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## Girlhood, Gazing, and Fatness

### Towards a Joining of Fat Studies and Girlhood Studies through Gabriella Sköldenbergs Young Adult Novel *Trettonde sommaren*

*Abstract: How can the fields of fat studies and girlhood studies inform each other in literary analysis? In this article, we analyse how being a girl means negotiating fat using the Swedish young adult novel *Trettonde sommaren* (Thirteenth Summer, 2018) by Gabriella Sköldenberg as an example. In the novel, surveillance of the teenage girl's body weight – which can be seen as a manifestation of fat haunting – is introduced by the mothers of two cousins, Angelica and Sandra, during a summer stay at their grandfather's home in the countryside. Although the two girls are not described as fat, thin normativity becomes a key issue in the narrative through their mothers' supervision. This leads to the confrontation with and death of another character who is perceived as fat by the girls and their mothers: the friendly and motherly Rut. The interplay between different gazes is at the core of our analysis and helps us explore how discourses of girlhood and fatness intertwine in the novel. We show how Angelica moves from being influenced by the mothers' and Sandra's thin normative gaze, to adopting an oppositional girl gaze which encompasses what we refer to as a fat gaze, a gaze that looks with the fat character rather than at her. Our analysis of gazes demonstrates the benefit of a combined focus on girlhood and fatness in approaching the novel. From a broader perspective, it also shows how the fields of fat studies and girlhood studies can enrich each other and together offer answers to how body size is experienced and conceptualised in relation to girlhood in young adult fiction.*

**Keywords:** fat studies, girlhood studies, gaze theory, thin normative gaze, oppositional girl gaze, fat gaze, thin normativity, fat haunting, young adult fiction, girlhood, Gabriella Sköldenberg

“I actually wish someone had told me that when I became a teenager. That one can’t just gobble down cookies all the time, just because it’s summer,” Maggan says. (Sköldenberg 25)<sup>1</sup>

In this quote from Gabriella Sköldenberg’s Swedish young adult novel *Trettonde sommaren* (Thirteenth Summer, 2018), the surveillance of eating, underpinned by pleasure and desire, manifests itself in a mother’s memory of her own experience as a teenager. Consequently, her warning to her daughter – one of two teenage cousins – and her pleading with the two girls not to let themselves get fat during the summer holidays are both permeated with expectations on girls’ behaviour and control of their bodies. The mother is a catalyst for a societal surveillance of teenage girls’ bodies in relation to fat. Triggered by this seemingly harmless statement, a thin normativity and a fat phobia present themselves and become focal points of how the girls negotiate and perceive other bodies, in particular a female subsidiary character they describe as fat. Written at a time when body positivism and fat activism have put fatness on the agenda in Sweden (see, for example, Hynnä and Kyrölä 1), *Trettonde sommaren* confronts issues of body norms from a girlhood perspective. This societal discussion is starting to emerge in contemporary Swedish children’s and young adult literature. In addition to the novel under study, works such as Malin Eriksson Sjögård’s middle-grade novel *Fat Dance* (2021) and Niclas Christoffer’s young adult dystopia *Losing Big or Losing Everything* (2021) approach structural norms linked to fatness.

In this article, we analyse how being a girl in Sköldenberg’s young adult novel means negotiating thin normativity and inheriting a relationship to femininity and body size that maintains prevailing discourses of fat shaming. We analyse how fatness is conceptualised and written into this novel by focusing on how the two thin girl protagonists view the woman they and their mothers describe as fat. The interplay between different gazes – such as a thin normative gaze, an oppositional girl gaze, and what we refer to as a fat gaze – is at the core of our analysis and helps us explore how discourses of girlhood and fatness intertwine in the novel. We argue that what is at stake in the novel is an ongoing negotiation of thin normativity. *Trettonde sommaren* was chosen precisely because of the ways in which it pinpoints how girlhood builds on negotiations concerning normalisation processes around body size and femininity.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on gaze theory, our analysis of gazes demonstrates the benefit of a combined focus on girlhood and fatness. It shows how the fields of fat studies and girlhood studies can inform each other and together offer answers to how body size is experienced and conceptualised in relation to girlhood. Fat studies contribute to our analysis with a specialised terminology for how fat is conceptualised and for the role fat can play in literature. Girlhood studies contribute with tools that show how and why fat has girl-specific implications. From fat studies we use central concepts such as fat haunting, thin normativity, and thin normative gaze, while girlhood studies provide us with concepts that highlight how girlhood is done and negotiated: girlhood as a relational practice, oppositional girl gaze, and the girl as narrator.

### Fatness, Gazing, and Girlhood: Theoretical Approaches, Key Concepts, and Previous Research

Undoubtedly, fat is a highly contested topic. In the 1960s, the Fat Acceptance Movement and Health at Every Size campaigned against the stigmatising of fat bodies, and since then social movements and activism such as body positivism have gained momentum. The transdisciplinary field of fat studies, with its roots in gender and queer theory, highlights fat as politics, social construction, and aesthetics (Pausé and Taylor; Kulick and Meneley; Rabinowitz). Fat studies enable us to think critically about fat and show that fat bodies are part of structural contexts where enforced healthiness and medicalisation are prevailing paradigms. Fat studies challenge the normalisation, knowledge production, and circulation of stereotypical body images (see Rothblum and Solovay; Kyrölä, *The Weight*; Kylölä, "Fat"; Harjunen; Tolvhed; Pausé and Taylor; Raisborough; Rinaldi et al.). Within fat studies, the term *fat* is used to avoid common euphemisms that make excuses for fat bodies (Wann, *Fat!*; LeBesco; Wann, "Foreword"; Parsons), and in line with that we use the term throughout our analysis.

*Trettonde sommaren* displays a complex relationship to fatness, a complexity that can be explored using gaze theory. In feminist theory, the male gaze is a well-known concept coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975 to explain the objectification of women in media and film. Mulvey's concept has been both developed and contested, for example by bell hooks who problematises the male gaze from an intersectional perspective and introduces a comple-

mentary concept: an oppositional gaze (hooks 307, see also Warhol; Stacey). According to hooks, an oppositional gaze is a way of interrogating power structures. Within girlhood studies, Mia Franck, who studies sexuality and girlhood in Swedish young adult fiction, applies hooks' concept in the form of a girl gaze that confronts gendered structures:

A girl's gaze [...] can subvert the notion of how girls are regarded. Assuming the role of a spectator she can make herself visible and, regardless of whether she is subordinate or not, she can resist objectification and turn her own gaze upon the observer. (Franck 291)

Franck's suggestion that fictional girls become empowered by this kind of girl gaze shows how the focus on girl-specific experiences within girlhood studies provides specialised concepts for discussing girlhood. Combining hooks' and Franck's concepts, we use the term *oppositional girl gaze* to pinpoint girls' power to confront gendered structures. In the novel, these structures include a fat phobia governed by normative expectations on girls. These expectations do not primarily derive from male presence in the novel, but are encompassed by the female internalisation of the male gaze. The number of characters is limited in *Trettonde sommaren*, and aside from the grandfather and an uncle who makes a brief appearance, no males are present. This means that the girls are isolated from all other male gazes, making the mothers the prime catalysts for the thin normative gaze and the girls' perception of themselves and other females.

In a study on the effects of what she refers to as "the cultural fat complex" of the Western world, psychotherapist Cheryl Fuller launches the term thin gaze. This gaze, Fuller argues, arises from "thin privilege" and is "the objectifying gaze cast upon the fat person by someone who is not fat" (33). It is, in other words, a fat theory equivalent to the male gaze. The thin gaze objectifies bodies, but for different reasons than the male gaze. Instead of expressing sexual desire, the thin gaze assumes the thin body as a norm and measures other bodies against this standard. We use this concept to show how the girls in the novel negotiate fatness, but as we would like to highlight the normative dimension we henceforth refer to it as a *thin normative gaze*. This gaze dominates the depictions of fat people in media in general and to a large extent in children's and young adult literature.<sup>3</sup> The thin normative gaze operates in a similar manner in *Trettonde sommaren*, but the complex narrative also displays cracks that open for multiple interpretations, one of them being a

possibility to go beyond this gaze, similarly to how hooks and Franck discuss an oppositional (girl) gaze. In contrast to the thin normative gaze, another gaze unfolds in the novel that is neither affected by thin normativity nor by a judgmental, objectifying gaze sprung from thin privilege, but characterised by an empathic approach willing to see the world from the fat person's viewpoint. In analogy with Jack Halberstam, who establishes the concept transgender gaze to describe a gaze that looks *with* rather than *at* the transgender character (78), we refer to this as a *fat gaze*, a gaze that looks with rather than at the fat character.

According to fat studies scholar Katariina Kyrölä, all female bodies irrespective of size are haunted by the idea of fatness, through what she refers to as *fat haunting* (*The Weight* 105–116). Another important concept in this context is *thin normativity*, which refers to the prevailing preference and higher status of slim bodies (105). The thin normativity of Western societies is especially prominent when it comes to the teenage girl body. Within girlhood studies, discourses concerning normativity – especially in terms of the relationship between mothers, daughters, and feminism – are discussed at length (see, for example, Fraustino and Coats 3–5; Wilkie-Stibbs; Crew 16; Trites, *Waking* 103). Fat in children's and young adult literature operates within these discourses but might also challenge them, as we will see in our analysis of *Trettonde sommaren*.

Fat is an understudied category in general, including in children's and young adult literature research. As Lynne Vallone points out, size and scale are central categories in literature for children and young adults over time. She defines body size as both a fact and an epistemology, a scale and a category of difference used to value people and bodies ("Size"; see also Vallone, *Big & Small*). Lately, the material turn has led to a renewed interest in examining depictions of the body, also in children's literature studies (see, for example, Nikolajeva). Yet, fat studies have not entered the scene fully within children's literature research. There are studies exploring fat within the field of children's literature adopting a longer historical perspective on a broader material, but they are few (see, for example, Flynn; Webb; Wedwick and Latham). One of the most extensive studies is Kate Flynn's doctoral thesis on prevailing fat stereotypes in British young adult fiction between 1960 and 2010. This and other studies on fat in children's and young adult literature draw on disability studies, discourse analysis, queer theory, gender studies, and visual fat studies. Most studies also define fatness in relation to other bodies,

an approach that we share in this article. However, the combination with girlhood studies largely remains to be explored. Flynn problematises the absence of a focus on girlhood in feminist fat studies. She calls for a perspective where the girl body is included and stresses the necessity of scrutinising the adult-centredness in fat studies (11).

The transdisciplinary field of girlhood studies is an offspring of gender studies. From the dissatisfaction with how feminist theory neglected girlhood, a new field of study developed (see, for example, Bradford and Reimer). At the core of girlhood studies is the focus on defining girlhood and a specialised methodology for understanding how girlhood is conceptualised within different discourses. Young adult fiction has long been a site for scrutinising girlhood. Contemporary young adult fiction harbours an arena for experimenting with girl tropes (see, for example, Christensen and Österlund; Huhtala), which becomes highly relevant when combining girlhood studies with fat studies.

There are a limited number of studies that consider fat and girlhood in children's and young adult literature. They are primarily focused on single or small samples of young adult novels and mainly on fat girl protagonists (see, for example, Amato; Averill; Byers; Hass; Parsons; Quick; Tønnessen; Younger). They study the conflation of weight and desire, body surveillance, and precarious relationships to food, but also fat characters' agency. The studies show how fat tropes in fiction connected to the depiction of fat women and girl bodies persist. The tropes are generally limited to the fat best friend trope, the funny fat girl trope, and the fat villain trope, restricting fat women and girl bodies to positions as sidekicks, comic relief, and villains (see, for example, Amato; Parsons; Younger). However, scholars also point out how counter-narratives emerge, via for example vulnerability or rebellion against body norms (see, for example, Flynn; Tønnessen; Warnqvist and Österlund, "Att skildra"; Warnqvist and Österlund, "Depicting"; Webb).

Our study mainly differs from earlier research on fat in young adult novels in our aim to bring fat studies and girlhood studies closer together. Our approach is to enrich gaze theory by using and developing concepts connected to body size. Unlike most previous studies, we also focus on non-Anglo-American material. Very few previous studies consider Nordic material when discussing fatness in young adult fiction. One exception is Elise Seip Tønnessen's analysis of Synne Sun Løes' *Miss* (2017), a novel about an over-eating girl who drops out of school. Her mother is introduced as an advocate of weight control and Tønnessen concludes that "staying inactive

and over-eating” can be seen as “a very clear sign of resistance” against this control on the protagonist’s part (181). Tønnessen also connects the girl’s fatness to the Nordic welfare state and regards it as “a symptom of an affluent society where the young no longer see any sense in reaching for a future” (174). The connection between fat bodies and a lack of future is a common chrononormative idea questioned by fat studies scholars (see, for example, Rinaldi et al.; Warnqvist and Österlund, “Att skildra”; Warnqvist and Österlund, “Depicting”), and as we shall see, it also appears in *Trettonde sommaren*.

## Girlhood as a Relational Practice

In *Trettonde sommaren*, the two cousins Angelica and Sandra spend the summer together at their grandfather’s house in the countryside, just as they have done every summer of their lives. The countryside summer holiday is a typical trope of freedom from rules and societal structures, but the girls’ haven is disturbed when Sandra’s mother in passing introduces the idea of the surveillance of body weight. The girls are not described as fat, but this supervision establishes fatness as a key theme in the novel. The girls confront a subsidiary character they consider fat, the motherly and well-meaning Rut, eventually leading to her death. The older of the two, Sandra, is fearless and daring, pushing her cousin to pursue adventurous, often also questionable, and risky, endeavours. When asked who she would choose to be if she could be someone else, Sandra’s answer makes it clear that she strives for power:

The one in charge. [...] No adult shall be in charge of me any longer. [...] A witch who punishes all who try to tell me what I can and cannot do. [...] I am a lethal witch who no one dares defy. (Sköldenberg 136–137)<sup>4</sup>

As the story unfolds, we learn that Sandra is deceitful, not to say dangerous, and unstable. She transgresses girlhood normativity by being violent, although generally through psychological rather than physical violence. Sandra’s violence brings her close to a new kind of girl depicted in Swedish young adult fiction who manifests her quest for power through violence (cf Kåreland; Warnqvist 154–155; Österlund 41–42). As the quote above shows, Sandra’s power quest is channelled via the girl witch trope. As Franck points out, powerful girls are repeatedly depicted via this trope in young adult fiction (259–270).



Angelica is mainly portrayed as Sandra's opposite. Other characters refer to her as "kind," "good," and "obedient" (Sköldenberg 129, 23, 32).<sup>5</sup> Angelica herself also identifies these as traits assigned to her: "Good and reliable, but boring. That's how the adults have always viewed me" (23), and "Good. That has always been my role" (129).<sup>6</sup> The descriptions connect her to the basic good girl pattern identified in previous girlhood research (Österlund), and the trace of the word "angelic" in her name establishes her as the pure and innocent of the two. Angelica is strongly affected by Sandra's charisma, and her compliant nature makes it impossible for her to say no to Sandra. However, to some extent Angelica also enjoys pushing limits, perhaps to rebel against the adults' perception of her. At first, the two girls break rules in typically childish and experimental ways, such as by setting fire to acetone in the bathroom sink. But things escalate and the dynamic between the girls not only prompts a power struggle – a recurring trope in the depiction of girlhood – but also a struggle within Angelica herself. As Roberta Seelinger Trites reminds us, being a girl comprises an ethics of girlhood and always encompasses negotiations of normativity and respectability (*Twenty-First-Century* 159). It is the balance between this, and the forbidden joys of the witch trope that Sandra offers, that becomes Angelica's challenge.

The focal point of this negotiation of girlhood is how the girls navigate attitudes to fat. This theme is centred on their attitude towards a friend and neighbour of their grandfather, an elderly woman named Rut. The relationship between the girls and Rut, and the girls' gazes on Rut and on each other, form the basis of our analysis. Complicating the dynamic between gazes in the novel is the fact that the story is focalised solely through Angelica's first-person narrative. Consequently, the actions and appearance of all other characters are filtered through her. In turn, this means that we do not know exactly how fat Rut is. Thus, the relation between girlhood and fatness is unstable from the beginning.

### Adopting a Thin Normative Gaze: The Mechanisms of Fat Haunting and Fat Phobia

How the girls in *Trettonde sommaren* perceive fatness is not static. When arriving at her grandfather's house at the beginning of the novel, Angelica first encounters Rut on her own and at this point, she does not mention Rut being fat. On the contrary, her focus lies on the mutual affection between the two. The encounter is tender and

physical. Angelica is intensely and lovingly inspected by Rut, and thus affirmed by her:

“My dear child! You’re finally here,” Rut says as she gets to her feet and comes to meet me. She gives me her bear hug that knocks the breath out of you a little. Then she looks at me carefully and caresses my cheek with a dry and warm hand. A wave of tenderness rushes through me. (Sköldenberg 13)<sup>7</sup>

While Angelica focuses on the tenderness and affection between them, the mentioning of the power of Rut’s “bear hug” suggests a big, strong body. Sandra, on the other hand, does not comment on Rut at all in the first chapters. What changes the girls’ perception of Rut is a key scene in the garden, with the girls and their mothers. At first, the girls eavesdrop on their mothers and overhear them discussing their daughters in a critical manner, foregrounding Angelica’s inhibited nature and Sandra’s outbursts and unreliability. When the girls join their mothers, the conversation shifts to female appearance, such as Sandra’s new hairstyle. Within girlhood studies, such negotiations of girlhood have been found common in fiction, a trope that describes how girlhood is done (see, for example, Aapola, Gonick, and Harris). The girls sit on their mothers’ laps, connecting the scene to a reminiscence of an earlier girlhood and of intimacy, but the mothers’ affection takes on different expressions than Rut’s and is focused on appearance. Sandra’s mother points out that Sandra has become heavy and jokes that the chair might break underneath them. She assures Sandra that she is only joking but adds: “But you’re going to have to be careful this summer with all of Aunt Rut’s cookies” (Sköldenberg 25).<sup>8</sup> Angelica’s mother protests, stating that Sandra is perfect the way she is and if anything, a bit slim. Sandra’s mother agrees, but continues:

“I’m just warning her of what could happen if she gives Rut free reign.” [...] “Sandra, you do realise I’m only saying this for your own good, right? Things happen to the body as one grows, and one can’t always tell when the change starts. That’s why one has to be on one’s guard” [...]. “Otherwise, you will end up like Aunt Rut – a spinster in a floral tent of a dress!” (Sköldenberg 25–26)<sup>9</sup>

At play are not only the mechanisms of fat haunting and fat phobia, but also the surveillance between generations that builds on an internalised oppression. Sandra’s mother urges her daughter to watch her weight, a warning sprung from ideas of the dangers of over-

eating and gluttony that disturb the expectations of a slim, controlled female body. This is of course connected to eating disorders, a topic thoroughly explored in both girlhood studies and children's and young adult literature research (see, for example, Daniel 185–209; Holmes). Sandra's mother expresses a stronger fat-phobic position than her sister, and this is duplicated in Sandra's behaviour towards Rut. Sandra is supposed to internalise a body surveillance expected of girls. Otherwise, she, like the spinster Rut, will be excluded from a heteronormative lifeline (it is implied that Rut once had a beau, but he is no longer present in her life, and she has no children of her own). In this case, fat surveillance equals regulation of the girls' emerging sexuality.

During the discussion of weight, Rut appears with freshly baked cinnamon buns, and the atmosphere grows tense as no one wants to taste them. The choice of cinnamon buns is significant as it can be linked to a Swedish feminist debate on motherhood, as expressed by for example Ebba Witt-Brattström in her reflections on the combination of baking and feminist mothering (Säverman). To visualise the complexity of femininity, Witt-Brattström reclaims the cinnamon bun, which is connected to proper and traditional mothering, as a feminist attribute that signals that feminism can encompass traditional traits without losing its edge. The connotations of the cinnamon bun suggest that the girls' attitude towards Rut is not limited to her being fat, but also expresses a rejection of the traditional and comforting mothering that Rut, unlike the mothers, offers. The contrast between the kind, caring, and welcoming Rut and the cousins' own mothers – depicted as sunbathing, smoking women who judge people by their appearances, express cynical and body-normative opinions, and appear discontent with how their lives have played out – is stark. Out of pity for Rut, Angelica finally takes a bun but Sandra continues to refuse, even though, as Rut stresses, cinnamon buns are Sandra's favourite. Finally, her mother forces her to take one, displaying the mother's double standard.

The garden scene sets off a change in the girls' perception of Rut. Prior to this scene, neither girl focuses on Rut as fat, but influenced by the opinions of their mothers on how girls and women should look and behave, they both adopt a thin normative gaze and start viewing Rut in a different way. While this shift is driven by Sandra, it is notable that the first glimpse of the girls' view of Rut as fat is expressed by Angelica. In the garden scene, when Rut gives Angelica a bun, her hand makes Angelica think of "raised dough" (Sköldenberg 27).<sup>10</sup> The observation is communicated without any

clues to Angelica's feelings; dough could in this case be associated with warmth and care, but as a baking reference it could also be connected to the rejection of the cinnamon buns. Sandra's response to Rut's fatness is less ambiguous. Her willingness to succumb to the thin normative gaze is immediate and driven by her quest for power. Targeting Rut – herself a woman without power and a victim of the normative structures surrounding her – gives Sandra an opportunity to fulfil her desires and gain power over an adult. Therefore Sandra, influenced by her mother's warnings about putting on weight, judges Rut based on her fatness:

“By the way. Did you see Aunt Rut? Did you see her arms, Angelica? I didn't think she could get any fatter, but she's absolutely huge now.”

Sandra is sort of swaying back and forth like seaweed in a current. She continues:

“Did you see how the veins were bulging out on her hands? I think it's all the fat in the veins that makes them lie there like wriggling worms underneath the skin. Fat people are so disgusting, I would never allow myself to become fat.”

I can see that she's waiting for me to respond, although I'm not sure what the question is. I don't understand why she talks about Rut that way. Maliciously. About our kind Aunt Rut.

“Yes, she's pretty fat,” I finally reply.

I add, as though to smooth it over, that mum says Rut can't help it.

“Some people become fat even though they eat very little, it's not their fault. It could be like that for her,” I say.

Suddenly I don't know if I really believe that. That Rut doesn't have herself to blame for the way she looks. I grow uncertain.

[...]

“But you're right, fat people are actually disgusting.”

My cheeks burn as I hear my own words. It is staggeringly easy to stop defending Rut. [...]

Sandra looks pleased. [...]

“I can't believe we never realised before, Angelica, how fat Aunt Rut actually is” [...].

“We've always known she's fat, but I don't understand that we never cared about it. Seriously, it's so weird that we didn't see it before.” (Sköldenberg 30-31)<sup>11</sup>

Angelica's internal thoughts and Sandra's comments confirm that they never considered Rut to be fat before, and that the fat-shaming attitude to Rut is new to them. Whereas Sandra has adopted her mother's thin normative gaze on Rut unreservedly, Angelica considers Sandra's comments mean, but still goes along with them.

This is representative of Angelica's overall approach to Sandra. Although she doesn't have the strength to challenge Sandra, the chance to resist the adults' view of her as a good girl at times seems to give her pleasure.

Angelica's ambivalence makes it possible for Sandra to take charge and go to extremes in every respect, for example by harassing Rut. Not only does Sandra talk about her behind her back and act reserved in her presence, but she also puts a dead bird in Rut's handbag, steals a photograph of Rut's old beau from her house, and makes fun of her large underwear hung out to dry. Angelica does not stop her or tell an adult, thus becoming an accomplice. Consequently, the two girls – who are themselves marginalised, yet invested in a female future to come – bully Rut, the only adult in the story that they can gain power over due to her position as an elderly and, in their view, fat spinster. Rut becomes someone Sandra, and ultimately also Angelica, can target as a replacement of the real wrongdoers: the girls' mothers who introduced this view of fat and thus functioned as catalysts for the girls' awareness of societal structures related to body size and femininity.

### Exorcising Fat Femininity: The Symbolic Death of the Fat Character

Throughout the story, Rut is portrayed as amiable and helpful. She loves the girls, takes care of them, and considers them her own grandchildren. Her caring nature points to a feminist ethics of care. The actions of care that Rut represent are not restricted to traditional mothering but linked to a politics of empathy with its roots in feminist ethics that stresses embodiment, situatedness, diversity, and the intrinsic sociality of subjectivity and care for others (Trites, *Twenty-First-Century*; Daly). Care ethics are displayed as Rut's central asset. The sole incentive to target her is the fact that she is fat. The threat her othered fat body constitutes to the girls, and to thin normativity, is so profound that it supersedes Rut's love and care for them.

Angelica does not fully understand the mechanisms of fat shaming and harassment, but she does have a sense of something being wrong. When the girls spy on Rut while she is picking mushrooms, the dehumanising effect becomes apparent to Angelica:

I do as Sandra says. Stay hidden and watch Rut who still doesn't know that we are there. As though she were an animal and we the hunters. I know it is a sort of game that Sandra has made up, but

something inside me would still like to give Rut a sign. I feel like I should warn her about something, without knowing what. (Sköldenberg 59)<sup>12</sup>

The suggestion that Sandra has chosen Rut as her prey is one of many examples of how the novel's dramatic end is foreshadowed. On the last day of their stay at their grandfather's, the girls and Rut go on a picnic. It takes place on a mountain and the weather is hot and dry. While Rut takes a nap, Sandra sets fire to grass and branches, persuading Angelica to join in. Excited by the fire, Sandra performs a wild dance, fantasising about being a powerful witch on the path to world domination like she longed for earlier in the novel. Her extreme behaviour and fantasies can be seen as a form of exorcism, and what is exorcised is fat femininity and mothering by extended family. Sandra's pyromaniac tendencies have been hinted at earlier and they, too, foreshadow the tragedy that unfolds. When Rut wakes up from her nap, she is horrified by the fires and tries to put them out. Instead of stopping, however, Sandra stands on the edge of the mountain and uses a burning branch to set fire to more grass. As Rut storms after her and struggles with her over the branch, Rut loses her balance, falls over the edge, and dies.

Rut's death can be read as a symbolic manifestation of the dangers of the thin normative gaze. In *Trettonde sommaren*, this gaze results in a construction of the fat person as the Other to the point that the person behind the fat – the kind and caring woman – is dehumanised. The symbolic death of the othered character is a recurring trope in, for instance, literature depicting lesbian and transgender characters (see, for example, Castle; Flanagan 218). Terry Castle underlines that for long, othered characters, such as lesbian heroines, were frequently killed at the end of novels. There is a pattern of getting rid of disturbing elements in a drastic, yet symbolic way. Fat studies draw on a critique of the idea of varying prospects for certain bodies depending on their size or function, discussing and questioning the notion that "fat bodies are often maligned of as having no future at all" (Tidgwell et al. 116). Rut's death is a literary embodiment and a criticism of this lack of future.

## Reclaiming the Oppositional Girl Gaze: A Paved Way for a New Fat Narrative

At the same time as the novel displays the death of the fat character as the consequence and risk of a thin normative gaze, it also offers

an alternative to that gaze. Angelica's oppositional girl gaze shines through in moments when she can break free from Sandra's spell on her. Moreover, Angelica's gaze, freed from the influence of Sandra, is not a thin normative gaze. Throughout the novel, Angelica struggles to liberate herself from others' influence and reclaim a gaze of her own on Rut, on herself, and on Sandra.

As Angelica starts to question Sandra's influence over her, Angelica's independent, oppositional girl gaze appears in descriptions of her watching Rut. Eventually she starts to look *with* Rut rather than *at* her, in other words adopting what we refer to as a fat gaze. This change is gradual. At first Angelica adopts the thin normative gaze:

[Rut] is sitting in grandpa's kitchen as usual. Without knowing why, I get angry when I see her sitting there on the stool with her stubby legs spread wide. The varicose veins wriggle down her ankles like long, blue leeches and the floral fabric of her dress is pulled tight like a clothesline between her knees. I see the elastic band of her underwear that has settled across her stomach, it circles her compact body like an equatorial ring. I think to myself that Sandra doesn't want her to be here and neither do I, but when I look at Sandra, I can't read any emotions at all in her face. (Sköldenberg 66)<sup>13</sup>

The thin normative gaze is manifested in the detailed descriptions of fatness: "stubby legs" and the "equatorial ring" suggesting that her stomach is as round as the earth. Angelica cannot decode Sandra's emotions towards Rut and later, this inability to interpret her cousin provides a space for Angelica to reconnect with her own feelings towards Rut. In fact, Rut's friendliness and care never cease and Angelica is struck by remorse: "A friendly net of laugh lines spreads across [Rut's] face and I feel ashamed of the aversion I felt a moment earlier. There is something comforting about Rut's way of being, that she is the way she is" (Sköldenberg 67).<sup>14</sup> This and many other sequences in the novel highlight how girlhood is done relationally (Trites, *Twenty-First-Century* 159). The ongoing negotiation between Angelica's own perceptions and Sandra's bears witness to this pattern.

A second example is a scene where the girls once again spy on Rut, this time through a window of her home, where she is resting in an armchair:

I look at Rut who is asleep. Her friendly face is completely relaxed, and I think to myself that I miss her. That I would like to step inside and sit on her lap, like I used to do. Her thighs are like soft cushions,

and she always sways her legs a little, so it feels like sitting in a boat on the lake. (Sköldenberg 78)<sup>15</sup>

When Angelica's oppositional girl gaze emerges, she describes Rut's fat thighs in quite a different way than before. Depicted as "soft cushions," they are part of a positive childhood memory Angelica longs to return to. When Sandra is sick for a few days, Angelica bonds with Rut, resulting in a new ownership of her feelings towards Rut and a possibility to question her own behaviour. "Why have I disliked her so much all summer?" (Sköldenberg 189), Angelica asks herself.<sup>16</sup> The insight makes her reconnect with Rut and enables her to see matters from Rut's point of view. This is an example of how Angelica's empowerment allows for a re-negotiation of the power balance between the girls.

When they embark on their disastrous picnic at the end of the novel, Angelica realises that her suggestion to picnic on the mountain may not have been a good idea considering Rut's bodily constitution: "I think to myself that it was stupid of me to suggest this, that the climb up the mountain is too much for Rut in this heat" (Sköldenberg 210).<sup>17</sup> Instead of rejecting Rut's fat body, Angelica's gaze has changed to the point where she can put Rut's situation before her own. Angelica has adopted an oppositional girl gaze and the subversive possibility of this gaze is a prerequisite for her turning against Sandra's judgmental, objectifying gaze on Rut and Sandra's manipulative behaviour. Instead, Angelica chooses an empathic approach and a willingness to see the world from Rut's viewpoint that signalise a fat gaze.

Even though Rut falls victim to the thin normative gaze, the novel still offers the possibility of looking with and not at the character regarded as fat. Rut is viewed by a narrator who in the end regards her as a subject in her own right. This paves the way for a new kind of fat narrative, where fat characters, even if they are not the narrator of the story, can be viewed through a fat gaze.

## Towards a Joining of Fat Studies and Girlhood Studies

In our analysis of the young adult novel *Trettonde sommaren*, we have shown how gendered bodily discourses are passed on from mothers to their teenage daughters. In the novel, girlhood and fatness are problematised through the discussion of the power balance between the teenage girl protagonists, their mothers, and the subsidiary character who is mothering them but who is rejected due to her fatness.



Through foregrounding girlhood studies concepts and reading them within the frame of fat studies, we have identified how the depiction of a subsidiary character perceived as fat may be informed by an oppositional girl gaze encompassing a fat gaze that confronts gendered stereotypes and structural oppression.

Our analysis of this novel is an example of the benefits of combining theoretical approaches from the two fields of fat studies and girlhood studies. It has led us to the conclusion that a further juxtaposing of these fields would be fruitful and can offer answers to how body size can be experienced and understood in relation to girlhood in literary analysis. When it comes to body size, girlhood studies have so far looked outside of a body normative girlhood to a small extent. This lack of fat sensitivity results in a failure to see that fat is an active category in girlhood. It is only when this sensitivity is applied that we can observe the reproduction of body norms between generations, like in the novel *Trettonde sommaren*, and how this can be broken through the oppositional girl gaze and even lead to the adoption of a fat gaze. In the same manner, girlhood perspectives are missing within fat studies, where fat in relation to girls and girls' bodies have not yet received much attention. To better address how girlhood and fat are related to each other and the role of fat in cultures surrounding girls, fat studies need to embrace the specialised terminology developed by girlhood studies for defining and describing girlhood. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how body shape matters for girls.

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## Notes

1 Original quote: “‘Jag hade faktiskt önskat att någon hade sagt det till mig när jag kom i tonåren. Att det inte går att bara glufsa i sig kakor titt som tätt, bara för att det är sommar’, säger Maggan.” All translations of quotes from *Trettonde sommaren* have been made by Hanna Liljeqvist.

2 *Trettonde sommaren* has been chosen from a broader corpus of books depicting fat characters within our ongoing research project “Body Politics and the Fat Child.” Our study differs from most of the earlier research on fat in children’s and young adult literature in that the material includes Nordic rather than anglophone books. The selection so far comprises mostly contemporary Nordic books collected via review work and our work with the Book Tasting at the Swedish Institute for Children’s books, the August Prize jury, the Nordic Council Children and Young People’s Literature Prize jury, and different working groups at the Swedish Arts Council. Through these different assignments we have read thousands of children’s and young adult books published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The general tendency in these books is a lack of fat characters, especially fat children, a tendency that we have explored in two other articles (Warnqvist and Österlund, “Att skildra”; Warnqvist and Österlund, “Depicting”).

3 This conclusion is supported by the results of other studies (see, for example, Raisborough; Flynn), although they do not use this particular terminology. It is also supported by the larger material in our research project.

4 Original quote: “Den som bestämmer. [...] Ingen vuxen ska längre bestämma över mig. [...] En häxa som straffar alla som försöker säga åt mig vad jag får och inte får göra. [...] Jag är en dödlig häxa som ingen vågar trotsa.”

5 Original quotes: “snäll,” “duktig,” and “lydiga.”

6 Original quotes: “Duktig och pålitlig, men tråkig. Det är så de vuxna alltid har sett mig,” and “Duktig. Det har alltid varit min roll.”

7 Original quote: “‘Kära barn! Äntligen är du här’, säger Rut som reser sig upp och kommer mig till mötes. Hon kramar sin björnkram som gör att man tappar andan lite grann. Sedan tittar hon noga på mig och smeker min kind med en torr och varm hand. Det slår upp en våg av ömhet i mig.”

8 Original quote: “Fast du får se upp nu i sommar med alla tant Ruts kakor.”

9 Original quote: "‘Jag varnar henne bara för vad som kan hända om hon ger Rut fritt spelrum.’ [...] ‘Sandra, du förstår väl att jag bara säger så här för ditt eget bästa? Det händer saker med kroppen när man växer och det är inte alltid man vet när förändringen börjar. Det är därför man måste vara på sin vakt’ [...] ‘Annars hamnar ni till slut som tant Rut – på glasberget, i blommig tältkänning!’"

10 Original quote: "jäst deg."

11 Original quote: "‘Förresten. Såg du tant Rut? Såg du hennes armar, Angelica? Jag trodde att hon redan var så tjock som man kunde bli, men nu är hon helt enorm.’ Sandra liksom vajar fram och tillbaka som sjögräs i strömt vatten. Hon fortsätter: ‘Såg du hur blodådrorna putade ut på händerna? Jag tror att det är allt fett i ådrorna som gör att de ligger som ringlande maskar under huden. Det är så äckligt med feta människor, jag skulle aldrig tillåta mig själv att bli tjock.’ Jag ser att hon väntar sig ett svar från mig, fast jag är osäker på vilken fråga hon har ställt. Jag förstår inte varför hon pratar så där om Rut. Elakt. Om vår snälla tant Rut. ‘Ja, hon är rätt tjock’, svarar jag till slut. Jag tillägger, som för att släta över, att mamma säger att Rut inte kan rå för det. ‘Vissa människor blir stora fast de äter väldigt lite, det är inte deras fel. Så kan det vara med henne’, säger jag. Plötsligt vet jag inte om jag verkligen tror på det. Att Rut inte har sig själv att skylla för hur hon ser ut. Jag blir osäker. [...] ‘Men du har rätt, det är faktiskt äckligt med feta människor.’ Det hettar i mina kinder när jag hör mina egna ord. Det går svindlande lätt att sluta försvara Rut. Och orden får mig att växa. Sandra ser nöjd ut. [...] ‘Jag fattar inte att vi inte har tänkt på det tidigare, Angelica, hur fet tant Rut faktiskt är’ [...]. ‘Vi har ju alltid vetat att hon är fet, men jag kan inte förstå att vi inte har brytt oss om det. Seriöst, det är så konstigt att vi inte har sett det tidigare.’"

12 Original quote: "Jag gör som Sandra säger. Håller mig gömd och tittar på Rut som fortfarande inte vet att vi är där. Som om hon vore ett djur och vi jägare. Jag vet att det är en slags lek som Sandra har bestämt, men något i mig skulle ändå vilja göra ett tecken till Rut. Det känns som om jag borde varna henne för något, utan att veta vad."

13 Original quote: "Hon sitter som vanligt i morfars kök. Utan att jag förstår varför, blir jag arg när jag ser henne sitta där på pallen med sina stabbiga ben brett isär. Som långa, blå iglar ringlar åderbråcken ner längs vaderna och det småblommiga tyget på hennes klänning spänner som ett klädstreck mellan knäna. Jag ser resåren på hennes underbyxor som lagt sig till rätta över magen, det går som en ekvatorring runt hennes kompakta kropp. Jag tänker att Sandra inte vill att hon ska vara här och inte jag heller, men när jag tittar på Sandra kan jag inte läsa några känslor alls i hennes ansikte."

14 Original quote: "Ett vänligt nät av skrattrynkor sprider sig över hennes ansikte och jag skäms över motviljan jag kände nyss. Det finns en trygghet i Ruts sätt att vara, att hon är som hon är."

15 Original quote: "Jag ser på Rut som sover. Hennes vänliga ansikte är alldeles avslappnat och jag tänker att jag saknar henne. Att jag skulle vilja gå in och sätta mig i hennes knä, som jag gjorde förr. Hennes lår är som

mjuka sittedynor och hon vajar alltid lite med benen så att det känns som att sitta i en båt på sjön.”

16 Original quote: “Varför har jag tyckt så illa om henne hela sommaren?”

17 Original quote: “Jag tänker att det var dumt av mig att föreslå det här, att klättringen upp för berget är för tuff för Rut när det är så här varmt.”

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