

PICTURE 1 - some of my illustrations

My background

On my home page in a kind of *Artist statement* I have tried to sum up the reason why I try to express myself in illustrations, the reason why I love this work so much and actually, the reason why I think it is so important to communicate in a responsible way.

Making art, making illustrations, is a way of communicating with the world. Depending on how I decide to portray our environment, the characters, their reactions and feelings in my children's books, I communicate messages that either cement or shake the existing norms and stereotypes of our society. Having this kind of power thrills me, but at the same time I'm aware that the privilege this enables is accompanied by great responsibility.

So, subjects like **representation and diversity** are topics that are very important to me, and has been for a long time. This said, I cannot stress enough that **I do make mistakes**, I probably **don't do enough** and **I could be better**. However - The reason why I find these themes important might lay in my background, at least to some extent.

Before starting my career as an illustrator I studied **social psychology**. And I have always found a big interest in the human psyche, how our feelings and emotions affect how we interact. How much of our perception of our own value is dependant on how others look at us. And how all of this affects the way we take on the world.

PICTURE 2 - Finnish Swedish minority

I also belong to a minority in Finland, the **Swedish-speaking Finns. Finlandssvenskarna**. We are a linguistic minority in Finland. We maintain a strong identity and are seen either as a separate ethnic group, while still being Finns, or as a distinct nationality. For me personally, I identify both as a Swedish-speaking Finn and as a Finn. We are not a suppressed minority. But since we are a minority of only 6 % of the population, we always need to fight for our existence to a certain point. Our language, the mother tongue is very important for many reasons. Maybe the most important is the culture that is closely connected to the language. If we lose our language we also lose our history and our culture. Another important thing is the right to use your own language in certain **sensitive situations**. For example when you are vulnerable, when seeing a doctor or the police or the court. Situations that are somehow connected with the **use of or distribution of power**. At the moment, the right to use your mother tongue in these situations or institutions **should be guaranteed in theory, but sadly, this is not always the case in practice**.

PICTURE 3 - funding

One might also argue that we are a very **privileged minority**. There are rich foundations that fund our cultural work. This is of course done to help preserve our culture and language. It is for example relatively easy for an artist who plans to write a book in Swedish in Finland to get a grant for his or her work. This said - naturally you need to proof some qualification. And the standard of for example children's books published in Swedish in Finland at the moment is very high.

PICTURE 4 - Rewarded books from colleagues

Publishing books in the Finnish Swedish community

It is not easy living on the money you get from publishing children's books in Swedish in Finland. The market is so small. We are only about 300 000 Finnish Swedes living in Finland. You need **either to sell a lot of books to Sweden** (which is not very easy) or get your book **translated to Finnish or other languages** (which is not very easy either). The reality is we **hope for grants or scholarships and / or rely on other incomes from freelancing jobs or teaching or something else**. Just like **any artist in this field** who is not a super seller cash cow.

But the small Finnish Swedish publishers are **doing quite well at** the moment. It seems that people are more and more curious of our authors and the small publishers are winning a lot of literary **prizes**. I have mainly worked with the Finnish Swedish publisher **Förlaget** and I am very happy with them. The small publishers know they will never be able to sell huge amounts of copies of their books in Finland. This might seem depressing. But the upside is that they might be more willing to do brave, artistic and even experimental choices when deciding what kind of books to publish. Which is wonderful for an picture book artist. This view on books and literature also enables us book makers to concentrate on narrower stories. **And this is a path to focus on representation and under-represented narratives and images.**

PICTURE 5 - My books / diversity

Norm creativity and representation

The situation is improving in Finland. Researchers even say we are going through an **revolution** in the field of picture books today. Mia Österlund, a Finnish literary scholar, critic and researcher who focuses on norm critique says that the children's books of today have an audience of many ages, both children and adults. The aesthetic ambitions and the messages that the books communicate offer meeting points for adults and children. She talks about **norm critique as a critical perspective that studies the society**. Like studying the society with an x-ray view. This way you will get your eyes on the skeleton, the structure. It exposes what the structure **includes**, but also **what is missing**. Who gets to be there and who does not? It is a question about **democracy**.

I think it is worth to remember that representation can be shown with relatively small markers, like thinking of what name to chose for your character (Anne - or - Annok for example) or details in the illustration.

PICTURE 6 - Bilders makt

We live in a very visual culture. The pictures we are exposed to every day shape our perception of the world, about other people and of ourselves. But **some**, or you may argue, **many** lack the crucial knowledge one needs to be able to interpret visual expressions. I have found a knowledge bank online, **Bilders Makt** that is available for everybody.

Here you can find pictures, movies and texts that **explain stereotypical pictures and illustrations**.

Bilders Makt offer a tool for deeper visual literacy about racist stereotypes.

The knowledge bank is put together by researchers, artists, journalists and other professionals.

<https://bildersmakt.se/> **I highly recommend checking it out if you understand and read Swedish.**

What we read as children shape us deeply because we are still in the process of forming. **We are like an empty white paper.** This is why the field of children's literature is often seen as one of the most important arenas **for fighting prejudices.**

PICTURE 7 - Mirror and window

The metaphor "**mirror and window**" is often used to differentiate between on the one hand reading where we get verified in what we already know, on the other hand reading that opens up totally new worlds.

An example of this could be: **A trans character in i children's book can function both as a mirror**

and as a window. For a child with similar thoughts and feelings about gender identity or gender expression the book may function as a **mirror**. And for a child that do not necessarily recognize his- or herself in this, the trans character in the book can function as a **window**. He or she can identify with the feeling of being seen as someone you are not.

PICTURE 7b - Mirror and window / clichés and quality

Not all books with representation are good. But all representation is not good representation either. The research can be poorly executed, the narrative may have shortages, the basic idea may be just weak.

An outside perspective is and will be an perspective from the outside, even in combination with the worlds best intention. This does not mean that an author that stands outside of a certain group can't depict the group. On the contrary - an author with genuine **curiosity, that dives into the subject and is willing to thoroughly understand it**, has every possibility to be in the skin of characters that do not resemble themselves at all.

Clichés and quality is however more **difficult to combine**. The attitude of the author or illustrator AND the angle of the narrative is equally important.

PICTURE 8 - Diversity in books that show our community?

Representation in Finnish Swedish picture books

Finland has not a very impressive reputation of accepting immigrants when comparing to other European countries and until recent years the society has looked quite **homogeneous concerning for example skin color**. During the 1990-ies the amount of asylum seekers rised and people from Somalia, Kosovo Albanians, Arabs were accepted and evacuated. During 2015 when a lot of people fled wars we got more new asylum seekers from the Midel East.

But the children who come here usually get integrated into Finnish schools, not Swedish speaking schools, and that is of course understandable. It is usually more useful to learn the majority language first. It only means that we don't get the same amount of multicultural enrichment into our Swedish speaking environments. This is something that maybe is reflected in picture books as well. **The fact is that in Finnish schools, and especially in Swedish schools in Finland, the majority is still very white.**

PICTURE 8 b - Books from Swedish Finnish authors and illustrators

This said, I do not think that we as picture book makes need to show this exact condition as a mirror if we for example illustrate a picture book that tells about a Swedish school class in Finland. **In this case you can think more WINDOW than MIRROR.**

You can also ask yourself the question - do I want to depict the society as it is right now - or as I would like it to be in the future? The right answer is of course dependant on the style of the story being in question.

PICTURE 9 - USA books diversity

This is the percentage of books depicting characters from diverse backgrounds in USA in

2015. The situation has most likely evolved since that. But it is interesting to see to what extent the whites have a majority.

Here I think I could said that I cannot stress enough the relevance of reading new books to children. People often tend to feel nostalgic and favour picture books from their own childhood. It is of course important to read the old classics too. But if you don't read the new books that reflect what happens in the society right now you will lag behind. And you will miss everything new and fresh that is presented for both children and adults. The children's and young peoples literature is the fastest genre to snatch the trends and shifts of our society and reflect it for us to read and analyse.

PICTURE 10 - Think Movie director thinking

Creating pictures

When taking on a new project I often find it useful to think as an movie director. This is the case even though I illustrate someone elses texts. I do a thorough casting. What types of characters do I need here? What skin color? What kind of body types? What kind of personalities? I try out different options and I do not lock them too early. It is always possible to go back and change. (This is why I like my working method with Photoshop so much).

I also plan and direct the scenography or the stage design. Where do I need this to take place? What kind of class perspective are we talking about? And the props, what do they tell about the story, what kind of props do I need in this particular story?

I also think about camera angles, and ask myself questions like: if using this low angel view, what kind of power structure does it reflect?

PICTURE 11 - Editorial experiment

What I try to do

In general I have had only good experiences with working with both editorial illustration and children's books. But earlier - especially with Finnish magazines I have noticed that the skin color of the illustrated people can be a sensitive, or actually a **unfamiliar matter**. It is not that the publishers act in a racist way, they are only so used to always see white people in their illustrations, unless the story is about **immigration or integration**. On several occasions I have been asked to change the skin color because as they said "the topic was about something neutral, nothing to do with immigration".

To me **something neutral** would be the perfect setting for using people of color in the illustrations. Now I have an experiment going on. I try to use people of color as models in ALL my new editorial illustrations. Because they are widely unrepresented in "neutral" stories. So far my experiment is going well and I think everybody in this field is starting to wake up to the importance of representation and diversity.

PICTURE 12 - Vildaare, värre, smilodon

When making **illustrations for children's books** it is of course a **cooperation with the author and the publisher**. Before starting a project we usually discuss the characters and the surroundings. We have **changed gender, skin color, added and removed objects just to get the feeling in the story right**.

In the book **Vildare, värre, smilodon with text by Minna Lindeberg** the main characters were originally two boys. This was in 2016, just before the MeeToo movement really got started. And before everybody started talking about the absence of girls in leading roles in books. But our editor felt that the story could get better with two girls. It was not often that a wild, explosive girl who didn't want to please anybody got to get the leading role. And in this case it was a Sami girl from the Sapmi area in Northern Scandinavia, a small minority of indigenous people.

PICTURE 13 - Cover for Vi är lajon!

Case: Vi är lajon!

So finally I thought I could walk you through the steps I took when I planned the illustrations in one of my latest books **Vi är lajon!** The text is by Jens Mattsson. Here I will concentrate mainly on the characters and the decisions concerning diversity and representation.

PICTURE 14 - Children

Characters - Children

Since this was the first spread in the book I wanted to bring the reader very close to the children in the beginning to show that they really ARE these lions that they are playing. I wanted to create the feeling that you can really **hear their roar**. And use a close up perspective in order to use a child perspective, give the children voices from the beginning.

PICTURE 15 - Adults

Characters - Adults

The author Jens told me that he had discussed with a family at the library when he was working as a librarian. The family consisted of a Swedish mother and an Asian father. The father said that he had noticed that in picture books the Asian men were mostly depicted as IT tech nerds, never as sex symbols or even just ordinary family fathers. **This was both interesting and a shame**. So we thought lets give this role to an Asian family father in our book. When thinking about the parents I thought I wanted to make them warm, loving, but with some hair loss (the father) and round hips (the mother).

PICTURE 16 - Home

Settings - where do they live?

How does it look in their home? This family is a middle class family I think. But I wanted to show normal everyday life with laundry and sandwiches on the tv-table, clothes on the floor. In this picture the big brother is ill, actually he is getting very ill suddenly. I also thought of the gender roles here. I didn't want the mother to be the most active part. As women are most often the primary care givers. So here I let the father take the important telephone call with the doctor.

PICTURE 17 - Hospital / nurse

Here the family arrives to the hospital. The big brother is now so ill so he has to live there. They meet

a patient and a nurse in the garden. Again - I didn't want to give the role as the nurse, the caregiver to the woman, neither to the person of color. So I decided the nurse would have to be a male and the patient could be a black woman.

PICTURE 18 - Hospital / doctor

Now the family has gotten a room in the hospital. The text says that they meet a doctor. The doctor is likely to be highly educated, probably a pediatrician or an oncologist. So again, I had a casting to think about. I felt like I did not want to repeat the stereotype of the doctor as a white male so it felt natural to give the role to a woman, a black woman.

With the images in a book I can communicate a message, I can give a voice to someone. This is also why it is so important to remember your responsibility to **be fair and just**. And to let **more voices, under-represented narratives, and images be heard. To let multiple stories about groups of people come out.**

If one single message about a group is repeated over and over it can become manipulative and dangerous.

And as a last slide I wanted to show you the brilliant Chimamanda Adichie's Danger of a Single story. It tells us so much about story telling, power and stereotypes. If you haven't heard it, check it out on YouTube.

PICTURE 19 - The danger of a Single Story

The "Danger of a Single Story", a 2009 TED Talk by Chimamanda Adichie, a young Nigerian author, provides a powerful tool for the Facing History classroom. In the twenty minute video, Adichie describes the powerful impression the multitude of British stories made on her as a young girl growing up in Nigeria. She argues that inherent in the power of stories, is a danger—the danger of only knowing one story about a group. "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Adichie recounts speaking to an American student who, after reading her novel centered on an abusive male protagonist, lamented the fact that Nigerian men were abusive. Having just read American Psycho, Adichie returns his pity, and calls it a shame that "all young American men are serial killers." The TED audience laughs at the absurdity of this generalization and her point is clear: on a micro-level, the danger of a single story is that it prevents people from authentically connecting with people as individuals. On a macro-level, the issue is really about power: almost by definition, there are many stories about the dominant culture so the single-story threatens to create stereotypes that stick to groups that are already disempowered.