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Introduction

An essential task for librarians and teachers is to encourage children to read books. In the wake of the “digital revolution,” Swedish society – as well as other societies – has been alarmed by the decreasing rates of children’s reading (*cf.* Hedemark, 2012). As a consequence, reading promotion activities have been initiated. To enable such activities, librarians and teachers, for example, have to select books for children to read. What kind of books do librarians assume will promote reading? Does length matter? What themes are regarded as popular by the children themselves?

The purpose of the present paper is to describe a school book club in Sweden, in order to provide informed and useful comments and advice for librarians in school libraries and for teachers.ⁱ Central research questions are: How are the studied book clubs organized? What characterizes the books used in the book clubs (using narratology)? What didactic implications for practice can be derived from the book club discussions (drawing on earlier research on these discussions by Eriksson, 2002a; Eriksson & Aronsson, 2004; Eriksson & Aronsson, 2005; Eriksson Barajas 2008; Eriksson Barajas & Aronsson, 2009)?

The Reader in Focus

The basic assumption of all reader-orientedⁱⁱ research is that the reader is a co-creator of the text. This can be studied in different ways: from the rhetorical to the “reader” *in* the text.

Stanley Fish (1970; 1980/1998) has been a foreground figure in promoting reader-response perspectives and social constructionism. Fish (1980/1998) coined the notion of *interpretive*

community to signify those who share interpretative strategies. In his theories, he primarily stresses the interpretive *situation*; that is, the context in which interpretation occurs.

Theoretically, the present study draws on a reader-response approach. Fish (1980/1998) stresses that communication, for example interpretation of fiction, takes place in a specific context. A consequence of being in a specific context is that one is embraced by a structure of assumptions concerning the goals and aims of the present situation.

Earlier research on promotion reading

There are a number of studies on reading promotion based on questionnaires and surveys. The most relevant conclusions are summarized below.

Drawing on a survey in a class of 22 fifth-graders, Andrew B. Pachtman and Karen A. Wilson (2006, p. 682) observed that what students found contributed most to their reading was: “Having a lot of books in the class library.” Their survey is very small but brings up an important point: that we should ask young people themselves about their reading habits. The article also indicates what, for example, Chambers (1993/1999) pointed at: that books be accessible. Additional, tape-recorded student comments further revealed that discussion after completing the book was an activity that increased reading, hence this is an argument for organizing book clubs and similar activities.

Jessie De Naeghel and Hilde Van Keer (2013, p. 367) concluded, based on their questionnaire study with 1,177 fifth-graders and their 65 teachers, that it “confirms gender differences in autonomous reading motivation as well as the positive relationship between home involvement in reading and autonomous reading motivation.”

What kind of children’s literature works to promote reading has been studied even less, with the exception of Carol L. Tilley’s (2013) historical analysis of comics in reading promotion in the 1930-1940s.

In sum, there is a lack both of ethnographic studies and of studies specifically focusing on the texts. The present paper has a twofold focus: 1) to characterize children's books that were used to promote reading, and 2) to summarize the didactic conclusions of earlier studies on the very same reading promotion activity.

Methodology

The primary focus of the study was on children's encounters with literature in a natural setting. A natural setting refers to a context that is natural as opposed to staged – natural in the sense that “it has not been got up by the researcher” (Potter, 1996, p. 135). The researcher has not created the conversational practice, that is, the conversation would have occurred regardless of whether it was being studied. In the present investigation, the booktalk practices were authentic activities, initiated by the school and occurring on the school premises.

Because I wanted a setting in which children would talk about books regardless of whether I studied the activity, I searched for schools that organized activities in which children got to talk about literature they had read as a regular curricular feature. This led me to a municipal elementary school – here called the Valley School – that had worked with reading support at all levels for ten years. I got to know about the school through The National Council for Cultural Affairs' list of reading projects. I first contacted the teacher-librarian at the school and received permission to collect data for the study there. Teachers in eight groups, two from each grade (grades 4–7), agreed to participate. The Valley School is located in a district outside one of the ten largest cities in Sweden. At this school the library was thus of interest to the pupils, the librarian and the school administrators. This coincides with Bates' suggestion that “the promotion of reading should be seen as a whole school issue, with the library's strategy for promotional activities forming part of a school-wide reading policy” (Bates 2009, p. 155).

Like most Swedish schools, the school under study is run by the local municipality. The book clubs were initiated when the school was established, though they have developed over the years. The teachers, the librarian and others believe that the different reading projects undertaken by the school are valuable. The school has established a work plan for activities in the library. The work plan document is very similar to the official compulsory school syllabus for the subject Swedish (Skolverket, 1996; Skolverket, 2010). In the documents, it is declared that the most important task for the school is to create good opportunities for pupils' language development. It is also stated that language is a road to knowledge, and that it is of fundamental importance to learning.

In all, 40 pupils (20 girls and 20 boys) participated in the book clubs under study. As indicated, the pupils were not selected to participate by the researcher. After asking which teachers were willing to participate, the teacher-librarian selected the groups that were asked to take part in the study. Once the groups had been selected, the teachers enclosed an information letter about the study with the usual information to the parents about the book club activity; this was sent home with the children who were asked to participate in the study. In my letter, I asked for consent from the children in the groups that would participate in the study (as well as from their parents). No child chose not to participate.

The five pedagogues involved (four female and one male) all had experience leading book clubs before the present book club events. Four of them were class teachers, and the fifth was the teacher-librarian of the school, with a background as a class teacher and continued training as a literary pedagogue.ⁱⁱⁱ

Book Club Routines at the Valley School

The book clubs were primarily inspired by Aidan Chambers (1985/2000; 1993/1999; 1991/1996) and his *booktalk* approach. In 1985, Chambers coined the term *booktalk* for talk

about reading in reader-response contexts (Chambers, 1985/2000). Chambers warns the reader about “[e]xclusively repetitious reading of one kind of book, of any one writer” (1993/1999, p. 13). To avoid repetitious reading, adults should help children read with variation. According to Chambers (1993/1999, pp. 12-14), the method for accomplishing this makes it possible to listen to what others say about books and to speak your mind about books.

To Chambers (1993/1999), talk about books is an essential part of reading. He describes the reading process as a Reading Circle: Chambers calls the first sequence the Selection of Books, the second sequence the “Reading” Time and the third the Response^{iv}; after the Response follows a new Selection, and so forth. Chambers stresses the importance of having an *enabling adult* who can support the child at every phase in the circle. Chambers (1991/1996, p. 15) claims that an experienced guide is the best company for learning readers, yet he acknowledges that learners learn from one another and that enablers do, in fact, learn from their novices.

According to Chambers, the Selection sequence includes the book stock, availability, accessibility and presentation. In a given school, this concerns questions like variety of purchase, opening hours of the school library or distance to a local library, and how the books are stored on the shelves. The Selection sequence is only meaningful if time is set aside for *reading* what has been selected. Chambers claims that the “Reading” sequence involves both reading to yourself and hearing an enabling adult read aloud in a pleasurable way. The final sequence – the Response – contains the essential point in Chambers’ ideas: the importance of *talk* about reading. The present school works according to a device from an 8-year-old girl that was rendered by Chambers: “We don’t know what we think about a book until we’ve talked about it.” (1993/1999, p. 15). This is, in a way, the motto for Chambers’ approach to improving how we teach children to become (literary) readers. In the Response sequence, the

enabling adult should avoid asking the child *why* s/he likes a book, because that may be experienced as an interrogation. Instead he suggests that the conversation around the book start with “Tell me...” (Chambers, 1993/1999, p. 49) and proceed with what the young reader likes, dislikes and finds puzzling in the book.

Apart from Chambers’ booktalk approach, another main source of inspiration for the book clubs was a reading development schedule created by Bo Sundblad, Kerstin Dominković and Birgita Allard (1983, pp. 58-64). They claimed that children limit their reading at a certain level of reading skill. Their 23-point model can be summed up in three main stages. During the first stage, children tend to be omnivorous; in the second stage (the 18th point) they tend to favor one specific genre, reading only one type of book (*e.g.*, horse books, mystery stories, fantasy). This level is sometimes referred to as the “age of book devouring.” According to Sundblad, Dominković and Allard’s definition of the “book-devouring child,” this child reads a great deal *but* is limited to one genre. This stage is assumed to be crucial to children’s reading, and but it is nevertheless important that teachers and parents assist children in developing beyond a single chosen genre. According to the authors, it is important both to assist children in *entering* this book-devouring stage, *and* to guide them out of it by offering variation in genre, in this way facilitating a move into the third and more advanced stage. In this respect, the reasoning of Sundblad, Dominković and Allard is in accord with that of Chambers.

As a compulsory part of the regular curriculum, the Valley School runs *book clubs* (Swed. *läsecirklar*, literal translation: reading circles) in grades 4 through 7. During one school year, two book club groups from each grade were video-recorded, i.e., eight groups in all.

The teacher-librarian introduced the book clubs in the classes some time before the book clubs actually started. The books presented were assumed by the teacher-librarian to be popular among children at the various ages concerned and represented different degrees of

difficulty. The proposed books were often the first in a series. The pupils chose four books and arranged them according to their preferences. Later, their choices formed the basis for how the groups were organized.

When it was time for the first book club session, all teachers leading a book club group entered the classroom of the class in question and gathered his/her respective group members. The teacher and pupils were seated around a table in the library or in a small room for group activities. Thus, the teacher did not stand at the front of the room in the traditional, hierarchical manner.

Every book club gathered three times, for about 30 minutes, in one fortnight. During the first session, the teacher presented the chosen book to the pupils in some depth. S/he talked about the author and what the story was about. Additionally, the pupils were asked why they had chosen the book in question and what their expectations were. This first book club session also came to be an opportunity for the pupils to present themselves in relation to reading. Some presented themselves as “devourers of books” (see Eriksson Barajas & Aronsson, 2009). Examples of statements are: Inga in Grade 4: ‘and I like thick books’; Jane in Grade 6: ‘I read three books in two days’; Sune in Grade 6 ‘I love to read.’ Jane also presented herself as a ‘horse-book reader’: ‘I read only horse books – there are only horse books on my bookshelf.’ According to these presentations, a number of the pupils could be interpreted as second stage readers in Sundblad et al.’s (1983) scheme, or – using Chambers’ vocabulary – repetitious readers of a special kind of book, excluding all other genres. That is, exactly the type of readers that Chambers (1993/1999, p.13) suggests should be challenged by an enabling adult to broaden their reading.

During the first book club session, the initial part of the book was read. Either the teacher read aloud or the pupils took turns reading aloud, or read quietly. At the end of the first book club session, the teacher distributed an information sheet about the “book club fortnight”. As

a preparation for the following, second, session, the pupils should have read the first half of the book and completed grade-specific tasks at home, such as identifying the main characters in the book. After yet another week, the third and final session was held, including the final report of the whole book. One recurrent element of the final session was discussions about the ending.

Books to Promote Reading

Below, I will present analyses of the books including setting, main characters, plot, and point of view. I will also present some themes that could initiate discussions on existential issues.

The Book Sample

The books that will be analyzed were first selected, among other books, for the book clubs by the teacher-librarian at the studied school. Then the teachers leading the book clubs treating the eight books in the present study chose to participate in my research project. Hence, the books are an authentic sample of books chosen to promote reading in the Swedish schools today. Naturally, this is not a strictly representative sample. Yet it is a sample of books that have been used to promote reading. Moreover, these books have been used several times in book clubs at the school in question.

Looking at the sample of children's books from the studied book clubs, one could draw some conclusions about what type of books a Swedish teacher-librarian today considers appropriate for promoting reading among middle-school pupils (here: aged 10–14 years). First of all, I will present basic data on the eight books.

Half of the chosen books were original Swedish works. Two were translations from English (Burkett, 1988/1989, Cowley, 1986, Cowley, 1981, Burkett, 1972/1985), one from Norwegian (Sørllø, 1989) and one from German (Svensson & Telemann, 1989). Only one of

the original Swedish books (Mankell's *Secrets in the Fire* (2000)) has been translated to English.

None of the authors had a top ranking on the list of Swedish library loans. Yet relatively well-known authors have written several of the books. Henning Mankell, for example, is a Swedish author, well known as a writer of both detective stories for adults and books for young people. He is the only author among the above-mentioned who had a high position on the national top list of authors based on library loans, where he ranked 15th.^v Next most borrowed in the present sample is Monica Zak, who was 146th on the list. Lasse Ekholm, the author of *Smuggelkatten*, was also in fact placed on the list, but was 186th out of 200.

The publishing house behind *Kampen om Visby*, Hegas, specializes in so-called easy-to-read literature. Their publications are arranged in series, with increasing levels of difficulty. *Kampen om Visby* is included in the so-called Wolf series, which is characterized by excitement and drama and is at difficulty level 5 of 8.

Smuggelkatten, *Pojken och den vita sköldpaddan* (*The Silent One*), *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* and *Secrets in the Fire* were all reviewed in major daily newspapers (cf. Lundqvist, 1990; Sandman Lilius, 1987; Werkelid, 1995; Toijer-Nilsson, 1987). All books, except *Nikki – min vän grävlingen* (*The Year of the Badger*), were reviewed in the catalogue of newly published books issued once every fortnight (*Sambindningslista. Böcker & AV-media* [*The book department's list: Books and audiovisual media*]) by The Swedish Library Association.

There is a common assumption that the younger the child is, the shorter the book s/he will prefer. Analogously, the younger the child is, the more illustrations s/he will prefer. In the present study, it was not possible to see such patterns in frequency of illustrations and age of the presumed reader; both books read in grade 4 were illustrated, but only one of the books in grade 5. One of the groups with the oldest pupils, i.e. grade 7, also read an illustrated book. Nor was it possible to see any clear relation between number of pages and age of the

presumed reader; the shortest book was indeed read by the youngest pupils, but the oldest pupils read the next shortest book. Also, number of pages is a deceptive measurement because layout and typography also determine the length of a text.

Summaries of the Books Used

The Year of the Badger (Burkett 1972/1985) is about Nikki a foundling badger, who is rescued by the Burkett family. The story covers the year that Nikki stays with the family before being returned to the wildlife.

The Silent One (Cowley 1981) tells the story of a foundling deaf-mute boy, Jonasi. Jonasi cannot talk, and is ridiculed for this. However, Jonasi can communicate with sea turtles. When misfortune strikes, Jonasi is blamed and eventually commits suicide.

In *Smuggelkatten* (Ekholm 1990), a lonely girl, Anna, with divorced parents smuggles a foundling cat – Drama – from Greece to Sweden. When the cat runs away with an American family, Anna is comforted by a new friend Per.

Kampen om Visby (Lindblad-Nelson 1995) is an historical novel in which a young boy befriends his servant when they both fight the Danish invaders.

Secrets in the Fire (Mankell 2000) is based on the true story of a girl named Sofia, who is mutilated and loses family members in the civil war in Mozambique, yet builds up an independent life of her own.

Also *Nonni och Manni* (Svensson and Telemann 1989) is based on real-life events. It is the story of when the author and his brother helped to clear their stepfather from murder accusations in their childhood Iceland.

Isnatt (Sørllle 1989) tells the adventure of the night when a brother, a sister and their male friend drifted off in the winter sea on an ice-floe, and eventually rescued themselves.

Narrative Analysis

In the subsequent description, I will apply the following notions to give a brief impression of all eight books: setting, point of view, characters and plot. I will also position the books in relation to major trends in the field of children's literature.

These notions are drawn from narrative theory (for further reading, see Chatman, 1978/1993; Genette, 1988; Prince, 1982; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). The literary terminology used is mainly based on Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987). The rationale for choosing narrative theory was its focus on the text. Narratology, and analyses drawing on narratology, has also been used in earlier presentations and studies of children's literature, internationally (cf. Vandergrift, 1986; Sutherland *et al.*, 1981; Wall, 1991) as well as in Sweden (cf. Edström, 1980/1994; Nikolajeva, 1998). It should be noted, however, that this will not be an in-depth account of all aspects of the chosen notions from a narratological perspective, nor will the above-mentioned notions that feature in the studied texts be fully analyzed.

In my interpretation of the texts, I will – like Janice Radway (1984/1991) in her analysis of romances – partly depart from the readers' responses. Thus, the present analyses of the books chosen by the pupils will be grounded in literary theory, but they will be limited to phenomena discussed by the pupils and teachers themselves.^{vi} For example, the setting will be analyzed because it was discussed in the book club when talking about where the events in a book took place. Likewise, the plot will be analyzed because what happened in each book was talked about in all book club sessions.

Foreign Settings

Maria Nikolajeva claims that the modern historical novel typically deals with ordinary people, even if the setting concerns famous historical events, while classical historical novels, for example those written by Alexandre Dumas, require historically correct descriptions

(Nikolajeva, 1998). Historical time can be seen as a “foreign” setting. Foreign settings in a more literal sense have become more and more frequent in children’s literature, according to Vivi Edström (1980/1994), who argues that, in Sweden, the orientation toward settings in foreign parts of the world in children’s literature has undergone great changes since the 1950s. Many books set in foreign milieus were published in the 1950s and 1960s; wild and beautiful nature from exotic countries often predominated in these texts. Didactic information about other countries was also a prominent feature. In the 1970s, books about foreign countries, especially developing countries, increased. Attempts were made to concretize difficult problems, such as political violence and poverty, for children. Later in that decade, social and cultural conditions were in focus. Often in such books, the description of the setting contained social criticism.

Only one of the eight books, *Kampen om Visby*, is set in historical time. The story takes place on the Swedish island of Gotland in 1361, the time of the famous battle in which Sweden lost both its Baltic islands to Danish rule, a situation that lasted for 300 years. The *chronotope* involved, that is, the space-time (Bakhtin, 1998, p. 84), is indicated already in the second paragraph of the first chapter of the book: “It was 27 July 1361. Only five days earlier, King Valdemar of Denmark and his whole army had landed on the south of Gotland. [my trans.]” (Lindblad-Nelson, 1995, p. 7). It thus concerns a famous historical event, just as in the classical historical novels. The main plot, however, is centered on a young boy from a merchant family and his servant – that is on “ordinary” people, not historical persons such as queens and kings. *Kampen om Visby* can therefore be characterized as a modern historical novel, according to Nikolajeva’s terminology.

Notably, the remaining seven books are also – at least partly – set in places foreign to the supposed readers. *Nonni och Manni*, *Isnatt* and *The Year of the Badger* are foreign in the sense that they are translations of stories that take place in Icelandic, Norwegian and British

settings, respectively. Furthermore, *Nonni och Manni* is a *retrospective* story – that is, treating past time but during the author’s lifetime (Nikolajeva, 1998) – from the turn of the century 1900. The story is located in the Icelandic landscape, and nature plays a significant role in the events. Nature is also important for the story of *Isnatt*; here the story is located in a Norwegian fjord. *The Year of the Badger* likewise takes place in the countryside, but this time the British countryside.

The Silent One is also translated; additionally it is set on an island in the Pacific, which would thus be foreign even for most of the supposed original readers in New Zealand. Correspondingly, *Secrets in the Fire* is written by a Swedish author, but set in the war-torn countryside of Mozambique. *Smuggelkatten* and *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* are both, mainly, set in today’s Sweden; however, *Smuggelkatten* starts in Greece during a vacation trip and ends up in a Swedish town; whereas *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* is an urban Swedish story that ends up in the jungles of Guatemala, where the hero is involved in releasing a snake that comes from an endangered species.

Nikolajeva (1998) claims that modern children’s books rarely deal with the big world. The books in the book clubs, thus, all differ from the prototypical modern children’s book.

Point of Views

Traditionally, the point of view in children’s literature mainly follows two well-established tracks: the omniscient narrator tells the story in the third person or there is a first-person narrator. This was also the case in the books studied. *Kampen om Visby*, *Secrets in the Fire*, *Isnatt*, *The Silent One* were all told by an omnipresent narrator, while *Smuggelkatten*, *The Year of the Badger* and *Nonni och Manni* were first-person narratives. In *Hjälp! Boan är lös!*, the narrator was an omnipresent third person except in three first-person parts, which were told from the dog Hampus’ point of view. In this respect, all eight books were rather typical children’s books.

Also, none of the studied books had a *double* address, that is, a type of address where the child and the adult reader are addressed alternately (Wall, 1991). Without having studied this aspect in any depth, I would consider *Isnatt* and *Secrets in the Fire* the only possible candidates among the studied books for categorization as using *dual* address, that is, when the child and the adult reader are addressed simultaneously. The remaining books follow the rather strong child-centered tradition in Swedish children's literature, and thus apply a *single* address, whereby only a child reader is addressed.

Male Protagonists

The main character of a story is also called the *protagonist* (Prince, 1987). This character is the one around whom the events of the story center. Around that character, a story normally contains subordinate, or *minor*, characters. A priori, it would seem easy to distinguish between the main character and the minor characters, but it is not always obvious who is who.

Identification of the main character of the story was an important issue in the book clubs studied. This was one of the obligatory tasks during the second session.

Literary characters can be *static* or *dynamic* and *flat* (*two-dimensional*) or *round* (*multidimensional*) (Prince, 1987). Dynamic characters change during the progression of the story, static characters do not. Flat characters are less developed in the text than round characters, which are depicted as fully developed humans. Usually, flat characters only have a few qualities and behave predictably, while round characters have several qualities, positive as well as negative, and are capable of surprising behavior.

Sofia, the main character of *Secrets in the Fire*, is indeed described as a complex human being, that is, both dynamic and round. She displays a wide range of human feelings: happiness, thoughtfulness, sorrow, despair, guilt, loneliness, hopefulness, and joy. Of all the characters in the studied books, she is the one that changes the most in the progression of the story. Sofia develops from a happy little girl, living protected by her parents in a village with

her sister and brother, into an independent, self-supporting and mutilated young girl, living on her own, having lost her sister and left her mother, brother and stepfather. Sofia's life transformation occurs during her journey as an internal refugee in Mozambique. *Secrets in the Fire* can thus be characterized as a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of development. The traditional novel of development dates back to the 18th century (cf. Järvstad, 1996). The customary procedure in a *bildungsroman* is to embrace a hero (the genre is traditionally male) who is leaving his home to discover the world. During his travels, he meets sinful as well as chaste women, and intellectual and spiritual guides. In the end, the hero settles down and adjusts to society, perhaps with a disillusioned vision of life.

Important changes in the characters also occur in some of the remaining books studied, however not as radical as those in *Secrets in the Fire*. One example is the merchant's son Thorfein, a 15-year-old who becomes friends with his servant Ulf at the end of *Kampen om Visby*. Thorfein is the main character in the book, and Ulf is a very important minor character.

Another character that changes is Kjell in *Isnatt*. He overcomes his own fears and original self-image of being a coward through the act of saving his sister, Tina, and their mutual male friend, Leif. The adventures in *Isnatt* occur around these three youngsters; Kjell, however, is more in focus than the other characters are.

The gender division among the authors of the books was even; half the authors were male, and half female. Yet, only two out of the eight books had a female main character. These were the young girl Anna in *Smuggelkatten* and the young girl Sofia in *Secrets in the Fire*.

In the remaining six books, the principal characters are thus male, though there are important minor female characters. The Swedish translation of *The Year of the Badger* is, however, a special case with regard to gender. The sex of the narrator is male, but this is not revealed until page 111, that is at the very end of the book. At this final point, it is apparent that the narrator is a boy, because the parents are buying a suit for – him. (In the original

English book, however, the sex of the narrator is revealed on the blurb.) The remaining characters of the story are the badger Nikki, and her “adoptive” family consisting of a mother, a father, a daughter – Sophie, the younger sister of the narrator, and the family dog, Tessa.

The main character in *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* is a 24-year-old casual laborer called Guttav. The minor characters are his friends, 11-year-old Frida and Rickard who are fourth grade pupils, and Guttav’s mother Birgit, called Isidora. Guttav’s real name is Gustav, but he has been called Guttav ever since the junior level of the compulsory school when he constantly misspelled his name. The characters have a shared interest in animals. In the household of Guttav and Isidora, we also find the boa Karo, the rat Hildur, the parrot Polydor, the spider Mrs Adams, the gecko Ace Crawford, 22 grass snakes, and later, the dog Hampus.

In *Nonni och Manni*, the main character is Nonni Svensson. Together with his younger brother Manni and their father’s friend Harald, Nonni experiences adventures in Iceland.

In *The Silent One*, the boy referred to in the title is the deaf-mute orphan Jonasi. The minor characters are his friend Asaki, his stepmother Luiza, and his stepbrother Samu.

Animals, Adventures and Typical plots

With regard to what the books “were about,” the discussions in the book clubs mainly concerned two categorizations: adventure books and animal books, in the terminology used in the school under study.

The “typical” plot in children’s literature follows the structure of the folktale: home – breaking up from home – adventure – coming home (cf. Propp, 1928/1958, p. 25-59). *Kampen om Visby*, *Nonni och Manni*, *Secrets in the Fire*, *Isnatt* all roughly follow this classical pattern. In *Kampen om Visby*, Thorfein leaves home to fight King Valdemar of Denmark and returns home after surviving several adventures. Nonni and his brother Manni also leave home; their mission is to exonerate their future stepfather from a false accusation of

manslaughter. Mission accomplished and a few adventures later, they return home to their mother.

Sofia in *Secrets in the Fire* leaves home with her mother and siblings. Some of Sofia's adventures are experienced with them. After an accident that killed her sister and led to the amputation of Sofia's legs, Sofia meets with adventures of her own. The home she "returns" to is her own, a new and safer one than the original.

The plot in *Isnatt* is unique, in that it takes place during a single night. Three youngsters drift out on an ice floe and are, thus, forced to spend a cold winter night on an island. After Kjell's courageous ride on an ice floe ashore, they are rescued and the story ends at their parents' homes.

In *The Silent One*, the pattern is faintly outlined. The main character, Jonasi, is a foundling. Because he is a deaf-mute, some of the Pacific islanders believe that he has magical powers and that he was brought to the island by a white turtle. Jonasi meets a white turtle and becomes friends with it, which increases the islanders' fear of him. When natural disasters occur on the island, the islanders blame Jonasi. His friends therefore want to move him to a school for deaf-mutes in a big modern city. But on his way to the town Jonasi throws himself off the boat and commits suicide by letting himself be dragged down into the ocean by his friend, the white turtle.

In a metaphorical sense, one could read this plot as home (the ocean) – breaking up from home (being put in a boat at sea for adoption) – adventure (events on the island) – coming home (returning to the ocean, for good, when drowning himself).

As can be seen, several of the book club books can, at least partly, be classified as animal books (as for example *The Year of the Badger*), most of them contain "adventures" (for example *Nonni och Manni*), and some contain both elements (like *Hjälp! Boan är lös!*).

Fiction and Life

The Swedish syllabus celebrates fiction as a gateway to existential issues, and to our understanding of the world and of ourselves. Fiction is also seen as a source of knowledge about the living conditions of human beings, throughout history and in different countries.

The books discussed in the present study contain some of these features. All books are, at least partly, set in “foreign” milieus. The books also mirror the general child-centeredness found in Swedish society, in that all of them, for the most part, have a single (child) addressee. This offers possibilities for identification and self-understanding. Furthermore, all of the books feature child heroes (in *Hjälp! Boan är lös!*, a 24-year-old is the hero, but two 11-year-olds are the closest minor characters).

All eight books involved themes that could be used to initiate discussions on existential issues. Without cataloguing all of them, a sample will be presented below. In *Hjälp! Boan är lös!*, freedom was at stake: both in a concrete sense, freedom for the endangered snake species the boa, and in an abstract meaning, freedom for humans to live in non-conformist ways, for example, to be a mother and prefer dancing to house work and to live under an exotic false name. *Smuggelkatten* involved a number of themes touching on major issues, one of which was living with separated parents. The young hero of the medieval story *Kampen om Visby* became friends with his servant at the end of the book; one theme was thus friendship over class boundaries. Caring about animals was a recurrent theme; it could be traced in *Hjälp! Boan är lös!*, *Smuggelkatten* and in *The Year of the Badger*. As mentioned earlier, the heroes of *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* smuggled snakes out of Sweden, into Guatemala, thereby breaking the law in order to help animals. The heroine of *Smuggelkatten* both broke the law and sacrificed her savings for her friendship with the cat that she smuggled from Greece. The narrator of *The Year of the Badger* and his family, who devote their lives to rehabilitating animals, save the wounded badger Nikki. Death and mortal danger are the overarching themes of *Secrets in the*

Fire; how a little girl in a country marked by civil war copes with the violent death of her father, living as a refugee, and with stepping on a land mine that kills her younger sister and mutilates her. In *Nonni och Manni*, themes like loyalty can be traced in the two main characters' struggle to exculpate their father's friend from a false murder accusation. The characters of *Isnatt* experience a night of mortal danger and are thereby exposed to additional afflictions such as love, sibling rivalry and jealousy. Life itself is at stake in *The Silent One*; after years of exclusion, the hero commits suicide at the end of the book.

The Absent Father

Fathers constitute another interesting issue in these eight books: in *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* the father of the hero is never even mentioned. In *Smuggelkatten*, he is divorced from the heroine's mother but he is still present in the heroines' life. In *Kampen om Visby*, *Secrets in the Fire*, *Nonni och Manni* the father is dead, while the main character of *The Silent One* is an orphan. The only two nuclear families in these books are those in *The Year of the Badger* and *Isnatt*.

As shown above, all eight books read and discussed in the booktalk sessions involve some type of existential issue: freedom, separation, loyalty, and death. Thus, these books may potentially promote discussions about existential issues. However, in the actual booktalk, these discussions tended to be hindered by talk about technicalities, such as how many pages one should read every day in order to finish the book in two weeks, and questioning the pupils about the exact meaning of a word in the text.

The Book Discussions and Some Didactic Reflections

It was striking that so many of the chosen narratives were situated in settings foreign to Swedish readers. This is in line with the curriculum, which states that fiction should increase pupils' understanding of other countries and cultural diversity. By reading fiction about what

life is like in another country, under different circumstances, the reader's mind can be opened and he or she can gain new perspectives on life. But it is not the text alone that creates new horizons, the discussion about the text is equally important (Sunderland *et al.* 2000; Eriksson & Aronsson, 2005; Eriksson Barajas, 2008). It is a challenge for teachers to achieve a perspective-broadening conversation about a book that contains stereotypical depictions. Another challenge is to maintain transgressive features when discussing a book that does not follow the usual traditions. It may seem easy to simply let the discussion follow the theme of the book. But the discussions of *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* showed that talk about the non-traditional mother Birgit – who called herself Isidora and danced instead of cleaning the house, and who did not nag at her son about keeping the house neat – led to the pupils' rejection of a woman who does not adhere to traditional patterns (Eriksson Barajas, 2008).

A clear pattern in the books read was the male majority among the main characters. In this way, girls get more training in gender transgressive reading (Howard & Allen, 1989, p. 296; Eriksson Barajas, 2008). Men are seen as the general case, which teaches girls to see the masculine as the human. Because of this, boys will have a harder time identifying with female characters, whom they see as the specific case. It is a didactic challenge for teachers to take this state of affairs and make a possibility out of it: An interesting discussion about the expectations placed on women and men, respectively, can be pursued by addressing differences in perspective taking.

Because one goal of the studied school was to make "bookworms" out of as many pupils as possible, the school's strategy was to let them read books that were the first volume in a series. When the pupils had finished reading, the teachers hoped that they would think it was fun and ask: "I want to do that again, is there a sequel?" In many cases this did happen at the studied school. Another strategy was to choose popular books that they thought the pupils

would read easily, but not the most popular books, as the teachers argued that the most popular books would be read regardless of whether they were in a book club.

The Organization of the Book Clubs

The practical organization of the booktalk partly conflicted with the didactic goals (Eriksson, 2002a). Much of the time was used to schedule the pupils' reading and to discuss how many pages they should read each day, or how far they should have read by the next book club session. These very concrete discussions limited the booktalk because they created dilemmas between scheduled reading and reading for pleasure (*cf.* Billig *et al.*, 1988). Another dilemma concerned the spontaneity of the discussions, because the pupils not only had to consider their own reading, but also keep in mind how far their classmates had read. Hence, a synchronization problem occurred. Finally, coercion regarding reading aloud and the risk of being exposed to control questions had a hampering effect on deeper booktalks. Two didactic goals concurred in the activity: to read skillfully concerned reading ability and reading comprehension, whereas to read well had to do with grasping the content of the text. Swedish pupils in grades 4–7 are used to the school stressing skillful reading, which is why teachers need to be extremely clear about the purpose of the activity – to read well. If the goal is to promote reading, it is important that all parts of the book club activity increase pupils' inclination to read books and create a positive attitude toward books and reading among pupils. In this way, pupils who read 'poorly' and slowly but who love stories can be caught up in reading books even though they struggle with decoding the text. One alternative that is already in use is to let pupils with severe reading problems listen to the book instead. In that way, everybody can participate in the same booktalk.

The pupils' response to the books they read can be seen in how they construed different reader identities (Eriksson Barajas & Aronsson, 2009), how they created gender together (Davies, 1989; Eriksson Barajas, 2008), how 'us' and 'them' were created in contrast to each

other in the conversations (Eriksson & Aronsson, 2005) and how realism and what was real in the books were talked about (Eriksson & Aronsson, 2004).

Leading Book Clubs

Book club leaders should keep in mind that one pupil might finish reading quickly based on duty, but not on his/her love of reading, and that, conversely, another struggling reader might be the greatest book lover in the group.

The tendency for adults to be more tolerant of gender transgressive behavior in adult characters than in children characters may be worth remembering, as well as the occurrence of the reverse attitude among pupils.

In the book clubs, there is a risk that positive and well-meaning stereotypes of the ‘Other’ will be created. It is important to be aware of the fact that stereotypes, even positive ones, are always limiting (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

Reading fiction about people in a foreign country provides opportunities to reconsider earlier preconceptions. Reading can help displace norms and hence help make the reader more open and tolerant. This is not an automatic process, however. For the teacher, this is a challenge that can be turned into a possibility by, e.g., reading a stereotypical text but using discussion to question the ideas in the text.

Is it Real?

The different interpretations of what is ‘real’ that might emerge in a book club can serve as starting points for discussions on the conditions of fiction and its relations to real life (cf. Richard Beach, 1998). Are facts in fiction reliable? How do authors create a credible fictive reality? Issues like these can help pupils reflect critically on what they are reading.

Clarity and Cultivation

Reading skillfully can comprise general reading ability and comprehension (Sundblad *et al.*, 1983). Another way of reading well could involve the ability to use literature to discuss

existential issues (Skolverket, 2010). Therefore it is important to make clear what the aim of a book club is. Is it to turn as many pupils as possible into bookworms? If so, then book clubs should be cultivated to concern create positive feelings about books and reading. Activities such as reading aloud for peers can be practiced on other occasions.

Another aspect of clarity is to state the number of pages that pupils should read in order to avoid time-consuming discussions. The option most likely to promote a love of books is to make pupils finish the whole book at one stretch.

Conclusions

Organizing book clubs presents both challenges and possibilities. It was notable that the participating pupils were engaged in the book clubs; they all read the chosen books and participated in the discussions. Analyses presented in earlier research show that the studied book clubs caused the pupils to individually share their reading experiences. The book clubs provided meeting points for children and literature, where the reader-response activity involved fiction that was related to life. In his classical title, Stanley Fish (1980/1998) asked: *Is there a text in this class?* In the studied classrooms, the conversation and the literary texts were intimately interwoven. Clearly, there were many readings, many texts rather than one unitary reading of each book. However, these “texts” were also partly the joint products of the discussions and the texts themselves.

The approach to running book clubs might differ between teachers and librarians; this has not been studied specifically due to the small and uneven number of participating teachers and librarians, respectively. However, I have detected a tendency among teachers to mix educational goals with the goal of becoming “book devourers”, in a way that proved to be dilemmatic and that sometimes hampered reading for pleasure. Possibly librarians – who do not have pedagogical goals in other subjects, such as mathematics and geography, to consider

as teachers so – might use an approach that could better enhance reading for pleasure? A future study focusing on this is most welcome.

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Endnotes

- i. The paper partly builds on a chapter from my dissertation (Eriksson, 2002b) and on parts of a Swedish book based on my dissertation (Eriksson Barajas, 2012).
- ii. There are several directions in this research area, and the terminology is not clearcut; however, in the present study, the notion ‘reader response’ will be used.
- iii. A teacher-librarian is a teacher who works in a school library but lacks a diploma in library science. In this case, the teacher-librarian is the head of the library and the only library staff member. In Swedish schools this is not an unusual situation.
- iv. Chambers places “reading” in quotation marks because the notion is much broader than scanning the words on a page.
- v. The statistics on the most borrowed authors are the only ones available.
- vi. Yet, naturally, the literary phenomena were not necessarily discussed using literary terms. For instance, the pupils discussed ‘what happened’ and not ‘the plot.’