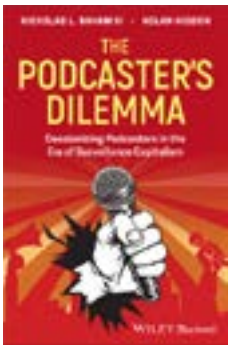
Book Reviews

Editor: Maarit Jaakkola



Nicholas L. Baham III & Nolan Higdon

The Podcaster's Dilemma: Decolonizing Podcasters in the Era of Surveillance Capitalism

Wiley Blackwell, 2022, 152 pp.

Written against the backdrop of a pandemic and a populistic Trump era, *The Podcaster's Dilemma* investigates how podcasting is used for decolonisation (to counter-narrate imperialistic discourses), while simultaneously being constrained by the big tech platforms the medium relies upon to exist.

Baham and Higdon, who are podcasters themselves, understand podcasting narrowly as a digital extension of rebel community radio and the opposite of corporate legacy media. They furthermore argue that podcasting – mainly due to its lack of editors, time limits, and governmental regulations (p. 139) – has the potential "to shape public opinion and form counter-publics of resistance because, just like revolutionary radio, it transforms passive listeners into active community members" (p. 17). In that way, the authors innovatively use the analogy between rebel revolutionary radio and podcasting as a theoretical framework for addressing how podcasting – specifically so-called decolonising podcasting – benefits marginalised and suppressed groups.

Decolonising podcasts refer to a specific type of podcasts which "interrogate, critique and offer counter-narratives to colonial mentalities" (p. 8); in other words, these podcasts seek decolonisation from structures created by imperialism. Through pages-long tran-

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scriptions of podcast episodes – and subsequent analyses hereof – Baham and Higdon investigate how podcasters use certain formal elements (monologue, conversations, personal stories, serialised storytelling, and humour) to deconstruct dominant cultures and ideologies regarding race, white supremacy, gender, sexuality, class, labour, and neoliberalism. The podcast medium, they conclude, is effective for creating "a way to engage and connect with audiences at a more intimate and *human* level" (p. 30).

The book's analyses are based on a survey of over one hundred podcasts, which were identified as decolonising through a keyword search on Apple Podcasts and other major podcast archives. Then, the authors proceed with an analysis of the profiles of the podcasters and how these engage in decolonising processes. The book is structured accordingly: After presenting the profiles of the decolonising podcasters, the authors show how these podcasters critique, interrogate, and create counter-narratives to dominant cultural assumptions – and, in turn, how podcasters encourage community activism and provide practical guidance for protest.

Only at the very end does the book discuss the "podcaster's dilemma": "that podcasters resist dominant ideologies, but these are the very ideologies that control and shape many of the tools and platforms they rely upon for producing and disseminating the media" (p. 9). Consequently, podcasters depend on the powerful, neoliberal tech platforms whose primary mechanism is data surveillance. At the same time, "the increased pressure from government and legacy media for big tech to censor problematic content has generated a conflation with content that is alternative to dominant media narratives" (p. 138) – and this, of course, increasingly concerns podcasting, being one of the least-censored media to date. In continuation, Baham and Higdon stress that the popularisation of the podcast medium will also affect its decolonising potential: Decolonising podcasters are being oppressed or forced away as podcast platforms (and their algorithm-based hit lists) become crowded with celebrities and corporate news media.

An interesting argument of the book relates to the aforementioned profiling of the podcasters. Most decolonising podcasters have backgrounds in journalism, media production, educational institutions, or academic scholarship – in fact, much like English-speaking podcasters ten years ago (Markman, 2011) – and for that reason, they enjoy privileges unavailable to people with other backgrounds. This might also be the reason why the authors find an absence of podcasters criticising ableism and ableist ideologies, which is in stark contrast with the vast and intersectional range of critiques of, for example, racism, sexism, and patriarchy. Podcasters are generally abled, educated, full-time working, middle-class – and thus, in this regard, privileged – people.

The methodology of the book is presented somewhat unclearly; it would, for instance, have been beneficial to have a more detailed, thorough presentation of how the various podcasts and episodes were sampled and analysed. But more importantly, as the authors investigate more than a hundred podcasts (which surely provide them with a solid quantitative understanding of their research object), there is a lack of in-depth explorations in the book. Fewer, more carefully selected cases would have provided space and time for this. Without detailed discussions, the book's central argument – that podcasters produce counter-narratives to dominant media discourses for the benefit of marginalised and suppressed social groups – is presented repeatedly throughout the book but without analytical differentiation. Focusing on fewer podcast cases would also have provided space for drawing attention to the aural specificities of sound and voice (e.g.,

tone, emotional register, dialect, rhythm, pauses), which constitute a significant part of the podcast medium (see, e.g., McHugh, 2012; Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

In addition to these methodological concerns, the definition of the podcast medium as a digital extension of rebel community radio and the opposite of corporate legacy media does not seem to apply to all the cases in the book. According to the authors, podcasts are per se rebellious and independent. While this might be true – and the common conception two decades ago – podcasting is increasingly adopted by corporate media. Several of the analysed podcasts are produced by corporate media such as Spotify, *Slate Magazine*, *The New York Times*, Earwolf, and NPR, whose podcast production cannot be deemed rebellious and independent. This ontological lack of clarity could stem from a rather superficial literature review of podcast studies. Engaging more with academic podcast research would, in addition, have provided the authors with new and enriching perspectives on their specific research interest. For example, the authors argue that "the privilege many podcast hosts enjoy in terms of education and employment could be a decisive factor in their seemingly waning interest in indigeneity and empire" (p. 134). However, a different podcast study (Donison, 2021) shows that Indigenous people do in fact use podcasting to speak about and disseminate decolonisation. Finally, I would have appreciated the authors' elaborated thoughts on "the podcaster's dilemma". This urgent issue – *and* the title of the book – is unfolded only on the very last pages. In combination with some repetitive language, sentences, and passages, the book seems a bit rushed and under-edited.

Despite these points of critique, I enjoyed the book's raw and open approach to its podcast material. And even though it makes no references to Nordic podcast cases or studies, I believe that its focus is indeed relevant to Nordic scholars. The book reminds us that we, as Nordic scholars, should pay more attention to today's human implications of the Nordic countries' massive colonisation (past and current), but in particular how underground media are used to counter-narrate imperialistic discourses in times of populism.

Freja Sørine Adler Berg
Research assistant, PhD
Department of Communication
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

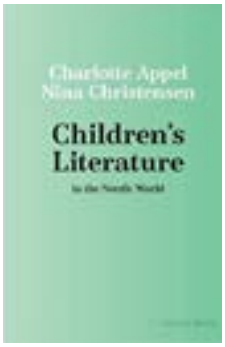
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Nina Christensen & Charlotte Appel

Children's Literature in the Nordic World

Aarhus University Press; The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021, 116 pp.

Children's Literature in the Nordic World is an ambitious book that aims to give an account of children's literature in the Nordic countries (referring mainly to Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Swedish-speaking parts of Finland) from 1750–2020. More specifically, the authors want to focus on children's literary *practices* and "trace the variety of texts, genres, and media encountered by different children; what they did with their books; how books were linked to other media; and how children and adults interacted in relation to literature and education" (p. 7). As such, Christensen and Appel's book provides a timely and relevant entry point, compilation, and compression of current historical knowledge of the intersections of childhood and literature in the Nordics.

That the book is a much-needed and welcome contribution to the field is apparent from the beginning, when the authors draw up the contemporary landscape of children's literature histories from the Nordic countries (p. 7). Of the literature histories mentioned, only one attempts to take on more than one of the Nordic countries at a time, namely Boel Westin's short encyclopaedia article from 2004 (Westin, 2004). And only two references are available in English: the article by Westin and a book chapter by Päivi Heikkilä-Halttunnen (2012) on children's literature in Finland.

What sets Christensen and Appel's book apart from other Nordic histories of children's literature, besides the publication language, is the broad geographical and contextual scope, covering general social and cultural tendencies across the Nordic region. In this book, it is the changing Nordic culture and political climate which dictate the form, rather than literary genres, individual authors, or publications. This broad scope arises from the authors' combination of "approaches from literary history, book history, cultural history, and childhood studies" (p. 105). As such, the book can be seen as complementing other recent publications on Nordic childhoods and media published in English, such as Helle Strandgaard Jensen's *From Superman to Social Realism: Children's Media and Scandinavian Childhood* (2017) and the anthology *Nordic Childhoods 1700-1960: From Folk Beliefs to Pippi Longstocking* (Aasgaard et al., 2017). Christensen and Appel's social-historical account could even be considered relevant background reading for these kinds of publications.

The book is structured chronologically, with Chapters 2–6 covering one historical period each and with chapter titles that succinctly delineate the time scope and main

thread running through the respective chapter. For example, Chapter 2, "Educating young hearts and minds, 1750–1820", traces the emergence and development of early children's literature and the relation between literature, education (not least religious education), and *Bildung* of the child (and additionally, the influence of enlightenment and romantic ideals on perceptions of childhood); and Chapter three, "The child as a future patriotic citizen, 1820–1900", looks at the changing borders of the Nordic countries in this period and how new ideas of nationhood and social and political structures influenced the upbringing and media use of children (in addition to the growing influence of the Romantic movements, and new genres and media arising); and so on.

The first four historical chapters (2–5) are structured similarly. First, the chapter is introduced by summarising a few key aspects of the period covered, and then typical reading habits, or reading *practices* (p. 8), are exemplified through a case study of two or three (Danish) child readers of different gender and from different social classes. Finally, each chapter contains three–five sections presenting a brief overview of the relevant social, cultural, and political context of the period, focusing on developments in educational policies, public institutions (such as schools and libraries), conceptions of childhood, social norms and values, the forms and content of literature produced for, read by, or produced by children, and finally the interactions between literature (including novels, poems, picture books, audiobooks, and interactive digital books) and other media forms (e.g., oral literary culture, drama, journals and magazines, comic books, games, and films). In the final historical chapter, "Autonomous children in a global world after 2000" (Chapter 6), the use of specific case studies is dropped in favour of a more general account of the importance of globalisation and digitalisation in contemporary children's media use. All in all, this structure makes for a very pedagogical account.

The authors successfully track general tendencies across the Nordic countries, such as the shifting balance in children's literature between "education, entertainment, and aesthetic experience" (p. 99) (which is discussed throughout in terms of literary quality and the approaches taken to illustrations inside and outside the book). In addition, the authors also stress what they refer to as "momentous changes" (p. 99), like the influence of the children's rights movements from the 1950s onwards (Chapter 5) or the impact of digital technologies (Chapter 6). With the choice to focus on different social classes and genders in specific case studies, the authors are also successful in showing both how social structures and public institutions influence reading habits, but also the part played by parents, teachers, and neighbours in securing – or limiting – access to reading material and encouraging certain reading patterns across social divides.

Christensen and Appel's book offers a quick and easy introduction to the history of Nordic children's literature and related media, and the wealth of references provided in the book is impressive and bears witness to a well-researched account. The book will be highly useful for students of children's literature, particularly in the Nordic countries, but also for researchers who are new to the field and wish to get a quick overview. The book would also be relevant to international researchers who want to learn more about the Nordic context of children's literature or to study the complex interrelations between social structures and children's learning and literature. I could even imagine using the book with international students in film or media studies, as a historical contextual overview of life and childhood in the Nordic welfare states.

The ambitiously broad scope, combined with the brevity with which the book is

written (the book is only around 100 pages long), is both the strength and the weakness of the book. Given the short format, the book necessarily becomes a historical overview of "children's reading cultures and media use as practice" (p. 11) and a source of inspiration for further studies, rather than an in-depth analysis and discussion of literature and society. This is, however, also what the authors, according to themselves, intended (p. 11–12). The book is excellent for introducing new readers to the topics covered and for pointing to interesting developments in Nordic history and culture that are important to childhood and children's literature, but it is left up to the reader to find more in-depth discussions of these developments, which is, however, often aided by the many references and suggestions for further reading listed in the book. This is, for example, the case when, in Chapter 6, the authors bring up international debates around political correctness and appropriateness in Danish media produced for children, mentioning a case where content from the Danish broadcasting service was banned from YouTube. The authors briefly list arguments for and against the ban, but without assigning more than half a paragraph to the discussion, they leave out details about the actual title or content of the banned programme (i.e., the infamous cartoon *John Dillermand*). In this particular case, the provided reference will be of little help to the international reader, as the reference is for a short popular-scientific article written in Danish (p. 89). The book is by necessity selective and would not be able to stand alone in a course on children's literature, but it still manages to show important tendencies in the relation between children's literature, political and social developments, differing conceptualisations of the child and childhood, cross-over literature, and media relations.

Some might also find the intention to write a *Nordic* children's literature history poorly executed, given that the book is mainly centred around Danish history, using purely Danish case studies. This is, however, a deliberate choice on the part of the authors who state that,

> Denmark has served as our central example in this outline of children's books and reading cultures in the Nordic world. […] A number of differences do exist among the Nordic countries. However, many general characteristics and even quite specific phenomena have been shared across the Nordic region, and especially among the three Scandinavian countries, in terms of institutions and media; approaches to children and conceptions of childhood; literary genres and topics; and even specific titles and authors' oeuvres. (p. 105)

Keeping this in mind, Christensen and Appel do show the many parallels across the Nordic countries, and they highlight differences between the countries when they arise. The authors are keen to provide historical and factual information, comparing the Nordic countries throughout the book, even though they reserve a relatively large portion of the book for more developed discussions of Danish examples.

As indicated above, it is largely the historical context which frames the form and content of the book, which means you also won't find a long-annotated list of authors or publications produced for or read by children in the Nordics. Rather, the book highlights specific works which have been particularly important throughout the different historical periods and which serve to exemplify a larger tendency, such as when H. C. Andersen's *The Little Match Girl* (1846), among others, is called upon to show the presence of nineteenth-century social problems in children's books (p. 41), or when

Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* series (1945–1948) is referred to as "the epitome of anti-authoritarian childhood" (p. 65) in the 1940s.

All in all, *Children's Literature in the Nordic Countries* fills a gap in the field of historical accounts of Nordic children's literature, particularly due to the geographical scope, the insistence on reading cultures and practices in a larger context, and due to the international outlook of publishing such an account in English. The book will no doubt be of use as a teaching resource in courses focused on children's literature and media, particularly in the Nordic countries, but also internationally or with international students studying in the Nordics.

Signe Kjær Jensen
Senior lecturer
Department of Film and Literature Studies
Linnaeus University, Sweden

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