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# Survival Kits for Babies: Baby Box Books and Infant Temporality in Finnish Maternity Packages

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## Abstract

Maternity packages, introduced in 1938 by the Finnish state to counteract declining birth rates and infant mortality, have reached all newborns regardless of income or social status from 1949 onwards. The box is a unique phenomenon internationally and a significant part of the Finnish history of childhood as its contents mirror contemporaneous views on childhood. In 1982, a baby book was added to the box. Research has, however, kept focusing on the social aspects of the box, ignoring the baby books. In this article, we make up for the lack of scholarly interest in the baby box books by studying how they depict temporal normativity. Drawing on queer temporal studies (Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010), we introduce the terms *infant temporality*/ *baby time* to discuss the interplay of aesthetics and normative timelines. We claim that these books use bodily tempo, rhythm, movement, as well as sensory and tactile aspects to depict non-normative timelines, understood as infant temporality. Drawing on Hartmut Rosa (2019), we argue that the interplay between adult caregiver and infant encouraged by these books aims to achieve *resonance*, understood as presence and connection. In contrast to adult *acceleration*, we claim that these books, as part of their unique hybrid aesthetics, present infant temporality as *deceleration*. Reaching a vast number of Finnish families yearly, the baby box books provide a strong temporal discourse while promoting a resonant reproductive time. However, we find that while the books studied deviate from adult temporal normativity, infant temporality is still included in a normative reproductive timeline, sanctioned by the Finnish state. Hereby, the baby box books expose temporal complexities of our era.

**Keywords** Baby books · Infant temporality/baby time · Normative timelines · Resonance · Finnish maternity packages

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Extended author information available on the last page of the article

In a speech addressed to the United Nations in 2008, Finland's first female president Tarja Halonen drew attention to the long tradition of Finnish maternity packages as "the nation's gift to every new-born". The Finnish state began to distribute maternity boxes in 1938 to counteract the declining birth rate and the increase in infant mortality; but from 1949 onwards, they were given to all newborns regardless of income or social status (Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022). The box, issued by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela), contains baby clothes and other child-care essentials such as a sleeping bag, a towel, a feeding bib and a cuddly toy.<sup>1</sup> The box itself comes with a mattress and can be used as the baby's first bed. As Ella Näsi and Karoliina Koskenvuo (2022, p. 411) note, the baby box is still a very successful and popular social policy in Finland, where the benefit "can be obtained as a maternity package [...] or an alternative cash benefit. [...] The baby boxes are provided free of charge [...] to all pregnant mothers or adoptive parents residing in Finland, and they are accepted by 95 per cent of first-time parents." Over the years, the contents of the box have mirrored current views of Finnish children, child-care practices, and *reading*. From 1982 onwards, the package has included a baby book. Since these books reach an average of 30 000 Finnish families every year,<sup>2</sup> they have a vast societal impact. Despite this state support of early literacy, the baby box books have received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

In the baby box, prevailing attitudes and norms on health, well-being, population, society, nation, individuality, welfare and childhood converge (Taskinen, 2013; Haataja and Koskenvuo, 2017; Koivu, et al., 2020; Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022). The maternity package is both a unique phenomenon internationally and a significant part of the Finnish history of childhood. Each year, the launch of a box with a new collection of baby clothes is a matter of lively debate covered by media, both at home and abroad (Tierney, 2011; Lee, 2013; Pells, 2016; Haataja and Koskenvuo, 2017; Smirnova and Selänne, 2018; Finnwatch, 2019; Koivu, et al., 2020). So far, research has focused on the social and didactic aspects of the maternity box. We, however, want to focus exclusively on the included baby books.

For this article, we have chosen to take a close look at the baby box books distributed during the 2000s. The maternity package has not included a new book every year, and some titles have been offered more than once. The following 16 titles were included in the maternity packages distributed from 2000 to 2022:<sup>3</sup>

**2000–2001:** Cacciatore et al.: *Adventures in my Arms (Syliseikkailu / Äventyr i famnen, 2000)*.

**2002:** *Look what I can do! (Katso, minä osaan jo! / Titta, jag kan!, 2002)*

**2003:** Mangold: *Nice to Watch! (Kiva katsella! / Kul att titta!, 1993)*

**2004:** Cacciatore et al.: *Rhyme Games (Loruleikki / Lek med rim, 2002)*.

**2005:** Cacciatore et al.: *Dance Magic (Taikatanssi / Lycka är att dansa, 2004)*.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the maternity package, see Kela's webpage. Accessed March 14, 2023 from <https://www.kela.fi/web/en/maternitypackage>.

<sup>2</sup> See Kela's statistics on the use of the baby box. Accessed March 14, 2023 from <https://www.kela.fi/maternity-grant-history>.

<sup>3</sup> The information has been gathered from The Finnish Institute for Children's Literature library database and Kela's webpages. Unless specifically commented on, all titles and quotes from the baby box books are our own translations.

**2006:** *Adventures in my Arms* or Cacciatore et al.: *Tumble Time (Rymyretki / Huller om buller, 2005)*.

**2007:** *Rhyme Games*.

**2008–2009:** Marttinen and Vasko: *The Happy Rhyming Caterpillar (Iloinen lorutoukka / Jollerlarven, 2007)*.

**2010:** Marttinen and Peltola: *The Little Reindeer's Day (Pikku poron päivä / Lilla renens resa, 2009)* or *Rhyme Games*.

**2011:** *The Little Reindeer's Day* or *Rhyme Games*.

**2012:** *Rhyme Games* or *The Happy Rhyming Caterpillar*.

**2013:** *The Happy Rhyming Caterpillar*.

**2014:** Pulli and Bast: *Rhyming in my Arms (Loruttele sylitellen / Famnramsor, 2013)*.

**2015:** Pulli and Hiltunen: *Together with the Baby (Vauvan kanssa / Tillsammans med babyn, 2014)*.

**2016:** Pulli and Pertamo: *Cockadoodledoo (Kukkuluuruu = Kuckeliku, 2016)*.

**2017:** Suvilehto and Hiltunen: *Fun and Games with the Baby (Lystileikit vauvan kanssa = Lek och skoj med babyn, 2016)*.

**2018:** Vasko: *My Strawberry Patch (Oma maa mansikka / Smultronstället, 2016)*.

**2019:** Pulli and Hiltunen: *The Baby in my Arms (Sylityksin vauvan kanssa / Babyn i min famn, 2019)*.

**2020–2021:** Tamminen and Hiltunen: *Hushaby Baby (Tuuti lullan lasta / Vÿss, vÿss, 2020)*.

**2022:** Sironen-Hänninen and Hiltunen: *Drops of Happiness (Ilo pizaroi! / Glädjedroppar!, 2021)*.

All of these books are, as is traditionally the case for baby picturebooks, hardback, no larger than 18×18, with pages made of thick cardboard (cf. Nodelman, 1988, p. 22).

While *Look what I can do!* and *Nice to Watch!* distributed in 2002 and 2003 are translations from, respectively, French and German, the remaining 14 baby books have been exclusively created in Finland for the maternity package and hence constitute the primary material for this study. These 14 baby books have captured our interest because of their hybrid function as parenting manuals and baby picturebooks. What is the nature of their unique aesthetics? What norms and ideals about childhood and parenthood do they convey? In order to answer these questions, we will argue that these books set out to introduce a specific temporality associated with adult caregivers taking care of and spending time with their newborns. Drawing on literary and sociological temporality studies, as well as picturebook studies, we coin and use the concept of *infant temporality* – also referred to as *baby time* for stylistic reasons – in order to capture how temporality works in these books. The concept stands for a non-normative timeline that stresses babies' need for *deceleration* in contrast to the normative, adult accelerating timelines of late modern society (cf. Rosa, 2019). The concept of infant temporality is further understood, in contrast to adult onrushing time, as focusing on *resonance* in terms of presence, bodily contact, deep connection, as well as feelings of belonging and attachment (cf. Rosa, 2019). Our claim will be that, as a format, baby box books use temporality in ways that suggest how babies

add temporalities deviant from the ones parents have been involved in before having a baby.

Our article will begin with a brief statement of our view of baby books in the light of previous research, followed by an exposé on how our term *infant temporality* emanates from and builds on previous temporality studies. We then move on to recap previous research on the maternity box and its baby books, before presenting and exploring specific cases of infant temporality in the selected baby box books from the 2000s.

## The Aesthetics of Baby Books

In line with Lian Beveridge (2017, p. 19), we define baby books as picturebooks for babies and toddlers up to 2 years of age. Regrettably, these books are often treated as objects rather than literature. Hence, few literary scholars have taken a serious interest in them (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2005, p. 325; Hurme, 2006, p. 14; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011, p. 1; Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2018, p. 149). Perry Nodelman (1988, p. 36) is, however, among the first children's literature researchers to point out the complex skills needed to read picturebooks, including baby books. Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer (2005, 2018) have likewise convincingly argued that the visual grammar that infants must possess in order to interpret images in early concept books is quite complex. They also raise the important point that baby books support literary competence, and should therefore be regarded as a form of "pre-literature", since they constitute "a preliminary narrative form. Through oral storytelling, which establishes a connection between the pictures or hints at the relation between an image and a real object, young children will be introduced to a form of narrative" (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2005, p. 342). A few studies also discuss the reading of baby books. Whereas Betsy Hearne (1992) introduces chewing as reading, Lian Beveridge (2017) sees the sensuality of chewing as part of a toddler's reading process associated with early sexuality.

We have also set out to study the baby books distributed with the Finnish maternity package from a literary point of view. We share the idea that baby books have the potential to be a form of pre-literature that constitutes an infant's first meeting with visual and textual art and narrative. Yet, we acknowledge that the aesthetic and literary qualities of these books vary greatly. For example, some years the maternity box has contained mass-produced Central-European baby books of poor quality, such as *Look What I Can Do!* and *Nice to Watch!*, which present a cavalcade of rather odd objects that infants are supposed to find interesting. According to Vuokko Virtanen (2006, p. 32), the reason behind the import of these bland mass-market books was economic, since foreign originals were cheaper and quicker to produce. Clearly, the kinds of books included in the maternity box are a result of conflicting artistic, pedagogical, ideological, and economic interests that, at times, have resulted in mainstream and bland books. Still, the baby box books deserve to be studied as pre-literature, since they reach such a large audience and may well be many new parents' and their infants' first encounter with books aimed at the very youngest.

As we will show, one of the many discourses converging in the baby box books specifically produced for the maternity package is temporality. Since there are no earlier studies of temporality in baby books, we want to draw attention to how these seemingly simple books are part of a larger discourse of temporal normativity. As James Reid and David Swann (2019, p. 319) note: “All versions of the baby box convey symbolic messages.” In our view, temporality is such a “message”.

## Time, Temporal Normativity and Infant Temporality

Time and temporality are fundamental aspects of all literature, as well as of the study of literature. Thomas M. Allen (2018) in fact identifies a “temporal turn” in literary criticism, when time is re-actualised as an analytical category within Literary Time Studies. More specifically, our understanding of temporality in the baby box books builds on queer temporal literary studies, which have critiqued late modern normative temporalities.<sup>4</sup> Since the notion of linear time builds on the idea of aging and growth as progression and reproduction, linear time – from a queer perspective – is considered “straight” (Freeman, 2010, p. xii). Jack Halberstam (2005, p. 1) argues that normative timelines – which typically include maturation, marriage and reproduction – can be interrupted by “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” emanating from queer subcultures. Other ways to disrupt normative timelines include shifting focus onto depictions of, e.g., anachronisms, non-maturation, and no future (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Freeman, 2010). Queer temporal literary studies make us aware that bodies age in various ways and that norms concerning maturation and development vary across time and space (Stockton, 2009; Pugh, 2011; Joosen, 2018; Malewski, 2021). Within children’s literature studies, Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) has coined the concept *growing sideways* in order to capture such non-normative timelines when growing up queer. Similar to queer temporality, we argue that the concept of *infant temporality* constitutes a non-normative temporality with the potential to disrupt prevailing normative timelines.

Elizabeth Freeman’s (2010) concept of *chrononormativity* or *temporal normativity* underpins our upcoming analysis, as a technique through which institutional forces enact, regulate, and discipline individuals with clock time, biological time and reproductive time. Freeman (2010, p. 3) argues that everyday life is divided into imagined time slots, which give those who follow the given norms an advantage. We argue that there is a need for a nuanced methodology for uncovering temporal normativity in literature aimed at babies.

Equally important for our understanding of temporality in the baby box books is German sociologist

Hartmut Rosa’s widely influential theory of time. Rosa has introduced the linked concepts of *social acceleration* and *deceleration* in order to demonstrate how time is speeded up in late modern contemporary societies. According to Rosa (2019, p. 64), contemporary temporality consists of the following three dimensions: techno-

<sup>4</sup> Queer temporal studies build on a Foucauldian view of time (see e.g. Mona Lilja, 2018).

logical acceleration, social acceleration and the acceleration of life rhythm. None of these competing forces is positive or negative as such. Instead, what matters is whether they foster *resonance*, which is understood as a feeling of deep connection with others.

Although time and temporality are of great importance in all literature, they have a special significance within children's literature studies and keep recurring in discussions of what children are and what children's literature is.<sup>5</sup> Emma Uprichard (2008) emphasises how childhood studies and children's literature studies tie temporality to conceptualizations of childhood. According to her, temporality is the defining feature of both children and childhood. Clémentine Beauvais (2015) develops this train of thought further by studying how adult power and child empowerment have been debated for decades. Beauvais (2015, p. 24) concludes that for children, power lies within possessing more future time, and hence potential to act, in relation to adults who may have power, but less time left to exert it: “[a] child growing up is not *sub-jected* to the passing of time; its elongating limbs and developing existence *are* the passing of time”. Like Uprichard, Beauvais concludes that children and childhood are not only defined by time, they *are* time.

Queer temporal literary studies have drawn our attention to how non-normative temporalities can interrogate chrononormative timelines in children's literature. Hence, studying time and temporality may give us a new and deeper understanding of the baby box books. Queer temporal studies' view of time helps us address the books' deviant and competing timelines, which are primarily associated with age, understood as infancy and parenthood. Consequently, we aim to show that the books studied contain non-chrononormative temporalities that define babies' bodies and timelines as different from those of adults. In other words, queer temporal studies inform our concept of infant temporality in order to address the age-related gap in how babies and their caretakers perceive time.

## Studying the Maternity Package

The Finnish maternity package was introduced in order to compensate for the lack of essentials during wartime and to counteract the decreasing birth rate and increasing child mortality rate. The contents of the box have over time mirrored contemporaneous attitudes towards childhood and child-care. For example, the name “maternity package” was recently criticized for being gendered and too exclusively tied to motherhood, hence ignoring other vital caregivers such as fathers; and today, the package is colloquially referred to as a baby box or parent package (Hanhinen, 2018; Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022, p. 421). The box contains clothes, essentials, information material and – since 1982 – a baby picturebook.

The maternity package as such has received plenty of scholarly interest, mainly by researchers within childhood studies, social studies and pedagogy. These studies hardly ever mention the books in any great detail. The issues raised and debated tend to focus on the success of this national policy in terms of welfare and health, as well

<sup>5</sup> See the forthcoming volume on temporality and children's literature edited by Mia Österlund, et al.

as ideological issues, such as gender equality and decolonisation (cf. Suvilehto, 2014, 2015, 2018; Reid and Swann, 2019; Koivu, et al., 2020; Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022). A recent research project called “Baby Box as an Emotional Object: the Sociomaterial Experiences of the Finnish Welfare State from the 1930s to the Present” (2019-) studies the intergenerational meanings and memories related to the maternity package from a socio-cultural-material perspective. On their project website, the researchers emphasize that “the baby box is extremely rich with subjective and collective experiences that are multilayered, even sometimes contradictory”.<sup>6</sup>

One prominent trend within the study of the baby box is to study the launch of the concept in other countries. In addition, Finnish social institutions closely monitor the reception of the maternity box. One such survey shows that astoundingly 92% of those who received the box in 2006 acquainted themselves with the included book *Tumble Time* (Miettunen, et al., 2006, p. 10). Some of the recipients praised the book for its bright colours and for supporting early interaction between caregiver and child, whereas the didactic elements and the bilingual text received both praise and reproof (Miettunen, et al., 2006, p. 10).

When studied, the baby box books are rarely regarded as children’s literature or picturebooks. The books combine tactile, visual and auditory repertoires in order to introduce the infant to rhymes, singing games and visual storytelling. Often the books have been produced in cooperation with a group of child-care experts. Pirjo Suvilehto (2014, p. 18), who has studied Finnish baby books published from 1970 to 2010 including the baby box books, concludes that these books – especially the ones published during the decades around the turn of the millennium – are characterised by prevailing pedagogical and psychological trends within education. Hence, the books’ didactic agenda is overt and invites research on children’s language development, early interaction and (gender) education, rather than on literary and aesthetic merits (cf. Suvilehto, 2014). We would like to add that this trend is especially visible in the books from the 2000s, which combine a normative instructional text solely directed to the reading adult, with playful content – such as images, rhymes and singing games – addressed to both infants and their co-reading adults. Consequently, these books are more or less awkward, hybrid mixtures of parental manuals and picturebooks, characterised by a striking double address (cf. Wall, 1991).

The hybrid baby box books are predominantly illustrated with simple figures and forms in strong colours, which lend them a uniform appearance. None of them are so-called “early concept books”, i.e. books presenting a sequence of objects. Still, they resemble classic infant picturebooks in that they seldom tell linear stories (cf. Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2005; Hurme, 2006, p. 9; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011, p. 4). As part of a state welfare project, they show a growing awareness during the 2000s of infants’ cognitive abilities to perceive images and colours, as well as the need to portray a wider ethnic range of babies. From 2004 onwards, no imported mass-market baby books have been distributed with the maternity packages. A further typical feature of these books is that they are bilingual. All books include texts

<sup>6</sup> See the project’s website <https://projects.tuni.fi/aitiyspakkauksenkokemushistoria/in-english/>, accessed March 14, 2023.



in the two national languages, Finnish and Swedish.<sup>7</sup> The books, therefore, stage an infant temporality that comprises an ideal, living, multilingual society where different languages – at least Finnish and Swedish – co-exist on the pages.

In the following chapters, we will analyse how time is written into the baby box books and show how they, thereby, stage infant temporality. We will argue that these widely distributed books are sites of negotiation for contesting timelines attached to age. The baby box books simultaneously embody infant temporality and societal norms on how time is best or most healthily, and hence most economically, spent with the baby.

## In Resonance with the Rhythm of Baby Time

Although babies are at the very beginning of their life span, temporality is a vital part of the baby box books studied here. First, these books are made to be read several times in a manner that encourages repetition and circularity. Secondly, as books produced, distributed and institutionally sanctioned by the Finnish state, they have a strong didactic purpose.

In Elina Pulli's and Mikko Hiltunen's *Together with the Baby*, infant temporality is at centre stage. Baby time is made all the more visible as it is depicted in sharp contrast to adult temporality, which is regulated by clock time and characterised by galloping haste. The book comprises rhythmical verses that emphasise time and interactive games together with the baby, and informative text snippets addressed solely to the adult caregiver and placed in boxes at the bottom of the right-hand page of each spread. The information box on the very first spread tells adult caregivers that: "During the first weeks, the baby needs no toys. The adult's gaze, lap and familiar voice are enough" (Pulli and Hiltunen, 2014, p. [1–2]). On the following spread, (see Fig. 1) a baby is depicted resting in the lap of an adult caregiver.

The scene is calm and serene, and the baby lies relaxed with eyes closed. While we can see the whole baby, the adult is only visible as an arm and hand holding the infant. Significantly, the adult wears a wristwatch with an empty dial. The image suggests that while measuring and following clock time is part of the adult timeline, baby time sets in when in the presence of the newborn, and clock time is banished in favour of focusing on the baby here and now. The verse to the right on the spread also alludes to time:

Stroking, stroking your back,  
 you are safe in my lap.  
 Softly touching your leg and thigh,  
 as you settle down with a sigh.  
 Nestling in my arms,  
 we belong together.  
 Pulli and Hiltunen, 2014, p. [4]

<sup>7</sup> From 2007 onwards, beginning with *Rhyme Games*, Sami translations of the baby box books have been available as folders or as downloadable PDF-files from Kela's webpages. In 2022, however, *Drops of Happiness* was published in three separate bilingual editions in Finnish and Swedish, Finnish and Skolt Sami, and North Sami and Inari Saami.



Figure 1

Both texts in Finnish and Swedish describe how the adult caregiver touches the child's body in a calm and safe manner that emphasises their togetherness.

This book, along with others in our material, depicts baby time as a discursive, many-layered timeline of its own. Throughout *Together with the Baby*, baby time is explicitly depicted as a time of closeness and pleasure: "In you I see a new world, / in me you see warmth and safety. / Together we create the future." (Pulli and Hiltunen, 2014, p. [2]). Staying physically close to the newborn baby is presented as ideal parental behaviour. Baby time is, therefore, also body time. Mara Lee (2012, p. 8), who has explored the relations between queer temporality and time subversive pleasure, has shown that breaks, pauses and delays are intertwined with pleasure. She imagines that the feminist icon Luce Irigaray would express such pleasurable interaction and intimacy as "pleasure is time" (Lee, 2012, p. 16). The symbiotic and pleasurable baby time suggested in the baby box books can further, drawing on Rosa's theory of time, be understood as a pocket of resonance, i.e. a nick in the late modern accelerating timelines of adult life characterised by deceleration, presence, reassurance and bodily contact. The books' baby time is both institutional and democratic, yet not necessarily only part of a deceleration. Also acceleration can create resonance, based on the thrill and allure of the fast and action-packed. A prominent trait in the studied baby box books is, however, that the infant temporality staged is predominantly characterised by pleasure, presence, bodily touch and happiness.

The books studied contain hardly any time markers, which creates a feeling of there being an infinite amount of time available for being together: "You are in my arms, always beside me. / My little baby. / We kiss, we dance. / My little baby" (Pulli and Hiltunen, 2019, p. [2]). Baby time thereby suggests a break from the chrononormative timeline, since it advocates repetition, deceleration, slowing-down, reproduction, affirmation, care and small-scale living in opposition to adult normative timelines defined by clock time, regulation and accelerating rush.

Freeman (2010, p. 3) suggests that bodies incorporate time. We argue that baby time is expressed as time during which bodily tempo, such as the baby's rhythm and movements, organise existence. Research on and theory of temporality emphasise that rhythm is a central aspect of time. Rhythm is also at the heart of the baby box books. More subtly in terms of how the ideal time spent with the baby is orchestrated based on the baby's pace, but also overtly in that many of the books actively promote an oral-based tradition of rhymes and singing games.

## Baby Time Comes First! Presences and Absences of Infant Temporality

On average, Finnish citizens welcome their first child between the ages of 29–31 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021). Hence, the gap between me-time before the baby is born and you-time when the baby has arrived is considerable. This explains the striking conformity of the baby box books. They all centre on promoting time together with the baby as a temporality of its own and at odds with adult societal timelines. These books tell us that the Finnish state promotes deceleration and a reproductive, repetitive timeframe – a baby time – at odds with accelerated, adult timelines.<sup>8</sup> We find the baby box books interesting precisely because of this tension within their temporal structures. Baby box books from the 2000s put the depiction of babies' interaction with their caregivers first. This is often executed subtly without explicitly naming how the two are related. Especially in *Rhyming in my Arms*, *Together with the Baby*, *Fun and Games with the Baby* and *The Baby in my Arms*, the illustrations focus on depicting the baby's body, whereas the adult's presence is signalled only by visible body parts, as in Fig. 1. The consequence of including the baby in the visual narration, while excluding the adult from it, serves to strengthen the focus on infant temporality as a time of meeting the baby's needs by engaging in joyful and interactive play, such as affirmation exercises, word play, singing, touching and moving together.

In order to put baby time first, some of the books go as far as to leave out all literary content altogether. For example, *Adventures in my Arms*, *Dance Magic* and *Tumble Time* consist of short, instructional texts for the adult on how to spend time with the baby, and bright, simple images meant to stimulate the baby. Most baby box books, however, use rhymes and playful, interactive elements to stage an ideal, happy infant temporality. Togetherness, but on the baby's terms, is at the heart of the books. In many of them, the personal pronouns “I-you” and “mine-yours” are repeatedly linked together: “You are soft and sweet, / so strong and able. / I give you strength, / you show me the way. / I draw the map, / around and around your body.” (Pulli and Pertamo, 2016, p. [5–6]). In *Rhyming in my Arms*, words referring to the adult's lap keep being repeated.

From a picturebook point of view, *Rhyming in my Arms* is one of the most intriguing titles. The illustrator Bast has chosen not to depict a realistic every-day setting,

<sup>8</sup> To make this possible, Finnish law grants parents social benefits, such as maternity grant, pregnancy and parental allowance, family leave up to approximately 14 months, and an allowance for the home-care of children under 3 years of age. See Kela's webpage <https://www.kela.fi/families>, accessed March 3, 2023.

but a fantasy landscape inhabited by chubby toddlers dressed up as berries and animals.<sup>9</sup> In the background, the observant reader can discern adult hands drawn in white lines or soft colours, which hold, stroke or cuddle the toddlers (Fig. 2).

The hands perform the movements proposed in the informative text. In addition, the cover illustration visualises subtly the adult presence in the background. The cover features two children. One child stands behind an orange elephant, whose shape resembles that of a large hand; whereas another large hand, almost invisibly drawn in a white and yellow line, lifts the acorn-shaped hat from the other child's head (Fig. 3).

The choice to drastically tone down the adult presence in the illustrations and to depict the child characters as hybrid animals and plants wearing caps with animal ears or headgear that make them look like berries has a profound impact on the infant temporality. In analogy with the Romantic, dehumanising practice of animalising young children (see e.g. Higonnet, 1998; Lassén-Seger, 2006), childhood is separated from adulthood as a different species associated with an idyllic closeness to nature. The effect is further strengthened by the text referring to the children having animal body parts, such as “snouts” and “paws”. As this example demonstrates, the infant temporality advocated in the baby box books can be imperilled, for instance by depicting the child characters in a manner that makes them less human and essentially different from the adult caregiver.

The infant temporality communicated in the books is, overall, predominantly characterised as ideally idyllic. Time spent together with the baby is depicted as harmonically interactive and conspicuously free from technology, bad timing, and any feelings of displeasure. How to soothe a crying and screaming baby may be mentioned in the instructional texts, but the imagery only shows pleasantly smiling, sleeping, playing and laughing babies.



Figure 2

<sup>9</sup> Children dressed up as animals also appear in *The Happy Rhyming Caterpillar*.

Figure 3



The books' combination of sound advice to caregivers and material meant to entertain and stimulate the baby presupposes a temporality that stretches into the future, since the adult is encouraged to act in such a manner that the baby's needs are fulfilled so that s/he can grow and develop in the best manner possible. The books keep returning to scenes from a baby's everyday life, such as nap time, bath time, playtime and bedtime. Still, not every intimate aspect of baby life is portrayed. Most obviously, there are no baby box books from the 2000s that depict or even mention breastfeeding or nursing as part of infant temporality. The lack of breastfeeding scenes is all the more striking as Finnish mothers tend to nurse their babies at least for a year, if not longer. Näsi and Koskenvuo (2022, p. 418–419) confirm this when they note that feeding bottles in the baby box from 1998 to 2000 were removed when “it was established that breastfeeding has various positive health benefits for both the mother and the baby”. Instead, nipple creams and breast pads for the mother were introduced to encourage breastfeeding (Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022, p. 419). Still, the lack of nursing scenes is not unique for the Finnish baby box books. B.J. Epstein (2017) shows that breastfeeding is a taboo topic in all Western picturebooks, in part because the depiction of breasts is too closely connected to a sexualised discourse, but also because of the widespread use of breastmilk substitutes. Since the Finnish health authorities have kept recommending that mothers nurse their children throughout the 2000s, we suspect that an anxiety about depicting bare breasts lies behind the lack of nursing scenes in the baby box books.

## Whose Baby Time Is It?

A conspicuous trait of the majority of baby box books from the 2000s is that their paratexts – typically placed on the back cover of the books – refer to academic expertise within developmental psychology and early childhood education. The back cover of, for instance, *Dance Magic*, presents a long list of experts consulted when making the book, ranging from specialists in child psychiatry, sexual health, choreography, graphic design to ophthalmology. The list even includes personal expertise of parenting. The absence of any children’s literature or picturebook expertise is, however, glaring. Moreover, the sheer length of the paratext verges on being overwhelming – even intimidating – in its eagerness to persuade caregivers of the need to fill the shared baby time with particular, societally sanctioned content. The books hereby stage an infant temporality that is paradoxically defined by both deceleration and resonance understood as closeness and intimacy in the private sphere, and a strikingly pressurising, future-bound discourse on how to be the best possible parent in order to give one’s baby the best possible chances in life.

The infant temporality advocated by the books studied here is, furthermore, deeply rooted in attachment theory, without any acknowledgement of this theory having been scrutinised and criticised by feminist research (see Burman, 2007). The texts on the back covers of several of the books from the 2000s explicitly mention the importance of attachment. For example, the text on the back of *Rhyming in my Arms* claims that “The attachment between child and parent is strengthened when the child is held, when you hug and play together”, and on the back of *The Baby in my Arms* it says that playing together supports “the interplay and attachment among parent and child”. The choice of words manifests how strongly these books are rooted in developmental psychology, and how their purpose as parenting manuals for adult caregivers easily overshadows their purpose as entertaining and aesthetically enjoyable baby books. The discrepancy between the expert advice, which tends to be expressed in forceful clichés, and the basic, practical activities presented in the books – such as holding, caressing and hugging one’s baby – is obvious. As a result, the infant temporality advocated is a junction where many, sometimes conflicting, institutional discourses meet.

The baby box books juggle two purposes simultaneously that are hard to unite. One is to advocate a carefree baby time filled with deceleration and resonance. The other is to promote an ideal, institutionally sanctioned “good” baby time that demands something from the adult caregiver and is only superficially private and intimate. We therefore presume that these books differ from other baby books, since their institutional and didactic agendas raise the question of whose baby time is depicted: the baby’s and caregiver’s private, decelerated time together, or an idealised situation dominated by normative advice from experts advocating governmentally sanctioned resonance and deceleration?

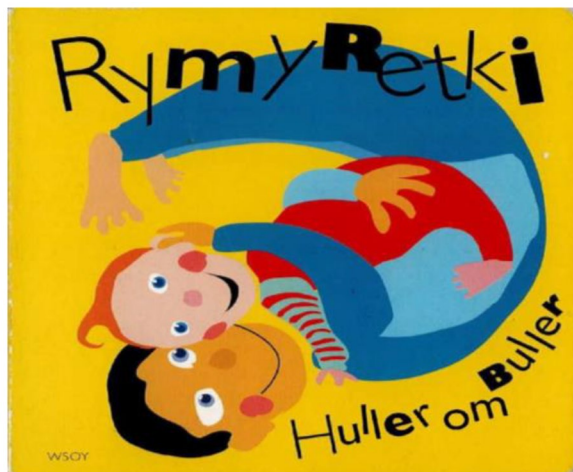
When the baby box books in 2006 begin to acknowledge the importance of fatherhood, the agenda also permeates the depiction of infant temporality. *Tumble Time* sets out to strengthen an ideal of fatherhood sanctioned by a long list of medical and psychological experts listed on the back cover. The core message, that the child should be at the centre of attention, whereas the father should direct all his attention onto



the child, is clearly signalled on the cover which depicts a child hugging, and being hugged by, an adult with traditionally male traits, such as short hair and blue clothes. The two smiling characters embrace, but whereas the child looks straight out of the picture establishing an intimate eye contact with the reader, the adult character's gaze is turned towards the child (Fig. 4). The normative text on the back cover confirms that: “from the adult's gaze, the baby can discern that s/he is affirmed”.

*Tumble Time* is influenced by experiences from two national networks on fatherhood and family life organised by The Family Federation of Finland (Cacciatore, 2006, p. 2; Suvilehto, 2014, p. 15). The book features the father as the only adult character present, which shows an enlightened awareness of families being diverse and not necessarily complying with the traditional model of a nuclear family. The text on the back cover stresses again the importance of kinship and resonance in order to “support, not only infants' sense of self-esteem, but also the unity between child and adult”, but goes on to claim that a different set of rules apply to fathers engaging with their children: “Men touch children in a different manner than women, and the child needs contact with both”. We find that the gendered view of infant temporality proposed is astoundingly biased and, hence, undermines the air of scientific expertise behind the book that the paratext wishes to uphold. *Tumble Time* is one of the baby box books that contain no literary text, only instructions for the adult caregiver. The baby time depicted is explicitly described as a phase of attachment based on touch. The claim that men touch children in a different manner surfaces in the instructive text, which not only proposes quiet cuddling, but also more forceful interaction and rough play. In contrast to other baby box books, which implicitly advocate a supposedly softer, “female” approach to interacting with children, fathers are encouraged to “wrestle” and “romp with the baby” and help the baby “climb increasingly higher” (Cacciatore, et al., 2005, p. [9–12]). The latter suggestion comes, however, with a warning: “Don't let go!”, which reveals a hidden fear and distrust in male caregivers being able to control such vigorous play (Cacciatore, et al., 2005, p. [9–10]). The appeal for control shows that the gendered infant temporality proposed to fathers in this book, despite its intentional progressiveness, is not only stereotypical but also

Figure 4



infused with a fear that the male manner of interacting with the child may get out of hand.

As we have argued throughout this article, most of the baby box books from the 2000s are – like *Tumble Time* – encumbered with an intent to teach rather than entertain their audience or provide them with enjoyable reading experiences. The appeal and address is so didactic that the books’ intent to be playful occasionally implodes. Out of sheer benevolence, many of the books fail to create an enjoyable reading experience. They do, however, succeed in establishing a variety of infant temporalities.

There is a strong connection between how temporality is narrated in the baby box books and how temporal normativity is promoted by the Finnish state. Infant temporality, prominently at odds with chrononormativity, becomes, in the hands of a welfare state’s support programme, an expected, desired norm. In this way, baby box books tell us something about timelines and normativity in Western welfare states; in fact, these books make visible how temporal orders are negotiated on different structural levels, from overarching governmental initiatives, such as the maternity package, to individual levels, where families use the baby books.

## Conclusion: Institutionally Sanctioned Pockets of Resonance

The baby box is still part of the Finnish welfare state’s agenda to promote the health of newborns and their caregivers and is considered both a social and a political success (Näsi and Koskenvuo, 2022). It is also considered “a shared experience connecting generations” (Koivu, et al., 2020, p. 28). Approaching the baby books distributed in the package from the point of view of temporality has enabled us to uncover previously unnoticed aspects of the books. Whereas many health effects of the maternity package are followed up and reported on, the baby books are regarded as less influential on the health of babies and their parents; hence, they are not evaluated as frequently. We, however, have aimed to reveal how much they do tell us about how having a baby in a late modern, post-industrial society, means adapting to a different time order with other schedules and timelines, since the baby’s life depends on the care given. As we have shown, time well spent, deceleration, adaptation to the baby’s pace and timelines are at stake.

Our take on temporality has been informed mainly by queer temporal studies linked to normativity, age and social theory. In our attempt to show how baby box books utilize temporality, we have drawn especially on Freeman’s concept of chrononormativity or temporal normativity, and on Rosa’s sociological theory of time. As we have demonstrated, the baby box books from the 2000s stage the time adult caregivers spend with their infants as a form of infant temporality. This baby time can be perceived as a non-normative timeline, since it – from the perspective of the adult caregiver – advocates deceleration and resonance in the form of an uninterrupted focus on presence and us-time with the baby. The advice shared on how to bring about such an ideal baby time together with a content and happy infant abound, yet only one of the books studied<sup>10</sup> encourages reading together or shows any books in

<sup>10</sup> *Adventures in my Arms*.



the illustrations. In fact, the baby box books favour an oral tradition of rhymes and singing games ahead of reading and are, as such, related to non-normative timelines in that they presuppose a slowing down.

In our analyses, we have argued that infant temporality – understood as pockets of resonance when adult caregivers set aside their own timelines or shift them to suit those of their babies – is characterised by competing temporal discourses. The baby time depicted in these books is so obviously framed by institutional discourses of the perception and use of time, as well as what it means to be a child or an adult, that while it is a decelerating non-normative timeline, it is simultaneously incorporated in normative temporality, that is, in sanctioned reproductive timelines. However, such timelines are inherently deviant.

Examining what contemporary baby box books are currently addressing via temporality reveals a number of things. Firstly, infant temporality is enforced as a norm, in all its non-normative declarations. Apparently, there is a place for infant temporality in Finnish society. Finland recently implemented new legislation on shared parental leave, and has a history of extensive leave in comparison to other countries. This context is of considerable importance, since the Finnish state makes sure that there is paid time to spend with one's baby.

The baby box books studied here portray infant temporality as a time when the baby is cherished, stimulated, kept safe and affirmed. As we have shown, queer studies ascribe queer temporality the potential to be a means of resistance (Lee, 2012, p. 8), which harmonises with Rosa's notion of democracy as time consuming (Lijster, et al., 2019). As a result, the baby box books exist in the intersection between institutional proposals and a time of pleasure.

We have shown that temporality is at the heart of the unique aesthetics of the baby box books from the 2000s. These books are part of the welfare state's concern with equality for every Finnish baby. Infant temporality is, in many ways, promoted in contradiction to how Finnish society is organized, striving towards acceleration and productivity. When it comes to newborn babies, the Finnish state hands out baby box books that promote a temporality at odds with other societal temporalities. Thus, what would be expected to be a non-normative time, infant temporality, is in fact the inflicted norm.

In our examples, we discern a certain kind of infant temporality: a period which creates a non-synchronism in baby box books as babies inherently belong to reproductive, repetitive timelines. Is not reproductive time already part of normative timelines? one might ask. Surely reproductive time is central to heteronormativity and, thus, included in normative timelines. However, read through the parameter of age, babies' timelines deviate from adult on-rushing temporalities. The shift from such accelerating adult time to infant temporalities is what most parents experience when having an infant. The feeling of being torn between competing timelines might be profound. However, there is no single mark of such a dilemma in the material; on the contrary, adults are absorbed by their babies and by the infant temporality. *Nota bene*, the baby time spent together is strikingly an affair between the adult caregiver and child. In our understanding, infant temporality as a concept is influenced by queer theory. Babies make ruptures in normative time from an adult point of view. They

disturb adult timelines. What baby box books seem to be doing is to convince and train the parent more than the infant.

Infant temporality emanates from the baby's needs. At the same time, the concept of baby time is far from unambiguous, but fundamentally drenched in acceleration understood as the baby growing. The maternity package also contains baby clothes in the smallest sizes, which the baby is expected to grow out of quite quickly. The baby box's content thus signifies a governmental culture of care that sees infant temporality as both a time of moving growth and stagnant safety.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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