Can you introduce any topic in children's books?

Many Swedish books for young readers deal with subjects that adults may consider too advanced for children. There are books about loneliness and death, but also about friendship and fantasy.

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Among the characters in the exhibition are smart kids who solve mysteries, tough princesses who rescue princes, and young children who are curious, angry and sad. There are children who wonder where they were before they were born, lonely children and children who want to decide over their own lives. The children have the opportunity to be different, to make their voices heard and to develop.

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Access to literature that all children are included in and feel is a part of us is important for language development. To this end, international exchange is vital. Ensuring that books are translated and reach readers in different parts of the world is further our awareness and understanding of one another. This is particularly important in the case of young readers.

Astrid Lindgren perhaps put it best herself: 'Good literature gives the child a place in the world and the world a place in the child.'

Pom and Pim

Tripping over a stone and bursting your balloon is bad luck, but finding a coin that will buy you an ice cream and coming out into the rain just when you've made a raincoat for your cuddly toy is of course good luck. That's how eventful and fluctuating a day in the life of Pom and Pim can be. The books are sparing, focused stories for the very young about an independent child and a floppy cuddly toy. We never learn whether Pom is a girl or a boy, and nor does it matter. Lena Landström's texts are short and simple and Olof Landström's illustrations clear and easily understood by the youngest readers.

Max

In the innovative books about Max, Barbro Lindgren adopts the child's earliest use of language, where each utterance is just a few words long. By this simple device she lets Max himself describe his dramatic day-to-day life with his team-mates. He is nothing short of a charmer, and a child who sometimes gets into unexpected situations. If things become too exciting, there is always the background and a rug to run in. The entire read is as a run-in so the reading takes the same amount of time as the course of events. Eva Eriksson's illustrations match the text perfectly and the result is humorous, expressive series of adventures for the very young.

Baby

The gender-neutral Baby, dressed in a striped nightshirt and with strands of hair sticking up, is the protagonist in a dozen or so books for the very young by Ann Forslind. Words are few and the simple, vivid images reflect emotions such as fear, anger and curiosity by means of precise body language and facial expression. This makes it easy for a young child to relate to the texts. Ann Forslind's trustworthy, unobtrusive line sketches images stop the detail and go straight for the essentials.
Bridget is a preschool child who has a knack of landing in strange situations while wandering about on her own. When she loses touch with her preschool group and has to spend the night in the woods, she meets a flock of wolves and tames them without fuss. Other episodes concern dopey sheep and rowdy elks. With unflagging optimism and ingenuity, Bridget works through her fears and shortcomings. As always, Pija Lindenbaum's books bring together text and illustrations in her own special, unerring brand of comedy.

Micke and Manne

In the books about Micke and Manne, it is Micke who talks about himself and his friend Manne. Micke would love to be brave but in all honesty he has to admit that Manne is braver. In I Watch the Dog (Jag vaktar hunden), Micke would love to give the dog sweets, to throw sticks and to put a collar on it, but on second thought he'll let Manne do it. The story is actually told in Pija Lindenbaum's humorous illustrations, and the text is almost superfluous.

Alfie Atkins

Alfie Atkins is a well-known figure for many children, both in Sweden and abroad. Gunilla Bergström describes in words and pictures the everyday lives of Alfie and his father. The books are set in an urban environment and Alfie has both an imaginary friend and real friends. His world is full of flights of fancy, games, ideas and inventions, but also of emotions such as anxiety, jealousy and fear. These, too, are a part of everyday life, all described without any finger-wagging or moralism.

Leni

Sometimes Leni pretends she's a baby and sometimes she wants to be a grown-up. She gets upset when the ladies at the pastry-shop call her sugarplum and she's jealous of her younger brother who rides in a pram while she has to walk. Emotions present in everyday life, such as jealousy, anger and uncertainty, are described with a comic touch. Emma AdBåge uses a wealth of period detail to help create a personal picture of Leni in which a child is allowed to grow and develop both physically and emotionally.
Findus

While Findus may be a mischievous little cat and Pettson a kind, patient old fellow, it feels natural to view Sven Nordqvist’s books as stories about a boy and his father. Findus wants to try out new things while Pettson prefers the status quo. Findus often gets his way, however, and Pettson is sometimes pleasantly surprised by it all, even when things get a bit out of hand. The gently nostalgic settings that Nordqvist describes in such detail are those of rural Sweden many years ago. The careful observer will find much in the pictures that is never remarked upon in the text.

Pippi Longstocking

The most famous character in Swedish children’s literature, Pippi Longstocking has already reached the ripe old age of 70. When Astrid Lindgren’s first book about this strong, rebellious girl appeared, it brought both acclaim and controversy. Pippi is not a well-mannered child – she says what she thinks and does what she likes. Also, she is so strong that she can lift a horse. But she always sides with the weak. The illustrations for Pippi Longstocking were by Danish artist Ingrid Vang Nyman. Her image of Pippi is that of an independent, outspoken girl with plaits that stick straight out at the sides.

Princesses

Princesses in fairy tales usually sit at home in the castle waiting for a prince to come and propose marriage. But The Princess in Per Gustavsson’s picture-books prefers adventure. When a magician makes the guests at her party disappear, she immediately sets off to rescue them. She may wear a pink dress but she resists princes, vanquishes dragons and plays ice hockey as energetically as she organises parties and inaugurates bridges. Employing an equally playful approach, Gustavsson has also written a couple of books about princes who don’t fulfill their traditional roles.

Johan and Ajax

The two stand-alone books A Star Called Ajax (En stjärna vid namn Ajax) and The Sister from the Sea (Systern från havet), written by Ulf Stark and illustrated by Stina Wirsén, are about friendship, grief and loss. Johan the dog is seven years old when Johan is born and they become the closest of friends right from the start. When Ajax grows old and dies, Johan refuses to accept it. His longing for Ajax is so great that he travels through the universe and brings him back. The sister from the sea is called Sirkka and she arrives on her own. At first, Margareta, the daughter in the family that takes her in, is not at all kind to her. She’d wanted a dog instead. But when the war is over and Sirkka is due to go back, they feel like sisters and are sad to say goodbye. Both books discuss serious and important issues in a sensitive and respectful way.

Sirkka and Margareta

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One day when Zackarina is angry at her dad, she digs a hole in the sand – and the Sand Wolf suddenly appears. They become friends and playmates and meet on the beach every day. He’s happy to listen to Zackarina’s reflections on all kinds of subjects, such as where she was before she was born. Zackarina gives expression to many of the things that occupy an imaginative child’s mind, and even if the Sand Wolf doesn’t have all the answers, he helps her move on. Åsa Lind’s read-aloud books about the Sand Wolf inspire both children and adults to engage in philosophical discussion. Kristina Digman’s illustrations nicely complement the text in a gently humorous tone.

Jerry and Maya

Incredible private eye Jerry and Maya solve crimes in the small town of Valleby. Whether it concerns stolen dogs, fires or spooky mummies, they always clear up the mystery. In The Whodunit Detective Agency, Lasse Majas detektivbyrå, Martin Widmark has found a form that suits both beginner readers and much older children. Helena Willis’ artful illustrations reflect Widmark’s humorous approach. More than twenty books about the two young sleuths have appeared so far.

Vita and Windsor

Vita is a little girl who paints the white lines in the middle of roads. She paints them completely straight. But one day she meets Windsor who is blowing about with the wind, and he wonders whether lines couldn’t be made crooked sometimes. Sara Lundberg depicts the various worlds in which Vita and Windsor move in bright colours and whirling brushstrokes. Her books about the friendship between these two lonely children can be read in different ways – as existential meditations or as fairy tales. In both cases, they allow free rein for both reflection and imagination.

A new generation

A generational change in children’s book publishing in Sweden has opened the door to artistic innovation and new characters. Writers and illustrators are continuing to emphasise the right of children to make their voices heard. Here, too, we find characters that represent contemporary Swedish society in all its ethnic and cultural diversity. Below is a selection of the new generation’s literary figures.

Selma has a little bird that pecks at her body because she’s lonely. In Ellen Karlsson’s read-aloud book, String, the Bird and Me (Snöret, fågeln och jag), Selma acquires a friend in the girl next door, String. This little neighbour does what she likes and no bird is going to peck at her. Eva Lindström’s quirky drawings effortlessly capture the tone of the story.

Those Left Behind are unnamed people – a father, two children and a granny. charm. Mum has died. Forthright and in very few words, Karin Saler describes how grief affects people differently. Siri Ahmed Backström’s illustrations vividly depict a family who have managed to survive and move on.

Moa writes a letter to the moon, which she thinks looks so lonely. When she gets no reply she goes there in a rocket. In Emma Virke’s picture-book Letter to the Moon (Brevet till månen), with its subtle illustrations, we realise that it’s probably Moa who feels lonely.

Big Brother is supposed to put his younger sibling to bed in the picture book The Lightning Gobbler (Blixtslukaren). Instead, however, the two make up a daring tale of wild adventure to help combat their fear of thunder and lightning. Jonatan Brännström’s efficacious text is well illustrated by Joanna Hellgren’s dramatic, brightly coloured images.

For more information about the authors and illustrators, scan the QR code.

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