Empowering Transformations

Empowering Transformations: Mrs Pepperpot Revisited

Edited by

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FOREWORD

In June 2012 Hedmark University College in Norway arranged the conference *Alf Prøysen's Literature for Children*, which was the first in a series of seminars about the esteemed Norwegian author and artist Alf Prøysen in view of his 100th anniversary in 2014. Prøysen's literary output for children covers a range of genres (prose, poetry, drama) and media (print, radio, TV, music), yet his *Mrs Pepperpot* stories featured most frequently in the papers presented and discussions initiated. Clearly, it seemed as if this little old lady - loved by her creator, as well as a world-wide audience - triggered a scholarly interest and called for a study dedicated all to herself.

The 2012 conference was the starting point, but the book you hold in your hand went beyond it. The study covers both reworked conference papers and essays written in the wake of the event. A warm thank you to all scholars who have contributed to this volume, whether you graciously agreed to rework your paper to make it fit the scope of the book, or whether you eagerly took on the challenge to write your essay later on. Your co-operation has been invaluable as we have aspired to produce an up-to-date critical anthology of essays exploring Prøysen's Mrs Pepperpot from a range of theoretical perspectives.

Finishing a book is indeed a joint effort. We also wish to thank Bildmakarna Berg AB, Kari Mona Rud Prestø, and Elin Prøysen for generously granting us permission to reproduce some of Björn Berg's, Borghild Rud's, and Alf Prøysen's illustrations of Mrs Pepperpot. Our warm gratitude goes to Hedmark University College and the research group AKS for providing us with the financial means to proof read the manuscript; and to Pia Ahlbäck for undertaking the task with such skill and enthusiasm. The financial support from Hedmark University College that enabled us co-editors to get together in Turku during a critical stage in the editing process, was also much appreciated.

Last but not least, we wish to thank Alf Prøysen for giving us such rewarding and inspiring material to work with. As this book sees the light of day in conjunction with his 100th anniversary, we hope that it will ignite and fuel a future scholarly interest in his work. For a woman supposedly used to extraordinary events, Mrs Pepperpot's laconic remark that "Life is full of surprises, isn't it?" captures our feelings while working on this book. During this process, we have indeed been surprised by the many

shapes and meanings Prøysen's Mrs Pepperpot has taken and communicated over the years. And we sincerely hope that this book will surprise and inspire its readers to revisit and reread the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories.

Turku, Finland and Hamar, Norway, March 2014

Maria Lassén-Seger & Anne Skaret

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: MRS PEPPERPOT REVISITED

MARIA LASSÉN-SEGER AND ANNE SKARET

> THERE was once an old woman who went to bed at night as old women usually do, and in the morning she woke up as old women usually do. But on this particular morning she found herself shrunk to the size of a pepperpot, and old women don't usually do that. The odd thing was, her name really was Mrs. Pepperpot. (Prøysen 2011, 7)

In this fashion Norwegian author Alf Prøysen introduced his beloved and internationally renowned character in print in 1955. The first story, which was called "Little Old Mrs Pepperpot", set the mode for the numerous tales that were to follow: Mrs Pepperpot, who leads an ordinary life with her husband in the countryside, undergoes extraordinary transformations into the size of a pepperpot (or a teaspoon).[1] She usually shrinks when most inconvenient. Yet, always inventive and resourceful, she manages to get by in a stylish manner.

Prøysen's shape-shifting Mrs Pepperpot blends the ordinary with the extraordinary. The stories are set in a realistically depicted Scandinavian rural milieu from the 1950s and 1960s. When Mrs Pepperpot is her normal size she attends to her house-wifely chores at home and in the village, but when she shrinks she goes off on remarkable adventures often instigated by her ability to communicate with animals when in miniature form. Despite her local and everyday roots, she has enjoyed wide international appeal and travelled across national and cultural borders. So far, Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* stories have been translated into twenty-three languages. In England Mrs Pepperpot was an instant success likened to Lewis Carroll's

[1] Mrs Pepperpot's original name in Norwegian and Swedish literally translates as Mrs Teaspoon.

Alice and in Japan she starred in an anime television series called *Spoon Oba-san* (1983-1984).

Alf Prøysen and Mrs Pepperpot

Prøysen's chief legacy is his *Mrs Pepperpot* stories. But despite the old lady's worldwide success, her creator is far less known outside Scandinavia. It may therefore come as a surprise that Prøysen, in his home country, was a multi-talented mega-celebrity of his time. Alf Prøysen (born Olafsen 1914-1970) was not only a respected author for both adults and children; he was also a popular and famous artist who wrote and performed his own music. He published his texts in magazines and books, he translated children's literature, and he performed live on stage, hosted radio shows and appeared on television.

Prøysen's road to success was, however, hard-won. Born as the son of crofters in the rural inland of Norway in the county of Hedmark, he grew up under poor conditions. As a boy and a young man he dreamt of a life beyond hard physical labour. First and foremost he wanted to be a painter. His dreams were nurtured by his family's extraordinary interest in literature and music, yet realising such dreams when born at the bottom of the social ladder with little access to education in general and art education in particular, is another matter. Prøysen's first adult trade was, in fact, the lowliest position possible. He was in charge of feeding the pigs. Still, he continued to draw and write in his free time and eventually managed to get his poems and short stories published in different magazines.[2] He also wrote and performed material for local, popular revue shows. Doggedly writing for several long and troublesome years, he slowly wrote his way out of his restricted social position. Prøysen's national breakthrough finally came at the end of the 1940s with his bestselling short stories and song collections for both children and adults. From then onwards, he was a beloved celebrity and revered artist until his premature death of illness in 1970, only 56 years old. (Prøysen 1989; Røsbak 1992; Birkeland, Risa, and Vold 2005)

Prøysen's personal background affected his work profoundly. Most of his texts are set in his childhood environment and his experiences of growing up as a crofter's son are mirrored in his predilection for communicating the underdog's perspective. Whether in song lyrics or in prose writings for children or adults, Prøysen always sides with the small,

[2] His first poem in print was "Red geranium" ("Røde geranier", *our translation*), published in the Norwegian magazine *Kooperatøren* in 1938.

weak and underprivileged, as does his Mrs Pepperpot (Ørjasæter 1997; Birkeland, Risa, and Vold 2005).

From the very beginning, Mrs Pepperpot was a multi-media phenomenon crossing the border between Norway and Sweden. Prøysen wrote his first *Mrs Pepperpot* story in 1955 for a writing contest arranged by the Swedish publisher Rabén & Sjögren. The story did not win the competition, but, as a result, Mrs Pepperpot had seen the light of day and within the same year Prøysen presented his feisty heroine in Norway. Here, Mrs Pepperpot appeared first on the radio show *The Children's Hour* (*Barnetimen for de minste, our translation*), which Prøysen hosted and where he also included musical elements;[3] and, shortly after, in the monthly magazine *Kooperatøren*, where the stories were accompanied by his own illustrations. A year later, in 1956, the first collection of *Mrs Pepperpot* stories was published in Sweden,[4] and, a year after that in 1957, the first Norwegian story collection was published, with more to follow. The Swedish and Norwegian book editions featured two different illustrators, Björn Berg and Borghild Rud respectively. When the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories were translated, Berg's illustrations accompanied them abroad, presumably since Rabén & Sjögren owned the foreign rights (Prøysen 1989, 76).

Prøysen continued to write stories about Mrs Pepperpot until his death in 1970. Providing an exhaustive over-view of this rich material is challenging since it is scattered over books and magazines in Sweden and Norway that do not overlap. Firstly, many of the Swedish *Mrs Pepperpot* stories have never appeared in Norwegian and although Norwegian collections keep introducing new stories, there are most likely variants unknown to the Norwegian readership to be discovered out there. Secondly, Prøysen presented Mrs Pepperpot in different media that did overlap. For instance, he might tell one story first on the radio, then present it in written form in a magazine, then publish it in Swedish and Norwegian book editions, and then in yet another magazine. When retelling a story for a new medium, he seldom simply copied it but used the opportunity to make changes in the text and in the illustrations.

[3] The radio show featured the famous theme song "If I become as small as a pepperpot" ("Blir je lita som ei teskje", *our translation*).

[4] Mrs Pepperpot's debut in Sweden results, in part, from the encouragement of Prøysen's Swedish friend and co-worker Ulf Peder Olrog, who translated the stories together with his wife Inga (Prøysen 1989, 76), and, in part, from the endorsement of editors at Rabén & Sjögren, including Astrid Lindgren, who had read and liked the story he submitted to the writing contest. But it has also been suggested that Prøysen, who was very cautious about his Norwegian audience, wanted to try the books out on a different market first (Barra and Sandene 1977, 5).

Sometimes these changes were necessary in order to adapt the story for a new medium, but Prøysen constantly reworked and refined his stories, which surely has contributed to their success and durability. When dealing with Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* stories, it is thus crucial to understand that the material consists of a manifold textual landscape covering a plethora of editions, media, languages, and illustrations. The stories are, in fact, as unfixed as their shape-shifting protagonist.

Prøysen took writing for children very seriously. In fact, he considered children to be his most challenging and demanding audience. His daughter Elin Prøysen (1989, 55, *our translation*) declares:

> He enjoyed writing for children and resented those who said "that's easy!" "On the contrary," my father said. "It's far more difficult to write for children than for adults, because you cannot fool children. They are not so polite that they will applaud anything. If they are bored, they will simply stop listening."

In an unsigned interview in the magazine *Illustrert* (nr. 51 1968), Prøysen reveals that of all his literary characters, Mrs Pepperpot was the one dearest to him. Much energy was spent on developing the stories and the character. He even wrote a story in which he explains how she came to life.[5] Initially, Prøysen wanted to write a fairy tale, but one about

> an ordinary human being, who looked a little bit like me and the children who are going to read the fairy tale [...]. Maybe I should write about an old lady who is somewhat kind and somewhat naughty, somewhat happy and somewhat sad? An old lady who wouldn't give up and sit down and cry if the fairy tale didn't follow the old fairy tale pattern? Yes! That I wanted to do. (Prøysen 2008, 134, *our translation*)

Prøysen set out to make his protagonist humane and complex. This volume, which introduces new critical readings of the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories, affirms that he succeeded beyond his wildest imagination.

Mrs Pepperpot and literary criticism

In 2014, Norway celebrates Prøysen's 100th anniversary. His plucky Mrs Pepperpot has, by then, fascinated readers world-wide for nearly sixty

[5] The story was originally published in a Swedish children's magazine called *Lyckoslanten* (nr. 4 1967) as a result of the huge popularity of the televised Swedish Advent Calendar about Mrs Pepperpot, which had been launched the same year.

years and the stories about her have earned their status as children's literature classics. Still, Prøysen's stories have received surprisingly little critical attention. Perhaps their popularity has overshadowed their literary merits. Perhaps Prøysen's unprejudiced attitude towards different and, at the time, new media has contributed to his work being overlooked by serious criticism. Certainly, his way of reworking his texts for different media has made it difficult to take stock of his *Mrs Pepperpot* oeuvre and study it with traditional approaches.

This volume aims to fill that long over-due critical gap by scrutinising Prøysen's classic shape-shifting heroine from a range of topical and theoretical perspectives, such as cognitive literary theory, gender and queer theory, eco-criticism, techno-criticism and intermediality, in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of Mrs Pepperpot's international success. The book begins with three essays that explore the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories in terms of ethical impact, power and gender. Firstly, Maria Nikolajeva reads Prøysen's stories through the lens of cognitive literary theory in order to uncover socially vital dimensions, such as what kind of knowledge about the physical world, society, human beings and ethics they offer to their young readers. In the second essay, Maria Lassén-Seger explores the stories' success via the motif of metamorphosis. Mrs Pepperpot's complex role as a shape-shifting literary minikin is unravelled in relation to tradition and her special powers are identified as her ability to act inappropriately and subversively in terms of the given social norms for her gender and age while in miniature form. The third essay, written by Mia Österlund, explores gender issues further by identifying queer moments in the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories. Approaching these seemingly traditional narratives from the point of view of queer theory, this essay shows how Prøysen's stories, in fact, renegotiate and rewrite generation, species and gender.

The second part of this volume enquires into Mrs Pepperpot's relations to nature, animals and technology. Also, Prøysen's writing for adults is addressed here in order to provide a fuller understanding of his authorial impact. Firstly, Svein Slettan reads Mrs Pepperpot's intimate relations with and respectful attitude towards animals and nature from an eco-critical point of view. The essay reveals how Prøysen's stories communicate ecological consciousness through Mrs Pepperpot's unsentimental vitality which connects her with every aspect of organic life. The following essay by Hans Kristian Rustad studies Mrs Pepperpot's encounters with modern machine technology from a literary techno-critical perspective. Mr and Mrs Pepperpot's radically different approaches to their new car are pitted against each other and the car is revealed as the

narrative vehicle of the story, as well as an arena in which the spouses interact and define their relationship. Finally, the third essay by Bjørn Ivar Fyksen demonstrates how the main themes in Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* stories - i.e. unequal power relations, inverted hierarchies and the underdog's perspective - resonate also in his writing for adults.

The volume ends with a section that brings together four essays that employ intermedial approaches in order to scrutinise the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories as multi-media phenomena that have been richly illustrated, as well as successfully transmediated into other forms of art and media. The first essay, written by Maria Lassén-Seger and Anne Skaret, argues the inseparable connection between illustration and literary characterisation when comparing the two, very different, iconic images of Prøysen's heroine by Norwegian Borghild Rud and Swedish Björn Berg. The second essay - by Anne Skaret - draws on media theory to unpick the intermedial relationship between Prøysen's stories, Rud's illustrations and Fritz Røed's "Mrs Pepperpot" sculpture; whereas the third essay by Björn Sundmark, with the help of an ethnographic and media studies-approach, investigates how Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* stories were remediated for Swedish television and thereby affected and reinstated a long-lived Advent Calendar tradition. The fourth and final essay deals with a topic indispensable to a volume about Mrs Pepperpot addressed to an international readership; that is, the circumstances surrounding her long-standing popularity outside the Nordic countries. Whereas the previous texts high-light thematic, ideological and ethical reasons for her popularity, this essay by Charlotte Berry draws on archival material in order to map Mrs Pepperpot's success in Britain.

In this manner, we wish to paint a many-fold portrait of Alf Prøysen and his long-lived and cherished character Mrs Pepperpot. To read and present the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories in dialogue with recent theorising has proved an exciting and rewarding endeavour. Undoubtedly, the subject is not yet exhausted and we hope that this volume will ignite a renewed scholarly interest in Prøysen's long-lived stories. It is our firm belief that not only will they continue to entertain a broad international readership, but they will and should also attract new scholarly readings, which will keep confirming the stories' status as true classics.

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PART I:

POWER, ETHICAL IMPACT AND GENDER

CHAPTER TWO

THE WISDOM OF OLD MRS PEPPERPOT: A COGNITIVE APPROACH

MARIA NIKOLAJEVA

Can readers learn anything from Prøysen's books about Old Mrs Pepperpot? Can readers learn anything from children's books in general? Throughout history, children's literature has been used as an educational implement, yet there is little research about how exactly this transmission of knowledge happens. Even if fiction can offer factual knowledge, depict human relationships and propagate opinions and beliefs, this is not the primary purpose of fiction (Lamarque 2007; Green 2010). Does children's literature have a different purpose from general literature when the intended audience is on a different cognitive level than the author? Can children's authors use fictional texts to convey knowledge? And if so, what kind of knowledge about the actual world, society, and human beings do Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* books convey, deliberately or subconsciously? These are questions inspired by cognitive literary criticism, which is a cross-disciplinary direction of inquiry that combines literary and cognitive theories to explore readers' cognitive and affective engagement with fiction (Stockwell 2002; Zunshine 2006; Keen 2007; Vermeule 2010; Hogan 2011).

Studies of children's literature about animals, toys, miniature people and size-related metamorphoses point out that these motifs are attractive for readers as well as writers (Stewart 1984; Kuznets 1994; Coslett 2006). For young readers, miniature characters create an encouraging sense of equality or even superiority. For the purpose of this essay, the prominent device of shifted perspective is of greater interest. What kind of worldview do stories of miniature people convey and how are these texts constructed to prompt a salient interpretation of this distorted world?

Knowledge of the physical world

The books about Mrs Pepperpot ask readers to dismiss their factual knowledge and trust the secondary belief, that is, the fictional contract between the writer and the reader stating that, within the story's frame, certain rules and conditions are true. This is a contingency proposition, reminiscent of that between oral storytellers and their audience: while listening to a fairy tale we must believe that wizards, dragons and flying carpets exist. Unless we accept this temporary contract, the story is pointless. The narrative voice of the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories does not intend to make readers believe that people can shrink and then grow back to their normal size. Neither does it claim that animals can talk. Adversaries of imaginative literature for children may say that children lack factual knowledge to distinguish the possible or contingent world from the actual world. Ostensibly, children do not know that people cannot shrink and that animals cannot talk. Conversely, child psychologists say that children have an innate capacity for imaginative play, and that inability to distinguish between imagination and reality - or shall we rather say ability *not* to distinguish between imagination and reality - is a valuable quality in children's cognitive and emotional development. The *Mrs Pepperpot* books expect readers to be able to enter a fictional contract, that is, to agree with the text that within the fictional world people can shrink and animals can talk, even though this is unlikely in the actual world. Exactly at what age such ability appears is hard to assess. Once again, children lack empirical knowledge of shrinking people and talking animals, but they also lack first-hand experience of a wide range of events in the books that expert readers perceive as credible. Children outside Norway lack the experience of a typical Norwegian landscape, of Nordic seasons, Midsummer bonfires or moose hunts. Outside Scandinavia (and possibly Canada), moose are frequently perceived as half-mythical creatures. If there are countries where the sun does not set, why would people not shrink? Contemporary Western young readers lack the experience of everyday events and actions in the *Mrs Pepperpot* books that belong to the past, such as fetching water from a well. Urban children who have never seen a fox, an ermine, a wagtail, or even a mouse perhaps think that these animals can talk. And if animals can talk, why would people not shrink? On closer consideration, the fictional world of Mrs Pepperpot is more complex than the contingency of phenomena of which expert readers have no direct experience. How can this text convey any knowledge of the actual world to young readers without reference frames?

From Rousseau to the radical pedagogues of the mid-twentieth century, children's stories that did not convey a credible portrayal of the actual world were considered harmful for children. Fairy tales have survived these attacks. The reason, or at least one of the reasons, must be that fairy tales also convey a credible picture of the actual world, with other means than realism. A strict pedagogue might claim that in terms of factual knowledge the *Mrs Pepperpot* books are worthless since there are no credible facts to learn from them. This may be true if we only consider direct factual knowledge, but there is still aesthetic knowledge that can be just as valuable. Prøysen's stories are neither more nor less reliable than textbooks about Norway's geography, history, vegetation and fauna, social institutions and human relationships. However, they employ aesthetic means where textbooks normally do not. Figurative language of fiction allows ambiguity. Textbooks should preferably not be ambiguous. However, cognitive criticism emphasises that figurative language precedes everyday language; that we think in metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibbs 1994; Turner 1996). If so, the *Mrs Pepperpot* books may be a better source of knowledge about at least some aspects of the Norwegian physical and social world than textbooks used in schools.

The possible world of Prøysen's stories is similar to the actual world, except that people can shrink and animals can talk. This world is a linguistic construction and cannot be verified, or rather falsified, as Karl Popper (2005) would suggest experimentally. The proposition: "Once upon a time there was an old woman who occasionally became as small as a pepperpot", is neither true nor false. The sender and the addressee make a fictional pact. For the duration of the story, this proposition will be perceived as true. The first story starts as follows:

> There was once an old woman who went to bed at night as old women usually do, and in the morning she woke up as old women usually do. But on this particular morning she found herself shrunk to the size of a pepperpot, and old women don't usually do that. (Prøysen 2011, 7)

This is a clever way to address novice readers without the indispensable knowledge of old women's habits. The text alerts readers to infer that there are ordinary and extraordinary events in possible worlds, and that in this particular possible world ordinary events coexist with extraordinary ones. To literally change perspective and observe the world from below is not merely a game with dimensions. It is also an issue within the philosophy of knowledge. What is the perceptible world and how can we understand it? Can we trust our senses or are there phenomena beyond our

immediate perception? Would not the world look different contingent on who is looking?

Representing the world through a distorted mirror is a well-known aesthetic device that presupposes that we can distinguish between the actual world and its artistic representation. Distortion points at fictionality, and readers acquire a sense of confidence when they can distinguish between fact and fiction. Contemplating the contingent world of Prøysen's stories, readers test their knowledge of both the actual, perceptible world and the possible worlds of their previous reading. Children know that you become wet when you fall into water or that you get hungry when you do not eat. They have no experience of shrinking people and talking animals from the actual world, but from a wide range of fictional stories: books, films and games. Some children's texts claim that shrinking people and talking animals do not exist. For instance, Mrs Pepperpot's adventures could be explained as dreams or pretence play. Instead, the text allows readers to explore, ponder, and draw conclusions. The books encourage cognitive activity. Sooner or later readers will discover that animals do not talk (at least not a human language). The next cognitive, or rather metacognitive, step is to ask why the text insists that animals can talk.

Knowledge of the genre

A possible world is a linguistic and aesthetic construction. It is inevitably less complete, yet more organised and coherent than the actual world. The setting of the *Mrs Pepperpot* books is limited and promptly delineated, like the physical world often is for young children, or at least used to be. Mrs Pepperpot's home is the centre of the universe, surrounded by North Farm, East Farm, South Farm and West Farm, which is an ingenious way of introducing basic geographical notions; with the store and post office (social institutions) farther away and nature all around. This structured, consistent, relatively black-and-white and deliberately exaggerated world can potentially become a more reliable source of knowledge than the unstructured and ambiguous actual world.

The first *Mrs Pepperpot* book opens with a familiar fairy tale formula: "Once there was..." which presupposes intertextual competence; the reader must be able to recognise the wording that signals a fairy tale. Yet her world is not that of a fairy tale and not even that of portal fantasy. She never leaves her own fictional world which is very similar to the actual world. Except for one detail. Now and then, she shrinks without any obvious reason, and when she shrinks, and only then, is she able to talk to animals. This tiny sliver of the distorting mirror makes the possible world

different and therefore exciting. Also, through this minimal difference readers can indeed learn something about the actual world.

The physical world is not the only component of the possible world in Prøysen's books, even though it is the easiest to observe. The books also reflect society, and various artistic devices are used to emphasise social structures and institutions. One may not immediately think of these stories as socialisation implements, but, paradoxically, this is exactly what gives them strong socialisation value. They are entertaining, action-oriented, with short, quickly paced episodes that seemingly do not afford any deep portrayal of society. Yet I would claim that they contain some of the most candid and credible social portrayals within children's literature. Fiction can represent society through various modes, and children's writers, consciously or unconsciously, represent society in a manner they believe is beneficiary for children to partake of. What do the *Mrs Pepperpot* books tell their readers about society, social norms, structures and practices? And further, do they comply with the conventions of children's literature or do they break, or at least question, them?

If conventional children's fiction is utopian by nature, as I have argued in my previous research (Nikolajeva 2000), and if it confirms adult normativity (Nikolajeva 2010a), Prøysen's stories are in every respect different. The protagonist is an adult. One might argue that she is an adult that "represents" a child, just as talking animals frequently represent children in children's fiction. But Mrs Pepperpot does not represent a child. She is neither naive nor innocent as a conventional fictional child is; she lives in a society that has laws and rules from which she is not exempt - unlike, for instance, Pippi Longstocking. She knows the value of money; she has attended school and, as opposed to Pippi, knows her multiplication tables; she has a husband and grown-up children; in other words, she has both adult experiences and responsibilities. Contrary to the typical children's book protagonist, she does not have to be socialised since she is already a fully recognised and respected member of society. Unlike Pippi, she does not have to question the adult world since she herself represents it. In which case, how can she, with her adult concerns, be of any interest at all for young readers, and what does she have to share with young readers that would be relevant to them? This is where the shrinking comes in.

Shrinking, as any metamorphosis, is a carnivalesque device, which presupposes that the empowerment is temporary. Most children's fiction confirms adult norms. Seemingly, the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories do the same. But only seemingly. Here it is not a child who is empowered through carnivalesque metamorphosis. On the contrary, it is an adult who is

disempowered and rendered even more helpless than those disempowered in the actual world: children and animals. Suddenly the weak and the oppressed become the norm. As in any carnivalesque narrative, order is restored at the end of every episode. In conventional children's fiction such restoration of order implies either that the fictional children are once again disempowered or, at best, that they have come into possession of knowledge and experience that will assist them in coping with the society they live in, a society with adult norms which children must learn to abide by. But Mrs Pepperpot already has this knowledge and experience. She handles carnivalesque situations precisely by virtue of her adult social skills. Is it then the young reader who learns the lesson? And what is the lesson?

Mrs Pepperpot has neither parents who tell her when to go to bed; nor is she the archetypal orphan of children's fiction. She has a husband, who is occasionally a bit silly, but their marriage is warm and harmonious, even though the gender roles are conventional. Glimpses of other families are also positive. It is, however, not an idyllic world. One can wonder why Mrs Pepperpot's children never make an appearance or why she has no grandchildren. This omission is in the first hand dictated by the plot. But the absence of child/parent conflict is not accidental. Children are conveniently removed, just as parents are usually removed in conventional children's fiction. The portrayal of family is radically different from the convention, which alerts readers' attention.

School and education are irrelevant to an adult character, but there are some episodes in the *Mrs Pepperpot* books that feature school and the local teacher. These episodes are reminiscent of several incidents in *Pippi Longstocking*, albeit less rebellious since school as a social institution is never questioned. In Prøysen's possible world, there are laws and rules; there are banks and councils; Mrs Pepperpot's husband must work hard to earn money, and it is repeatedly hinted that Mrs Pepperpot is careless with money. The social world is thus far from utopian. Apart from brief memories of sibling squabbles, there are no nostalgic childhood memories and no idealisation of the children Mrs Pepperpot befriends. At the same time, the adult world is not condemned as exceptionally cruel, unjust or mindless; or represented as a lost paradise. An adult protagonist is a device for defamiliarisation, which, as cognitive criticism points out, stimulates brain activity.

Knowledge of other people

What do the *Mrs Pepperpot* books tell us about human nature? They are not associated with any profound representation of interiority. On the contrary, they match the conventional definition of children's literature as predominantly action-oriented. Each story is built around external events and focuses on solving a concrete problem. It would seem that there is no room for inner life. Naturally Mrs Pepperpot thinks and occasionally talks to herself when she tries to get out of unexpected circumstances, but these thoughts are in the first place plot engines.

However, from a cognitive viewpoint, an opaque character, whose thoughts we cannot access, is particularly interesting. In real life we cannot partake of other people's thoughts and feelings, but literature offers us a unique possibility of training our mind-reading skills. Mind-reading, or theory of mind, is a concept within cognitive psychology that refers to our capacity to understand other people's thoughts and feelings. In real life we ascribe other people mental states based on their actions, reactions, facial expressions, body language and other external signals. Fiction allows us to employ mind-reading without running the risk of misunderstanding. For young readers, mind-reading through fiction is extremely valuable for their cognitive and emotional development (cf. e.g. Kidd and Castano 2013). Since the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories face young readers with situations for which they have no real-life experience, they must use their attention, imagination and memory, all essential cognitive skills. For instance, readers notice at once that Mrs Pepperpot is not surprised when she shrinks, but makes the best of it. Readers are prompted to imagine how it feels to wake up in the morning and have shrunk to the size of a pepperpot. They can accept it without reservations, just as they accept that a frog can turn into a prince. Fairy tale characters are not expected to have feelings; their actions are not governed by feelings, but by the plot.

Mrs Pepperpot, however, is not an ordinary fairy tale character. With her, readers are encouraged to imagine how she feels when she wakes up. Naturally, readers are encouraged to read further, in order to find out how she will cope with her chores. Yet there is room to ponder: how does it feel to find oneself in a situation where you have totally lost control? The closest parallel in fiction is Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), where the protagonist also finds herself in a world where other characters and objects are larger and stronger. Still, there is a decisive difference. Alice is a child who gradually becomes even more disempowered in a world where all rules are abolished. Mrs Pepperpot knows the rules and is

allowed to keep her adult wisdom. As a result, readers feel empathy for Mrs Pepperpot, but are also effectively distanced from her. This is an ingenious narrative device. Empathy can only be employed if our mind does not coincide with someone else's. Mrs Pepperpot's adult status and adult mind precludes immersive identification, as does the fact that readers have no experience of shrinking. Immersive identification implies life-to-text projection, or judging characters on the premise of "just-like-me", which is a highly immature, solipsistic approach to the world and to other people (Nikolajeva 2010b). As educators we want children to develop the ability to understand other people's thoughts and feelings without necessarily sharing them. As opposed to immersive identification, empathy is a valuable social skill. Prøysen's *Mrs Pepperpot* stories question identification compulsion and therefore allow young readers freedom to think independently.

Readers of the *Mrs Pepperpot* books are given very little guidance in mind-reading as compared to conventional children's literature where an omniscient narrative voice usually provides helpful comments. The text might mention that Mrs Pepperpot is glad or angry, but frequently readers are expected to draw their own conclusions from the protagonist's actions. Does she feel guilty when she has accused innocent mice of stealing? It is never spelled out, but most readers are likely to be familiar with some form of guilt. Most readers have also experienced joy, distress, fear or anger - basic emotions, as well as more complex social emotions, including love and guilt. Experimental cognitive research has shown that when we read about emotions, our brains react in the same way as if we really experience them (cf. e.g. Vermeule 2010). This means that we indeed share Mrs Pepperpot's emotions, simple as well as complex, and the more the text asks readers to do this, the better emotional competence readers acquire.

The books also offer training in higher-order mind-reading, of the kind: "A thinks that B thinks that A thinks..." With few exceptions, the stories are focalised through the title character. Readers see what she sees and experience what she experiences. But like most human beings, Mrs Pepperpot does not live in isolation. She must interact with other people, as well as with animals, to achieve her goals. She must read others' minds. Because of focalisation, readers share this process, rather than, as with an omniscient perspective, have access to other minds than the protagonist's. For instance, Mrs Pepperpot believes that the school teacher has been purposefully mean toward the little girl, while the teacher in fact feels bad and buys fruit as a reconciliation gift. Together with Mrs Pepperpot,

readers learn a lesson: do not judge other people too quickly and merely on the basis of their actions.

It would of course be going too far to claim that the *Mrs Pepperpot* books are profound psychological stories that offer readers insight into a rich and varied interiority. The books are doubtless action-oriented, but actions do not eclipse human traits that we recognise from real life as well as from previous reading. We could also investigate what kind of ethical knowledge the stories offer, explicitly or implicitly, not least the ecological ethics where Prøysen was well ahead of his time. We could further examine the existential knowledge of determinism and free will, tangibly present through Mrs Pepperpot's transformations: what is the purpose of her shrinking, apart from the humorous effect? Is there any hidden power behind it? Not least, I would make a case for the stories' ability to convey indispensable aesthetic knowledge, that is, an understanding of how stories work.

What are the gains?

A cognitive approach to the *Mrs Pepperpot* stories has opened the dimensions of the text that are not easy to reach through other analytical tools. The most important aspect is perhaps the issue of reading for learning as opposed to reading for pleasure, and I have shown that a humorous, action-oriented text can nevertheless convey valuable knowledge of the world, of society and of other people. The metamorphosis device creates defamiliarisation which stimulates readers' cognitive activity and can, arguably, be more efficient in creating a reliable portrait of reality than straightforward realism. Typically, with a text such as *Mrs Pepperpot* we do not reflect on the knowledge we are acquiring, since this process happens automatically and is eclipsed by external events we engage with. Yet the stories offer, as I have shown, a wide range of information that readers may relate to from life experience or from previous reading experience. "Simple" as they are, the stories contain grains of wisdom, which is ultimately why we read fiction.

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