



## Nature and the City in Three Norwegian Picturebooks

Katarzyna A. Tunkiel

*Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Stavanger*

Katarzyna A. Tunkiel holds a PhD in Norwegian literature from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She has worked as an associate professor at the Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Stavanger. She is currently affiliated with the Norwegian Reading Centre at the same university.

[katarzyna.a.tunkiel@uis.no](mailto:katarzyna.a.tunkiel@uis.no)

### Abstract

Representations of urban environments are not very common in Norwegian picturebooks, yet they allow for a nuanced understanding of how nature functions in picturebook iconotexts. This article aims to examine the relationship between nature and the city in the following works: *Anda i ødemarka* (2012) by Ragnar Aalbu, *Fugl* (2013) by Lisa Aisato, and *Glassklokken* (2010) by Bjørn Arild Ersland and Lilian Brøgger. Drawing upon the notion of the chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981), particularly Nikolajeva's (1996) writings on the chronotope in children's literature as well as Gifford's (1999; 2012; 2014) scholarship on the pastoral and post-pastoral, the article provides an ecocritical reading of these picturebooks, inspired by some of the key questions of ecocriticism (Glotfelty, 1996). The analysis considers both the narrative and visual dimensions of the iconotexts, making it possible to shed light on environmental issues addressed in the books.

Keywords:

Norwegian picturebooks; ecocriticism; urbanity; chronotope; pastoral

Picturebook representations of the city offer a good starting point for studying tensions between the elements of the nature–culture dichotomy in children's literature. No less importantly, they provide an opportunity to discuss possible environmental issues emerging from this relationship. Earlier ecocritical readings of Nordic picturebooks containing images of an urban environment show that the city may appear as a dissatisfying space in need of transformation (Goga, 2017), as well as an idyllic space, opposed to negatively understood nature (Rättyä, 2018). Providing an analysis of three Norwegian picturebooks with urban settings, this article will explore this area further, making it

possible to see how other depictions of the city in Nordic picturebooks can complement or diversify the two extreme views indicated above.

The article consists of five sections. In the first, I will outline the context of the analysis, briefly commenting on the place of the city in children's literature, particularly from a Norwegian perspective, and with a focus on picturebooks. In the second, I will introduce the theoretical framework used in my reading of the selected texts. Theory will be further clarified in the course of the analysis that will follow in the subsequent three sections, which are each devoted to one book.

## Urbanity in children's books

Traditionally, characters in literature for young readers have been placed in pastoral or rural settings, which has led to the promotion of “a nostalgic and, often, implicitly anti-urban world view” (Bavidge, 2006, p. 324). The origins of this tendency can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Romanticism and the construction of the pure and innocent child, artistically represented in the symbolic spaces of nature, to which children were considered to be particularly close (Jones, 2002, p. 21). In the context of Norwegian children's literature, this relationship acquires an even greater meaning. In the land of mountains and fjords, living in harmony with nature has been elevated to the level of a character trait of the competent Norwegian child (Goga, Guanio-Uluru, Hallås & Nyrnes, 2018, p. 2). This again may be linked to the overarching idea that in Norwegian society, nature is a more highly valued category than culture (Gullestad, 1992, p. 207).

For many Norwegian children, however, reality differs from the Romantic vision of life in the bosom of nature. Even though rural values are perceived to be a central aspect of Norwegian identity, Norway is becoming more and more urbanised. According to Statistics Norway (2018), as of 2018, 82% of the population reside in urban settlements and over one third in the five largest metropolitan areas, including the Oslo agglomeration that recently has surpassed one million inhabitants.

One may ask whether Norwegian children's literature follows this development and includes representations of urban environments. Although a complete analysis of Norwegian literature is beyond the scope of this article, the answer would probably be that, at least regarding picturebooks, the city only occasionally serves as a literary backdrop. As Trine Solstad (2018, p. 93) points out in her discussion of Norwegian nonfiction picturebooks, when it comes to nonfiction for preschool children, it is symptomatic that it concentrates on the countryside

idyll, usually overlooking the aspects of life and play in the city.

Similar conclusions are drawn by the British researcher Jenny Bavidge (2006, p. 324), whose analysis of the UK government-recommended fiction picturebooks for children under the age of five showed that only one out of fifty-four titles had a vaguely urban setting. This trend can also be observed among the picturebooks for all age groups honoured by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture's literary prize since the year 2000 – only three out of nineteen books are set in an urban environment, including the most recent winner, *Hakk o ve* (2018) by Ragnar Aalbu, author of one of the books this text will focus on. For now, we can assume that representations of the city are not very common in Norwegian picturebooks.

## The city chronotope in the iconotexts

In the next part of the article, I will analyse the following three picturebooks: *Anda i ødemarka* (*The Duck in the Country*, 2012) by Ragnar Aalbu, *Fugl* (*Bird*, 2013) by Lisa Aisato and *Glassklokken* (*The Glass Dome*, 2010)<sup>1</sup> by Bjørn Arild Ersland, illustrated by the Danish artist Lilian Brøgger. The books have been selected for their urban settings, and also because the urban element in each of them enters into an interplay with nature, an aspect that I find particularly interesting to examine. Additionally, all three are examples of artistically refined children's books that actually address audiences of all ages, so-called cross-over fiction – a well-established subgenre in Scandinavian children's literature (Ommundsen, 2015; Beckett, 2012). In this way, they are representative of an important group of picturebooks published in Norway.

Even though I use the term “urban setting” to highlight the topographical dimension of the texts, it would be more accurate to say that the city has an organisational function in the narratives, acting as a centre around which fundamental events revolve (Bakhtin,

1981, p. 250). Thus, Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, defined as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84), or more specifically, the city chronotope, will be useful for the purpose of my analysis.

Focusing both on the spatial and temporal aspects of the city chronotope in the iconotexts, denoting the inseparable unity of verbal text and pictures as two distinct semiotic systems in picturebooks (Hallberg, 1982), I will discuss three problems inspired by the key questions of ecocriticism formulated by Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996). I will examine how nature and the city are represented in the picturebooks, how the elements of nature and the urban interact with each other, and whether there are any values in the books that may be consistent with ecological wisdom. I will mostly draw upon Maria Nikolajeva's (1996) writings on the chronotope in children's literature, as well as the concepts of pastoral and post-pastoral, presented and developed by Terry Gifford (1999; 2012; 2014). Lastly, it ought to be stressed that the selected picturebooks can be interpreted from a number of other ecocritical perspectives that I am not going to discuss here, the aim of this article being to investigate the relationship between nature and the city in the iconotexts, and how this may be seen in light of the vital environmental questions specified above.

### ***Anda i ødemarka: a reverse pastoral***

Ragnar Aalbu is a critically acclaimed author and illustrator of Norwegian picturebooks, known for his distinctive drawing style, which is characterised by extensive use of geometrical shapes and subdued colours, accompanied by humorous wordplay, absurd storylines and intertextual references. *Anda i ødemarka* is exemplary of Aalbu's work. With its witty puns making use of lexical ambi-

guities, mostly expressed in intraiconic texts (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001) – as in shop names such as "FISK & helt VILT" (which translates as either "FISH & GAME" or "FISH & totally CRAZY") – the picturebook manages to appeal to both children and adults alike. The original title, including the subtitle *Based on a true story*, refers to an authentic Norwegian farm worker called Anna Widén, known as "Anna i ødemarka", whose life story was told in a bestselling biography published by Dagfinn Grønset in 1972.

By linking the main character to a real person, known for having strong ties with nature, Aalbu subtly alludes to what the Duck represents. Furthermore, she is the only anthropomorphised animal in the book, while all the other characters, shown for the first time on the front endpaper, are either humans, or animals with no or minor human-like traits. In addition, the protagonist is called an "outdoor duck" on the endpaper, which both foreshadows the development of the plot and situates the Duck in opposition to the other, more urban-oriented characters. For this reason, the Duck's rural character seems to stand out in the otherwise inherently urban context.

For the most part, Aalbu's city is generically drawn, with no distinguishing Scandinavian features that can be found in towns depicted in some other Norwegian picturebooks (Goga, 2017). One of a few exceptions is in the last spread, where the intraiconic text says "Pizza Kongen | Altfor Norge" ("Pizza the King | Way too Norway"), which clearly alludes to the motto of Norwegian kings – "Alt for Norge" – translating as "Everything for Norway". Furthermore, there are almost no elements of natural landscape in the iconotext besides water, apparently a river, flowing through a cityscape littered with skyscrapers, cranes, smoking chimneys, cars and exhaust fumes. These motifs, in addition to a colour palette of subdued greys and browns, make the visual representation of the city quite stereotypical – it appears to be heavily industrialised and polluted.

The verbal text in the first spread, however, contrasts with this impression. Having declared it a lovely day, the Duck, looking up at the clear sky, decides to “go for a leisurely fishing trip” to the country.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, this implies that the Duck seems to be satisfied with her urban existence; she only needs a short break from the hustle and bustle of the city to “fish and relax, all by herself”, as stated in the sixth spread. Secondly, the sunny morning in the city is the spatial-temporal node in which the protagonist initiates a series of events that make up the whole narrative. Nikolajeva (1996, p. 133) observes that, in picturebooks, the flow of time can be expressed visually. This is exemplified in *Anda i ødemarka* in which a big yellow sun in changing positions over the horizon is a distinct element of the iconotext. Temporality is also indicated by how the Duck’s yellow Austin Maxi 1750 moves further towards the right, first through the streets of the city, than onto a dirt road, to eventually arrive in the country. Thus, the development of the story and the transposition from an urban to

a more natural landscape are closely interrelated.

The story of the Duck’s car journey, told entirely through pictures and dialogue, can be viewed as an example of a pastoral narrative, characterised by many of the typical features of this kind of writing listed by Gifford (2012). “The essential pastoral momentum” of retreat and return (Gifford, 2014, p. 18) is prominent, and so is an idealisation of the country, described in the sixth spread as truly idyllic: “it is so quiet there, only chirping, whooshing and gurgling” (Aalbu, 2012). The Duck’s look of contentment as she envisions fishing on her own emphasises the sentiment in the verbal text. Further, the country not only becomes idealised but also gets associated with a feeling of nostalgia, expressed in the twelfth spread by a quote from “Going to the Country”, a Bruce Cockburn folk song from 1970. Interestingly, visual references to other famous musicians of the 1970s, namely Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, can also be found in the city, which, together with other period-specific features,



Fig. 1. Ragnar Aalbu, *Anda i ødemarka* (2012). Reprinted with permission from Ragnar Aalbu.



Fig. 2. Ragnar Aalbu, *Anda i ødemarka* (2012). Reprinted with permission from Ragnar Aalbu.

such as the Austin Maxi, make nostalgia a characteristic of the iconotext in general.

As is often the case with Ragnar Aalbu's books, the story has a comical twist. While the unsuspecting Duck is daydreaming about the idyllic destination of her trip, a dramatic chase after Hilton, a pet dog caught on the Duck's fishhook, unfolds in a way reminiscent of a classical chain tale. Four city-dwellers run after one another until they all end up in the country, where they discover its appeal and go bathing in the lake. This makes the Duck deeply disappointed, and she frustratedly comments on the behaviour of "the halfwits" who "are scaring off the fish". As a result, she goes back to the city where, paradoxically, she finally can find some peace. The wordless last spread shows a scene that one might call an urban idyll: the Duck is smiling, fishing in the city river, surrounded by the smoke and exhaust fumes from the traffic above her.

The Duck's trip and the impossible dilemma in which she finds herself, longing for a solitary experience in unspoiled natural scenery but unable to fulfil this wish,

may also be characterised as a reverse pastoral. By this, I mean that the purpose of the Duck's retreat is not achieved until she returns to the city, and that escaping the city proves not to be necessary for finding satisfaction – on the contrary, the urban environment turns out to provide what she initially sought in the countryside. Nevertheless, the journey to the country leads to an indirect critique of the city, which often takes place in pastoral narratives (Gifford, 1999, p. 36). In this case, urban lifestyle is critiqued through the city-dwellers' naive excitement as they unexpectedly meet nature, contrasted with the Duck's innate enthusiasm for the natural world, but also, as indicated earlier, through the visual representations of the industrial urban landscape contrasted with the green countryside.

Besides the immediate enjoyment of the lake, the Duck's car trip has another long-lasting effect on the humans' behaviour. Not only does the Duck unintentionally show humans how to appreciate nature, but, even more importantly, she actively teaches them responsibility for natural resources. As we

learn from the epilogue on the back endpaper, after many years of work on her part, a wetland area close to the city is given protected status and becomes one of the country's richest bird reserves. In other words, *Anda i ødemarka* may be viewed as a story of fostering ecological awareness and the only picturebook of the three discussed here that explicitly addresses environmental issues.

### ***Fugl*: the city as a confinement**

As one of few prominent picturebook artists in Norway, Lisa Aisato repeatedly uses cityscapes as backdrops in her works. Both her own books, including *Odd er et egg* (*Odd is an egg*, 2010) and *En fisk til Luna* (*Luna's fish*, 2014), and illustrations made for others' texts, such as *Don Fridtjof* (2010) by Anna Bache-Wiig, contain images of distinctly urban landscapes. The city in *Fugl* is depicted from a bird's-eye view on the endpapers in order to establish the scene and introduce the urban setting of the book. The colour palette and the dominant motifs chosen by Aisato to represent urbanity resemble those used by Aalbu in *Anda i ødemarka*: tightly packed houses, smoking chimneys, electric cables and TV antennas are all painted in subdued shades of yellow, beige, brown and ochre. In this case, too, it is difficult to identify the city as typically Norwegian or Scandinavian. Additionally, the upper part of the endpaper image is somewhat blurry, evoking associations with pollution.

As Nikolajeva and Scott (2001, p. 249) observe, endpapers can be used to accentuate changes taking place in a picturebook. The endpaper illustrations in this book are almost identical, with the exception of a tree, the only natural element in the cityscape. On the first endpaper, the tree is vividly green, contrasting with the rest of the urban scene. In it, looking at an empty sky, sits the main character, a red-haired pre-adolescent girl whose greatest wish, as we learn from the first spread, is to become a bird and fly away

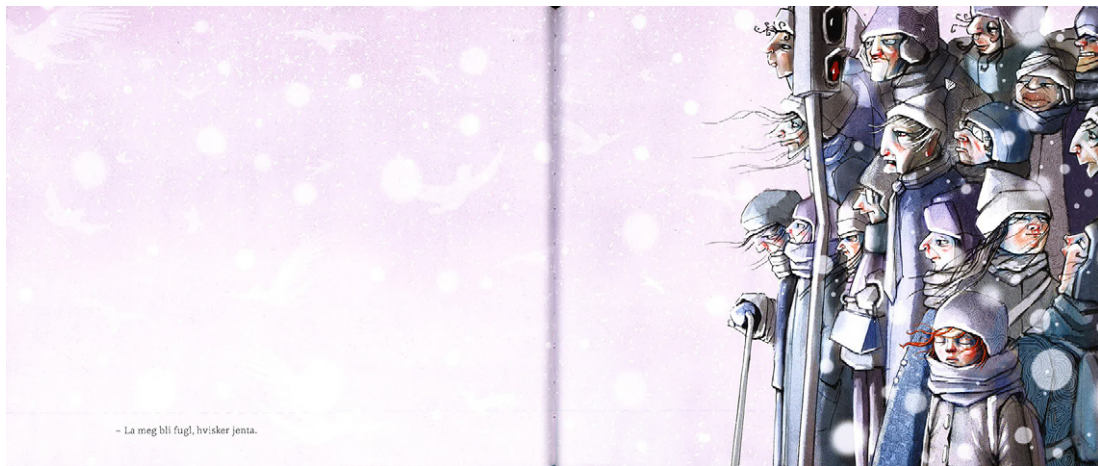
for winter. In this respect, the tree has a clear foreshadowing function. On the back endpaper, the girl's grandfather is sitting in the tree, which is now covered with the sparse foliage of early spring; he is looking at a flock of birds flying towards him, perhaps hoping to reunite with his granddaughter, who has joined the birds and left him.

The first spread of the book zooms in on the girl sitting in the tree. Her appearance further emphasises the contrast between nature and culture established on the front endpaper. With her fair skin and red hair she perpetuates the tradition of strong, independent girls in Scandinavian children's literature, such as Pippi Longstocking and Tonje Glimmerdal (*Astrid the Unstoppable*), but also that of red-haired romantics and daydreamers, like Anne of Green Gables. With her rosy cheeks and shiny eyes, on the one hand she may embody a vital force, symbolising life, youth and warmth in the otherwise cold, urban world. On the other hand, her white complexion and the blue circles around the eyes – a feature she shares with other inhabitants of the city, pictured later in the book – might suggest illness, perhaps related to the polluted environment. At any rate, the girl in the tree unmistakably represents the Rousseauian vision of a natural child, in which regard her dream of literally becoming a part of the natural world and flying “away from all that dark, cold winter” seems unsurprising.

As already indicated by the endpapers, the rhythm of changing seasons plays an important part in *Fugl*. The narrative takes place over more than two years, marked by the comings and goings of migratory birds, by the protagonist's attempts to become one of them, as well as by her birthdays. In addition, names of the seasons appear regularly in the verbal text. Nikolajeva argues that the chronotope in classical epic writing for girls “is continuous both in time and space” (Nikolajeva, 1996, p. 125). Temporality in these books reflects the cyclicity of



**Fig. 3.** Lisa Aisato, *Fugl* (2013). Reprinted with permission from Lisa Aisato.



**Fig. 4.** Lisa Aisato, *Fugl* (2013). Reprinted with permission from Lisa Aisato.

female time, and is often expressed by recurrent events, such as seasonal changes, while spatiality is limited to a number of confined spaces, like home or school, where the female characters spend all of their time.

The city chronotope in *Fugl* bears a clear resemblance to that of female narratives discussed by Nikolajeva. However, the secluded space of the house with the garden where the girl lives with her grandfather may be viewed as a chronotope of its own, namely the idyll. Bakhtin (1981, p. 225–226) refers to the unity of place that brings together generations and undergoes rhythmical changes as one of the main features of the idyllic chronotope. Gifford (2012, p. 50), in turn, emphasises order and stability in his discussion of the pastoral.<sup>3</sup> On the surface, the

girl's life is organised and unproblematic, but the apparent impression of domestic harmony contrasts with her wish to break away. Interestingly, her dreaming of escaping the world, as well as the last, successful attempt to do so, is connected with the lone tree in the garden, which shares one vital characteristic with the Bakhtinian chronotope of the threshold: it symbolises a breaking point in life, a life-changing decision (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 248).

The iconotext in *Fugl* presents the girl mostly in the (seemingly) idyllic space of her home, both indoors and in the garden. The third spread also describes her walking to school, while in the eighth she is seen with a crowd of pedestrians at a crossing. In a broader sense, the protagonist remains con-

finned within the city she dreams of leaving. Further, the urban life and the negative connotations of winter (cf. the first spread) are associated with each other, which is expressed visually in the third and eighth spreads, where passers-by and a crowd of city-dwellers represent the city itself. Their disinterested, apathetic, and even angry faces embody the blasé outlook described by the sociologist Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”: because of rapidly changing stimuli in their environment, people in metropolises become indifferent to their surroundings (Simmel, 2002, p. 14).

The cold and unfriendly atmosphere in the city, reflected by the indifference of its inhabitants, is seemingly what the girl in *Fugl* wants to abandon. However, since the tenth spread shows the girl’s naked torso with signs of puberty, the picturebook may be read as a narrative about coming of age, in which sense the protagonist’s dream acquires a deeper meaning, also from an ecological perspective. According to Nikolajeva (1996, p. 128), the big city chronotope may be linked to the threats and the temptations of the grown-up world. Thus, if read as a story about entering adulthood, *Fugl* might be celebrating the romantic natural child, who wants to leave the city not to grow up, but to finally be free as an adolescent.

In her reading of *Fugl*, Tatjana Kielland Samoïlow (2015) also sees the girl’s empowering metamorphosis as a victory of nature over culture, as well as a complete negation of the society, which, unlike the protagonist, cannot change. This view may be developed further by accentuating the negative consequences that the child’s liberation has for those she leaves behind in the urban space. In the penultimate spread, where the girl eventually flies away with a flock of birds, the last sentences read: “Then she looks down at the old house, towards the garden, the road and the city. She thinks for a moment about her grandfather, but then she flies through dark clouds and feels the sun warm her face” (Aisato, 2013). Despite the brief moment of

hesitation, the girl chooses personal happiness. Her decision, romantic and idealistic as it may seem, is also egoistic and problematic. Leaving behind the polluted city, as well as her grandfather, the girl relinquishes herself of environmental and familial responsibilities. Therefore, even though *Fugl* does not overtly thematise environmental issues, it raises questions about young people’s obligations in the modern world. In other words, the story contends with the literary trope of the child as a saviour, showing that the young should not be unquestionably expected to mend the adult world.

### ***Glassklokken*: a gloomy post-pastoral**

*Glassklokken* is the first picturebook from the collaboration between Bjørn Arild Ersland, an experienced and critically acclaimed Norwegian author of fiction and nonfiction for children and youth, and Lilian Brøgger, one of Denmark’s leading illustrators. In her work, Brøgger uses a vast range of styles in order to explore the possibilities within the picturebook medium (Brøgger, 2000, p. 85), but she is best known for her unrealistic, almost surreal, illustrations. Aesthetically, *Glassklokken* borders on surrealism when it comes to the visual expression – characterised by the frequent use of unconventional colours and patterns, distorted perspectives, as well as somewhat grotesque figures and faces – and when it comes to the representation of the fictional universe itself.

As in *Fugl*, the front endpaper establishes a distinct division between the urban and the natural world, which remains present throughout the iconotext. An oblong spot of vivid red placed in the lower right corner of a dark, monochrome, asphalt-like pattern may easily be interpreted as blood symbolising life – and death – in an urban space, and thus foreshadowing the events in the book. The city setting is introduced in the first two spreads, where cars in motion – the



focal point and the main visual motif of the iconotext – represent destructive forces of the urban world. Unlike most other elements in the spreads, the cars are shaded with densely packed ink lines, which emphasises their movement and gives them a slightly diabolic look. Further, the rushing vehicles contrast with the animals of the city who meet their fate in the traffic, such as the fox running towards the road in the second spread and the insects smashed on the bonnets of lorries in the fourth.

As in the picturebooks discussed earlier, the city is rather generic, with no specific Scandinavian features. In a similar manner to Aisato in *Fugl*, Brøgger has chosen to associate it visually with a negatively laden natural phenomenon, in this case the night. Even the warmer colours in the second spread are dominated by dark patches, conveying the gloominess of the night, which contrasts with the bright representations of nature in pictures of the titular glass dome. The impression of gloominess is accentuated by the shadowy figure of a mysterious old lady with a big hat, accompanied by an ominous description: “No-one knew where she was

going, or what she had in her sack” (Ersland, 2010).

The mysterious lady turns out to be a taxidermist who picks up animals killed by cars at night and brings them to life by stuffing and placing them in the glass dome, “a constructed biotope”, as Anne Schäffer (2012) calls it, reminiscent of a morbid museum full of lush vegetation. One day, the lady finds a dead girl in a pool of blood. The child has already been introduced in the first spread, where she can be seen on a bridge with a man who is presumably her father. Later, the girl is moved to “her paradise”, as the dome is called in the penultimate spread, and placed among rabbits that have been waiting in vain for a good playmate. Meanwhile the man goes looking for the girl at night. Eventually, the old taxidermist chooses to lead him to the dome by knotting pieces of the girl’s yellow dress on trees. The last, wordless scene, where the man is standing with his back turned to the reader, looking at the girl among the rabbits, is the only one showing the dome in all its glory, filled with swirling, floral patterns of bright green and a few smiling animals.



**Fig. 5.** Bjørn Arild Ersland & Lilian Brøgger, *Glassklokken* (2010). Reprinted with permission from Bjørn Arild Ersland & Lilian Brøgger.



**Fig. 6.** Bjørn Arild Ersland & Lilian Brøgger, *Glassklokken* (2010). Reprinted with permission from Bjørn Arild Ersland & Lilian Brøgger.

In her reflections on time–space in children’s literature, Nikolajeva (1996) distinguishes between the concepts of primary and secondary chronotope, which can be related to the real and the magical world in fantasy narratives. In my view, the city chronotope in *Glassklokken* is primary in the sense that both space and time resemble reality: the city, filled with tenement houses, pedestrians and cars, seems very familiar, as does the flow of time, which is marked by regular changes of night and day. The glass dome, on the other hand, does not seem to belong to the real world but can be perceived as a kind of secondary chronotope. Even though it follows the rhythm of day and night, the dome, with all its motionless inhabitants captured in the moment of their resurrection, remains somehow suspended in time. Even though one may reach it from the city, only the old lady knows how to enter it. Hence, the titular structure itself adds a supernatural, or even surreal, dimension to the narrative.

The taxidermist plays a central role in the iconotext. Firstly, she functions as a link between the primary and the secondary chronotope: only she has access to the glass

dome and only she may allow others to access it. However, there is another way in which she stands out as a superhuman being. The verbal text in the fifth spread says that she never sleeps: she collects roadkill at night and works in her workshop during the day. Secondly, it is the taxidermist’s actions that give this book a sense of the post-pastoral as it “successfully suggest[s] a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved” (Gifford, 2014, p. 26).

In total, Gifford identifies six fundamental aspects of the post-pastoral, many of which are present in *Glassklokken*. Being in awe of the natural world and recognition of the human’s role in a creative-destructive universe within this world are the first two he discusses. Both are useful for analysing the old lady’s activity. Even though the iconotext gives no clues about her motivation, her deep respect for nature is made clear as she carefully picks up dead animals, packs them in thin leather bags, and arranges them in the dome. Moreover, the taxidermist’s actions reflect her acknowledgment of “a continuous momentum of birth and death, death

and rebirth” (Gifford, 1999, p. 153) in nature, but what is important is that she is not merely a passive observer of these processes.

In fact, she steps into the role of a demiurge, an active force that brings animals and the girl back to life and restores order, or to put it differently, she becomes a conscience of her species. Working on a “constructed biotope”, where plants, animals and humans thrive side by side, the lady creates a showcase for an Arcadia or a Garden of Eden, a reality that might exist if only other people could gain insight into the workings of the human-dominated natural world. As Gifford says about the fifth quality of post-pastoral literature, our consciousness may be “the species’ opportunity to take responsibility for its ecological relationships” (Gifford, 1999, p. 165).

One may read the picturebook as a narrative about death and afterlife, but given the circumstances in which the animals and, seemingly, also the girl lose their lives, I would argue that the environmental dimension of the story cannot be ignored. In the fictional universe of the book, it is evident that human technology brings destruction. The glass dome, considered symbolically, may thus be a gloomy warning of the loss of the natural world’s integrity. On the other hand, it also provides hope. The dead girl is, after all, the only one whom the rabbits accept as their companion. Rabbits, as we know, symbolise fertility, rebirth and new life, so their relationship with the girl could signal the re-establishment of a lost balance in the environment dominated by humans.

### Concluding remarks

The three picturebooks analysed in this article are very different, both aesthetically and thematically, yet they have a few things in common – starting with the fact that they are all examples of crossover fiction. As I have tried to indicate in my readings, *Glassklokken* and *Fugl* especially stand out as particularly open texts that can be interpreted in multi-

ple ways, depending on the reader’s competence. Here, I have used the chronotope as an analytical tool to study representations of nature and the city, including the interaction between the two in the iconotexts, and to explore possible environmental concerns expressed in the books.

The cities in all three picturebooks are represented quite stereotypically as industrialised, polluted and congested with heavy traffic. Furthermore, they are associated with negatively laden phenomena: the darkness and cold of the winter and the gloominess of the night. None of the cities are reminiscent of Norwegian urban landscapes, granting room for more generalised readings of the iconotexts, but also distancing them from the Norwegian reality. Generic depictions of the cities can make it difficult for Norwegian children to immediately recognise the urban environment as something familiar and, as a result, to relate to the ecological issues addressed in the books.

An anti-urban view of the world prevails in the iconotexts, while the idealised nature, unsurprisingly, becomes a positive counterbalance to the urban. Nature is the sphere in which the characters seek retreat and rescue, and is also something worth saving and exhibiting. Still, as shown in *Anda i ødemarka*, the city has the potential to be a satisfactory space.

In all three narratives there is a transposition from the urban to the natural world, which demonstrates problems that occur at the intersection of the two spheres. Either it is the impossible dilemma of the reverse pastoral, the question of responsibility when leaving the confinement of the city, or the need to restore balance between the creative-destructive forces in the universe of the post-pastoral: all these problems concern different aspects of nature in relation to the urban, as well as different ecological issues.

Even though representations of the city are not common in Norwegian picturebooks, they add a valuable perspective to how nature may be portrayed in children’s

literature. The tension that arises in contrasting depictions of the natural and urban world creates ample room for discussion, provided that there is a dialogue between the child and adult readers. In her monograph on crossover picturebooks, Sandra L. Beckett remarks that this medium is particularly suited to collaborative reading experiences, empowering “the two audiences more equally than any other narrative forms” (Beckett, 2011, p. 2). Hopefully, sharing

opinions on the relationship between nature and the city in literature can contribute to shaping a new generation of ecocitizens, regardless of the environment in which they are raised.

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## Notes

- 1 The picturebooks have not been published in English. All translations of the Norwegian titles and quotations from the books are my own.
- 2 I choose to translate *ødemark* to *country* in English in order to capture the meaning of the notion represented in the book. I also want to avoid confusion with *wilderness*, an established concept in ecocritical writing, often associated with untamed landscapes of the New World, as opposed to the more domesticated nature of the Old World pastoral (Garrard, 2012, p. 67).
- 3 According to Bakhtin (1981, p. 225–226), the idyllic existence of generations in one specific area is limited to such basic realities as love, labour, stages of growth, food and drink, and does not involve trivialities of everyday life. In this respect, it is harmonious and unproblematic. The idyllic chronotope is further characterised by conjoining human life with the rhythm of nature, which Gifford (2012, p. 50) also highlights in his discussion of the pastoral. For him, the pastoral entails stability of a problem-free respite in closeness to nature, as opposed to the busy life of the city.

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