



## Life of a Fatso: Young, Fat and Vulnerable in a Scandinavian Society of Perfection

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The Scandinavian welfare system is based on ideas of equal access to education and employment. Taking part in society and contributing one's share is seen as a right as well as a duty. Indeed, success in education is connected to high employment later in life, which is a prerequisite for the survival and success of the welfare state. With an educational system that offers the right to 13 years of schooling, it is a paradox that three out of ten pupils in Norway do not finish upper secondary school (normally three years) within a time frame of five years (Sommer 2016). The situation is parallel in the other Nordic countries (Markussen 2010).<sup>1</sup> This has led to a growing concern for this group of young people, since their failing education is seen to connect to mental health problems and future unemployment (Anvik and Waldahl 2017). In a qualitative study taking the perspective of young people who are not in education, employment or training, Anvik and Waldahl (2017, p. 19) raise the question 'whether

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the welfare state's partitioned help services are able to deal with the complexity of the challenges that the young people face'.

While statistics tell us about increased risks of marginalization depending on social status, disabilities and migration (Markussen 2010), the voices of the young people involved talk of shame and guilt, and that the feeling of failure is reinforced by the awareness of all the welfare state has done for them. They have a desire to be seen as whole people, not merely as users or patients (Anvik and Waldahl 2017). It is this complexity that I aim to shed light on in my analysis of Synne Sun Løes' young adult novel *Miss* (2017), featuring a young woman who is, indeed, a dropout, but also a resource. Fiction may offer a different kind of access to the full picture than surveys and statistics.

The title *Miss* carries a double reference—on the one hand, to Ea's feeling of being a mis(s)fit; on the other hand, to her critical stance to her best friend turning into a 'Little Miss Perfect'. Dropping out of school, over-eating and skipping her exercise are some of the means Ea uses to place herself as an outsider and, hence, in opposition to perfectionism. She insists on describing herself as a fatso (*'tjukkis'*) and regards herself as a social loser. Hence, her most vulnerable features are central in her resistance to living up to expectations for young females in contemporary Scandinavian society. As Ea struggles with her increasingly fat body, she can also be seen as a symptom of an affluent society where the young no longer see any sense in reaching for a future. In all, these voices convey a social criticism that I will try to catch in my final discussion.

Two themes are recurrent in Ea's position as an outsider: her decision to drop out of school, and her over-eating. These are the two reasons Ea gives for why she has been going regularly to therapy since she was 13 (Løes 2017, p. 20). Together, they represent both social and bodily protest, making her strong as she exposes her vulnerability.

## YOUNG AND VULNERABLE

In a certain sense, one can claim that being young in itself means being vulnerable. Young people are in a phase of transition from child to adult, from being taken care of to taking responsibility for their own life. According to Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the period from puberty to young adult is characterized by the specific challenges of finding an identity, followed by a stage where the challenge is to

develop intimate relationships and friendships. Failing to meet the challenge of identity may lead to problems with role confusion later in life, while the lack of intimate relationships may lead to isolation (Erikson and Erikson 1998). Specific to Erikson's theory is his emphasis on sociocultural and biological forces in a person's development. Unlike other theories of development from child to adult, he also recognizes that development carries on throughout a lifetime, and that previous crises may be solved later in life. The existential question of the teens is: Who am I and what can I be in terms of occupation, gender roles, politics, and beliefs?

The Danish scholar Ayoe Quist Henkel points to this feeling of vulnerability as a basic characteristic of young adult fiction:

Basically, youth literature conveys a range of emotions that are particularly prominent in the period between being child and adult: often in a form representing and reflecting on the feeling of being in an *existential vacuum* characterized by vulnerability and uncertainty bordering to desperation. (Henkel 2011, p. 24, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

This has been reflected in Norwegian contemporary young adult fiction, as emphasized by the recent juries of *The Ministry of Culture's prizes for children's and young adult literature*, highlighting central themes such as identity and the uncertainty of youth. Eeg, leading the jury for publications from 2017, specifically mentions *Miss*, by Synne Sun Løes, as an example of an outsider who rebels against parents, the establishment and the social norms connected to body, appearance and schooling (Eeg 2018).

Synne Sun Løes' novel may be seen as part of a Scandinavian trend in some ways. But the novel also stands out from typical stories about young teens struggling to fit into new social arenas, in its thematic complexity as well as in the form of narration. The main character, Ea, is 16 years old, and on the point of dropping out from her first year in upper-secondary school. She defines herself as a misfit, apparently with no interest in adapting to social expectations. Rather, her life can be understood as a protest against her well-adjusted parents' expectations. Her mother is a doctor, a general practitioner; her father is an accountant: they both expect Ea to make the best of her abilities, live a healthy life and prepare for a successful future. In contrast, Ea has dropped out of school and spends her days knitting small garments for pets (dogs and cats), reading, going to her therapist—and eating.

The narrative is strongly focused on Ea's body and personal life, relating mainly to family and therapists. Apart from Fanny, who has been Ea's best friend since their mothers met in the maternity ward, there is hardly any mention of classmates or social life at school. During the book, Ea develops a relationship to her neighbour Viggo, a rich heir who is even more of a dropout than herself, mostly taking drugs and watching television series. In addition to the close-up on Ea's personal life, the novel gradually reveals a social context that includes political and ideological issues, as well as the history of Ea's extended family.

Much attention is given to Ea's close relationship to her Aunt Edith, and the importance of this relationship becomes apparent when the reader learns that Edith committed suicide and Ea was the one who found her drowned in the bath exactly one year before the present story begins. Edith was Ea's mother's twin sister and appears to have been a complete contrast: while the mother is skinny, Edith was fat; while the mother is ambitious, hardworking and stressed, Edith was an artist leading a free, but poor life. As the story unfolds, we learn how these contrasts have dominated the mother's life and led to her complete break from her own parents. Both sets of grandparents are surprisingly distant, busy with their own affluent lives and travels.

The novel is structured in two main parts, and covers the period from September, when Ea turns 16, until July the following year. The first part runs through the autumn until New Year's Eve and describes Ea's downward development spiral from the moment she decides to drop out of school. The second part runs from January until July, displaying a gradual change of perspective from introspective disgust to an outward interest in other people's lives wherein Ea takes on more responsibility. Within each section, the story is told through a varied set of perspectives, which are visually marked by different font styles. All the perspectives relate to Ea and her first-person narrator, but the distinction between them opens up the opportunity to see the ambivalences and tensions in her situation.

## VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE

In answer to what vulnerability is, Mackenzie et al. (2014) propose three different sources of vulnerability. First, they claim that vulnerability is *inherent* to being human, since we exist in bodies that may be hurt, and we are dependent on others who may not always fill our needs. This source of vulnerability is closely connected to understanding the human

condition as based in the corporeal and the social. My claim, that being young is a state of vulnerability, can be understood along these lines. Second, Mackenzie et al. point to specific *situations* as a source of vulnerability. This view ties vulnerability to context in time and space. In *Miss*, the fact that Ea finds her Aunt Edith drowned in the bath after committing suicide makes Ea specifically vulnerable. The third source of vulnerability is characterized as *pathogenic*, and is closely connected to questions of power and dependency. Mackenzie et al. (2014, p. 9) point to how institutional structures, as well as interpersonal relationships, may become sources of power that can be misused, thus failing to meet the very needs they were designed to address. Dependency may occur in professional relations, such as between therapist and patient. In family relations, the child's dependency on adult care is typically changing through adolescence and this, in itself, may cause imbalance and displacements in dependency and vulnerability in times of transition. In Ea's case, it is particularly interesting to discuss whether her outsider behaviour is a healthy or harmful reaction to what she experiences in relation to parents and therapists.

According to Judith Butler, vulnerability can manifest on individual and collective levels, and it can take bodily or linguistic forms. Linguistic vulnerability is expressed by name-calling and discursive categories. Discourses produce ideals and norms that act on us, and shape the ways we act and understand ourselves. Butler's main example is about how gender is performed and assigned through language. In my analysis of *Miss*, it may be interesting to look at how Ea negotiates discourses of her as being fat, client, daughter, school dropout and so on.

Judith Butler presents a discussion on how vulnerability relates to resistance, where she points out how vulnerability must be understood within social and material relations:

What I am suggesting is that it is not just that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible. As I will hope to show, we cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside this conception of social and material relations. (Butler 2016, p. 16)

Butler points to how humans are formed by social norms 'that precede us', and comments on her understanding of performativity as dual rather

than opposites, comprising ‘both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting’ (Butler 2016, p. 18). Butler’s discussion is set within a social and political context, where she claims that vulnerability and resistance condition each other: ‘vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment’ (Butler 2016, p. 22). Moving her ideas into literary analysis of fiction, I find the relational and performative aspects of vulnerability interesting, as well as the social context in which these relations, actions and discourses are set.

Returning to the dilemmas of the Scandinavian welfare states concerning dropouts from school, I find the novel *Miss* by Synne Sun Løes (2017) an interesting case for discussing questions of vulnerability and resistance. How is the dropout positioned in relations to family, friends, institutions of support and society as a whole? How may her vulnerability be understood, and how can resistance change her position?

*Miss* was selected by the International Youth Library as one out of six Norwegian titles for *The White Ravens* international catalogue 2017, where it was labelled with the key words ‘Overweight; Outsider; Norm; Differentness’ (White Ravens 2017). In some ways, it represents a tendency in Norwegian young adult fiction of increased interest in the vulnerability of young girls in contemporary society. In other ways, it transcends this trend. The first part of the analysis will be thematic and discuss two main questions: What has made this teenager from a well-off family so vulnerable? And what forms of resistance do we see? In addition, my analysis will point to formal features, such as how the resistance is voiced and in what kind of discourse it is expressed. Finally, I will discuss what this novel may reveal about contemporary Scandinavian society, and how it offers perspectives on the social norms and discourses that ‘precede us and that form the constraining context for whatever forms of agency we ourselves take on in time’, to put it in Judith Butler’s words (2016, p. 18).

### MISS—A NETWORK OF RELATIONS

The relational nature of being situated in the world is integrated in the very structure of the novel. The story is told as a collage of voices through which we follow Ea through her dialogues with key relationships in her life: her successful parents; her late aunt, with whom she identifies; her friends; her therapists and, not least, her own body.

As already mentioned, one person of particular significance for Ea is her Aunt Edith, her mother's twin sister. At the point when Ea writes her story, a year has passed since Edith committed suicide by drowning herself in the bath. This incident is never explicitly mentioned within the family—it is taboo. But the experience remains there, immediately beneath the surface, which can be seen in the reactions of Ea's mother when she finds the book *The Sacred Art of Dying* under Ea's bed. This experience may represent a double trauma in Ea's life: not only has she lost her beloved aunt in the worst way possible, this trauma is also haunting her relationship to her mother, who is terrified that Ea may turn out the same way.

The story about the twin sisters Edith and Birgitte (Ea's mother) unfolds gradually. Ea retells what she has heard from Aunt Edith about a constant conflict between Edith and her mother (Ea's grandmother), who considered her daughter mentally disturbed and tried to slim her down by force as early as at the age of 10. Ea's mother seems to have been squeezed between sister and mother and, ultimately, she had chosen to give her loyalty to her sister. However, she never talks about it after the death of her sister. Her stance is not revealed until Ea's grandmother contacts her, suggesting that the little family could join the grandparents in their new vineyard in Italy for a summer vacation. The two have not spoken for nine years, so this conversation is very disturbing to Ea's mother. She drops her guard and Ea sees her mother soften and weaken, and become a person who needs her help. In this situation, Ea's mother finally speaks to Ea about the wrongs done to her sister—a situation that mirrors what she sees happening to Ea.

Ea's core family is vulnerable because of its isolation from extended relations. Mother, father and child are at each other's mercy when there are no other close relations to support them in times of difficulty. Ea has no siblings, no cousins, and the only close relative outside the core family seems to have been Aunt Edith. All four grandparents are alive and well, but they seem too busy living their own individual lives to be close to their grandchild during her difficult times. Admittedly, her paternal grandparents are mentioned as a possible solution to her quitting school. But the fact that they are called by their forenames, Else and Tor, and not referred to as Grandmother and Grandfather, indicates that family commitment is not their first priority. They live in Houston, Texas, in a big house with its own gym and swimming pool. Even more distant are

her maternal grandparents, who turn out to be part of the problem when they try to enter the scene after nine years of withdrawal due to conflict.

While Ea's relation to Aunt Edith reveals a similarity that appears to be a scary reminder of Edith's destiny, her relation to Viggo next door has the opposite effect. With Viggo, Ea finds herself saying the same kind of things that her parents say to her: 'Even if you don't need to work for a living, it is not a bad idea to have a job [...] for your own mental health' (Løes 2017, p. 200).<sup>3</sup> She tells her therapist that she is worried about Viggo, because he has no ambitions for his life, and he will not go out for a walk, and just sits indoors and watches television series (Løes 2017, p. 146). Meeting Viggo and his family triggers Ea's soundest instincts. She refuses to smoke marijuana with him, and when Viggo's skinny mother suggests that she may just throw up all the food she eats, Ea is appalled. It appears that meeting someone she sees as more vulnerable than herself demonstrates to Ea the nature of her limits.

Summing up this part of the thematic analysis, we may see Ea's vulnerability as both inherent and situational. She is in an age of transition, and she is at her most vulnerable at the point when she is supposed to enter upper-secondary school. This is not uncommon among teenagers in Scandinavian countries, as witnessed by dropout statistics. At this point in a teenager's life, societal expectations increase, in parallel with the end of compulsory schooling. A more specific reason for her vulnerability is situational, connected to her identification with her Aunt Edith and her fate. In Ea's case, it is hard to judge whether her specific situational vulnerability triggered her inherent vulnerability at the point in her life where dropping out could carry serious consequences. The fact that she has been receiving therapy since the age of 13, two years before she was faced with her aunt's suicide, points to a more longstanding vulnerability. But it may also point to the expectations and solutions of a certain class.

## A VULNERABLE BODY

*Miss* has been read as a book about eating disorders by some of the reviewers. 'Intelligent on eating disorders' is the title of Anne Cathrine Straume's review (2017, my translation). However, Straume connects the weight problem to Ea's position in society: 'Eating disorder is not a choice one makes, rather it is a consequence of an inner or outer pressure where power over the body may appear as the only way to cope' (Straume 2017).



Ea is not just chubby, she is fat. Looking into the mirror, she sees 104 kg of body mass distributed on her 166 cm height. She weighs twice as much as her skinny, ambitious mother. Her mother has made some rules in exchange for accepting that Ea chooses not to go to school: she is supposed to go for a walk or do some exercise every day, besides doing independent studies. Hence, the vulnerability of being fat is mainly expressed through the mother's concern. In her worries, Ea's mother is not just mirroring the politically correct understanding of individual responsibility for maintaining a healthy body. Her worries are also the result of experiencing the decay of her own sister, a fear that is only mentioned in affect. This means there are collective as well as individual norms and ideas that precede Ea's situation and act on her, and Ea's resistance is best understood as a reaction to this situation. She has, however, reached the age—and the size—that prevents her parents from controlling her. So, staying inactive and over-eating is a very clear sign of resistance. Nevertheless, Ea understands the dangers of over-eating and, to herself, she sometimes admits that she is afraid of getting too fat to move around, and of ending up like her Aunt Edith, who was so fat in the end that she could barely move.

Throughout the book, we find repeated chapters with the heading 'Life of a fatso' (*'Livet til en tjukkis'*). These are set in bold; ironically, the word for bold typeset in Norwegian translates to 'fat'. By labelling herself a fatso, Ea manages to counteract her own discursive vulnerability. At one point, her friend Fanny asks why she uses the form *'tjukkis'* for 'fatso', not the more common *'tjukkas'*.<sup>4</sup> Ea's answer shows a clear strategy of discursive power in insisting on her own form of the word. She claims that a woman cannot be *'tjukkas'*. *'Tjukkas* smells of hairy truck driver with sweaty buttocks. If you are a woman, you are *Tjukkis'*, Ea claims, adding that the female version smells sweet and synthetic (Løes 2017, p. 296). In Ea's middle-class context, her body is not being talked about in such a blunt way. In fact, Ea says that her therapist Elliot never mentions her body and seems to avoid seeing it. This opens a void that Ea fills with resistant discourse.

In the first fatso chapter, Ea defends fatsos in society, claiming that they deserve more respect for the hard work it takes to eat a great deal of unhealthy food (Løes 2017, p. 43). She claims that fat people contribute to economy, since they consume a lot of food, and require a great deal of textiles to cover their fat bodies. They also contribute with entertainment, as being a perfect cast member for a reality show. She also compares fatsos

to old people, sketching a life situation of reduced activity. One sign of change in Ea's life is when she starts searching for fat role models. She reflects on why so many people seem to hate Lena Dunham in the television show *Girls* and concludes that the reason is that she muddles up their prejudices: a fat person should be shy, shameful and a failure, but Lena Dunham is fat (or, at least, not skinny), smart, rich and leads a successful life (Løes 2017, p. 139). These observations point to a developing consciousness about the possibility of resistance.

### SOCIAL VULNERABILITY

Dropping out of upper-secondary school at an age between 16 and 19—the age when one becomes an independent subject and should be able to make major decisions about one's own life—is the most common outsider position for youth in the Nordic welfare states. Expecting the entire population to finish 13 years of schooling is a rather new phenomenon that seems to expect the entire population to abide by middle-class values of education. It is well-known from welfare research that there is a statistical connection between education, employment and health (Anvik and Waldahl 2017).

Ea's mother knows all about this from her experiences as a general practitioner. Hence, her worries must be seen as very realistic, and her coping strategy is mainly discursive. She refuses to put the label 'school dropout' on her daughter and prefers to say she is taking a break. In an affluent family, there are ways to disguise the problem—in this family, the story is that Ea will spend the spring term with her paternal grandparents who currently live in the USA. The mother also knows all about how to handle the formalities around her daughter staying away from school. Even so, she seems terrified of failing as a parent and makes Ea promise not to let her mother's friends become aware of what is happening. When Ea's therapist tries to challenge Ea to tell him what she is afraid of, Ea answers that 'it is mom who is scared, not me. I am not the type' (Løes 2017, p. 159). What her mother seems to be scared of is the long-term consequences of not finishing an education in today's society, where there are few job opportunities for unskilled workers. Central, here, is the social stigma for Ea, and indirectly for her mother, who sees Ea's situation as a sign of inadequate parenting.

The novel offers no explanation why Ea does not want to go to school. There are no indications that she cannot cope with the school subjects;

she is fond of reading, and seems to collect ideas and thoughts from quite sophisticated philosophers. Her cultural references represent an interesting mix of popular and classical culture, from books ‘for dummies’ to *The Sacred Art of Dying*.<sup>5</sup> This is a mix typical of a world with digital access to endless cultural materials. Her problem seems not to be that she cannot follow the schooling but, rather, that she does not see the point of it. She does not *want* to abide by social rules and norms. Another form of resistance is that she does not participate in social media. When everybody forgets about her birthday in the opening of the book, the explanation that Ea and Fanny come up with is that it is because she is not on ‘Snap, Insta or Facebook’, so no one was reminded about her birthday. Not being on social media is equivalent to not existing in the social world, Ea reflects (Løes 2017, p. 15).

This resistance to doing what everyone else takes for granted bears witness to Ea as an independent person. This is confirmed by Fanny when she and Ea are back together. She says: ‘You have always had such incredible self-confidence. Just naturally inside you, while I...I am dependent on having everyone noticing how clever I am, to be able to feel like a real human.’ Her conclusion is that Ea is a good friend to be with: ‘I can be myself because you are yourself’ (Løes 2017, p. 242).

Socially, Ea’s problem seems to be that she is not adjusting to society’s expectations of a young, well-off and intelligent girl from one of the best parts of the city. This gives rise to an abundance of ironic comments on contemporary society. According to herself, Ea is actually quite successful in business life. She has set up an Internet shop where she sells small garments for pets that she makes herself: she is crocheting bikinis for dogs, and knitting swim suits for cats. The irony of using one’s independence for something totally meaningless in the grand scheme of what the world needs reflects back on a society where values are only counted in money. Bikinis for tiny creatures also reveals an obvious contrast to her own fat body, demonstrating vulnerability through resistance.

Throughout the book, we also find chapters where Ea makes ‘career plans’—altogether, 19 plans distributed across five chapters (Løes 2017, pp. 81, 152, 228, 267, 316). Each plan is discussed with its pros and cons. Her first plan is to become a new, modern Buddha. The pros are that it only requires her to ‘think, meditate, breathe, live and suffer’ (Løes 2017, p. 81), but the con is that she cannot allow herself to be really angry. So she discards that idea. In the same way, she goes through all the other ideas—becoming a dog walker, a philosopher, chocolate taster,

housewife, librarian, living from disability benefits, to mention but a few, until she finally settles for being herself (Løes 2017, p. 316). The pro is that she does not have to waste her life trying to be like everyone else. The con is that she cannot escape herself, no matter how dull or tragicomic her life will be. This insight is what leads up to the ending of the book, where Ea embraces all good things in her life.

### A YEAR OF CHANGE

The novel is structured in two parts with a turning point that links them. The book starts with a chapter where Ea lists all the things that she hates, starting with emotions and her body. It ends in a symmetrical way, with Ea's list of all the things she loves, ending in an abundance of emotions: 'emotions in all sorts of flavors, colors and shapes...Quivering, tingling, prickly, tickling, itchy, crawling...sweet, salt, bitter, angry, happy, longing...scared...(Just love it.)' (Løes 2017, p. 321). Throughout the autumn, from Ea's forgotten birthday until New Year's Eve, life seems to grow darker and more hopeless every day. Ea is trapped in her position as outsider, she falls out with her best friend, therapy seems to have become a habit that does not lead anywhere, and the notion of just having a break seems less and less credible. So, what is it that makes Ea's life take a turn for the better?

A series of events seem to point in the same direction. The first thing that happens in part II is that Ea is told that her psychiatrist has died. This is an ironic follow-up to their last meeting, where Elliot tries to explain to Ea that he cannot go on treating her for much longer. Ea's reaction is totally directed towards herself, she does not see his situation. The last thing she says is, 'You can sleep. But don't die. If you die, I will hate you for the rest of your life. I will sue you!' (Løes 2017, p. 160). In this new situation, Ea agrees to try going to a youth coach her mother has found, Marielle. Initially, Ea is deeply sceptical of anyone named Marielle and, indeed, their first meeting is far from a success. Marielle's approach is quite the opposite of Elliot's. She characterizes him as the protective type, using the metaphor 'bubble wrap', while Marielle is more provocative, like 'itching powder' (Løes 2017, p. 256). It is Marielle who surprises Ea by asking her if she wants to become a feminist. And she raises the question as to where the problem lies: in the fat body, or in society. She recommends that Ea reads a book entitled *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* by the British psychotherapist and activist Susie Orbach (Løes 2017, p. 218).

Marielle talks about unhealthy ideals and fat being one of the biggest taboos in contemporary society.

The first sign that something is changing in Ea is her anger. She is angry with life, with her parents and Fanny, with all the anorexics of the world. And she is angry with herself and her own body (Løes 2017, pp. 189–190). The next emotion that appears is compassion. This is due to a change in her relations, first, with her mother, who suddenly needs support and comfort, then with Fanny, who turns out not being so perfect after all. And, finally, her father is involved in a bicycle accident and needs her help. She even feels compassion with Marielle, when she gets chicken pox, but still sticks to their appointment. The change in Ea seems to be in her ability and willingness to see other people’s perspectives. In the first part of the book, she is constantly protecting herself by shutting out other people’s perspectives. Whenever her mother tries to convince her what is good for her, she answers with irony or exaggeration. Since she is an intelligent dropout, she masters the discourse that could have impressed her opponents, but she uses it for her own purposes. An example can be found in an early clash with her mother, who expresses her concern about Ea not going to school:

Idleness as such is not the root of any evil, on the contrary it is a truly divine life, as long as you are not bored...Søren Kierkegaard.

‘Do you want to be completely idiot in your head? Is that what you are trying to do?’ mom wheezed.

‘Søren was no idiot’, was my dry answer. ‘Besides, school functions as a prison or a mental hospital, it is only concerned with defining, classifying, controlling and directing people...Foucault said something like that. And he was not an idiot *either*.’ (Løes 2017, p. 33)

This example demonstrates how Ea’s resistance is not only bodily, in that she is over-eating and denies leaving the house; it is also discursive (Butler 2016), and shows how Ea, as a result of her social status in a well-educated family, holds the resources for resistance by being able to pick apart her mother’s arguments. A teenager who talks about Kierkegaard, Foucault and Buber (Løes 2017, p. 35) may seem a bit too much, if that was what she did all the time. But, typical of a teenager, Ea shifts quickly and unpredictably from the super-intellectual to the childish. Right after

her Foucauldian critique of power in the school system, she tells her mother that no one can become a normal person when her name consists of only two vowels; an inadequate name inevitably leads to an inadequate person, she claims (Løes 2017, p. 34) This discursive resistance may protect her from her mother's demands and her therapist's challenges but, at the same time, it increases her vulnerability by driving her into total isolation.

The only person that Ea does not feel the need to meet with this protective shield is her Aunt Edith. The chapters about her relationship with Aunt Edith are formulated as letters, each one of them starting with '*Dear Aunt Edith*'. These chapters seem to be Ea's sanctuary in the first part of the book. The language Ea uses to express her feelings to Aunt Edith is personal, close and honest. She protects herself against emotions in all other contexts, and refuses to answer Elliot when he finally asks her what she is afraid of. At their last session, she exclaims: 'What is the use of emotions, anyway?' (Løes 2017, p. 160). But in her letters to aunt Edith, she is direct and clear: 'I miss you' (Løes 2017, p. 25), 'What shall I do, Aunt Edith? With myself and my life?' 'I trust you' (Løes 2017, p. 26).

The collage of texts is characterized by different styles, adjusted to the relationship in focus in each chapter. What the chapters have in common is that they all seem to be genres of personal expressions. In a digital world, these are found as new genres of self-writing practices in blogs and online diaries (Lüders et al. 2010, p. 955). In spite of the fact that Ea is not participating in social media, she is well acquainted with the Internet, and its discursive practices of self-presentation seem to afford discursive resources that Ea applies in her reflections on her life and relations. Her repeated titles, such as 'Life of a fatso', 'Elliot' or 'Little Miss Perfect', resemble blog posts in terms of labelling, as well as personal linguistic form. Her self-presentations include listing who she is, what she hates and loves, and what kind of career she may choose. Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) explores how self-representations develop in digital media. She draws connections from pre-digital writing practices such 'diaries, memoirs, commonplace books and autobiographies', to blogs and written status updates (Rettberg 2014, p. 1). What is different in the digital age is that what used to be private is made public, multiplying the relations these self-presentations enter into, and adding a social pressure to perform a reflective identity.

### WHOSE PROBLEM IS IT ANYWAY?

Sending Ea to therapy to remedy her position as an outsider is a typical individualistic way of dealing with the problem. This solution is questioned when Ea's therapy sessions come to an abrupt end. After Marielle has been away on holiday for three weeks, she says to Ea: 'You are as you are, and that is fine [...] Hence, you don't need to come here anymore. You are a smart young lady' (Løes 2017, p. 285). She adds that she is very impressed with the Internet shop Ea has set up, and that she is not worried about her future at all. She even issues a diploma saying that Ea is 'Fit as a fiddle!' (Løes 2017, p. 318). This raises the question of whether Ea has been 'normal' and healthy all the time. Has therapy only led to perpetuating her in a role as sick and vulnerable? The dependency Ea displays in her relation with her first therapist, Elliot, may point in that direction. Ea often reflects on how Elliot seems sleepy and bored. Her remarks often reveal that the most important thing she has learnt through therapy is being a patient. She plays the role close to perfection, which also means that she knows exactly what to say to please her therapist, or to veer off on a tangent from one of the rare challenges he puts to her when asking what she is afraid of. This strategy does not work with Marielle. With her unorthodox methods of provocation, Marielle is able to take Ea by surprise and shake her out of her habitual rut. However, the contrast between the traditional therapist and the modern coach is not as straight forward as it may seem. Even if the course of events proves Marielle right, Elliot is portrayed with sympathy, whereas the description of Marielle is more ironic. Who knows what three years of talking to Elliot has meant to Ea, perhaps they prepared her for Marielle's provocations? In the fictional context, one of Marielle's important contributions is to provide feminist awareness and to introduce the possibility of resisting all the expectations of family and society.

The novel does not answer questions regarding how Ea ended up as a fatso and a dropout in the first place. Many factors in her life point to a resourceful and well-protected person. Her parents are well-educated and show a keen interest in her life. The family is well-off and live in one of the best parts of the city. At one point, her mother accuses Ea of suffering from 'West side sickness' (*'vestkantsyken'*; Løes 2017, p. 136). This concept points to the irony of youth in the best parts of town—which is the west side, in the case of Oslo—who struggle just as much as the children of single mothers and the unemployed (Løes 2017, p. 137). Youth

from the west side of the city are just as depressed, use drugs and struggle with the pressure to perform, Ea's mother has learned on a seminar in community medicine. Indirectly, she seems to ask if Ea's problem is just being spoilt and not being willing to put any effort into her life. On a more global scale, this question could be posed concerning how youth in Scandinavian countries take the welfare system for granted, and what consequences that carries for their understanding of how they are positioned in the world.

In the first part of the book, Ea is quite clear that she does not want to be 'normal', to adjust to the middle-/upper-class respectability that is expected from her. She avoids emotions of any kind, protecting herself behind ironic comments and exaggeration. She states explicitly that she wants to remain in control, which seems to be the explanation for why she hates it when Fanny pops in on unannounced visits. All these reactions increase the distance between Ea and other people and contribute to her position as an outsider. Even though her mother's worries are hidden behind the thick layers of irony that Ea's voice adds, the reader realizes that there is some truth to the problems her mother foresees. The fate of her Aunt Edith is but one example of where marginalization could lead.

Through Ea's voice, we see glimpses of a society that expects everyone to follow the same route to perfection. She seems to be displaced in her criticism of contemporary society: 'I say that I long for another time. A time without mobile phones and social media. Likes and Selfies' (Løes 2017, p. 46). Towards the end of the novel, Ea reflects on 'The life of Miss Misfit' and why she does not fit in, concluding that 'EVERYTHING is too tight' (Løes 2017, p. 312). She asserts that 'There is too little stretch in the society-skinny-skinny-jeans' (Løes 2017, p. 312). Hence, the problem is not Miss Misfit, but a society that does not provide enough flexibility and space for her expansion, either bodily or mentally.

In her criticism of society, Ea's comments may be strong and to the point. Yet, these comments are set in a context where Ea is obviously a part of the same society that she is criticizing. She is critical of modern media but earns her money from selling pet garments on the Internet, a production of goods that can only be valued in a society where communication has become a commodity. And she finds her wisdom not only from traditional philosophers, but also from modern life coaches and commercial self-help literature, as can be seen when she mentions Tony Robbins as 'the man in my life' (Løes 2017, p. 290). She asserts that 'Tony R. can be trusted, he is always available, non-stop-night-and-day, never sleeps.



Every time I need some popular-psychological Pepper to pep me up, I just search his name, and there he pops up. Tony R. Full of energy and golden peppercorns' (Løes 2017, p. 290).

To what extent is Ea's situation typical of being young in contemporary Scandinavia? She belongs to what has been termed the 'Skam generation', referencing the popular television series *Skam* [*Shame*] (Andem 2015–2017) that peaked at the time when *Miss* was published. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) did extensive research into their target group of girls aged 16 before they launched this story about a group of young people at an upper-secondary school in Oslo in September 2015 (Lindtner and Skarstein 2018, pp. 14–15). Shame may seem to be a more relevant characterization of Ea's emotional state than of the social group of characters in *Skam*. Nevertheless, the experience of being self-conscious to a degree that may lead to feelings of worthlessness—and, hence, social withdrawal—seems to be typical of Ea's generation. The series was character-driven, focusing on one character each of the four seasons, hence foregrounding emotions, values and relations between the individual and the group. The technique of transmedia storytelling, distributing events between online video clips and postings in social media created what the Danish film scholar Anne Jerslev (2016) termed 'emotional virtual reality'. The focus on individual identity work resonates with trends in young adult fiction, where identity, missing relations and outsider positions were recurrent themes throughout the same period, according to the juries awarding the yearly book prizes for literature for children and the young.<sup>6</sup> As contemporary narratives, these stories reflect the challenges young people go through in terms of being made responsible for creating their individual selves in a culture of high achievement and ubiquitous social control. At the same time, these stories enter into the discourses and social norms that form the conditions and opportunities to perform our lives, according to Butler (2016).

The culture of mediated self-presentations discussed in this chapter (Rettberg 2014) sets some typical frameworks for young lives across the modern western world where online life is not constrained by geographical borders. When Ea finally settles for 'being myself' as career goal, this may not be as straightforward as it sounds in a society where self-presentations are filtered to fit into social media. It is Ea's experience that she does not exist (socially) unless she is present on social media. Finding out who you are, as the central challenge of development in Ea's age

group, used to be a question of defining the ‘I’ in relations to other people in face-to-face encounters with relatives, peers, teachers and so on. In Ea’s isolation, she meets very few people face-to-face. For a period of time, she talks only to her mother and father, and to the therapists who are paid to talk to her. This points out how much the individual is left to herself in the social class to which Ea belongs.

In the novel, the trend for individualism is underlined by the way the story is structured, voicing the important relations in Ea’s life individually. Each short chapter focuses on one relation, Ea and her mother, Ea and her father, Ea and Aunt Edith, Ea’s relation to her two friends Fanny and Viggo, and her relation to therapist Elliot and coach Marielle. There is no sense of extended family or community in terms of class, school or other kinds of fellowship. This situation may be typical of the class to which Ea belongs, adhering to values of strong, self-sufficient individuals. Early in the book, Ea declares to her mother that ‘love means more than money’ (Løes 2017, p. 106), but she has to admit that her mother has a point when she answers that it is easy for Ea to say, as long as she does not have to make money, but merely spend it. Ea then reflects on what her life would be like if her parents were working-class.

The class perspective is mostly touched on indirectly in the novel. In discourses of social democratic welfare states, class tends to be overrun by ideals of equality. Welfare institutions are established to provide equal access to education and health care. In return, citizens are expected to make the best of the opportunities offered. This may be one of the trends that lead to a society of perfection, since there is no excuse for not coping with the expectations of greater society. The kind of pressure that makes Ea feel that everything is too tight (Løes 2017, p. 312) may come not only from her class background but, paradoxically, from the expectations inherent in a modern welfare system.

## CONCLUSION

I started out my analysis asking what has made Ea so vulnerable. What makes this question interesting is that, on the surface, she is well-protected and on the fortunate side of society. However, she is subject to the inherent vulnerability of being young and in a phase of transition. She is also subject to the situational vulnerability of experiencing her aunt’s suicide and, ultimately, the pattern of conflicts in her mother’s family. In reaction to this situation, her resistance is expressed in the form of

over-eating and dropping out of school—which are powerful forms of resistance in the class and society to which she belongs. This raises more general questions about the pressure to perform and invent a self in modern society, and about how we handle situations where young people do not quite fit the required standards.

The novel *Miss* portrays vulnerability in a young person's life through a series of different text forms, providing a puzzle for the reader to complete by combining all the relations and perspectives presented. Ea's vulnerability is inherent; hence, it can shed light on the drama of being young and struggling to find out who you are, and why and how you are placed in this world in a more general sense. But it is also situational, bearing witness to how every individual is at the mercy of the relations around her, and how individual choices may carry consequences in wider circles.

Ea's resistance is both bodily and discursive, and her creative use of metaphoric language opens up alternative views on her situation and experiences, causing the reader to laugh and cry simultaneously. Indirectly, her very personal accounts of her life and position pose serious questions to contemporary society. The welfare state grew out of an ideal of a community of solidarity where everyone should perform according to their ability and receive support according to their needs. In a modern society, where new media and discourses challenge the performing of self, this novel shows a shift of focus from community to individual, from contributing to the collective 'we' to creating an 'I'. This self-conscious individual may seem strong in her strategies of resistance, as Ea does by turning her back on social expectations. However, as Ea's turning point comes from realizing the vulnerability of others, her story also carries a critique of this individualism.

## NOTES

1. With a possible exception for Finland. However, the statistics are based on different ways of delimiting the group of school dropouts and, consequently, cannot be compared directly (Markussen 2010, pp. 14, 73).
2. The quote in original: 'Helt grundlæggende formidler ungdomslitteraturen et udvalg af de emotioner, der er særligt tilstedeværende i perioden mellom barn og voksen: ofte i form av gengivelse af og refleksjoner over at befinde sig i et *eksistentielt vakuum* preget av sårbarhed og usikkerhed grænsende til desperation.'

3. All translations of quotes from the book from Norwegian to English are mine.
4. According to the dictionary *Bokmålsordboka*, ‘tjukkas’ means a fat boy or man. There is no equivalent form of the word for a fat woman; the female form “tjukkis” has been created by the author.
5. Presumably referring to the book by Kenneth Kramer: *The Sacred Art of Dying: How the World Religions Understand Death*, first published in 1988.
6. Schäffer (2015) talks about identity and adaptation as important themes, along with the uncertainty of youth; Lande (2016) points out a specific focus on introvert voices in the books from 2015, and mentions identity as a recurrent theme in children’s literature published in 2016, posing the question ‘Who am I? Where do I belong?’ (Lande 2017); whereas Eeg (2018) highlights the outsiders searching for identity as particularly interesting in the books published in 2017.

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