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Children's
Literature

from

Norway

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Putting Norwegian Literature for Children on the Map

Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* placed contemporary Norwegian literature on the world map. During the course of a few short years, it became an international success and in 1995, it achieved the accolade of being the best-selling book in the world. This success marked a turning point for the translation of Norwegian literature. Today, sales of translated Norwegian literature are higher than ever.

Over 30 years, NORLA has provided support, financial and otherwise, to translators and publishers who wish to produce Norwegian literature. The core of our business is granting translation subsidies to foreign publishers and issuing travel grants to translators and authors, as well as helping translators and publishers to find books that would be interesting to them. The majority find what they are looking for and in 2008, NORLA granted translation subsidies for nearly 300 titles in some 50 countries throughout the world.

Despite, *Sophie's World* being a novel for young people, it is Norwegian literature for adults that has had most attention until now. It is our hope that our literature for children and young people will now catch up. The brochure you are holding charts an overview of contemporary Norwegian literature for children and Young people and introduces Norwegian picture books. The illustrations by central picture artists. Norwegian children's literature is high quality. And we hope that this introduction will help a wider global audience to become acquainted with it.

Oslo, February 2009
On behalf of NORLA

Gina Winje
Director



Norwegian Literature for Children and Young People

STEIN ERIK LUNDE

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orway is proud of its rich and extensive range of literature for children and young people. Of course, this is due to the fact that we have a host of talented authors. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the authorities have paved the way, ensuring that conditions for Norwegian authors allow them to write the books they want and to have their work published. Many should definitely be translated and be made accessible to children and young people beyond the borders of Norway.

Norwegian authors annually publish some 160-170 books of all genres, for children and young people. The table below illustrates the genres of the various publications, with figures referring to all books assessed by the Literary Council of Norwegian Authors for Children and Young People from 2005 to 2008.

Novels for young people are books written for young people aged from 13-14 to adult. It is a relatively new genre in Norwegian literature, only being introduced and developed during the 1970s. It may well not exist as a genre in its own right in some countries.

Some of these books could just as easily have been published as books for adults and vice versa. One such example is *Beatles* by Lars Saabye Christensen which is read, understood and loved by many young teenagers. Often it is a question of marketing and whether the author wishes their book to be categorised as an adult or a teenage book. Furthermore, the cover and art work is tailored towards the required target audience. There is a problem in that the most advanced young readers may prefer not to read novels targeted at young people, deeming them not to be 'real' literature, or considering them too childish, so they progress directly to adult books. However, there are a number of authors in Norway who prefer to write for young people. A common feature of their works is that the main characters are in their teens, on their way to growing up and meeting the challenges of an adult world. They are written in a style reminiscent of what can be described as the modern novel, which in Norway started with *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun.

A realistic style of writing is paramount. And it is well known that there are no limits to the storyline of a realistic novel. However, as young people are the target audience, the books are about young people and their day-to-day life. They tackle generational conflict, friendship,

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2005-08
Novels for Young People	29	17	27	30	103
Novels for Children/Illustrated Stories	39	48	40	49	176
Thrillers & Detective Stories	3	3	10	11	27
Fantasy	6	10	12	13	41
Easy Readers	26	29	31	25	111
Poetry	2	1	5	5	13
Short Stories	4	2	2	1	9
Plays		1		1	
Pictures Books & Cartoons	31	31	33	41	136
	140	141	160	175	617



awakening sexuality, an introduction to alcohol and drugs, love, death and the meaning of life. In recent years, the characters have ventured beyond peaceful Norway to areas of conflict in the world. For example, in Arne Svingen's *Black Ivory*, the first-person narrator accompanies Sam, his injured friend, to the Ivory Coast. They search for Sam's mother in this country ravaged by civil war. The novel gives a persuasive, realistic view of everyday life during a civil war, and at times it is a disturbing read.

In novels for young people, the reader meets people who relate to their community and whose actions stem from their environment. Many of these authors feel a need to say something important about growing up in our times. Most of the authors have long since liberated themselves from the requirements of yesteryear that books written for young people should have an educational element. As a result, the readers

are taken seriously, and the authors regard their audience as independent, thinking individuals able to assess various courses of action without the author pointing out what is good and what is bad. The task of raising the child is left to the parents and teachers, maybe even to priests. Instead, the authors concentrate on showing what happens, and maybe the reason why things happen. They concentrate on making art, not on teaching. In this way, the novels for young people resemble those aimed at adults.

Last Autumn a debate was initiated in newspapers, when a critic accused authors of books



Henrik Hovland og Torill Kove | Johannes Jensen føler seg annerledes (Johannes Jensen feels different) 2003



Marvin Halleraker | Høyt over husene (High above the houses) 2007

for young people of being exploitative with regard to their depiction of sex. Naturally this was denied by the authors. They pointed out, as is the case, that sexuality is part of life, even for young people.

Nevertheless, few of these books conclude in the depths of despair, without a glimmer of hope for the main character(s). It is likely that authors writing for young people wish to convey the message to their readers that life, despite everything, is worth living. This can be seen as an indication from the authors that they feel solidarity with their young readers, consciously or subconsciously.

Harald Rosenløw Eeg is a leading author in this genre. His latest novels depict boys on the outside of normal, healthy environments for young people. They are neglected and feel unloved. Rosenløw Eeg is able to fathom the depths and complexities of a boy's temperament, and he bravely dares to show how difficult and dark life may seem to some. Hilde Hagerup tackles a similar field in her last book *The Bite*. Bjørn Sortland often includes his knowledge of art in his books. In *Minute of Honesty*,

he attempts to retell European art history, as well as writing a book about the one great love. Sverre Henmo and Jon Ewo are also accomplished writers. Henmo has his strength in the tenderness with which he depicts apparently normal boys, especially in *The Boy on the Left*. Ewo's main characters are stranger and often inhabit the fringes of conventional young people's communities, for example the heavily overweight Bud Martin in *XXL* and *Mikromini*.

There are also authors who write in a more experimental modernist tradition. Many of these authors write in New Norwegian, the second official language of Norway. Many of these authors are published by Det norsk samlaget, which has invested substantially in literature for children and young people over a number of years. Marit Kaldhol and Rønnaug Kleiva are two such authors. As well as novels, they also write short stories and prose, often with girls being the main characters. They both write succinctly and poetically. Ingelin Røssland also writes in New Norwegian about girls, many of whom excel in being tough and energetic.

Handgranateple Hand Grenade Apple is an especially successful novel for young people. She is currently writing a series of thrillers about a girl detective.

Some novelists who normally write for adults, sometimes write a novel for young people. Many authors produce good first novels, such as Aina Basso who last year published *Ingen må vite (No-one Must Know)* a historical novel for young people.

There are a significant number of novels published whose depiction of characters and environments is so credible, and whose action and language are so complex, that combined with their level of reflection, they can safely be described as art.

Thrillers, detective novels and horror stories are also published. On the whole, they are formal literature, but they are often written by established authors who have a firm understanding of intrigue and suspense. Johan Harstad is a good example of this. He usually writes for adults, but last year he wrote *DARLAH*, a thriller for young people which takes place on the moon and which was immediately sold to several other countries.

Every year, a handful of poetry anthologies are published for children and young people, often written by experienced lyricists with a history of writing for adults. The poetry is written both in rhyme and free form.

Novels for children are books written for children aged from 0-12. These books could probably just as easily be called storybooks. Many are illustrated. Some are quite funny, often about adults making a fool of themselves, or disgusting monsters making life difficult for people, or animals that can talk and behave like people, or detective stories with little violence or blood. Many of these novels for children tackle the same themes as the novels for young people, but in a more simplified manner.

Several authors in this genre write series of books, including Marit Nicolaysen with her books about *Svein and His Rat*, which have proved inordinately successful in Norway and have been translated to several languages. They are amusing, entertaining books with spectacular action and central to each book are Svein and his beloved rat who overcome any obstacle put before them. Rune Belsvik occupies a position all of his own with his literary universe illustrated in his books about *Dustefjerten (The Nincumpoop)*. For some strange reason, he has barely yet been discovered outside Norway. Furthermore, Belsvik, who also writes for adults, has expressed his belief that his books for children are more important than the books for adults. He considers his books for adults as a welcome break from his real writing.

Endre Lund Eriksen and Ingeborg Arvola have also produced good books where they tackle difficult topics such as alcohol abuse, failure of care and mental illness. These are undoubtedly discussed in concerned articles in newspapers and in television debates, but in the books of Lund Eriksen and Arvola, they are the inevitable reality in the lives of the adults. In turn, the children must relate to these troubled adults and they manage to do so in a particularly practical and tolerant manner. The authors depict the children with humour, without moralising or condemning the difficult lives of the adults, which is probably what is most impressive. It does not sadden us to read about these children, and we know that these reckless little heroes will cope.

It is my belief that many of those who read these stories as children will continue to read as adults. We can only hope that they have discovered the joy and the pain of good literature and writing.



Øyvind Thorseter | Klikk (Klick) 2004

Fantasy and easy readers are the genres that have increased most in number of titles in recent years. Written both for children and for young people, fantasy is extremely popular. When young people have read *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* they often turn to other series, even Norwegian ones. Ruben Eliassen is a Norwegian author of fantasy novels whose status is on a par with pop stars with some groups of young people. Recently, a board game

was even released based on his *Phenomena* series.

Fantasy novels are bulky books with a host of characters and quite a complicated storyline. As so many of these weighty tomes are published, the quality can be inconsistent and some of them are too obviously based on their international role models. This will hopefully be sorted out over the next few years. It is interesting to see how some authors are

drawing on traditional Norwegian folk tales and mixing them with fantasy and the traditional storytelling genre.

Another category encompasses the so-called easy reader. As their name implies, they are books that are meant to be easy to read and easy to understand. They are aimed at children and young teenagers. Easy readers are not generally ambitious in terms of literary aspirations, but it seems as if the publishers see them as stepping stones to stimulate children to explore the world of books and pursue more demanding literature. It is debatable whether these books really promote the joy of reading and literary skills. Do you really want to read good literature if all you have read is mediocre or poor literature?

I would say that in Norway, our picture books are consistently of an extremely high quality. In this leaflet, there is an article devoted entirely to picture books. They are normally illustrated by people who consider themselves to be artists. There are a few Norwegian publishing houses that have devoted a lot of time and energy over the years to achieve this high quality, with regard to both the text and illustrations. Furthermore there are some cartoonists making themselves known who seem to have high ambitions with regard to the text that accompanies the pictures.

In all the categories I have mentioned, there are books that are difficult to place with regard to audience age. A few years ago, the author Jon Fosse introduced the term 'multi-age literature', that is books that can be read by people of all ages. The text can be understood on several levels, and the codes and references understood by the adult are not completely comprehended by the child reader. However, the story is formulated so that this does not destroy the understanding and reading of the child.

Many picture books can be characterised as multi-age literature. They are read and thumbed through and talked about very often by an adult with a child on their lap. There are also novels in this category, such as Geir Gulliksen's *Hannu, Hannu*.

A significant reason why Norwegian literature for children and young people is of such high quality is, as previously mentioned, due to the support and investment of the Norwegian authorities over many years.

The most important element of this policy is the purchasing system, which is a unique means of public support introduced in the 1960s. It means that 1550 copies of every book of a sufficient literary quality are automatically purchased for distribution to the libraries of Norway. This results in publishing houses not losing money on most publications. It also means that the books are distributed throughout Norway through libraries, schools and in local communities.

Furthermore, many authors are invited to visit schools where they read extracts from their books, talk to the pupils and lead writing courses. Naturally the aim of such projects is to promote reading amongst children and young people. They can also be a substantial source of income for those authors in demand.

This financial framework around literature for children and young people is an important counterbalance to the commercialisation otherwise prevalent in society as a whole. Sales through bookshops of literature for children and young people are not high. Children and young people do not buy books themselves. They are purchased by adults, and parents and grandparents rarely buy books by contemporary authors for their children and grandchildren. They normally purchase classics, books they read when they were children.



Merete Marken Andersen og Hilde Kramer | Raske reven Rogers lille rottebok, 2006

Which Norwegian books for children and young people have generated interested beyond the borders of Norway? Many of the classics have been translated: the folk tales, Alf Prøysen and *Mrs Pepperpot*, Anne-Cath Vestly's depictions of growing up in the 1960s and 70s and Torbjørn Egner's *Karius & Baktus* and *Cardamom Town*. In addition there are modern classics; Jostein Gaarder, Tormod Haugen, Torill Thorstad Hauger, Klaus Hagerup's *Markus & Diana and others*. Apart from these, it is mainly the award-winning authors that are translated. Several authors of adult literature who are already translated and then go on to write a children's book, often have these translated too.

There are also clever literary scouts, especially in France and Germany, who discover books that get lost in Norway, and ensure that they are translated: Maria Parr's charming novel *Waffle*

Heart has been translated into five languages, Emilie Christensen's lyrical short novels about *The Duckling and Me* have been or are being translated to several languages, and Helga Eriksen's *Eg er på veg (I'm on my way)* is wending its way to Germany and France.

And there is a lot more to be discovered. In recent years, Norwegian literature for adults has become popular in the world. Maybe it is time for the same to happen for literature written for children and young people?

Stein Erik Lunde has written ten books, both fiction and non-fiction, for young readers.

Norwegian Picture Books

art
for
everyone

KJERSTI LERSBRYGGEN MØRK,
Norwegian Institute for Children's Literature



Stian Hole | Garmanns sommer (*Garmann's Summer*) 2006

The picture book has a central position within contemporary Norwegian literature for children and young people. Recently, Norwegian picture books have also attracted international attention and recognition. Why?

One book that has been successful abroad is Stian Hole's *Garmanns sommer* (*Garmann's Summer*) (2006). This book won the Bologna Ragazzi Award in 2007 and has been translated into over ten languages. The book is about Garmann, aged 6, who is dreading starting school. In his meeting with three great aunts, the themes of melancholy and existentialist disquiet are depicted across

the age gap. Aunt Borghild dreads dying, Aunt Ruth dreads having to use a Zimmer frame, whilst Aunt August has forgotten what she is dreading. In *Garmanns gate* (*Garmann's Street*) (2008) there are also philosophical reflections on life and death, conveyed with warmth and humour. Garmann has started school, where 4th-grader Roy makes him set light to the lawn of the Postage Stamp Man. The fire is put out, and the retired postman and Garmann become good friends over a herbarium, stamps and some mathematical problems, and a lifetime of heartbeats. The pictures are built up as seamless digital collages, where the aunts have borrowed wrinkles from Norwegian artists, a young Elvis sits on a double-decker bus, whilst other impressions are left by Edward Hopper,

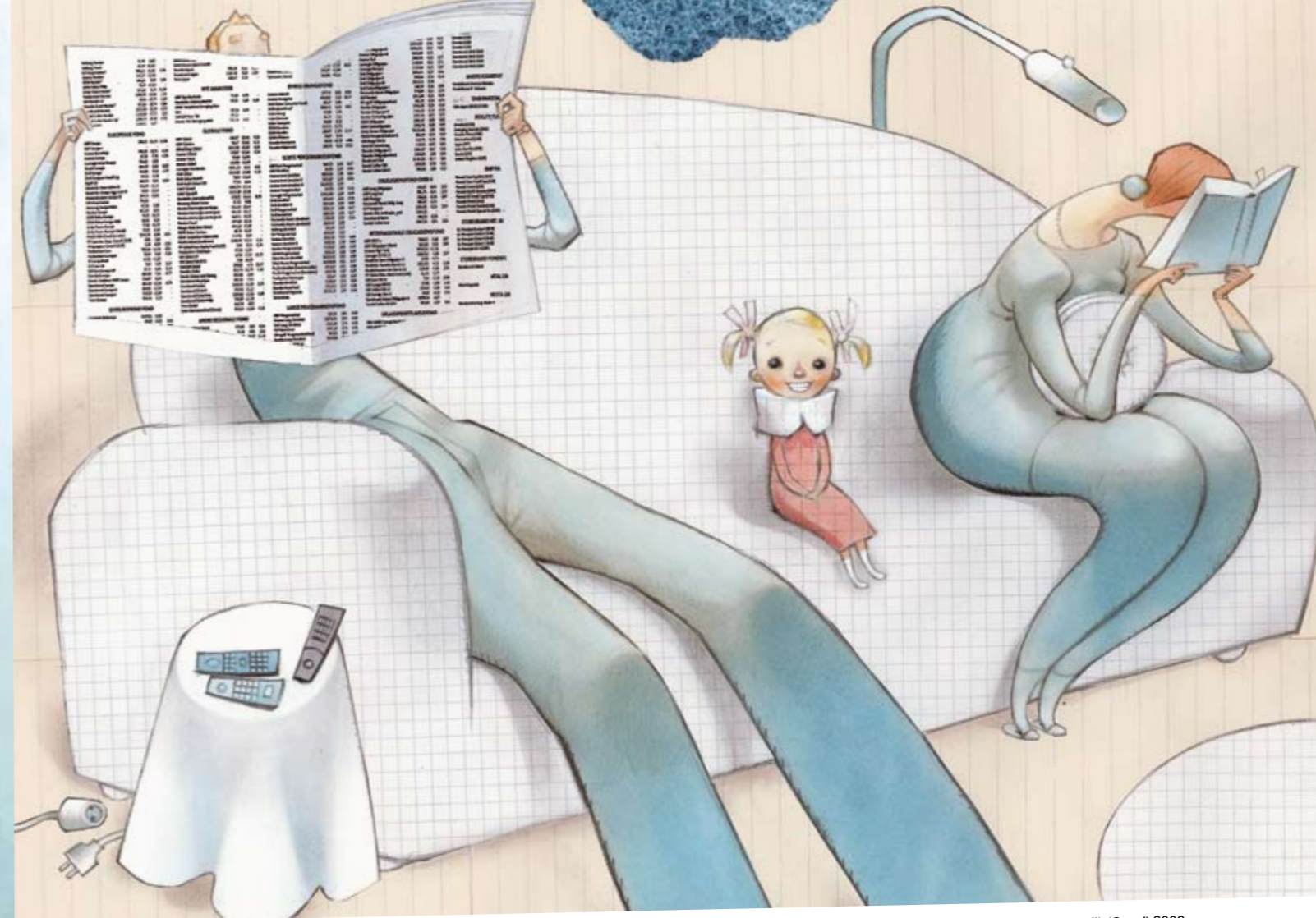


Oddmund Hagen and Akin Düzakin | Knute 2003

René Magritte and Alfred Hitchcock. A poetic and melancholy perspective can also be found in picture books such as *Eg kan ikkje sove no (I Can't Sleep Now)* (2008) by Stein Erik Lunde and Øyvind Torseter, in *Høyt over husene (High Above the Houses)* (2007) by Marvin Halleraker and in *Bort frå jordet (Away from the Land)* (2003) by Oddmund Hagen and Akin Düzakin.

Another distinct feature of the Norwegian publications is picture books that break taboos. Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus make picture books that address difficult themes, especially within the framework of the nuclear family. Their books address sibling rivalry, a child's anger, a mother's anxiety and grief for a dead dog. *Snill (Good)* (2002) is about good,

little Lussi who is so unassuming that she one day becomes invisible. This self-effacing little ray of sunshine must learn to bellow and sully her image in order to take her place in the family and in the classroom. In *Sinna mann (Angry Man)* (2003) we meet Boj who has a violent father. Boj writes a letter to the king, who comes to sort out the father. The text of these books is poetic and powerful, with prolific use of symbols in the text and images. Tiny Lussi in hues of light yellow and pink must become a hammer, a pair of scissors and a club to become visible. Frightened little Boj adopts the foetal position when Angry Man is on fire and his mother bursts into flames. Furthermore, the books are psychological and educational projects which show children the way out of difficulties.



Gro Dahle and Svein Nyhus | Snill (Good) 2002

There are a number of anti-authoritarian picture books which, though adopting the perspective of a child, demonstrate much less pedagogical goodwill. *Ulvehunger (Wolf Hunger)* (1995) by Else Fagerli portrays an extremely ruthless and feisty Little Red Riding Hood, whilst *Den store røde hunden (The Big Red Dog)* (1996) by Erlend Loe and Kim Hiorthøy parodies ideologies such as communism and feminism. *Arkimedes og brødkiva (Archimedes and the Sandwich)* (2000) by Hans Sande and Gry Moursund is a playful portrayal of the authoritative stories of our culture: patriarchy, Christianity and science. The

book is about Eureka, her father and their black cat Archimedes. The father is an unsuccessful inventor who becomes a victim of his own natural laws, but with ingenuity, warm water and 37 packets of lemon jelly, Eureka manages to get Archimedes to walk on the bath water. Thus, her father is saved. The expressive style of pictures, strong colours and typical childlike drawing style further emphasises the parody of the great stories. Furthermore, a complex and ambiguous expression results in the juxtaposition of Eureka's naïve first-person narrative and the grotesque images in the pictures, especially a scantily clad,



Hans Sande and Gry Moursund | Arkimedes og brødskiva (Archimedes and the Sandwich) 2000

apple-shaped father. A humoristic expression of authority is also found in *Konglesugeren (The Pine Cone Sucker)* (2004) by Bjørn Rørvik and Per Dybvig, where linguistically brilliant animals are central – whilst a fox who can't pronounce his r's has the main role in *Raske reven Rogers lille rottebok (Rapid Roger Fox's Scribbles & Writings)* (2006) by Merete Morken Andersen and Hilde Kramer.

Linguistic and inter-textual games with other works and genres pervade *Dyr i drift (Animal Antics)* (2008) by Ragnar Aalbu. Norwegian domestic animals are placed in a global media reality, where the cow takes the place of Stalin in Russian posters, the pig is linked with Dr. Livingstone and the sheep becomes Superman. Linguistic sensibility and

inter-textuality in images and texts also characterise Fam Ekman's work. Ekman is a picture book artist with a multitude of expression, developed over several decades. Her books encompass everything from simple line drawings to complicated collages of simple abstract shapes, often originating from textiles. Ekman often uses folktales as a springboard for her own stories and frequently pays homage to surrealism in her text and pictures, in her motifs and style. *Skoen (The Shoe)* (2001) is spun around the story of Cinderella. Here in the guise of the cleaner. The prince has become an antique dealer, but has kept the shoe over the years. Here too the shoe is the key to happiness. The book has several sophisticated references, whilst the prince visually resembles Hans

Christian Andersen and his linguistic contemplations resemble those of Hamlet. Whilst Ekman's books can be read by adults as well as children, we have in recent years seen several examples of picture books which primarily address the more mature reader. *Avstikkere (Detours)* (2007) by Øyvind Torseter, winner of the Bologna Ragazzi Award 2008, and *Hitler, Jesus og farfar (Hitler, Jesus and Granddad)* (2006) by Lene Ask are examples of such works.

Traditionally, the picture book was understood to be a sweet, simple book for young children. Now our understanding of the genre and our concept of art is confronted with picture books which challenge and move, aesthetically and thematically. Boundaries are challenged in contemporary Norwegian picture books by sophisticated inter-textual games, experimentation with style, stories with taboos, irony and parody,



Bjørn Rørvik and Per Dybvig | Konglesugeren (The Pine Cone Sucker) 2004

addressing existential problems and an advanced interplay between text and picture.

These books can appeal to young people and adults, but they have also largely retained the child's perspective. An ever-increasing number of Norwegian picture books can therefore be characterised as multi-age books.

An important reason for the success of the Norwegian picture book is the state support, which focuses on the quality of the picture book as opposed to its commercial potential. Even if the majority of picture books published in Norway are built on a traditional model, the author and illustrator are free to experiment. That is how art is made.



Ragnar Aalbu | Dyr i drift (*Animal Antics*) 2008

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