

SKIING AND BEING SWEDISH: TAKING A COLD LOOK AT WINTER PICTUREBOOKS

This slide is filled with white light, like the moment before snow-blindness sets in. And when I write these words the screen before me is white like newly fallen snow.

Today I am going to take you cross country – cross country, as in cross-country skiing. But also as in “cross examination” of a country, Sweden, and one of its iconic sports, skiing. I find the word “country” is particularly suited for this winter-sports context; for it is a word that in snow-like manners covers the trinity of land, nation and state. And skiing relates both to the landscape and a specific Nordic geography, to the sense of shared experience and society, and to the organization and administration of the body politic. Specifically, I am going to criss and cross ideas about the relationship between skiing and being Swedish. The terrain will be familiar to many of you – children’s picturebooks – as will the approach, where close reading, iconotext, discourse, and representation will be used as critical tools to get us there and back again – across the white and cold expanse.

Now let’s go tracking!

Let us fill this white space with signs!

3. The fundamental reason for the “national” status of skiing is, I believe, that it is a sport that



reflects the traditional conditions of living in a sub-arctic geography. When cold and snow is a given during 4-6 months of the year, skiing assumes much more importance than as a mere “sport”: until recently it was a necessary survival skill. And an able skier was someone who was useful to the local community and economy, and because of that – admired. Moreover, both the local and national economy depended on forestry, most of

which was carried out in winter. In addition to that the army needed soldiers who could ski. In other words, Sweden in days past needed skiers, just as our society today cannot do without people who can drive car today.

4. On top of that skiing is also closely associated with mythologized historical moments. Gustav



Vasa's return from Sälen to Mora on skis in 1520, later commemorated with the Vasaloppet ski race (since 1922), represents such an iconic moment.

5. But one can also include legendary explorers over snow and ice. In the front row we find Swedish arctic explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld – and of course eminent Norwegians Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen – whose intrepid deeds gave further status to the skier-explorer as a national symbol for the modern age.

How could ever tennis or swimming compete? Did Gustav Vasa vanquish the Danes with the help of his amazing back-hand smash? did Nansen swim across Greenland?



These are rhetorical questions, and you know the answer.

6. In other words, skiing is rich with cultural and historical connotations. Yet, as I have already



hinted, skiing is at the same time less of a sport than an *idrott* – a Pan-Scandinavian word which can be rendered as “physical activity or exercise.” When Nansen spoke at the ski games in the Holmenkollen ski stadium in Oslo in 1903 he expressed his distaste for the English sports-ideal: “Engage in physical activity, but shun sports and all kinds of record-breaking”.

7. Somewhat paradoxically, such un-sporting engagement in sport is at one and the same time regarded as more serious and existential than sports (as recreational play), yet less competitive and bound by rules and regulations. Characteristically, early ski competitions were tests of endurance both for participants and spectators. When the Sami skier Pava-Lasse won the Nordenskiöld-race in 1884 it took him 22 hours to complete the 200 kilometer distance through untracked snow.



So, after this brief introduction to the discourse of skiing and being Swedish, let us turn to how it surfaces in books for children.

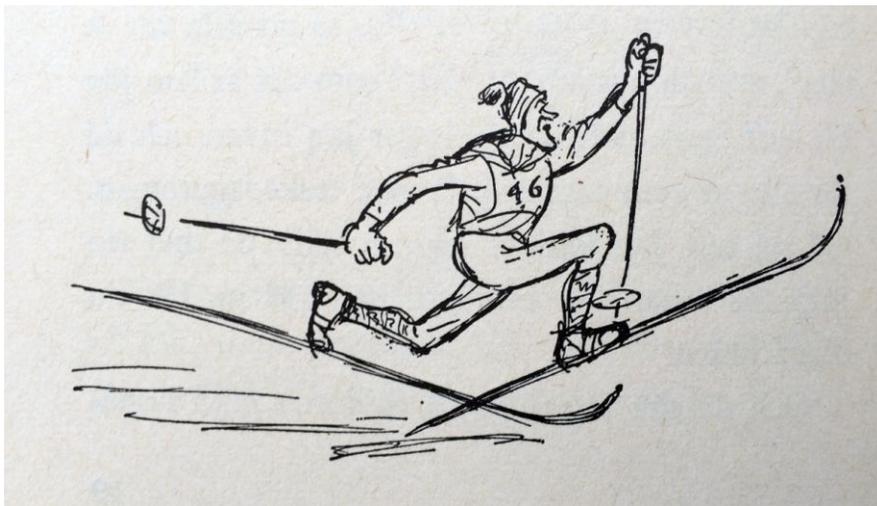
8. First, we have representations in the heroic-nationalist mode.



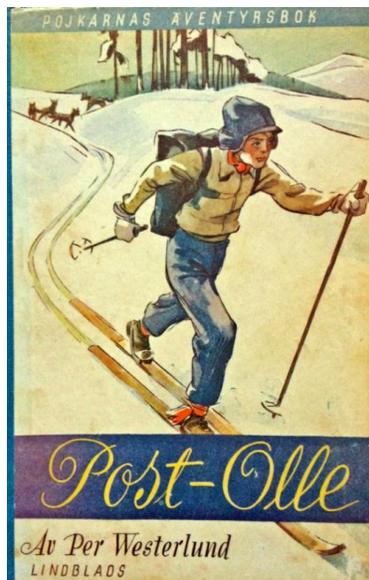
9-10. Another important category is recreational skiing, or skiing as play.



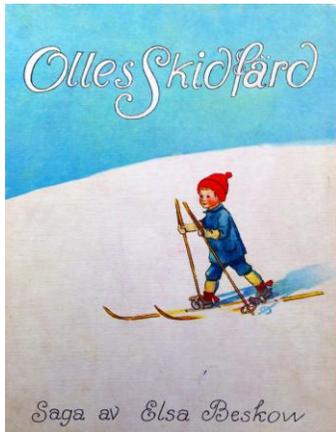
11. Then we have skiing as competitive sports.



12. Finally, we find representations of everyday skiing, or skiing that is done out of necessity.



Ollie's Ski Trip



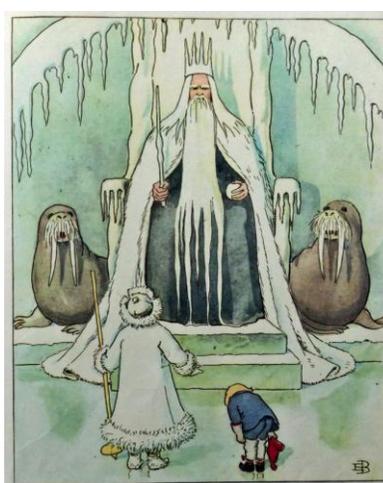
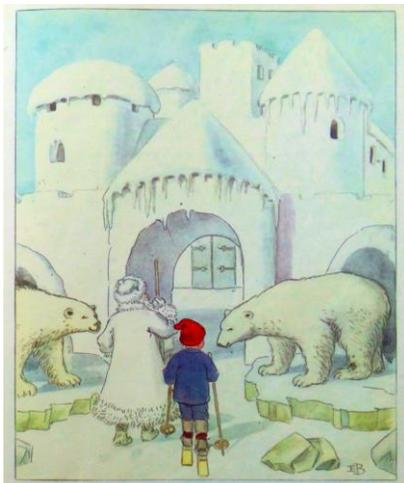
13. In one of the most famous Swedish picturebooks of all time: Elsa Beskow's *Olles Skidfärd* ("Ollie's Ski Trip") from 1907 some of these categories blur and mix in interesting ways. The story is about Olle, who, on his sixth birthday gets a pair of "real" skis from his father (his old pair of skis had been fashioned out of crude planks by the foreman on the farm). Later, when

there is snow, Olle goes skiing.

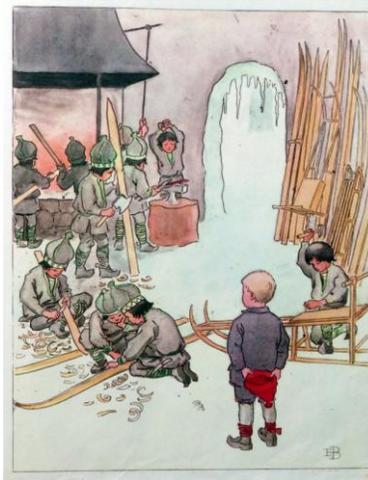
14. He meets Old Man Frost who offers to guide him to the Winter King. On their way, they meet Mother Thaw, but Old Man Frost chases her away.



15. Eventually, they arrive at the snow castle of the Winter King, and are received in the throne room. The King takes a liking to the energetic and winter-loving boy, and promises him a pair of skates, and invites him to look around in the castle.



16. In the next room Olle sees a group of Sami men and women who are making ski shoes and knitting socks around a fire. Continuing to the next room Olle sees girls making mittens and boys making skis and sleighs. They are very industrious and work quickly. They are in a hurry, because they want to be ready before Christmas, and, as one of the boys says, “Swedish children wish to have such Christmas presents.”



17. But then there is a break, and Olle witnesses and participates in all kinds of winter sports and games: downhill skiing, skating, building a snow-man, going on a sleigh-ride, having a snow-ball fight. Eventually, however, Old Father Frost takes Olle home again; they put on skis and let a reindeer pull them along. The story’s coda is that on Christmas day, Old Father Frost (presumably) has left a pair of skates for him on the steps outside the front door, and another present, a sleigh, for Olle’s little brother. The rest of the winter they are outdoors as much as possible. At first they resist the arrival of thaw and Spring, but in the end they realize that Spring – and even Mother Thaw – can be good too.



Olle’s adventure on skis is on one level a journey of discovery – less monumental than Nansen’s journey across Greenland, perhaps, but nevertheless a quest into an unknown realm, into a winter wonderland and back. The Winter King himself endorses winter sports, strengthening

the national-royalist connotations, and the king is himself vaguely reminiscent of the heroic figures of Nordenskiöld and Nansen, mustaches and all. It is certainly no coincidence that the palace is guarded by polar bears and that the king himself is flanked by two walruses, animals that belong outside Sweden, in the polar regions. The Sami people that Olle meets also signify northernness. They are the Swedish Other of the north. The skills and culture they possess as part of their way of life can be appropriated and commodified for recreational and playful purposes. One notes that Olle is regularly placed as a spectator rather than as a participant in relation to the Sami people. But Olle also enjoys a privileged position in relation to many other Swedish children, as is clear from the description of the skis that he is given as a birthday present – real skis (that cost money) instead of the ones that his father's foreman on the farm had crafted. Olle is also shown to be a child who has time for recreation and things to play with, in itself clear indicators of privilege at the time of publication. And Beskow's lavish picturebook fantasy was of course, originally aimed at precisely the affluent middle class – Olle's parents, as it were – people who could afford to give away both skis and picturebooks. However, over time, the raised standard of living for the majority of the population, meant that these conditions were shared by most Swedes. Thus *Olles skidfärd* has come to define, in part, what skiing and being Swedish means – national-heroic overtones, a generous dose of exotic northernness, and wintry fantasy.

Gustav Vasa and Vasaloppet

Olles skidfärd combine some of the fundamentals in its representation of skiing, but the explicit historical connections are lacking, and the competitive aspect is downplayed.

18. We have to turn to Gustav Vasa and the Vasaloppet ski race for these things. Gustav Vasa's adventures in the county of Dalarna – skiing and otherwise – is a fixture in Swedish history teaching. Iconically, the most important scenes are: Gustav Vasa's rallying speech in Mora



21-22 Vasa alone in the wilderness, and

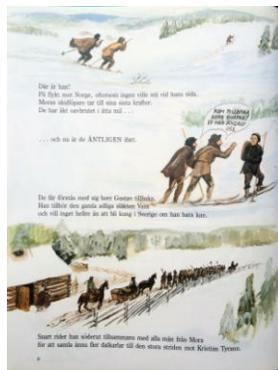


Eller anar
Gustav Vasa nåt
när han kämpar sig fram
genom den vinande
snöstormen i Dalarna?



Seinon faller tytt och ställa över landet,
och stana i den djupa slängen i Dalarna håller ett ensamt
skidspår på ett snöiga ägge.
Att det är spåret efter mästa kung i Sverige kan ju ingen se.
Men det är ju ett tydligt spår.
Spår av han emellan långt borta.

23-24 The moment when the two fleet-footed pursuers reach him. In fiction too, the motif occurs now and again, as in the recent *I kungens spår* [In the King's Tracks] (2016) by Peter Arrhenius, in which a girl time travels in order to meet Gustav Vasa to try to change the course of history.



25 However, the most influential remediation of Gustav Vasa's ski adventure is of course the Vasaloppet ski race held in commemoration of Gustav Vasa's return to Mora in 1520. The race was held the first time in 1922 and annually draws some 15.000 skiers.



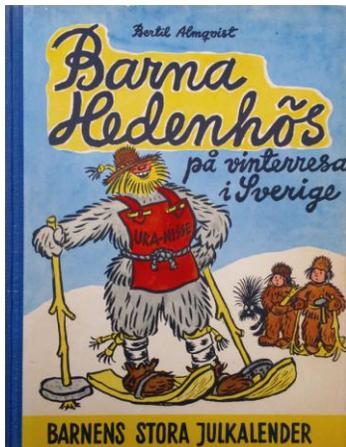
26 Vasaloppet, with its motto inscribed over the finish line, “in the ski-tracks of our fathers, towards future victories,” is imbued with patriotism, but even more so with a general sense of



“tradition,” both national and personal in nature. Primarily it is a popular sports and media event, but it draws some of its symbolical strength from its historical and fictional connections. It is still a coming of age ritual for Swedish men. Today, however, it is less

gender-bound and has more to do with current ideals of fitness, health and a contemporary quest for intense experiences. Its appeal also resides in its combination of popular vernacular skiing and professional, competitive sports. For it is one of the few sports events, together with marathon races, where an amateur can compete with the elite.

27 Due to its cultural significance it comes as no surprise that the Vasaloppet has been treated



in children’s literature as well. A good example is Bertil Almqvist’s



picturebook *Barna Hedenhös på vinterresa i Sverige* [The Winter Journey of the Hedenhös Children] (1958). It was the fifth volume of thirteen (1948-1971) about the adventurous stone age family Hedenhös. In “the winter journey” the family decides to go north from their home on “Stockholmen” (“the log isle”) on the ice-covered Baltic one of their relatives has acquired fame

up to Nämforsen, where as petroglyph cutter (Nämforsen has one of the best know petroglyph sites in Sweden). On their way there they also visit a stone age zoo and fight some ur-Vikings.

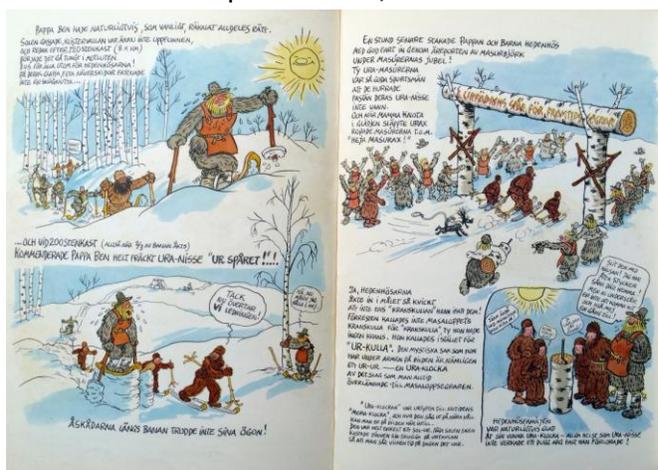
28 The return journey takes them overland, since they also want to go to Ura (a pun on “ur” as in old and “Mora”). Almqvist’s picturebook thrives on language jokes and stereotypes. Thus, the men of Ura wear the traditional leather apron, typical of the folk dress, they make clocks – and they ski!



29 The manifold champion Ura-Nisse is modelled on Mora-Nisse (although not physically – Mora Nisse was small and lithe) who won the race an unparalleled nine times in the 1940s and early 1950s. *The Barna Hedenhös Winter Journey* may be set in the stone age, but more than that it is a narrative about the post-war period in which it was conceived. There is an air of optimism, and technological inventiveness that permeates all of the Hedenhös albums. The family lives in what is going to be the capital of Sweden, the center, and they represent progress and modernity more than anything else. In the winter journey Ura/Mora represents the primitive and traditional – the roots – and its people are strong and good, if a bit backward. In the inevitable march of progress, the Hedenhös family are the future, whereas Ura-Nisse is an atavism, who can only rely on his strength.



30 With their superior skills, and skis made from birch bark, Ben, Sten and Flisa show that technology beats brute force any day (and especially on a warm day when the snow tends to stick to the skis).



The Moomin Winter Follies

Another children's author and illustrator who has engaged humorously with skiing and winter sports, is Finland-Swede

31 Tove Jansson. In the novel *Moominland Midwinter* (1957) she makes a memorable portrait



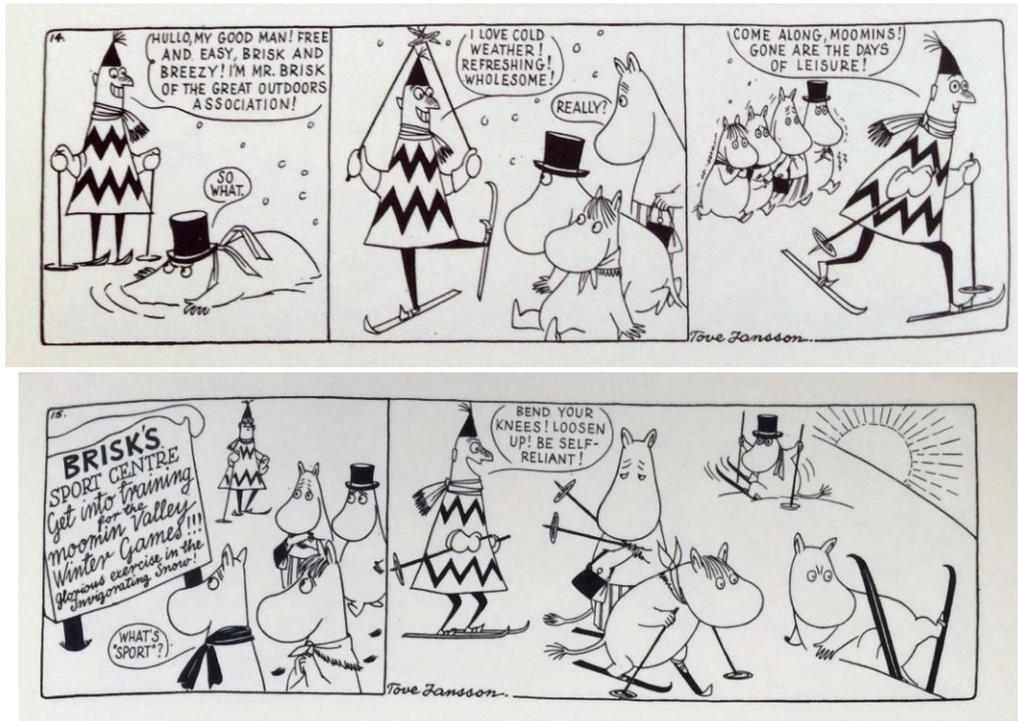
of a winter sports obsessed hemulen. The hemulen is a health freak, he is happily self-centred, and sure of himself. But he is not competitive, and when forced to it, he can help others. He saves the little creature Salome, who loves his horn music. And, unwittingly he rescues the dog Ynk from the wolves. In some ways he is a parodic progeny of the explorer he-men of the 1880s, and the health and fitness prophets of the early twentieth century.

32. His ambitions to teach the Moomintrolls and the other creatures of Moominvalley about winter sports fail, however. He is regarded as a curiosity, when winter-bathing, and when Moomin gives in to the Hemulen's entreaties and tries downhill skiing, it becomes a frightening and humiliating experience, except for the spectators. The only one who wants to learn is Little My, who soon surpasses the Hemulen, and then goes her separate way. And the only time, the



Hemulen manages to strike a chord with the Moominvalley creatures is when he arranges a snow-ball battle.

33. The hemulen is too much, in every respect, but he has some positive qualities. But when Jansson revisits the winter setting, and part of the basic storyline, in the comic strip *Moomin's Winter Follies* (1959), the Hemulen has been replaced by an even less likeable character, Mr Brisk. If the Hemulen is modelled on the heroic lifestyle skier who is uninterested in results and medals, Mr Brisk is an embodiment of the competitive skier. He shares with the Hemulen a passion for winter sports, but the essential thing for Mr Brisk is winning.



34. If he cannot win his sense of purpose is lost. When Mymble, who has fallen in love with him, turns out to be the better skier, he wants to kill himself. And unlike the Hemulen who in the end saves Salome and carries her with him on his journey, Mr Brisk rejects Mymble outright. When she asks if he wants to dance with her, he says, “dancing, my dear, is a very futile sport” (no doubt because dancing is not about wining). With tears in her eyes, Mymble leaves, saying to herself, “Now if I were he...I'd like me terribly.” Given the Moomintrolls' love of dancing (not to mention Tove Jansson's), this surely makes Mr Brisk one of the most unsympathetic characters in the entire Moomiverse.



Everyday skiing

Elsa Beskow's nostalgic winter fantasy, as well as Bertil Almqvist's and Tove Jansson's humorous subversions represent skiing as recreation – as an outdoors activity or as competitive sports. Neither Olle, nor the Hedenhös family, nor the Hemulen/Mr Brisk and the unconvinced Moomintrolls engage with skiing as an everyday mode of communication, or a necessary work skill. In the children's literature set in the northern half of Sweden, however, skiing, if commented on at all, is treated as a naturally occurring, necessary practice. In a “Norrländ” context (which includes the counties Lappland, Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Ångermanland, Jämtland, Härjedalen, Medelpad, and Gästrikland) skiing is an important cultural marker, albeit often left unremarked because of its ordinariness. Since there are no picturebooks in this material, I will end this presentation by displaying a few of these books.

31. The dangerous environment is a recurring theme. In *Post-Olle* by Per Westerlund, Olle's father, the post master in a remote area of Lapland has an accident in which breaks his leg. Resolutely, the fourteen-year old Olle takes over his father's job for a few months. This means skiing 50 km every other day between four wilderness villages with the heavy post bag on his back. He has to cope with wolves and bandits. But “Post-Olle” is made of the right mettle and pulls through. There are numerous such boys' adventure books.

Sami culture is often invoked. Their skiing and hunting skills are admired, as in *Marja och Gråben*, or in Laura Fitinghoff's *Lapp-Natti*, or *Klomma*. The risk of exoticization in these works is apparent, even when there seems to be genuine respect for their way of life.

