

Det skeva rummet / The Skewed Room

Relating Queer Relationships and Literary Settings in Tove Jansson's Novels

While the research on Tove Jansson has been extensive, and, while she in later years has been regarded as somewhat of a queer icon, the actual queer theoretical readings of her works have been few and scarce. However, it is a well-regarded fact that the characters Thingummy and Bob (*Finn Family Moomintroll*, 1948) are stand ins for Tove Jansson and her first female love, theater director Vivica Bandler – in Swedish the names Tofslan and Vifslan are a clear reference, that is lost in the English translation. Moreover, Too-ticki is known to represent Jansson's life partner graphic artist Tuulikki Pietilä.

What is less discussed is the abundance of other queer relationships and characters to explore in Jansson's later work and novels, which is just now starting to become of more interest in literary research (Lahdenperä 2022; Wells 2019; Österlund 2016; Antas 2014).

In my, yet unwritten, dissertation *Det skeva rummet*, or, as I have translated it into English *The Skewed Room. Relating Queer Relationships and Literary Settings in Tove Jansson's Novels*, I explore queer relationships and how they relate to the settings in Jansson's novels. My aim with this study is to 1) add to the body of queer readings of Tove Jansson by discussing the interplay between character depiction and setting, 2) this is done by exploring how queerness relates to physical space, specifically the homes of queer people, and moreover 3) to explore the tensions between the queer theoretical concepts queer and *skev* in relation to how I use them in my analysis of Jansson's works.

Skev was first introduced in literary studies in Sweden in 2005 as an alternative and complement to “queer” and a translation of the Norwegian *skeiv* in literary studies. The coining of the concept was an attempt to introduce a broader analysis of queer in Nordic literary studies. While queer as a concept pointed to sexuality in relation to heteronormativity, *skev* was broader and included other deviations from normativity than sexuality and gender expression. Via this maneuver, the concept queer was meant to keep its specific impact in relation to sexuality and avoid the risk of watering it down (Heggestad, Karlsson & Williams 2005:3).

Much like queer, *skev* also encompasses an unwillingness, and sometimes inability, of complying with the rules associated with one's biological sex (Harjunen 2020:40). In Finnish, the word “vino”, which means crooked, is used as a translation for *skev*. *Skev* does not yet have

an equivalent in English. Hilda Jakobsson (2020) has proposed “skewed” and “bent” as possible translations, and in the title of this paper I refer to her suggested concept. However, skewed does not fully encompass *skev*, so today, and until a sharp equivalent is developed, I will be using *skev* untranslated.

Queer readings have traditionally been focused on queer leakages (Rosenberg 2002) in a heteronormative canon, places where a text cracks and reveals something queer, or allows itself to be read as queer. With time queer readings have been applied to explicitly queer works as well (Björklund 2018:8). As I said, *skev* is meant to be a wider concept, coined to encompass and study non-normative constellations and identities, and to point out all things that chafe or break against normativity, without necessarily linking it explicitly to sexuality or gender expression. In a literary text, what is *skev* is whatever stands out, is worrying or annoying. With *skev*, the disturbance is key. A *skev* reading is focused on what unbalances and destabilizes normativity (Heggstad, Karlsson & Williams 2005:3). *Skev* applies to whatever is bent, sideways, and gives a feeling of something being “off”. It’s not meant to replace queer, but to complement it, and expand into areas where queer might not reach (Jakobsson & Österholm 2022:10f).

Skev can be used both as theory and method (Franck 2005, Österholm 2012); an analytical term as well as a method of reading, much in the same way that we do queer readings (Björklund 2018). The *skev* theoretical frame is much what I just described, an expansion of and a complement to queer, and the study of chafing and disturbance in a text. It also encompasses a spatiality and temporality, and the way certain characters or narratives are unable to fit into a normative timeframe (Jakobsson & Österholm 2022:14; Bond Stockton 2009; Malewski 2001). The *skev* method is looking for the places in the text that wobble, whether it be characters, narratives, language, or something else. It might also be allowing the analysis itself to become *skev*, by, for example, allowing feelings or senses to become a part of the method (Jakobsson & Österholm 2022:15).

In my dissertation I use *skev* as a theory of non-normativity and as a method of reading literary text by addressing such crookedness in texts, that is characters, narratives or settings. I also see a point in combining *skev* with queer. When using queer, I wish to emphasize sexuality and gender expressions that go against a cis-hetero norm, while *skev* is used to look for the places in the text where the hidden queer thematic becomes obvious, where something chafes too much

to be ignored. I also use *skev* specifically for the spatiality that it encompasses, as a method for approaching the settings in Jansson's novels.

My motivation for this is that I want to explore and expose the queerness of Tove Jansson's works, and I don't want to shy away from reading her texts and characters as queer, as non-heteronormative. However, in order to show and discuss how her literary worlds and settings are more than merely queer in a sexual sense, I need the concept *skev* to show accompanying deviations from other norms, especially in relation to spatiality. I consider it fruitful to examine the way sexual queerness leads to an overall *skevness* in the works and how, perhaps, there might be occurrences where something that is queer isn't also *skev*.

This leads me to the material for my dissertation, the novels *The True Deceiver* (1982) and *Fair Play* (1989).

The novels are chosen because they both demonstrate a fluctuation in relationships and settings, but they tell stories of very different characters and relationships, where queerness and *skevness* may be applied. I would argue *The True Deceiver* is more *skev* than queer. It is entirely possible to do a queer reading of the novel, but it is first and foremost the *skevness*, namely the way the characters are unable to comply with the normative expectations of their surroundings, that allows it to be read as queer.

Fair Play, on the other hand, is a decidedly queer novel, and my focus for today. It is a story about everyday life and everyday love in between two women artists that seem to be a couple. While often implicit, as Hallie Wells (2019) has shown, there is a homosexual slant to Jansson's works. Consequently, the characters in *Fair Play* are not only *skev*, they are queer as well – that is they are at odds with normativity, and with heteronormativity.

In this paper I will suggest a *skev* reading of *Fair Play*, which shows it as a queer novel. Both queerness and *skevness* are built on how the lesbian relationship impacts and is impacted by the setting in the novel, mostly physical spaces such as apartments, hotel rooms and a cottage. I argue that the characters being queer, makes it a queer novel, and this also makes the characters spaces queer. I also argue that the ways the settings shift and change is *skev*, and that this *skevness* leads us to a queer reading of the novel. Furthermore, I explore the possibility of *skevness* appearing in the story when the queerness is not explicitly written out, often in confrontations with other characters than the two protagonists.

Fair Play tells the story of Jonna and Mari. Jonna, filmmaker and artist, Mari writer and illustrator, live in apartments next to each other, with an attic in between. This is already a deviation of normative housing. The two women share their lives and work in an easy and comfortable routine. They challenge and support each other, and every conversation, movie night and dispute is deeply infused with love.

In no way is it a loud story, it lacks all mentions of labels or discussions about sexual identity. The novel comprises of chapters that could just as well be read as standalone short stories. In these stories, we see hints of long lives and the amount of work that has gone into the home they have created. Jonna and Mari share a love of movies and have distinct rituals for how to watch a movie and talk about it. They take turns buying groceries and always eat dinner together. Jonna always makes sure that they both take their vitamins. They know how and when to ask about and discuss the other's projects, and they spend the summers in a cottage on their own little island. Moreover, through the whole story disruptions or changes in their lives affect their surroundings, and vice versa.

Much of this could easily be interpreted as female friendship, possibly lesbian continuum, as coined by Adrienne Rich (Rich 1980). Hanna Lahdenperä explores the romantic love in Tove Jansson's novels in her article "'Det finns mycket tomrum som måste respekteras'. Kärlekens poetik i Tove Janssons senare prosa" (2022), and poses the very relevant question "how do I know that [...] Jonna and Mari [...] are a romantic couple?" (Lahdenperä 2022, p. 302, my translation). She points out some textual evidence, but argues that the most important evidence of a romantic relationship in *Fair Play* is the response it awakens in the reader. As readers, we recognize the signs of a romantic relationship, even if it isn't named as such in the text. Given Jansson's biography and tendency for writing quiet love, we recognize that *Fair Play* is not just a "novel about friendship" as it said on the back of the original edition (1989), but that it is without doubt a queer love story, and it is written by a queer woman in her mid-seventies in a time when the queer had to be implicit.

The chapter "Jonna's Pupil", tells the story of when Jonna starts tutoring a younger woman, Mirja and Mari starts finding changes that are made to Jonna's surroundings, as Mirja's art starts to take up space in Jonna's study, and worst of all for Mari, Mirja's fancy cape and artist's beret are hung next to Jonna's door. Jonna also dotes on Mirja, making her food, lending her warm clothes and feeding her vitamins during winter.

In this chapter, there is a notable tension between Jonna and Mari. Jonna is happy to have a student, a protégée, while Mari grows more and more irritated with Mirja's presence in their lives. "It was incomprehensible that Jonna, who could be so chilly and distant, was now suddenly being a perfect wet nurse to a person who, in Mari's opinion, lacked every ounce of common civility, let alone charm" (*Fair Play*, p. 107). Finally, Mari stops coming over to Jonna's apartment, until one evening, when she comes over and demands that they watch a horrible movie, preferably one with murders in it. At this time she notices that Jonna's studio looks empty. Mirja's art is gone, and so are her cape and beret. Neither of them comment on it, but later in the evening the following exchange takes place:

"For that matter," Jonna went on, "did I ever tell you how when I was young I just marched out of their art school in the middle of the term so I could do my own work?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, anyway, it was a real event in those days. A demonstration!"

"I know." Mari turned a page in her book. "That teacher you had, your professor? The one who was so overbearing?"

"Mari," said Jonna, "sometimes you're really a little too obvious."

"Do you think? But once in a while a person just needs to say what doesn't need to be said. Don't you think?"

And they went back to their reading. (p. 109)

In this conversation we see how they resolve the conflict concerning Mirja. This is done not by explicitly discussing why Mari is upset or how Jonna feels about her student leaving, but by Jonna implicitly admitting that she probably was smothering Mirja, being overbearing, and ignoring Mari. Wells points out that while Jonna says that Mari is being too obvious, the criticism really is quite veiled (Wells 2019). By approaching their exchange with a *skev* look, focusing on what is not being said – an admittance of being hurtful, and also an acceptance of the unsaid apology – we can experience a make-up between lovers.

This chapter is a great example of what Lahdenperä describes when she mentions the reader's response to a text as the most important evidence of a romantic relationship. There is a chafing, a *skevness*, to the text, which hints to unsaid words and unexpressed feelings. Jonna's and Mari's relationship also becomes *skev* with Mirja's presence. Mari is not able to express her jealousy, and she is not able to make a claim to Jonna's time and affection without putting a name to their relationship. Since the queerness of the story is implicit, suddenly the quietness and unspoken contract of the romantic relationship goes from something easy and comfortable

to a hindrance. It starts to chafe and warp, and the text becomes *skev* to accommodate for the queerness that cannot be expressed.

Birgit Antonsson (1999) notes that the routines in Jonna's and Mari's lives can be seen as stagnation in the romantic relationship, but, while I understand this reading, I am more prone to agree with Lahdenperä's interpretation that the stillness in the story is indicative of Jansson's way of describing love as a way of recognizing, accepting, and responding to the other's way of life (Lahdenperä 2022, p. 303). I find this to be evidence of *skev* writing, a way of writing queer love in a time when it wasn't accepted.

This finally leads me to the main theme of my dissertation – literary settings and queer homes. In studies about queer spaces, Foucault's thoughts about heterotopias are frequently mentioned. Heterotopias are places in the real world that act as counter-sites, outside of all other places, at the same time both representations and inversions of them (Foucault 1986:24). Angela Jones (2009) coins the concept "queer heterotopias" and writes that they are "places where individuals can challenge the heteronormative regime and are 'free' to perform their gender and sexuality without fear of being qualified, marginalized, or punished" (Jones 2009). The queer heterotopia becomes a place of power, subversion and activism, and spaces that demands recognition. With this in mind, I wish to turn my attention to queer homes and look at how queer inhabitants make a place *skev*.

The home is always a central piece in Tove Jansson's novels. As early as *The Moomins and the Great Flood* (1945) a big part of the plot revolves around finding a home, and how the most important part is neither location nor the physical house, but the people with whom you make the home. The *skevness* of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, comes from the moomins being refugees, and how the lack of a home makes all other norms de-prioritized. Saara Jäntti notes in her dissertation (2012) the many possible definitions of the word home, and she emphasizes the emotional aspects of the word: "it connotes belonging, attachment, and these emotional aspects turn home into an ideal, one that, in turn, create expectations, or even norms, to what home should entail" (Jäntti 2012:77).

Jäntti also elaborates that these expectations of what a home should entail usually include expectations and norms for performances of gender (Jäntti 2012:78). If we consider what Jones writes about queer heterotopias being places that empower and free individuals, and places that subverts heteronormativity, then we should be able to pose the same thought for queer homes.

A queer home does not need to follow the norms of what a normative home “should entail”, and I would argue that a home becomes queer when queer people live in it. However, I would also argue that a home becomes *skev* when it is unconventional in the way that it is created, whether the inhabitants are queer or not.

This is true for *Fair Play*, in that Jonna and Mari are not sharing a traditional home and household, but rather they are making a *skev* home. Part of it comprises of physical closeness – their apartments are separated by an attic, and they spend as much time in each other’s place as they do in their own. In a way, the attic becomes part of their shared home, and adds its own liminality to their spaces. The *skeveness* of Jonna’s and Mari’s homemaking is not *skev* only because of their queerness but would be considered *skev* even if they were a heterosexual couple.

When the agreed upon terms of their home are broken or challenged, like in “Jonna’s Pupil”, both the settings and the relationship dynamic changes. Their relationship reveals its *skeveness*, or, perhaps, it becomes *skev* when confronted with an outsider. As long as Jonna and Mari are the only characters being narrated, there is no need to express their queerness – we can read queerness between the lines and in their everyday routines – it is quiet, but not hidden. Nevertheless, as soon as the routines are broken, the telling of the story becomes *skev* to hide the queerness. Which in turn reveals it in a *skev* reading.

Jonna and Mari travel a lot, and on their travels, the changing scenery allow them to fall out of their well-rehearsed roles and routines and find new ways of relating to one another. In one chapter, “In the Great City of Phoenix” they are on a road trip through the USA. At the hotel where they are staying the hotel cleaner, Verity, constantly rearranges their things. On the first day she:

had laid out [their] belongings symmetrically but with a certain humour; had unpacked their travel mementos and arranged them on the dresser in a caravan whose placement did not lack irony; had placed their slippers with their noses touching and spread out their nightgowns so the sleeves were holding hands. [...] She had given the room a face. (*Fair Play*, p. 79)

Verity continues to rearrange the room every day until they leave the hotel, every time highlighting something new. On their final evening, Verity has arranged their shoes “in marching order toward the door” (*Fair Play*, p. 84) and left their suitcase open.

Unlike a lot of the other times when something or someone interrupts their routines and disrupts their environment, this rearranging doesn't cause any upset in the relationship. Instead, this chapter feels like an outside acknowledgement of their relationship. Nothing is said, and there is nothing explicit in-text that hints to it, but the nightgowns holding hands, the lightness of the atmosphere and the way that even among strangers Jonna and Mari never introduce themselves simply as friends, makes me as a reader recognize a certain acceptance. The liminality and impermanence of the hotel and the foreign city allows for a certain transparency that we don't see when there are interruptions to the environment of their home. The hotel becomes a *skev* place, where normal rules don't apply and where interruptions that would normally cause upset are accepted and welcomed. In turn, Jonna's and Mari's relationship is not emphasized as *skev*, but can simply exist.

In the final chapter, Jonna gets the opportunity stay in a studio in Paris for a whole year. The chapter focuses on the tension between the couple considering this opportunity and the decision that must be made. It all begins with a change in the atmosphere, but unlike the other times when something changes, this time it is subtle.

It was not easy to say precisely when the change had occurred, but Jonna was different. Very clearly something had happened. It wasn't something you noticed right away [...] No, it was imperceptible, impossible to put your finger on. But it was there. (*Fair Play*, p. 123)

This is also the only time that the change leads to proper, outspoken, expression of emotions. After noticing Jonna's silence and the subtle changes in her behavior, Mari finally tells her "that [she] meant so much to her that it would be completely impossible to get along without her" (*Fair Play*, p. 125). Hearing this Jonna blows up and tells Mari to not say that and to leave her alone. Mari does so for the night, and after a night of worrying she asks Jonna why she wants to get rid of her. Jonna finally shows Mari the letter from Paris and tells her about the offer of a studio. Mari is instantly relieved. "Good Lord" she says, "is that all!" (*Fair Play*, p. 126). She encourages Jonna to accept the offer, and, in light of the promise of a year of solitude, she "felt something close to exhilaration, of a kind that people can permit themselves when they are blessed with love" (*Fair Play*, p. 127).

There is a promise of a longer, more permanent change of their physical space – but, and this is important, as Lahdenperä (2022) notes there is also the promise of a new phase of growth in their relationship. Something which would not have been possible if their physical environment

had stayed the same. She points out that Mari's reaction is exactly what we would expect of someone who is afraid that their relationship is coming to an end. She also notes that the final sentence of the novel is the only time when the word "love" is used to describe the relationship.

In conclusion, *Fair Play* tells the story of queer characters and queer love, but also of a *skev* home. Jonna's and Mari's relationship is queer, in that it is a same-sex relationship, and this also makes their home queer. Their home is *skev* because it doesn't follow the norms of what a home and household "should" look like, it consists of two apartments that they move in and between as if they were one, while still having their own spaces. I would argue that while their relationship is queer, it is not normally *skev*. It doesn't stand out; it doesn't chafe in the text. In the story it is simply a relationship like any other, and the only thing that sets it apart is the way that their home is constructed.

However, their relationship becomes *skev* when confronted with others. When someone visits, or when they are outside their home, their queerness becomes something other. The fact that they are partners but unable to disclose it makes all emotional reactions seem too strong, out of place, annoying – in other words, *skev*. In addition, with these emotional disruptions comes disruptions in the settings. It is hard to say if the change in the setting changes the dynamic of the relationship or vice versa. I would be inclined to say that, at least in Jansson's works, the two are inseparable. If the emotions of the characters change – the environment cannot stay the same, and if the environment changes, so too must the characters and their relationships. What is notable is that when they are abroad, outside of their physical comfort zone, they are better equipped to handle *skevness* in the environment, and changes to their routines are not as interruptive to the relationship. It is as if they are able to allow themselves to enjoy a *skev* situation, and perhaps allow themselves to be more *skev*, but without fear, when they are away from home. And, in the final chapter, in the face of a more permanent change of settings and routines, there is a promise of something *skev* in the future. Moreover, perhaps it is in these *skev* moments and spaces the queer home becomes a queer heterotopia, a place of empowerment and freedom.

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