Migration and Identity in Swedish and Canadian Historical Novels for Children

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Abstract The article on migration and historical consciousness consists of two parts: the first focuses on Swedish author Maj Bylock's *Drakskeppstrilogi* [*Dragon Ship Trilogy*], in which I relate my discussion to my doctoral thesis *Maj Bylock's Drakskeppstrilogi* [*Dragon Ship Trilogy*] *and Historical Consciousness in Ten-to-Twelve-Year-Olds*; the second part discusses three Canadian novels — Kathleen Pearson's *The Sky is Falling* (1989) and Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada* (1978) and *Days of Terror* (1989, 2008). The focus in the first part is on Bylock's protagonist Petite/Åsa and her development from a gender, ethnic and class perspective. With the aid of the postcolonial concepts *diaspora* and *hybrid identity*, I discuss cultural encounters resulting from migration. The female characters in Bylock's trilogy attain what the American researchers Brown and St. Clair term *empowerment*. The Viking age is compared in the second part with the three Canadian historical novels, which are set in different chronological periods but focus on the phenomenon of migration and its effects. As my research demonstrates, these novels are particularly well-suited to class discussions about ethics, the value of human beings and their cultural encounters. The analyzed novels demonstrate that the process of adaptation is not dependent primarily on context but inner strength. Children's fiction thus has an important part to play in helping young readers not only to accommodate to change but to appreciate the advantages of adopting a new country and its values — not least, it provides the opportunity to create a new identity.
Key words migration; historical consciousness; the historical novel; the "other"; empowerment

In my thesis "It Could Just As Well Have Happened today" and "Historical Consciousness in Ten- to Twelve-Year-Olds" I discuss the advantages of class discussions of fictional texts for pupils between the ages of ten and twelve, showing how these facilitate the development of historical consciousness. In the first part of the thesis, I analyze the three novels in the trilogy about the Viking age by the Swedish author Maj Bylock, *The Dragon Ship* (1997), *The Golden Sword* (1998) and *The Distant Castle* (1998), focusing on the use of fiction in social science lessons. The purpose is to show how novels can facilitate children's historical consciousness by identifying with particular characters.

Both here and in my thesis I focus on the protagonist, Petite/Åsa (later known

as Åsa) and her development in terms of gender, ethnicity and class. I use postcolonial concepts such as *diaspora* and *hybrid identity* to describe cultural encounters occurring as a result of migration (McLeod 205). McLeod (who refers to Robin Cohen 's research) defines diaspora as "a sense of living in one country across time and space to another" (McLeod 207). I demonstrate that female characters achieve a high level of *empowerment*, a concept used by the American researchers Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair to describe their adaptation to the new country. *Empowerment* is defined as "a nourishing belief in capacity and competence" (Brown & St. Clair *Declarations of Independence*: *Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 27).

The concept of *empowerment* is central to the portrayal of the protagonist. The protagonist's situation as a migrant points above all to cultural encounters both in the past and the present, highlighting the situation of the slaves in the Viking age. The analogy with the present ensures that the novels are excellent sources of discussions about ethics, the value of human beings and cultural encounters.

In Bylock's trilogy, Petite (a Frankish daughter of a nobleman) is kidnapped by the Vikings. The reader follows her entrance into a new, Nordic society. As a consequence of her forced migration, Petite experiences many cultural encounters. Today, immigrant children have similar experiences. Bylock's reader follows the protagonist as she develops from a young girl into a woman, a process strongly influenced by new ideas and traditions in the new country. During her adolescence, Petite makes a number of decisions that are central to her development. As a result, she becomes increasingly empowered by the experience of isolation, her subjection to multiple trials and subsequent return to society as a fully-fledged member.

In the second part of my thesis, I analyze how 11-year-olds read Bylock's trilogy. Three pupils' texts, their discussion of the novels and interviews with the pupils were documented during a six-week thematic project on the Viking age. The analysis was conducted with the aid of Judith A. Langer's concept of *envisionment building* (Langer 2011). Langer uses the word *envisionment* to refer to the world of understanding that a person has at a given point in time. The resulting envisionments constitute text-worlds in the mind; they differ from individual to individual. Envisionments are a function of one's personal and cultural experience, relationship to current experience, what one knows, how one feels, and what one is after (Langer 9). The development of pupils' historical consciousness and newly acquired knowledge can be related to the themes of the novels. By identifying with the characters as they follow the plot, pupils acquire historical knowledge while at the same time developing their historical consciousness. As I show, discussions about the books play a crucial role in this process.

Maj Bylock claims that the present exercises a strong influence on her portrayal of the past, particularly when the events are set several hundred years back in time, because the writer is able to remove any irrelevant details. The focus is instead on timeless, human phenomena and cultural encounters (Opsis Kalopsis 19).

The term "historical consciousness" has become increasingly important, particularly as history is a key subject at school and because interest in general in historical events and times remains insatiable. As Klas-Göran Karlsson (2009) argues, the

term "historical consciousness" has played a key role since the 1990s in forming how authorities and schools formulate their school curriculum goals (78). It is also important to take into consideration the views of university lecturers and professors when it comes to how historical consciousness is created and facilitated. Karlsson, for example, argues that "Every human being has an historical consciousness, which means that he or she reflects on, [and] integrates history into his or her own identity, knowledge and actions" (48). In my doctoral thesis I define historical consciousness as:

> The knowledge that all human beings exist in time and space, which means that they have an origin and a future together knowing that nothing is unchangeable. Historical consciousness deals with the interpretation of the past, the understanding of the present and ideas about the future. (Ingemansson 10)

Knowledge and analogy (Pettersson 179, 181) are two crucial perspectives in my study of historical novels for children. As already established, I focus on the protagonist, Petite's/Åsa's development in terms of gender, ethnicity and class; her development towards greater empowerment is crucial to my analysis. *Empowerment* in this context refers to the development of a high degree of knowledge that can be used to help others (Brown & St. Clair *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 26f).

In the following discussion, the titles of Bylock's novels are abbreviated as follows: *The Dragon Ship* (DS), *The Golden Sword* (GS) and *The Distant Castle* (BF) or named *The Dragonship Trilogy*. (The abbreviations mean the Swedish titles).

Cultural Encounters "Now and Then" in Maj Bylock's Novels

The cultural contexts in which the protagonist finds herself strongly influence her transition from a girl into a woman as well as her quest for an identity in the new society. Her fictional cultural encounters and identity issues resonate strongly with the present and are reminiscent of those affecting immigrants today.

The Concept of "the Other"

Adopting a multicultural perspective, the trilogy follows the protagonist's life from girlhood to adulthood; ultimately, Petite achieves a state of *empowerment* as defined by Brown and St. Clair above, namely "a nourishing belief in capacity and competence" (Brown & St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 27). Gender is an important factor in this development. Petite/Åsa experiences several important cultural encounters, beginning in her homeland, the Frankish empire. She changes during the voyage with the Vikings to the Nordic country that is to be her home. She undergoes further changes, first during her period as a slave, then when she moves to her new home in the Viking village, and finally, as an adult, when she becomes the ruler of the Viking stronghold. She experiences isolation and numerous trials, after which she is ready to be reintroduced into the new society not only as a member but as a ruler.

The Dragon Ship Trilogy was written between 1997 and 1998, a period of increasing migration to Sweden. Like the fictional Petite/Åsa in Bylock's novels, children today must make many adjustments to new customs and educational practices; they must also learn a new language. They are "the other", a central term within sociology and philosophy to denote the tendency to define oneself in relation to others. The process incorporates the tendency to idealise oneself and one's own culture. Immigrants today are "the others", strangers in a new land (Ålund 10).

An example of the "other" perspective in *The Dragon Ship* is the first time Petite/Åsa thinks about the Vikings. Reflecting on their appearance, she realises that "All people she had seen before in her life had had black or brown hair and brown eyes. Just like her. She shuddered and wondered if the Vikings really were human beings" (DS 35). Petite/Åsa is later looked upon in exactly the same way, as "the other", a character from another culture. Initially, she looks upon the Vikings as the "other", convinced that she represents the norm. This view has ethical consequences, which Petite/Åsa reflects on whenever she meets strangers.

Having served her time as a slave, she tries to re-enter society. She must face the fact that she is "the other" and learn to deal with being an outsider in the village. The situation is now reversed: as she once looked upon the Vikings, she is now regarded herself.

The central chapter of the novel is entitled "Who knows from where the winds are blowing?" (DS 102) Boel and Stein, unlike the other villagers, have no doubts about the girl whom they have brought into their home. Boel tells the villagers that she "found her", hoping that this would pre-empt any questions. As a consequence, the girl becomes known as "Åsa, the foundling" (DS 88). When no one can hear, the villagers say: "A child like that does not come from the gods. It probably comes from the trolls" (DS 88); this reminds the reader of Petite's /Åsa's own remark about the Vikings the first time she saw them (DS 35). It is clear that she is not accepted by the village people.

Finally, after many trials, Petite/Åsa is taken into the village by the most important elder, who, as he points at Åsa, remarks: "'No one knows where she comes from. But from now on she is one of us.' The village people said: 'Yes, she is one of us'" (DS 107). Children between the ages of 10 and 12 can empathize with the protagonist; at the same time, they note that situations can change. Petite/Åsa now feels safe but still she keeps her origins a secret and refuses to play with the other children, some of whom are suspicious of her because of her dark hair and unusual appearance.

Petite/Åsa has never encountered snow or winter before. Even the weather, it seems, must be a trial for her. Boel wants her to play with the other children: "'Run over to the other children', she says, as she tells Petite/Åsa to leave the cabin. Although she is frightened, the little girl runs outside. When one of the oldest girls takes her out on the ice, she realizes that "It was a long time since she [had been] so happy" (DS 109). The novel teaches us that if being "the other" is a major challenge in its own right, being forced to move to a new country and start a new life is an even greater one.

Identity and Empowerment

The second example that resonates with the present is the portrayal of Petite/Åsa 's ongoing identity development. In the *Dragon Ship Trilogy*, this development is prompted by the cultural encounters that follow her migration. Her Frankish origin, gender and appearance are crucial factors, as are the changes in her geographical and historical circumstances; all must be taken into consideration when understanding the different stages of development in Åsa's identity (De los Reyes & Mulinari 14).

Petite/Åsa is a marginalized figure as she moves from place to place, a problem experienced by many immigrants today. Ethnicity and identity are strongly interrelated because it is the "variety of social practices, rituals and traditions" that identify "different collective groups" (McLeod 111). The concept of *diaspora*, as earlier mentioned, is useful in analyzing Petite/Åsa's situation in the new country. Nine different characteristics of *diaspora* can be identified, five of which apply to the present discussion: exile from the homeland, idealization of the homeland, idealization of the old home, a troubled relation with the new hosts and the possibility of an enriched life in a new and tolerant country (Cohen 161 – 162).

Identity can grow as a result of a process of *hybridization*, which incorporates mobility (McLeod 216). McLeod argues that *hybridization* is an ongoing process. Furthermore, one's "subjectivity is deemed to be composed from viable sources" (McLeod 219). McLeod also claims that fiction can shape "hybrid identities at the 'in – between' and 'living in between'" (McLeod 216). To live "in-between" causes one to feel ill at ease in both the old and new culture, a painful experience, which ultimately leads to marginalization. Alternatively, such circumstances can facilitate the development of a new identity and open up unexpected opportunities as they act as "roots to routes" (McLeod 216 – 225). Petite/Åsa exhibits a number of these traits. One early example is when she has escaped from being a slave on escaping into the woods. "She was brave and crawled out of her hiding" (DS, 61). Another example is when she has learnt how to deal with life on a farm. "Boel was pleased when she saw how Åsa took care of Gullhova, the horse" (DS,86). Åsa is also empowered when she dares to oppose the boy in action to shoot a deer in the forest: "You will not shoot" (DS, 114).

Critics have shown an increasing interest in the lives of girls and women in the past(Brown & St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 53) and particularly, in empowered heroines. In the second half of the 1990's, several historical novels appeared featuring the lives of "empowered girls" (Brown & St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 26). Sweden is no exception; Annika Thor's *A Faraway Island*(1996), Maj Bylock's *The Escape to the Land of Iron* (1999) and Anita Larsdotter's *Disa at Birka* (1998) all demonstrate the positive effects, particularly among women, of belief in one's capacity and competence , that is to say, in empowerment. The development of the "I" is closely related to one's gender. Historical novelists are strongly influenced by the current debate on the situation of women as they incorporate modern values into their texts. In America, for example, Karen Cushman wrote *Catherine Called Bird-*

ie in 1994, about a woman rebelling against society (Brown & St. Clair *The Distant Mirror. Reflections on Young Adult Historical fiction* 27). Petite/Åsa's developing identity as a consequence of her forced migration can be compared with the situation of immigrants today, a fact of which Maj Bylock is clearly very well aware:

> I think history is fascinating. It is important for children to know about the past in order to get references to their own lives. There are also many things in the past that can help me to tell stories about our time. [---] You can take away inessential things to bring forward timeless and universal human issues. (*Opsis Kalopsis*, 1993:1, 20)

There is clearly a strong connection between migration, class and gender in historical novels featuring female characters. In modern novels, there is an even stronger emphasis on ethnicity. *White lilacs* by Caroline Meyer(1996), for example, shows an African-American community with a girl growing up to resist social structures in the end (Brown & St. Clair, *The Distant Mirror. Reflections on Young Adult Historical fiction* 138).

In Bylock's trilogy, the central question is how her protagonist can achieve empowerment and develop a strong sense of self as opposed to a mere determination to exert power over others. "Meaningful empowerment should result from *purposeful action* rather than from innate talent or coincidental circumstances" (Brown & St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 27). In the following section, Bylock's empowered protagonist is compared with the protagonists of three Canadian novels.

Cultural encounters "now and then" in Canadian novels.

Canada has a long tradition of fiction for children. Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), which may be classified as historical fiction, is widely read in Sweden. I focus here on three historical novels by two Canadian authors; all feature migration and all three are written for the same age group as Bylock's trilogy, that is 9 – 12 year olds. European and North American children of this age group enjoy historical fiction (Brown & St. Clair, *The Distant Mirror. Reflections on Young Adult Historical fiction* 3 – 10). Indeed, Canadian historical fiction is given pride of place in Fiona M. Collins and Judith Graham's Historical fiction for children. *Capturing the Past* (2001).

The three novels discussed here describe growing up under trying circumstances. The child protagonists strive for empowerment. As already established, migrant children must adjust to a new environment, they experience isolation, are subjected to many challenges; their ultimate goal is to be reintroduced into society (Brown & St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult fiction* 26 – 27). I will look at the protagonist's development with respect to migration and relate this to Bylock's three Swedish novels about the Viking age. The focus is on cultural encounters during the children's migration.

As already established in the earlier discussion of Bylock's trilogy, those dispers-

ed from their homeland are characterized by an idealization of the supposed ancestral home, and a troubled relationship with the host society (Cohen 161; see the section "Identity and empowerment" above). These features of *diaspora* are central elements in the following discussion.

Three Canadian Novels

The first novel to be discussed in terms of migration and identity is Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada* (1978), which describes a flight from slavery in nineteenth-century America. Taken from her mother by a ruthless slave trader, all Julilly has left is the dream of freedom. She thinks about a land where it is possible to be free, a haven to which she and her friend Liza may perhaps come one day. When people from the Underground Railroad offer help, the two girls seize the chance to escape. They are slaves without any rights. Their trials are three-fold: they must escape, walk in the swamps dressed like boys and hide from slave hunters. When they are finally reintegrated into society, the empowerment process is complete: "Your relative Lester works in this town and he will take care of you now" (Smucker, *Underground to Canada* 162, Swedish version). This is the same sort of identity building that Petite/Åsa goes through in *The Dragon Ship* and the two following novels.

Barbara Smucker is also the author of *Days of Terror* (1989), about a German boy, Peter Neufeld, who lives with his family in a Mennonite community in Russia in 1917. After experiencing the terror of revolution, parts of the family manage to migrate to Canada. The Mennonite community in Canada arranges and pays for the journey. Peter is 10 years old, and despite his young age, has longed for migration for some time. He encounters many trials: The family is robbed by bandits and suffers from the plague. As a means of survival, Peter formulates a mission of his own: to achieve empowerment (although he does not use the actual term, of course).

Finally, the family has the money to migrate. They endure a difficult journey to Canada. When the family is reintroduced into society, Peter is described in the following terms: "As if he could almost take Otto's place as a man on the farm" (Smucker, *Days of Terror* 47). The novel contains several examples of the effects of *diaspora*, including a longing for the homeland: "It was just like the wagon that had carried them to the train in Lictenau, South Russia, when the cherries were ripe in the orchards of Tiegen" (Smucker, *Days of terror* 235).

1989 saw the publication of Kathleen Pearson's *The Sky is Falling* (1989), in which Norah and her brother Gavin are sent to Canada from England in the summer of 1940. The circumstances in their village are difficult, causing their parents to be anxious about their safety. When they leave England, the children are told: "When things go wrong, as they often will, remember you are British and grin and bear it. Be truthful, brave, kind and grateful" (Pearson 41).

Norah is isolated both at school and in her new home (Pearson 215). She undergoes several trials, the effects of which are exacerbated by the fact that her hostess has no knowledge of children, which causes considerable problems between the two. One day, for example, Norah and her friends are making a bonfire in a ravine but the fire gets out of control and they have to call for the fire department. Norah immediate-

ly thinks of Guy Fawkes in the seventeenth-century England and is inspired. But she is blamed for the fire and feels even worse about her situation (Pearson 189 – 194). She also attempts to return to England with her brother but they are discovered (Pearson 200). After all these experiences, she remarks: "I *hate* the war. I just want to go *home*"; home is the children's goal and the opposite of where they are (Pearson 204. Pearson's italics). As Norah's situation improves and she is gradually absorbed into society, Aunt Florence realizes that it is her fault that the children tried to run away (Pearson 209). Gradually, Norah is able to believe in her own capacity and competence, thereby achieving a state of empowerment as previously defined.

All three novels demonstrate a strong interest in providing historical perspectives that are analogous to our time and also describing strong female protagonists. Peter in *Days of Terror*, for example, enjoys the same empowerment as the girls in the other novels do.

Comparison with *Anne of Green Gables*

Anne of Green Gables is the final novel to be discussed here. Although the protagonist is not an immigrant, her life is similar to that of a migrant today in that she must learn to adjust to a new environment. Before arriving at Green Gables, she lives an isolated life, works hard and is lonely. As an orphan, poverty is her lot.

At Green Gables, her trials stem more from her personality than the environment. She must learn to control her temper and moderate her stubbornness. The neighbors fail to see Anne's good qualities. It is not until she shows that she can be useful to Marilla that she can become a fully-fledged member of society. Up to this point, she must rely on her mental strength. By taking care of things and people, such as a three-year-old girl who has croup, she becomes increasingly empowered. She takes care of the child until the doctor comes and actually saves the child's life (Montgomery 203 – 204). Her stern adoptive mother Marilla, who initially did not want to take Anne into her house, finally acknowledges that her life would be dull without Anne, even admitting this to Anne herself (Montgomery 236). Marillas brother Matthew seldom says anything concerning Anne's behaviour because he is aware that Anne has difficulties in adjusting. But one day after Anne has done something odd again, he defends her manners: "Don't give up all your romance, Anne," he whispered shyly, " a little of it is a good thing – not to much, of course- but keep a little of it, Anne, keep a little of it" (Montgomery 227). Although Anne is not an immigrant in the normal sense of the word, she must nonetheless accommodate to her new environment and the ideas, values and expectations of her new family.

In all the novels discussed here, the child protagonist finds him-/herself in a new environment. The migration that takes place in the Viking age (Bylock) as well as in the first (Smucker) and second world wars (Pearson) gives rise to a struggle for survival, religious trials and a painful process of accommodation to the new environment. The protagonists also discover, however, that there are some positive effects of migration: people are helpful, and values and standards are more flexible in the new country. A direct parallel can be made here with the present. It is thus not surprising that Maj Bylock chooses to place present-day values into historical settings: it

is only the chronological period that changes, not the values themselves. This is also true of Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*.

All of the novels discussed here show the importance of adaptation to the new environment as part of the process of achieving empowerment. This entails a series of adventures in which the protagonist learns to become a leader and put others before him/herself. Like so many immigrants today, he or she is initially "the other" but ultimately becomes absorbed into the new society. Survival is contingent on being part of a context and contributing to society as a fully-fledged member. Bylock's, Pearson's, Smucker's and Montgomery's novels are sources of inspiration to females in particular — especially female immigrants — as they demonstrate that the process of adaptation is not dependent on historical setting but on inner strength. Children's fiction thus has an important part to play in helping young readers not only to accommodate to change but to appreciate the advantages of adopting a new country and its values — not least, the opportunity to create a new identity.

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