

Mind Lab

By Petra Helgesen
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Imagine if we could dream each other's dreams? Imagine if you had a thousand elks in your garage? Imagine if I could collect holes?

These are just some of the thought experiments that Norwegian children's literature and young adult fiction have to offer. Norwegian authors and illustrators play with their readers and challenge them by turning reality upside down and imagining improbable situations. They use picture books, fantasy fiction or Manga comics to explore what might happen if the world were different.

There can also be surprises in everyday stories, where the protagonists transform reality through play, and thus help the readers to see something familiar in a completely new way. Norwegian children's literature does not tell readers what to think, but rather encourages children and young people to think for themselves.

The freedom of a safe neighbourhood and year-round-activities in nature are still essential elements of childhood in Norway. We are a nation that cherishes values such as democracy, freedom of speech, equality and trust, and children's books reflect our understanding of children as independent, responsible individuals. Such thought experiments offer readers an opportunity to build resilience in the face of difficult realities.

Typically, the main character is an active and independent child, who often has responsibility for their parents or siblings. The relationships are portrayed in a light and humorous way for the youngest readers. They can laugh at the adults who can't keep up, and the absence or incompetence of parents allows a space for the child to explore secrets and find solutions.

The burden of responsibility is greater in Norwegian young adult fiction. These novels pose existential questions, and the reality they describe can be both brutal and unfair. The main characters often behave badly; they are not in control of their social situations and let their family and friends down.

If the protagonist makes a mistake in a children's book, the author forces them to sort it out themselves, whereas in young adult books, the reader is frequently left to work out a better solution. Happy endings are never a given.

Since the early 1980s, it has become almost a tradition for Norwegian authors to push boundaries, deal with topics in unconventional ways and confront one taboo after another. Norwegian children's and young adult literature is as curious and bold as its protagonists.

Most recently, young Norwegian readers from six to nine have been able to read about war, seen through the eyes of a mine detection dog. And over the past few years, expressive picture books have dealt with bullying in nursery school, incest or porn. New narrative devices are constantly being introduced in young adult novels to deal with topics such as suicide, mental health and youth crime. The creators of children's books clearly believe that young readers deserve artistic expression that is challenging in both form and content.

This mind laboratory also extends to Norwegian non-fiction for children and young adults – a growing segment of the Norwegian children's book market. Here, the curious "imagine if" is replaced with an astonished "imagine that". Imagine that children were sold as slaves in the Roman Empire! Imagine that you can get stones in your kidneys! Imagine that the octopus can have more than a thousand children!

Young adult and children's literature in Norway trusts the child's ability to think, so the readers' minds are expanded and changed by reading the books.

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