



The Swedish Institute for Children's Books

The Book Tasting

Summary 2021

Table of Contents

What is the Book Tasting?——	3
Summary——	3
Book Tasting 2021	
Increased publication numbers and increased sales——	4
The Swedish children's books market——	6
The digital publication of literature for children and young adults 2021——	8
Children and villains: Criminal roles in children's and young adult books 2021——	9
Tiger mamas and fatigued parents: Present and absent parents in 2021's picturebooks——	11
Activism——	13
Body image and body positivity——	15
Environmental issues and ecocritical perspectives——	16
Virus, vaccine and illness: Covid-19 and the pandemic——	18
In the wake of the pandemic: Hiking and gardening——	19
Narrative technique and form——	20
Translations and depictions of other cultures——	21
Theoretical literature——	23

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What is the Book Tasting?

The Book Tasting consists of lectures that are open to everyone who is interested, an exhibit of the previous year's books for children and young adults published in Sweden, and a report with statistics and analyses. The Book Tasting is carried out with support from the city of Stockholm.

An overview – not a selection based on quality

In the Book Tasting, the Swedish Institute for Children's Books goes through the previous year's entire set of publications of books for children and young adults and presents the works with the usage of statistics and in-depth analyses of prominent themes. The Book Tasting is thereby a sort of literary history in a micro-format, which only looks at a particular year, but in which comparisons to previous years also occur.

This year's Book Tasting covers all the printed books from 2021 that were received by Sbi by the last day of February 2022. The statistics do not include digital publications (e-books, audiobooks, digital literature and apps). The Institute does not currently collect these, but does follow developments in the field.

The Book Tasting makes no judgements about the quality of individual books. Rather, the aim is to review the entire collection of published works and the breadth within it.

Summary

By the last day of February 2022, 2,204 printed books for children and young adults that had been published in 2021 had arrived at the Swedish Institute for Children's Books (Sbi). This is an increase of 167 titles in comparison to the previous year (8 percent). After several years in a row of a decreased sum, down from 2017, which was the year with the highest number, the number of books for children and young adults has increased again. This was the case for almost all the categories. The largest increase was within the category of middle-grade books, fol-

lowed by picturebooks and non-fiction.

There is no definitive reason for the increase, but a contributing factor may be that there was a certain sense of restraint during the pandemic, and this is now changing. It is primarily hybrid publishers and publishers specialised in easy-to-read books that have increased their publication numbers. Publications by hybrid publishers increased by 42 percent in 2021. This increase is also linked to a large increase to the number of debut authors this year, 50 percent. More people want to write books for children and young adults, and have probably had more time to do so during the pandemic.

The percentage of translations has been decreasing steadily during the past decade and it continued to decrease in 2021. In 2021, 66 percent of the total sum of books published were Swedish-original titles (1,451 books) while translations were therefore only 34 percent (753 titles). This means that the record gap between originals and translations that we saw last year has widened further and now 2021 has taken the title for the year in the history of children's literature when the share of percentages was most likely the lowest.

Digital publications for children and young people continue to increase. Therefore, Sbi has this year, as in past years, invited literary scholar Ann Steiner from Uppsala University to review these publications for the Book Tasting. Among other things, she notes that the number of digital publications is getting closer to that of printed books, that the number of original publications in digital format is still small, and that there are surprisingly few overlaps between the most popular audiobooks for children and the printed books for the same target audience.

This year, Sbi has also asked author Märten Sandén to explore villains and crime in children's books from 2021. He argues that there is a lot of variation in terms of how criminals are depicted, depending on the age of the audience and on the genre of the book, and that the criminal characters are particularly central in thrillers. He also reflects on the view of criminals in relation to issues of ethics and morals. Who is a criminal and why is not always uncomplicated.

The depiction of parents and parenthood likewise

reveals a broad spectrum in literature for young readers. Literary scholars Tuva Haglund, from Uppsala University, and Malin Nauwerck, from Sbi, have analysed the image of parenthood in 2021's picture-books for the Book Tasting. Their analysis shows the breadth of the portrayals of relationships between parents and children, and how this is affected by society's norms but can also be seen differently by children. They also explore how parental care, or the lack thereof, can be expressed in both words and images.

As shown in the Book Tastings in the last few years, contemporary literature for children and young adults is characterised by a strong awareness of life today. Several prominent themes with clear links to contemporary life are explored in detail in this year's Book Tasting: activism, body image and body positivity, environmental issues and the pandemic. Besides these in-depth analyses, this report also contains information about the size of the year's publication numbers and sales of literature for children and young adults, the children's book market, and translations and depictions of other cultures.

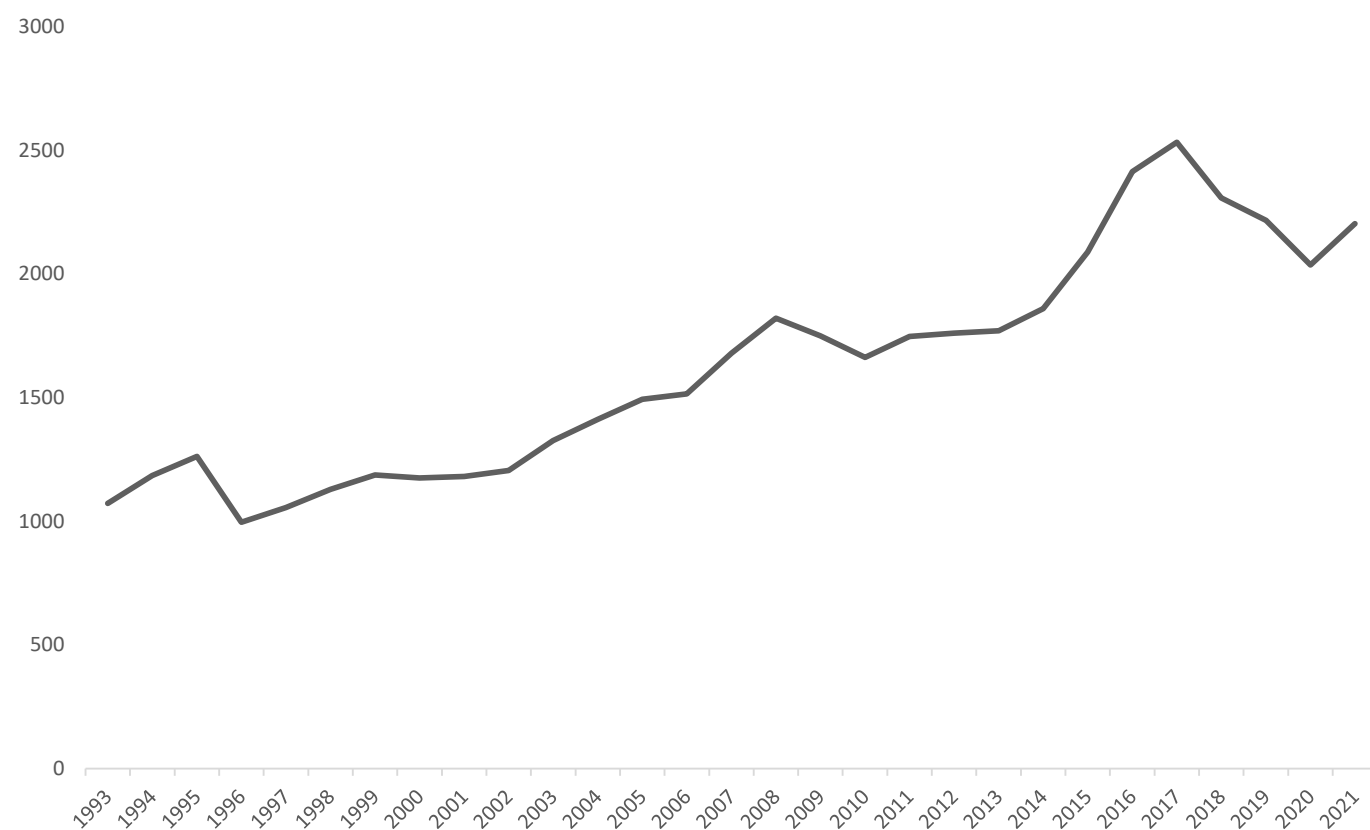


Diagram 1. Children's and young adult books published in Sweden 1993–2021. Source: *Bokprovning på Sveneska barnboksintitutet: En dokumentation. Årgång 2021, 2022, p. 42.*

Book Tasting 2021

Increased publication numbers and increased sales

By the last day of February 2022, 2,204 printed books for children and young adults that had been published in 2021 had arrived at the Swedish Institute for Children's Books (Sbi), which is an increase of 8 percent, or 167 titles, from the previous year. The downward trend of the previous three years has therefore been changed. Publications increased in most categories in 2021 and it was only in the smaller categories of drama, poetry, songbooks and collections that the figure decreased or was unchanged. The largest increase was in the category of middle-grade books, followed by picturebooks and non-fiction. In previous Book Tastings, Sbi has noted that the percentage of translations has decreased steadily over time. Despite a marginal increase in 2021, translations are still at a low level, and the gap between original Swedish titles and translations continues to increase (see the section Translations and

depictions of other cultures)

In working on this year's Book Tasting, Sbi contacted ten publishers with a more substantial number of publications to get their thoughts about the reasons behind the general increase. Judging by the answers received, there is no one clear reason behind the increase, but a contributing factor is that there was a certain sense of restraint during the pandemic, and this is now changing. It is also worth noting that it is primarily hybrid publishers and publishers specialised in easy-to-read books who have increased their publication numbers. The forementioned is also linked to a large increase to the number of debut authors this year. Several of the publishers contacted said they had received an increased number of submissions from debut authors and they think this is because more people want to become authors, and have probably had more time to write during the pandemic.

From a more long-term perspective, the number of books for children and young adults published in Sweden has increased steadily since the Book Tasting started at the beginning of the 1990s. During the 2010s, the increase happened at a faster pace and the large number of books published for young readers led to a decreased number of sales per title. The industry then started talking about the idea of excess publication, and after the heights of 2017, the publication total decreased again, up until 2021.

Since the start of the 2000s, when Sbi began keeping records for individual categories, the number of publications has increased markedly in almost all categories, despite the overall decrease since 2017. Picturebooks are the category that has increased the most in terms of the number of titles, but chapter books have also seen much development. In both cases, there has been almost triple the number of books published up through today. Non-fiction has also increased steadily during the 2000s; in 20 years, the publication number has more than doubled. Young adult novels had a small but stable increase, but today the number is approximately back to the same level as it was 20 years ago.

At the moment, Sbi does not have the technical capability to collect digital works and as there is no regulation about providing the copyright library Kung-

liga biblioteket (the National Library of Sweden, or KB) with copies, KB has no statistics about the field either. Svenska Förläggareföreningen (the Swedish Publishers' Association) provides figures that only cover their member organisations' publications. Sbi has therefore asked Ann Steiner to look at the development in this area for the Book Tasting. Among other things, she notes that the number of digital publications is getting closer to that of printed books and that the number of original publications in digital format is still small (see the later section The digital publication of literature for children and young adults). The increase to digital publication has so far not affected printed books for young readers to any large extent. A noticeable consequence, on the other hand, is that the republication of printed books has steadily decreased over the last years and continued to decrease in 2021 too. This probably is due to publishers choosing to publish their backlist digitally instead of as printed books.

According to sales figures from Svenska Bokhandlareföreningen (the Swedish Booksellers' Association) and Svenska Förläggareföreningen, there continued to be positive development to sales in 2021. There was an increase in all sales channels and also children's literature was one of the categories that increased the most in total. A particularly strong area was in terms of streaming services, where the number of streamings increased by over one-third compared to the year before. Young adult literature was, however, still the category that sold the worst regardless of format. While the sales for other age categories increased in 2021, the sales of young adult literature in principle stood still (Wikberg 28, 45-7).

The book in the category of literature for children and young adults that sold best in 2021, in regard to all sales channels, was Elias Våhlund and Agnes Våhlund's chapter book *Handbok för superhjältar. Utan hopp* [Handbook for superheroes. No Hope], the sixth book in the series. Other top sellers were books from other popular chapter book series, such as the six books in Camilla Brinck's Musse & Helium series and Martin Widmark and Helena Willis' *Musikmysteriet* [The music mystery], part 30 in the book series LasseMajas Detektivbyrå [LasseMaja's detective bureau]. Only five of the twenty books on the top

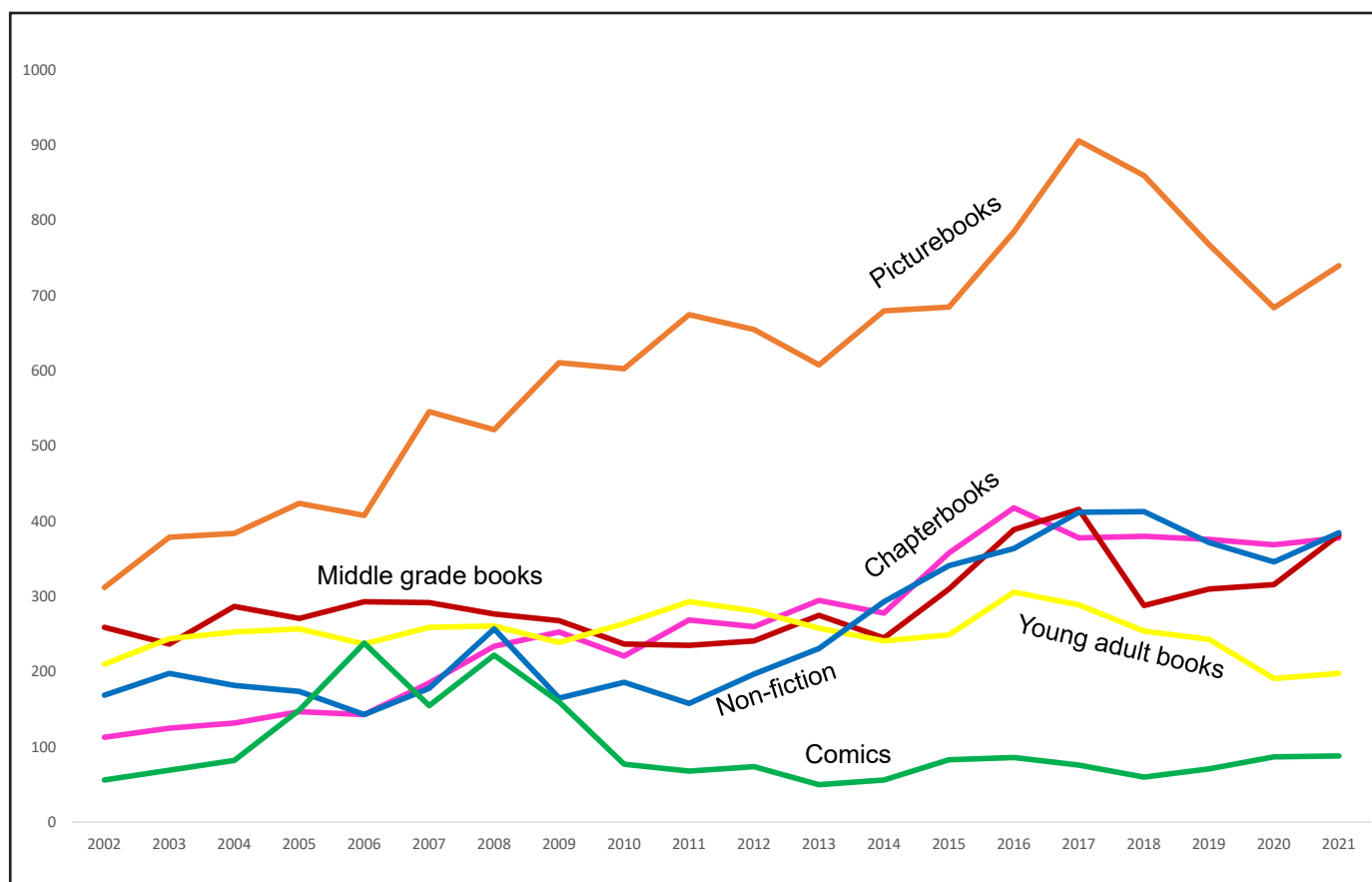


Diagram 2. Children's and young adult books in categories, 2002–2021. Source: *Bokprovning på Sveriges barnboksinstitutet: En dokumentation. Årgång 2021, 2022, p. 42.*

list were translated, and all those five were by J.K. Rowling. These were four of the Harry Potter books and the fifth was the chapter book *The Christmas pig*, with illustrations by Jim Field, translated to Swedish by Jan Risheden. On the list was also Johan Rundberg's middle-grade book *Nattkorpen* [The night raven], which won the August Prize in the category of Best Swedish Children's Book of 2021 (Wikberg 61).

The Swedish children's books market

In 2021, 264 different publishers and others produced printed books for children and young adults, including self-publishers (the total in 2020 was 256). 54 of them published six or more titles. The larger publishers dominated in terms of the total titles published, and the ten publishers that published the most titles in 2021 were responsible for 49 percent of the publications.

The majority of the books for children and young adults published in Sweden are published by the large, traditional publishers, but in addition, organisa-

tions, schools and private individuals also publish books. It is hard to say much about the total size of the self-published category for 2021. Self-published books are marked as such in Nationalbibliografin (the National Bibliography) of the Kungliga biblioteket, but as they have not yet finished cataloguing the books from 2021, it is hard to draw any conclusions about the numbers from 2021. Self-publication includes publication through publishing services, where the author pays for the entire publication run, but not always books published through hybrid publishers, which have become more common in the most recent years. Publication through hybrid publishers is financed partially by the authors themselves, but in exchange they receive a larger portion of any royalties than they would from a traditional publisher. The publication of books for children and young adults through hybrid publishers increased by 42 percent in 2021, while publication through publishing services decreased somewhat. The largest hybrid publisher for children's books is Visto förlag,

which increased its publication numbers by more than two-thirds in 2021, from 35 to 59 titles.

Some publishers/owners are divided so they have both a traditional section and a hybrid one. Idus and Visto are examples of that. During 2021, they increased their publication figures for children's literature by 49 percent, from 114 titles to 164, and they are one of Sweden's most profitable publishing companies (Löner 25).

The three largest publishers of printed books for children and young adults in 2021 in regard to the total number of titles were, as in the previous year, Bonnier Carlsen (276 titles), Rabén & Sjögren (155 titles) and Tukan (138 titles). Out of the ten publishers with the largest numbers of publications, only Rabén & Sjögren and Lilla Piratförlaget decreased their publication figures, while the rest went up. Bokförlaget Hedvig, which publishes easy-to-read books and started up in 2020 with nine titles published, is responsible for the largest increase in a single publisher this year. Their figure increased by 31 titles in 2021, up to 40 books. Other easy-to-read publishers also increased their fi-

gures, such as Nypon and Hegas, which both belong to the group of ten publishers with the highest publication figures.

There are two large publishing groups in Sweden, Bonnier Group and Storytel. Bonnier Group owns Bonnierförlagen (Bonnier publishers), of which the publishing companies that mainly produce books for young readers are Bonnier Carlsen, Bokförlaget Hedvig and Fenix förlag, but other publishers owned by Bonnier, such as Bonnier Fakta, Bokförlaget Max Ström, Forum and Gondol, have also published a book or two for children in 2021. In total, the Bonnier companies were responsible for 15 percent of the publications in 2021 (in 2020, it was 14 percent), where Bonnier Carlsen alone published 13 percent.

Storytel owns Norstedts förlagsgrupp (Norstedts publishing group), and the publishers within that group that publish books for young readers are Rabén & Sjögren, B. Wahlströms and Brombergs Bokförlag. In 2021, Storytel purchased 70 percent of Lind & Co, but that publisher is run as an independent and is not part of the Norstedts group. The

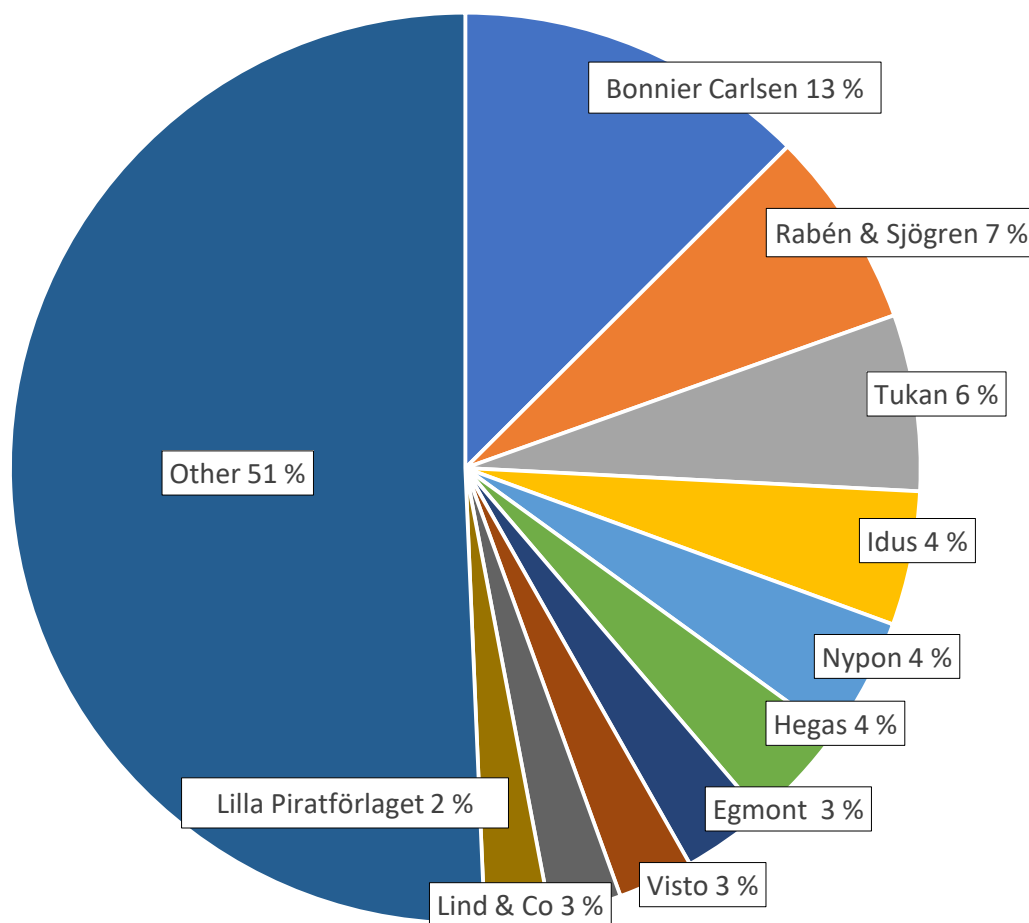


Diagram 3. The ten largest publishers in comparison to the other publishers. Source: *Bokprovning på Sveriges barnboksinstitutet: En dokumentation. Årgång 2021, 2022, p. 58.*

Storytel group, including Lind & Co, was responsible for 11 percent of the publications in 2021. Rabén & Sjögren alone was responsible for seven percent, while Lind & Co published three percent.

There are other examples from the past years of publishers joining together, being purchased by others or dividing up their operations into different publishers. For example, in 2021, Opal became the primary owner of Berghs förlag and the publishers have increased their collaboration, with shared offices and a shared marketing department. Opal also includes Vox by Opal, which is an imprint that publishes books for young adults. Another recent fusion of publishers happened in 2020, when Nypon and Vilja förlag were acquired by Studentlitteratur.

The publisher En bok för alla (A book for everyone) traditionally has only worked on republishing older titles or collections of previously published texts, but today they also publish a number of new titles. The number of new titles increased in 2021. An example is the picturebook for younger children *Bortal!* [Gone!] by Carin Wirsén and Matilda Ruta. En bok för alla is jointly owned by Alfabeta Media AB, Föreningen En bok för allas vänner and Ordfront förlag. The publishing company previously published with financial support from the state, but this ended in 2007 and since then they have worked according to the same principles as commercial publishers.

The number of books with one or more authors/illustrators publishing their first books for children increased by 50 percent in 2021, from around 200 titles in 2020 to around 300 titles in 2021. Only one author/illustrator has to be a debut one, in a book with multiple originators, for the work to be counted as a debut children's book in Sbi's statistics. The debut authors are mostly from hybrid publishers, publishing services, smaller publishers and self-publishers, but some also do come from the traditional publishers.

The digital publication of literature for children and young adults 2021

Guest author: Ann Steiner

Books for children and young adults that are in print are well documented, but when it comes to publications for young people in formats other than print,

there is much less information. There have been audio recordings of children's stories since the early 20th century in Sweden, on 78s, vinyl, cassettes and CDs, but the listing for them in Kungliga biblioteket's Swedish media database is not comprehensive and also the descriptions are spotty. Even worse is the registration in more recent years of digital publications for children and young adults. Neither digital audiobooks nor e-books are covered to any large extent in any list and there is today no overview of how extensive the publication in these two formats is. Nationalbibliografen confusingly mixes audiobooks and talking books for those with reading impairment, even though the systems for the production and the consumption of them are completely different. An audiobook is for the general market while a talking book is a non-commercial recording of a printed book for people with reading impairments, and such books are produced and distributed in a particular system.

In a study of audiobooks for children *Barnlitterära strömningar. Om ljudböcker för barn* [Streaming children's literature. On audiobooks for children] (2022), the literary sociologist Karl Berglund and I showed that the most overarching picture of commercially accessible audiobooks for children is available from the databases of internet bookstores. Besides the titles that are registered in the databases, they also include audiobooks published by, for instance, streaming services and music publishers, and which are only available for streaming via particular channels. Besides that, there is also a significant set of productions aimed at preschools and schools by ILT Inläsningstjänst (a recording service) and its streaming services Polyglutt and Polyfino. The overall picture is that the production of audiobooks is almost as extensive as the publication of printed books for children and young adults.

The publication of audiobooks and e-books for young people is increasing and this increase is seen both at publishers who also publish printed books and at companies that do not publish printed books. The latter includes purely digital publishers, music publishers and streaming services. The largest single producer of digital literature for children in 2021 was Saga Egmont (and its sister company Story House

Egmont), which published 250 audiobooks and 468 e-books for children and young adults in Swedish, and this is equivalent to over 20 % of the entire production from the year. This can be compared to the established publishers who are members of the Svenska Förläggareföreningen, of whom 17 published literature for children and young adults in 2021. They published 539 audiobooks and 723 e-books, which was around 40 percent of the total production in these formats (*Förlagsstatistik 2021* 19). A large share of the production was from companies not based on printed books or that in other ways were far from the traditional book market, such as streaming services, purely digital producers and music publishers, but also self-publishers.

Digital children's literature in terms of audiobooks and e-books is comprised partially of parallel publications of literature, which means works that are published digitally and in printed format at the same time, but the largest proportion of digital production is the publication of older titles. There are also some originals published in audiobook format and among the most popular titles to listen to in 2021 were the humour group IJustWantToBeCool's many specially written titles. Children also often listen to long book series. Martin Widmark and Helena Willis' LasseMaja books and the republication of Sören Olsson and Anders Jacobsson's Sune and Bert books are some of the ones children listen to the most. It is worth noting that there are overlaps among the most popular audiobooks and the most popular printed books for children, but they are surprisingly few. Among the most popular audiobooks for children are some totally different titles, such as the previously mentioned books series but also Bamse stories, Åsa Larsson and Ingela Korsell's PAX series, Enid Blyton's Famous Five books and Gunilla Bergström's books about Alfons Åberg (Steiner and Berglund 40–42, 47).

Besides e-books and audiobooks, there are also digital publications for children and young adults on various websites. Those with the broadest distribution in Sweden are not aimed specifically at children but have many writers and authors who are under 18 years old – among these are the Swedish writing website Poeter.se and the Canadian Wattpad (which

has many texts in Swedish). Besides being important for their own writing, these websites are important for young people's reading and so the different fan-fiction websites should also be mentioned. Digital publication on websites cannot be quantified in terms of publication or reading, but it is a part of young people's literary culture.

Children and villains: Criminal roles in children's and young adult books 2021

Guest author: Märten Sandén

Criminals have appeared for a long time in all categories of children's literature, from picturebooks to books for teenagers. For obvious reasons, they are key in detective stories or thrillers. The actions of a criminal are catalysts for a thriller's plot and catching the criminal is the logical conclusion to the story. Criminals in children's books can carry out different types of crime, such as theft, kidnapping, robbery, selling drugs and even murder. The type of crime and the kind of threat the criminal constitutes generally is more serious as the age of the reader increases. Deeper reasoning skills around morals can also be linked to more in-depth depictions and stories, but there are some exceptions.

In books for children and young adults, criminals, depending on the age of the reader and the genre, can be adults, children or animals. In books for the youngest readers, crime (usually a theft) often comes about because of a misunderstanding or carelessness. A common situation is that the guilty party is an animal. For example, in the picturebook *Ritas svans* [Rita's tail] by Helena Koch and Sara Heldt, a rat feels pangs of conscience after having stolen a bit of a woman's furry hat (in order to look like a squirrel). Here, the theft defines the character's status as a criminal, even though the humans in the book are already convinced that rats steal. Everything ends happily, and the one who stole is not stigmatised. If the criminal is an adult or a child, the focus of the story is usually on reasons for the crime rather than the guilty party's character. In Lena Lilleste and Lena Forsman's chapter book *Mobil-tjuven* [The mobile phone thief], it turns out that the guilty boy had never had a mobile phone of his own. Even though he is caught in the act, the boy is not depicted as a

criminal, and he too is not stigmatised because of his criminal actions.

In the picturebook *Korvtjuven* [The sausage thief] by Marianne Gretteberg Engedal, and also in the chapter books about Familjen Knyckertz [The Filchers family] by Anders Sparring and Per Gustavsson, the main characters are honest children who live in a family of thieves. In these books, the protagonists' identities as criminals are something they are born with – for instance, the Knyckertz [Filchers] family have the first names of Bove, Palle and Kriminellen [Villain, Steal and Criminal] and they, just as the entire sausage thief family does, always wear clothes that are stripey like prison uniforms. The dynamic in these books comes from the child's resistance to stealing, which is a protest against the parents' authority and the identity the child has been born into. By switching the perspective so that crime is the norm and the child's law-abiding nature is a rebellion, these sorts of books contain both suspense and criminals without being too threatening for the target audience.

Without a doubt are Martin Widmark and Helena Willis' chapter books in the series LasseMajas detektivbyrå [LasseMaja's detective bureau], the most well-known puzzle mysteries for children today. In 2021, the thirtieth in the series, *Musikmysteriet* [The music mystery], was published and, like other titles in the series, it offers a gallery of potential thieves where all but one are innocent. In the LasseMaja books, both the crimes and the criminals are relatively innocent and the thrill comes from the reader discovering the guilty party along with Lasse and Maja. Widmark has created his own pedagogical variant of a thief, less caricatured and more interpretable. The criminals are rarely evil and the crimes often come from a lack of something or from a deeply felt longing. The theft in *Musikmysteriet* [The music mystery] comes about not from greed but due to a difficult family relationship. The criminal steals money, but the aim is to compensate for a missing father. By making criminals and crime understandable, Widmark stimulates his readers to think about morals, free will, common sense versus feelings and similar topics.

The most classic children's thrillers are book series in which two or more children solve crimes in book

after book. Long series of thrillers, which had their golden age in the middle of the 20th century, are also represented in the publications from 2021. In book series where the detective work itself is the main aspect of the book, the detective groups have names like Mysterieklubben [The mystery club], Hemliga Trean [The secret three] and Trillingtrion [The triplet trio], or they are named after the locations where they work (such as Smögen, Södermalm and Gotland). It is also common to mix genres, such as in the book series Hästdetektiverna [The horse detectives], Arkeologdeckarna [The archaeology detectives] and Cirkusdeckarna [The circus detectives]. These long series are aimed at different ages and have various levels of realism and so that means that the criminals in them are different. The guilty party can be anything from a pretty typical adult to a child the same age as the reader, but there are also real criminals. There are some unrealistic and rather harmless criminals, but it is in the long series where the classic criminal archetypes live on to the largest extent. Here, the criminals are still often one-dimensional characters with no motive other than greed or an in-born inclination to steal.

Sometimes the criminal is the hero of the story. Robin Hood, the Count of Monte Cristo, Arsène Lupin and Sweden's own cunning 19th-century criminal Lasse-Maja are traditional examples. The hero-criminal's crime is often carried out with finesse, intelligence and humour. In many cases, the intention behind the crime is also good – taking from the rich and giving to the poor, righting a wrong or taking revenge on an unsympathetic person. Among 2021's books, there is a new edition of *The Arctic incident*, part 2 in Eoin Colfer's young adult series about Artemis Fowl. The book came out in its fifth Swedish edition in 2021 and has thereby been in print in Swedish for almost twenty years, as translated by Lisbet Holst. The thirteen-year-old criminal genius Artemis is not a completely realistic character, which is also true of the way the story swaps between the human world and the leprechaun world. But the hero-criminal Artemis' carefully thought-out thefts are exciting, even in a world of magic. Leigh Bardugo's stories also take place in a fantasy world. *Six of crows* was published in a paperback edition in 2021, translated by Carina

Jansson, and has the seventeen-year-old master thief Kaz Brekker as the protagonist. Bardugo's world is dark and violent, but Kaz Brekker has all the characteristics of the hero-criminal.

Closer to reality is Sanna Norlin's middle-grade book series *Mästertjuvarna* [The master thieves], whose first two parts, *Den första stölden* [The first theft] and *Det falska slottet* [The false castle], were published in 2021. The protagonists Dante and Vega are regular children who become master thieves mostly on accident and never really accept their identities as hero-criminals. The crimes that take place are certainly ingenious but also rather innocent: the theft of truffles from a restaurant kitchen in the first book, and the theft of a Lego castle from a toy store in the second. The relationship between the middle-school boy Dante and the somewhat older Vega gets almost as much space as the mystery intrigue itself.

In Johan Rundberg's middle-grade books about Mika Månvind, a girl in an orphanage in 19th century Stockholm, both the criminal and the detective depictions are ambiguous in an interesting way. Mika lives in a Dickensian slum world, where taking the step into crime is never far away. She herself is an almost archetypal pure-hearted hero on society's side, symbolised by the shabby police officer Hoff and the hard but fair orphanage. In Mika Månvind's world of distress and shifting positions – which takes place at a far enough distance, time-wise, from today's readers to give the books a fairy tale tone – there is space for both real criminals and several nuances of hero-criminals. The adult Thief Queen in the book of the same name is seductive but emotionally cold and other adults with power seem directly evil, while the lawless but good-hearted Tekla has some aspects of the hero-criminal.

Criminality among young people has dominated the media and societal debate the last years and this is reflected in books for young readers too. In Mats Berggren's *Den vita glöden* [The white glow] and Kajsa Gordan and Sofia Nordin's first two easy-to-read books about Zeke, teenagers must deal with realistic moral and legal dilemmas, where the protagonists are often torn between boring honesty and a glamorous but dangerous criminal life. This dilemma is particularly clear in *Den vita glöden*. Daniel has served two

years at a juvenile home when he starts high school in the Stockholm suburb where he grew up. His past as a criminal follows him and the temptation to solve his own and his family's financial difficulties with new crimes is always there. In Jali Madi Susso's *Som en gatubund* [Like a street dog], the main character Liam is drawn into criminal behaviour and is forced, in a complex and nuanced way, to reflect on his actions and his identity as a lawless person.

Beneath the words in young adult books, there is a constant contrast between the judicial system's definition of desirable behaviour and the images that young people – and all of us – are fed through advertisements and innumerable fictional and documentary depictions of what counts as worldly success. At least in books for young readers, the role of the criminal appears to have changed at the same pace as society in general. The resourceful champion of justice, such as Kalle Blomkvist, is no longer the obvious hero. The criminal role has become an alternative, even if it is rarely glorified. Those who break the law are not necessarily morally inferior and in many cases – at least for a time – they are financially more successful.

Tiger mamas and fatigued parents: Present and absent parents in 2021's picture-books

Guest authors: Malin Nauwerck and Tuva Haglund

Claustrophobia and inequality in the nuclear family, upgrading the mother's role, regretting parenthood and high expectations for both mothers and fathers to be both physically and emotionally present with children: during 2021, modern parenthood has been a very current subject in societal discussions and also a major theme in fiction and non-fiction for adults. But raising children has also been one of the most common themes in children's literature, with the difference being that it is children's experiences in focus. At the same time, children's books are created by adult authors, artists and illustrators, and therefore it is not always clear who is doing the talking for or to.

The duties and concerns of parenthood are depicted not least in books about daily routines, such as tooth-brushing, bedtime routines and drop-off and pick-up at nursery, which feature often. The father's

role is ever more evident in picturebooks about these routines. This can be interpreted as a sign of a move towards more equal parenthood, but also as a projection of an ideal rather than a totally representative reflection of reality. Among 2021's publications, the father is often the only present caregiver, as in *Godnatt, Roj!* [Good night, Roj!] and *Godmorgon, Roj!* [Good morning, Roj!] by Ellen Karlsson and Lisen Adbåge. In Anders Isacson's *Lemmy*, the father appears for the first time on the last page, but does compensate for a mother who is always too busy and tired to be a present parent.

Picturebooks also validate the normalising of modern families, as discussed in previous Book Tastings, and show that parental-like care does not have to take place within the family, as in Ester Roxberg and Nathalie Ruejas Jonson's *Mina tantkompisar* [My aunt friends]. The impression on the whole is that as long as the child's needs are met, picturebooks often are not fussed about who provides care and closeness.

Children's perspectives of care can, however, be different from adults', which is often expressed through both words and images. *Sov nu, Sickan* [Sleep now, Sickan] by Sofia Rådström has a visually distinctive child's perspective, where the images do not show the father's face. Instead, we see the arms that carry, comfort and put the child to sleep. Emma Virke and Joanna Hellgren's *Min mamma är snabbare än din!* [My mother is faster than yours!] can be read as a depiction of the stressed parent's aim to pick up the child early at nursery, but it is told as the waiting child's fantasy games make the mother's route from work to nursery turn into an adventure, with sharks and rocket umbrellas.

Another type of children-centred perspective can be found in those books that use second-person narration to reflect a read-aloud situation, and where the content is a declaration of love from parent to child, as in *Alltid här för dig* [Always here for you] by Laura Di Francesco. Reading aloud is a strikingly common theme in picturebooks and is often linked to bodily closeness and comfort. Emily Joof and Matilda Ruta's *Det djupa blå* [The blue depths] emphasises the closeness between the daughter and the mother in images of slings, cuddles and bodies close to or on

each other while reading.

Often, physical and mental closeness to the parent is the condition for a child being able to overcome an obstacle. The daughter in *Det djupa blå* challenges her fear of water, but it can also be about stammering, as in Jordan Scott and Sidney Smith's *I talk like a river*, translated to Swedish by Katarina Kieri, or about the fear of the dark, as in Sofia Weiss and Heidi Forssell LaGrasta's *Alva och mörkeret* [Alva and the dark]. When parents' and children's interests are in conflict, as in Annica Hedin and Per Gustavsson's *Berit vill inte* [Berit does not want to], the solution is for the mother to view things from her child's perspective and to meet her needs as they play together in a way that the child decides on. The mother's respect and compliance in relation to her child's world is also important in Sara Lundberg's *Glömdagen* [The day of forgetting] and in Lotta Olsson and Emma Adbåge's *Glad* [Happy].

Embodied and biological aspects of parenthood appear in many picturebooks in which characteristics that are typical of animals, such as brooding, protecting, feeding or defending, are linked to parents. Hanna Albrektson's picturebook *Hönan och ägget* [The chicken and the egg] takes the form of a dialogue between the adult reading aloud and the child listening, as together they follow a pregnant chicken and her egg, which must be protected from a farmer. Kate Claxton and Angela Mayer's *My mum's a tiger*, translated by Matilda Olsson, shows a mother who is described as being like a tiger as an explanation for the "tiger stripes" on her stomach. Here, the picturebook creators use the child's view of the stretch marks as evidence for the mother's strength, which offers the parent breathing room away from society's requirements for a mother's appearance.

There is a clear division between stories that depict children in caring, secure relationships and those where the parents are absent or lacking in caregiving. The latter category has pedagogical elements all the way through it. The authors want to educate and open up possibilities for conversations about the specific experiences that are thematised, as well as to create understanding regarding parents' limits and offer solutions for giving children security. The type of experience it is about is often clear from the title

alone, as in *Hur arga får vuxna bli?* [How angry can adults get?] by Anna-Carin Magnusson. The didactic aim is often also apparent from the books' tips and advice for parents in the same situation, references to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and accompanying discussion questions. Many authors write based on their own experiences as parents or have a job in which they work with vulnerable children.

But there are also examples of how established picturebook creators take on deficient parenting with similar pedagogical aims. In those cases, they use higher amounts of empty space, colour and perspectives to depict the child's vulnerability and the consequences of the parent's absence. In *Var är Sigges hemma?* [Where is Sigge's home?], written and illustrated by Stina Wirsén in collaboration with Save the Children, a mother is depicted who at first "just sleeps", and then she misses out on organised visits with her child. Through Sigge's meeting with social services and Sigge's later placement with a foster family, other caregivers compensate for the parent's psychological and physical absence, and in these books this is the most common way of fixing the child's vulnerability. It might be a friendly neighbour, a relative or the other parent. In Lotta Lundh and Nils Melander's *När mamma fick tröttsjukan* [When Mama got chronic fatigue], the mother tries to combine a career with involved parenting, which results in exhaustion. When the father takes more responsibility for the everyday duties in the family, the children's relationship with their mother becomes less demanding and can be focused on the parent's love and the good times.

But solutions for the parent's absence are not always as easy. In Lina Jansson's *Fredagsmys* [Friday fun], Lou and Ellis are sent out of their flat when their parents are going to have a party, and they only find a temporary refuge in playing with friends. Naive images and rhymes strengthen the children's perspective, which can be read as irony here about how the happy picturebook family's Friday fun takes place somewhere else. In Frank Furu and Linda Bondestam's *Ni är inte min mamma* [You all are not my mother], it is Aysha, a refugee child, who speaks. From her perspective, the love and care of the mother she is missing cannot be replaced by other

people. Like Aysha, the reader is left uncertain of the mother's fate and the reader has to accept that children's wounds cannot always be healed.

Altogether, the stories take the children's side and emphasise that one must make sacrifices to meet a child's needs, but they also show empathy for the modern parent's situation, at least when the problems fall within the frame of socially accepted issues, such as a stressful day, new partners, a changing body or limitations because of illness.

On the other hand, there is a clear distancing from the parental figures in the books that feature neglect, substance abuse or physical abuse. In those works, the child's vulnerability requires clear solutions, often from outside the family. Generally, there is no grey zone between these categories, but one exception is mobile phone usage. Several titles, such as *Maya och pappas dumma mobil* [Maya and Dad's stupid mobile] by Fanny Olsson and Sofi Sprangers, depict children trying to have more contact, primarily with fathers, who are caught up in their phones. From a larger perspective of absent parents, it is clear that mobile phone dependence is a fault that is accepted within good parenting and therefore it does not require someone outside the family to intercede. However, the distance between the child and the parent that the mobile causes can be considered in relation to the solely positive depictions of reading together, and in this way can be seen as a contribution to the current debate about the future of reading.

By basing words and images on the child's way of understanding the world, picturebooks offer alternative views on parenthood to the general societal conversation, as well as their own ideals. In the picturebooks from 2021, these can be summarised as adult society's joint responsibility for children's right to care, parents' awareness and accommodation of children's needs, and a wish that being with the child or seeing things from the child's view is what would free a parent from the demands of the adult world.

Activism

There continues to be engagement in trying to change societal structures in 2021's books for children and young adults and activism is still a central theme in the works. Children and young adults stand

up against injustice and work collectively. It is the climate, the situation for girls and various issues on a local level that are the main topics on the agenda.

In a number of books, a collective of girls or young women work together to protest, oppose and change situations for the better. A sense of community arises from these collectives. The middle-grade book *Aldrig backa* [Never back down] by Cina Friedner takes place in a fifth-grade class where some of the boys are loud and mean and interrupt classes. During the breaks, they take over the football pitch in the school yard. A new girl joins the class and inspires the others to protest together. The girls start imitating the boys' behaviour, challenging and confronting teachers. For instance, they express their displeasure about school toilets with pee on them. In the young adult book, *Jobbiga tjejer* [Difficult girls] by Lisa Bjärbo, Johanna Lindbäck and Sara Ohlsson, a group of girls work to do two things: one is to clear a classmate from the suspicions that they started a fire in the school's gym, and the other is to demand a separate school toilet for girls. When the school leadership does not approve the latter, the girls gather a group together to occupy one of the school's out-of-the-way toilets and to decorate it as their own. In both books, the school toilet is an important symbol.

The young adult book *Så jävla operfekt* [So damned imperfect] by Charlotte Cederlund is about classroom hierarchies and bullying because of appearance in a high school class. The protagonist Emma is abandoned by her best friend, feels she is fat and has to deal with mean comments from boys. One day, she gets an anonymous note that says that she is lovely as she is. Emma starts to realise that she can stand up for herself and she signs up for the school's Santa Lucia parade to show that all bodies are acceptable. She gets several of the school's girls to join what turns into body-positive activism. Activism connected to body positivity is a recurring theme in 2021's books (see the next section, Body image and body positivity). Another example is Malin Eriksson Sjögård's middle-grade book *Fat Dance*. It is about Maddi, who is bullied by her classmates because she is fat. When non-binary Elli joins Maddi's class, they connect in their outsider status and due to their love of dancing. Maddi's cousin is in the dance group Fat

Dance, where all members are body activists, and this inspires Maddi and Elli to start their own dance group.

Among the non-fiction works, there are many that encourage the reader to become an activist to save the planet. *The Leaders* picturebook, part of the series Little People, Big Dreams, by María Isabel Sánchez Vegara et al., and translated to Swedish by Sten Sundström, introduces, among others, activists such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai to the youngest readers. Non-fiction books for schoolchildren who are climate activists are richly and colourfully illustrated, with fact boxes and top tips. Information about ecosystems and environmental damage is paired with both scary messages about the planet's condition as well as encouraging news, pictures of cute animals and a story of global goals. In *Guardians of the planet* by Clive Gifford and Jonathan Woodward, translated by Sara Hemmel, and *Kids fight climate change* by Martin Dorey and Tim Wesson, translated by Malin Davidsson (both published in collaboration with environmental organisations), children are encouraged to become climate activists by taking practical actions to have a more environmentally friendly lifestyle while also influencing their adults. So much responsibility being placed on children to take action in children's books about climate issues is something that has been noted in previous Book Tastings as well. *How to change everything* by Naomi Klein and Rebecca Stefoff, translated by Nils Håkanson, is a more comprehensive book, with 294 pages, aimed at adolescents. The environmental movement's history is described, with fights and protests on a collective level. The book also discusses issues of social justice by describing how climate catastrophes affect primarily poor and vulnerable societal groups.

Among the non-fiction books are also some that encourage action regarding racism and prejudice relating to gender, gender identity and sexuality. In the easy-to-read book *Demonstrera* [Demonstrate] – which is part of the non-fiction series Utforskaren [The explorer] – the reader learns about different ways of making change happen through demonstrating. The book also includes tips from the human rights activist Linnéa Claeson on how to organise your own demonstration. *The league of super feminists* by Mirion

Malle, translated by Lotta Riad, offers activism in a graphic novel format. She explains central concepts in feminist research, such as representation, gender and intersexuality, and subjects such as gender-neutral language and consent. In *This book is antiracist*, by Tiffany Jewell, Aurélia Durand and Patrick Konde, published in collaboration with the organisation Friends and translated to Swedish by Hillevi Jonsson, the author Tiffany Jewell writes from a personal perspective and gives historical information about racism, antiracism, ethnicity and prejudice. The reader is encouraged to reflect on identity and society and is also recommended strategies to use for protesting and acting as an antiracist. *Queera tider. Hbtqi då och nu* [Queer times: LGBTQ+ then and now] by Edward Summanen and Adrian Malmgren explores various aspects of being homosexual, bisexual, trans, queer or intersex. This book also takes a historical perspective and introduces important pioneers and collective movements. The right to be yourself is the focus and the final chapter encourages the reader: “Get involved!”

Body image and body positivity

In many of the recent Book Tastings, Sbi has noted that themes regarding the body, body image and bodily functionality are prominent in published works. The most recent years, for example, have included many titles that have made visible disabilities and variations to abilities. Stories in which gender identity, sexuality and/or ethnicity are in focus have also been common.

In 2021’s publications, there are also titles that explore these themes, but to an even larger extent there are different types of bodies, although what makes them different is not explored at a thematic level. Trans or non-binary people, people in wheelchairs or with different skin colours occur ever more frequently but without this fact about them being referenced in the stories. Studies show that a typical development for literature that includes these types of norms is this: initially, the current norm is discussed and questioned, but after a while, the norm-challenging bodies appear in the same way as other bodies in the stories (see, e.g., Cart and Jenkins xix–xx).

At the same time that certain types of bodies are becoming more part of the norm, the gaze is shifting to other types of bodies that are not yet accepted in that way. An awareness of body size has begun to appear more in books for children and young adults in the most recent years and, in 2021, a greater number of books than in earlier years were published that had the fat body as a prominent theme. Often, there is a body-positive undertone and many of the books are also explicitly body positive. In some cases, they are also body activist, as in Malin Eriksson Sjögård’s previously mentioned middle-grade book *Fat Dance*. This book and similar titles depict the everyday difficulties that fat children and young adults face, such as bullying, outsidership and finding clothes in the right sizes in shops, but they can also be about them finding ways to like and accept themselves and their bodies.

The body-positive books include Anette Skåhlberg’s middle-grade book *Tjock* [Fat], which was published for the first time in 2018 and was republished in 2021. It is about Anna, who is fat and has had enough of how the world treats her. With her grandma’s help, she starts to accept the word “fat” and to decide over her own body herself. A body-positive book is Vio Szabo’s young adult book *Att se stjärnor* [Seeing stars], in which Iskra and Isabelle meet when they both start roller derby, a sport that is depicted as body-inclusive. As Iskra says: “Lovisa is small and round. Not fat like me or Steken, but still. It’s nice that there aren’t just thin girls here” (48). Another body-positive young adult book is *Firekeeper* by Angeline Boulley, translated by Emilia Fjeld, which is about Daunis, who is tall and large, with a wide bottom. Even though she is physically fit, she often receives comments about her body. Her closest relatives stand up for her and she has an accepting view of herself and her body.

There are also books about weight that have a perspective other than body positivity. The dystopian young adult work *Losing big or losing everything. Endast en överlever* [Losing big or losing everything. Only one will survive] by Niclas Christoffer takes place in a world where the state controls and watches the citizens. Those who are fat lose rights, such as taking public transportation or using social media. When

the fourteen-year-old twins Xerena and Xerene are accused of abuse, they are put onto the popular reality show *Losing big or losing everything*, where the aim is to lose weight. The winner gets back their rights and can live a life of luxury, while those who lose are murdered.

Even if fat bodies are more common than previously in 2021, there are still few such bodies in the publication output as a whole and they rarely appear in pictures, even on covers of books about fat protagonists. An overview of 2021's covers shows that while the representation of, for instance, ethnic diversity is common, such as through different skin colours, the fat body is almost completely absent on covers of chapter books, middle-grade books and young adult novels. This confirms the view that fat bodies continue to be "absent bodies" in Swedish children's books and young adult novels. (Warnqvist and Österlund 25). In those cases where fat bodies are shown, it is usually an adult secondary character who is depicted as fat. Not even the body-positive titles mentioned above depict fat people on their covers. The few examples of fat children who are depicted are almost exclusively in picturebooks. An example is the third book about *Billie, Billie, Korven och staden* [Billie, Korven and the city] by Julia Hansson, in which Billie, who is fat, goes out on a walk with her dog Korven and gets lost. This picturebook is therefore an example of a story where the narrative is about a fat person, but without body size being mentioned.

A number of titles are also body positive from a broader perspective. For example, there is Annika Leone and Bettina Johansson's *Bara rumpor i backen* [Bare bottoms on ski slope], the third part in their explicitly body-positive picturebook series, where the aim is to show bodies of different colours, sizes and ages. Another picturebook with a body-positive message is Sekou Kabba and Sagar Ramachandran's *Neahs magiska hårresa* [Neah's magical hair journey]. Here, it is about hair. Neah's uncle takes her on a journey through a magical door to show Neah all the hairstyles that suit Afro hair.

Several titles problematise the obsession with appearance and dysphoric body perspectives. In the young adult book *Alla för någon det finns* [There is so-

meone for everyone] by Samir VII, one protagonist, Hanna, believes – unlike all the others in the book – that she is the ugliest person in the whole world and she is so obsessed about her appearance that she takes drugs to try to manage the situation. Neither the drugs nor plans to have plastic surgery help and Hanna's story has an unhappy ending.

A more humorous approach to this obsession with appearances is found in Artur Laperla's graphic series *Super Potato*, translated to Swedish by Johanna Brock. Here, the appearance-focused superhero Super Max is transformed by Doctor Evil into a round potato. This makes Super Max upset until he discovers he still has his superpowers. In this way, he becomes Super Potato, still as focused on his appearance, but happy and satisfied when he can wear a doll's wig from a Super Max doll. The wig falls off when he flies, but even without it, Super Potato is satisfied with his appearance. On the last page, he stands in front of the mirror and asks the mirror if it has ever seen such an attractive potato.

Environmental issues and ecocritical perspectives

In the most recent Book Tastings, it has been noted that publications for children and young adults reveal a lot of interest in environmental issues and ecocriticism. This tendency is still strong among the books from 2021 and, as in previous years, it is found in both fiction and non-fiction. As has been discussed previously, the aim is in part to inform readers about climate change and environmental issues, and in part to inspire the reader to take action. This is often done through encouragement to have a more sustainable lifestyle on the individual level, but it can also be about political engagement. In particular it is in the non-fiction books where issues about the environment and climate are often related to activism (see the section Activism).

The environmental theme is, as in past years, seen in books for all ages, but in 2021, it was particularly frequent and explicit in books for younger readers. Littering was a common subject. The sea and beaches were the focus in several of them, which can be compared with the major interest in the sea and sea creatures in 2021's non-fiction. In picturebooks

such as *Clem and the crab* by Fiona Lumbers, translated by Annika Meijer, and *Skogsmulle och den ledsna fågeln* [The forest creature and the sad bird] by Katarina Oldenburg and Lars Bällsten, the protagonists learn about the consequences of littering and get help from their friends to clean nature up. That is also what the children do in the chapter book *Silla och spöknätet* [Silla and the ghost net] by Malin Nilsson and Anna-Majje Wik, in which a whole school class puts up an exhibition of the litter they have collected on the beach.

What the books that explore littering have in common is that they emphasise the individual's ability – and responsibility – to contribute to an ecologically sustainable world. Recycling is depicted in both non-fiction and fiction as an example of how an individual can make a difference, as in the easy-to-read non-fiction work *Fakta om sopor* [Facts about trash] by Frida Bejder Klausen. The picturebooks *Tröjtrassel* [Sweater mess] by Josefin Norlin and *Vad kan det bli?* [What could it become?] by Frida Blank and Marianne Sund depict recycling and reusing as something creative and fun. *Vad kan det bli?* gives various tips for how old packages can be used in play. Among other things, tins get a new life as a drum set. Another example of environmental efforts is in the easy-to-read chapter book *Lisen räddar ängen* [Lisen saves the meadow] by Cecilia Sundh and Anna Nilsson, in which Lisen and Sami create a meadow outside their afterschool care building in order to help the insects.

It is not just in the realistic stories that environmental issues are discussed; they also come up in books with fantastical elements. For example, aliens come to the rescue in the middle-grade book *Vi måste rädda planeten jorden!* [We have to save planet Earth!] by Liz-Marie Wretborn Falk and Christoffer Johansson and in the chapter book *Toomi och den lilla plangneten* [Toomi and the little plangnet] by Eva Susso and Katsiaryna Dubovik. In both these books, the earth-dwellers are destroying the environment and they need help from the aliens to save their planet. *Vi måste rädda planeten jorden!* also has a list of tips for people to live in a more climate-smart way; among other things, the reader is encouraged to keep a climate diary for a week and to write down all the good

deeds done for the environment during the week.

Even if the environment is the focus of the majority of the books that have an eco-critical perspective in 2021, there are also some books that are specifically about the relationship between animals and people. Lena Sjöberg's non-fiction work *Djurens som hjälper oss* [Animals that help us] presents a number of animals that help people in various ways and explores humans' relationships to these animals, including in sections about animal testing and animals used in war. The sections "Animals that help our planet" and "Animals that clean up what we've made dirty" put people's relationship to animals in a larger ecological context, as does a section about the 130,000 species that humans have made extinct so far and what this means for biological diversity.

The middle-grade book *Pax, journey home* by Sara Pennypacker, translated by Ingela Jernberg, also shines a light on the relationship between animals and people. After having lost his father to war, Peter wants to return to the place where he grew up to start a new life, and maybe to see his formerly tame fox Pax. He joins the "water warriors", an organisation that cleans waterways that were polluted during the war. His contact with the water warriors and with Pax, who finds Peter and trusts him with his cub, who has been poisoned, helps Peter to have the courage to relate to others again.

In books for young adults in 2021, issues related to the environment, climate and ecological sustainability are not as prominent as they are in titles aimed at younger readers. The ecocriticism that does appear is also seen in different guises in young adult works; above all, the ecocritical perspective can be found in dystopian young adult works. Often, a society is depicted that has been affected by climate change, toxic waste or other types of environmental problems.

An ecocritical dystopia from 2021 is *Wilder girls* by Rory Power, translated by Sabina Söderlund. It takes place at a boarding school for girls on an island off Maine in the US. The island is affected by a virus that causes mutations in some infected people, animals and plants, and kills others. The school is put in quarantine and has almost no contact with the outside world. When they run out of food, the people and

animals on the island have to fight for the remaining resources. The virus is connected to the warming climate. If the individual's responsibility is emphasised in the ecocritical titles for younger readers, then here it is more the individual's survival that is the focus. It is not about contributing to a better future but rather handling an already changed world.

Books with environmental and ecocritical themes for younger ages generally have a happy ending. Perhaps Lisen Adbåge's horror picturebook *Furan* [The pine tree] is the exception that proves the rule. In general, there is a clear desire to give young readers hope for the future: sea and land are cleaned from litter, insects keep buzzing in new meadows. At the same time, the happy ending is somewhat conditional in that it requires both children and adults to immediately take action.

Virus, vaccine and illness: Covid-19 and the pandemic

In last year's Book Tasting, Sbi showed that publishers were swift to publish books related to covid-19 and the ongoing pandemic. The authors and illustrators primarily wanted to explain what a virus was and how people could best wash their hands. These books were most common among picturebooks and non-fiction.

Among 2021's publications, there are still books on this topic being published, and now they also include text-based literary fiction. The pandemic is raging in Sören Olsson and Anders Jacobsson's middle-grade book *Berts desperata dagbok* [Bert's desperate diary]. Bert gets a cold and has to be quarantined with his parents. It is difficult for various reasons, but especially because he would rather see his girlfriend, Alva. Covid-19 also plays a central role in the chapter book *Hedda och rättvisan* [Hedda and justice] by Caroline Blomqvist and Johan Jansson. During the pandemic, Hedda thinks it is unfair that she cannot sleep over at her best friend's house or visit older relatives. But when she hears the prime minister speak on TV, she understands that she has to take responsibility and she decides not only to take responsibility for the pandemic but also to try to make the world more just and happier.

Kim M. Kimselius writes about two pandemics

in the young adult book *Hotet mot Venedig* [Threat against Venice], which is part of a series about the time-travellers Ramona and Theo. At the start of March 2020, Ramona, Theo and their friends Ulrika and Robert are in Venice. By travelling through time, Ramona and Ulrika end up in 16th century Venice, where the plague is raging. Theo and Robert are still in 2020 and have to face the spread of covid-19.

The middle-grade book *The 143-Storey Treehouse* by Andy Griffith and Terry Denton, translated by Katarina Kuick and Sven Fridén, treats the virus as an unwelcome guest. The virus is not named, but winks to the covid-19 pandemic are clear in the images, in which the virus looks like a coronavirus. The protagonists are chased by the virus and have to wear masks. The virus is finally killed by an injection.

There are also books in which an ongoing pandemic is hinted at, but the plot has a different focus. An example is the middle-grade book *Mollys tunga ryggsäck* [Molly's heavy backpack] by Malin Roca Ahlgren, Maya Roca Ahlgren and Mattias Andersson, in which Molly worries that her father is going on a work trip and can get infected by a virus out there in the world. In Essie Andersson and Ulf Teleman's chapter book *Wi-wi-gänget på äventyr i gamla Minnesota* [The wi-wi gang on an adventure in old Minnesota], covid-19 and the pandemic are mentioned initially, as the children are studying from home and the parents are working from home. The pandemic is described as a "slap in the face" (7) at the beginning of to the young adult book *Grim* by Sara Bergmark Elfgren. The narrator describes how she can't work at the Gröna Lund amusement park, how her father has to teach students online and how her mother has "visor marks on her face" (7). But here, too, the plot is about something else for the rest of the book.

Among the picturebooks from 2021, there are still titles about washing hands and books in which anthropomorphised viruses appear. Gunnell Gisslén and Eva Borgman's *Hjälp, det kommer ett virus!* [Help! A virus is coming!] is about the Lymfgren family (as in the lymphatic system), who are white blood cells, working to fight the virus in the body. The virus is undefined. Readers are encouraged to become "hand-washing heroes" in Katie Button and Kasia Dudziuk's *Superheroes wash their hands!*, translated by

Malin Barthelson to Swedish, which offers instructions on how best to wash your hands. The bacillus, which looks like corona, gets smaller and smaller on each spread as hands are washed, until it disappears on the final page.

A more symbolic approach with hints at the pandemic and its effect on society is taken by Matilda Ruta in the picturebook *Stora faran* [The big threat], which talks about a large and initially undefined danger that is threatening animals in *Strandskogen* [Beach forest]. The threat means that the adults are storing extra food and that everyone has to stay home and not go out. The big threat turns out to be a bird, which eventually flies away.

As in 2020, in 2021 a number of non-fiction books were published about viruses, vaccines and illness. There are titles such as the easy-to-read *Lätta fakta om virus* [Easy facts about viruses] by Daniel Waluszewski and Kjell Thorsson, *Vaccin* [Vaccine] by Oskar Degard, *The germ lab* by Richard Platt and John Kelly and translated by David Wiming, and *Vi upptäcker vaccinet* [We discover the vaccine] by David Hedlund and Anna Nilsson. Pernilla Gesén's easy-to-read *Fakta om covid-19* [Facts about covid-19] was published as an e-book in 2020 and in print in 2021. The pandemic is also named in other types of non-fiction, as in several about animals. Jan Fleischmann says in *Gorillor. En spännande upptäcksresa i Kongo* [Gorillas. An exciting journey of discovery in Congo] that the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo closed all national parks at the start of the pandemic and that gorillas can also get covid-19.

In the wake of the pandemic: Hiking and gardening

In the wake of the pandemic, many people have developed new interests and habits. The media reports that more have gotten allotments and summer cottages, and started to get into outdoor activities such as gardening and hiking. These new behavioural trends have shown up in 2021 in books for young readers too. Significantly more books this year than in previous years have been given subject key words such as Mountains, Hiking, Gardening and Gardens. Whether the increase is due to the “covid effect” is hard to say, but books for children and young pe-

ople generally quickly capture what is happening in society.

In books about the mountains and hiking, there are, for example, two siblings who hike in the mountains with their mother in the chapter book *Lilly & Milo. Äventyr på fjället* [Lilly & Milo. Adventure in the mountains] by Maria Balthammar and Helena Balthammar. In Emma V. Larsson and Maria Trolle's picturebook *Frejas första fjällvandring* [Freya's first mountain hike], it is Freja who is hiking in the mountains with her parents. Anthropomorphised animals also go out in the wild. In Cecilia Heikkilä's picturebook *Den sista utposten* [The last outpost], *Lilla Björn* [Little Bear] goes out with their grandfather to look for the last outpost. But first they practice things at home that might be useful when it comes to hiking in the wild. In the middle-grade work *När fjället tystnar* [When the mountains go quiet] by Helena Söderblom, Adam is going for a hike with his big brother. They experience bears, bad weather and accidents, and the readers learn along with Adam what one should or should not do when out in the mountains. Hiking also comes up as a theme in non-fiction works. *Lätta friluftsboken – junior* [Easy outdoor book – junior] by Bengt Fredrikson, Andreas Palmaer and Karin Ulin explores facts about animals and plants, the Swedish right of public access, getting lost and finding food in nature that can be cooked on portable stoves.

In 2021, around ten books were also published about gardening, a significant increase when compared with previous years. Books about gardening and gardens were primarily non-fiction, but there were also picturebooks, often with elements of fact in them, so-called faction. An example of a picturebook with elements of faction is *Odla med Lo* [Garden with Lo] by Katarina Ekstedt and Kajsa Hallström. The anthropomorphised lynx Lo learns to garden with their class. The book contains instructions so the reader can start gardening too.

Among the non-fiction books, seeds are sown in, for instance, *Att så ett frö* [Sowing a seed] by Lena Sjöberg, *How flowers grow* by Emma Helbrough, Maggie Silver and Uwe Mayer, translated by Linda Pelenius, and *Seed to sunflower* by Camilla de la Bédoyère, translated by Marie Helleday Ekwurtzel. Flowers and

growing are also the focus of Rebecca Malmsköld and Staffan Eklund's *Perenner. För en liten trädgårdsmästare* [Perennials. For a little gardener] and Sommarblommor. *För en liten trädgårdsmästare* [Summer flowers. For a little gardener] and Karolina Svensk's *Jordiga fingrar* [Dirty fingers]. Emma Jansson writes about edible plants in *Mina första blommor och ätbara växter* [My first flowers and edible plants], while Pia Lundin's *Näringslära – pyssel för de minsta – odla* [Nutrition – puzzles for the youngest – growing] ends with pictures that the reader can colour in.

A slightly different depiction of cultivation and plants is in *Domesticated plants and other mutants* by Iban Eduardo Muñoz and Alberto Montt, translated to Swedish by Ellinor Broman. The book is about how plants have been changed over the years, such as by gene modification, so that plants can be grown faster and suit our tastes. The reader also learns some simple growing techniques and about research into the subject.

Narrative technique and form

Most books for children and young adults published in Sweden follow similar, well-established formulae for narratives. This means having a linear story told by a narrator in first- or third-person. Among the publications from 2021 as a whole, there are a few works that experiment with narrative techniques and forms, and these are primarily among the picturebooks.

A number of picturebooks play with what, in Western contexts, is seen as the accepted way of reading: from left to right. Two examples from the picturebooks of 2021 are Maria Jönsson's *Nycklarna* [The keys] and *Kolla väskan!* [Check the suitcase!] by Elisabet Ericson and Ebba Forslind. *Nycklarna* is a so-called tête-bêche book, which means that it can be turned and read from two directions. The book is about Nahid and Castor, and from one direction, the story is told from Nahid's perspective, while from the other it is told from Castor's. *Nycklarna* also stands out in regard to form because it is expandable. In *Kolla väskan!*, page-turning happens not horizontally but vertically, in the same way that one turns a wall calendar. Every other page shows a suitcase and the next page shows the suitcase and its contents from

above.

Many picturebook artists work with combinations of different techniques in their images. A typical technique is collage, as seen in 2021 in, among others, *Ingenting och allt* [Nothing and everything] by Naima Chahboun and Magdalena Cavallin. The book begins with the question "How did it start?", which leads to philosophical explorations of the creation of the earth and how Nothing can come out of Something. On a completely black spread, "Nothing" is symbolised by a single cable car on a wire, while a few pages later "EVERYTHING" is represented by a busy collage of people, animals, objects and plants, which covers the entire spread. The wordless picturebook *Ett rep* [A rope] by Cao Wenxuan and Yu Rong is another example of collage. Yu Rong is known for combining drawings with traditional Chinese paper cut-outs.

A title that is different from other picturebooks in several ways is *Vi går till parken* [We go to the park] by Sara Stridsberg and Beatrice Alemagna. It is in large format and has thick pages of cardboard-like paper, which makes one think of an art book rather than a typical picturebook. Even the way the words and images are handled is different from contemporary narrative conventions for picturebooks, as some spreads are covered completely by pictures without any text to go with them, while other spreads are bright white, with just a few short lines in a corner.

Johanna Schaible's picturebook *Det var en gång och blir så mycket mer* [Once upon a time and it became so much more] translated by Gunilla Halkjaer Olofsson, plays with perspectives in shape, images and words by zooming in and out of time and space. In the first half of the book, the format on the pages shrinks by a centimetre per spread. This happens while the text moves closer to the present, from the first spread of "Billions of years ago, the world was created" to the statement "A minute ago, the light was turned off", which is illustrated by a bedroom in the dark. The book's smallest spread, in the middle, shows a shooting star. The reader is encouraged to "Wish for something!" before the book pages begin to change size again, growing from small to larger and larger. The text moves to questions that address the reader as "you". Just as in the book's first half, the time per-

spective gradually changes, but now in reverse order, from the present to the future.

Another picturebook with a playful narrative style is *Dagen* [Day] by Sara Villius and Mari Kanstad Johnsen. It is a depiction of a day at preschool and what makes the book stand out in regard to its narrative technique is its metafictional aspects, which are unusual in books for small children. On the two last spreads, the reader sees a child and a teacher reading a book called *Dagen*, that is, the same book they are in. The cover of the book the child and teacher are reading looks the same as the cover of the book the reader is holding. This doubling – the book within the book – gives the book a metafictional dimension that draws the reader’s attention to the construction of the story.

Among the picturebooks published in 2021, there are also books that require accessories for the reader to get out as much as possible of the visual story. The picturebook *När spöket Elsa flyttade till stan* [When Elsa the ghost moved to town] by Carl Johanson comes with what is described as a “magical magnifying glass” in a pocket on the inside of the cover. When the reader looks at the book’s pages through the magnifying glass, they see details that would not otherwise be visible and the reader must therefore use the magnifying glass to see everything hiding in the images. *Över sand genom sten* [Over sand through stones] by Christian Gripenvik and Malin Forsman is the third picturebook about Emma the crocodile. At the end of the book, there are flashcards that the reader can cut out and play with. In other cases, the book is one of several objects that together form a toy product, such as puzzle boxes that have both puzzles as well as non-fiction books or picturebooks. *Harry Potter magical advent calendar* has 25 doors in the shape of envelopes and the envelopes contain, among other things, a keyring, stickers and a number of mini non-fiction books about J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter world.

When it comes to prose narratives, it is most often in young adult novels that there are experiments with narrative technique. As Sbi has discussed in previous Book Tastings, social media and other types of techniques have become more common elements in literature for children and young people, and is

not least found in young adult novels. In Ebba Hyltmark’s easy-to-read young adult novels, *Jag skriver till honom och säger att allt är okej* [I’ll write to him and say that everything is okay] and *Om jag bara kan få henne ur mitt huvud* [If I could just get her out of my head], parts one and two in the series Nevermind, social media and mobile phones have a particularly prominent role. The narrative takes place totally through the young people’s chats, texts and mobile notes. Extracts from letters, emails, chats and other types of communication occur often in books for young readers, but for the entire story to take place like this is still relatively unusual.

Experiments with form and narrative techniques are not only seen in literary fiction but also in non-fiction. Both the tête-bêche format and the vertical page-turning mentioned earlier are also found in *North Pole; South Pole* by Michael Bright and Nic Jones, translated by Helena Nyman Grosshög. This is a flip book that is about the North Pole from one direction and the South Pole from the other. Another non-fiction book with a different narrative technique is *Det farliga djupet. Ett interaktivt havsäventyr* [The dangerous deep. An interactive sea adventure] by Linus Hammar Perry and Josephine Lawrence. The reader starts their journey as a baby codling and chooses on each page between two different events, turning to a different page depending on their choice. Their choice means that the story of the cod’s life develops in different ways and gives insight into how the fish lives and into other water creatures around it.

Translations and depictions of other cultures

In 2021, the sum of translations published continued to decrease. This means that the previous year’s record-high gap between originals and translations continued to widen and that 2021 now takes over as the year in children’s literature history in Sweden when the share of translations has probably been the lowest (cf. Mählqvist 59; Tellgren 71; Warnqvist 341). In 2021, 66 percent of the total sum of books published were Swedish-original titles (1,451 books) while translations were therefore only 34 percent (753 titles). Five years ago, in 2017, the division was 56 percent Swedish and 44 percent translated, and

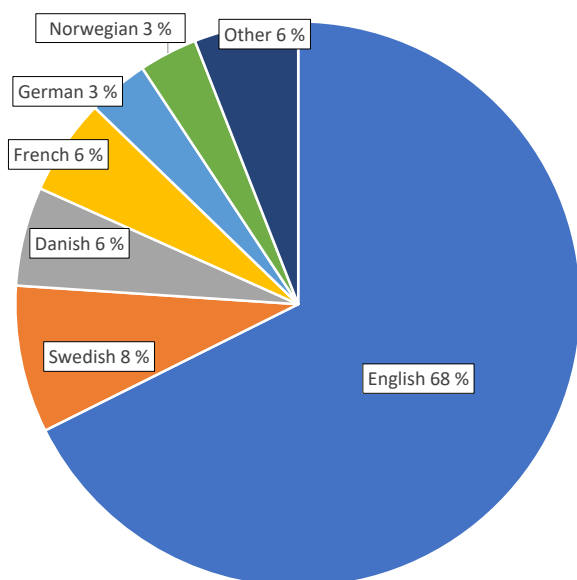


Diagram 5. The five largest source languages for children's and young adult books published in Sweden in 2021.

Source: *Bokprovning på Svenska barnboksintitutet: En dokumentation. Årgång 2021, 2022, p. 49.*

since then, the gap has just increased. The publishers themselves see a range of reasons for this: the high costs of translation in relation to the income received, a flood of good Swedish manuscripts, an increased interest among consumers for Swedish-language originals, limited language skills among the publishing company's staff and also cultural differences, such as that books from other countries can contain morals and a pedagogical tone that feels foreign in Swedish.

Non-fiction and comics are the categories where the numbers of translations were the largest in 2021. 51 percent of non-fiction titles were translations (197 out of 385 books) and 89 percent of the comics were (78 out of 88 titles). The translations were translated from 19 languages, including Swedish (books translated to another language from Swedish and published in Sweden), which is one language less than in 2020. Close to 70 percent of the translations came from English, which is an increase from previous years. Otherwise, translations are primarily from the larger European languages French and German and from Sweden's neighbours Danish and Norwegian. Many easy-to-read and reading practice books were translated from Danish. Over half the books translated from French are comics, which can be explained by the strong comics tradition in the French language.

Many picturebooks and non-fiction works for small children were translated from German, but also the two middle-grade series *Woodwalkers* and *Seawalkers* by Katja Brandis.

Very few titles, as in previous years, were translated from parts of the world other than the West, which means that narratives from and depictions of cultures in areas of the world other than Europe and North America are unusual. When they do occur, it is almost exclusively in picturebooks and it is primarily small publishers and self-publishers who focus on this type of work. In 2021, these translations were primarily from East Asia, such as China, Japan and South Korea. Five picturebooks translated from Chinese came out in 2021. One of them was *The moose of Ewenki* by Gerelchimeg Blackcrane and Jiu Er, translated to Swedish by Marta Östborn, which is about the Ewenki people, who live in and off nature. An example of a picturebook translated from Japanese to Swedish, by Mariko Takahashi, is *The cat without a name* by Fumiko Takeshita and Naoko Machida.

There are also some titles that were translated from English but come from, or take place in, areas of the world other than Great Britain, North America or Australia. The poetic picturebook *Sweetest Kulu* by Celina Kalluk and Alexandria Neonakis, translated by Janna Berg, is an example. "Kulu" is an Inuktitut word that is often used as a nickname for newborns and young children. Another example of a book that is not from the English-speaking part of the world is *Jungle tales* by Uruguayan-Argentine author Horacio Quiroga, translated from Spanish to Swedish by Sarah Andersson Solanes. The book is a middle-grade collection of short stories that takes place in the jungle in Argentina.

From other rarely represented linguistic areas, there are, for example, two non-fiction books about politics, translated from Polish by Ella Fronczak, both by Boguś Janiszewski and Max Skorwider: *Politics – how a country works. About things adults don't talk about (often because they don't know themselves)* is about, among other things, democracy and power, while *Revolutions* explores the concept of revolution. The Ukrainian author Andrej Kurkov and the Ukrainian illustrator Tania Goryushina, both living in Sweden, published two picturebooks in both Swedish and

Russian in 2021, *Igelkotten och presentmysteriet* [The hedgehog and the mystery of the present] and *Varför ingen klappar igelkotten* [Why no one pets the hedgehog], both translated to Swedish by Tania Goryushina. The latter is a republication and was originally published in 2018. Finally, there is the picturebook *The cuckoo clock's little bird* by Feridun Oral, translated from Turkish by Hamdi Özyurt.

Translated by B.J. Woodstein

Theoretical literature

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