



Competence and citizenship in picturebooks: a reading of Lisa Aisato's *Fugl (Bird)*

Tatjana Kielland Samoilow

To cite this article: Tatjana Kielland Samoilow (2015) Competence and citizenship in picturebooks: a reading of Lisa Aisato's *Fugl (Bird)*, Barnelitterært Forskningstidsskrift, 6:1, 27280, DOI: [10.3402/blft.v6.27280](https://doi.org/10.3402/blft.v6.27280)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.3402/blft.v6.27280>



© 2015 Tatjana Kielland Samoilow



Published online: 07 Dec 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 309



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Competence and citizenship in picturebooks: a reading of Lisa Aisato's *Fugl* (*Bird*)

Tatjana Kielland Samoilow*

Department for Norwegian Literature and Language, Queen Maud University College of Early
Childhood Education, Trondheim, Norway

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the picturebook market has been flooded with books about children's emotions and psychological reactions to traumatic events. This psychological turn has been connected with the notion of the competent child. The Nordic countries in particular have become famous for viewing the child as a competent actor, a view that is substantially integrated into early years education legislation and curriculums for early childhood education. This article discusses the idea of the competent child in relation to an ever-growing discourse on children's citizenship. A thorough analysis of Lisa Aisato's picturebook *Fugl* (*Bird* 2013) will lie at the center of this discussion.

Keywords: *picturebooks; children's citizenship; the competent child; politics; agency; early childhood education; childhood studies*

With the rise of the postmodern picturebook in the Western literary field, picturebooks have become ever more experimental and playful with regard to visual expression and thematic range. Nordic picturebooks in particular have become famous for breaking taboos and provoking debate (Christensen 2013, 190). Themes in Nordic picturebooks today include death (e.g. *Førstemamma på mars* 2013), divorce (e.g. *Krigen* 2013), depression (e.g. *Kakerlakken med den stygge frakken . . . og hovudet fullt av triste tankar* 2013), difficult mother-child relationships (e.g. *Pinnsvinmamma* 2006), abortion (e.g. *De skæve smil* 2008), and domestic violence (*Sinna Mann* 2003).¹ This focus on children's emotions in contemporary picturebooks has been noted by several scholars (Colomer 2010, 41; Christensen 2003b, 113), and we can hence speak of a psychological turn.

These current trends, combined with representations of strong children taking responsibility for their own lives, have been connected to discourses on the competent child (e.g. Christensen 2013, 187). Viewing children as competent implies perceiving them as "agents and participants with competence to actively contribute to the shaping of their own lives and society," as stated by Kjørholt (2010a, 12; my translation).² She goes on to argue

that discourses on the competent child are inevitably connected to discussions of children's citizenship (Kjørholt 2010a, 12). In an overview of several definitions of citizenship, Smith and Bjerke (2009, 15–34) note four concepts that lie at the heart of all of them—rights, duties, participation, and membership—and they draw special attention to the individual's role in relation to society.

This article aims to explore the relationship between constructions of the child as competent and as a citizen with emphasis on a Nordic context. Participation and the individual's active role are key concepts when talking about both competence and citizenship alike. It is thus necessary to ask what kind of agency is ascribed to the competent child. What is the role of the child in social settings? How might the strong emphasis on children's psychology and individuality reflect and influence our understanding of citizenship? As a point of departure for this theoretical discussion, I will analyze the picturebook *Fugl* (*Bird* 2013) by the Norwegian author and illustrator Lisa Aisato N'jie Solberg (artist name Lisa Aisato), a story about a girl who wishes to become a bird.

The article is divided into three main sections and structured as an argument. I will start by

*Correspondence to: Tatjana Kielland Samoilow, Førsteamanuensis, Seksjon for norsk, NTNU, Fakultet for lærer- og tolkeutdanning, Norway. Email: tatjana.samoilow@ntnu.no

outlining the relationship between children's literature/picturebooks and childhood studies, stressing the notion of the competent child. The next section is an analysis of *Fugl* with special emphasis on the motif of metamorphosis. Against this backdrop, I will then discuss the view of the child in contemporary Norwegian picturebooks, and Aisato's book in particular, within discourses on children's citizenship. By focusing on the construction of the child and key concepts such as citizenship, participation, agency, and competence, the article will fit within literary childhood studies. I will draw specifically on research within the field of early childhood education, because of the importance of picturebooks for preschool children.

CONSTRUCTING THE COMPETENT CHILD

Ever since Philippe Ariés' path-breaking study *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (1960), there has been a growing consensus within childhood studies that childhood is not only a biological fact but also a social construction.³ In their thorough review of the emergence of what they call "a new paradigm of childhood," James and Prout (1990) explain the social institution of childhood as "an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted" (7).⁴ Discourse analysis has been influential within this constructionist understanding of childhood, in relation to the idea that language is inseparable from and influences social practices and institutions (James and Prout 1990, 25). What we understand by childhood is partly shaped by children themselves, but mainly by adults through legislations, childhood research, and adult-driven institutions, such as schools and the mass media. If one accepts childhood as a construction, it follows that there is not just one understanding of childhood, but rather that the term is culturally and historically coded and under constant renegotiation.

Children's literature is one of the areas where childhood is both produced and reproduced.⁵ Literature is a participant in cultural productions of reality and thus bound up with power. In her influential study *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Rose (1993, first published 1984) argues that children's literature does not primarily evolve out of what children are or what they want, but out of the adult writers' needs. According to her, in narratives for children, time and again the child is constructed as a unified whole and a "natural object." Thus, "narrative secures the

identification of the child with something to which it does not necessarily belong. And it does so without the child being given the chance to notice, let alone question, the smoothness and ease of that process" (Rose 1993, 63). Consequently, the representation of the child in books for children is an idealized one, showing the child as the adult wants it to be. Nodelman (2010) suggests that "[c]hildren's literature most centrally teaches children how to be childlike, in terms of adult-authorized ideas of childlike-ness" (19). Hence, children's literature is willingly trying to influence children's subjectivity production, making children's literature a forceful producer of childhood.

According to Nodelman, however, picturebooks do not only show children how to be childlike. He argues that the sophisticated pictures in modern picturebooks contrast with the often simple and childlike texts, granting children access to a hidden adult world and adult thoughts about childhood (Nodelman 2010, 20). However, I would argue that in contrast to texts about children (e.g. policies or sociological and pedagogical theories), literature for children conceals ideological undertones by merging into the children's own culture, hence gaining extra power. In modern picturebooks, whether the child is represented as empowered or not, is vital for the underlying conception of childhood. The question is whether the idea of the competent child has become an ideology. If so, what does the term imply?

It was the Danish family therapist Jesper Juul (1995) who first coined the term "competent child." It is a heuristic term and part of what James and Prout (1990) have called the new paradigm of childhood, viewing children as active participants in the "construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (8). The same understanding shapes the concept of competence, as suggested in the introduction. It should therefore be clear that the idea of the competent child is not unique to the Nordic countries, as Nina Christensen (2013, 188) also points out, but rather part of a paradigm shift in the Western world at large. However, the notion has gained an especially strong foothold in the Nordic countries, where it has been developed further. Indeed, the Nordic welfare systems and gender equality have produced a well-developed nursery sector, making the Nordic countries leaders in early childhood education studies.

Korsvold (2013, 61) has shown that the Norwegian development of the competent child can be seen as parallel to childcare policies and an enormous

growth in nurseries. The need for professional child-care increased in part because changes in the labor market in the 1970s required women to enter the workforce. Through careful reading of documents on early year education legislation and child psychology research, Korsvold demonstrates how those changes altered the whole discourse on the child. Until the 1970s, children were considered as mainly pre-social beings, unfulfilled creatures who had to be socialized and educated into becoming proper citizens, and who were in need of their mothers' protection (Korsvold 2013, 68). From the 1970s onwards, Korsvold sees the arrival of the competent child. Children are now mainly perceived as autonomous and social individuals that are active in shaping their own lives. This major alteration in the perception of the child therefore also leads to changes in power relations between adults and children.

Here we can see a blurring of boundaries between childhood and adulthood, which has been the subject of major discussions in childhood studies internationally and which Postman (1982) has labeled *the disappearance of childhood*. This disappearance is mainly linked to the consumer culture and mass media, which opens a door to adulthood that until the 1950s was under adult control because of the hegemony of the written word. The visual mass media has granted children access to violence, sex, and hedonism (Kenway and Bullen 2008, 175). This blurring of boundaries led to changes in power relations (Kenway and Bullen 2008, 177). The appearance of crossover picturebooks, addressing children and adults alike, can be seen as a symptom of those changes, as can tendencies to transgress taboos. Another symptom is the recurring theme of evermore complicated adult-child relationships in contemporary picturebooks.⁶

In recent years the interest in childhood studies among Nordic literary scholars has been increasing, with Christensen being a major figure in the field. Through analysis of picturebooks and their reception from 1950 to 1999, Christensen (2003a) shows that developments in Danish picturebooks roughly follow the paradigm shift outlined above. The construction of the child as competent in children's literature can be identified in two main ways: through analysis of *the implied child reader*, or through analysis of how children are *represented*, including their social relations and surroundings (Christensen 2003b, 116). The implied child reader can be seen as competent through the themes authors choose, among other things. Taboo transgression clearly states that children do not need to be shielded from the dark sides of reality

(Christensen 2013, 192). Rather, they should be confronted by psychologically troublesome aspects of the human psyche and reflect upon them.⁷ Thus, contemporary picturebooks may grant children access to the adult realm.

As Goga (2013) points out, representations of different types of competent (or autonomous) children have dominated Scandinavian children's literature for the past 50 years, and this "has supported and championed the picture of an independent, energetic and reflective child; and in addition, inspired thousands of readers to motivate coming generations to fight for the right to fill in and further develop their understanding of these concepts" (252). She obviously ascribes great political power to the representation of the competent child when stressing literature's influence on the development and understanding of the concept. Goga is certainly right to trace the competent child back to the 1950s or even 1940s. Many famous Scandinavian literary children are what we would now call competent children. This includes more or less all of Astrid Lindgren's child characters, with Pippi Longstocking being the prototype of a competent child, actively shaping her own life and questioning established truths presented by adults, and thus disturbing traditional power relations. In contemporary picturebooks, competent children can also be seen to dominate. For instance, many books for the smallest children represent pure child universes, where child-like characters cope with friendship troubles and emotions.⁸ In taboo-transgressing books, children are often represented as reflective competent beings, or as being empowered to become competent, as is the case in Aisato's picturebook *Fugl*.

CONSTRUCTING THE COMPETENT CHILD IN AISATO'S *FUGL*: A DOUBLE READING

Lisa Aisato has become famous for her picturebook *Odd er et egg* (*Odd is an egg* 2010) and for her series of picturebooks about the troll *Tambar*, which she created in cooperation with Tor Åge Bringsværd (Aisato and Bringsværd 2010). Her work has been nominated for several literary prizes, the most prestigious being the Brageprisen. *Fugl* (Ill. 1) is the third picturebook Aisato created on her own.

The overall plot is simple. A young girl living alone with her grandfather has only one great wish: to become a bird and fly away with the other birds before winter comes. Year after year the girl enquires whether the birds will take her with them, but every time they ask if she can fly.



Ill. 1. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.

Though the girl shaves her head and dresses like a bird, she is not able to transform and none of her attempts to fly succeed. In the third year, she utters her wish in silence on her birthday. Suddenly feathers start growing on her body and she finally turns into a bird, happily flying away and leaving her grandfather behind.

The text is extremely simple and has been criticized for its banality (Dybvik 2013). It concentrates on telling the story, emphasizing the girl's dream. It does not provide any kind of motivation for the girl's wish. Hence, when concentrating on the text alone, the implied child reader is forced to focus on the dream and its fulfillment, leading the reader to an overall positive interpretation of the book.

Meanwhile, although the iconotext is mainly complementary, the sophistication of the pictures gives access to a darker, more adult reading, thus to some extent enhancing the narrative.⁹ The pictures serve as illustrations accompanying the text and showing the girl's metamorphosis. Furthermore, the pictures also provide some psychological depth to the story. The text does not tell us anything about what distinguishes the girl from others or what she is trying to escape from. Meanwhile, the visual representation is of a vulnerable, longing, and deeply sad child. Aisato focuses extensively on the girl's eyes, which are large and often tearful. The girl is never shown in the company of other children, and the only adult in her life seems to be her grandfather.

The main motif in the book is metamorphosis, which is a well-known theme in books for children and adults alike. Dating back to Greek and Roman mythology, the motif is used in a variety of ways. In folk tales it is usually the effect of a curse or the granting of a wish. Often metamorphoses are used as means to explore identities and as a tool to critique society (Lassén-Seger 2006, 26). This is especially typical for modern literature, with the most famous and unsettling example being Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung* 1915). According to the literary scholar Lassén-Seger (2006, 2f.), one of the main purposes of

the motif in children's literature is the exploration of child empowerment, and thus the question of whether the child is liberated or entrapped through the transformation is crucial. When analyzing stories about transformations, one has to distinguish between positive and negative changes, and voluntary or involuntary ones. Furthermore, one must determine whether the story is narrated in a joyful or serious mode. One category that has gained in frequency in the 20th century is what Lassén-Seger calls "victimised and lost child metamorphoses" (Lassén-Seger 2006, 9). As we will see, *Fugl* can be placed into this category. To find out whether the motif contributes to constructing the competent child by empowering her, the question of why the metamorphosis takes place is vital for the interpretation of the book. In the following sections, I will present two readings of the book. I will start with an account of the book's reception and mainstream interpretation as a psychological tale. Afterward, I will present an alternative reading, turning my attention to the representation of the social surroundings. In both readings metamorphosis and the construction of the competent child will be foregrounded.

METAMORPHOSIS AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS TOWARD SELF-REALIZATION: THE RECEPTION OF *FUGL*

The book has only been reviewed on two official platforms—the online review *barnebokkrittikk.no* and the daily paper *Dagbladet*. However, it has gained enormous recognition among literary bloggers, who nominated the book for the newly established *book blogger prize* (*bokbloggerprisen*). Out of 36 comments by Norwegian book bloggers, most read the book as a story about wishes coming true.¹⁰ Overall, readers perceived the metamorphosis as positive. This is not surprising since it is explicitly formulated as a wish or a dream. Moreover, birds are traditional symbols of freedom, although the subject of transformation, the book's melancholic mood, and the girl's solitude give rise to the question of what the girl wants to escape from. Most bloggers find the answer to this question in a feeling of not belonging. However, some have suggested that it is a story about death, rather than wishes coming true.¹¹ In her review of the book in *barnebokkrittikk.no*, Hilde Dybvik even asks whether the girl is sick and about to die, associating an illustration in the book showing the girl clinging to a tree with Edvard Munch's painting *Syk Pike* (*Sick Child*) (doublespread 1; see Ill. 2). Another interpretation suggested by Dybvik and some bloggers is that the book is dealing with puberty,



Ill. 2. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.

reading the girl's gradual transition symbolically as the change from childhood to adulthood (Dybvik 2013).¹² This last interpretation is especially rooted in a picture showing the girl, wearing childlike underwear, looking down at her body as feathers grow on it (doublespread 10; see Ill. 3). Shown from ground perspective, the girl's body is drawn in an exaggerated way, thereby stressing the emotional shock of the transformation.

Both reviewers and most bloggers have pointed out the book's inconclusiveness and double bind. Interestingly, however, they all concentrate on the girl's emotions, as does Aisato herself, stating in an interview that *Fugl* is a book about not belonging and being different (Aisato 2013, in *Fredrikstad Blad*).

According to Colomer (2010, 48), the reason "sadness and depression now invade children's books in a new kind of rupture with thematic taboos" is to be found in the dominant values of Western society. The child has not only been turned into a competent human being but has also become a victim of consumer society. Consumerism has led to a kind of meaning vacuum, causing depression, personal dissatisfaction, identity problems, and psychological instability in the grown-up world. According to her, the fronting of emotions in modern picturebooks thus provides "emotional defenses for children" (Colomer 2010, 48).

Colomer's analysis fits nicely with the common interpretation of the book. Read as a tale about a "lost" girl's self-realization, *Fugl* is typical for Nordic (or Western) picturebooks, emphasizing the individual and her/his emotions, vulnerability,



Ill. 3. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.



Ill. 4. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.

and psychological complexity. Though the pictures are unsettling, the overall message is positive with a happy ending, at least for the girl (doublespread 15; see Ill. 4). The motif of the metamorphosis thus becomes the symbol of the child's empowerment and her ability to change her fate. The book reflects and reinforces the view of the child as both a vulnerable and a competent actor. It provides hope for the lonely, ill-adjusted child—escape is possible. As the book cover states, "sometimes, if you really, really wish for something, strange things can happen . . ." (Aisato 2013; my translation).¹³ Colomer's idea that the psychological turn is part of a wish to provide children with psychological defense might reflect the authors' intentions. However, what are the underlying ideological consequences?

METAMORPHOSIS AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

I argue that the pictures not only reveal the book's psychological aspects but also that the visual complexity uncovers a social dimension. When analyzing the pictures one can see that they are arranged around a contrast between culture and nature. This contrast is already apparent in the endpapers. The front endpaper gives us an overview of a town (see Ill. 5). Aisato uses mainly brown colors, locking the town into a light fog. The only color in the picture is in the corner, portraying the girl sitting in a tree in the garden. Throughout the book, this green oasis and her grandfather's house stand in opposition to the world and the people surrounding her—that is, the society. This is especially evident



Ill. 5. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.

on the eighth doublespread. Here, we see a crowd of people waiting at a streetlight in the cold winter (see Ill. 6). The picture expresses society's total individualization and human alienation from both nature and each other. Most faces are painted with straight, hard lines, and the artist uses variations of gray, white, and purple to enhance the sensation of coldness. Though people are standing side by side, nobody is looking at each other. In the front right corner, we see the girl dreamily closing her eyes, wishing for escape, as the text reveals.

Aisato is working with well-known dichotomies: nature/culture, summer/winter, warmth/coldness. The pictures, the lack of interhuman communication, the girl's wish to become a bird, and later her metamorphosis can clearly be seen as nature being valued over culture. The kinship between children and nature, as we see in *Fugl*, is typical for children's literature. Often the child functions as an element of reconciliation between the two (Lassén-Seger 2006, 33f.).¹⁴ In *Fugl* we do not witness such reconciliation. Instead, we can detect a total negation of society. What the pictures show is a depressingly misanthropic worldview, with no hope for change.

By emphasizing the social aspects of Aisato's book, it can be read as a harsh critique of society. As we have seen, the girl's transformation can be understood as empowerment, giving the child the opportunity to escape, and thus, following Colomer, the book can be said to prove psychological defense. However, the motif of metamorphosis seems to denote both change and immutability at the same time. The girl can change, but society can't. In fact, the dystopia in *Fugl* reaches its climax at the end of the book. The last doublespread displays the grandfather alone, looking at the sky. The text reads as follows: "Every winter, if you are in this town, near the old house in the garden, you can see a grandfather sitting on top of a naked tree" (Aisato 2013; my translation).¹⁵ Here, the iconotext's symmetry enhances the notion that the grandfather is left behind. By describing the tree as naked, the text underlines the grandfather's loneliness. The back

endpaper heightens the dystopia further. It is an almost exact copy of the front endpaper but now showing the grandfather in the tree instead of the girl. Also, while the tree and the garden at the beginning of the book constitute a colorful oasis and refuge, at the end they can hardly be distinguished from their disheartening surroundings—the tree is nearly bare (see Ill. 7). If one interprets the garden and the fellowship between the girl and the grandfather as a symbol of humanity, the girl's metamorphosis not only denotes the victory of the individual but also the loss of humanity.

Certainly, Aisato constructs the child as competent both through the melancholic and dystopic worldview hidden in the pictures and by empowering the girl. However, this empowerment seems to be achieved at the expense of human fellowship. Thus, at the same time as the book can be said to provide psychological defense against the individualistic consumer society, it also reinforces the same value system it inherently criticizes. It is precisely this tension between individuality and society—the psychological and the social—that makes the book interesting and renders reflection over children's citizenship highly relevant. What kind of citizenship does the girl entertain?

THE CHILD AS A CITIZEN

In *Politics* Aristotle defines a citizen as someone who takes part in the *polis* (Aristotle 2007, book III, chap. 1, 113). According to the Greek philosopher, humans are by nature social beings (Aristotle 2007, book I, chap. 2, 31). Of course, since Aristotle's time, the understanding of the term has changed considerably.¹⁶ Until the Enlightenment only a few property-owning men were granted citizenship and thus the right to influence public life. Immanuel Kant introduced the distinguishing terms *bourgeois* and *citoyen*. The first refers to a person who enjoys civil rights and property, while the second denotes a person who is given political rights and the right to vote (Cockburn 2013, 11). The growth of democracy since the 18th century has given both civil and



Ill. 6. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.



Ill. 7. Aisato, *Fugl* 2013.

political rights to an increasing number of men and later women. Especially with the growth of welfare states in Western countries, citizenship has become more and more associated with the individual's rights (Cockburn 2013, 7). Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the individual's interaction with the wider community still lies at the heart of most definitions. Key questions on children's citizenship have attended to how citizenship for children can be practiced and to children's actual participation in social spaces (Cockburn 2013, 202f.).

The discourse on the competent child and the discussion of children's citizenship became even more salient with the ratification of the UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (Kjørholt 2010a, 12). Article 12 of the convention defines what has been termed *participation rights*, which lies at the heart of both citizenship and the conception of the competent child. In the Nordic countries, participation has become a major issue in early childhood education since the 1990s and was established as a legal right in 2005 (Kjørholt and Winger 2013, 70). Section 3 of the Norwegian *Kindergarten Act* states that

Children in kindergartens shall have the right to express their views on the day-to-day activities of the kindergarten. Children shall regularly be given the opportunity to take active part in planning and assessing the activities of the kindergarten. The children's views shall be given due weight according to their age and maturity. (Kindergarten Act)

The section makes up an important part of a regulatory framework governing the purpose and content of kindergartens in Norway. The framework points out the importance of children's social development. However, as Anne Trine Kjørholt (2005, 2010a) has noted, participation is often interpreted as children's rights to choose freely. In several studies, Kjørholt documents how kindergartens have stopped having common meetings ("samlingsstund") and common meals, giving the children the possibility to choose for themselves when or where to eat and even when to change their nappies (Kjørholt 2005, 160; 2010b, 156). She argues that the emphasis on the competent child and children's participation should be understood in connection with general individualization tendencies in society. By drawing on Charles Taylor's philosophy of the self, she underlines that "individual self-realization is always closely connected with participation in and belonging to a human community" (Kjørholt 2005, 164). For Kjørholt and other critics of liberalism, the pendu-

lum between purely individual choice and the child as part of a wider fellowship has swung too much in favor of the individual, constructing "fellow citizenship of children [...] as the individual's right to be free and make her or his own decisions" (Kjørholt 2005, 158). Consequently, the basis of what Aristotle considered to be human, as a political animal, is undermined.¹⁷

What Kjørholt detects in Norwegian kindergartens is reflected and reinforced in literature. What is striking in Aisato's *Fugl* is the total lack of social interaction, and it is in fact an escape from social contact. The book is not an exception; rather, it confirms a general trend in contemporary picturebooks in both Nordic and other countries alike. This point has also been made by Ommundsen (2004) in her reading of Dahle and Nyhus' famous book *Snill* (2002), English translation *What a Girl* (2012), a story about Lussi, a girl who is so nice that one day she vanishes into the wall. Ommundsen remarks that Lussi only frees *herself*, without any thought for others: "The individualistic ideal—that everyone is the smith of his own happiness—remains a truth which does not quite harmonize with the wish for liberation and recognizing other. [...] The idea of solidarity and moral responsibility for others is not presented as a possible solution" (ibid., 216; my translation).¹⁸

But the competent child is not only often represented as individualistic and even egoistic. Agency, which is a crucial part of the idea of the competent child, is often limited. For example, Dahle and Nyhus deal mainly with domestic problems such as depressive mothers, violent fathers, divorce, or children's anger. Although Christensen (2013, 186) has shown that Stian Hole's picturebooks about the boy Garmann¹⁹ can to some degree be placed in a global context, they all nevertheless revolve around the narrow space of the boy's immediate environment, concentrating on the boy's wondering about the world, and his fears and longings. As Colomer (2010) states, "childhood has been circumscribed to very limited spaces, practically the bedroom and the schoolyard; so that the space for children to play and move around in is estimated to have decreased to one ninth of what it was throughout during the twentieth century" (47).²⁰ In Aisato's book, the girl is not even granted agency within the realm of reality. Agency is outsourced to the magical world of the birds.

Thus, the notion of the competent child creates a paradox. Certainly, children's citizenship and children's participation are ever more important values in Nordic and most Western countries, but

at the same time children's agency is narrowing. This is equally evident in the social practice in kindergartens, as in literary discourses. By narrowing the scope of agency to the private sphere and focusing solely on individual development, the child is constructed as a pre-political being, not as a proper citizen or even a citizen of the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As we have seen, Aisato's book *Fugl* reveals a view of the child as competent. Through the depressive and melancholic visual backdrop of the story, the implied child reader is viewed as competent enough to understand and tolerate sorrow and feelings of isolation. Furthermore, in the story itself, the girl is given agency. Yet, following common definitions of citizenship as the interaction of the individual with society, the girl's escape from the dreadful society in Aisato's book can be seen as a violation of a core value of citizenship, namely social interaction. The double bind in Aisato's book with the happy ending for the individual on the one hand and the loss for the grandfather, and symbolically for humanity, on the other seems to contest the current focus on children's self-realization in Norwegian picturebooks and the construction of children's limited citizenship as such. However, as I have shown, the book has mostly been interpreted psychologically, focusing on the girl's emotions. This is partly because of the dominance of psychological children's books and partly because of the use of the motif of metamorphosis. The optimistic book cover and the girl's wish both invite the reader to interpret the transformation as positive. Hence, individualism not only triumphs through the girl's change but is likewise exulted by most reader's positive interpretation of the metamorphosis.

The one-sided focus on children's inner life in contemporary picturebooks equates competence with individuality. As pointed out, literary sources, especially picturebooks, are forceful producers of childhood. By constructing the competent child as an egotistical antisocial child, literature reinforces the focus on individual self-realization. Consequently, the discourse on the competent child might weaken the notion of citizenship as the individual's interaction with society. To reinforce individualism and children's rights at the expense of responsibility and fellowship means both depriving children of their full citizenship status, as a balance of rights and responsibilities, and undermining the concept of citizenship as such.

Notes

1. For a discussion on controversial picturebooks in an international context, see also: Evans (2015). *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks. Creative and Critical responses to visual texts*.
2. Original quote: "aktører og deltakere med kompetanse til å bidra aktivt i utformingen av sitt eget liv, og av samfunnet."
3. Of course, Ariés' study has been greatly contested, especially the claim that childhood was "invented" in the 15th century. However, the notion that childhood is a cultural construction rather than a natural or biological fact has gained wide acceptance.
4. In their article "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems," James and Prout (1990) outline changes in childhood theories within psychology, sociology, ethnology, anthropology, and history. What they note is a paradigm shift from theoretical discourses on children that were dominated by developmental psychology, especially Piaget's model of developmental stages, to a more constructionist view on childhood.
5. For a more thorough discussion on the relationship between literature and childhood studies in Scandinavia (Denmark), see Christensen (2003b).
6. This is also the main concern in Kristina Hermanson's recent article in this journal: "Inkompetenta vuxna och kompetenta barn" (*Incompetent Adults and Competent Children* 2014).
7. Picturebook artists have written and signed an international proclamation insisting on picturebooks as an art form on its own, and on the implied reader's irrelevance: www.thepicturebook.co/.
8. For example, in the Swedish book series *Vem* (Who) by Stina Wirsén, we meet a bunch of ruffled childlike teddy bears who, without adult intervention, cope with everyday friendship problems. A similar child universe with no adults present is presented in Tore Renberg and Øyvind Torseter's series about the siblings Ine and Hasse.
9. The term iconotext was coined by Hallberg (1982) and refers to the interplay between text and picture in picturebooks. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) elaborate Hallberg's concept and point at different relationships between text and image. In complementary picturebooks "words and pictures [are] filling each other's gaps" (12).
10. The webpage "norske bokbloggere" has collected 36 comments on the book. The contributions range from short notes to reviews: www.norskebokbloggere.wordpress.com/2014/02/01/samlesing-fugl-av-lisa-aisato/.
11. For example, the point is made by book blogger Mai Lene: www.maileneles.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/aisato-lisa-fugl-gyldendal-2013/.
12. See, for example, Randi Aasheims's blogg (www.reading-randi.blogspot.no/2014/02/tanker-om-bok-lisa-aisato-fugl.html). Both death and "coming-of-age" are typical subjects in metamorphosis stories (Lassén-Seger 2006, 9, 26).

13. Original quote: "Men av og til, hvis man virkelig, virkelig ønsker seg noe, så kan det merkeligste skje ..." (Aisato 2013).
 14. In Hans Sande and Olav Hagen's *The Plum Tree* (Plommetreet 1984), for example, a young boy swallows the stone of a plum and turns into a tree. Being narrated by the boy himself the reader experiences nature from nature's own point of view. The boy describes the beauty of being rooted in the earth, flowering in the spring, hearing the first birds singing, giving home to nests, and feeling the sun on the trunk. At the end of the book, the boy turns into a human being again, returning to his father's house. In *The Plum Tree*, metamorphosis functions as a means of reconciliation between humans and nature, providing the reader with a unique perspective of nature's point of view.
 15. Original quote: "Hvis du er i denne byen, ved det gamle huset i hagen, kan du hver vinter se en bestefar sitte øverst i et nakent tre."
 16. For an extensive discussion on children's citizenship, see Tom Cockburn's *Rethinking Children's Citizenship* (2013), and Nicola Taylor and Anne B. Smith's *Children as Citizens?* International Voices (2009).
 17. Another question rising from un-nuanced beliefs in children's competence is whether it really is in children's best interest to be considered as absolutely competent. Is the concept of competence placing too heavy a burden on children, Kjørholt asks (2010a, 20).
 18. Original quote: "Det individualistiske ideal—at enhver er sin egen lykkes smed—blir stående som en sannhet som ikke helt harmonerer med ønsket om frigjøring og det å se andre. [...] Tanken om solidaritet og medmenneskers moralske ansvar for andre lanseres ikke som mulig løsning."
 19. Garmanns sommer (2006; Garmann's summer 2008), Garmanns gate (2008; Garmann's street 2010), Garmanns hemmelighet (2010; Garmann's secret 2011).
 20. Of course, there are exceptions, as in Hans Sande and Silje Granhaug's *Pappa er sjørøver* (2011, Daddy is a pirate).
- BIBLIOGRAPHY**
- Aisato, Lisa. *Odd er et egg*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2010.
- Aisato, Lisa Aisato N'jie. *Fugl*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2013.
- Ariès, Phillipe. *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*. Paris: Plon, 1960.
- Aristotle. *Politikk*. Translated by Tormod Eide. Oslo: Vidar, 2007.
- Bringsvært, Tor Åge. *Tambar er et troll*. Illustrated by Lisa Aisato. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2010.
- Brøgger, Lilian, and Oskar K. *De skæve smil*. Illustrated by Dorte Karrebæk. Risskov: Klematis, 2008.
- Christensen, Nina. *Den Danske Billedbog 1950–1990: Teori. Analyse. Historie*. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2003a.
- Christensen, Nina. "Fictive Childhoods: On the Relationship between Childhood Studies and Children's Literature." *Efter barndommens død? Tidsskrift for Børne- & Ungdomskultur* 46 (2003b): 107–22.
- Christensen, Nina. "Contemporary Picturebooks in the Nordic Countries: Concepts of Literature and Childhood." In *Looking Out and Looking In: National Identity in Picturebooks of the New Millennium*, edited by Åse Marie Ommundsen, 183–94. Oslo: Novus, 2013.
- Cockburn, Tom. *Rethinking Children's Citizenship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013.
- Colomer, Teresa. "Picturebooks and Changing Values at the Turn of the Century." In *New Directions in Picturebook Research*, edited by Teresa Colomer, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Cecilia Silva-Díaz, 41–54. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Dahle, Gro, and Svein Nyhus. *Snill*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2002.
- Dahle, Gro, and Svein Nyhus. *Sinna Mann*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2003.
- Dahle, Gro, and Svein Nyhus. *What a Girl*. Translated by Arundhati Deosthale and Mira Beckstrom Laurantz. Gurgaon: A&A Books, 2012.
- Dahle, Gro, and Kaia D. Nyhus. *Krigen*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2013.
- Dybvik, Hilde. "Fri som fuglen?" *Barnebokkritikk*, February 14, 2013. Accessed July 4, 2014. http://www.barnebokkritikk.no/fri-som-fuglen/#.U7Z0ZPl_tQF.
- Evans, Janet, ed., *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks. Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts*. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Goga, Nina. "Children and Childhood in Scandinavian Children's Literature over the Last Fifty Years." In *Bologna: Fifty Years of Children's Books from Around the World*, edited by Giorgia Grilli, 235–52. Bologna: Bolonia University Press, 2013.
- Grande, Martine. *Kakerlakken med den stygge frakken ... og hovudet fullt av triste tanker*. Oslo: Samlaget, 2013.
- Hallberg, Kristin. "Litteraturvetenskapen och bilderboksforskningen." *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, no. 3/4 (1982): 163–8.
- Hermansson, Kristina. "Inkompetenta vuxna och kompetenta barn." *Tidsskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 44, no. 2 (2014): 21–34.
- Hole, Stian. *Garmanns sommer*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2006.
- Hole, Stian. *Garmanns gate*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2008.
- Hole, Stian. *Garmanns hemmelighet*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2010.
- James, Allison, and Alan Prout. "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems." In *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, edited by Allison James and Alan Prout, 7–34. London: Falmer Press, 1990.
- Juul, Jesper. *Dit kompetente barn : på vej mod et nyt værdigrundlag for familien*. København: Schønberg, 1995.
- Kafka, Franz. "Die Verwandlung." *Die Weißen Blätter. Eine Montasschrift* 2, no. 10 (1915): 1177–230.
- Kenway, Jane, and Elizabeth Bullen. "Dividing Delights: Children, Adults and the Search for Sales." In *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture*, edited by Kirsten Drotner and Sonja Livingstone, 168–82. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2008.
- Kjørholt, Anne Trine. "The Competent Child and 'The Right to be Oneself': Reflections on Children as Fellow

- Citizens in an Early Childhood Center.” In *Beyond Listening: Children’s Perspectives on Early Childhood Services*, edited by Alison Clark, Anne T. Kjørholt and Peter Moss, 151–73. Bristol: Policy Press, 2005.
- Kjørholt, Anne Trine. “Barn som samfunnsborgere—til barnets beste?” In *Barn som Samfunnsborgere—til barnets beste?*, edited by Anne Trine Kjørholt, 11–29. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010a.
- Kjørholt, Anne Trine. “Barnehagen som lekegrind for autonomi og valgfrihet?” In *Barn som samfunnsborgere—til barnets beste?*, edited by Anne Trine Kjørholt, 152–71. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2010b.
- Kjørholt, Anne Trine, and Nina Winger. “Barndom og rettigheter under lupen. Individualisering, verdighet og menneskeverd.” In *Ytringer om likeverd, demokrati og relasjonsbygging i barnehagen*, edited by Anne Greve, Sissel Mørreaunet and Nina Winger, 75–89. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2013.
- Korsvold, Tora. “Fra familiemedlem til rettssubjekt. Framveksten av en moderne barnehagebarndom.” In *Ytringer om likeverd, demokrati og relasjonsbygging i barnehagen*, edited by Anne Greve, Sissel Mørreaunet and Nina Winger, 61–74. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2013.
- Krøger, Cathrine. “Hver illustrasjon er et kunstverk.” *Dagbladet*, April 8, 2013. Accessed July 4, 2014. <http://www.dagbladet.no/2013/04/08/kultur/anmeldelser/litteratur/litteraturanmeldelser/bok/26527612/>.
- Lassén-Seger, Maria. *Adventures into Otherness: Childhood Metamorphs in Late Twentieth-Century Children’s Literature*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2006.
- Nikolajeva, Maria, and Carole Scott. *How Picturebooks Work*. New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Nodelman, Perry. “Words Claimed: Picturebook Narratives and the Project of Children’s Literature.” In *New Directions in Picturebook Research*, edited by Teresa Colomer, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Cecilia Silva-Díaz, 11–26. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Ommundsen, Åse Marie. “Kanskje det fins flere helt usynlige jenter? Bildeboka *Snull* av Gro Dahle og Svein Nyhus.” In *Barneboklesninger. Norsk samtidslitteratur for barn og unge*, edited by Agnes-Magrethe Bjorvand and Svein Slettan, 204–17. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2004.
- Postman, Neil. *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Saanum, Kari, and Gry Moursund. *Pinnsvinmamma*. Oslo: Omnipax, 2006.
- Sande, Hans. *Plommetreet*. Illustrated by Olav Hagen. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1984.
- Sande, Hans, and Silje Granhaug. *Pappa er sjørøver*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2011.
- Sirens, Trine. “Såre barnebøker om ensomhet.” Intervju med Lisa Aisato. *Fredrikstad Blad*, February 2, 2013. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.f-b.no/kultur/sare-barneboker-om-ensomhet-1.7776012>.
- Smith, Anne, and Håvard Bjerke. “Children’s Citizenship.” In *Children as Citizens? International Voices*, edited by Nicola Taylor and Anne B. Smith, 15–34. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2009.
- Østvang, Gyrid Axe, and Per Ragnar Møkleby. *Førstemamma på mars*. Oslo: Samlaget, 2013.

WEBSITES

- Convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 20, 1989. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.
- Kindergarten Act*, June 2005. Accessed January 12, 2015. http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Barnehager/engelsk/Act_no_64_of_June_2005_web.pdf
- Norske bokbloggere*. Accessed January 1, 2015. <https://norskebokbloggere.wordpress.com/2014/02/01/samlesing-fugl-av-lisa-aisato/>.
- Once Upon a Time*, Mai Lene’s blog. Accessed July 1, 2015. <https://maileneles.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/aisato-lisa-fugl-gyldendal-2013/>.
- Picturebook Proclamation*. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://www.thepicturebook.co/>.
- Reading Randi Blog*. Accessed July 1, 2015. <http://reading-randi.blogspot.no/2014/02/tanker-om-bok-lisa-aisato-fugl.html>.