



Art in Book Form

Children's Book Illustration in Norway

By Egon Låstad
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Illustrated books are a unique format. What other type of literature is as free from rules and yet so endlessly rich in aesthetic expression? The combination of text, illustration and book design offers unique possibilities in the field of children's literature – possibilities that, for adults, are restricted to art books and alternative comics. Many Norwegian illustrators have discovered this artistic freedom and chosen happily to dive in. The result is a growing number of innovative, horizon-expanding and daring books for children, in terms of both form and content.

Norwegian children's book illustration includes a rich diversity of unique voices, both young and old. The creators have a background in art and illustration, and they reveal their talent in expressive abundance within a range of formats, from vignettes and book covers to comic strips, graphic novels and picture books. Those who are successful, often then stay in the field. Several write their own texts – and have developed their skills as an author, so they can create entire books.

Norwegian children's book illustrators stopped producing idealised or pedagogical illustrations a long time ago, and instead cultivate what is not perfect, in both their choice of technique and actual lines. There is a huge appetite for experimentation, with bold, confident choices; physical and digital work tools are combined in original and surprising ways. The use of pictures often helps to carry the story in Norwegian picture books, to the extent that text is not always needed. I have myself been on a committee that awarded an important literary prize to book without words.

One particular characteristic of Norwegian children's books is that the illustrations often say more than the text. This is a bonus for curious, observant eyes when someone else is reading aloud. Some illustrators even weave in details that contradict the text – often to humorous effect. The most radical example entails a change in perception, where objects described in colour are portrayed as colourless. This type of positive resistance challenges the reader to think for themselves. And whets the critical mind.





However, none of these experiments are the main point of the books. First and foremost, the sender has an important message to convey. In Norway, we have picture books about neglect, incest and a child's first encounter with pornography – to name but a few. It goes without saying that it requires enormous sensitivity on the part of the illustrator to depict such tabooed subject matter in a constructive and instructive way.

Children's books in Norway take children seriously, and the effect is anything but depressing. Divorce, exclusion and even death are depicted with empathy, warmth and light humour. There is great comfort to be found in the colourful, often unusual perspectives presented in the pictures. Many of the books are about overcoming challenges, both big and small, and the children portrayed in the books are independent and resourceful. Ultimately, children are the winners in these books, as they actively grapple with their personal situation.

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