Challenging Adamant Norms
– An analysis of the portrayal of childhood and gender in the Handbook for Superheroes books

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Abstract

Children’s literature is one of many important influences of childhood socialization and teaches children about contemporary society. Therefore, it is important to understand what messages children’s literature convey. In this thesis, I analyze four contemporary, Swedish graphic novels, aimed at children between the ages of six and nine years old. My research questions are: how do the studied books portray children and childhood? And how do the books portray the intersectional positions of girlhood and boyhood?

To gather and analyze my data, I used close reading and thematic analysis. This process resulted in three themes, which I call: ‘a child in need of protection or the competent child’, ‘the gender-neutral superhero or the gendered superhero’ and ‘constructing girlhood and boyhood’. The results show that the books depict children in two ways; either as dependent and vulnerable or as competent agents. This relates to traditional, developmental understandings of children as well as understandings of children as formulated by the new paradigm for the study of childhood. Moreover, the results problematize the role of the superhero, specifically the ways in which the books explicitly gender the superhero in the text and portrays what could either be interpreted as a gender-neutral or an implicitly masculine superhero in the illustrations. Finally, the results indicate that the books depict girlhood and boyhood as contrasting identities.

In conclusion, the authors of the books seem interested in challenging conventional norms regarding children and childhood, in line with a larger trend among Swedish children’s literature. At the same time, the books also convey traditional norms regarding both girlhood and boyhood, such as by the clear markers of age and gender in the illustrations.

Keywords: children’s literature; children; childhood; girlhood; boyhood.
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1. Introduction

Sweden is generally thought of as a forerunner when it comes to both children’s rights (Heimer & Palme, 2016: 436) and gender equality (see, for example, Hübnette & Lundström, 2011: 48; Eklund & Lundqvist, 2018: 1), even though the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child still has not been incorporated into Swedish law\(^1\) (UNICEF, n.d.). The Swedish government proclaims itself as the ‘first feminist government’ (Regeringskansliet, n.d.) and states that ‘girls and boys, women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives’ (Regeringskansliet, 2017, my translation). One way in which these values and ideas could be promoted is through children’s literature, which is often perceived as an important influence of childhood socialization (see, for example, Pesonen, 2015a: 12).

According to the Swedish Institute for Children’s Books\(^2\) (2018: 5; 2019: 7), a trend in children’s literature published in Sweden during 2017 and 2018 was to acknowledge social injustice, particularly in relation to power imbalances between children and adults and other norms relating to for example gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Overall, the books ‘challenge the majority norm […] and encourage an inclusive perspective’ (ibid.: 12, my translation). In this sense, authors of Swedish children’s literature seem interested in promoting the values regarding, for example, children’s rights and gender equality that Sweden is understood as a forerunner of.

2. Research problem and research questions

As one of many important influences of childhood socialization, children’s literature becomes of academic interest as it, among other things, conveys ideas about what it has meant historically, as well as what it means today, to be a child (Asplund Carlsson, 2003: 10). Children’s literature also has an important impact on children’s ideas and understandings of gender. Steyer (2014) states that stereotypical depictions of female characters in children’s literature ‘have the potential of negatively influencing the development of young children’ (ibid.: 175-176) whereas non-sexist portrayals have the potential to, for example, reduce stereotypic gender role behavior (ibid.: 176). In this way, children’s literature becomes an

\(^1\) The UNCRC will be incorporated into Swedish law as of January 1\(^{st}\), 2020 (UNICEF, 2018).
\(^2\) In Swedish: Barnboksinstitutet.
important tool in understanding contemporary childhood as well as contemporary girlhood and boyhood.

As Sweden is considered a forerunner of children’s rights (Heimer & Palme, 2016: 436), where ‘the achievements in gender equality policies and practices’ is ‘a central aspect of the construction of “good Sweden”’ (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011: 48), children’s literature should arguably promote non-stereotypical portrayals of girls and boys to be in line with these values. Therefore find it interesting to look closer at the constructions of age (more specifically children and childhood) and the intersection of these with depictions of gender in contemporary Swedish children’s literature.

The aim of this thesis is thus to examine depictions of children, childhood, girlhood, and boyhood as portrayed in both text and pictures in contemporary Swedish children’s literature. Specifically, I will study a Swedish book series called *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) which is a series of four graphic novels aimed at children between the ages of six and nine years old. This means that I will, on the one hand, examine how the books portray children and childhood and, on the other hand, how the books portray the intersectional positions of girlhood and boyhood. The following research questions will guide the thesis:

- How do the studied books portray children and childhood?
- How do the books portray the intersectional positions of girlhood and boyhood?

3. Previous research

The field of children’s literature research, and picture books in particular, is extensive and includes research of historical literature, studies of picture books as a medium and of the narratological aspects in them (Druker, 2018: 4-5, 9). In this review of previous research, I have mainly chosen to focus on research which studies representations of children, childhood and gender in children’s literature. To my own surprise, I found it very difficult to find studies that have focused on depictions of children and childhood in children’s literature. Less surprisingly, it was very easy to find studies that dealt with depictions of gender. This literature review will
therefore mainly present research which focuses on gender rather than age, or the intersection of the two. I have also chosen to not limit the review context-wise but will instead give examples from many different contexts.

Though this thesis focuses on graphic novels as its empirical material, this is not represented in this literature review. I did not find any previous literature that dealt specifically with graphic novels as its empirical material in a way that related to the thesis topic. Instead, it was much more common to focus on picture books. As picture books and graphic novels in many ways are quite similar, specifically concerning the importance, and interrelation, of text and illustration, I find these studies relevant for this thesis as well. This literature review will therefore mainly share findings related to picture books.

I have chosen to present this literature review in three different categories: quantitative studies, mixed-methods studies, and qualitative studies. This will demonstrate the different methodological approaches that have been used in the field. Moreover, I will focus on the theoretical approaches and findings of the studies, to give an overview of the field. Finally, I will end with a concluding subchapter, where I discuss the lessons drawn from previous research in the field of children’s literature.

3.1. Quantitative studies of children’s literature

One common approach to the study of children’s literature is using quantitative methods, such as content analysis (Kok & Findlay, 2006: 257). These kinds of studies focus on quantifiable measures of sexism, gender (in-)equality and gender representation in their studied material.

The studies by Kok and Findlay (2006) and Luyt et al (2011) are similar both in approach and results. Kok and Findlay (2006: 252-253) used content and frequency analysis to analyze gender stereotyping in 25 Australian award-winning picture books from the 1970s to the 2000s and Luyt et al (2011: 49) examined (female) gender representations and stereotypes in 80 Singaporean picture books from the 1970s to 2008 using a content analysis approach. Both studies showed a lack of gender stereotyping in either the books from the 1970s or the books...
from the 2000s’ (Kok & Findlay, 2006: 256). However, both studies comment that they have only studied certain aspects of gender stereotyping and that ‘more subtle forms of gender misrepresentation and stereotyping could be at work’ (Luyt et al, 2011: 62).

Another example of a quantitative study of children’s literature is the study by Crisp and Hiller (2011: 197), in which they have analyzed Canadian Caldecott-medal winning picture books between the years of 1930 to 2011. Their results showed that the studied books were more often written and illustrated by men than women and that it was more common for the books to have male than female leading characters and that these, typically, were portrayed in a gender stereotypical way (ibid.: 201-203). Their findings also showed many ungendered characters (14%), some of which had their gender indicated in the illustrations, some of which did not (ibid.: 204).

3.2. Mixed-methods studies of children’s literature

Another approach to studying children’s literature is using a mixed-methods approach.

In their study, Diekman and Murnen (2004) had 40 individuals’ read one out of 20 children’s books. These had been labeled as either sexist or nonsexist by researchers and publishers. Afterward, they were all asked to answer a questionnaire, which allowed both qualitative and quantitative aspects to be captured (ibid.: 377-378). In this way, they applied a mixed-methods approach. Their results show that although there was a difference between the books labeled as sexist and non-sexist, the latter ‘portrayed at best a narrow vision of gender equality, in which women adopt male-stereotypic attributes and roles’ (ibid.: 381). Both types of books only let traditionally feminine roles be adopted by women whereas traditionally male roles were available for both men and women in the so-called non-sexist books. In other words, it was easier for female characters to adopt ‘male traits’ than for male characters to adopt ‘female traits’ (ibid.: 381).

Filipović (2018: 312-313) also uses a mixed-methods approach to analyze the representation of gender in 15 children’s books and then interview educators about these findings. The first phase
consisted of a quantitative frequency count and a qualitative content analysis and showed a significant overrepresentation of male characters in both text and illustrations and that so-called gender-neutral characters were more common than female characters (ibid.: 312, 315). Here, Filipović acknowledges the argument that ‘illustrated neutral animal characters that lack feminine markers […] are understood to be male by children’ and that if this is true, ‘the domination of male characters in the illustration would become even more prominent’ (ibid.: 315). This furthers the underrepresentation of female characters in the book. The second and third phase of the study, in which early childhood educators were first asked to write reflective journals about the findings from phase one and then interviewed about the topic, demonstrated ‘a lack of awareness regarding gender patterns in books they often used with children’ (ibid.: 317).

3.3. Qualitative studies of children’s literature
The final approach to the study of children’s literature that I will present here is studies using a qualitative approach, just like this thesis.

I want to begin by presenting the study by Österlund (2008), the only study in this literature review to focus on the intersection of gender and age (generation). Österlund analyzes four children’s picture books by the Swedish authors Carin and Stina Wirsén, focusing on the renegotiation of girlhood (ibid.: 5, 7). The book *Små flickor och stora*, one of the books studied by Österlund (2008: 10) tells the story of a girl’s resistance to her mum’s understanding of girlhood as being ‘the good girl’. Though departing from traditional girlhood, with floral dresses and pink bows as gender markers, the girl manages to negotiate gender in a way that avoids so-called masculinization and gender stereotypes simultaneously (ibid.: 13). Österlund (2008) states that Carin and Stina Wirsén manages to portray a ‘nuanced portrait of the girl’ in which girls can ‘embrace both princess dreams and amazon strength simply by being complex literary characters’ (ibid.: 14, my translation). Thus, it is possible to have the power to decide for oneself and still remain within the construct of girlhood (ibid.).

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3 In English: *Small girls and big ones*
Hermansson (2014: 21) analyzed four Scandinavian picture books, in which a prominent theme is the incompetence of parents and adults. The study highlights the competence of children and specifically, when and how they are allowed to be competent (ibid.: 21-22). One example of the competent child is from the book *När Åkes mamma glömde bort* by Pija Lindenbaum, which Hermansson (ibid.: 25) has studied. This book tells the story of Åke’s mum, who is transformed into a dragon. Or for the adult reader, a story of how the mother suffers from burnout and resigns from her role as the competent parent (ibid.: 25, 27). Regardless of the reason for Åke’s mom’s sudden incompetence, Åke is forced into the role of the responsible and competent child. It is only as his mom resigns from her competence that Åke is allowed to assume it, and when he does, he is in charge of getting the competent parent back. The resignation of the parent is consequently what gives the child greater room for agency and competence. The study by Hermansson (ibid.: 31) thus shows that an incompetent parent might give room for a greater degree of agency and competency on the part of the child or children in general.

Odenbring (2014: 1) analyzes the ‘Emma book’, a series of Swedish picture books published in the 1970s, through a close reading in which the iconotext is also examined. In her discussion, Odenbring (2014: 2, 9, 12) states that the societal changes of the 1970s Swedish context, in which for example the understanding of children changed in favor of one that regarded children as independent social actors, are clearly characterized in the books but that, nevertheless, the representations of gender in the books are in many ways traditional. For example, even though Emma’s family is described as ‘equal’, where the mum and dad help each other with the domestic chores, there are also instances in which Emma’s mum is portrayed as the only parent doing the chores related to the home and children (ibid.: 9-10). Consequently, the Emma books can be said to represent both societal changes and traditional norms.

The last study I want to present here is that by Taber and Woloshyn (2011: 889). They study the ways gender and dis/ability, more specifically ability and exceptionality, intersect in Canadian award-winning children’s literature, with the help of feminist critical discourse analysis (ibid.: 889). They found that the five books they studied contained both traditional gender norms and that the characters’ lives were subject to power relations that impacted their

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4 In English: *When Åkes mom forgot*
agency (ibid.: 894-895). The possibility to challenge and contest these power relations were, in turn, strongly impacted by the characters abilities and exceptionalities (ibid.: 898). Taber and Woloshyn (ibid.: 895, 900) also found that female characters more often critiqued societal norms than male characters and that they were more likely to challenge and transgress traditional gender norms. This is similar to the results found by the earlier presented study by Diekman and Murnen (2004: 381).

3.4. Previous research – what does it tell us?

As demonstrated by this review of previous research, quantitative, qualitative as well as mixed-methods approaches have been used when studying children’s literature. The quantitative approaches commonly use frequency and content analysis and focus on the occurrence of and relation between, for example, female and male characters in the story as well as in the illustrations. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, commonly use close reading as a methodological tool. The two studies that had used mixed-methods approaches combined quantitative and qualitative methods to get results that could be quantifiable as well as qualitatively analyzed. The review of previous research thereby shows that there are many ways, methodologically speaking, to conduct studies of children’s literature but also that the chosen method as well as empirical material has implications for the result.

Focusing specifically on the results of the studies, and what lessons can be drawn from these, I find the question of whether or not gender inequality and gender stereotypes are still portrayed in children’s literature to be of particular interest, specifically as the studies by Kok & Findlay (2006) and Luyt et al (2011) found no such indications. Causes for this could, for example, be that their methodological approaches could only capture certain expressions of gender stereotyping and sexism (Luyt et al, 2011: 62). Kok and Findlay (2006: 256) and Luyt et al (2011: 62) mention themselves that their result stands in contrast to much other research, which instead indicates a persistence of unequal gender representation in children’s literature. This pattern is also represented in this literature review, as the studies by Crisp and Hiller (2011: 203), Diekman and Murnen (2004: 381), Filipović (2018: 312, 315), Odenbring (2014: 12) as well as Taber and Woloshyn (2011: 894-895) demonstrate.
One way in which the literature review is indicating a change in the representation of gender is through the pattern that female characters are becoming more free in adopting traditionally masculine traits (Diekman & Murnen, 2004: 381; Taber & Woloshyn, 2011: 895, 900). Though only a start, it demonstrates some form of change and widened possibilities in relation to gender norms. The study by Österlund (2008: 14) also indicates a renegotiation of girlhood, though still within the boundaries of traditional girlhood. This literature review thereby indicates that the portrayals of particularly female characters are changing. The portrayals of male characters are also not changing to the same degree as the female characters. So even though gender stereotypes, gender inequality, and sexism are still persistent in children’s literature, it seems like the authors and illustrators of children’s literature are interested in portraying gender non-stereotypically.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was difficult to find studies that examine portrayals of children and childhood. Consequently, this thesis can contribute to the field by offering analyses of how children’s literature portrays children and childhood as well as girlhood and boyhood.

4. Method

4.1. Selecting the material

For the process of selecting the material for this thesis, I have done a purposive sampling. This means that I have aimed at selecting material ‘relevant to the research questions that are posed’ (Bryman, 2016: 408). The material is therefore selected for its perceived ability to answer the research questions rather than for its ability to represent a larger population, which is typically how the material is sampled in quantitative research. According to Bryman (2016: 408), an important part of purposive sampling is to have clear and relevant criteria which determine which material is included or excluded from the sampling. For this thesis, it was important that the material let me study contemporary, Swedish literature and to focus particularly on depictions of children and childhood, and how these intersect with depictions of gender. My selection criteria for whether a children’s book was suitable or not was:

1. It must be produced in Sweden;
2. It must be produced after 2010;
3. It must have children as prominent and recurring characters;
4. It must be aimed at children between the age of 6 to 9 years.

The fourth, and final, criterium was formulated as a way of narrowing down and specifying a sphere within the huge field of children’s literature for this thesis. I chose this specific age group as it is the group in which many children learn to read on their own and because these books usually still contain both text and illustrations. This means that my selected material has the potential of being used in multiple ways; for the child to read on their own (in school or at home), for adults (parents, teachers, other adults) to read for children or for children to look at the illustrations alone. This means that there is great potential for literature aimed at this age group to be read by many different readers and for the literature to be used in many different ways. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on this field of children’s literature.

During my process of searching for relevant material, I realized that my first four criteria were too wide and that too many books potentially fit the selection criteria. Therefore, I added two more criteria with the aim of narrowing the scope. These are that:

5. The chosen books should be widely distributed or popular;
6. The chosen books should be written by the same author(s).

Besides narrowing the scope, the fifth criterium is also aimed at indicating which newly published books are read by many children and therefore has its depictions and meanings widely distributed. The choice to focus on books written by the same author(s) rather than several is a result of the scope of this project. I find that I am more intrigued by the possibility to produce an analysis of one authorship with more depth and focus, rather than a more superficial analysis of several authors works. I find the idea of focusing on books by several authors alluring and important too, but more appropriate for a project with a broader scope and more generous time frame.

Having added the two last criteria, I turned to three of the biggest Swedish online book shops (Bokus, Adlibris, and Akademibokhandeln) in my search for the material for this thesis. At the time of my initial search in February 2019, the book series *Handbok för superhjältar* by Elias

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5 In English: *Handbook for Superheroes*. The books will hereafter be referred to with their English translation.
and Agnes Våhlund were popular on all three sites in the category of books for children aged six to nine years. There were, however, four other book series that were popular at the online book shops at that point of time, which fit my criteria. Besides having already written about one of these book series elsewhere (Malm & Söderström Gardevåg, 2015), the book series *Handbook for Superheroes* was also the only series of book that occurred on the popularity list of all three online book shops at this time. This indicated to me that these books were more widely distributed and popular and thus, I chose these books as my empirical material.

Focusing on a book series rather than books from several authors do have implications for the study, just as the opposite decision would have implications too. One such implication concerns the possibility to generalize my findings. The perceived problem of generalization regards not only this thesis but qualitative research in general. Bryman (2016) states that ‘it is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigations are restricted (ibid.: 399). He suggests that the purpose of much qualitative research is to contribute to theory rather than to generalize to a specific population. Thus, ‘it is the quality of the theoretical inferences that are made out of qualitative data that is crucial to the assessment of generalization’ (ibid.: 399). As touched upon earlier in this chapter, the ability to generalize my results have never been a goal which is particularly demonstrated by my purposive sampling strategy. For this reason, I do not regard the lack of possibility to generalize my results as a problem. Instead, it is a well thought out effect of my sampling strategy.

4.2. The empirical material: *Handbook for Superheroes*


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6 The translation of the book titles is made by me.
comic books (Boglind & Nordenstam, 2015: 198). The books are targeted at children between the ages of six and nine years and are about 90-100 pages long. In 2018, the second and third part of the book series was awarded ‘Children’s detective story of the year’ (Rabén & Sjögren, 2018).

4.3. Analytical perspectives
In this thesis, I will focus my analysis on two categories: age (specifically, children and childhood) and gender. I understand these as constructed and structural categories, implying that the meaning of age and gender are not ‘given’ nor ‘natural’ but rather produced within a specific time and context (James & James, 2012: 116). Moreover, by recognizing age and gender as social structures, I acknowledge the way in which these categories work as social stratificators and how these may limit or expand a child’s ability to act or choose (ibid.: 128). I also find it important to highlight that I consider age and gender to be an example of intersectional categories, meaning that they are always intertwined and interdependent on each other and other categories such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Prout & James, 1997a: 8). Thus, age or gender can never be fully understood on their own.

When the ‘new paradigm for the study of childhood’ (Prout & James, 1997b: 2) emerged in the 1990s, it not only recognized childhood as a socially constructed category, or children as active co-constructors of their own lives, but also argued that ‘children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults’ (Prout & James, 1997a: 8). In its focus on children and childhood, Child Studies have shown that historically, ‘children’ as a category have been understood primarily in biological and developmental terms and as future adults; as becomings rather than beings (Oswell, 2012: 40). By drawing on Child Studies as a paradigm and field, I recognize the importance of giving voice to children’s experiences, perspectives and interests and the generational order in which children are marginalized (Halldén, 2003: 15). I, therefore, find it important to have ‘age’, and specifically children and childhood, as one of the perspectives through which I carry out my analysis.
The parallel between Child Studies and Women’s Studies is not far-fetched; they both aim to highlight the experiences, interests, and perspectives of marginalized and silenced groups (Prout & James, 1997a: 7), they both focus on what they consider to be structural and constructed societal categories and they both struggle with the dichotomy of nature versus culture, i.e. the question of whether womanhood/childhood is biological or cultural (Halldén, 2003: 15). That is one reason why I have chosen to focus on gender alongside age. I also find the question of gender to have particular relevance when talking about children’s literature, and specifically, children’s literature containing illustrations, as these tend to portray gender in a stereotypical way even though the illustrations are becoming more diverse and norm critical (Kåreland, 2015: 129). Although the gender perspective on children’s literature is far from new or innovative, I find that it has continued relevance in the contemporary (Swedish) society where gender issues are re-actualized through movements such as the #metoo movement that took place in the fall of 2017 (TT, 2018). Therefore, I have chosen gender as my second analytical perspective, specifically examining how depictions of gender intersect with depictions of childhood.

4.4. Collecting and analyzing data

In the coming two subchapters, I will describe my process of collecting data through close reading and my process of analyzing the collected data through thematic analysis. I have decided to present these as two separate chapters in the hope of clarifying the processes. However, separating the data collection and data analysis in this way also has the downside of the processes seeming to be more detached than they, in fact, are. Above all, it is important to state that close reading has a distinct element of analysis to it as well, as data collection in the context of literary studies means ‘gathering’ quotes or illustrations that the researcher believes is of interest in relation to the research problem and research questions. There is not any data waiting to be ‘collected’, it is the researcher that decides what fits the scope and what does not. In this sense, talking about close reading as a data collection method oversimplifies and conceals the analytical aspects of the process (Herrnstein Smith, 2016: 58). Nevertheless, I have chosen to write about close reading as a data collection method and to write about it as a separate process from the data analysis. Hopefully, this makes my course of action for collecting and analyzing the data more clear.
4.4.1. Close reading

Close reading describes the detailed study of text (Kårelund, 2015: 166) and is a commonly used method for data collection within the field of literary studies (Herrnstein Smith, 2016: 57). However, there exists no consensus of what the practice exactly means or entails but has rather come to be used in various ways (ibid.: 57). In the context of this thesis, close reading refers to the practice of detailed study of both text and illustration. The iconotext, that is, the interplay between text and illustration, which ranges from complete coherence to complete discordance between text and illustration, is of great importance as well (Nikolajeva, 2000: 15, 22) as both text and illustrations are vital components of the story in the studied books. The iconotext of the books will be considered in the data analysis process.

My data collection process was theoretically informed, meaning that I focused on a number of beforehand chosen aspects rather than all aspects of the material (Pesonen, 2015b: 68; Bryman, 2016: 411). These aspects were age, specifically children and childhood, and the intersection of childhood and gender, as indicated by the research questions. Because close reading is quite unspecific in its approach, I decided to formulate five steps to follow in my process of gathering data. These have a focus on age and the intersection of age and gender and allowed me to focus on both text and illustrations. Having these steps also assured that I worked with each of the four books in the same way.

When collecting my data, I focused on one book at the time, starting with the first book in the book series and ending with the fourth and last one. The specific procedure for collecting data from each book followed these five steps:

1. Read the whole book from beginning to end without taking any notes at all;
2. Read the book again from beginning to end and identify and take notes of pages in which the text explicitly refers to age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity;
3. Read the book again from beginning to end and identify and take notes of pages in which the text implicitly refers to age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity;
4. Read the book again from beginning to end and identify and take notes of pages in which the illustrations visualize age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity;
5. Read the book again and take note of every mentioned character as well as their age and gender (as expressed explicitly or implicitly in the text and/or illustrations).

The first and second step of the data collection process is very straightforward; step one means simply reading the books and step two means taking note of keywords. The next two steps, however, are vaguer and require a bit of explanation and illustrative examples. The third step was born out of the realization that not all references to age or gender would be explicit, but rather more hidden. Hence, the need to look for implicit references to the above-mentioned keywords. As an example, the collection of explicit references did not allow me to collect the pages in which the female superhero is referenced to as ‘he’, which turned out to be an important theme for the analysis. Neither did the collection of explicit references allow me to pick up on the topic of friendship and bullying. Instead, these were collected as part of the implicit references, as the first example clearly related to discussions of gender (though not explicitly) and the second example related to understandings of childhood, yet again not explicitly. Though deciding what is, and what is not, an implicit reference to age and gender is a matter of definition or perspective, I found this part of the data collection process crucial for the end result.

The fourth part of the data collection process, where I focused on the illustrations in the book was also a bit tricky as, for example, close to all pages of the books can be said to illustrate age as most pages contain illustrations of children. As not to drown in data, I decided to be a bit more selective in my data collection. Thus, I mainly focused on illustrations of contrast, such as the contrast between the so-called ‘boys’ and Lisa. This illustrated the intersection of age and gender well. Similarly, illustrations containing both Lisa and the thieves illustrated the intersection of age and gender well too. Once again, deciding what is, and what is not, a visual reference to age and gender is highly dependent on one’s definition or perspective. Nevertheless, this step of the data collection process was highly important for the end result.

The keywords used in step two, three and four are derived from my analytical perspectives ‘age’ and ‘gender’ and the research questions, which formulate an interest in the intersection of age (children and childhood) and gender. Thus, I chose age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity and masculinity as my keywords. Other additional keywords could possibly have been for example ‘woman’ and ‘man’ as they illustrate my interest in depictions of the intersection of age and gender. However, they do not correspond with my primary interest in
children and childhood, and the intersection of age and gender, and was therefore not included as part of my selected keywords. ‘Girlhood’ and ‘boyhood’ could also have been chosen as keywords as they clearly conceptualize the intersection of age and gender, focusing on childhood as a specific age group. However, I find that this aspect is already captured by other keywords such as girls, boys, femininity, and masculinity. As I was collecting both explicit and implicit references to my keywords, I was also able to collect phrases that did not use the exact phrasing as my keywords, yet still clearly related to my research topic and research interest. One example of this is from the first book, where Lisa is referred to as ‘nine years old’ (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 15, my translation). This exact phrasing is not mentioned in my keywords, still, as it is an implicit mention of age, it could still be incorporated as part of the collected material. In this sense, I found the keywords to be sufficient.

A clear implication of my choice of close reading as my data collection method and the subsequent decision to formulate a procedure of five steps for the data collection that was theoretically informed is that I have, to some extent, decided what data is relevant for this thesis, and what data is not. In other words, one could argue that by doing a theoretically informed data collection, one potentially misses out on interesting aspects of the material. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the purpose of theoretical sampling is to only find data that is relevant for the research topic and research questions (Bryman, 2016: 411). Thus, it is the theoretical perspectives that the data collection is based on that determine what data is relevant and what data is not. Consequently, one can collect different data from the same empirical material depending on the theoretical interest. In this thesis, the data collection was informed by an interest in depictions of children, childhood, and gender, and thus, other data that, for example, related to topics of ethnicity or the superhero role as such was not included. That does not mean that this data is not relevant, but rather that the research interest determines what empirical data is relevant for the thesis in question.

4.4.2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a data analysis method that, as the name suggests, revolves around the search for themes (Bryman, 2016: 584). Like close reading, thematic analysis is not a strictly defined activity. On the contrary, the search for themes occurs in many different analytical methods and is used in many diverse studies (ibid.: 584-585). The question of what constitutes
a theme is not clear either. Bryman (2016: 584) argues that a theme is as a pattern found in the research data, which relates to the research topic and has the potential of contributing to the research field in question. To find these themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003: 89-92) suggest looking for, for example, repetitions, metaphors and analogies, similarities, and differences or missing data. For the purpose of this thesis, a theme refers to a pattern found in the empirical data that relates to the research problem and research questions.

I recognize that text and images are not the same and therefore cannot be analyzed in the same way. Rose (2016) argues that images are always intertwined with other media, such as text or other images but that nevertheless, ‘they are not reducible to the meanings carried by those other things’ (2016: 22). This is also emphasized by the previously mentioned concept iconotext, which recognizes that text and meaning may either correspond or disconnect. For this reason, it becomes important to analyze text and images both in relation to each other and on their own. This is also the reason for why I have some steps in my analytical process that analyze only text and image (step one, three, five) and other steps where I relate the text and images to one another (step two and four).

The visual analysis, as well as the analysis in general, is based on the keywords age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity, and masculinity, as were also used in the process of close reading. In analyzing how these keywords manifest in the images, I have related these keywords to conventional understandings of age and gender. This means that age and gender can manifest through, for example, corporal markers (such as height, wrinkles, length and color of hair), through the type of clothes a character wears and the color of these (for example pink dress/skirt versus blue pants) as well as through the specific poses in which the characters are portrayed (such as through passive versus active poses). A guide in this analytical process, both for image and text, has been the schemes by Nikolajeva (1998: 129) and Josefson (2005: 8), who list activities and traits that are usually perceived as either female or male in a Western contemporary context. These schemes can be found in Appendix I.

Similarly to how I had steps to follow in my data collection process, I also created steps to follow in my data analysis process. These are based on my interest in depictions of children,
childhood, and gender and also incorporates the previously described concept of iconotext (see step two and four of the analytical process). The first seven steps of the analytical process are aimed at processing the data to examine depictions of children, childhood, and gender. The sixth step specifically aims to initiate reflections regarding the importance of age and gender for the plot and in the character portrayals. It is only in the final step that the material is sorted into themes for the analysis. The specific procedure for processing and analyzing my data was as follows:

1. Return to the explicit mentions of age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity in the text (step two of data collection) and identify patterns within and between the books;
2. Compare the text analyzed in step one to the surrounding illustrations; do these align or are they in conflict?
3. Return to the implicit mentions of age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity in the text (step three of data collection) and identify patterns within and between the books;
4. Compare the text analyzed in step three to the surrounding illustrations; do these align or are they in conflict?
5. Return to the illustrations that visualize age, children, childhood, gender, girls, boys, femininity or masculinity (step four of data collection) and identify patterns within and between the books;
6. Answer the following questions based on the collected and analyzed data:
   6.1. Is the sex/gender and/or age of the main characters important, or even crucial, to the plot of the book? (Nikolajeva, 2000: 173)
   6.2. Are the illustrations overly explicit or stereotypical in their portrayal of gender and/or age? (ibid.: 173)
7. Compare the material concerning age to the material concerning gender; how do age and gender relate to each other within and between the books?
8. Gather the analytical material produced in the previous steps and sort them into themes to be presented in the analysis section of the thesis.

The process of analyzing the data was an iterative process where the themes emerged as the analysis proceeded. This means that the final themes cannot be linked to a specific step in the analysis but are rather a product of the analysis as a whole. My data analysis process resulted in three themes, which I call ‘a child in need of protection or the competent child’, ‘the gender-
neutral superhero or the gendered superhero’ and ‘constructing girlhood and boyhood’. These illustrate themes found in the text as well as the illustrations and are sometimes themes that run throughout all four books or are mainly found in some of the books.

The choice to define my analytical procedure through eight analytical steps followed from the ‘vagueness’ of thematic analysis, namely that there is no consensus on what thematic analysis entails or even what a theme is (Bryman, 2016: 584). This has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it allowed me to be consistent in my analysis of the books but on the other hand, it may have caused me to miss important and relevant data. At the same time, I found it important to be very clear about my procedure both in the data collection process and the data analysis process and formulating clear steps for the procedures allowed me to do that. I, therefore, find that the positive aspects outweigh the negative in this matter.

Last, but absolutely not least, I find it important to raise the issue of subjectivity in relation to analyses in general. I agree with Pesonen (2015b) who states that ‘no analysis is definitive, as another interpreter could always find new aspects of the texts’ (ibid.: 69). In other words, I recognize that there is no such thing as an ‘objective’ reading or analysis of a text, but rather, that it will always be informed by the position of the reader. Having stated that, I also acknowledge that it is important to demonstrate the link between my empirical material and my analysis, which includes demonstrating my analytical process. My predetermined steps for the analysis are thereby part of my ambition and strive for transparency and clarity.

4.5. Ethical reflections
This research project neither involves participants nor the collection of personal data of any kind and thus, there is no need for an ethical reflection that focuses on established ethical principles such as the collection of informed consent (Bryman, 2016: 125). Neither does this research projects involve children as participants, meaning that I will not have to consider the specific complex ethical issues that concern children in research (Farrell, 2005: 1, 3). I have
thus chosen to only shortly discuss the issue of copyright and the Swedish quotation right\(^7\) in relation to this project.

Because I have chosen children’s literature as my empirical material, and graphic novels in particular, I knew from the beginning of this project that I would want to incorporate illustrations from the books as part of my analysis if possible. In accordance with Swedish copyright law, I asked for permission from the book publishing company, as well as the authors and illustrators of the books to do so. This permission was granted during the course of the project and thus, I have chosen to incorporate illustrations from the books in my analytical chapter. The email can be found in Appendix II. Swedish law also includes the right to republish artwork and images in academic work through the quotation right (SFS 1960:729, 23§). This right is granted as long as the academic work motivates the inclusion of the image or artwork and as long as this is done in accordance with good practice. In accordance with the quotation right, I have therefore made sure to reference each image properly.

5. Analysis

In this section, I will present the three themes identified during the analysis, which I call: ‘a child in need of protection or the competent child’, ‘the gender-neutral superhero or the gendered superhero’ and ‘constructing girlhood and boyhood’. These themes will be presented one by one under their own subheadings. All themes relate both to the text and the illustrations in the books and aim to answer my research questions, which are: how do the studied books portray children and childhood? And how do the books portray the intersectional positions of girlhood and boyhood?

The first theme, ‘a child in need of protection or the competent child’ discusses the way in which Lisa is portrayed as her 9-year-old self in comparison to how she is portrayed in her superhero role. I argue that these depictions can be linked to a broader debate around how to understand children and childhood, where developmental understandings of children argue that children are vulnerable ‘becomings’ whereas proponents for the new paradigm for the study of

\(^7\) In Swedish: citaträtt.
childhood argue that children are competent social actors. Thus, this theme highlights how the studied books portray children and childhood and relate to the first research question.

The second and third themes ‘the gender-neutral superhero or the gendered superhero’ and ‘constructing girlhood and boyhood’ related to the second research questions and thereby highlights how the books portray the intersection of age and gender. Specifically, the second theme discusses the way in which the books both talk about and illustrate the superhero and whether they depict a so-called gendered neutral superhero or an implicitly masculine superhero. The third, and last, theme discusses the way in which girlhood and boyhood are constructed more generally in the books, where I argue that all characters in the books (except for the two superheroes Lisa and later Max) are described and portrayed as either a child, adult or elder as well as either female or male.

As part of the analysis, I will incorporate illustrations from the books to further demonstrate the links between my analysis and the empirical material. Some of these illustrations will be cropped to show only the part of the illustration that I find relevant for the particular discussion. Full versions of the illustrations are available in Appendix III.

5.1. A child in need of protection or the competent child

The first book in the book series Handbook for Superheroes (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a) introduces the character Lisa, a nine-year-old girl who lives with her grandmother. She is bullied by three boys in her class, who she refers to as ‘the boys’. One day, when running home from school, chased by the boys as usual, she runs into the library as to escape her bullies. There, she sees a glowing red book called ‘Handbook for Superheroes’. Though she does not believe in superheroes, something about the book seems real. She asks the librarian Caroline, who also happens to be the sister of her grandmother, to check it out for her. However, the book does not seem to be part of the library system. Caroline says that she can take it anyways, as it probably will not be missed by anyone. And that is how Lisa’s journey to becoming a superhero begins. Throughout the four books (Våhlund & Våhlund 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) Lisa assumes her new superhero identity ‘the Red Worm’, guided by the handbook. This contains the instructions to learning 101 superhero powers, from which Lisa chooses to practice three:
the ability to fly, the ability to fight and the ability to speak with animals. As the Red Worm, Lisa faces the supervillain Wolfgang and his gang of crooks. The contrast between Lisa in her superhero role and Lisa as her nine-year-old self is clear and it is this contrast I want to discuss in this theme.

The portrayal of Lisa as a shy, lonely and bullied girl is consistent throughout all books and is explicitly commented upon by Lisa herself. For example, she states that she has been bullied for her ‘big ears’ since day one in her new school and that she is always alone during her breaks (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 15, 19). ‘Will it always be like this?’ she asks herself (ibid.: 21, my translation) and at one point, she also wonders why no one helps her (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 36). She continues by stating that ‘no one seems to see her. And if they did, no one cared anyway’ (ibid.: 37, my translation). Lisa is not unable to act though, on the contrary, there are several instances in which she attempts to improve her situation. One such instance is described in the first book, where Lisa refuses to let the boys chase her home from school, as they usually do (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 51). ‘I refuse to run [...] If you want something, we will have to fight about the matter’ (ibid.: 51, my translation), Lisa states as she is being portrayed in a pose that mediates power and strength. However, her bravery to stand up against her bullies is not rewarded as the scene continues with her being punched by one of the boys. Robert, one of the bullies, states that ‘You do not mess with us. It is we that mess with you. Okay?’ (ibid.: 52, my translation). It is not common that Lisa in the role of herself is given space to act in this way, in fact, this is one of the very few instances. It is instead more common for her to be passive and shy as demonstrated when she later answers her grandmother’s question of whether something particular had happened that day with a silent head shake. ‘It is better to be silent’, Lisa thinks for herself (ibid.: 53, my translation) and she goes back to her previous role as the shy, lonely girl. In general, I would argue that when portrayed this way, her role conveys vulnerability and the need for protection. Picture 1 is in this sense not representative of the way

![Picture 1: Lisa in a powerful pose.](Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 51, cropped)
Lisa is usually portrayed, but rather an example of a rare instance in which Lisa is given agency outside of her superhero role. Nevertheless, I find this image important as a contrast to how she is more commonly portrayed, which can be seen in Picture 5.

As Lisa enters her superhero role, where she becomes ‘the Red Worm’, her portrayal changes drastically. Dressed in a red one-piece suit with a hood and a red tie with holes cut out for her eyes, she suddenly conveys competence, bravery, and agency in a way that she typically does not when she is ‘herself’. In the first book, Lisa meets an old man who has been robbed of his coin collection. Being the superhero, Lisa decides to help the old man. Lisa finds the two adult male thieves and wins a fight against them. She takes the coin collection with her and returns it to its owner. Later in the book, the following conversation takes place between the thieves and their boss:

- Did a superhero steal the coins?
  - Yes, chief.
- And he⁸ was masked?
  - Yes, chief.
- And he hit you?
  - Yes, chief.
- Even though you were twice as many, and he was half your size?
  - Yes, chief.
- Are you totally hopeless?
  - Yes, chief. We mean no, chief. (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 83, my translation)

⁸ I will discuss the use of ‘he’ in this conversation as part of the next theme.
This conversation demonstrates Lisa’s ability and excellence as a superhero and also emphasizes the fact that Lisa could win over the two men despite her being half their size and them being twice as many. Implicitly, this comment on the contrast between the child superhero and adult thieves. In that way, Lisa’s competency and agency in her role as a superhero is emphasized.

Lisa’s position as a competent social actor when she is a superhero is further emphasized in the following books. In the third book, the Red Worm is described as the protector of the city she lives in and it is stated that ‘The crooks that do not surrender immediately, Lisa could easily take to the police station. The thugs did not stand a chance’ (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: 12, my translation). Here, it is also described that her new role has made her popular as well as wanted and needed, as the police chief says that ‘You should know that everyone here in town loves you […] I really do not know what we would do without you’ (ibid.: 13). In the same book, Lisa as her superhero alter-ego is being interviewed by the town’s mayor when suddenly, the room they are in is filled with a cloud of thick, green smoke. Lisa realizes that it is the supervillain Wolfgang and his gang of crooks who are out for her. In the illustrations, she is portrayed among masked crooks with heavy weaponry. Arguably, the situation is dangerous.
(although, as an adult reader, it is also easy to argue that it is unlikely that something too drastic or scary would happen, as it is a children’s book) and as Lisa handles the situation by escaping, it demonstrates her competence to evaluate the situation and act upon it. Fear, as conveyed by Lisa’s big, scared eyes in picture 4, is thereby depicted as a sign of competence rather than a weakness as it demonstrates her ability to analyze the seriousness of the situation. Fear does not decrease her competency or agency; it is instead an expression of it.

With the establishment of the new paradigm for the study of childhood, a new way of thinking about and understanding children and childhood arose. Proponents of this understanding argued that children are competent, social agents with the ability to make a change in their own lives and the world around them (Prout & James, 1997a: 8). This stands in stark contrast to previously dominating understandings, where children’s vulnerability, innocence and lack of competence were understood as a result of children’s positions as ‘becomings’ (James & James, 2012: 132-133). It is these contrasting understandings that are evident in the Handbook for Superheroes series, where the Red Worm represents the first understanding whereas Lisa the 9-year old

*Picture 4: Lisa and the heavily armed villains.*

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: 68-69)
represents the latter. Overall, when Lisa is herself, she is dependent and vulnerable, whereas the Red Worm demonstrates competency when she handles difficult situations and is willing to put herself in danger to help others. In this sense, the two different roles that Lisa has becomes examples of the contrasting picture of the competent child, on the one hand, and the child as a vulnerable individual in need of help, on the other.

To some extent, the superhero role even allows Lisa to move beyond the child identity. When she is the Red Worm, Lisa is allowed to handle situations that arguably are not normally deemed suitable for children, such as that portrayed in Picture 4 where she is faced with villains armed with laser-sighted weapons. In this sense, she is portrayed in a way that makes her competent superhero rather than a competent child. At the same time, the reader knows that Lisa is the superhero and that she is a child and thus also knows that the superhero is a child. So even though the superhero role gives Lisa an opportunity to act outside of conventional norms regarding childhood, she is still interpreted within this framework. The fact that the villains that superhero Lisa face are all adults further emphasize the difference between the child superhero and the adult villain. With this in mind, Lisa is still constructed as a child and as a competent child rather than as a competent superhero alone.

The contrast between Lisa the 9-year-old and Lisa the superhero is also evident in the illustrations in the book. When Lisa is portrayed as her 9-year old self, she is often portrayed either on her own or in contrast to her bullies, the boys. With few exceptions, such as that of her trying to stand up against her bullies (as described earlier) her poses convey that she is shy or vulnerable. Portrayed as her superhero alter-ego ‘the Red Worm’, however, the illustrations portray Lisa in a different way. Poses which I would like to describe as more ‘traditional’ superhero poses, alluding to for example, Superman, are common and further demonstrate the understanding of Lisa the superhero as a competent child.
Picture 5: Lisa in contrast to her bullies.
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 37, cropped)

Picture 6: Lisa on her own.
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 24, cropped)

Picture 7: Lisa in superhero pose.
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 75, cropped)
The topic of competence and in particular, the competent child, is also treated in previous research of children’s literature. In her study of incompetent parents and competent children, Hermansson (2014: 31) demonstrates that when the adult world fails to act and lose their competence, it is the children that assume responsibility. To some extent at least, I would argue that Lisa assumes such a role when she becomes her superhero alter-ego ‘the Red Worm’. When Lisa is her superhero self, she not only resolves issues related to criminal activity that the adult world fails to handle but she also attempts to find a solution to her being bullied, a problem that the adult world also has failed to solve. Because when Lisa is the Red Worm, she is well-liked and popular and she also gets the chance to stand up to her bullies, which she does successfully. This happens in the second book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 68ff) where the boys have put themselves in trouble by teasing a large gorilla when a circus visits the town. The gorilla chases the boys and traps them in an alley. Lisa, the Red Worm, arrives and talks the gorilla into not hurting the boys if they, in turn, stop bullying. As a result, the boys apologize to Lisa for bullying her at the end of the book (ibid.: 92–93). Hence, the superhero role allows Lisa to assume agency and competence in relation to her own life situation and to solve the problems that the adult world cannot.

As a final point, I find it important to point out that there are certainly instances in which Lisa in her superhero role shows vulnerability and instances in which Lisa as herself demonstrates competence and agency. An example of when superhero Lisa demonstrates vulnerability is
when she is portrayed in several instances as feeling scared about the things she has to do as the Red Worm. In the fourth book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 12), it is even stated that Lisa fears for her own life. An example of the contrary, that is, when Lisa in the role of herself demonstrates agency is when Lisa attempts to stand up against her bullies, as already mentioned earlier in this chapter. Nevertheless, I find the contrast between the competent child (Lisa as the Red Worm) and the vulnerable child (Lisa as herself) to be visible in the books and to add to the debate of how children should be understood. Thus, as I interpret the books, they can be said to represent conventional and traditional understandings of children but at the same time challenge these through the ways in which the Red Worm is portrayed.

5.2. The gender-neutral superhero or the gendered superhero

As presented in the previous theme, Lisa in her superhero role can be said to represent the competent child and it gave her an opportunity and possibility to gain popularity and stand up against her bullies. Another interesting aspect, which is what I will discuss more in-depth in this theme, is the way in which the superhero is positioned within the intersection of age and gender in the books and how Lisa as the superhero the Red Worm is constructed specifically in this intersection. In other words, constructions of girlhood are central for understanding the specific ways in which Lisa and her superhero alter-ego are constructed. Lisa is not the only superhero in the books, however, as Lisa’s former bully Max becomes her friend and superhero apprentice in the fourth book of the series. I will therefore also shortly discuss how Lisa and Max in their superhero roles are portrayed in comparison with the other children in the books.

I will, however, start the discussion by talking more generally about the superhero role.

In the third book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: 22-24), a discussion between Lisa’s bullies Max, Robert and Nick is taking place, in which they are discussing superhero traits and more specifically, what makes a good superhero or not. Nick states that he and Robert would make better superheroes than Max, as they ‘are better at everything’ (ibid.: 23, my translation). More specifically, he states that they are faster runners, better at playing soccer, can flip on the trampoline and are better at climbing trees. Thus, they make better superheroes. Max argues that he is smarter and implies that this would, on the contrary, make him the better superhero, but this is met with laughter from the two other boys. Nick states that ‘there is no one that has intelligence as a superpower’ and that ‘superheroes can fly, run super-fast or climb up and
down. They are super good at fighting and they can shoot laser with their eyes’ (ibid.: 24, my translation). In this sense, Nick constructs a gendered superhero.

Nikolajeva (1998: 129) presents a scheme of so-called ‘female’ and ‘male’ characteristics, which often are opposites. This means that if it is considered masculine to be active, then it is considered feminine to be passive, and so forth. In this scheme, Nikolajeva gives strong, competitive, independent, active and rational as examples of male characteristics, with the female opposites being beautiful, self-sacrificing, dependent, passive and intuitive. The male characteristics align quite well with the above discussion about the superhero and further shows how the superhero as such is gendered. This also becomes evident in the first two books in the book series (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 83; 2017b: 20-21), as Lisa’s superhero character the Red Worm is referred to by other characters as ‘he’. In other words, other characters in the book interpret the superhero to be a boy. The reader, however, knows that it is Lisa who is the superhero and because she is described as a girl elsewhere in the books, the reader knows that the superhero is a girl. It is described that it bothers Lisa that people think that the Red Worm is a boy, but that it also means that it is even less likely that anyone will suspect that she is the superhero (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 22). In other words, it is so unlikely that a girl could be a superhero that, the way the books puts it at least, no one will ever figure out that it is indeed Lisa who is the superhero.

The text does not problematize Lisa’s age the same way it does with her gender. In the first book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 32), the books describe that Lisa thinks that her grandmother would faint if she knew that Lisa was practicing to become a superhero. Whether Lisa would think this because she believes that her grandmother finds it dangerous to be a superhero as such, or because she believes that her grandmother finds it unsuitable because of her age and/or gender is not stated. Furthermore, reading the books as an adult, my interpretation is that Lisa’s grandmother not only knows but is a driving force in Lisa’s transformation towards becoming a superhero. That she would faint if she found out that Lisa was the Red Worm is thus unlikely.

It is not only competency that Lisa is allowed to adopt when she is the Red Worm, but also being brave, protective and active, which are traits traditionally interpreted as masculine traits
Thus, when Lisa puts on her superhero outfit, she is allowed to break norms as a girl. In this sense, the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) book series attempts to represent a new way of doing girlhood through Lisa the superhero, which is contrasted to the portrayal of Lisa’s ordinary self, which rather represents a traditional girlhood. The transformation between ‘ordinary girl’ to superhero represents a transformation from traditional girlhood, where girls are expected to be passive and dependent (Nikolajeva, 2017: 193) to a new girlhood where girls possess strength and courage. Previous research in the field of children’s literature demonstrates that it is more common for female characters to adopt male characteristics than for male characters to adopt female characteristics (Diekman & Murnen, 2004: 381, Taber & Woloshyn, 2011: 895, 900). This could explain why Lisa as the Red Worm is allowed to transgress traditional gender norms. However, allowing a girl to adopt traditionally male traits does not necessarily result in a believable depiction of a character according to Nikolajeva (1998: 133). She argues that depicting a female character in a traditionally male role only really results in a sex swap, resulting in a ‘hero in drag’. Thus, she questions the progressiveness of portraying a female character who is in all other aspects depicted traditionally masculine. In other words, it is possible to question whether the Red Worm truly represents a changing girlhood or if she is a so-called ‘hero in drag’. Portraying the superhero character as a girl indicates an interest in disrupting norms, specifically those concerning the gendered superhero and what girls are allowed to do. The result, however, is that those norms are reinforced rather than renegotiated.

When discussing the gendered superhero, the concept of iconotext becomes of interest, as the illustrations in the books do not portray the same complexity as the text does. In fact, I would argue that the illustrations convey a so-called ‘gender-neutral’ superhero, though a superhero whose body is still marked by its age. In other words, in the specific case of the superhero, the text discusses gender but not age, whereas the illustrations discuss age but not gender. The iconotext thus shows a conflicting and ambivalent relationship, meaning that the text and illustrations do not align to the point that they dispute each other, or even cause confusion (Nikolajeva, 2000: 22).

I would argue that in the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) books, all characters are clearly portrayed as being a specific age and gender in
the illustrations\textsuperscript{9}. The only exceptions to this are the superheroes. When Lisa puts on her superhero outfit, her long hair is concealed, and she wears pants instead of a skirt. And in the fourth book, where the former bully Max has become Lisa’s friend and co-hero, he wears an identical outfit, though yellow instead of Lisa’s red. Comparing the ways in which Lisa and Max are illustrated as superheroes to the ways in which other girls and boys are portrayed in the books clearly shows the contrast between the gendered children and the gender-neutral, yet child, superhero. Age, in this context, is shown through the height of the characters, which is most visible in contrast to adult characters.

\textit{Picture 9: Portrayal of school children.}

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 13, cropped)

\textsuperscript{9} I will return to how this manifest in the last theme.
It is possible to question whether the so-called gender-neutral portrayals of the superhero in the illustrations are truly gender-neutral. Nikolajeva (2017: 193) argues that because masculinity is the norm, it is often perceived as neutral. Previous research further supports this, as Filipović (2018: 315) states that gender-neutral characters are often interpreted as male by child readers. In other words, what we perceive as ‘gender-neutral’ is in fact often masculine. It is thus relevant to critically question whether the gender-neutral superhero is, in fact, gender-neutral or not. Comparing the portrayal of Lisa and Max as superheroes in the books with other portrayals of children, as through the above illustrations, show more similarities between the boys and the superheroes than between the girls and the superheroes. Specifically, I am thinking about the use of pants instead of skirts and the lack of visible long hair. This is further emphasized by the many powerful poses in which mainly Lisa as the Red Worm is portrayed, which, as previously mentioned, alludes to traditional (male) superheroes such as Superman. All four cover pages are great examples of such poses, which arguably further strengthen the connections between the superhero and masculinity. In this way, the illustrations do not portray the superhero role as a possibility for expressing a changing girlhood but rather signifies that the superhero is either gender-neutral or even masculine.
Picture 12: Cover page of the first book.  
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: cover page)  

Picture 13: Cover page of the second book.  
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: cover page)  

Picture 14: Cover page of the third book.  
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: cover page)  

Picture 15: Cover page of the fourth book.  
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: cover page)
5.3. Constructing girlhood and boyhood

So far, I have discussed some specific cases in which age and the intersection of age and gender are visible; first, in the case of the character Lisa and secondly, in the case of the superhero. In this final theme, I want to discuss how the intersection of age and gender manifest more generally in the books. In short, I find that the illustrations are distinct in portraying characters as either boys or girls, as well as either children, adults or elders. I will focus particularly on the intersectional positions of girlhood and boyhood, as follows from my research questions. How age and gender are constructed for adults and elders are thus not investigated more closely here other than as contrasts to children.

In the illustrations of the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) books, age and gender are clearly portrayed (except for the earlier discussed exception of the superhero). I find that the illustrations, on the one hand, distinguish between children, adults, and elders and that they, on the other hand, distinguish between male and female characters. All characters are thereby ascribed a specific position in the intersection of age and gender. In terms of age, the most distinct marker is the height of a character as well as (the lack of) wrinkles and grey hair. The position of children is further pronounced by their use of school uniforms, which, interestingly, is barely used in Sweden. However, I would argue that it serves its purpose to distinguish children from adults as the school uniform alludes to childhood. To signify gender, the girls wear skirts as part of their school uniform, often in combination with long hair. The boys, on the other hand, wear pants and have short hair. Interestingly, color does not seem to play any significant role in the books to signify either age or gender. Nevertheless, it is very obvious to me at least which character should be understood as a child or an adult and which character should be understood as a girl or boy, departing from the illustrations. In this sense, the books construct girlhood and boyhood as distinct from each other as well as from other groups such as adult men and women.
The age and gender of each character are not only visible in the illustrations but also apparent in the text, where characters are referred to as either ‘she’ or ‘he’ and have distinctly gendered names. The age of characters is not as commonly referred to, except for cases in which groups of children are referred to as ‘the children’ (for example, Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 39). There is one pattern, however, of explicit references to age and gender in the books. This is that the group of three boys that bully Lisa is referred to as ‘the boys’\(^{10}\). In fact, it was the only explicit reference to age and gender that was recurrent throughout the books. I would argue that naming the group of three boys in this way brings with it a set of expectations and perceptions associated with boyhood. Specifically, I am thinking about traits and behavior along the line of being violent and competitive, traits and behaviors that Nikolajeva (1998: 129) define as traditionally male. These expectations are also realized, at least to some extent, as they are portrayed as the mean bullies in the first two books. The first book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 12) starts with a scene where the boys chase Lisa home from school. Later in the book, Robert even punches

\(^{10}\) ‘Killarna’ in Swedish.
Lisa as she tries to stand up against her bullies (ibid.: 52). In the second book, the boys continue their bullying by making Lisa trip in the school cafeteria and teasing her about her apparently big ears (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 24, 36). It is only after Lisa saves the boys from an angry gorilla in the second book that the boys are starting to be portrayed in a more nuanced way and not only as the mean bullies.

The way in which the boys are portrayed also stands in stark contrast to the main character Lisa. Presumably, they are all the same age so the contrast depends on the boys being portrayed in line with traditional boyhood and Lisa being portrayed in line with traditional girlhood. This means that the boys are portrayed, as already described, as violent and competitive whereas Lisa is portrayed as vulnerable and dependent. Arguably, this makes the depiction of bully versus bullied more contrasting and enhances the power differences between the characters. This is also reproduced in the illustrations as the boys are portrayed as ‘looking down’ on Lisa, once again emphasizing the power that the boys have, and Lisa does not. In this sense, the books construct girlhood and boyhood as contrasting identities where boyhood enables agency but also being mean and aggressive whereas girlhood means being dependent and shy.

![Image](image.png)

*Picture 17: The boys in contrast to Lisa.*

*(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 13, cropped)*

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11 The books do not seem to distinguish between children based on age, with the exception of a distinction between children and toddlers, as exemplified in the fourth book (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 64).

12 Picture 5 is also an example of this.
6. Conclusion

This thesis shows that the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) books display an interest in disrupting norms regarding childhood, girlhood, and boyhood but end up reinforcing those norms rather than challenging them. Overall, the books portray a traditional view of children and construct girlhood and boyhood in line with prevailing norms. This means that children, in most cases, are portrayed in contrast to adults and as vulnerable ‘becomings’ and that girlhood and boyhood are portrayed as contrasting identities. In this sense, the books continue the tendency of portraying gender stereotypes (Diekman & Murnen, 2004: 381; Crisp & Hiller, 2011: 203; Taber & Woloshyn, 2011: 894-895; Odenbring, 2014: 12).

The Red Worm, Lisa’s superhero alter-ego, is the character that most clearly demonstrates the interest in challenging norms. Firstly, the superhero role allows Lisa to demonstrate competency and agency. In other words, it is the superhero role that is needed to become competent in this context (Hermansson, 2014: 31). Secondly, the superhero role also allows Lisa to challenge conventional norms surrounding girlhood as she demonstrates strength and power. This resembles findings of previous research which indicates that particularly female characters are allowed to challenge and critique societal norms and to adopt traditionally masculine traits (Taber & Woloshyn, 2011: 895, 900; Diekman & Murnen, 2004: 381). However, the Red Worm is still allowed to display fear, a trait typically not associated with either the superhero or masculinity. In this sense, the Red Worm does disrupt prevailing norms. At the same time, it may also be questioned whether Lisa is actually representing a renegotiation of girlhood (Österlund, 2008: 14) or whether she is a so-called ‘hero in drag’ (Nikolajeva, 1998: 133); a female character with all-male traits. Similarly, it can be called into question whether the illustrated ‘gender-neutral’ superhero is indeed gender-neutral or whether it is actually an expression of the implicit, male norm (Nikolajeva, 2017: 193).

There are definitely instances in which traditional norms regarding both girlhood and boyhood are visible in the books and the illustrations, in particular, clearly demonstrate each character’s position in the intersection of age and gender. The books show an interest in challenging and critiquing prevailing norms, but they end up reinforcing them rather than renegotiating them. However, what they succeed in doing is making these norms visible. For example, the instances
in which the Red Worm is referred to as ‘he’ and Lisa’s thoughts about this (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 83; 2017b: 20-22), makes visible the implicit male norm and the ways in which the superhero as such is gendered. Thus, the books make an important contribution to challenging and, above all, visualizing otherwise invisible social structures.

The question that remains is: why is it that children’s literature in general, and specifically the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) books, still reinforce stereotypes and traditional norms even when they seem to demonstrate an interest in doing the opposite? Authors of children’s literature, like all other people, are not able to free themselves from the prevailing social structures and their associated norms and stereotypes. We are all part of the societal system that has particular understandings of norms around both children as well as girlhood and boyhood. In other words, stereotypes and norms are still prevailing in children’s literature because they are still prevailing in the general society. However, visualizing these norms and structures may be the first step toward change and in this, the *Handbook for Superheroes* (Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b) books succeed.

Increased knowledge about power structures such as the generational order and the gender system, as examined in this thesis, could possibly lead to the production of more children’s literature that challenges conventional norms. However, I would argue that what is essential is more research that examines positive cases of representation and strategies for portraying age, gender, ethnicity, et cetera in a non-normative way in children’s literature. This could broaden our understanding of how it could be possible to produce children’s literature without falling into the trap of reproducing traditional norms and stereotypes.

6.1. Limitations to the study

As a purely qualitative study, this thesis does not allow me to say something about, for example, over- or underrepresentation of male or female characters, which is a common topic for previous quantitative studies in the field (see, for example, Kok & Findlay, 2006; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; Filipović, 2018). It would have been interesting, however, to add a quantitative component to the study as to be able to say something about the occurrence of child versus adult
characters as well as female versus male characters. At the same time, this would have required a much larger sample to get statistically significant results, making it difficult, if not impossible, to also carry out the qualitative analysis in the frame of this project.

The qualitative approach in this thesis also means that the analysis I have carried out is only one of many possible readings. I do not claim to present an objective reading of the empirical material, but rather acknowledge that the analysis is strongly influenced by my choice of analytical perspectives and my own situatedness. Another reader with other entry points than age and gender will be able to find other interesting aspects of the books to analyze.
Bibliography


Appendix I

A list of traits that are usually perceived as either female or male according to Nikolajeva (1998: 129). The scheme is originally published in Swedish and is thereby translated by me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women/girls</th>
<th>Men/boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression inhibiting</td>
<td>Violent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional, wild</td>
<td>Emotionless, harsh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedient</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sacrificing</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerate, careful</td>
<td>Ravenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td>Protective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesizing (in Swedish: syntetiserande)</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks qualitatively</td>
<td>Thinks quantitatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And so on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A list of traits and activities that are usually perceived as either female or male according to Josefson (2005: 8). I have chosen only to include the traits and activities that I have deemed relevant for the current study, where childhood, girlhood, and boyhood are in focus. This means that the, according to Josefson (ibid.), typically male trait to have “sex with many people” is not reproduced here. The scheme is originally published in Swedish and is thereby translated by me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we often perceive as “female” traits/activities</th>
<th>What we often perceive as “male” traits/activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td>Logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being empathic</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>Warrior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>Fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking care of</td>
<td>Tough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consoling</td>
<td>Confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugging one’s friend</td>
<td>Boxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing a skirt</td>
<td>Practical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sweet</td>
<td>Building muscles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giggling</td>
<td>Liking adventure/excitement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty</td>
<td>Competing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required to look good</td>
<td>Taking initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a best friend</td>
<td>Helping oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing nail polish</td>
<td>Power and status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix II

Email from Anna Ivarsson at book publishing company Rabén & Sjögren, in which I get permission to use illustrations from the books in my thesis.

Original, in Swedish:

Hi Rebecka, now I have gotten an answer and the authors says ok.

“She is more than welcome to use our images. If she lets us know which images she wants, we can also send them in high resolution.

She can find the pictures in our books and in the slideshows which she can download from the website of Rabén.

Greetings, Elias”

Regards

Anna
Appendix III

This appendix contains the uncropped version of all pictures along with their descriptions.


- Vad gör du? frågade Robert förvånat.
  - Jag tänker inte springa, sa Lisa bestämt. Vill ni nåt, så får vi slåss om saken.
  Robert började gapskratta.
  - Hahaha! Det var det dummaste jag hört!
  - Har du glömt bort vilka vi är? undrade Max.
  - Jag tar hand om det här, sa Nick med ett elakt leende.

Plötsligt hörde Lisa en gammal man ropa. Men det var inte i närheten, utan någonstans långt därute i staden.
- Hjälp! Hjälp! Kan någon snälla hjälpa mig?


*Picture 2: Lisa in her superhero outfit.*

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 63)
I en annan del av staden var två tjuvar olyckligare än på mycket länge. Deras chef var fruktansvärt arg.

- Har en superhjälte stulit mynten?
- Ja, chefen.
- Och han var maskerad?
- Ja, chefen.
- Och han slog ner er?
- Ja, chefen.
- Fast ni var dubbelt så många och han var hälften så stor?
- Ja, chefen.
- Är ni helt hopplösa?
- Ja, chefen. Vi menar nej, chefen.

- Det var bara en massa värde-
  lösa mynt ändå, försökte den ena tjuven.
- Värdelösa? Bland de pengarna fanns Den skelögda drottningen av Danmark. Bara det myntet är värt en miljon kronor!
- Va?! För en skelögda drottning?
- Exakt! Och nu är det ni som genast stjäl tillbaka alltihop. Annars möblerar jag om era ansikten.

Det såg hon något som gav henne kallt känslor. Många av alla antiga män maskar, gick överklädda figurer omkring helt lugnt. De hade på sig vargmasker. Hemligheter, fruktansvarda makt. Hon hade mycket!

Men det som fick Lisas blod att frysa till is var den gigantiska bestien bakom vargarna. Han var särskilt obelisk så stor som de andra. Hans mask var hemtänkande av alla andra och hans ögon glimrande i röken. — Hitta den röda lilla röttan, vände han.

Det är mig de är ute efter, tänkte Lisa. Jag måste härifrån. Om jag försvinner kan de andra strunta i alla andra.

**Picture 4: Lisa and the heavily armed villains.**

*(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: 68-69)*
Men ingen verkade se henne. Och om de gjorde det, så var det ingen som brydde sig.

Om jag försvann nu skulle ingen märka någon skillnad, tänkte Lisa.

*Picture 5: Lisa in contrast to her bullies.*

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 37)
Hela dagen fortsatte killarna att reta henne så fort de kom åt. På lektionerna blåste de små, hård, blöta pappersbollar i nacken på henne. Och på lunchrasten lade Nick krokben för henne i matsalen.


När solen började gå ner samlades de i Lisas rum igen. De förstod alla att det här var en speciell kväll. Om något gick fel kanske det var sista gången de såg varandra.


*Picture 7: Lisa in superhero pose.*

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 75)
Lisa förstod honom. Egentligen ville hon också bara ge igen. Men vad för slags superhjälte skulle hon vara då?


Plötsligt var de inte alls tuffa längre. De var bara tre väldigt, väldigt rådda pojkar.

*Picture 8: Lisa saves her bullies.*

*(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 85)*
Lisa kastade sig fram och höll för hans mun.
- Schh! Inte här! Och inte nu, fräste hon. Förstår du?
- Okej, viskade Max mellan hennes fingrar. Men pappa sa att kidnapparen heter Wolfgang och att det är han som styr den undre världen.

Det var inte bara Max som var upppekt den här morgonen. Hela klassen pratade om kidnappningen. Alla var säkra på att Röda Masken skulle ge kidnapparen en rejäl omgång.
- Den där töntvargen är lätt som en plätt för Röda Masken, skrattade Nick.

*Picture 9: Portrayal of school children.*

(Vählund & Vählund, 2018b: 13)
- Det fungerar! skrek de båda samtidigt.
  De puffade sig runt i tåghallen och Lisa blev mer och mer säker på hur mycket puff hon behövde för att komma iväg. Ju fler gånger de provade, desto säkrare blev hon på att styra var hon skulle hamna. Till slut kunde hon landa exakt där hon ville.

- Vi kommer att klara det! ropade Max.
- Vi kommer att rädda borgmästaren! tjöte Lisa.

- Vi ... har fått sällskap, avslutade Max.

Picture 10: Superheroes Lisa and Max.
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: 48)
Lisa borde såklart ha blivit glad av de fina ord som polischefen sa. Men hur hon än försökte kunde hon inte känna någon glädje.


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Picture 11: Lisa as the superhero the Red Worm.
(Vählund & Vählund, 2018a: 14)
Picture 12: Cover page of the first book.
(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: cover page)
Picture 13: Cover page of the second book.

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: cover page)
Picture 14: Cover page of the third book.

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018a: cover page)
Picture 15: Cover page of the fourth book.

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2018b: cover page)
Picture 16: Girls and Boys.

(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017b: 20-21)
Just då hände det som inte fick hända. Lisa smubblade till och föll handlöst mot marken.

Robert, den blonda ledaren, skakade på huvudet:
- Att du aldrig lär dig flyga.
- Med de öronen borde du ha flaxat iväg för länge sen, flinade Nick elakt.
- Vår din pappa en elefant eller? skrattade Max bakom de andra.
- Du behöver inte vara leden, tröstade Robert och började dra i hennes öron. Vi ska lara dig flyga.

*Picture 17: The boys in contrast to Lisa.*

*(Våhlund & Våhlund, 2017a: 13)*