

# Maternal Abandonment, a Queer Choice?

Björklund, Jenny. 2021. *Maternal Abandonment and Queer Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Swedish Literature*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. (293 pages)

**MATERNAL ABANDONMENT AND** *Queer Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Swedish Literature* considers novels about mothers who leave their children. Jenny Björklund analyzes “25 mothers in 22 female-authored novels” (7), in genres ranging from “hen lit” (144) to crime fiction to “high-brow” (189). In *Lesbianism in Swedish Literature: An Ambiguous Affair* (2014), Björklund questioned a metanarrative of progress, or the idea that progressive law and policy reflects broader non-homophobic outlooks in Sweden. In her latest book, she turns to literary representations of hetero-hegemonic families to question metanarratives about Sweden as the best place to be a mother. With help from scholars like Sara Ahmed, Björklund acknowledges that her exemplifying characters are white, middle-class, heterosexual (and cis, although she does not use this word) Swedish women. Importantly, she cites a variety of scholars working on non-white and non-heterosexual texts, contexts, and communities, relying primarily on Ahmed and Jack Halberstam. They help her articulate the particular significance of the sociopolitical positionality of the fictional mothers under consideration: their privilege to choose departure.

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Björklund's research suggests that it is a certain kind of fictional Swedish mother who leaves: "I have not been able to find any Swedish novels where less privileged mothers who leave are focalized" (250). There are, of course, variations internal to Björklund's mothers related to geographical and historical setting, mental health and economic struggles, and life trajectories. In some novels, there are minor characters or maternal symbols – migrants and others belonging to "an unspecified imaginary collective" (220) – defined by *absence* of the privilege to choose. These mothers leave for "noble" reasons, maintaining the belief that mothers (should) always choose whatever is best for their children, making abandonment a "necessary evil" (220). For Björklund, the fact that the narrative function does not focalize unprivileged mothers means that they are not utilized to critique the ideal of motherhood.

Björklund uses the following questions to guide her research on contemporary Swedish literature: "what does it mean that so many mothers leave their families [...]?" (246), and "How do Swedish cultural and sociopolitical discourses on motherhood, family, and gender equality figure in the novels [...]?" (8). One answer to the first question is simply that even (white, hetero, middle-class, cis) Swedish women cannot "have it all." They cannot, in other words, find personal and interpersonal fulfillment because their lives are overdetermined by reproductive heteronormativity. In Sweden, the social pressure to reproduce is so great that not wanting to have children remains unthinkable – until it is too late. Björklund finds that many contemporary novels include forms of "resistance to the imperative to have children" (215). Certainly, some novels uphold the "the Swedish gender equality ideal" (245) in its individualist, neoliberal, heteronormative configuration. In Chapter 2, Björklund argues that Emma Hamberg's *Brunstkalendern* (2007) and Carin Hjulström's *Irene Panik* (2014) offer stories of what it might take to find happiness in the "the dual-earner/dual-carer ideal" (13): mom must leave dad and kids, at least for a while, so that he can learn to care and she can learn to earn. The remaining examples, however, suggest that strong forms of maternal ambivalence persist.

Relying on recent sociological studies, Björklund describes the com-

paratively high rates of gender equality, welfare support, and maternity in Sweden today. This context makes study of maternal ambivalence in Swedish literature and culture particularly important because it differs strongly from, for example, the United States. Research on maternal ambivalence in the US might assume that “paid parental leave, affordable childcare, and monthly cash benefits for parents” (192–3) would go a long way toward improving life satisfaction among mothers – and they might; but Björklund’s research highlights and critiques the pronatalist history and ideologies behind such policies, encouraging us to think beyond the gendered reproductive assumptions at play in politics.

When writing this review, I considered whether Björklund’s title could have been maternal abandonment *as* queer resistance. What Björklund defines as queer resistance, however, is only achieved in certain modes: often, in counter-narratives and implicit critique. In Chapter 5, for example, Björklund acknowledges that the “dominant narrative” in Helena von Zweigbergk’s *Sänt man bara säger* (2009) “disciplines [the character of] Susanne into a more caring and family-oriented woman” (201). Björklund then emphasizes depictions of physical pain, anxiety, and boredom, “taking seriously Susanne’s unwillingness to be a mother” by highlighting experiences that constitute embodied resistance to “pronatal dogmas” (201). Some of the strongest moments in *Maternal Abandonment and Queer Resistance* involve Björklund’s attention to such counter-narratives.

Part of Björklund’s work is to explain why queer is an appropriate label for the trend to depict maternal abandonment. In her introduction, she cites Halberstam and Tavia Nyong’o’s claim that “queer can name ‘what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins’” (1). Scholars have demonstrated that same-sex couples in Sweden are now taking part in “coupledom and the nuclear family” (131). For Björklund, this means that “we may need to look for queer resistance elsewhere, and representations of (heterosexual) mothers who leave is one such place” (131). Her book thus exists in the field-wide tension between queer’s openness – i.e., its resistance to being limited to specific identity categories – and its primarily hegemonic institutional unfolding. It evokes,

that is, ongoing debates about what queer can mean, as well as (more implicitly) critiques of the field's masculinist, white supremacist, and classist formations. I would have liked Björklund to take, in moments, a more paranoid, self-critical approach. What does research have to say, for example, about the experiences of queer parents? Is a family with same-sex or gender non-conforming parents really not a site of queer resistance?

As a straight, cis woman who works in queer studies, I don't make these comments to police Björklund's application of queer, but because I wouldn't want to silence rigorous and interesting resistance to the appropriation of queer studies by and for straights. In the end, Björklund chooses the term queer because she is deeply indebted to queer theory and finds literary representations of maternal abandonment to involve "norm-breaking practices" (249); resistance to Swedish "pronatalism" (255); forms of critical negativity ranging from feminist complaint to suicide as resistance to untenable motherhood; and exposure of the ways in which "Swedish-branded values like gender equality and progressive family politics" can be "unrealistic and excluding" (246). As the title of her conclusion, "Dreams of a Different Future," suggests, Björklund is looking to literature for models of something better and queerer than neoliberal reproductive heteronormativity.

An easy to read, informative, and intriguing book, *Maternal Abandonment and Queer Resistance* would be great to assign in courses or to include on a reading list focused on, for example, sexual politics in contemporary literature. Björklund assumes an Anglophone reader unfamiliar with Sweden, resulting in an arguable strength of the book for readers new to Scandinavian culture and history: she weaves brief, helpful introductions to historical developments and concepts like *folkhemmet* into her readings. Future research inspired by Björklund's book might challenge the "lack of representation" (250) of less privileged mothers by looking beyond the Swedish novel; it might engage with disability studies when it comes to the question of mental ill-health (Chapter 4), or with trans studies when it comes to theorizing gender. In her introduction, Björklund writes, "Parenthood is, of course, gendered" (1). I would

ask students to trace what gender means (mostly cis-femininity?) as they read, to develop critically queer literacy and because there are parents for whom the gendering of parenting is nothing like a matter of course.

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