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# Cultivating Response-Ability in Secondary Literary Education: Staying with the Trouble with/in Lisen Adbåge's Picturebook *Furan*

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## Abstract

While research has highlighted the potential of picturebooks in upper secondary education, empirical research is still limited. This article explores what the picturebook *Furan* by Lisen Adbåge produces in the secondary literature classroom by engaging with Donna Haraway's [2016] concept of "staying with the trouble". From a vantage point of postfoundational inquiry, we ask how the theoretical concept can unfold the encounters in-between the students and the picturebook. The data consists of video recordings of three upper secondary classrooms, and in the analysis, we follow Maggie Maclure's [2013] approach of "data that glows". Instances that glow are when the students struggled to make sense of the picturebook, either staying with the trouble or avoiding it. The analysis shows how the picturebook produces string figuring, sympoietic thinking and crafting in the literature classroom, enabling students to start cultivating response-ability as a way of responding to troubled times. The article explores what postfoundational theories like Haraway's can bring about in literary education.

**Keywords** Picturebooks · Literary education · Secondary education · Donna Haraway · Postqualitative inquiry

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## Introducing the Trouble

Feminist and posthumanist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) describes the times we live in as disturbing, mixed-up, turbid, and troubling. The task at hand, according to her, is responding, learning to be truly present, rather than hoping for simple or rapid solutions. But how can we respond to these mixed-up and troubled times in the context of literary education? This question inspired us to explore what encounters between a picturebook and students in secondary education might stir up.

Sofia Ahlberg (2021) discusses the role of literary education in times of crisis and emphasizes the need to engage with the crisis, rather than perceiving it as terminal and thus seeking to avoid the challenges it brings about. Crisis, according to her, marks a need for change; it is an ongoing process which we need to be able to handle. Literary education in troubled times could therefore entail dealing with uncomfortable questions, thinking critically and creatively, as well as enduring uncertainty (cf. Ahlberg, 2021). In this article, we direct attention to literary education as a way of being-in the world. In this endeavour, we build upon Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble". The idea encourages an engagement with the intricate and entangled relationships between humans and the environment in present times and contemporary challenges, such as environmental deterioration. Haraway (2016, p. 1) describes the meaning of trouble as "to stir up", "to make cloudy", "to disturb". Staying with the trouble, according to Haraway (2016), entails stirring up responses to the troubled times we live in and not only hoping for safe futures.

The aim of this article is to explore what the picturebook *Furan* (The Pine Tree) by Lisen Adbåge (2021) produces in the secondary literature classroom by engaging with Haraway's concept of staying with the trouble. We ask: (1) *What is produced in the encounters in-between the students and the picturebook?* and (2) *How does the theoretical concept of "staying with the trouble" unfold these encounters?*

## Picturebooks as Provocation

Much alike in Haraway's description of trouble, postqualitative educational researcher Karin Murriss (2016, 2019, 2021) employs the concept of provocation in her research on picturebooks in education, indicating something that stirs up and disturbs. In line with this, we perceive picturebooks as challenging literary texts with relevance in secondary literary education.

Joanna Haynes and Murriss (2012) discuss picturebook as aesthetic objects enabling philosophical exploration. They highlight the indeterminacy of these picturebooks, consisting, for example, of postmodern devices (Haynes & Murriss, 2012; Murriss, 2016). Murriss (2016) underlines the importance of selecting picturebooks carefully if they are to act as a provocation for philosophical work. The picturebooks she chooses, according to her, "often provoke useful epistemic dissonance and emotional disturbance" (Murriss, 2019, p. 158). Provocation in this sense is not about creating opposition or conflict in the classroom. Rather, we follow Murriss' definition above. This also evokes the description made by Macarena García-González, Soledad Véliz, and Claudia Matus (2020). The authors describe the picturebook as a provocation "that operates in the entanglement of discursive and affective realms" (2020, p. 545)

rather than as a pedagogical tool with a clear message. In a similar way, Murriss (2016, p. 219) states that a philosophical approach to working with picturebooks “disrupts using children’s literature in education as a means to give readers the right moral messages. As a relational pedagogy, it provokes fresh, more egalitarian relationships between child–adult–animal and other material/discursive bodies”.

### Previous Research on Picturebooks in Secondary Literary Education

Children’s literature scholars have established the picturebook as a crossover medium for all ages (cf. Beckett 2012, 2018; Ommundsen, 2010, 2018). Still, picturebooks are widely perceived as a medium for young children in the process of learning to read (cf. Arizpe & Ryan, 2018; Österlund, 2021), not as an art form for broader age groups, such as adolescents (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2023). However, Mia Österlund (2021, p. 270) notices a tendency to implement picturebooks at all levels of education in Finland in what she calls “a paradigm shift toward a systematic inclusion of picturebooks in education for wider age groups”. Similarly, Maria Jönsson (2019) emphasizes how picturebooks, due to their artistic complexity, can be used in upper secondary school to foster literary analysis.

However, empirical research on picturebooks in secondary literary education is scarce (cf. Arizpe & Styles, 2016; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2023). Sylvia Pantaleo has done extensive work on students’ interpretations of picturebooks across primary school levels, as well as research on picturebooks in junior secondary education. A notable example is an exploration of seventh-grade students’ responses to Shaun Tan’s picturebook *The Red Tree* (2001), focusing on aesthetic development and visual literacy (Pantaleo, 2011, 2012). Sissil Lea Heggernes (2021) has also explored how picturebooks can be used in the L2 classroom for intercultural learning among eighth-grade students, through Peter Sís’s hybrid picturebook *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007). In her article, she shows the importance of art dialogues in intercultural learning. Furthermore, Tove Sommervold (2020) studied ninth-grade students’ meaning-making processes with picturebooks in relation to literary competence. She demonstrated how teachers place greater emphasis on efferent modes of reading, while students in their group discussions focused mainly on aesthetic reading. In a previous empirical study, we have also shown how undecidable elements of a picturebook invite eighth-grade students to negotiate different interpretations (Åkerholm & Höglund, 2022). These studies collectively demonstrate the potential of picturebooks to enhance various language and literacy skills. However, as mentioned above, our interest extends beyond these outcomes, directing attention to literary education as a way of being-in the world.

### Previous Research with Postfoundational Theories in Literary Education

In this study we think with Haraway to explore picturebooks in upper secondary education. This entails a theoretical and methodological shift towards postfoundational inquiry, an approach that Jackson and Mazzei (2023) describe as positioned in the ontological turn that implies a shift away from anthropocentrism and representationism. Interest in postfoundational inquiry and theories is new but growing in literary

education research, where postfoundational theories seem to spotlight a focus on for example relations, materialities, affects, and undecidabilities.

Rita Felski's postcritique has been influential in the field, emphasizing the affective aspects of literary work. Felski (2015, p. 12) also recognizes "the text's status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen.". Per Esben Myren-Svelstad (2020) uses Felski's postcritique as a starting point for discussing the choice of literature in the Norwegian L1 classroom. Rather than the starting point being that literature has certain effects in the literature classroom, Myren-Svelstad highlights how a postcritical view on literature shows the value of the potential literature has in encounters with different readers.

Furthermore, a new materialist perspective is used by several researchers to show how literature has agency in the literature classroom. When discussing picturebooks in literary education, Macarena Garcia-Gonzalez and Soledad Véliz are notable examples. Along with various colleagues, they have applied new materialism to children's literature (see García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020) and to picturebooks in the classroom (see Véliz & García-González, 2020). For instance, together with Claudia Matus, the authors explore the use of challenging picturebooks in two middle school classrooms. The authors perceive the books as "vibrant matter", resonating with human and non-human matters, such as their readers and the spaces in which they are read (García-González et al., 2020, p. 544). Spaces are also important in the research of Thomas Roed Heiden and Helle Rørbech (2024). Thinking with new materialism, Heiden and Rørbech explore the engagement in the relations between pupils, teacher, researcher, and the text, as well as the becoming of interpretive spaces in a process drama. The research of Ola Harstad (2018) also delves into relations and becomings. He draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze to explore becoming with literature. Harstad (2018) highlights how the subjectivity of literature teachers is constantly changing, continuously becoming. Moreover, Harstad (2020) underlines the unpredictability of literature education, stating how it is impossible to predetermine the consequences of readers' encounters with literature.

Unpredictability is also present in the research of Heidi Höglund and Sofia Jusslin, who explore unpredictability in arts-integrated teaching in literacies and literary education through a rhizomatic approach in line with Deleuze and Guattari. The rhizomatic approach, they write, puts emphasis on "that which is not yet known and on a multiplicity of intense connections and their movement in irregular and infinite directions" (Höglund & Jusslin, 2023, p. 119). In collaboration with Rørbech, Höglund also explores performativity in the literature classroom, viewed through both a poststructuralist and posthumanist lens (Höglund & Rørbech, 2021).

Drawing on the interest in postfoundational inquiry and theories in literary education research, our article contributes to this discussion by including Donna Haraway's concept of staying with the trouble to unfold encounters between students and the picturebook *Furan*.

## Furan: What is Human and what Is Nature

Nominated for the Swedish August Prize for best children's and young adult book in 2021, Lisen Adbåge's *Furan* has been well received. In the justification for the nomination, the jury points to how Adbåge moves the boundaries of the picturebook, critiquing the climate crisis without including a moral judgement. The jury stresses that the picturebook raises the question: "What is nature and what is human?" (August Prize, 2021).

*Furan* tells the story of a family finding the perfect spot to build their house. On the establishing spread, the family can be seen marvelling at their new house lot with three pine trees they think need to be taken down for them to build their dream house. The family is portrayed working together to build their house, the sun shining and the children playing with kites – an idyllic story of settlers in untouched nature. However, the last of the pine trees is difficult to chop down. It resists, screaming as it falls, the wood bleeding (see Fig. 1). Soon after moving into their newly built house, the family start noticing changes in themselves; skin is turning to bark, feet into roots. Soon enough, the family understands what they need to do: they dig holes in the ground, plant themselves in the holes, and shortly, they take root. Eventually, a new family arrives at the same spot, seeing four pine trees that need to be taken down for them to build their dream house.

Muted colours, hues of brown combined with contrasting reds and blues, create a quiet and subdued atmosphere. However, the red resin of the pine trees stands out on the spreads, as well as the pine needles, speckled in red, covering the endpapers. The story takes on a more horror-like tone towards the end as the colours in the spreads



**Fig. 1** The pine trees resisting and the wood bleeding. *Furan* [The Pine Tree] by Lisen Adbåge (2021), rendered with permission

get darker and browner. The back cover also warns, ‘Beware of scares!’ (*Varning för rys!*), highlighted in a full moon, thus amplifying the horror motif. Beatrice Reed (2023, p. 163) draws parallels between the plot structure of the horror genre and that of *Furan*.

The relationship between human and nature is central to the story. Lykke Guanio-Uluru (2023) notes that study of the representations of plants in children’s literature is expanding as a part of critical plant studies in the humanities. In her overview of critical plant studies in children’s literature, Lydia Kokkola (2017) mentions how we have assumed that plants are passive and humans are active in the forming of human–plant relations. In line with critical plant studies, however, the plant might have intention, or consciousness (Kokkola, 2017). Reed (2023) explores the motif of arboreal metamorphosis in three Scandinavian picturebooks. She elucidates how metamorphosis in the picturebooks serves to underscore the human element since it exceeds the difference between human and plant (Reed, 2023). Simultaneously, she demonstrates how the tension between the trees’ distinctiveness and their resemblance to the human is never fully resolved in *Furan*, which prompts the reader to shape their own understanding of the relationship between human and nature (Reed, 2023).

The fact that *Furan* was nominated for the August Prize contributed to our decision to work with the picturebook in secondary literary education, alongside the fact that it prompts the reader to shape their own understanding of the picturebook. *Furan* raised questions for us as researchers and teachers, which was another reason we chose it. Its horror-like depiction of the climate theme, combined with the lack of overt moral to the story, intrigued us.

## Staying with the Trouble: A Sympoietic Threading/Felting/Tangling

Our theoretical framework consists of Donna Haraway’s concept “staying with the trouble”. The concept foregrounds the need to confront and navigate the uncertainties and complexities of both the present and the future, without attempting to return to an idealized past or favouring future technological salvation (Haraway, 2016). Haraway acknowledges the intertwinements of all beings on Earth and proposes a meaningful, sustainable co-existence between humans and other species: “We become-with each other or not at all” (Haraway, 2016, p. 4). In such a becoming-with, Haraway encourages us to confront messiness and uncertainties while actively working towards more ethical and sustainable ways in such co-existence.

While Haraway’s work does not address literary education, our study attempts to think with some of her central ideas in this context. As a way of staying with the trouble, Haraway (2016) introduces string figures as a theoretical trope. Building on her ideas for co-existence, string figuring serves as a trope for the collective, joint thinking and creating she refers to as “sympoietic threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting” (Haraway, 2016, p. 31). String figuring is about giving and receiving patterns, “dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before” (Haraway, 2016, p. 10). According to Haraway, string figuring is sympoietic; it is a collective thinking and crafting. Sympoietic, here, refers to something that does not make

itself; its connections are present everywhere and as continuously whirling tendrils (Haraway, 2016). The collective thinking—sympoiesis—is a presupposition to stay with the trouble and think new thoughts.

The sympoietic threading, felting, and tangling inherent in string figuring are connected to what Haraway describes as response-ability—a collective form of knowing and doing. Haraway (2016, p. 34) states: “Whether we asked for it or not, the pattern is in our hands”. This underscores that regardless of whether we want it or not, it is our responsibility to create something meaningful from the pattern. Haraway terms this process ‘cultivating response-ability’, highlighting the importance of the ability to respond as a crucial aspect of navigating and getting on together in troubled times. String figures and sympoiesis are both ideas we perceive as relevant in the context of literary education, as is the notion of response-ability as a way of being-in the world through literary education.

## A Postqualitative Approach

This study is methodologically grounded in postqualitative inquiry, signifying a theoretical and ontological shift that reshapes qualitative research approaches (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). Postqualitative inquiry originates from (new) materialist ontologies, embracing a flattened logic and a non-hierarchical, non-representational approach to research (MacLure, 2013; see also Jackson & Mazzei, 2023).

In postqualitative inquiry, the research process does not necessarily start with pre-determined, fixed research questions; rather, it embarks from curiosity (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). This calls for an open-ended approach to research, where emphasis is placed on theory and concepts over predefined methods.

## Bringing the Picturebook into Secondary Literary Education

The study was inspired by the concept of the intra-vention study (Taylor, 2018) together with the teachers, with the purpose of exploring the use of picturebooks in secondary literary education. Placing the study within a postqualitative paradigm, we were inclined to see “what happens if...?” students in secondary literary education engage with a picturebook (Taylor, 2018).

The study took place in three upper secondary schools, involving three teachers and three groups of second- and third-year students aged 17–18 years. The schools were all Swedish-medium schools in Finland, meaning that the students’ first language was Swedish, and the research was conducted within an L1 context.

In September 2022, us researchers, the three participating teachers, and a pile of picturebooks gathered to choose a picturebook and plan the study. Not much discussion was needed to come to a decision on the picturebook *Furan* as something about the picturebook intrigued, affected, and unsettled us literature teachers and researchers. Katrina posed the question of what the meaning or message of the picturebook might be, a question that was not all that easily answered. Susanna suggested a creative assignment, a work of art, for the students to engage with the picturebook.



During the fall of 2022, the students read and engaged with the picturebook *Furan* in an advanced course focusing on literary analysis. In the course in question, the students had not worked with picturebooks prior to the intra-vention. During three lessons, they did exploratory work with the picturebook (lesson 1) and created a work of art elaborating on their thoughts on what questions the picturebook raises (lesson 2). They were instructed to choose between creating a poem, a series of photos, or a clay sculpture. Finally, they presented their work and wrote a text analysis assignment (lesson 3). The teachers all had a slightly different approach and adjusted their teaching in a manner they felt comfortable with, still all followed this setup. The researchers were also engaging in the activities during the lessons, moving around the classroom and talking to the students.

The data produced consists of video recordings of all nine occasions, focusing on four smaller groups consisting of 3–4 students.<sup>1</sup> The students' poems, photos, and sculptures were saved and/or photographed, as were their handwritten notes. The researchers also took memory notes. All the video recordings were transcribed, and the examples from the data used in this article were translated from Swedish into English. All the names in the transcripts, except for the authors' names, are pseudonyms to secure personal integrity. To ensure the ethical quality of the study, the guidelines and principles formulated by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (2023) were followed. Both students and teachers were informed of the aim of the study and that the focus of the analysis and gave their consent to participate.

### Data Glowing as Analytical Approach

Following the framework of postqualitative inquiry, educational researcher Maggie MacLure (2013) suggests the concept of data that glows. According to her, the researcher does not stand outside the data, prepared to categorize and calibrate; instead, the data might resonate with the researcher in an embodied manner, affecting both the body and mind. MacLure refers to this as “the glow”. Drawing on Deleuze, she describes this glow as appearing around singular points in the data: “bottlenecks, knots and foyers” (MacLure, 2013, p. 662). Therefore, such research involves feelings and sensations, both within ourselves and in others. MacLure's concept of data that glows challenges the conventional view of data as an inert and indifferent mass waiting to be coded. Instead, it suggests that data possesses its own ways of becoming intelligible. The mission is to be attentive to data's invitation and watchful to its capacity to force thought.

Following postqualitative inquiry, the study adopts a *thinking with theory* approach. As proposed by Jackson and Mazzei (2012, 2023), thinking with theory involves actively putting theories to work in empirical data as opposed to concentrating solely on interpreting data through systematic coding or the identification of themes. Drawing inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari, Jackson and Mazzei (2012) employ the idea of ‘plugging in’ to articulate their approach. Plugging in signifies a

<sup>1</sup> We focus on three of the smaller groups since the students in the fourth group were not always present, leading to the group having different constitutions in each lesson.

process wherein theory and philosophical concepts are connected to data and read through each other.

## **Furan as Provocation**

As researchers, we were curious about what the picturebook *Furan* would produce in the classroom and how Donna Haraway's concept of staying with the trouble could produce new thinking when plugged in to the data. Throughout the analysis, we felt the data glowing around points where the students' engagement with the picturebook met some kind of resistance. These were instances where the picturebook acted as a provocation, in some sense creating dissonance, disturbing, stirring up (Murris, 2019). These instances were knots that we as researchers could not immediately untangle – the picturebook was affecting the students which, in turn, was affecting us. In the analysis, we focus on these instances in three student groups, where the picturebook acted as a provocation.

## **Threading/Felting/Tangling the Human–Nature Relationship**

One of the student groups (Isabella, Julia, Kiara, and Lydia) struggle to make sense of the picturebook. The picturebook acts as a provocation in the sense that it sparks discussion, posing questions and offering resistance. This occurs during the first lesson when they unprompted question the aim of the picturebook, suggesting that the question engages them. Julia, in particular, expresses frustration, sighing and mentioning that she struggles to find an “underlying meaning”. Hence, the picturebook acts as a provocation in the sense that it unsettles her. As mentioned earlier, the picturebook lacks a moral to the story. The fact is that Julia is still looking for something about her expectations of picturebooks, of children's literature, or of literary education. During the lesson, the students circle back to the question of the aim of the picturebook. Something in the relationship between human and nature catches their attention:

### **Example 1, Lesson 1 (Karolina's Classroom)**

**Julia:** It's like, it's saying that you shouldn't like.

**Isabella:** Build new houses.

**Julia:** Yes, or not like hurting other people. But if you think about the trees being human, imagine that when they are cut down they bleed, so it's like earlier. That you shouldn't like hurt strangers or like....

**Isabella:** Or maybe that you hurt people without knowing it.

**Julia:** Yeah, like karma or something similar.

**Kiara:** (laughs) That was as karma as it gets.

**Julia:** Mm... But the thing about nature is that they took a lot from nature and used it. That they didn't like give anything back. They're only thinking about themselves that family.

**Kiara:** Mm.

**Julia:** Maybe it's something... this is like super far-fetched... that like, it's like climate change. That they exploit natural resources.

Julia returns to this question, trying to find new ways of thinking. Isabella is thinking together with Julia. Together they are threading/felting/tangling, thus deepening their understanding. This takes its starting point in gaps in the iconotext that are open to interpretation (cf. Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). For example, Julia refers to the trees bleeding. While the text only mentions resin flowing from the branches, the images depict something red dripping from the branches and the walls of the house; thus, the visual narrative expands the verbal narrative (cf. Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Isabella continues this line of thought, with her statement on the family unknowingly hurting people. Thus, she is accepting Julia's interpretation of the iconotext.

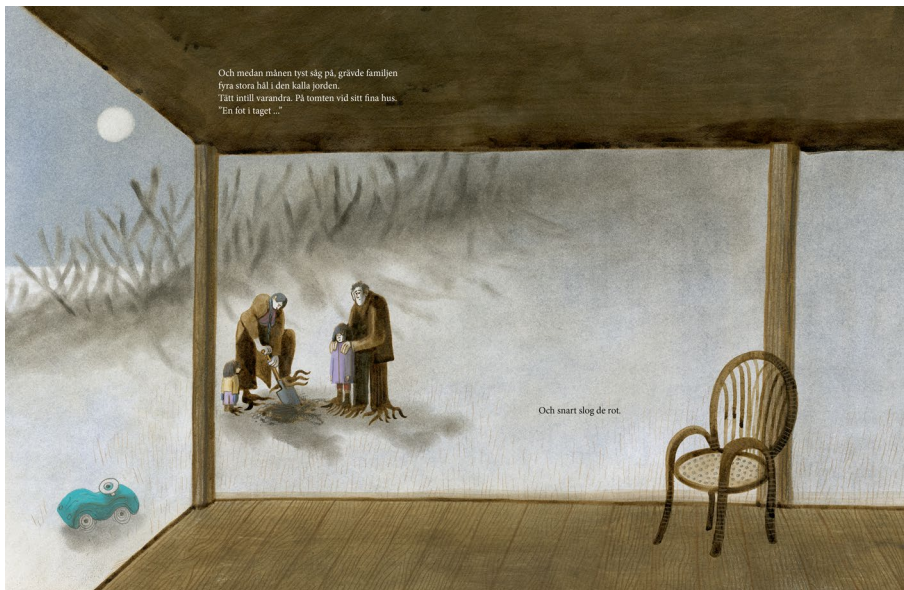
However, the question of the aim of the picturebook still intrigues the students in the third lesson. The students are threading/felting/tangling this question during their work with the picturebook, as in this example (2) where they discuss the spread where the family buries themselves in the soil, taking root (see Fig. 2):

### Example 2, Lesson 3 (Karolina's Classroom)

**Julia:** Eh, well. They are... I would say that they are a little more like... Well, whether they want to or not, they have to like create a relationship to nature. That's how I see it.

**Kiara:** They sort of become nature.

**Lydia:** And there they look, they all look sad there.



**Fig. 2** The family planting themselves in the ground. *Furan* [The Pine Tree] by Lisen Adbåge (2021), rendered with permission

**Kiara:** Yes, they look very defeated.

The human–nature relationship still intrigues the students, but instead of talking about climate crisis and exploiting nature, the students are approaching the theme from an existential point of view, exploring (as the August Prize jury puts it) what is human and what is nature. While Julia points out that the family is forced to create a relationship with nature, Kiara refers to the family becoming nature. Thus, the boundaries between human and nature are now blurred, which the students interpret as a defeat, as the end of (at least human) life.

The human–nature relationship unsettles the students throughout the three lessons, manifesting in their threading/felting/tangling of the aim of the picturebook. The students’ interpretations also show how they do not separate the theme of the picturebook from its aesthetics. Rather, these are entangled in their discussions. The students are particularly focusing on the family’s (involuntary) relationship with nature, when the family is forced to bury themselves, becoming trees. These are matters of life, death, and resurrection, phrased by the students as the family “becoming nature”. The fact that they are dwelling on these existential matters throughout all three lessons, not moving forward with the assignment, may initially come off as insufficient. However, thinking with Haraway, it can be seen as what she refers to as sympoietic threading/felting/tangling, not necessary moving forward but rather staying with the trouble. Thus, the complexity of the iconotext of the picturebook allows for the students to stay with the trouble regarding the existential matters that the picturebook raises. However, the students’ anticipation of the picturebook imparting some kind of moral message unsettles them in their encounter with it. This unfamiliarity with the picturebook as a medium can also be noted in the second group.

### Dropping Threads, Avoiding the Trouble

In the second group (Axel, Benjamin, and Clara), the students are visibly unsettled by the picturebook. These students repeatedly distance themselves from the picturebook in different ways: laughing, joking, swearing, turning to the camera. They do not seem to be familiar with the picturebook medium, something that manifests in their discussions and can be seen in the example below (3), where the students are questioning the picturebook both as children’s literature and as art. In the example, the students have just finished reading the book for the first time.

#### Example 3, Lesson 1 (Nina’s Classroom)

**Axel:** Honestly, what kind of a picturebook is this?

**Benjamin:** Jeez, that’s a creepy children’s book.

**Axel:** That’s true. It’s a little, little *Exorcist* all in all.

**Benjamin:** Yeah. I have nothing to say other than bad.

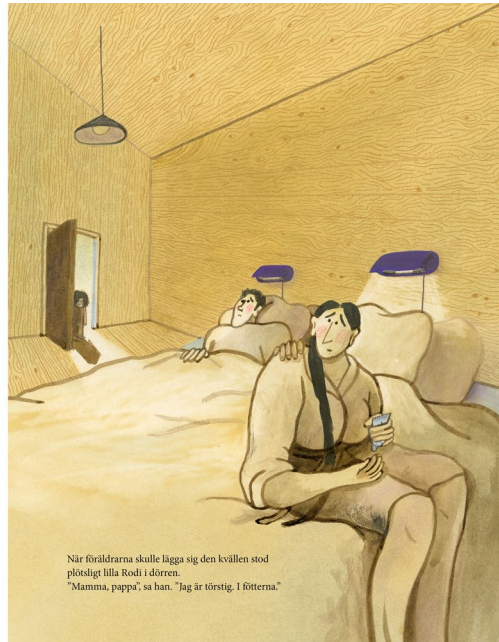
**Axel (points to his watch):** I keep looking at my watch, and that crap has not been ticking for a year. It has stopped. It’s so long ago.

F-ck. I’m thirsty in my feet.

**Benjamin:** I only have one thing to say: badly drawn.



En vecka gick, familjen hade fötterna nedstuckna i hinkar från morgon till kväll.  
 "Det känns nog faktiskt lite bättre nu", sa Florence.  
 "Du ser", sa pappan. "Det här går över."  
 Men mamman var lysst och klädde sig bekymrat i håret.  
 Då låg det som en kvist knäcktes och ett par barr föll ner på bordet.  
 "Ett barr i barret", skojade pappan.  
 Men ingen skrattade.



När föräldrarna skulle lägga sig den kvällen stod  
 plötsligt lilla Rodi i dörren.  
 "Mamma, pappa", sa han. "Jag är törstig. I fötterna."

**Fig. 3** "Mom, dad", he said. "I am thirsty. In my feet." Furan [The Pine Tree] by Lisen Adb?ge (2021), rendered with permission

Here, the students struggle with the picturebook format, dismissing it as "badly drawn" and "creepy", marking a distance from the picturebook. The talk of the watch that has stopped working can be seen as an effort to turn attention elsewhere, intentionally dropping a thread.

Benjamin mentions "children's book" but questions its suitability for children. The group returns to this question several times, discussing how they, as children, probably would have been scared by the picturebook, and in the example below (4), comparing it to an uncensored Grimm fairytale. Clara initiates this, suggesting the language and the content are more aimed towards adults. When asked about this by one of the researchers (Heidi), Benjamin elaborates:

#### Example 4, Lesson 1 (Nina's Classroom)

**Benjamin:** And the story in itself is a little, like I would say that it's pretty abstract. Like, how should I put it, children's books, picturebooks are kind of easy to understand, they are like, the story. But here the story is kind of bizarre, and I don't really know if, when a child reads if they actually understand what is happening.

**Axel:** Yeah, in that sense it is for adults, but I don't know about the language. Because I think, like *Pettson and Findus*<sup>2</sup> or something like one of those classical, it

<sup>2</sup> Axel is referring to the popular picturebooks about *Pettson and Findus* (1984-) by Swedish author Sven Nordqvist. The picturebooks tell the story of an old man and a cat, living together in the countryside. The

was very, the text was easy to follow. But you just have to read the story to not think about it as a children's story.

**Benjamin:** No.

**Axel:** Like, you know, how Cinderella and those were like actually really bloody and scary and then Disney changed it. This is like, as if Disney never changed it. *((Heidi laughing))* It is.

In the example above, the students question the audience of the picturebook, suggesting it may be more suitable for adults. This is a shift from viewing the picturebook as exclusively for children. They find the text easy to follow, but the themes and content inappropriate or frightening for children. The students thus take a normative approach to the picturebook, emphasizing the fostering aspects of children's literature. They generalize picturebooks, describing them as "easy to understand". The group, and especially Benjamin, repeatedly refer to the pictures as badly drawn, indicating that the aesthetics of the picturebook is somehow unsettling them. Adbåge's illustrations are quite rough, with muted colours and broad pencil strokes, deviating from Benjamin's expectations of a picturebook.

However, despite their different ways of distancing themselves from the picturebook, it clearly provokes them. In this group, the picturebook acts as a provocation in the sense that it is disrupting their concept of a picturebook, regarding both themes and aesthetics. Thinking with Haraway, threads are dropped. The students are reluctant to make something of the pattern in their hands, avoiding staying with the trouble. According to Haraway, in string figuring, we must make something of the pattern in our hands.

Despite various attempts to distance themselves, avoiding the trouble, we still note an exception. In example 3, Axel mentions in passing, "F-ck, I'm thirsty in my feet", which is a reference to the picturebook (see Fig. 3). While he mocks the picturebook, it still somehow affects or intrigues him. The fact that the picturebook intrigues the students is, on the other hand, clearly present in the third group.

### **Collectively Crafting an Eco-Centric Reading**

In the third group (Miranda, Natalie, Olivia, and Philip) the picturebook acts as a provocation in the sense that the students are disturbed by the horror motif of the picturebook, by a sense of discomfort it creates, unsettling them. In the following example (5), the students have been discussing what the resin is and why it is red, when a thought suddenly strikes them.

#### **Example 5, Lesson 1 (Susanna's Classroom)**

**Natalie.** Because I'm thinking that then the house has to like. It's probably the house that is haunting them. They can probably hear voices in the walls like literally from those previous people.

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illustrations are vivid, playful, and full of detail. In some translations, the characters are called Festus and Mercury.

**Fig. 4** Clay sculpture made by students Miranda, Natalie, Olivia, and Philip



**Olivia**((*laughing*)): Probably.

**Philip**: Yeah, they have built a house of those who lived there before. I didn't even think about that.

((*Olivia giggles*)).

**Natalie**: I didn't notice it earlier until somebody else said it. ((*laughing*))

**Miranda**: No, me neither.

**Natalie**: Shit!

**Miranda**: Their blood is the resin.

**Philip**: It is, indeed.

Here, the students are referring to multiple spreads where the walls of the house are bleeding, branches are scratching the windows, and pinecones and needles are found inside the house, in the washing machine and in the kitchen drawers, even though the pine trees have been cut down. In this example, the swearing is marking surprise and interest rather than distancing. However, the interpretation that the resin is the blood of the earlier inhabitants, and that the walls are made from humans, unsettles the students, which can be seen in Olivia's uncomfortable laughter. This interpretation is incorporated into their clay sculpture (see Fig. 4), thus repeatedly threading/felting/tangling this question. Thinking with Haraway, the sympoietic thinking seen in the first group can be noted here, manifested in a literal collective crafting. In the example below (6), the students are presenting their clay sculpture to the whole class.

### Example 6, Lesson 3 (Susanna's Classroom)

**Natalie**: It's meant to look like this, you know. Like, what's it called in Swedish, "miserable", I guess.

**Miranda**: Sad, worried or something.

**Natalie**: Yeah, like totally destroyed.

**Susanna (teacher):** They look anguished, almost.

**Natalie:** That's like the idea, um, they are supposed to look like they're suffering. ((laughing)) Because they've been chopped down, and they are like human souls inside trees. They are like stuck there. They don't, like. They are not rooted in the ground, they can't grow, sprout, they are stuck inside the house, sort of. Maybe something like that.

When presenting the idea behind the clay sculpture, the students focus on the suffering shown in the faces in the walls. However, this suffering is described slightly differently here, compared to the first lesson. While the students during the first lesson are focusing on human suffering, on the blood and the souls of the dead haunting the family, they are now describing plant suffering: not being rooted, not being able to sprout and grow. Here, again, the human–nature relationship is at the centre of their threading/felting/tangling. The collective, sympoietic crafting has shifted their understanding: while starting out from their own, anthropocentric perspective, they are now moving towards an ecocentric reading. Thinking with Haraway, their string figuring is creating new patterns, a shift in their literary analysis. This can be seen as an example of them starting to cultivate response-ability. Despite, or maybe because of, the picturebook initially unsettling them, they are making something of the pattern in their hands, both in relation to the picturebook and in relation to the world, thus, staying with the trouble.

## Disrupting/Unsettling what Becomes Thinkable

In the analysis, we can see how the picturebook *Furan* acts as a provocation in multiple ways: disrupting and unsettling the students. A provocation in Murriss' understanding is something that stirs up, indicating setting new thoughts into motion. This stirring up sparks discussion, posing questions and offering resistance, which in turn allow the students to thread/felt/tangle these questions, as can be seen in the first group. The picturebook also disrupts the students' idea of the picturebook format, which is noticeable in the second group, where it causes them to drop threads, avoiding the trouble. Finally, the picturebook acts as a provocation in the sense that it unsettles the students in the third group, serving as a starting point for collectively crafting an ecocentric reading. The fact that *Furan* acts as a provocation in these various ways underlines the possibilities of reading picturebooks as complex and challenging texts in secondary literary education.

The picturebook not only unsettles and disrupts the students. In their encounters with *Furan*, it also produces something else. When the students stay with the trouble, binaries are disrupted (cf. Murriss, 2016), binaries between child/adult, life/death, and human/non-human. This is closely linked to the string figuring taking place in the groups. For example, in the first and third groups, the students are threading/felting/tangling existential matters: life and death in the relationship between human and nature, in humans becoming nature. This is a sympoietic thinking which allows the students to stay with the trouble, rather than moving on to the next task. As this study shows, staying with the trouble is not merely about staying with the text for a



certain number of lessons. Rather, thinking with Haraway in the context of literary education puts emphasis on collective thinking, on sympoiesis. It puts emphasis on devoting oneself to the problem, not dismissing it or waiting for solutions. It highlights the possibilities of working with literature as a means of being able to respond in troubled times, of cultivating response-ability.

It is the threading/felting/tangling that allows the students to stay with the trouble, to start cultivating response-ability. But this calls for the literary text to raise questions, to disrupt, to unsettle, to provoke. In the encounters in-between the students and the picturebook, new thinking is produced through the provocation and the threading/felting/tangling that follows. However, it is not possible to know beforehand whether a literary text will provoke students. Literary education cannot decide beforehand what students' encounters with literature will bring about (Harstad, 2020). As researchers and teachers, we could not predict beforehand how the students' encounters would unfold. In the second group, the string figuring sometimes fails: the students are dropping threads and are reluctant to make something of the pattern in their hands. Their scepticism of the picturebook might be too great an obstacle, making us aware of how these students struggle with being response-able. Importantly, the students struggle in two ways: firstly, they struggle with reading the picturebook as a literary text. This suggests that, in this case, an introduction to the picturebook medium as a complex art form and a medium for all ages might have been called for (cf. Ommundsen et al., 2021). It also emphasizes how knowledge of picturebooks as an art form should not be taken for granted, neither with children nor with adolescents, illustrating the relevance of picturebooks in secondary literary education.

Secondly, the students struggle with being response-able towards the questions the picturebook actualizes in them. The students' lack of knowledge of the picturebook medium has consequences for them being response-able in a wider sense. If they are unable to respond to the picturebook, they cannot stay with the questions the literary text raises. The students' struggle to do this, implying that they are struggling with being response-able, unable to address both the text and the existential questions it raises. Hence, our study empirically illustrates the necessity of literary analysis for students to be response-able in both aspects. Furthermore, the students' struggle shows how both the form and content of the picturebook play a part in their analyses of the text. This can be noticed for example when the second group describes the picturebook as "creepy", referring both to the form and the content. Further, it can be noticed in the third group's threading/felting/tangling of the resin. The students do not treat form and content as separate but rather as entangled.

However, how can we acknowledge and address this entanglement in literary education? Theories that recognize entanglements and move beyond binaries are needed. While Haraway's work does not provide us with tools to further explore the entanglement between form and content, it does highlight the relationship between the text and the reader from a non-anthropocentric perspective. Rather than the text being interpreted by the reader, the reader and the text are entangled through string figuring, in sympoiesis. A postqualitative research approach is not a tool for mapping out or identifying patterns, for example what topics the students' discussions revolve around. Rather, this approach highlights intensities and entanglements, as well as blurring binaries. In this study, the approach of data glowing made us notice what was

disrupting and unsettling the students, what was stirred up. However, we acknowledge that we, as researchers, are rooted in an anthropocentric perspective, making some thoughts harder to think. The anthropocentric perspective is also ingrained in the context of literary education that this study was part of. While a postfoundational approach does not provide all the answers nor should be seen as the sole prevailing one, it does highlight certain aspects, as shown above. We believe that postfoundational theories offer valuable perspectives for research in literary education.

In the context of literary education, staying with the trouble becomes an approach rather than a method. This approach gives perspective to central questions in literary education. For instance, thinking with Haraway challenges the literature choice in multiple ways. According to Haraway (2016, p. 35) “It matters what thoughts think thoughts”, meaning that the literature read in schools affects the ways students think about the world, what becomes thinkable. Picturebooks that are complex and challenging in the way *Furan* is, might, through their entanglements of form and content, stir up such responses. Thinking with Haraway, the way to approach such literature might be through string figuring, through a collective thinking that does not necessarily involve solving problems and rapidly moving on to the next assignment but instead threading/felting/tangling and staying with the troubles and questions the literary text raises. Thus, the literary analysis does not solely take its starting point in the questions the teacher poses, but in the collective thinking and crafting. Finally, staying with the trouble in literary education entails stirring up response to the troubled times we live in, creating a wider purpose for literary education: cultivating response-ability.

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