

Shaping a collection of essays into a self-contained unity is by no means an easy task. The selected articles, commented on above, illustrate how – paradoxically – a generous and inclusive approach to the subject matter of child autonomy and child governance is, in fact, one of the volume’s best features. Apart from the texts singled out above, readers can also delve into enlightening discussions of the ambiguous religious imagery of the Christ child (Davis), a carnivalesque Polish novel in which an adult is temporarily transformed into a child king (Czernow), play as a child-ruled space (Kelen), child rule in a contemporary comic strip and a popular TV series for children (Ommundsen), how picturebooks allow and encourage agency among child readers (Yokota), and the importance of playtime (Chengcheng & Malilang).

*Maria Lassén-Seger*

### A Scandinavian View on Children’s Media in Retrospect

**Helle Strandgaard Jensen. 2017. *From Superman to Social Realism: Children’s Media and Scandinavian Childhood*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. xii, 188 pp. ISBN 978-90-272-0160-7**

This book gives a nuanced and detailed account of the sometimes heated public and academic debates on children’s literature, media, and culture in Scandinavia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s. Drawing on a voluminous archive of newspaper editorials, transnational conference proceedings, academic articles, and books, Jensen elucidates not only the immediate issues under debate, but also how they were informed by contemporary social anxieties and by shifting understandings of children’s needs. This involves contemporary understandings of childhood, as well as ideas about parental authority, the role of experts, and the question of the purpose of children’s media.

This approach has the signal advantage that it makes decades-old debates intelligible and thereby avoids the pitfall of seeing only incomprehensible moral panic. For example, in Scandinavia in the 1950s, there was, as in the USA and elsewhere in Europe, a debate about the appropriateness of comics for children, although the terms of this controversy were particularly Scandinavian. Superhero comics such as Superman, Batman, and the Phantom were popular with children, but educational experts regarded them with suspicion. These comics were seen as too capitalist and were thought to undermine democratic values; they diverted children from higher quality reading such as classic children’s books.

Sixty years later, the comics in question may look rather innocuous, but Jensen’s analysis helps us to see why many people were troubled by them. With World War II still fresh in people’s memories, comics that celebrated superpowered vigilantes who acted with apparent contempt for democratic principles and due process looked very dubious. Putting myself in their shoes, I find it hard to dismiss their anxiety that these comics might encourage children to adopt anti-democratic attitudes, even if there was a large dose of paternalism in the belief that parents needed expert advice to choose appropriate reading matter for their children. As the most popular comics were American imports, there was also concern that native Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian cultural traditions might be drowned out. Anyone who has walked past a Swedish multiplex in recent years, where American blockbusters

often outnumber Scandinavian productions 13 or 14 to 1, would hesitate to dismiss this concern.

This links to another theme of these debates, the purpose of children's books or, with the advent of television, children's media. In the 1950s, literature enjoyed a much higher status than comics, and classic children's books were seen to transmit Scandinavian cultural traditions and thus assist in children's enculturation as good democratic citizens. The 1960s raised a radical challenge to this model of children's culture and the implicit value it placed on authority and tradition. Inspired by Marxism and the revolutionary fervour of 1968, a new generation of academics, together with some children's writers, argued that the favoured children's classics of the 1950s were reactionary in that they sought to transmit rather than challenge tradition. The works of Tove Jansson and Astrid Lindgren, for example, with their use of fantasy, induced a false sense of reality in children. Children were to be seen as citizens with their own agency who needed accurate knowledge of the contemporary world. They should be empowered to challenge the reactionary culture and politics of the adult world. This led to a shift away from fantasy and towards social realism in children's books that lasted through the 1970s. The 1960s also saw the emergence of a broader "children's culture". Film, and especially television, began to dominate children's leisure.

The 1980s saw a return to the idea of childhood as a time of vulnerability, with children requiring protection from a wicked world. The growing domination of home video with easily accessible horror films and pornography caused increasing concern, not least because children's viewing was slipping out of adult control. But whereas in the 1950s pedagogical experts regarded parents with some suspicion in enabling children's bad choice of reading matter, in the 1980s parents came to be seen as the guardians of children's well-being. In part, this was a practical matter: who else could ensure that children would not watch inappropriate material in the privacy of their own homes when nobody was there to supervise them? Living now in the age of smart phones, this feels very familiar.

Although the arguments over children's media mutated and evolved over this time, there are also consistent themes and ongoing questions that are contested anew in each period. These include children as agents able to make their own choices versus children as vulnerable innocents in need of protection. There were also varying ideas about who was to protect children: a cadre of experts, psychologists, and librarians, or their parents? It is also fascinating to see how debates over children mirror broader social anxieties and the way those engaged in the debates project their own needs onto children. While the 1960s' radicals had a point when it came to challenging tradition and the assumption that tradition is automatically good, they projected their own needs and fears onto children no less than anybody else, seeing them as instinctive revolutionaries who, given the chance, would overthrow the state.

This book is most welcome. It makes available to the English-speaking world – which is often a bit self-obsessed, culturally-speaking – a clear, meticulous and nuanced account of recognisable debates motivated by all-too-recognisable anxieties, but informed by different historical experiences and cultural assumptions.

*Theo Malekin*