

# The Welfare State and the Nursing Home Novel: Bent Vinn Nielsen's *A Life in Ordinarity*

**Peter Simonsen**

Institute of Literature, Culture and Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark

55 Campusvej, 5230 Odense M, Denmark

Email: petsim@litcul.sdu.dk

**Abstract** Old age is a major issue in many political debates in the contemporary Danish welfare state as well as in much contemporary Danish fiction. Most western populations are experiencing a demographic revolution, where societies are coming to consist of an increasing number of older compared to younger citizens. This puts pressure on the traditional Danish or Scandinavian welfare model, which has financed all older citizens' pensions and health care, but which most politicians and economists argue cannot be carried into the future in an unchanged form. Thus welfare reforms have been accelerating since the 1990s. Concurrently, in contemporary realist fiction many authors address the subject of old age, aging and the welfare institutions and intersubjective collectives in which this takes place. In these fictions, often set in nursing homes, hence "nursing home novels," we may observe how individual citizens can be imagined to live in and with these welfare reforms. Among these authors this essay singles out Bent Vinn Nielsen and in particular his novel from 2010, *Et liv i almindelighed* (*A Life in Ordinarity*) to propose that through the immersive experience of fictional reading such a text potentially provides readers with affective knowledge of the final chapters of life as experienced by ordinary individuals in the welfare state. This knowledge is needed, the essay proposes, in order to have a qualified and properly nuanced public debate about old age in the welfare state of the future.

**Key words** Bent Vinn Nielsen; welfare state; nursing home; old age

A number of critical studies have in recent years begun to address and analyze the complex relations between the Danish welfare state as it has emerged and been transformed through a series of political compromises since the Second World War, and narrative works of imaginative literature (Kjældgaard and Stjernfelt; Hansen; Schwartz; Simonsen and Stougaard-Nielsen; Mai, *Kættene*). The underlying premise is that we enhance our understanding both of the welfare state and of literature when we consider them in an interdisciplinary perspective. In terms of this research, Bent Vinn Nielsen (born 1951) singles himself out as an author who claims special interest. In particular by virtue of his most recent novel, *Et liv i almindelighed* (*A Life in Ordinarity*) (2010), his fifteenth since his debut in 1978. The novel is set in a nursing home (hence "nursing home novel") and it deals with a key political issue in today's welfare state: old age. Old age is a major issue in the political debate in

the contemporary welfare state, where the increasing number of old (Above 65) and very old (Above 80) citizens both entitled to and in need of pensions and various forms of care is often seen as a potential bomb under the welfare system. Old age is also an issue in much contemporary fiction, where many authors address the subject of old age and ageing and the welfare institutions and intersubjective collectives in which this takes place, and through the immersive experience of fictional reading potentially provide their readers with affective knowledge of how this chapter of life is experienced in the context of the welfare state. This knowledge is needed, the essay proposes, in order to have a qualified and properly nuanced debate about old age in a reformed welfare state of the future.

Vinn Nielsen's work can be considered as both a product of and a critical response to the welfare state as the political and ideological system that frames the lives of ordinary Danes in multiple ways. The critic, Rune Lykkeberg, has recently argued this in his study, *Kampen om sandhederne* (*The Battle for the Truths*), where much of Vinn Nielsen's work functions as a seemingly privileged mirror of changes in the basic values and mentalities in Danish society over the past decades. According to Lykkeberg, Vinn Nielsen's novel, *Opkøb af dødsboer* (*Buying Estates from the Dead*) (1980), for instance, anticipates by twenty years the then newly elected Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal party, Anders Fogh Rasmussen's 2002 critique of the reigning values and ideological presuppositions of the Danish cultural elite (Lykkeberg 59). The cultural elite was seen to have participated in creating a system of welfare that was informed by many good intentions on behalf of the citizens in terms, for instance, of creating equality through progressive taxation and economic redistribution as well as providing free health care for all, free education (including higher education) to enable social mobility, as well as a variety of pensions and other monetary means of insurance against social risks. Yet despite these good intentions, the system was felt by many to be, on the one hand, patronizing and to disempower the individual, and, on the other hand, a system that is largely beneficent to the middle class rather than those at the bottom of society.

Vinn Nielsen's critique of the welfare state is complex and reflects many Danes' ambivalent relationship to the welfare state. Most Danes support the basic ideas and values of the welfare state (Petersen and Petersen 2007; Gundelach). Indeed, to assume political power and governmental office, one cannot be fundamentally critical of the welfare state (Petersen and Petersen 2010). The chief architect behind Anders Fogh Rasmussen's victory in 2001, the liberal politician Claus Hjort Frederiksen, for instance, in an interview in 2010 embraces the welfare state in a way he and the Liberal party had never done before 2001 when he says that he has had it "ind under huden" (it has "gotten under his skin") (Lundis 37). However, he finds that it has developed away from a Social Democratic universalist model, where everyone gets the same offers and services from the state, towards a more (neo) liberalist model, where the individual citizen is given more choices and where the public sector is integrated with and competes with the private sector. Yet many Danes are also skeptical of the welfare state's interventions in their personal, intimate lives when the state assumes a position of one who knows better than the citizen what is best for that citizen. And

they are skeptical about the good intentions on behalf of those at the bottom of society.

Vinn Nielsen is acutely aware of this ambivalence. This can be seen for instance in the fact that he, on the one hand, is a part of the welfare system because he gets money from the National Art Foundation of 1965 for being a creative author of the highest quality, and on the other hand that he is very skeptical of the very system that feeds him because he knows that it sometimes treats people in inhumane ways by denying them their individuality and reducing them to infantile clients. This is brought out in a newspaper essay from 1998 where he reflects with Kafkaesque insight and precision on how he was granted a prestigious lifelong stipend from the state. The official letter from the Minister of Culture pointed out that this stipend was “samfundets officielle anerkendelse af og taknemmelighed for de værdier, du har skabt som kunstner, og som har beriget samfundet som helhed” (society’s official recognition and expression of thankfulness of the values you have created as an artist, which have enriched society as a whole) (Vinn Nielsen, *Dysfunktionelle* 8). The welfare state, in other words, appreciates its artists, even if they are critical of it (sometimes *especially* if they are critical) (Mai, *Kættene*). This is a key aspect of Danish democracy, which one of the most significant intellectuals who supported the idea of the welfare state in the period after the Second World War, when it was frowned upon by many, Villy Sørensen, describes in a newspaper article in 1965:

“Ligesom diktaturstaten ganske logisk forbyder den originale kunst for at opretholde sig selv, er det ganske logisk, at den demokratiske stat begunstiger kunsten — for at opretholde sig selv. Loven om statens kunstfond er det officielle udtryk for, at staten har anerkendt kunstens opposition lige så vel som den politiske opposition”

(As a dictatorship logically bans original art from sustaining itself, so the democratic state must favour art for its own sustainability. The Law on the National Art Foundation is the official stamp for the state’s recognition of art as a critical opposition similar to the political opposition) (qtd. in Mai, “Literature as Companion” 56).

Yet even as it appreciates and subsidizes a critical and oppositional literature as the bedrock of democracy and freedom, the welfare state in the guise of the complex system of taxation makes life almost intolerable for many artists. In the 1998 essay Vinn Nielsen reports how the state made him feel disempowered when — without even informing him — it took money that he earned through having his books available free of charge in the public libraries (a cornerstone in the welfare state’s cultural policy) and used it to pay his tax debts and in effect virtually deprived him of his livelihood. He is not averse to paying his taxes, he says, but he wants to be treated with at least a modicum of respect. These kinds of ambivalent experiences with the double-edged sword of the welfare state inform Vinn Nielsen’s work in many ways.

Vinn Nielsen is not a politician and he has no utopic literary agenda. In a newspaper interview he states that for him, literature is not meant to give directions or for-

mulate a political program. Instead it must reflect, with the greatest adequacy and precision, how a given politics influences the people in their ordinary lives. Vinn Nielsen's novels are ideally suited for this task in so far as they combine a distinct social realism of language, style and content that is almost documentary in terms of giving slices of life as it is lived in Denmark today, with certain experimental aspects of modernism, especially the use of limited perspective and narrative unreliability and irony. This mix enables Vinn Nielsen to avoid the tendency towards naïve moralism and idealism in traditional social realism, where the indignation and know-all attitude of the author can transform the work into propaganda, and the diametrically opposed tendency towards abstraction and mysticism in high modernism, where the formalism of the author can turn the work into a merely self-reflecting string of words that cannot keep the reader's interest for long. Navigating these Scylla and Charybdis, Vinn Nielsen instead delivers what has been characterized as "et stort og enestående stykke samtidssociologi" (a grand and unique piece of sociology of the present) (Stjernfelt 262).

The choices made by an author of where to turn his sociological gaze, of which political consequences to investigate in his art are political, no doubt, but they do not reflect an ambition to change things in a direct manner reflective of a crude instrumental understanding of the literary work of art. Vinn Nielsen's most recent novel, *Et liv i almindelighed*, investigates among other things Danish welfare politics as it has impacted on retirement habits and the treatment of the very old in nursing facilities. The nursing home and the treatment of the very old is a privileged topos when anyone wants to measure the extent to which the welfare state lives up to its own good intentions. In an essay from 2000, Vinn Nielsen reflects on the Social Democratic Prime Minister (1993 – 2011), Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's annual New Year speech to the people, which is broadcast on January 1<sup>st</sup> every year. Nyrup Rasmussen talked at length about and celebrated the history and basic values of the welfare state, saying among other things,

"Vi skal have råd til velfærd Møllerssamfundets grundlæggende omsorg og tryghed. Vi må ikke affinde os med svigt i forhold til dem, der er svagest og mest udsat. Vi må ikke affinde os med, at gamle på plejehjem behandles uværdigt. Der *skal* overalt i vores land være en ordentlig Ældreomsorg"

(We must be able to afford the basic care and security of the welfare state. We must not fail those who are most weak and exposed. We must not accept that old people in nursing homes are treated in an unworthy manner. Everywhere in our nation there *must* be a proper care for the old) (Rasmussen; Rasmussen's italics).

Nyrup Rasmussen's point was that we could afford this and that reports of maltreatment in nursing homes were exceptions to the rule. To this, Vinn Nielsen drily comments:

Hvis man nu var senildement beboer på et plejehjem i Odder, er det ikke sikkert

man ville kunne se ligheden mellem det samfund, statsministeren taler om, og så det man selv kender. [...] Enten taler Nyrup mod bedre vidende, eller også har hans rådgivere bare ikke fortalt ham, at i løbet af de år han har været ved magten, har middelklassen nok forbedret levestandarden. Men det har de omkring 800.000, der er afhængige af velfærdMøllerssamfundets velvilje, bestemt ikke. (Vinn Nielsen, *Dysfunktionelle* 19)

(If you were a senile inhabitant of a nursing home in the city of Odder, it is not certain that you could see the similarity between the society the Prime Minister talks about and the one you know yourself. [...] Either Nyrup Rasmussen is speaking against his better knowledge, or his advisors have neglected to tell him that in the few years he has been in power, the middle class may have improved its standard of living. But those 800.000 people who depend on the good will of the welfare state, have not.)

While Vinn Nielsen here, in a polemical newspaper essay, sides with the old nursing home inhabitant and against the system, in his art he is more nuanced.

Disregarding for a moment the novel's complex manner of articulation through various narrators and the subtle ironies that emerge from this manner of articulation, it contains, on the one hand, what seems a critique of a system of public welfare that both pays generous early retirement pensions ("efterløn") to individuals who could still work (aged 61 and 62), but have chosen to follow their own interests and ways of aging, and at the same time seems to disregard the individual needs and desires of a very old disabled person in a nursing home (the protagonist, Skat Enevoldsen, who is 96 years old, has to struggle against the system to get his daily shave and the freedom to go on a little road trip). On the other hand, the novel opens itself up to being read as affirmative of certain aspects of the welfare system given that the welfare system both directly and indirectly enables Skat Enevoldsen to tell his life story to a voluntary visiting friend. This visiting friend has taken early retirement because there were no jobs for him in this part of the country (the hardware business that had employed him closed), but unlike his wife, who cultivates herself with trips to enjoy nature and art museums and joins other early retirees at Nordic Walking, he spends his early retirement as a visiting friend at the local nursing home where he has been sent specifically to visit Skat Enevoldsen by the municipality, a key part of the welfare state. In the telling of this story, Skat Enevoldsen enriches his own life and the lives of others, both directly and indirectly. The welfare state in other words is both a companionable helper and an obstacle to be struggled against, and persons on early retirement are both represented as problematic narcissistic free riders and as crucial supporters of the welfare system that pays their pensions. The relations between the work of literature and the welfare state are in other words complex making it impossible to deduct a politics from this novel as far as the state is concerned.

*Et liv i almindelighed* thus engages what may be the most serious immediate challenge of the welfare state: the growing number of people reaching deep old age and moving from the position of taxpaying contributors to the welfare system to being recipients of various welfare services and benefits. Some economists and demogra-

phers see this as a potential disaster and talk about a “global retirement crisis” (Jackson 325–32), yet Vinn Nielsen sees more than that; a fertile artistic material that gives us as readers a rare chance to imagine life — a life lived in ordinarity — from the perspective of old age disability (Skat Enevoldsen is confined to a wheelchair and unable to use his fingers to write due to arthritis), which is a perspective most readers are debarred from in their ordinary lives. The novel indeed continues but also extends Vinn Nielsen’s micro-sociological approach by opening up his work to a tendency which we have witnessed increase its pace over the past decade or so in both Danish and international fiction; stories which in various ways seek and find aesthetic expression for life as it can be imagined being lived and experienced for an old individual; a perspective and slice of life not traditionally bestowed much attention by writers of imaginative fiction. In Danish literature, besides Vinn Nielsen, we can think of work by Christian Jungersen, *Krat* (1999), Kirsten Thorup, *Ingenmandsland* (2003), Bent Haller, *Først ved livets ende* (2004), Trisse Gejl, *Patriarken* (2006), Anders Bodelsen, *Varm luft* (2009) and Vibeke Grønfeldt, *Livliner* (2011). Different as they are in many ways, these authors aim to provide realistic, that is, credible, believable and at times seemingly authentic narratives about old age as it is lived, sensed and felt by imagined individuals in contemporary Denmark. Their stories enable readers to imagine what it is like to inhabit the country of old age, a country whose inhabitants are nothing like they used to. Old people in the West are generally older, healthier and much more interested in their specific identity and circumstances in life compared to the generations that came before. Today it is normal to expect to grow old even though the maximum number of years reached by the oldest old has not changed significantly. The reasons for this “long life revolution,” as it has been dubbed by Robert Butler, have to do with developments in medicine, hygiene, nutrition, increase in wealth, better working and living conditions. We see new life ages emerge (we can expect both a third and a fourth age), new types of identities, hobbies, interests, diseases, medicines, forms and places of living, patterns of consumption, educational needs, etc. Our common existential horizon is in other words being expanded dramatically, even if slowly. To begin to make sense of the human implications of these revolutionary changes we turn to fiction for its capacity to dramatize the life of the individual in society and to capture emergent structures of feeling, mentalities and issues of human interest.

One of the first pieces of welfare legislation in Denmark (1891) concerned old age pensions. Indeed, care for the old has always been a key issue in the development of the welfare state (Petersen). The universalism of the people’s pension of 1956, where all citizens were granted the right to the same relatively generous pension upon retirement, irrespective of who they were and how they had lived their life, is an important symbol of the Danish model of welfare and an integral part of Danish national identity. This despite the fact that the pension system, through a number of still ongoing reforms aiming to accommodate the welfare system to changing demography, has developed away from its former pay-as-you-go universalism towards a system where the individual’s future pension is contingent upon his or her employment, which means that a greater degree of inequality can be anticipated in the future.

Yet Danes (and Scandinavians more generally) expect the state to take care of them in their old age and in the Danish welfare state care for the old is seen as primarily the duty of the state rather than the family or the employer (Szebehely). The state takes care of the old in order that adult children can pursue their own careers. The idea that the state acts as a parent vis-à-vis the citizen is indeed second nature to many Danes, whether they like it or not (Kjældgaard). Former Social Democratic Prime Minister (1972–73 and 1975–9), Anker Jørgensen, who is by many Danes seen as the incarnation of the traditional ideas and values of the welfare state, compares in an interview the welfare state (which he conflates with the welfare society) to a family: “på samme måde som forældre skal skabe tryghed for deres børn, så har samfundet — bare i større målestok — til opgave at være en slags forældre for borgerne og sørge for tryghed” (in a manner similar to parents making sure their children are secure, society’s role — merely on a larger scale — is to be a kind of parent to the citizens and ensure their security) (Lundis 16). In the 1960s and 1970s a greater number of old age pensioners moved into a nursing home while they were still in relatively good health. The modern nursing homes were large and in them the inhabitant was treated in a standardized way almost as if he or she were in a hospital. At the end of the 1970s amidst the world oil crisis, it increasingly dawned on politicians that the state could not afford these nursing homes, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that few people wanted to enter what was being seen as what Erving Goffman would call “total institutions” to be treated as patients even while they were healthy. Instead, the politics was changed to enable people to stay in their own homes as long as possible and only go to a nursing home facility (or other form of sheltered housing) when they could no longer be cared for in their own homes (the standard of private housing had risen dramatically in the Golden Age of the welfare state, 1950–1970, where many had acquired their own house in the suburbs to give this politics a firm basis for realization). The means to realize this politics was extensive home care and completely refraining from building new nursing homes after 1987 (Rostgaard). Simultaneously, a new understanding of old age as *not* an illness but rather a phase of life filled with potential for change, productivity and personal growth began to emerge both among the elderly and society in general. The desire to stay in one’s own home after retirement and for the rest of one’s life is the desire of the overwhelming majority of Danes today. This suits the politics, which is increasingly aimed at developing various forms of home care, and reflects the advanced individualization of late modern societies (Lewinter). As an anthropological study has recently shown, to become dependent, enter a nursing home and be treated as an object by indifferent caretakers epitomizes our greatest fear when asked about what constitutes “the good life” in old age (Nielsen). As I will suggest in the last part of this essay, Vinn Nielsen’s *Et liv i almindelighed* is virtually unthinkable and maybe unreadable outside of this context of the Danish welfare model regarding old age. Before making that argument, I wish to indicate how old age is represented in two of Vinn Nielsen’s previous novels.

Nursing homes and old age can be found on the margins of Vinn Nielsen’s earlier work. *Realiteternes verden* (1992) (*The World of Realities*) is a novel profoundly critical of the mentality generated by the welfare state in a group of unemployed and

unskilled workers in a Danish province (Nakskov, Lolland). The nursing home here figures as the ultimate but ambivalent “gift” the welfare parent-state has to offer the citizen-child. The first person narrator, Knud, looks from within his rather limited point of view at his own situation as a client of the welfare state without any prospect of real employment:

[...] vi sad jo bare på vores blankslidte, artige røv og blev mere og mere gråmelerede. Vi skulle nok holde kæft og gøre, som der blev sagt. Vi generede ikke nogen, vi kunne ingenting og vi gjorde ingenting. Ingen kunne bebrejde os noget, vi lavede ingen uro, vi sad helt stille og roligt og var bare glade for at blive forsørget. En skønne dag kunne de køre os hen på et plejehjem, så kunne vi sidde derhenne og spise småkager og more os over de ungdommelige typer, som gad optræde for os i fjernsynet. (75)

([...] we were just sitting on our well-worn, well-behaved ass getting more and more grayish. Of course we would shut up and do as we were told. We didn't bother anyone, we were good for nothing and we did nothing. No one could blame us, we caused no trouble, we sat all quiet and were happy to be provided for. Some fine day they could take us to a nursing home where we could sit and eat biscuits and be amused by the youthful types who cared to entertain us on television.)

Knud speaks directly to a small group of listeners (according to Vinn Nielsen they are students of sociology, Skyum-Nielsen 18) on behalf of a collective “we.” He cannot imagine a life that is different from the one he has, where he is kept alive by the welfare state, but where all the state has to offer him on the horizon of the future is a nursing home. This may sound comfortable with cookies and TV, but as we hear repeatedly through the novel, Knud does not like to watch TV, and as the novel also points out in the story of one of the marginal characters, Emmy Jordansen, there is not much to look forward to.

Emmy Jordansen is a long time friend of Knud's family who lives alone with poor health (bad lungs) in very poor housing by the harbour. Knud visits her now and then, but not as often as he thinks he ought to (148). On one of his visits, Knud says,

Var det ikke noget for dig at komme på plejehjem? spurgte jeg hende — sådan som jeg vist også havde gjort sidst. Men nej, det ville hun ikke. Hun havde en hjemmehjælp til at komme to gange om ugen, det var godt nok [...].

Da jeg gik kunne jeg ikke lade være med at tænke på, at man ærlig talt godt kunne se på hendes lejlighed, at hun kun havde hjemmehjælp to gange om ugen. Der var møgbeskidt, den hjemmehjælp hun havde, kunne ikke være af de mest effektive. Hvorfor lod man mennesker bo på denne måde? Var det ren beregning: på den måde kradser de hurtigere af, det er langt billigere end at sende dem på plejehjem?

Svineriet, tænkte jeg da jeg lukkede mig ud, sådan er det efterhånden ble-

vet her i svineriet. (149 – 50)

(Shouldn't you consider getting into a nursing home? I asked her — as I think I had done the last time we met. But no, she wouldn't. She had home care twice a week, which was good enough [ ... ].

As I was leaving I couldn't help but think that really it was obvious from her flat that she only had home care twice a week. It was filthy. The home care she had could not be the most efficient. Why were people allowed to live like this? Was it pure calculation; in this way they croak faster, it's much cheaper than sending them to a nursing home?

The mess, I thought as I let myself out, this is how it has come to be here in the mess. )

Knud clearly thinks the welfare state does not do its job properly and he even thinks this as part of a big conspiracy; that the state (which he refers to as “the mess,” which in the Danish original is “svineriet” and refers to the mess left by pigs carrying very negative connotations) kills the citizen slowly and indirectly but systematically through providing insufficient home care. In the end, his prophecy of course turns out to be self-fulfilling as he sums up this thread of his story by saying that “hun er død, helt efter svineriets plan” (she is dead, exactly in accordance with the plan of the mess) (172).

In the novel we observe an isolated part of the welfare state where those at the bottom of society try to subsist on the lowest welfare rate and are forced to moonlight if they want extra money, for example to send their daughter to university, as Knud against all odds manages to do. Thus, in the story of Knud and his group, this novel is chilling in its portrayal of how the welfare state has rendered them passive and given them a self-image as victims, reflected also in how they see the state as fully responsible for their care in old age even though they know it cannot live up to that responsibility (in part because of the magnitude of moonlighting and other forms of tax-evasion going on in society, where the rich exploit the poor doubly: by paying them less than they otherwise would, and by not contributing to the common good by paying taxes). Yet, in the marginal story of Knud's oldest daughter, Susan, who gets the highest grade average from high school and goes straight to university in Copenhagen (her tuition is fully paid by the state but setting her up is made possible by money Knud earns moonlighting), the novel narrates a story of social mobility, which is a success story of the welfare state even as it is also the story of the death of the local community from where the story is narrated as an exception to the rule represented by the younger sister, who drops out of school to work at the local gas station.

In Vinn Nielsen's novel, *En bedre verden* (*A Better World*) (2004), the nursing home is again present at the periphery of the fiction, but nonetheless serving an important function. Early in the novel, the first person narrator, Rudy, is told on the phone by the head of a nursing home that his father, aged eighty two, has just died, and it strikes him that the last time he visited his father was two years ago:

Da jeg havde lagt røret, kom jeg i tanke om, at det var to år siden jeg sidst

havde besøgt min far på hjemmet. Jeg havde dårligt nok tænkt på det, jeg havde jo altid travlt.

Jeg var chokeret.

Ikke bare over at far var død, han var trods alt i en alder, hvor døden ikke kommer som den store overraskelse. Han var godt slidt. Måske var det i sig selv et lille mirakel, at han trods alt blev toogfirs.

Men det var ikke kun derfor, jeg var chokeret.

Jeg skammede mig. Som en hund.

Hvorfor havde jeg ikke set min far i to år? (14)

(When I had hung up the phone, I realized that it had been two years since I had visited my father at the nursing home. I had barely thought about it, I was so busy all the time.

I was shocked.

Not just at my father's death, he had after all reached an age where death comes as no big surprise. He was pretty worn down. In itself it was perhaps a small miracle that he reached eighty two.

But that was not the only reason I was shocked.

I was ashamed. As a dog.

Why hadn't I seen my father in two years?

Rudy's sense of shame stems probably from both having left his father in the care of the nursing home whose leader seems all nice but also very patronizing when she allows the father to smoke a cigar on his eightieth birthday, and from having let him down by pursuing an unfortunate path in life. It leads him to think about his father's one dream in life: the dream of owning his own house with a small garden. This was something his father could never afford, but which the workaholic freelance photographer Rudy, who lives alone in a little shabby apartment where he spends very little time, can easily afford. So he buys a house in the outer suburbs of Copenhagen in order to lead a "better life" than his father had done (15). However, one year after his father's death, he suffers a breakdown from stress and his doctor orders him to go on a vacation. What happens on this vacation is at the heart of the novel's theme of a dramatic midlife crisis and adjacent need to find new meaning and purpose in life, which Rudy by accident finds when he begins to write a story about two people and their complex relationship and reflects that maybe there is a certain hope for a better world in that act of writing about other people's complex inner worlds (88 – 89). While this story is not directly related to the welfare state, it is significant that the midlife crisis, which leads to a writer finding his vocation and an intersubjective poetics, is framed by that same individual's shock and sense of shame at having neglected his father and left him in the care of the welfare state's nursing home.

In *Et liv i almindelighed* we finally enter the nursing home and the mind of the old individual in a position of dependency vis-à-vis the welfare state. As mentioned, this novel is virtually unthinkable and maybe unreadable outside of this context of the Danish welfare model regarding old age. This goes both for the subject matter of the novel (state financed old age care and pensions as well as a new family structure and

intergenerational relations and organized voluntary help) and for the very form and style of narration (reminiscence therapy in a nursing home setting facilitated by the welfare state and made possible by a voluntary visiting friend who has taken early state financed retirement). The novel is narrated in a peculiar but striking and compelling manner. It is presented as a recording made by one of the characters in the novel (James D. Møller). The voice who speaks the most is that of an old inhabitant of a nursing home, the 96-year-old Skat Enevoldsen. He has accepted the welfare state's offer of a voluntary visiting friend (a sign that care taking is organized in a "welfare mix" of private and public agents, as described in e. g. Lewinter) and its suggestion (mediated by the physical therapist at the nursing home) that he should write his memoirs, narrate his life story, because it will increase his life quality. A member of the local authorities, the municipality responsible for most welfare services, has written a brochure outlining the benefits of reminiscence therapy that is offered to the inhabitants of the nursing home to increase their quality of life (and presumably to increase their health status and thus *prevent* them from becoming a too great burden on the health care system, although in this novel we are very far from the paranoia vis-a-vis old age politics we witnessed in *Realiteternes verden*). In an essay from 2006, a person who has experience from a Danish old age pensioner's organization working with reminiscence workshops says that "along with other elderly, the participants [in such workshops] are given the opportunity to refresh memories that had long been forgotten. To be able to remember more than you thought you could, can form the basis of wonderful and positive experiences, which enhance the quality of life for the individual" (Vestesen 66). The offer to write his story tempts him, although we are not told exactly why he is tempted (Vinn Nielsen, *Et liv* 13). This temptation to tell his story is crucial to this novel. It may be interpreted as an indication that he is both tempted because it will bring a meaningful closure to his own life and because he can perhaps for the first time communicate, however indirectly, with his youngest daughter, Jenny. He sees her all the time, but it is difficult for them to speak with intimacy and we are given a sense early on in the novel that there are things he wants to tell her (19) but is unable to because of his temper (28). However, Skat's fingers are too frail to write his memoirs. This problem is fixed by the voluntary visiting friend, who shows up with a recording device at the opening of the narrative. The intersubjective relationship between Skat and the visiting friend has in other words been created by the welfare state, which according to social legislation is indeed obliged to organize and subsidize such voluntary services (Lewinter 54 – 60).

Skat Enevoldsen has inhabited the nursing home for the past 6 years. Previously he was able to take care of himself, but now he is confined to a wheelchair and unable for instance to shave himself. This is in fact the novel's way of introducing his basic existential situation to the reader; Skat Enevoldsen stubbornly insists on his right to a daily shave, which he seems to consider instrumental to maintaining his dignity and sense of life quality. Indeed, it is as if his daily shave represents his entire claim to have personal autonomy and self identity. In the very first chapter he manages to claim this daily shave despite meeting resistance from the leader of the nursing home, who casually remarks that "Man kan blive barberet et par gange om ugen

[...]. Nogle bliver kun barberet en gang om ugen” (You can get a shave a couple of times per week [...]. Some are only shaved once a week) (11). Yet this is not the beginning of a piece of traditional social realism that indignantly tells of a system's failure to protect the weak individual against its own standardizing and spirit-breaking measures. Had Vinn Nielsen written fiction in the spirit of his newspaper essay's reaction to the Prime Minister's paean to the welfare state, this could have been expected. Instead, Vinn Nielsen narrates a story about how deeply our lives are involved in the system and how some services and benefits provided by the welfare state in fact miraculously work, even if not always according to plan, and enable life to be lived in ways that seem to increase the happiness of the individuals living there.

Skat Enevoldsen is in the nursing home because he can no longer take care of himself and because his two adult daughters cannot take care of him. His oldest daughter, Lore, because she lives far away in the northern part of the country (Vendsyssel), and in addition has a disabled adult son to take care of. His youngest daughter, the laggard Jenny, who was born in 1951 and is 48 years old, cannot take care of him even though she lives as a single right next to the nursing home in a house which according to her father is big enough for an entire family. Modern family life is not as it used to be — it is deeply intertwined with the state. Jenny moved in with her father briefly before he went to the nursing home, but she could not balance her work life as a school teacher and her private life as her father's primary care taker. Choosing her own work, in the manner she is encouraged to by the welfare state that encourages de-familiarization (that is, takes responsibility for care of children, old, disabled), but which in other states and cultures would be less easy for both economic reasons and reasons of norms and customs, she caused her father's resentment and had to call for her older sister to arrange for his move into the nursing home against his will (174). In a world apart from the highly de-familiarized Scandinavian welfare state, the youngest daughter would be more likely to have been obliged to take care of the old father. This would have kept her from living the life she herself has chosen and that seems to make her feel happy and content, as far as this novel is concerned. If her life is really authentic and if her happiness is really genuine, however, that is, if she leads a morally and ethically laudable life, seems open to interpretation. Indeed, she can both be seen as wasting her life and as living the good life. She is competent as far as her work is concerned (she is a teacher specializing in “vanskelige drenge” (difficult boys) (124)), she jogs, watches movies, drinks wine, goes on vacations with a friend, and does occasional charity work. She visits her father almost every day, enjoys herself and lives a carefree secure life within the cocoon of the welfare state. Liberal critics of the welfare state would say that she has virtually been lobotomized by the state whereas Social Democrats in the tradition of Anker Jørgensen might say that the parent-state is taking good care of her. Villy Sørensen and most of the culture-radical critics who Vinn Nielsen, according to Rune Lykkeberg, holds in contempt for their know-it-all attitude in behalf of other people uninterested in or directly skeptical of their elitist norms and values, would say that she has confused the means (social security, material wealth, rights to welfare benefits) with the ends of the welfare state (to be allowed to confront one's inner existential anxieties and prob-

lematic personality without worrying about basic needs for survival) (Sørensen 1956, 79).

Skat Enevoldsen's story, which he tells in little bits of pieces over a period of time, takes up the first two thirds of the novel, until he suddenly dies. In the process of telling his story, Skat seems to open up to James D. Møller and also to reach some kind of closure in his life, especially as far as his son Carlo is concerned. Skat, we understand by implication, more or less drove Carlo to a dramatic suicide and I interpret the novel as Skat's desire to come to terms with this by beginning to take responsibility for his actions for the first time. At the heart of the novel is thus the story of a father's brutal raising of his son (especially his crude and insensitive initiation of the son into the mysteries of sexual procreation) who ends up killing himself as a consequence of his father's tyranny. This story is only marginally related to the context of the welfare state. Perhaps it indirectly implies that the education of children in public school — not least their education in matters of sexuality — is to be preferred compared to this, that is, it may be read to support the idea of the state as a substitute for malfunctioning families. What interests me in this novel as an exemplary welfare narrative is the framing of the father-son story: an old man sitting in his wheelchair telling his life's story to a voluntary visitor sent his way by the municipality also responsible for initiating the storytelling in the first place. Were it not for the welfare state, the story would never have been told.

After Skat Enevoldsen's death, James D. Møller takes over and reflects on the story he has heard and then begins to tell parts of his own story. He talks in solitude to the recording device about a minor crush he has developed on Jenny and he talks about the problems in his marriage, which seems to be nearing the end and dying out of sheer boredom and divergent life interests, but which in the end seems to find new stimulus. As James D. Møller says after his marriage has survived a minor crisis (his wife learns how he clumsily tried to kiss Jenny), "Der er gået næsten tre uger nu. Hun er stadig mere opmærksom over for mig end hun har været i mange år. / Man kan ligefrem sige, at hun er kærlig" (It has been almost three weeks now. She is still more attentive towards me than she has been for years. / One can actually say that she is affectionate.) (209). And he talks about what to do with the recording of Skat Enevoldsen's story now that he is dead. After thinking it over, he decides that it belongs to Jenny to whom he gives it at the end of the narrative. The novel is in other words to a large extent about the telling of one's life story from the vantage of the end and about the potentially life changing effects of telling and listening to such narratives.

There is no authorial instance beyond these recorded voices (we also hear one of the care taker's voice very briefly on the tape). As such, this mode of narration may be said to be dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense and open to interpretation in the manner characteristic of what Anne-Marie Mai has theorized as "welfare literature" in a recent essay. According to Mai, imaginative literature is both "companion" to and "critic" of the welfare state, something she relates to its dialogic nature and openness to engage with issues (political, social, and broadly human) in an unprejudiced manner:

The present welfare literature is characterised by a focus on dialogue as the basic democratic premise and value and sometimes points out human experiences and experiential forms that have previously not been articulated. That is, not all literature in the welfare state is welfare literature, but welfare literature is a literature that contributes to and challenges the dialogue between the members of the welfare state (Mai, "Literature as Companion" 50).

Vinn Nielsen's novel is both an instance of this as it literally records this kind of conversation and about this in the sense that the very genesis of the conversational situation in the novel is the intervention of the welfare state. The dialogic poetic Mai outlines entails an emphasis in this literature on intersubjective relationships, which is also a prominent theme and structural feature of Vinn Nielsen's work, at stake both in the dialogic situation which the novel dramatizes where two or more people are together in the same conversational space, and in the represented action, which centres on a number of intimate human relationships enmeshed in the welfare state.

Nursing home novels, that is, novels about old, disabled and relatively powerless people in nursing homes, who are at the mercy of the welfare state, are about more than just that. They are parables of the relationship between the individual and the state at its extreme: of the vulnerable and exposed individual citizen in a typically disempowered and feared state vis-à-vis the powerful welfare state in its many manifestations and valuations, at least among Danes: on the one hand Danes typically want the state to take care of them and their old family members, on the other hand, they fear the state of being in the hands of the state and they tend still to have a bad conscience that stems from putting their elders in the care of the state so they can go to work and cultivate their individual careers.

In this novel we move from a primitive welfare state that only cares for social security and providing simple services such as shelter, food and personal hygiene to a more developed and reflective welfare state that also concerns itself with the life quality of the individual citizen and with recognizing his or her unique human potential by facilitating such a thing as reminiscence therapy for a 96-year-old disabled person. Something indeed comes out of these welfare state mediated and facilitated human relations. Skat Enevoldsen gets the chance to tell the story of his life and seems to find closure by bringing several personal traumas to rest. The visiting friend, James D. Møller, gets the chance to see himself from the outside in a new and strange perspective through Skat Enevoldsen's very direct manner of confronting him and thereby gets his rather stale marriage shaken up and, after a crisis, reinvigorated. The youngest daughter, Jenny, to whom the recording is ultimately given, gets to see her father from a new angle and a chance to get to know him and understand the motivations behind his actions in old age in a manner that is similar to how we, as readers of all this, come to see how an old disabled man in a wheelchair may hide a rich inner life and a complex character which it cannot hurt — in a double sense — to pay attention to by listening carefully and by supporting a system of welfare that enables this storytelling. In a sense, this nursing home novel is thus more than anything an allegory of the role and fate of the storyteller in the bosom of the modern welfare state — Skat Enevoldsen, James D. Møller and Bent Vinn Nielsen — and of the need to support

them even to the end.

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