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## Ubiquitous Diversity. *Minä ja uusivauva (Boken om attfåsyskon)* by Maria Frensborg and Maija Hurme, or Where Do Children Come From and Are They All the Same?

Wszechobecna różnorodność. *Minä ja uusi vauva (Boken om att få syskon)* Marii Frensborg i Maiji Hurme, czyli skąd się biorą dzieci i czy wszystkie są takie same?

### KEYWORDS      ABSTRACT

diversity,  
multiculturalism,  
Finnish picture  
books, iconotext,  
Finnish children's  
literature,  
informative picture  
book

The aim of the article is to analyse which of the topics, listed by the Finnish Institute for Children's Literature (Lastenkirjainstituutti) as the most common topics in children's books published in Finland in 2020, appear in the book *Minä ja uusivauva (Boken om attfåsyskon)* by Maria Frensborg and Maija Hurme, and how the authors deal with those topics. The author of the article also analyses the ways of presenting diversity, both in text and in images, and attempts to find the reasons for the increasingly more popular presentation of diversity as an element of everyday life by Finnish authors of books for children. Among the main aspects of diversity in the book, diversity in terms of ethnicity, culture, gender, as well as various family models are presented. However, all these aspects are portrayed primarily from the perspective of equality and similarities, and not by highlighting the differences between members of different social groups.

## SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

różnorodność,  
wielokulturowość,  
fińska książka  
obrazkowa,  
ikonotekst, fińska  
literatura dziecięca,  
informacyjna  
książka obrazkowa

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przeanalizowanie, które z tematów wyodrębnionych przez raport Lastenkirjainstituutti (fińskiego Instytutu Książki dla Dzieci) jako najczęściej poruszane w 2020 r. w literaturze dziecięcej wydanej w Finlandii zostały ukazane w książce szwedzko-fińskiego duetu autorek Marii Frensborg (autorki tekstu) i Maiji Hurme (ilustartorki) *Minä ja uusi vauva* (czy też, w szwedzkim oryginale, *Boken om att få syskon*) oraz to, w jaki sposób zostały one przedstawione. Przedmiotem analizy w artykule są także sposoby przedstawienia przez autorki różnorodności, zarówno w tekście jak i w obrazie, oraz próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, jakie są przyczyny coraz powszechniejszego przedstawiania różnorodności jako elementu codzienności przez fińskich autorów książek dla dzieci. Wśród głównych aspektów różnorodności w książce pojawiają się przede wszystkim różnorodność pod względem etnicznym, kulturowym, płciowym, a także przedstawione są rozmaite modele rodzin. Wszystkie te aspekty są jednak ukazane przede wszystkim przez pryzmat równości i podobieństw, nie zaś poprzez podkreślenie różnic pomiędzy członkami odmiennych grup społecznych.

## Introduction

Although *Minä ja uusivauva*, or (in the original) *Boken om attfåsyskon*, would probably be regarded as a Swedish publication, given the nature of picturebooks or iconotexts in which text and image are of equal importance, the work by Maria Frensborg (author of the text) and Maija Hurme (illustrator) can be regarded as a Swedish-Finnish publication. Taking into account the data on the current situation of the Finnish publishing market provided annually by the Finnish Institute for Children's Literature (Lastenkirjainstituutti), in this article I will attempt to analyse which of the most popular themes of children's books published in Finland in 2020 are addressed in Frensborg and Hurme's book and how these themes are presented. Above all, I will focus on the diversity of all kinds, which, although not the main theme, occupies an important place in both image and text.

Although educators could probably add a lot of themselves in this regard, I will conduct my analysis from the point of view of literary studies. At the very beginning, I would like to define some key terms for the article. The subject of the analysis is a picturebook, i. e. according to Kristin Hallberg's definition, "a children's book with one or more pictures on each double-page" (Hallberg, 2017, p. 51). I also use the concept of iconotext, understood as the actual text of a picturebook and being the interaction between words and images (cf. Hallberg, 2017, p. 52). The article mentions

that the publication by Frensborg and Hurme is partly informative. As Nikola von Merveldt rightly points out, the popular term *nonfiction*, defining a genre by what it is not, seems quite unfortunate. Thus, an informational picturebook is a factual publication in which the illustrations are as important as the text, so that they not only illustrate the information, but they also organise and interpret it. Importantly, informational books are also intended to entertain and inspire readers, which is why picturebooks have become their predominant form aimed at children (cf. Merveldt, 2018).

### *Kirjakori*

Because of the activities of Lastenkirjainstituutti (hereafter: LKI), i. e. the Finnish Institute for Children's Literature, each year we have the opportunity to learn about current trends in the Finnish publishing market. Therefore, the annual report published by LKI makes it possible for us to look at the book published in Finland in 2020 (and in Sweden the year before) from a broader perspective, and to pay attention to how its themes fit into the prevailing trends in recent years.

One of the main themes in children's books published in Finland in 2020 was broadly understood diversity. It is worth mentioning that the theme of diversity (including social, cultural or ethnic diversity) has been prominent in Finnish children's literature for several years now. Ethnic diversity, which is the easiest to spot at first glance, is mainly present in the pictorial layer and usually appears, so to speak, "by the way". This is certainly related to the multiculturalism of the Finnish society, whose structure, almost always quite heterogeneous, has only benefited from this heterogeneity in recent years as a result of migrations. As the editors of the book *Suomalainen vieraskirja. Kuinka käsitellä monikulttuurisuutta* (Finnish Guest Book, or How to Deal with Multiculturalism)<sup>1</sup> notice in their article: "Finland has never been mono-cultural, although this has often been claimed in the public debate"<sup>2</sup> (Huttunen et al., 2005, p. 16). For years, the characters in children's books have not represented the typically Finnish (as commonly understood) type of beauty, and there are even works (such as the famous *Tatun ja Patun Suomi* by Aino Havukainen and Sami Toivonen) in which the illustrations in new editions have been slightly altered to make the Finnish society depicted therein more varied, in line with the current situation. This is related to the fact, also mentioned by Huttunen, Löytty and Rastas, that the increase in the number of ethnic and cultural minorities in the Finnish society has also affected the image of

1 *Vieras* – means "guest" in Finnish, but also "stranger".

2 Translated by the author.

the street, which is significantly different from that of the 1980s, for example (Hutunnen et al., 2005, p. 17). In the picturebooks currently being produced, the society visible in the illustrations is very diverse.

The LKI report for 2020 notes diversity (understood as the belonging of humans, by virtue of their characteristics and roles, to various groups) in children's books primarily in the following forms: gender diversity, ethnic diversity, physical diversity (including that related to disabilities), as well as expressed through the presence of numerous family models in the society. These are particularly important themes, as they enable young readers to identify with the characters in the books written for them (cf. Lastenkirjainstituutti, 2021). Other themes that were most represented in books for children and young people published in Finland in 2020 included environmental protection and the related role of the child in the climate change process, or death as part of children's and young people's lives. In 2020, the child's agency and influence on the surrounding reality, and the presentation of the world from a woman's point of view were also among the most important themes (cf. Lastenkirjainstituutti, 2021).

*Minä ja uusivauva* is a story about a child's anticipation of the birth of a younger sibling. Although this expectation is presented in a fictional way, as stated earlier, the book can undoubtedly be considered partly informative. The description of Misa's waiting for the birth of her younger sibling is interspersed with facts about reproduction, pregnancy, birth, and the development of a baby. Little readers are introduced to such important and serious topics as conception, in vitro fertilisation, adoption and childbirth (by force of nature and by caesarean section). What has not been particularly surprising in Scandinavian books for children (cf. Dymel-Trzebiatowska, 2017) may still be somewhat of a novelty for the Polish reader. Although in the 21st century, thanks to the growing interest in Scandinavian literature (including that aimed at children), bolder works have also begun to appear in Poland, certain themes are still not particularly common on our publishing market. It is still not typical to depict topics considered taboo in book illustrations. The illustrations in *Minä ja uusivauva*, which, despite its clear characteristics as an informational book, is still a fictional children's story, openly show a family washing together in the shower, Misa's parents having sex (the fertilisation of the ovum is shown in high magnification against this scene) or various birthing positions hanging on the wall of the doctor's surgery. These images complement the text which mentions only some of these subjects. The text, on the other hand, explains the IVF procedure, the adoption process, as well as how specific types of birthing take place and how they differ from one another. Thus, in its humble form, it is a book that offers the child a solid dose of knowledge about the world.

An interesting aspect in *Minä ja uusivauva* is the issue of the gender of the characters depicted in it. In the Finnish version of the book, the main character awaiting the birth of a younger sibling is Misa. In Finland, this name can be given to a girl or a boy,

and there are almost three times as many boys/men with this name as girls/women (cf. Nimi lapselle, n. d.). Due to the peculiarities of the Finnish grammar, when reading the book in this language, it is impossible to decide whether Misa is a boy or a girl until he introduces himself to his newborn sibling as the older brother. This is because there are no genders in Finnish, and even the third person pronoun is one, common to all genders. Also, in the original Swedish-language version of the book, the main character has a name that can be either female or male: Mika. However, the main character is not the only one whose gender is not entirely clear. Throughout the pregnancy of Misa's mother, it is mentioned that a *vauva*, i. e. a baby, will be born. It is not said that Misa will have a sister or a brother. When the baby appears in the world, the illustrations do not make it clear whether it is a boy or a girl. The illustration of the baby without a nappy does not dispel these doubts either: it is difficult to say whether its genital organs resemble those of a male or a female; the closest thing to the truth would probably be to say that it is "something in between". When, at some point in the Finnish version of the book, the baby's name, Venni, finally appears, the question of gender is still unresolved. This is because, once again, it is a name suitable for both a woman and a man. The same is true in the Swedish version: the child is given the name Joni, which, in Sweden, may be a man's or a woman's name.

The issue of unspecified gender also applies to other characters in *Minä ja uusivauva*. Emma, Misa's kindergarten classmate, also appears in the book. When her siblings are mentioned, not once is the gender of these children specified; they are simply referred to as siblings (*sisarukset*). Not revealing the gender of the protagonist is an increasingly common practice in Finnish books for children. Although the latest LKI report (on books published in 2022) does not record the number of publications in which the gender of the protagonists is not known to the reader, in earlier reports this information has appeared, and the presence of characters whose gender is not distinguished in any way in the book no longer surprises anyone in Finland. This can be seen as a way of drawing attention to the fact that what is important in diversity (in this case gender diversity, but, as will be discussed further on, also diversity in virtually every other aspect) is not what divides people, but what unites them. The fact that the protagonists belong to different social groups is not emphasised in any way; it only appears "by the way", and often does not draw attention to itself at all.

## Ethnic Diversity

The increase in the number of books that show diversity as an element of everyday life has been noted by, among others, in the LKI 2021 report. These books, therefore, feature characters from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with different

languages, characters from different types of families, but their diverse backgrounds are usually shown very subtly, often only in the illustrations.

A similar situation occurs in the book by Frensborg and Hurme. The main character himself is the child of a dark-skinned mother and a white father, which, however, is not mentioned anywhere in the text. We only learn this from the illustrations. Just a dozen or more years ago, when the first version of *Tatun ja Patun Suomi* by Aino Havukainen and Sami Toivonen was written in 2007, the presence of characters with different skin colours in children's books was not as common as it is today. This social change resulted in the fact that, when a modernised version of the book about Tatu and Patu appeared on the market in 2017 on the occasion of the centenary of Finland's independence, the authors made some changes to the book, which included editing the illustrations to increase the number of people with different skin colours (cf. Pesonen, 2017, p. 46).

In addition to Misa and his siblings, Misa's cousin Ilda, who is also waiting for a younger sibling, also appears in *Minä ja uusivauva*. Her situation differs, however, in that Ilda knows that she will have a sister who, for the time being, lives in some distant country. The illustrations in the book hint at the Asian roots of both girls, but it is impossible to find information about this in the text.

## Different Kinds of Siblings, Different Family Models

The diversity in Frensborg and Hurme's book also manifests itself in showing the young reader a variety of family models. Apart from Misa's rather typical family of four, in which two siblings with a relatively small age difference share their parents, the reader also gets to know the family's neighbours, the kindergarten children in Misa's group or his distant relatives. When the children are sitting in a circle in the kindergarten and Misa announces to everyone that he is going to have a sibling, the other children talk about their own family situation. Among them are the twin sisters, Emma and her three siblings, with whom she shares a dad but different mums, as a result of which they live together only every other week; or Samir who has a younger brother. The book also mentions the aforementioned Ilda, Misa's adopted cousin, who is waiting for her adopted sister for whom she and her mum and grandmother are soon going abroad. A neighbour Hilma also appears whose family includes "one dog, one Hilma and two mums" (Frensborg, Hurme, 2020, p. [29]). One of the mums is currently pregnant. It is on the example of this family that in vitro fertilisation is presented in an unobtrusive way.

## Different, yet the Same

Although the authors present young readers with a whole cross-section of family situations, the book does not emphasise the differences between them. On the contrary, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that, although life situations and family models may differ significantly from each other, they actually have a great deal in common. This equality, or common fate, is also highlighted in the context of the birth itself. Misa learns that every human being lived in their mother's belly before birth. The fact that the same fate applies to people of all ages and social statuses is highlighted. Indeed, it was not only Misa and his younger siblings who stayed in their mother's belly, but also their father, grandfather and even kings and presidents. Later, when Misa's mum starts giving birth to her child, the boy learns that his uncle's little kittens were also all together in their mum's belly before they were born.

## Summary

Being at the same time a fictional story about expecting a new sibling and an informative book about the birth of a new life, *Minä ja uusivauva* deals with diversity on many levels, emphasising, however, not the differences between representatives of different social groups, but their common features and fates. Thus, the book shows diversity in terms of ethnic, cultural, gender or social aspects, but, above all, it shows the peaceful coexistence of representatives of all these groups. Each of the characters depicted is an equal member of the local community. The peers that Misa encounters on a daily basis come from completely different families, cultures or ethnic groups, but are all presented, first and foremost, as children with a lot in common.

Due to the informative aspects of the book, which, in addition to the main plot, introduces the youngest readers to the secrets of the origin of new human (and animal) life, reproduction and the associated difficulties, it can be said that the book is also didactic. All the relevant topics in the book are presented in a way that is appropriate for a picturebook: the illustrations do not duplicate the contents of the text, but complement it, so that some of the information is conveyed solely through the image.

Considering the themes dominating the books for children published in Finland in 2020, it can be concluded that *Minä ja uusivauva* is a fairly typical example of the literature published in that year.

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