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# Living Materiality: Elsa Beskow's Work in a New Light or a Holistic Approach to Children's Reading<sup>1</sup>

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The paper starts from the view that an analysis of the concrete materiality of a work, such as format, choice of paper, typography and colours, is fundamental for an understanding of picturebooks and their impact on children's reading. Historical picturebooks also reveal the cultural understanding of children and childhood in different times and cultures. The tight connection between materiality, reading and learning in picturebooks is exemplified by the work of the Swedish author Elsa Beskow (1874–1953), who was strongly influenced by the ideas of the Swedish progressive educator Ellen Key. The paper relies on the state of the art in materiality research in children's literature, with special emphasis on children's reading and on the consequences of the transmission processes for picturebooks as *artifacts*.

**Keywords:** Elsa Beskow, materiality, picturebook, reading, progressive education, transmission

The year 2024 marked the 150th anniversary of the Swedish author-illustrator Elsa Beskow (1874–1953). In her own country, the picturebook creator was duly celebrated with a series of events and new books: her former publisher Bonnier reissued many of her picturebook titles; an exhibition was organised at the Zorn Museum in Mora at the end of the year; and a new monograph on the national picturebook icon was published (cf. Persson 2024). Elsa Beskow significantly influenced book and children's culture

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a presentation at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the European Network of Picturebook Research, Tel Aviv, held online on 4 October 2021. I would like to thank the audience for their fruitful comments to sharpen my arguments. My thanks also go to the Ridderstad Foundation, which has made it possible for me to conduct in-depth research on Beskow's material in a postdoctoral project together with Lisa Källström. See <<https://www.petrabaeni.ch/putteundpipppiaufreisen>>.

in Sweden around 1900. She became popular with her picturebooks such as *Peter in Blueberry Land* (1904) and the series of books about three aunts: *Aunt Green, Aunt Brown, and Aunt Lavender* (1918). With an oeuvre of more than forty picturebooks, a reader for elementary school that she designed herself, and several fairy tales, as well as a large collection of sketches and letters (both private and professional),<sup>2</sup> this book creator left behind a huge amount of material.<sup>3</sup> Elsa Beskow's prolific work and popularity have led to translations into more than twenty languages so that many printing houses around the world have published her books (Elsa i världen, n.d.).

This paper takes a deeper look into Beskow's work, her time and her creating process and explores her works to show how she deals with materiality and design related to children's reading and learning. The following questions are discussed. How are the topics of reading and materiality connected in Beskow's oeuvre and why does materiality in picturebooks matter? What makes Beskow's insights interesting and important to this day?

First, a short contextualisation of Beskow in her time is given to help answer these questions. Secondly, an excursion into the theory of materiality and the connection to reading is made. Thirdly, two of her titles are chosen and analysed to reveal her world: a) *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* (1901) to show how Beskow connected pedagogy and art in relation to reading, and b) the picturebook *Farbror Blås Nya Båt* (1942) to indicate how important the conscious choice of certain materials such as colours in the book design was for the book creator. Furthermore, the letters between Beskow and her publisher concerning the printing process of the book illustrate her involvement in the aesthetic process of producing her own books. The last section discusses transmission and shows how materiality matters in the original work and in newer editions of Beskow's picturebooks. How are Beskow's books translated and transmitted into other cultures and languages? Do changes in the book design have an influence on the reading process?

The following section provides a short historical overview to reveal why materiality plays a major role in Beskow's work.

## Elsa Beskow in her time – art and pedagogy

There are many reading and writing scenes in Beskow's pictures and texts (Figs. 1–3). The scenes in both her picturebooks and her readers in the series *Vill du läsa?*

<sup>2</sup> This material has recently been added by the Beskow family in the Archives of the Carolina Rediviva University Library, Uppsala-SE.

<sup>3</sup> The archives of Bonnier, Beskow's lifelong publishing house in Stockholm, and of the Centre for Social History (näringslivshistoria) in Alvik/Bromma, Sweden, offer a wealth of material to delve into the "materiality" discourse with Elsa Beskow. The collection of almost all her published books since the first editions make it possible to see the changes in the books in Sweden over a period of almost 120 years of publishing history. The vivid correspondence between Beskow and Bonnier from 1902 to 1953 shows the extent to which Beskow was actively involved in the publishing and printing process. In more than 400 handwritten and typewritten letters (collected in one box, divided into three folders and grouped by the years 1902–1939, 1940–1948, 1949–1953) we can follow her involvement in decisions on paper, format, typography and colours for her books.

*I-III* (1935/36)<sup>4</sup> show children in different reading positions, in different rooms, and with different persons. They illustrate how much reading relates to reading practices and habits and to the design of the books themselves (Müller-Wille 2017: 41). The book creator's interest in the subject of reading and writing and the book as an artifact can be found in the historical context of her time.



**Fig. 1.** The image on the title page of *Årets saga* [*Around the Year*]. (Beskow 1949 [1927]).

**Sl. 1.** Slika s naslovnice slikovnice *Årets saga* [Tijekom godine] (Beskow 1949 [1927]).



**Fig. 2.** An image from *Vill du läsa? Bredvid läsebok för de två första skolåren* [Do You Want to Read? A(n Extra) Reader for the First Two Years of School] (Beskow and Siegvold 1950 [1936]: 3).

**Sl. 2.** Crtež iz *Vill du läsa? Bredvid läsebok för de två första skolåren* [Želiš li čitati? Dodatna čitanka za prve dvije školske godine] (Beskow i Siegvold 1950 [1936]: 3).

<sup>4</sup> *Vill du läsa? I-III* was developed together with the psychologist Herman Siegvold for the Swedish primary school. It was used in schools until the 1970s. The text and images are by Beskow.



**Fig. 3.** An image from *Tant Bruns Födelsedag* [*Aunt Brown's Birthday*] (Beskow 1925: [1]).

**Sl. 3.** Slika iz *Tant Bruns Födelsedag* [Rođendan tete Brown] (Beskow 1925: [1]).

As a student of the progressive educator Ellen Key (1849–1926) and her ideas on the education of the child (Key 1900), Beskow as a girl was already in touch with new goals in education.<sup>5</sup> The figureheads of progressive education, including Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, were also representatives of new ideas. Pedagogical goals no longer centred on moral and religious education but focused on children's need for play, imagination, and freedom in nature without the control of adults. One of Key's main premises was that learning to read and education are linked to a certain aesthetic standard (Báni Rigler 2019: 55ff). The "Swedish reform pedagogy", epitomised by Ellen Key and her ideas, also incorporated ideas from the "Kunsterziehungsbewegung", which saw the need for creativity and handicrafts in children's education (Wittmann 2018), as propounded by William Morris and exemplified in his ideas about book design as represented in the Arts and Crafts movement. These ideas contributed to the pedagogical and artistic questions of the time, especially about children's needs concerning reading and books, but also about the idea of how books should be produced and created. Elsa Beskow's initial work, like her classic *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*], which is analysed below, fell into the period of the Golden Age of Children's Literature (Zweigbergk 1965: 333ff). Thanks to industrialisation and new printing techniques, elaborately illustrated and expensive books became cheaper, and the Swedish picturebook finally not only reached bourgeois children but found its way to all Swedish children. Nevertheless, Beskow maintained a high aesthetic quality despite cheaper mass production until her death.

One reason for the lifelong distribution of highly aesthetic picturebooks can be seen in Beskow's reflections on education and the arts in general and reflections

<sup>5</sup> For biographical information about Elsa Beskow, see Hammar 1958, 2002.

on questions of (the making of) books and aesthetics in particular (Bäni Rigler 2019: 17ff). Many pedagogues and philosophers of her time, which she must have known, had similar ideas. One of them was Walter Benjamin (1898–1940). The philosopher and novelist examined children’s reading and writing from an aesthetic point of view (Bäni Rigler 2019: 63). In many of his essays, he reflects on the reading, learning process, and writing of the child and puts it in the context of reading as a process which is highly connected with the book and its materiality (Bäni Rigler 2019: 63ff; Källström 2020: 27ff). As a graduate of a progressive pedagogical school (Haubinda, Germany) and as a collector of children’s drawings and abstract art, he represented the spirit of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with his thoughts on art and pedagogy and commitment to children’s reading, writing and creativity (Müller-Wille 2019: 11ff; Giuriato 2020: 73ff). Taking a closer look at Beskow’s work, it becomes clear that Benjamin’s ideas, which even include children’s reading habits, body postures, and sight (Källström 2020: 103ff; Källström and Bäni Rigler 2024), must have been familiar to the Swedish book creator, who embraced the aesthetical and pedagogical spirit of her time and conveyed it in her own work. The artist’s focus on the cultural techniques of reading and writing connected with the new ideas on education and arts can be seen in the books’ design. The books were explicitly created by an artist who aimed to teach children to read and write. Before showing how Beskow brought together pedagogy and art, and how important the reflections on materiality in her work were, the next section takes a deeper look into the debate on “materiality” in children’s literature, and especially in the research of picturebooks.

### **Materiality – Elsa Beskow’s work in a new light**

Elsa Beskow’s well-researched work was, for a long time, mostly analysed from a biographical point of view (Hammar 1958, 2002). Questions about the illustrations, form, and interplay of text and image have occasionally been discussed, but few researchers have looked at aspects of the material. As I have shown in my own PhD thesis (Bäni Rigler 2019), the current debate on “materiality” in literary sciences, and the need to focus on material aspects even in picturebooks (Druker 2008; Veyerli Alaca 2018, 2019), casts a new light on Beskow’s work.

Since the debates and discussions in research about “materiality” had their beginnings over 20 years ago, the term has been vibrantly discussed in various disciplines of the humanities, with a wide range of approaches.<sup>6</sup> I refrain from giving a general overview but rather focus on the debates especially in children’s and young adult literature.<sup>7</sup> While in literary scholarship the term “materiality” mostly refers to phenomena ranging from interest in media-theoretical questions to communication theories, historical interest, and the analysis of material cultures in a text (Müller-Wille 2019: 12), few concepts actually focus on questions of the concrete materiality of books as objects and their impact on different institutions and reading practices. Therefore,

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Benne even suggested to abandon the term, to avoid too many different definitions. See Benne (2015: 82)

<sup>7</sup> For an overview, see, for example, Petra Bäni Rigler (2019: 23–35) or Müller-Wille (2017: 17–32).

precisely these latter aspects are especially important for the research of children's and young adult literature as can be found in current general materiality research works (Hombrecher and Wassiltschenko 2020: 537ff, Ververi Alaca 2018: 59ff, 2019, Kurwinkel 2017). Concerning picturebook research, an early approach to materiality was presented by the Swede Anna Hallberg (2009: 95–100). Hallberg pointed out that the form of a book has a particular impact on children's literacy and that the book is a means for children to have their first experiences with art. This approach is in line with Elina Druker's work (2008). Druker's analysis of the concrete materiality of the picturebooks of certain Nordic book creators reveals that the genre of picturebook can be situated between the status of a work of art and the boundaries of different media (Druker 2008: 22). This artistic perspective of picturebooks as works of art, as defined by Druker and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer in *Children's Literature and the Avant-garde* (2015), plays a major role in reading and writing, also in Beskow's work.

In "Das Lesen neu erfinden" [Reinventing Reading],<sup>8</sup> Müller-Wille strengthens this artistic point of view and says that it is the avant-garde experiments in the design of children's books that allow us to reflect on typography, materiality and the act of reading, as well as to think of the book as a three-dimensional object (Müller-Wille 2019: 19). As reading in children's literature is highly connected to other media, interest has arisen in the production processes of children's literature and media and their different aesthetics, including books and films. This is reflected in a growing number of publications in recent years (e.g. Bäni Rigler 2019; Field 2019; Hubli 2019; Källström 2020; Lötscher 2020; Müller-Wille 2017, 2019; Tomkowiak 2019). These publications also show that reading and materiality, especially in the field of children's literature, relate highly to each other, as Müller-Wille emphasises (Müller-Wille 2019: 14). Next to materiality, topics such as gaze and viewing as important acts in reading, perceiving and making sense of the world (also concerning illustrations) (Källström 2020) or the influence of digital media on reading habits and reading posture play an important role in state-of-the-art research (Mackey 2018: 175ff, Kokkola 2018a and 2018b: 1ff). Müller-Wille stresses that questions of media and material theory are crucial in children's literature because we cannot assume that potential readers already possess the cultural technical skills that are so important in handling books. This means that in the context of children's literature the texts and the books themselves teach exactly these cultural techniques, namely how to read and handle books (Müller-Wille 2019:14). This seems plausible, especially regarding picturebooks. Picturebooks as material objects are often the first books children encounter during their literary socialisation and reading (e.g. Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer 2020).

Analysing Beskow's picturebooks widens the bandwidth of debate in literary studies, especially in children's literature research. The books invite reflection on play with the self-referential aspects of the book (Field 2019) and, alongside, on their materiality.

<sup>8</sup> Translation of German and Swedish into English is by the author.

Academic debates in the field of materiality and reading in children's literature research highlight the importance of what children use to learn to read and the reading practices they adopt. The books of Elsa Beskow, which can be seen as a combination of high aesthetic values and pedagogical goals, demonstrate precisely these aspects. The impact and the transmission of texts and illustrations both from one culture and from one language to another (Mein 2010) on the materiality of "old" picturebooks cannot be fully answered here; a possible approach to this issue is given at the end of this paper.

Finally, we can say that the wide discussions about "materiality" in children's literature research, especially concerning picturebooks, has become part of a broader discussion in literary studies, as Schmitz-Emans shows (2019). However, much research still needs to be done on picturebooks and graphic and visual texts.<sup>9</sup> As Beskow's work is only one of many that provide us with rich material for such research, the following section is related to the analysis of her classic *Peter in Blueberry Land*. The picturebook is analysed with respect to its concrete materiality and its impact on the reading process. Elements such as format, paper, and typography are chosen to show how these aspects<sup>10</sup> of a book are used to evoke reading and learning to read by children.

### Functions of reading in *Peter in Blueberry Land*<sup>11</sup>

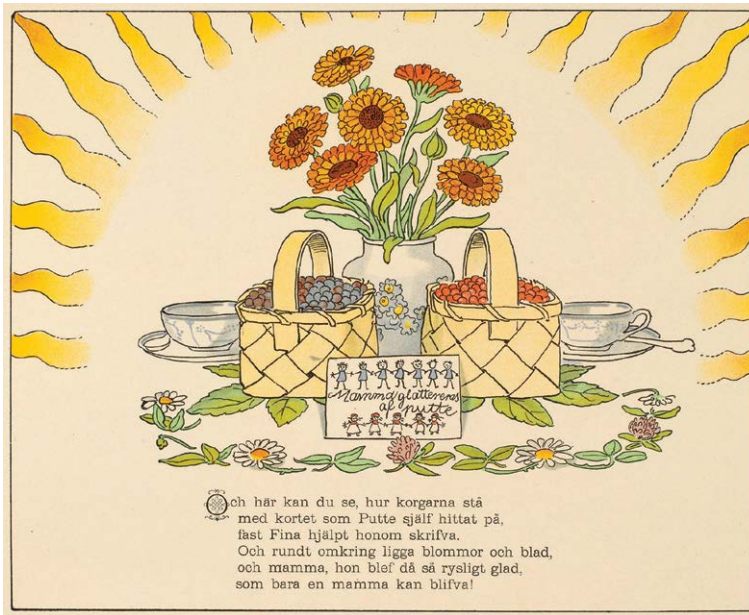
*Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen*, published in 1901, was the book with which Elsa Beskow made her artistic breakthrough. The fantastic story of Peter, a little boy who goes to the nearby forest to pick blueberries and lingonberries for his mother's name's day and is bewitched by the blueberry king who helps him find the berries, is one of many books of this book creator that can be used to demonstrate the functions of reading (learning). On the one hand, Beskow's classic incorporates the ideas which the author and progressive educator Ellen Key postulates in *Barnets Århundrade* (1900) [*Century of the Child* (1909)], namely to answer Key's demand for an education with a focus on children's fantasy, adventure and outdoor experience; a call which also aims to give children valuable, highly aesthetically shaped books and literature in general (Bäni Rigler 2019: 55ff). Angelika Nix sees the protagonist Peter as the first progressively educated child in the history of Swedish picturebooks, uniting the ideas of education, art and craft (Nix 2016: 141–158). On the other hand, the book also brings together the pedagogical and artistic discourses of the book creator's time concerning reading and design. So, the book can also be seen as a programme for Beskow's conscious use of material aspects to introduce children to the process of reading (Bäni Rigler 2019).

<sup>9</sup> I point to the international network *The Graphic World of Children* (under the direction of Lisa Källström) that works on questions of the visual and material world of children. It looks at texts such as children's magazines, comics, graphic novels, illustrations, children's writings (letters and diaries), children's drawings, etc.

<sup>10</sup> For specific materials, see Monika Wagner (2010: 866–882).

<sup>11</sup> For a complete analysis of the topic "functions of reading" in this picturebook, see Bäni Rigler (2019: 78–99).

If we understand reading and learning to read (and even writing) as actions which are closely related to the movement of the hands, we can find parallels in the meaning of gathering berries (in German “lesen” [reading] from Latin “legere” [collecting, gathering]) and reading. We could postulate that Peter, while gathering berries and having adventures in the forest with the animals and plants, is learning to read and write, as the last image and the text on the final page of the book show (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** Last page of the picturebook *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*] (Beskow 1901: [38])

**Sl. 4.** Posljednja stranica slikovnice *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [Petar u zemlji borovnica] (Beskow 1901: [38])

At the end of the story, when Peter is returning to his own world as a normal-sized child, he is capable of illustrating and writing a gift card for his mother (with the help of his sister, as the text says). This card shows his harvest of berries, but at the same time it also symbolises Peter's personal harvest, namely the skills he learns to be able to read and write, thanks to work with his hand (Báni Rigler 2017). The story about Peter represents growth and self-confidence, but also the reading process of children. The importance of the hand can be seen in Key's demand for manual labour and handicraft. According to progressive educational goals, doing things by hand and experiencing nature is part of a natural education leading to cultural techniques (Reckwitz 2016: 67ff). Just as Peter needs his hands to collect berries and go on adventures, the reading child uses his hands to learn about a book's haptic aspects, such as paper, format, and turning the pages and, finally, how the handling and reading of books work.

Analysing the book in terms of its concrete material aspects, it becomes clear that Beskow connects the topic of reading with the design of the book to offer the reading child a highly aesthetical reading experience combined with pedagogical effect, namely to learn to read.

Beginning with the *format*, the book uses a large landscape format (30 x 24 cm), reminiscent of a stage (Spaulding 1995). This, for its time, unusually big horizontal format<sup>12</sup> encompasses several aspects. First the big paper surface, expensive to produce, indicates a valuable artifact. Secondly, it emphasises the function of reading, leading the view of the reader in the direction from left to right. The reading child can easily follow the protagonist's movements on the big page and experience Peter's path as a journey. Thirdly, the format forces the reader to handle the book in a certain way; for example, it is suitable for reading on a table or in the lap of an intermediary (mother, grandfather, siblings, etc.) who will hold it while reading aloud to the children. If reading habits and the handling of the book are already reflected in the format, the cover illustration designed in Jugendstil strengthens the reading theme even more.

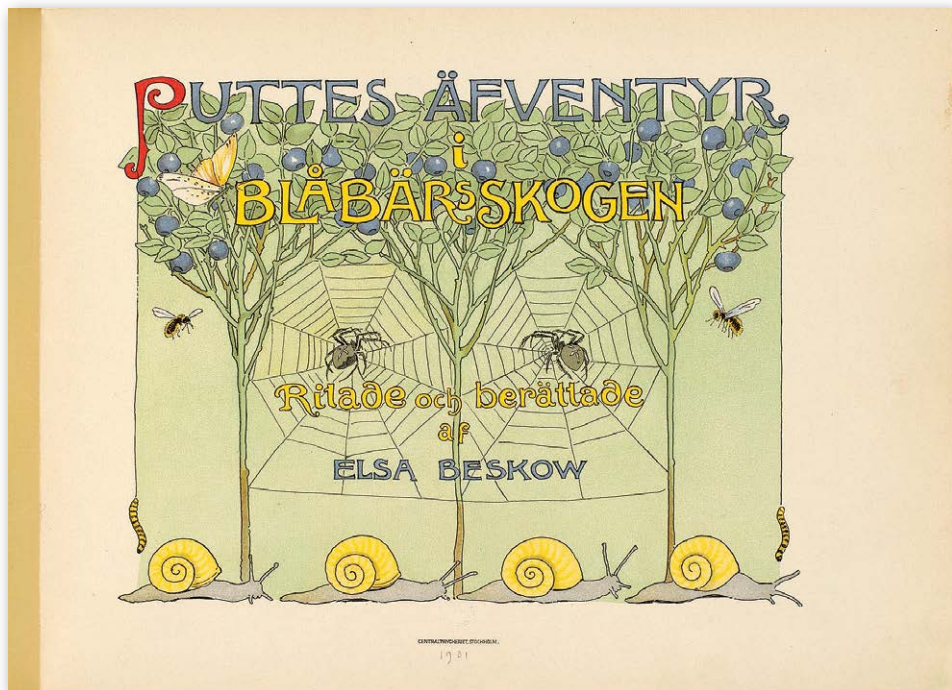


Fig. 5. The front cover of the picturebook *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*] (Beskow 1901)

Sl. 5. Prednja strana korica slikovnice *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [Petar u zemlji borovnica] (Beskow 1901)

<sup>12</sup> Similar formats could be found in the works of Beskow's contemporaries, Milli Weber (1891–1978) and Ernst Kreidolf (1863–1956).

The visual introduction on the front cover shows the “mise en page” of a nature landscape, namely the details of a forest, the main setting of the whole story (Fig. 5). In the middle of the illustration, we find spider webs that look like two eyes, referring to the organs we need for reading, which invite the reader to step into the visual world of the book and discover the forest. Furthermore, the frame<sup>13</sup> with overlapping ornaments of leaves, berries and snails gives the reader an orientation for the gaze; for example, the snails that crawl along the lower edge of the book from left to right in the direction of reading (according to the Western reading convention) invite the reader to enter this magical world of the book and the forest. The snails in the right-hand corner of the book act as page turners (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001: 153), inviting the reader to slowly turn the page.

Analysing the material aspect of *paper*, it becomes clear that paper has different functions within the story and the book. Turning over the thick cover made of sturdy, rough cardboard, the reading child enters the forest together with Peter and thereby the story unfolds.

Thinking about paper as a product of the Swedish forest “par excellence”, Beskow is alluding to the forest where Peter is experiencing his adventure with the choice of paper from the very beginning of the story. After turning over the cover, we find two white blank pages, made of thinner, rough paper, which increase the suspense of the story and at the same time form a boundary between the story and the book.<sup>14</sup> This tension is further emphasised by rustling paper, which originally served to protect the pictures and thus gave the content importance (Genette 1987: 22). The fine paper, which almost melts between the fingers and crackles as you turn the pages (Schulz 2015, Gunia and Hermann 2002) and is so different in feel from the binding and the rest of the paper, is probably deliberately used to draw the reader and viewer to the content. At the same time, the rustling of the paper anticipates the rustling of the leaves in the forest in Peter's adventure.<sup>15</sup> After these paratexts (cf. Genette 1987: 22), the reader finally arrives at the first image, finding Peter as if standing on a stage (Fig. 6).<sup>16</sup> For the following 16 double spreads, of which only the right-hand page is illustrated while the left-hand page is left empty, Beskow chooses paper of thick, beige-white material, like handmade paper, which has an impact on the colours and the feel of turning the pages. This paper of a certain thickness and with a matte surface allows more colour pigments to be absorbed in the printing process, making the illustrations luminous (Müller 2012: 107ff; Holt, von

<sup>13</sup> About the frames in art and book design, see Victor Stoichita (1998); Uwe Wirth (2013: 15–60).

<sup>14</sup> On the colour “white” or the blank page, see Lothar Müller (2012: 126ff); Uwe Wirth (2011: 107–118). The following authors also address the emptiness of the page: Dieter Mersch (2002: 126–130) and Katarina Yngborn (2010).

<sup>15</sup> Müller writes about the connection between leaves in the forest and the pages in a book: “Just as the organic leaf in the foliage emphasises the individual leaf, so the leaf in the book emphasises the flexible individual page which is turned when leafing through” (2012: 127).

<sup>16</sup> Beskow's interplay with other arts, such as theatre, when she refers to the cultural techniques of reading and writing, is not surprising, given the aesthetic and literal values a picturebook can convey. As we flip through the book and follow Peter's red hat – an allusion to *Little Red Riding Hood* – Peter seems to move as if on stage.

Velsen and Jacobs 2018).<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the stiffness of this paper quality makes it easy to turn the pages with care and, thanks to their resistance, the pages do not fall so quickly onto the left-hand white page of the double spread. For the reading child, the thick, slowly turning page opens a space on the right-hand side of the book, as if a stage curtain is being drawn aside, revealing more and more of the scenery. Again, an allusion to the theatre is made. Inserting paratexts on different kinds of paper has significance for the story but also for the book as an artifact: Beskow is playing with different media within the book and thus with the possibilities of a book. Beskow's decision to leave the left-hand pages white could also serve several purposes. First, blank pages make books more expensive since additional pages are needed, and paper was an expensive material. So, the book creator alludes to the book as an artifact. Secondly, the white pages have the function of time: they give the child reader a chance to rest (the eyes) before the next set of densely drawn pictures while following Peter's journey through the forest, and the opportunity to let the impressions sink in (Bäni Rigler 2019: 84). Thirdly, the decision to leave blank pages in a double-spread picturebook can also be seen as a way of bringing the creator's highly artistic illustrations (watercolours) to the forefront, as in a museum (Bäni Rigler 2019: 123). According to Müller (2012: 310ff), the choice of paper quality, namely white paper and pages, is closely linked to the ideals conveyed: in this case, the valuable Jugendstil book alludes to the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement around 1900, which focused on the book as a handmade artifact, and thus on the process of book production (Müller 2012: 318, Kammer 2014: 36).



**Fig. 6.** An original painting for the picturebook *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*] (Beskow 1901). Archives of the Nationalmuseum Stockholm.

**Sl. 6.** Izvorna slika za slikovnicu *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [Petar u zemlji borovnica] (Beskow 1901) iz Arhiva Nacionalnoga muzeja u Stockholmu.

<sup>17</sup> About Beskow's use of colour in *Tomtebobarnen* (1910), see Edvard von Krusenstjerna (1954: 191ff).

Beskow, who saw herself as a book designer and artist, drew attention to the making of the book itself and to reflections on the discourses of her time through her choice of material. Using paper of different qualities for a picturebook had the purpose of giving the reader/viewer, especially the learning child, the chance to experience different haptic sensations, sensations which are highly connected to the story and to the book as an object. She was consciously addressing the pedagogical and, above all, artistic and art-historical questions of her time.

That Beskow was reflecting the artistical topics of her time concerning book production can also be seen in her use of the *typography and writing* of the first page, the beginning of the storytelling (Fig. 6), where the divided placement of the first letter and the rest of the text catches the eye and evokes ambivalence. The first letter "I", with its strong serifs and its ornamental decoration is reminiscent of the initial of a medieval manuscript and stands somewhat apart from the rest of the text. The script of the remaining text block in the centre of the box is reminiscent of the almost sans serif letters which are modern in their simplicity and fine stroke. The slender antennae, which waft over the capital letters like light leaves in the wind, thematically take up the airy leaf ornament of the opening initial, which so clearly refers to the surrounding nature of the forest floor. The typographical arrangement of wide spacing, which suggests that plenty of air should be able to pass between the letters, is aimed at a child audience that is just learning to read (Willberg and Forssmann 1999: 77ff). The implication here is that reading is something simple, airy, natural, as well as very sensual and aesthetic.

There may be several reasons for this ambivalence, which is implied between old and modern writing, as the period in which Beskow's books were produced was subject to major upheavals. On the one hand, the book market was crying out for cheap, mass-produced books, while, on the other hand, the countermovement embodied by the Arts and Crafts movement was emerging, wanting to retain the old way of making books, dispensing with mass machine printing and creating greater awareness of artists' craftsmanship (Drucker 1994: 97). Beskow, who was acutely aware of the developments within the book printers' scene in Sweden around 1900 (Gram 2006), used typography and writing as topics to reflect the making of books. Two-part typeface design in the first text block can be seen as a reflection of book production by visualising its ambivalence: the ornate initial stands for the handcrafted character, while the other letters refer to the technical nature of bookmaking. The design of the typeface of Beskow's work mirrors not only the medium of the book in terms of the importance of reading, but also the circumstances in which books are produced, i.e. ultimately the book market.

To sum up, the short analysis of chosen aspects of the concrete materiality of a book as format, paper, typography and writing in *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* has shown some functions of these material aspects aimed at the reading and learning process. It has revealed that in Beskow's classic, the pedagogical intentions go hand in hand with the book's artistic aspects. First, the deliberately designed cover gives the reader visual access to the book, and second, it provides initial guidance on how to use the book. Visuality, the sense of perception central to reading, is addressed by appealing

to the sense of sight. While the direction of reading from left to right is indicated by the snails that invite the reader to turn the page, the tactile sense is additionally stimulated by the quality of the paper. At the same time, the paper refers to the Swedish forest, the main setting of the story, and to leaves, again a reference to the practice of leafing through a book. Beskow's deliberate use of the format and size of the book is a reference to other media, such as theatre, and an early reflection on the possibilities of the book as a medium. Furthermore, the prominent large landscape format – an elaborate mode of production – directs the aesthetic sense towards the artistic design of the book, which can also be seen in the choice of a deliberate typography and writing referring to the making of books in Sweden around 1900. Finally, in the conception of *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen*, we find an artifact that incorporates production methods, artistic design, ways of handling the book itself and even literal practices. This analysis is just one example of Beskow's picturebooks showing how the creator prepares children for the reading process through the deliberate use of material aspects, but also the adoption of a reading posture and the handling of the book, as shown in the reading scene illustrations (Figs. 1–3). With her classic, Beskow lets children gain their own tactile, visual, and physical experience of the book. In brief, *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* is about the materiality of reading.

Up to this point, it has been shown how closely the conscious choice of material parameters is linked to learning to read. The following section focuses on colours resulting from the printing process by giving another example of where the book creator takes a strong stance on her own artwork.

### Colour, valuable material – insights into the aesthetics of production

Throughout her life, Beskow was in lively correspondence with the Bonnier publishing house (her main publisher), which is confirmed by many letters preserved in the archives in Sweden. This section gives an insight into the close relation between the creator and her publisher concerning the design of the books and the production aesthetics. Focus is put on the concrete material of *colour*.

On 31 May 1949, Elsa Beskow wrote in a letter to her publisher Gerard Bonnier: “Det är ju fenomenalt med alla dessa omtryck av mina gamla bilderböcker!” [It's fantastic with all these new editions of my old picturebooks!]. However, this exclamation is to be read ironically, as the subsequent passage in her letter shows. Accustomed to being closely involved in the printing process, in the choice of colours and paper for her books, Beskow was often disappointed when her books were reissued, as she writes:<sup>18</sup>

Måtte nu de nya omtrycken bli bättre än de mest föregående. Det är för det mesta en stor besvikelse för mig att se hur trycken försämras medan för undan hur de ursprungliga klara färgerna blir grådaskiga.

[May the new reprints be better than the most recent ones. It is usually very disappointing for me to see the prints deteriorating as the original bright colours become greyish.]

<sup>18</sup> Letter dated 31 May 1949 from Beskow to the publisher Gerard Bonnier.

The book creator seemed to suffer when her books were not published according to her own vision, especially when it came to the colours. Beskow complained that the quality of the colours in the new versions was deteriorating, with light colours becoming increasingly greyish. Just how hard Beskow fought to have her books published the way she wanted can be seen in the following example.

As early as the 1940s, Beskow had to make compromises for her new picturebook *Farbror Blås Nya Båt* (1942) [*Uncle Blue's New Boat*]. In a letter dated 4 August 1942, Kai Bonnier from the Bonnier publishing house suggested reducing the format of the new picturebook. He also suggested keeping all the illustrations but printing them in black and white to reduce costs. Beskow replied immediately, on 7 August 1942. In the first part of the letter, she writes diplomatically that her main concern is that the book should be well presented.<sup>19</sup> In the second part, she tells him that she can never accept his suggestions about the colours. She writes:

Det kan jag omöjligt gå in på! Om jag vetat på föremål att Ni inte kunde trycka på färg på alla bildsidorna, då skulle jag ha utfört en del endast i svart, men då i ett helt annat manér [...]. Jag vet hur jämriga och tråkiga sådana reproduktioner blir. Allt charm försvinner, mina akvareller fotograferas på detta sätt endast i svart. Det kan jag således inte alls vara med om.

[I can't possibly go into that! If I had known at the time that you could not print colour on all the pages, I would have done some in black only, but in a completely different manner [...]. I know how lame and dull such reproductions get. All the charm disappears, my watercolours are photographed in this way only in black. So, I cannot agree with this at all.]

Beskow's answer to Bonnier's suggestion is clear – it is an unequivocal “no”. She was adamant about her artistic concept and did not want to replace her precious colour illustrations with cheap black-and-white reproductions. In this and even other statements by Beskow (Bani Rigler 2019: 130ff), we find the typical attitude of a book creator who wants to hold on to her ideas of a holistic book design in which colour is one of the essential materials in her creative process. But we also read of a publishing house that at the time was struggling with technical problems affecting the production and quality of the images. Publisher Kai Bonnier writes in a letter dated 10 August 1942:

Jag försäkrar imellertid att det icke spelar någon roll, då för närvarande alla klichéanstalter äro absolut överbelastade med arbete. Vi har talat med olika firmor i staden för att få klichéerna gjorda, men alla svarar att för ögonblicket finns ingen möjlighet att börja med klichétillverkning. [...] Det finns så få kemigrafier i Sverige, som kunna göra färgklichéer så att de bli bra [...].

[I assure you that [the question of whether to print the images in colour or black and white] does not matter, because all the cliché companies<sup>20</sup> are overloaded now. We

<sup>19</sup> “Det viktigaste för mig i den saken är att boken blir bra framställd” [The most important thing for me in that matter is that the book is well presented]. Letter of Beskow to Kai Bonnier on 7 August 1942.

<sup>20</sup> Cliché Company: chemical-graphic printing works that could produce colour prints through a chemigraphic process that served as printing templates (letterpress process, especially for printing illustrations around 1900). See Kipphan 2013.

have spoken to various companies and they have replied that they cannot produce colour now. There are so few chemical printing institutes in Sweden that can make good colour plates [...].]

The struggle with the chemical printing process is one reason that the new picturebook needed to adapt to the current circumstances. Another reason was World War II when book prices in Sweden rose steadily during the crisis. As Katharina Sjökvist (1977) points out,<sup>21</sup> the war significantly affected the quality of books. The graphic designer analysed the illustrations in *Farbror Blås Nya Båt* and remarked that the picturebook was a poorly published book, in contrast to the earlier books about *Tant Grön*, *Tant Brun* och *Tant Gredelin* (1918). She wrote: “I *Farbror Blås Nya Båt* är dessutom bildytan nedtagen och marginalerna större på färgplanschererna” [In *Uncle Blue's New Boat*, the picture area is also reduced and the margins on the colour plates are larger] (Sjökvist 1977: 25). She states that the colour illustrations were smaller and the margins more extensive than in other picturebooks by Beskow. She also points out that the outlines and silhouettes were completely missing. She wonders whether this shortage of printing materials might be a consequence of World War II.<sup>22</sup>

Sjökvist's remarks clearly show that the prints in this book could not have met Beskow's very high standards for the quality of the reproduction of her picturebooks.

The publishing house depended on the printers, who, although they had mastered the new technical possibilities such as lithography and four-colour printing, were wholly overloaded with work during the crisis years. The economic measures taken during World War II may even have affected the printing industry in Sweden, as Sjökvist noted.

These brief insights in the intensive correspondence show that Beskow was primarily concerned with the book's quality and was ready to stand up for her books as she had initially planned them. According to Ellen Key's requirement of high quality in children's literature, Beskow endeavoured to design picturebooks with the pedagogical aim of teaching to read according to the aesthetic criteria, as pointed out above. Circumstances did not always allow for books to be produced in their material aspects as artists intended, and this was not always within Beskow's control.

Books altered in their design during Beskow's lifetime and also after her death. The next and final section shows such changes of the material aspects and discusses their impact on books and on their making.

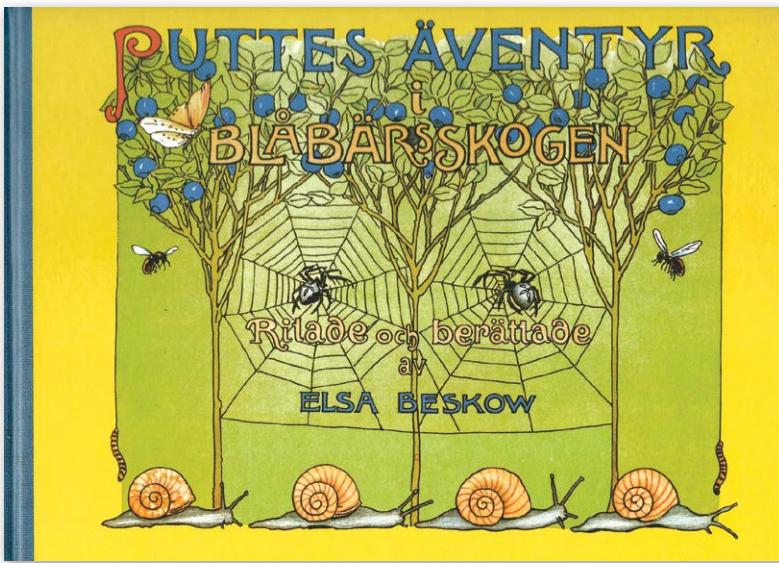
### Transmission – image and text on the move

“In allen Fällen beschreibt der Begriff der Transmission [...] eine Übertragungsbewegung beziehungsweise stellt das mediale Kopplungsstück, durch das die Übertragung organisiert wird, in den Mittelpunkt” [“In all cases, the concept

<sup>21</sup> Katarina Sjökvist was the first Swedish researcher to analyse Beskow's work for material aspects, especially for distinctions concerning colours. But she remained on a purely descriptive level.

<sup>22</sup> “Är det kanske beroende på kristidens brist på material, tryckfärg o.s.v.? Det var ju krig i världen 1942.” [Is it perhaps due to the crisis that there was a shortage of materials, inks, etc? There was a war in the world in 1942] (Sjökvist 1977: 25).

of transmission describes a movement of transmission, or puts the media coupling piece through which the transmission is organised, at centre stage” (Mein 2010: 7). Georg Mein’s definition, especially the idea of a movement of transmission, can be easily applied to the work of Beskow. Her picturebooks have been edited countless times in many cultures and languages. The fact that the books often differ in design and appearance – considering the 120-year publishing history – is inevitable. Nevertheless, the question remains whether the book creator still wanted to stand up for her books, as some editions hardly resemble the original version of a particular title. Publishers, typographers, and layout artists have taken it upon themselves to appropriate the books (for appropriation, see Gilbert 2012). A short comparison between two chosen Swedish editions of the picturebook *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* will give some ideas of what transmission means in Beskow’s work.<sup>23</sup> First, looking at her work in Sweden, a diachronic view of the images and texts in *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen*, from the first editions to the present day, shows that the book has undergone enormous changes in terms of the material aspects such as colour, paper, format, and typography.<sup>24</sup>



**Fig. 7.** The front cover of the 1994 edition of Beskow’s picturebook *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*]

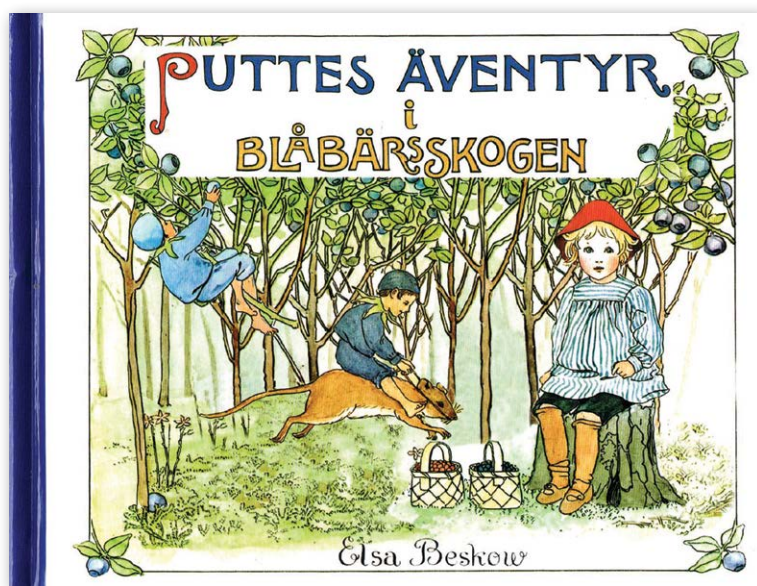
**Sl. 7.** Prednja strana korica izdanja slikovnice Else Beskow *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Petar u zemlji borovnica*] iz 1994.

<sup>23</sup> No overview of the history of transmission is given; rather, focus is placed on the transmission of the aspects of concrete materiality.

<sup>24</sup> Between 1901 and 2002, *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* was published over thirty times (Kerpner 2002: 22–23). For this article, I chose only two editions with relevant changes. For a more detailed overview of the Swedish editions, see Báni Rigler (2019: 248–257).

Looking at two prominent covers of the picturebook from 1994 (Fig. 7)<sup>25</sup> and 2009 (Fig. 8), they show significant differences in the design compared to the first edition (Fig. 5). Both books were edited after Beskow's death. In Fig. 7, we can see that the colour in this edition has changed from off-white to bright yellow. The yellow cover and blue spine remind one of Sweden's national colours. The title differs in typography,<sup>26</sup> and besides, the paper used in the book is not matte and soft but thick, whitish, and glossy, giving a tactile impression different from that in the first edition of the book. The book lacks the direct haptic feel of paper that quickly reminds us of the leaves of trees in a forest, as in the first edition. Given that a reader knows different editions from different times, these changes in materiality might seem strange, as the first edition always seems to be the right, "original", one. However, regarding the long publishing history of this picturebook, every publisher had ideas and possibilities in their time to produce the book, its design, and its appearance (as the correspondence proves).

Another phenomenon can be seen in the 2009 edition of the book in miniature format (17 x 13 cm), showing the cover image that Beskow never created. We are still looking for something from the original design of 1901. The format, paper, typography, and colours have changed utterly.



**Fig. 8.** The front cover of the 2009 edition of Beskow's picturebook *Puttes äventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Peter in Blueberry Land*]

**Sl. 8.** Prednja strana korica izdanja slikovnice Else Beskow *Puttes äventyr i blåbärsskogen* [*Petar u zemlji borovnica*] iz 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Since the 1960s we can find this kind of yellow cover. But during this long period, the yellow colour became greyish until the cliché-plates were renewed and later photographed (Kerpner 2002: 22ff).

<sup>26</sup> For the typography and transmission, see Báni Rigler (2019: 215ff).

The cover image is a computer-generated compilation of illustrations from the whole book. It shows what in the history of technology had become possible in designing books. Reference to sight and visuality (for the reading child) has changed. Thus, the clear guidance Beskow gave her readers/viewers in the big formats and the cover illustration has gone. Rather than showing how reading works, the new technologies and the technical possibilities of digitalisation stand out in this edition (which is probably rather a merchandise-article than a picturebook. As such, miniature books are used as gifts to remember the most famous Swedish picturebook creator). This can also be seen in the double-spread design. In the miniature version, the text of the actual story, previously enclosed within the image itself, has been distributed over two pages. Thus, the effect of the white page on the left of the two-page spread is completely lost.

While analysing the material aspects of the illustrations and books, even the language can be explored. When it comes to translation into other languages, this field of research still needs to be studied. Apart from a few spelling corrections needed on account of orthographic reforms, the text has remained almost unchanged. This looks different, for example, in German editions of *Hänschen im Blaubeerenwald* (first edition 1903) from the same period. Research has shown that picturebooks from publishing houses such as Loewe or Urachhaus reveal significant differences in cover illustrations, typography, format, and colours (Báni Rigler 2019: 257ff). For example, images from the picturebook were used as cover illustrations.

Further, the colours are much darker and greyer than the bright Swedish colours in the first edition. To name further differences, the text is written in prose rather than verse, as in the Swedish edition. Looking at the books published by Loewe, new and additional title pages were designed for the publishing house's anniversary, or even cover pages that Elsa Beskow never created (Báni Rigler 2019: 257ff).

These few examples of changes in the Swedish and German editions raise some questions about dealing with old picturebooks. While specific book changes were inevitable during Beskow's lifetime, as shown in the section above, the main question is how publishing houses deal with high-quality, consciously and deliberately designed books, such as Beskow's artistic books. Which publishing mechanisms play a role here, who ultimately determines what a book looks like, and what effects does this have on the recipients? What ethical considerations are necessary to respect the spirit of a book designer? In this very permeable process that is inherent in the transfer from one edition to the next, further questions arise, such as what consequences do the transfers have for the book as an "object" and "artifact" and, not least, what are the material differences of a book within a country and in an international context?

It is not easy to give a precise answer to these questions. Many factors have an impact on the way "old" picturebooks are printed (reproduced) today. In the book market, apart from the author and illustrator, there are many different participants, such as the producer, the printer, and the bookseller, to name but a few, who have other ambitions. For them, design is often driven by economic rather than aesthetic and pedagogical interests, as the example of Beskow's mini-book of 2009 shows. Altering a text or a book can thus have the negative connotation of appropriation, implying that

reworking means looting, robbing, poaching, or even piracy, as described by the art historian and expert on artists' books, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix (2012: 234). Contrary to this opinion, Mein sees something positive in the act of transmission. According to him, precisely these changes mark entry points where borders are crossed, reflecting the mediality and materiality of the transmission movement itself (Mein 2010: 8).

Transmissions, in this sense, should not be seen as something undesirable. They allow us to reflect on why certain aspects of a book, especially material ones, were altered. Even in Beskow's case, the change can have historical, technical, ideological, or economic reasons. If we look at the Swedish book market, the newer editions of Elsa Beskow's books are still very close to the book artist's ideals and her "original" illustrations.<sup>27</sup> This is thanks to the Beskow family, who are still heavily involved in the work of Bonnier and used to control the rights to use the illustrations in Sweden.<sup>28</sup> If we move away from the Swedish book market and look at the German book market (as done above), more variations of the same title can be found. This is a small selection of variations of Beskow's picturebook in an international context, a field still to be explored.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to the question at the beginning of this paper concerning transmission, in other words, if changes in the book design influence the reading, we have arrived at some conclusions. For the reading and learning child, these changes probably do not matter if a child is reading *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* in an edition from 1901, 1950, or 1994, as long as the books still incorporate the idea of encouraging the child to handle the book actively through its material aspects such as format, paper, typography, and colours: to turn the pages, to leaf through the book, to feel differences in the paper qualities, to learn about the reading direction through the format, and so on. However, the changes matter for researchers interested in questions about the development of books within their historical context. In any case, the considerable variations of one picturebook and its transmissions provide an outstanding possibility to delve into further questions of concrete materiality, the impact on reading situations, postures, or book handling. In this sense, even current editions of Beskow's books should not be seen as worse editions but rather as time documents demonstrating new possibilities in printing, digitalising, and designing books. In any culture and language, they are always children of their own time.

## Conclusion

The analysis and discussions show that Elsa Beskow was a book artist who, from the beginning, created her picturebooks in the spirit of thinkers such as Ellen Key and Walter Benjamin. Progressive ideas about education and pedagogy strongly influenced

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<sup>27</sup> I use the term "original" to differentiate between the original watercolour painting, the first illustrations that were transformed for printing into printing blocks for multiple use, and the "first edition" of a picturebook.

<sup>28</sup> Since 2023 the rights after 70 years had run out.

<sup>29</sup> In a current research project, even Polish editions of *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* are going to be compared in an international context.

her work. Teaching reading and writing is increasingly linked to new ideas in the field of (children's) art, craft, and book production. The analysis of Beskow's classic *Puttes äfventyr i blåbärsskogen* (1901) in terms of its concrete material aspects shows how much the deliberate choice of format, paper, typography and colours, influences and stimulates young children's reading in visual, haptic, and atmospheric ways. In this sense, Beskow's picturebooks are still important today. Questions such as what happens when these parameters change over time due to new printing technologies, new historical, material, and ideological circumstances, and whether or not we have "inferior" books or artifacts now, are probably always issues of perspective and time. If we want to keep the spirit of an author-illustrator or artist as alive as possible, the answer is probably "yes." However, books can be considered in the context of a series of historical events and as a wealth of variations of a single title in different languages, cultures, and contexts. In that case, the reader and researcher are suddenly presented with variations and adaptations. Each edition allows us to delve deeper into a work or a particular time. If reading is not only about the reading child but also about the reading researcher, reading becomes even more about "collecting" (in the sense of gathering "berries"): collecting new readings. According to the literature researcher Annette Gilbert, reprints and new editions of books can be an act of re-reading, allowing the reader new access and a new perspective that can lead to a revised and refined interpretation of a work (Gilbert 2012: 23). Her theories can be used in picturebook research and provide a theoretical framework that can be applied to any book, be it old or new. Beskow's picturebooks provide rich material to find out exactly this.

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### **Živa tvarnost: djelo Else Beskow u novom svjetlu ili holistički pristup dječjem čitanju**

Rad polazi od stajališta da je analiza tvarnosti djela – poput formata, izbora papira, tipografije i boja – temeljna za razumijevanje slikovnica i njihova utjecaja na dječje čitanje. Povijesne slikovnice također otkrivaju kulturno shvaćanje djece i djetinjstva u različitim vremenima i kulturama. Uska povezanost između tvarnosti, čitanja i učenja u slikovnicama prikazana je na primjeru švedske autorice Else Beskow (1874. – 1953.), koja je bila pod snažnim utjecajem ideja progresivne švedske pedagoginje Ellen Key. Rad se oslanja na najnovija istraživanja o tvarnosti u dječjoj književnosti, s posebnim naglaskom na dječje čitanje i na posljedice koje procesi prijenosa imaju za slikovnice kao *artefakte*.

**Ključne riječi:** Elsa Beskow, tvarnost, slikovnica, čitanje, progresivna pedagogija, prijenos