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Review of Maria Hellbom's *Älgkungen* (2022) and *Pärlbäraren* (2023)

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Älgkungen and Pärlbäraren by Maria Hellbom

(Blurb) In Maria Hellbom's many-layered, enchanting children's fantasy novels, two pre-teen protagonists team up with age-old, local mythical creatures and animals in order to save their rural community, its people, forests and animals from fire and exploitation.

Fantasy literature is a perfect playground for fast-paced adventures, strange creatures and magical incidents that dazzle readers. The best fantasy novels also tend to resonate deeply with themes and issues acutely relevant to the present-day societies within which they are written and read. Maria Hellbom's fantasy series for children, currently comprising the two novels *Älgkungen* (The Elk King) and *Pärlbäraren* (The Pearl Bearer), are a case in point. They are both set in the small, rural village of Vidås located in the county of Jämtland bordering westwards to Norway and northwards to Lapland. In this idyllic landscape with deep, lush forests, the girl protagonist Klara has spent all of her happy childhood summers. Her family has roots here extending far back in time. This is where her parents grew up and where her grandparents still live.

Klara has always felt a strong connection with the forests surrounding Vidås. Recently, she has formed an intense and direct bond with the local, magical forest creatures (called "vidugast"). The Elk King Reynir has become her special, secret friend ever since he sought her out and made her aware of her ability to speak and engage with Vidås's age-old, magical forest people. Together with Aron, a boy her own age, Klara is drawn into a series of highly dangerous adventures where both the future of the surrounding wild nature and her own family relations are at stake.

In both novels, Hellbom skilfully mixes elements from the child detective story with fascinating depictions of - sometimes chilling, sometimes humorous – encounters with odd, magical forest creatures from the local folklore. Exploring tensions in Klara's relationship with Aron, as well as the entangled interconnections among her own family members and relatives, Hellbom ensures that the exciting and entertaining adventures are given depth and complexity. At first, Aron comes across to Klara as a boring computer nerd obsessed with facts and figures. But as they gradually get to know one another, Aron comes out of his shell and proves to be a reliably resourceful friend and ally, who stands the test whether faced with a devastating forest fire or highly dangerous, aggrieved magical creatures. Together the two young protagonists do some successful sleuthing in the village archives, which reveals that the line between the human world and that of the forest folk is far thinner than they had expected. There are, in fact, magical creatures not only in the woods of Vidås, but also infiltrated among the villagers.

A fascinating trait of Hellbom's novels is that they subtly merge a deep concern for complex, historical, economical and class-related family and community relations with ecological awareness and an outspoken respect for diversity and the importance of all life forms, human as well as non-human. Klara is perceptive and picks up on awkward family silences and strained relations among her relatives. She refers to it as the "kinship muddle". For her, the magical adventures are a means to mature into a deeper understanding of her own family's complicated history. Gradually she gains insight into how her mother's wealthy family has kept interfering with that of her father's less well-to-do ancestors for generations.

She also learns that her mother's family once acquired land and forest in Vidås by ethically dubious means. However, Klara's curiosity, compassion and empathy for both human and non-human life forms empower her with the ability to heal past wrong-doings and bridge the gap between generations, as well as the different life-forms of Vidås that have to get along for their common good.

The novels may be the first two in a longer series with sequels yet to come. Still, Hellbom has already managed to build a solid fictional world where magic and realism co-exist and overlap in surprising ways. Local mythology, dialect and popular belief are brought to life and the force of magic is made tangibly real by being truly powerful, hence also dangerous. The second novel *Pärlbäraren* (The Pearl Bearer) takes a firm stand against deforestation. It also portrays a community that moves away from narrow-minded prejudice towards embracing diversity and equality. Aron's brown skin and Klara's Asian looks make them easy targets for menacing racial slurs and, as women of Asian origin, Klara's paternal grandmother and aunt Sunee have had their share of offensive male advances. Still, Hellbom definitely refrains from preaching political and ecological awareness. Instead, she makes such real-life issues appear an organic part of the story she so captivatingly tells. Klara and Aron's common strategy to battle injustice is to mediate and forgive. Their answer lies in helping each other out and choosing to do good, as a means of restoring enchantment to an injured world.

About

Älgkungen (The Elk King) by Maria Hellbom. Bonnier Carlsen, 2021, 349 pages.

Pärlbäraren (The Pearl Bearer) by Maria Hellbom, 2023, 353 pages.

Rights: Tiina Nevala, Bonnier Carlsen

Maria Hellbom is a psychologist specialised in cancer rehabilitation, who turned to writing fiction fairly late in life. In 2020 she submitted a manuscript to Bonnier Carlsen's nation-wide writing contest that eventually became her debut novel *Älgkungen*.

Älgkungen won the Children's Radio Prize (Barnradions bokpris) in 2022.

Pärlbäraren (The Pearl Bearer) has been nominated for the Children's Radio Prize 2023 and The Norrland Literary Prize (Norrlands litteraturpris) 2023