has begun. Firstly, these reading instructions are
directed to the adult reader, even if the motto is also directed
to the child, who is expected to be strengthened by the explicit
statement that you are capable of deciding for yourself whom
you want to be, and hence who you can be. The motto inclines
towards a discourse of freedom in line with an individualistic
discourse that presumes the child is able to know who she/he
wants to be, independently of any context. In this way, the book
primarily addresses a young reader who is set free from social
norms. The addressee is assumed to be able to shape his or
her identity autonomously, regardless of what others consider
normal in terms of, for example, clothing. This is the general
didactic/norm-critical message in both written and visual texts.

Glossy, full-page pictures, all in colour, are presented on the
left-hand side of the spread, strictly separated from the words.
The written text is placed to the right, surrounded by smaller
pictures. A painted brown thread accompanies every spread. The aesthetic is neither groundbreaking nor experimental, but rather functional. There are intertextual references to other well-known Swedish picture books, such as a little cat who is reminiscent of Findus in Sven Nordqvist’s Pettson and Findus series of books. Therein, Nordqvist depicts an idyll of the Swedish countryside in some detail. In spread three in “Kalle with a dress,” the picture of the cat reinforces just such an idyllic situation. The boy Kalle, with the typical Swedish name and very light hair, is a guest at his cousins’ house in the countryside during the summer. The cousins’ parents run a hostel. It is pleasantly warm weather and all the people in the pictures are laughing. The narrator points out that Kalle is visiting his cousins, named Gloster and Granat, after different kinds of apples. These original names could be read as an ironic wink to the adult reader. The motif is classic: it is summer holiday and the children are playing with plentiful supplies of wild flowers in the meadows, alluding to a common understanding of a nature-loving people and the Swedish right to roam.

The children’s games strengthen the discourse of the innocence and freedom of childhood. This discourse is put into direct contrast with the general dress code in western countries like Sweden, which dictates that boys and men normally do not wear dresses.

Kalle wants to wear a dress for practical reasons. It is very warm outside and he is, according to the narrator, happy and comfortable wearing a pink dress with silver dots. Kalle’s individual choice is presented positively, both visually and textually. The problem posed is one of the reactions hailing from the surrounding environment.

The hetero norm is represented by Kalle’s working class family; the father works as a garage mechanic and the mother as a train driver. The parents are clearly gendered, with the pictures depicting them wearing different kinds of clothing. However, the issue of gender representation within their lines of work is not raised. The parents object to their son’s choice of clothing: “you can’t go around in a dress all the time.” After the summer holiday, as the six-year-old boy starts school, the parents want the son to become normalized and wear a shirt and trousers. Yet, Kalle goes to school wearing a dress. Both his classmates and their parents immediately react to his clothing. The narrator states: “This is impossible. He must dress in ordinary clothes. He must be normal, and dress normally.” Kalle refuses to adjust and he is pleased with his choice. His parents change their minds and eventually start to defend him by turning the whole concept of norms upside down: “It is normal for Kalle to wear a dress, therefore he is normal.”

Kalle is both textually and visually portrayed as a very self-confident child, who is not bothered by what others may think of his appearance. The message is clear: a boy who likes to
Image 1. »Kalle With a Dress« by Anette Skåhlberg and Katarina Dahlquist.
wear a dress should not be mocked. Further, the story focuses on individual freedom and the assumed possibility that one can be whoever one wants to be, regardless of social norms. Still, this individualistic theme ends in a situation where all human characters wear dresses.

At first, Kalle is punished for his choice but, in the end, he is rewarded as what was formerly perceived as deviation becomes the norm. The dress is now depicted as magical, bringing all boys superpowers and enhancing their skills in whatever they do; whether football, golf or working as a garage mechanic. The dress is connected to actions and enhanced performance as a person.

»Kalle with a dress« can be regarded as norm-crit example of children’s literature in line with the ambition of the publishing house, since Kalle confidently wears a dress and even gets all the other boys and men to do the same. On the other hand, the picture book confirms traditional masculine norms. The dress is in fact transformed into a masculine attribute that enhances the role of boys. The narrator explains: »it is impossible to stop the achievements of the boys.« The pictures show girls and women too, all wearing dresses or skirts. For them though, the dresses are not connected with magic. Far from being transformed, the inequality of the gender relation is strengthened: the men, but not the girls, become superheroes. A new excluding norm is established, as the individualistic norm is simultaneously consolidated.

In her article, Eva Heggestad concludes that masculinity has something to gain by being feminized in »Kalle with a dress«. The book shows that boys may enjoy wearing clothes usually worn by girls. But does it really change the binary gender system or the notion of what it means to be a boy? We would rather argue that the dress has little to do with feminization, but is transformed into a magic tool that enhances the boy’s capabilities and thus enhances masculine dominance.

Fairclough discusses how utterances that are not grammatically negative might still function semantically in a negative manner. This reasoning is relevant to understanding the paradoxical workings of discourse in »Kalle with a dress«. By trying so desperately hard to convince the reader that a boy may wear a dress, it simultaneously confirms the norm that says boys who wear dresses constitute a major deviation. The iconotext also emphasizes the norm by explicitly neglecting it and saying that one may create one’s own norms. In »Kalle with a dress«, the inverting of a system of norms takes place as if it were as easy as a walk in the park.
As Jönsson claims, most self-stated norm-critical books reproduce socio-realistic narrative standards. This is partly confirmed by our study, though we would now like to add some nuances. *Jag vill ha baklava* [I want baklava] was published in 2010 by Olika förlag. It is written by Kalle Güettler and illustrated by the Danish illustrator Pia Halse. The book has no straightforward narrative and contains some quite experimental pictures in which various textual and visual elements merge. There are free flying heads and big balloons ‘bleed’ from one page into the other. Sometimes the reader needs to turn the book upside down to be able to read the text.

The cover features a picture of a man with a gigantic, black moustache and huge eyebrows. He wears a yellow T-shirt with a peace symbol. On top of the man’s hat, there is a little spy wearing a hat and shoes. To the right there is a black-haired child wearing a purple dress. This is Perian and the man is her father. The story has a first person narrator, whose name or gender is not mentioned. He/she lives with her two mothers and a sibling, Kim.

The plot is quite simple: after having tasted Perian’s baklava, the main character/first person narrator is determined to get hold of more. The main character is not visually portrayed until the last spread and is not explicitly gendered either in the text or the images on the last spread. He/she looks like a smaller version of one of the mums, with curly red hair. The visual depiction of Kim on the other hand reminds of the portrayal of the other mother, but with glasses.

The parents are both busy with meetings and cannot help their child buy or bake baklava. Neither of them even seem to have heard of baklava, leading to several misunderstandings and a play on words. One of the mums asks if baklava is healthy or cheap, thus representing a disciplinary adult world that the narrator rejects. When Kim tells the main character to check on the web about how to bake baklava, he/she strangely enough does not search the Internet. Instead, a visual and textual investigation of the different meanings (of the Swedish) word for web [»nät«], such as spider web, toy railway and fishing net, develops across subsequent spreads.

Eventually, the main character/first person narrator visits Perian, but only because Perian’s father has promised to help him/her baking baklava. After the baking is done, as he/she arrives back home, the parents are angry because their child did not give them a call to tell them where he/she was. Thus, the first person character/narrator now repeats the phrase that one of the mothers utters at the beginning: »I did not have the
time, the child says and continues: I had to bake baklava.\(^{36}\)
The last page presents a detailed recipe.

The main character is certainly presented as a competent child, even if he/she is far from being typical of contemporary children’s literature regarding technological competence\(^{37}\) — this young person seems to be totally unaware of the Internet. Nevertheless, the narrator is presented as highly competent at getting what he/she wants, no matter what it takes.

I want baklava\(^{38}\) certainly broadens out representations of whiteness, ethnicity, sexuality, family norms and gender. In addition, it departs from the idea of a transparent mode of narrating, both textually and visually. In contrast to most of our selected titles, it challenges the ideal standard of a straightforward mode of narrating, accompanied by realistic, more or less symmetrical, illustrations. The textual-visual relation is more complex and playful than in most of the
other examples. Rather than »throwing stereotypes out«, it visually utilizes the cliché of the »oriental« man by combining stereotypical features (such as a gigantic black moustache and huge eyebrows) with non-stereotypical features (the hippie T-shirt, baking skills, badminton). 

»I want baklava« does not merely broaden the range of representation but also emphasizes the ambivalence, contradictions and surplus that language produces. This relates to the post-structuralist understanding of meaning-making as a complex, contradictory process that cannot be fully regulated, since every utterance carries an unintended surplus.\(^{38}\) This approach blurs every simplistic understanding of representation. Yet, the story clearly has a didactic ambition. The main character's statement at the beginning, that one has to do everything by oneself, is only partly confirmed. Certainly the main character is able to fulfil his/her wishes, though not without help from others.

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**PRINCESS VICTORIA: A STORY OF HOMELESSNESS?**

*Prinsessan Victoria* [Princess Victoria] is written by Kristina Murray Brodin and illustrated by Kajsa Lind. Olika published the book in 2014. In the centre of the cover, the title character is pictured: a shabby white woman with spiky hair, sitting on a bench with a shopping trolley and a plastic bag close by. To the left, there is a dark skinned child offering the woman a pair of gloves. Their eyes meet. The dot above the first »i« in the title is shaped like a princess's crown, emphasizing the princess theme. However, those who expect feminine glamour will be deeply disappointed or perhaps happily surprised. This is not a fairy tale of wealth, heterosexual love and happiness, but a socially realistic depiction of a young child meeting a homeless woman, trying to help her out. With few exceptions, the socially realistic textual and visual modes of telling are largely symmetrical, resulting in a lot of redundancy.\(^{39}\)

The representation of literary characters is explicitly broadened out in the picture book. Though more and more non-white characters appear in Swedish picture books, most human characters are still white and often middle class.\(^{40}\) In this book, the eponymous heroine is a homeless woman. The main character/first person narrator is a brown-skinned child living with her dad in a flat. The father is portrayed as a proper working man, baking buns, watching news and keeping the home neat and tidy, in line with the Swedish male standard envisaged in gender equality terms. Throughout the book, the representation of gender is sensitively handled, even with regard to the more minor characters.

Regarding class, the book is more complicated: it is neither clearly progressive nor explicitly norm critical. The narrative portrays the homeless woman from the point of view of the
child, who one day comes across her as she sits near the block where he/she lives.

Victoria is principally portrayed as a speechless character, who repeatedly responds merely with »You little one!«. This phrase is repeated throughout the book like a refrain. In fact, these are almost the only words that the homeless woman utters. When asked, she replies that she is called Victoria. Just like the princess, the first person narrator comments with reference to the Swedish context. The name of the child/narrator is not mentioned, neither is he/she gendered either textually or visually. If gender is not an explicit theme in this book, various aspects of class, or rather economic differences on a micro level, are; they are also integral to the central motif of homelessness and poverty.

Class is made visible through the use of contrasts. The narrator lives in a neatly organized apartment block, and it is stated that the narrator’s family stayed at a hotel during the previous summer. In relation to Victoria, there is a major class difference, not least as regards her physical appearance. The narrator comments on her teeth, several of which are missing, as can be seen in the pictures. There are also comments about her odour. In one passage, the narrator claims to be able to tell from the smell that Victoria has been sleeping in their house. Also, one of the neighbours is said to find it smelly and messy in the attic where Victoria sleeps.

While Victoria hardly says anything at all during the course of the story, the child opens up and tells her of his/her own personal problems. Despite the lack of verbal response, the child is seemingly content with the kind look in Victoria’s eyes.
something that is emphasized in the text. Nevertheless, when Victoria does not answer the child’s question about where she lives, he/she gets angry and starts screaming. After this, Victoria utters what is by far her longest line, in which she says that she could live like a princess if someone would leave the front door open.42

This is the only passage in which Victoria asks, albeit indirectly, for help. In all other cases, it is the competent child character alone who establishes what is required, bringing the homeless person warm clothing, soap, water and cinnamon buns. In this respect, the book represents a familiar turn in Scandinavian picture books of the two last decades, such that competent children play a key role when adults become incapable of responding to circumstances as expected.43 In this case, the child is presented as if he/she were an adult in relation to Victoria, who lacks access to the resources required to meet even her own basic needs, such as those relating to hygiene. This also means that the narrator judges Victoria and tells her the kind of things that adults more often tell children, such as the fact that she ought to see a dentist.

Given that the story is told from a child’s perspective, and that Victoria has very few lines in which to present her point of view, this is not a story primarily about homelessness or a portrayal of a homeless person but rather a story of a child meeting a homeless person and trying to help her out. The causes and effects of homelessness are not dealt with on a macro-level. In the end Victoria disappears, but this does not seem to bother the main character. His/her focus is now on a new friend named Lou, who is about to pay a visit. Hence, Victoria becomes a part of the story that the narrator might share with the new friend.

According to Dolk, gender pedagogy and equal treatment work in general tend to emphasize role models and good examples. As a consequence, the discussion tends to be limited to success on an individual level and exclude failure and problematic issues. This applies very often to (norm-critical) picture books too, perhaps at least in part as an effect of the narrative frequently playing out from a child’s perspective, but also of the pronounced didactic intention. This might in turn explain why the question of social injustice is omitted even in a picture book that tells a story of homelessness.44 Regarding Victoria, the situation is practically the same in the beginning and in the end. But the main character has both lost and found a friend, while fulfilling his/her mission to help a poor, homeless human being by feeding her and keeping her warm and clean. At the same time, she found someone to speak to openly about his/her friend, who is about the same age.
THE VOLCANO AND THE CALF THAT PO SAVED: PUTTING ONESELF OR ONE’S MORAL OBLIGATIONS FIRST?

The picture book *Vulkanen och kalven som Po räddade* [The volcano and the calf that Po saved] by illustrator Grethe Rottböll and author Viveka Sjöberg was published by Vombat in 2016. Both Rottböll and Sjöberg are well-established names in the field of children’s literature in Sweden. The pictures in the book are expressive and clearly influenced by Japanese woodcuts. The story takes place outside Sweden, in a country that could be Japan. On the cover page, there is a dedication to Masami Yoshizawa from Fukushima, a cow keeper who is still alive today.° The pictures play a central role in the story, also reflecting changes to the natural world as the story proceeds. In the first spread, the landscape is pictured in yellow, green and brown colours associated with peace and harmony. This spread contrasts with the following one, which shows the volcano erupting. Here, the landscape is totally black, with the exception of the white ink. The presentation of the volcano eruption clearly symbolizes danger and fear, and just about everyone must leave the island. However, Po Shepherd is unable to leave his cows due to his sense of responsibility.

In *The volcano and the calf that Po saved*, the protagonist is presented as a human being taking responsibility for others and fulfilling his obligations no matter what it costs him. A conflict between species, but also between the obligations towards

*Image 4. The volcano and the calf that Po saved* by Grethe Rottböll and Viveka Sjöberg.
others vis-à-vis the obligations towards oneself is made abundantly clear: »You have to think of yourself. Cows are not important. You should eat cows. You should milk cows. Yes, these are the things they shouted at him. But Po was no butcher, he was a cow keeper.» Po listens to the people who surround him, but remains in the poisoned landscape in order to take care of the cows. The main motif, children caring for animals, is rather common. In this picture book, there is a possible symbolic level relating to obligations and solidarity across species. It is a story of not leaving other species to die and being prepared to forsake oneself while acting in solidarity with others.

In Pija Lindenbaum’s *Pudlar och pommes* (2016) [Poodles and French fries], published by Lilla piratförlaget [Little pirate publisher], there is a similar motif. The story is about three dogs escaping from their island, leaving behind a little black dog all on its own. After a while, the dogs decide to return and retrieve the one they left behind. The motif of escape connects directly to the contemporary global situation. More and more people live in exile. Many people escape precarious situations by foot, walking along dangerous roads and over the hills, others are hidden on small rafts and cast out upon the Mediterranean Sea. The picture book processes the actual political situation in a similar manner to how »The volcano and the calf that Po saved« thematizes obligation, solidarity and care.

**FINAL REMARKS**

»Kalle with a dress« and »Princess Victoria« each relate differently to their publishers’ explicit norm-critical intentions, though there are some similarities to be found. Both titles contribute textually and visually to broadening out the representation of people, but neither explicitly questions relevant norms. In this respect, they express a tolerance of the pedagogical approach rather than pursuing a norm-critical one. Our study therefore confirms Jönsson’s conclusion mentioned earlier, concerning the less than radical outlook expressed in norm-critical publications. It also confirms Heggestad’s claim that even queer picture books may well challenge heteronormativity but they often confirm the ideal standard of a stable couple by depicting families with same sex parents in a mainstream way. Hence, they avoid more controversial subjects like a lesbian couple divorcing or transsexuality. This is, as Heggestad notes, in line with B. J. Epstein’s study on how heteronormativity is represented in Anglo-Saxon children’s literature. This is also convergent with Dolk’s claim that a gender pedagogy and equal treatment work in general tend to focus on success stories rather than presenting difficulties or failures.

The most striking result of our analysis is, we would argue, the dominant emphasis on the competent and individualistic
child’s determination to get what she/he wants. This goes hand-in-hand with a new liberalistic ideology, as we mention above. The associated discourse is part of the somewhat contradictory or heterogeneous norm-critical project, where collectivism and individualistic or (new) liberal discourses intersect. »Princess Victoria« tells a story of a determined child who is capable of assisting a homeless person without involving others. Eventually, the homeless person disappears, leaving no significant traces behind. The verbal text tells that the main character/narrator finds a new friend at school to replace a previous friend who had let her down before she met Victoria. In »I want baklava« the protagonist is unable to cope alone but a friend’s father helps him/her acquire a delicious pastry. This could be interpreted as a statement of solidarity. On the other hand, one might conclude that the protagonist uses other people in order to realize his/her will.

As we made obvious in our reading, Kalle in »Kalle with a dress« is portrayed as a boy with norms of his own, independent of dominant ideal standards and other people’s opinions. He is characterized as a free, innocent child. The happy ending in this case results in everyone wearing a dress, a piece of clothing that endows one with super powers, assuming that one is a boy or a man. In this sense, the story consolidates aspects of hegemonic masculinity rather than challenging them, as it simultaneously presents another dominant norm by inverting an existing one regarding clothing and gender: though girls still wear dresses, children’s appearances are still clearly gender defined. The main character in »Princess Victoria« secretly takes responsibility for a homeless woman, yet the picture book reproduces a view of homeless people as being smelly and dirty. Further, the picture book reproduces existing norms by presenting the homeless woman as more or less mute. And eventually, the protagonist/narrator finds a new friend at school who replaces both Victoria and, first and foremost, the former friend at school who let the protagonist/narrator down by not inviting him/her to a party. Thus, Victoria disappears as quickly as she showed up, leaving no more permanent effects than traces in the snow.

Our examples tend toward success stories of independence and individual autonomy, with »The volcano and the calf that Po saved« as the one striking exception. Hence, this picture book, like many children’s picture books, has a happy or at least an open ending. It deviates in several ways from the other examples analysed or commented upon in this article. This title does not clearly mock dominant norms regarding gender or sexuality; it presents a textually and visually gendered boy. In contrast to most norm-critical picture books, the story is not set in a familiar and current western or Swedish context, but in a landscape that is reminiscent of Japan (an aspect that the
paratexts also indicate). First and foremost though, rather than promoting individual freedom, the story instead challenges contemporary norms that champion individual freedom and autonomy. It also mocks the humanistic idea of absolute human superiority over and above other species: in this story, humans’ moral obligations are even applied where animals are concerned.

This title is not the only picture book from the norm-critical publisher that has an approach to the norm-critical agenda different to that of earlier titles, which mostly focus on gender and family norms. »Princess Victoria« deals with norms regarding poverty and homelessness, though, as we discuss above, the book also tends to reproduce certain norms regarding this phenomena. However, there are other examples indicating a new direction in norm-crit publishing. Jesper Lundqvist’s latest title, published by Olika in 2015, is called Alla dör [Everyone dies], with pictures by Gabi Frödén. It is a rhyming picture book that has no proper narrative but is a textual and visual investigation of the motif of death. From an intersectional perspective, various parameters are visually and textually represented regarding gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, age and so forth. Different views on how to handle death are also conveyed.\(^{50}\) However, the main theme is not difference but rather the common predicament that all living beings share: a unique life that is valuable just because it has an end. The final maxim connects to a discourse of free will: »Take the opportunity to lead your life, in whichever way you like!«\(^{51}\) The book is also an example of today’s increasingly common hybrid of a textbook and picture book, which presents both facts and fiction.\(^{52}\)

Another not so obviously norm-critical book deals with a child’s thoughts about how their parents would react if he/she would disappear. Allt är precis som vanligt [Everything is just as it ever was] (2016) is written by Kristina Murray Brodin and illustrated by Maija Hurme. Murray Brodin is the author of »Princess Victoria« discussed above and the book is published by Olika. »Everything is just as it ever was« is published by Vombat in co-operation with the Finnish-Swedish publishing house Schildts & Söderström in Helsinki. This story is also told from the perspective of a first-person narrative. It presents quite a small child wearing a red hood, blue jeans and a yellow backpack with a heart on it. The child lives with a mum and dad who, according to the narrator, are usually busy. The majority of the book is devoted to a dream in which the child becomes invisible just like Ninni does in the short story by Tove Jansson entitled »Det osynliga barnet« [The invisible child] (1962) or the Norwegian picture book Snill [Kind] (2002) by Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus. In these two intertexts, it is stated that the protagonist is a girl, and femininity and gender stereotypes are, at least in the latter, critically scrutinized.
Sagolikt publishing house has not published any new picture books since *Juli slår knut* (2013) [*Juli kinks*], which is part of a sequel of books telling the family story of a male giraffe couple, Jösta and Johan, who adopt two children.

While norm-critical publishing houses now publish books that are not oriented as explicitly or obviously as they were previously towards certain norms, especially those regarding gender and family others, the established publishing houses are becoming more and more interested in broadening their repertoires, questioning stereotypes and presenting characters other than those who are white heterosexual and middle class. One striking example of this is Pija Lindenbaum, mentioned above for her picture book about migration. Lindenbaum is one of Sweden’s leading authors in the field of picture books. She has been perceived as a norm-critical author/illustrator even though her books are not published by self-stated norm-critical publishers. Another example is *Veckan före barnbidraget* [*The week before child benefit*] by Elin Johansson and Ellen Ekman, published by Rabén & Sjögren in 2016. This title presents a mum and her child, trying to make ends meet in contemporary Sweden.

Thus, it seems that the gap between norm-critical publishing houses and other publishers oriented towards children’s literature is shrinking. However, there will be no lack of more conventional picture books, nor of Swedish picture books conveying a white middle class hetero norm. Still, there has been an increase in picture books published, in which more thought is given to challenging out-dated norms and broadening the repertoire of characters and experiences. This means that the gap between self-stated norm-critical and (self-stated) leading mainstream publishing houses has decreased. However, in what ways this might impinge on the norm-critical publishing of children’s literature in the future remains an open question.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Not all publishers use the term ‘norm critical’ though, a point addressed in more detail later on in this article. In 2009, Ölika and Vilda merged into one publishing house named Ölika. In 2017, Sagolikt publishing house was bought by Whip Media.


5 Norman Fairclough: Discourse and Social Change (Cambridge, 1992), 35.

6 Anette Skåhlberg & Katarina Dahlquist, Kalle med kläning (Uppsala: 2008); Kalle Güetiller & Pia Halse: Jag vill ha baklava! (Linköping, 2010); Kristina Murray Brodin & Kajsa Lind, Prinsessan Victoria (Linköping, 2014); and Grete Rottböll & Viveka Sjöberg: Voltelen och kalven som Po räddade (Färjestaden, 2016).

7 Eva Heggestad: »Regnbågsfamiljer och könsöverskridande barn: Bilderbokens nya invånare«, Samlaren (Uppsala, 2013), 244–245.

8 Kulturnyhetererna, Sveriges television, 28 August 2008.


10 Dolk: Böngstyriga barn, 29

11 Maria Rosén: »Makt lärande och strategier för förändring« in Janne Bromseth & Frida Darj (eds.): Normkritisk pedagogik (Stockholm, 2015), 79, our translation of the original: »Medan den normkritiska diskursen har som mål att synliggöra och förändra öjämlika maktrelationer, är konsekvensen av de andra [mobbningsdiskursen, toleransdiskursen och den nyaauktoritär diskursen] att de osynliggör och upprätthåller maktierarkier«.


13 Langmann & Månsson: »Att vända blicken«, 96.


15 Salmson & Ivarsson: Normkreativitet i förskolan: Om normkritik och vägar till likabehandling, (Linköping, 2015), 61.

16 Hugh Cunningham: Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500 (London: 2005).

17 Fairclough: Discourse and Social Change, 79.


19 http://www.sagoliktbokforlag.se/kontakt/v%C3%A5r/vision-22003861, (26 April 2016), our translation of the original: ’Bryta normer’ Det är vi vuxna som måste ge alla barn förutsättningarna att okritiskt se sig om i världen. Barn bär på de fördomar vi ger dem. Barn är så öppna som vi tillåter dem
att vara. Vem som helst ska kunna älskas oavsett kön, älder, utseende, hudfärg eller religion. Vi tycker att det är så otroligt viktigt att barn får vara barn så länge det går. Att sagorna som barn läser eller får lästa för sig ger dem just det som de behöver för att utvecklas till empatiska och fördomsfria vuxna.«

20 Cunningham: Children and Childhood, 193.


23 Anette Skåhlberg & Katarina Dahlquist: Kalle med kläning, our translation of the original: »Det är du själv som bestämmer vem du ska vara. – Anette Skåhlberg«

24 There are ten picture books by Sven Nordqvist about Petterson and the cat Findus; the first three are: Pannkakstårta (1984), Rävjakten (1986) and Stackars Petterson (1987).

25 For further analyses of the presentation of nature in Swedish picture books in general, see the article by Camilla Brudin Borg and Margaretha Ullström in this issue of LIR Journal.

26 In Sweden, nearly all women work outside their homes, but to be a train driver remains a male-dominated profession.

27 Anette Skåhlberg & Karolina Dahlquist: Kalle med kläning, our translation of the original: »du kan inte gå omkring i kläningen hela tiden«. Spread 5.

28 Ibid., our translation of the original: »Det går verkligen inte för sig. Han måste ta på sig vanliga kläder. Han måste bli normal, och klä sig normalt.« Spread 10.

29 Ibid., our translation of the original: »För Kalle är det normalt att ha kläning, alltså är han normal.« Spread 10.


31 Skåhlberg & Dahlquist: Kalle med kläning, our translation of the original: »Men inte går killarna att hejda inte.« Spread 11.

32 Heggestad: »Regnbågsfamiljer«, 239, our translation of the original: »manligheten har med andra ord något att vinna på att bli mer kvinnlig«.

33 Fairclough: Discourse and Social Change, 22
Maria Nikolajeva: *Bilderbokens pusselbitar* (Lund, 2000).

Güttler & Halse: *Jag vill ha baklava*, spread 3.

Ibid., our translation: »- HADE INTE TID, sa jag. Måste baka baklava.« Spread 12.


Nikolajeva: *Bilderbokens pusselbitar*, 23.


Murray Brodin & Lind: *Prinsessen Victoria*, e.g. spread 1, our translation: »Du lilla!«.

Ibid., spread 8.


Dolk: *Bångstyriga barn*, 129.

Rottböll & Sjöberg: *Vulkanen och kalven som Po räddade*, our translation of the original: »kovaktaren som finns på riktigt«, cover.


Pija Lindenbaum: *Pudlar och pommes* (Stockholm, 2016).

B.J. Epstein: »We’re Here, We’re (Not?) Queer? In GLBTQ Characters in Children’s books« in *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012) and Heggestad: »Regnbågsfamiljer«.

Dolk: *Bångstyriga barn*, 129.


Ibid., our translation of the original: »så passa på att leva det, på vilket sätt du vill!«

This picture book can be compared with Pernilla Stalfelts *Dödenboken* (1999), [The book of death], published by Rabén & Sjöberg.