CHAPTER 4

Struggling to Become a Mother: Literary Representations of Involuntary Childlessness

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In Sweden the welfare state provides mothers with a high degree of support and flexibility, and gender equality and progressive family politics are crucial to the nation's self-image. The welfare state has also encouraged its citizens to reproduce through various pronatalist measures, such as paid parental leave, state-subsidized childcare, and monthly cash benefits for parents. Compared to other European countries, Southern European countries in particular, birth rates in Sweden and the other Nordic countries are relatively high (see, for instance, Björnberg 2016, 509–10; Esping-Andersen 2016). The number of Swedish women who never have children is not high from a European perspective (13.5%), but it still

This publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 952366, and from the Centre for Gender Research and the Department of Literature at Uppsala University.

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H. Wahlström Henriksson et al. (eds.), *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3_4

means that almost one out of seven Swedish women are childless (Statistics Sweden 2020).[1]

As motherhood is still at the core of constructions of femininity, women who do not have children come across as unintelligible and are often represented in negative ways. In a study of cinematic representations of childlessness, Cristina Archetti (2019) shows how these portrayals of childless women are highly negative, regardless of the reasons they do not have children: “the childless tend to die, either by suicide or killed by others; if they do not die, they acquire a child against all expectations; only men and female (super) heroes can overcome the trauma of infertility; and childlessness by circumstance practically does not exist” (182; see also de Boer et al. 2019; Graham and Rich 2014). Cultural representations of women who try to have children but fail are rare, as media tends to give privilege to stories with happy endings. Rebecca Feasey (2019), who studies mainstream media representations of infertility and non-normative family building, highlights the discrepancy between the miracle-baby-in-the-end stories in the media and the harsh medical reality where fertility treatments fail more often than they succeed. She is particularly wary of this situation, as she points out that most people get their information about infertility from the media rather than medical literature.

This chapter focuses on three twenty-first-century Swedish novels that give slightly different images of women who struggle with infertility. In contrast with the cinematic representations in Archetti’s study and the media representations in Feasey’s, the women are not represented in negative ways, and the novels do not end with babies or even pregnancies. In this chapter I analyze literary representations of involuntary childlessness and the women at the center of these narratives, focusing in particular on how non-motherhood is positioned in relation to femininity and (hetero) normativity. I also situate these representations in their national context and analyze how they relate to Swedish-branded values like gender equality and progressive family politics.

I have selected three novels where the struggle to have children takes center stage and with female protagonists who are either first-person narrators or focalized by a third-person limited narrative: Pernilla Glaser’s

[1] All of these women are not involuntarily childless; according to the Public Health Agency of Sweden, 5% of the population do not want children (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2019). Furthermore, these statistics do not include women who have become mothers without giving birth, such as some mothers in same-sex relationships.

40 minus (2010; 40 Below), Martina Haag's *Glada hälsningar från Missångerträsk: En vintersaga* (2011; Happy Greetings from Missångerträsk: A Winter's Tale), and Tove Folkesson's *Hennes ord: Värk I–III* (2019; Her Words: Ache I–III).[2] The novels are selected to give diverse perspectives on involuntary childlessness; they represent different genres (autofiction and popular fiction), and the protagonists have different life situations: one lives in a heterosexual relationship (Glaser), one is single, at least in the beginning of the novel (Haag), and one is in a lesbian relationship (Folkesson).

Pernilla Glaser's novel depicts Emma, who is in her late thirties and tries to become pregnant with her male partner Jimpa. They have struggled to have children for four years and gone through two fertility treatments. They both work as architects, but while Jimpa has thrown himself into a promising career, Emma's career has stalled. The novel depicts Emma's life crisis, which plays out in relation to different gendered and heterosexual norms.

Martina Haag's novel centers on forty-four-year-old Nadja, who is on the waitlist to adopt as a single woman. Nadja receives news from the adoption agency about new regulations that will prioritize married couples, which eliminates her chances to adopt. She makes a deal with her sister, Lotta, who will find a man Nadja can marry if Nadja takes care of Lotta's father-in-law, Sigvard, while Lotta and her husband go on a trip to Paris to save their marriage. Through a misunderstanding Nadja is put in contact with the wrong man, Jocke, but against all odds Nadja and Jocke fall in love. They decide to get married, but when Jocke finds out about Nadja's need to marry someone in order to adopt, he feels betrayed and leaves Nadja at the altar. After some time apart the couple reunite at the end of the novel and get married.

Tove Folkesson's autofictional novel depicts the writer Tove and her partner Hanna, who struggle to become parents through donor insemination while building a life on the countryside near Tove's maternal grandmother and uncle's farm, which has been in the family for generations. During the course of the novel, Tove and Hanna go through two inseminations; the first is initially successful, as Tove gets pregnant, but it ends in miscarriage, and the second fails.

[2] These novels have not been translated into English, so all translations are my own in collaboration with line editor Rebecca Ahlfeldt.

"But I Just Wanted to Be Normal": Normative Femininity and the Swedish Gender Equality Ideal

Motherhood is constructed as the core of femininity, and women who have chosen not to become mothers are often viewed as unfeminine (see, for instance, Cummins et al. 2021; Peterson and Fjell 2010, 124–25). The novels discussed in this chapter do not depict women who are voluntarily childless but women who struggle to become mothers. However, the novels still highlight how the protagonists in various ways negotiate normative femininity. To some extent, their status as childless women seems to be a threat to their femininity, but the link between femininity and motherhood is also criticized and undermined in the novels. In this section I will discuss how the three novels' representations of femininity play out against the backdrop of the Swedish gender equality ideal and Swedish pronatalism.

The three novels are published in a Swedish context, where gender equality is conceptualized as a national characteristic (see, for instance, Martinsson et al. 2016). Gender equality has been a core value of the Swedish welfare state, and it is linked to the possibility of combining professional and family life. With the expansion of the public sector after the Second World War, many Swedish women entered the labor market, which in turn led to demands for political measures that would make it possible for women to be working mothers. During the 1970s the social-democratic government launched an ambitious political program aiming at gender equality, with state-subsidized affordable childcare and generous paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers. The Swedish gender equality ideal requires both parents to contribute to the labor market and also to care for their children, thus promoting a dual-earner/dual-carer ideal (see, for instance, Björk 2017; Gottzén and Jonsson 2012; Klinth 2002; Klinth and Johansson 2010; Martinsson et al. 2016). In Swedish politics and public debate, gender equality is usually viewed as an unquestioned goal, and analyzing and critiquing gendered norms and structures are steps in the process of achieving this goal (see, for instance, Dahl 2005).

Swedish gender equality politics is interlinked with progressive family politics as many of the reforms initiated from the 1970s and onward facilitate the combination of career and family life. Through various political measures, the Swedish welfare state has encouraged its citizens to reproduce, at least since the 1930s when birth rates in Sweden fell to a record low. Initially these measures were explicitly pronatalist, as they aimed to

increase birth rates. Today Sweden's progressive family politics does not explicitly aim at increasing birth rates, but as I have argued elsewhere, it still has pronatalist dimensions and contributes to pronatalist pressure (Björklund 2021, 191–93, 236–37). Compared to other European countries, Sweden also has high birth rates.

Glaser's novel ties into a Swedish gender equality discourse by highlighting and problematizing how gender roles and gendered structures saturate both professional and personal lives. Emma's and Jimpa's different positions in the job market are a recurring theme. While they were in school together, Emma was the smarter and more hard-working of the two, and everybody had expected her, rather than Jimpa, to get a top job after graduation (Glaser 2010, 129, 220). Emma connects the facts that Jimpa has a better job and a higher salary to gender: "He was a promising young man and she was a diligent girl. There's a difference" (Glaser 2010, 30).[3] Gender roles and gendered structures are also visible in the couple's personal lives, especially in their responses to involuntary childlessness. Jimpa pulls away, invests in work, and does not want to talk about the process. Emma is unhappy, and the struggle to have children rules her life. As with gendered structures in professional life, Emma connects some of the differences to gender. She remembers how, as a little girl, she used to play a game that would tell her how many children she would have as an adult: "Emma had once asked Jimpa if he had played that game as a child. He had snorted and laughed and said that little boys don't think about having children. Emma assumed that both little boys and little girls thought about what their adult life would look like. But in order to visualize an adult woman you apparently had to visualize a parent" (Glaser 2010, 81).[4] Here Emma's awareness of gender serves a didactic purpose, pointing to how femininity is culturally constructed as linked to motherhood, while masculinity is not linked to fatherhood. Similarly, Emma's critique of the view of the female body as either maternal or an object for men's desire is conveyed in an ironic or humorous way, when she imagines what it is like to have a baby: "What a relief. You could wear a milk-stained college sweatshirt all day and everyone would still find you radiantly

[3] "Han var en påläggskalv och hon var en duktig flicka. Det var skillnad."

[4] "Emma hade frågat Jimpa en gång om han hade lekt den leken när han var liten. Han hade fnyst och skrattat och sagt att småkillar tänker väl inte att de ska ha barn. Emma antog att både småkillar och småtjejer tänkte på hur det skulle bli när de blev vuxna. Men för att tänka sig en vuxen kvinna behövde man tydligen tänka sig en förälder."

beautiful and fresh-looking since you were a Mother with a sacred task" (Glaser 2010, 31).[5] She makes clear that as motherhood is positioned at the core of femininity, there is less need for a mother to make an effort to look beautiful in order to perform normative femininity.

The examples above can be understood as the novel writing itself into a Swedish gender equality discourse, in which critiques of gendered structures and stereotypes are part of the process to achieve gender equality. Gendered norms and the link between femininity and motherhood are also critiqued in Haag's novel, though in a slightly different way. While Glaser's Emma still adapts to normative femininity by making motherhood the sole purpose of her life, Haag's Nadja is different. She is into heavy metal and confidently maneuvers Jocke's snowmobile; when Jocke asks if she can do it, she responds: "Of course I can. I've had a driver's license for a [motor] bike since I was sixteen. How much harder can it be to drive one of these?" (Haag 2011, 171).[6] Heavy metal, motorcycles, and snowmobiles are conventionally masculine domains, and by embracing them Nadja represents a less conventional femininity. In other ways, Nadja's femininity does not depart too much from the Swedish gender equality ideal. Ulrika Dahl argues that Swedish gender equality politics has aimed at changing the division of labor between women and men—to redefine what both groups can do. But even if men can do household work and women can fix a car, they are not supposed to deviate too much from normative gender roles, as the Swedish gender equality ideal is based on heteronormativity, according to which genders are binary, separate, opposite and supposed to desire each other (Dahl 2005). Similarly, in Haag's novel Nadja can drive a snowmobile, but she still dresses in a conventionally feminine way, with high-heeled boots, thin leather gloves, and a purse.

However, in Haag's novel the link between femininity and motherhood is undermined through humor and performativity. Feminist theory (see, for instance, Butler 1999 [1990]; Lundberg 2008; Österholm 2012) has highlighted how norms of femininity and patriarchal and heteronormative structures can be resisted with the use of humor, failure, and excess. Anna

[5] "Vilken befrielse. Man kunde gå runt i en mjölkfläckig collegetröja hela dagen och alla tyckte ändå att man var så strålande vacker och fräsch eftersom man var moooor med ett heligt uppdrag."

[6] "Klart jag kan. Jag har haft bågekort sedan jag var sexton, det kan ju inte vara mycket svårare att köra en sån här."

Lundberg (2008) shows how excess and laughter are often used in feminist and queer comic culture to challenge oppressive power structures and indicate that a different social order is possible. In Haag's novel, Nadja adapts to a more conventional femininity that is compatible with ideal motherhood when registering at the adoption agency. Humor is used to highlight how her adaptations to conventional femininity and motherhood are done in a performative manner, which reveals the instability of these identities as well as the link between them. Before the visit from Social Services, which is part of her approval process as an adoptive parent, Nadja sews curtains to make her apartment look nice. Curtains and sewing are here framed as part of what is expected of her as a mother-to-be, which indicates that it is a kind of performance of normative femininity (Butler 1999). But, as Judith Butler argues, performing femininity will always fail to some extent, as there is no true or core femininity; rather, it is constructed through various iterations. In Nadja's case, femininity fails, as she is not particularly good at traditionally feminine handicrafts such as sewing and knitting but also because of the way she performs these skills. Her sewing and knitting are excessive; she makes loads of dresses of different sizes as well as pants, sweaters, and pillows in the shape of the whole Barbapapa family (Haag 2011, 18–19).[7] The choice of the Barbapapa family further highlights excess; the family is (too) large, and the members threaten normativity as they constantly shift shapes and can morph into something unexpected. Maria Margareta Österholm (2012) argues that excessive femininity can be subversive, as it reveals the performative dimensions of femininity. Similarly, in Haag's novel, the iterations and the excess call attention to the constructed character of femininity but also of motherhood, as these identities are linked in Nadja's preparations for the adoption. Moreover, since femininity and motherhood are both revealed as constructions, the link between them is destabilized.

Still, even if the link between motherhood and femininity is criticized in Glaser's and Haag's novels, motherhood is connected to a normative life course. Glaser's Emma is depicted as someone who is invested in how she appears to others and in upholding a perfect façade, and her strivings to become a mother are sometimes framed as a means to fulfill norms. When she reflects on why she wants a nuclear family so badly, she cannot find an

[7] The Barbapapa family appears in a series of children's picture books from the 1970s, created by the French-American couple Annette Tison and Talus Taylor. The family members are pear-shaped, blob-like characters who can shift shapes at will.

explanation other than that she wants what everybody else has: "She wanted a husband and children and a car and maybe a little dog. Ski vacations to Sälen [a Swedish ski resort] and summer vacations to Greece and a house that she had designed herself. It was security, perhaps, or at least some kind of community" (Glaser 2010, 15).[8] When Emma imagines what everybody else has, it is a normative, middle-class family life, and this life has the potential to create security and community. She also distances herself from other childless women in the online support groups she sometimes attends: "She didn't want to be one in a group of desperate women. She wanted to be successful" (Glaser 2010, 102).[9] Being able to conceive is here linked to being a successful woman, which means performing normative femininity.

Over the course of the novel Emma's depression escalates, but the turning point comes when she realizes that she has to stop prioritizing the appearance of success over her own happiness. Since appearance and success have been linked to the ability to fulfill norms throughout the novel, this turn of events can be seen as a critique of these norms. The critique is also reinforced by the examples, discussed above, of how gendered norms restrict Emma's life. The representation of Emma shows how she is deeply impacted by these norms. Even if she is critical of the gendered structures that position Jimpa as a promising young man with a thriving career and her as a mother-to-be, she does not apply for a new job. Her solution to her career problems is to hope to become pregnant to be able to go on parental leave (Glaser 2010, 129). Despite her critique of the construction of the female body as either maternal or sexual, she adopts this view of herself and takes on the blame for her and Jimpa's failure in both areas. She hates her body after the fertility treatments have failed (Glaser 2010, 219), and she worries that the lack of love and affection between her and Jimpa is due to her not being sexy enough (Glaser 2010, 130).

Even in Haag's novel, which undermines the link between femininity and motherhood in the most forceful way, the impact of this construction is hard to escape for Nadja. Infertility is sometimes represented as incompatible with femininity, such as when Nadja first finds out about her inability to have children: "Sterile. What a freaking word. Childless.

[8] "Hon ville ha man och barn och bil och kanske en liten hund. Skidsemestrar till Sälen och solsemestrar till Grekland och ett eget ritat hus. Det var trygghet kanske eller i alla fall någon sorts gemenskap."

[9] "Hon ville inte vara en i en mängd desperata kvinnor. Hon ville vara lyckad."

Malfunctioning woman. Infertile" (Haag 2011, 8).[10] Nadja is also, to some extent, faulted for being childless: her infertility is said to be caused by untreated chlamydia in her unruly teens (Haag 2011, 74), which suggests that she was not responsible enough to care for her future reproductive capacities.

On the one hand, Glaser's and Haag's novels critique gendered norms and structures and undermine the link between femininity and motherhood, but, on the other hand, motherhood is still placed at the center of a normative life course for women, especially in Glaser's novel. I have discussed how the critique of gendered structures can be read in light of the Swedish gender equality ideal, but the normative position of motherhood can also be situated in the Swedish context as part of Swedish pronatalism. The Swedish welfare state has not only facilitated for women the combination of professional and family life; infertile couples also have access to fertility treatments through the tax-funded health care system. This right was extended to lesbian couples in 2005 and to single women in 2016. Rikke Andreassen (2019, 85) has argued that non-normative families do not necessarily undermine traditional family ideals but, rather, extend those ideals to include new types of family members. I would argue that the same could be said of motherhood; as the Swedish state has granted reproductive rights to more groups, the normative position of motherhood is strengthened.

The normative positioning of motherhood is even more pronounced in Folkesson's novel, as motherhood becomes a way for the protagonist Tove to become "normal" and compensate for non-normative sexuality. Folkesson's novel does not challenge the link between femininity and motherhood to the same extent as Glaser's and Haag's, even if it sometimes questions concepts of what is natural. The idea of conception as natural is resisted, sometimes even explicitly, such as when Tove responds to Hanna's fear of people who think conception should happen "naturally" by pointing out that there is nothing natural—"everything has been created by us" (Folkesson 2019, 114).[11] The idea of what is seen as natural is also problematized through the many connections between, on the one hand, Tove and Hanna's relationship and their struggle to become parents and, on the other hand, nature and farming, such as in a passage where it

[10] "Steril. Vilket jävla ord. Barnlös. Icke fungerande kvinna. Ofruktsam."

[11] "Allt har vi skapat."

is stated that "most cows are inseminated" (Folkesson 2019, 132).[12] Nature imagery is also prominent in the depiction of the insemination, as when Tove lets her entire body "become big and wet like a field, and the light inhale, the blue-white drop of life" (Folkesson 2019, 180).[13] Connecting lesbianism to the natural world is a common trope in lesbian literature, and it serves to counter discourses of same-sex love as against nature (Bergdahl 2010; Björklund 2014).

However, while the discourse on lesbianism as against nature is challenged in Folkesson's novel, the idea of "the natural" as acceptable and "normal" is upheld. Several times Tove mentions the shame she feels about not being able to conceive without help (Folkesson 2019, 23, 44, 68), which frames this process as something that should happen within a very narrow definition of "naturally." Similar normalizing strategies appear throughout the novel, such as the many connections to the Bible and Virgin Mary. The chapter when Tove and Hanna receive the letter from the hospital about their first appointment contains several explicit references to the Annunciation, such as Mary, Joseph, and the archangel Gabriel, as well as verbatim quotes from the Bible. The recurring references to Mary highlight how an unconventional pregnancy where no man has been involved can still make the mother the symbol of all mothers and serves to normalize Tove's motherhood.[14]

Motherhood is also represented as a way for Tove to *become* "normal." She thinks about herself as deviant in relation to all the women who have lived on the farm: "But I just wanted to be normal. Give birth, like them. Care. Be a regular mother" (Folkesson 2019, 19).[15] Motherhood even seems to compensate for non-normative sexuality, as Tove hopes that being pregnant will make her more familiar and easier to accept among her countryside neighbors (Folkesson 2019, 219). While motherhood is linked to normality, childlessness is connected to deviance. Tove refers to a story about a childless widow who used to live nearby and is said to haunt the neighborhood. Tove wonders whether the widow was a lunatic who failed to become pregnant and hopes that she herself will not end up like the widow (Folkesson 2019, 217–19). Tove's fear of childlessness is a

[12] "De flesta kor insemineras."

[13] "bli stor och blöt som en åker, och den ljusa inandningen, blåvita droppen liv."

[14] It also further strengthens the idea of motherhood as sacred, which is particularly interesting in relation to Sweden's status as one of the world's most secularized countries (Berggren and Trägårdh 2006, 383).

[15] "Men jag ville bara vara normal. Föda, som de. Vårda. Vara en vanlig mor."

recurring theme in the novel, especially after the miscarriage; it is associated with shame (Folkesson 2019, 372), exclusion (Folkesson 2019, 395–96), and fear of not being able to carry on the family line (Folkesson 2019, 371). Parenthood is also connected to success; when comparing being a writer to being a parent, Tove concludes that being a parent is linked to higher status (Folkesson 2019, 357). Tove's struggle to become "normal" through having children firmly positions motherhood at the core of normativity.

The representations of femininity and non-motherhood in Glaser's, Haag's, and Folkesson's novels have to be read in the Swedish context, where family politics is closely tied to the gender equality ideal. While the novels sometimes explicitly critique gendered structures and the link between femininity and motherhood, thus becoming part of a Swedish gender equality discourse, they also, to various extents, reinstate motherhood at the core of femininity, in line with Swedish pronatalism. Moreover, all three novels center on a woman who wants to become a mother and follow her perspective closely. Their partners are represented only from the women's point of view, which gives limited insight into their thoughts and feelings around infertility. The dominant position these novels give to the woman who gives birth further strengthens the link between femininity and motherhood.

"I Want Children Too, but Together with Him": Nuclear Families and Heteronormative Temporality

The Swedish gender equality ideal, with its links to family politics and the dual-earner/dual-carer model, is intertwined with normative heterosexuality and the nuclear family norm (see, for instance, Björklund 2021; Dahl 2005). These norms are also tied to (hetero)normative temporality. Jack Halberstam (2005) argues that the Western world constructs respectability and normality according to "a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (4) based on "those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). For Halberstam, reproductive temporality is a heteronormative construction, but it still guides the way we are expected to lead our lives, what counts as a good life and the order the markers of life experiences should follow. Glaser's, Haag's, and Folkesson's novels depict involuntary childlessness, and as such, they represent a kind of stalled (hetero)normative

temporality. The protagonists are stuck in time, waiting to move on with their lives and enter into a new life stage as mothers. The novels also disrupt the nuclear family ideal, since the protagonists are unable to reproduce. However, as I will show, the novels, to some extent, also confirm these ideals. In this section, I will discuss how the three novels relate to the nuclear family norm and the logics of (hetero)normative temporality.

Haag's novel, and to some extent Glaser's, explicitly resists the nuclear family norm. In Haag's novel, this norm is often supported by other characters, such as when a worker at the adoption agency, explaining the decline of Nadja's application, tells her that the adoption agency needs to think about what is best for the children: "now the child will go to a married couple instead, with both a mother and a father" (Haag 2011, 49).[16] The nuclear family norm is also upheld through the recurring representations of childlessness as linked to loneliness and emptiness, such as when Nadja first receives the bad news from the adoption agency: "I am 44 years old and childless. I will be alone for the rest of my life. In fifty years, I will be dead. In a hundred years, nobody will know that I have even existed" (Haag 2011, 55; see also 44–46, 71, 144).[17] However, while the nuclear family often is referred to explicitly as the best way to lead one's life, such as in the example at the adoption agency above, it is represented in a less rosy light. This is sometimes done through comedic contrasts. Nadja's mother constantly nags Nadja because she is single and childless and compares her to her sister Lotta, who got married early and had three children. She tells Nadja how happy Lotta is and how Lotta knows "how to have a REALLY GOOD LIFE!" (Haag 2011, 25).[18] In the chapter that follows, Lotta is introduced for the first time, and it turns out that her life is not as great as their mother portrays it; her marriage is unhappy, and Lotta is in charge of all the unpaid household work: the house, the children, and her father-in-law, who orders her around and complains about everything. Nadja and Lotta's mother is represented as a comical stereotype who literally speaks in capitals when delivering her "truths" about what a good life entails, and the contrast between the flawless façade she tries to uphold and Lotta's unhappy nuclear family life creates a comedic effect and

[16] "nu får ju barnet komma till ett gift par istället, med både en mamma och en pappa."

[17] "Jag är 44 år och barnlös. Jag kommer att leva ensam i resten av mitt liv. Om femtio år är jag död. Om hundra år är det ingen som vet att jag ens har levat."

[18] "hur man ska ordna ett RIKTIGT BRA LIV!"

suggests that having husbands and children may not make women happy after all.

The nuclear family norm is also resisted through contrasts between the novel's representations of nuclear families and other relationships. There are very few representations of happy nuclear families in the novel. Lotta and her husband travel to Paris to save their marriage, but start fighting again shortly after their return. Nadja and Lotta have a complicated relationship with their mother, and the novel does not mention their father. Nadja's best friend Katti is divorced and has shared custody of her children. However, other relationships are represented as more resilient. Nadja's relationship with Katti is depicted as closer than any of the more conventional family bonds in the novel. When Katti hears that Nadja will not be able to adopt, she is in a TV studio recording a show, but she fakes food poisoning in order to support her friend. She encourages Nadja to find someone to marry and runs Nadja's sound studio while she is away. Katti appears more reliable than any of Nadja's family members, and the representation of Nadja and Katti's relationship thus counters Nadja's fear of having a lonely childless life. The novel also represents the bond between Lotta's father-in-law Sigvard and Jocke as close and loving, and when Nadja develops a relationship with both of them, the three form a kind of family bond even if neither one of them is (genetically) related.

Nadja's relationship with Katti and her relationship with Jocke and Sigvard come across as happier and more stable than the nuclear families depicted in the novel. Moreover, children are rarely represented, and when they are, they are mostly depicted as annoying. Also, when Nadja falls in love with Jocke, the love for Jocke rather than reproduction becomes her priority. She even turns down two marriage proposals to be with him; she declines Sigvard's offer to marry her when Jocke has left and turns down the man whom Lotta originally set her up with and who appears at the doorstep when Nadja has fallen in love with Jocke but before they decide to get married. In a phone call Katti asks Nadja if she has given up on having a child, and Nadja responds, "No, but what's most important right now is Jocke. I want to be with him. Whether we have children or not, we'll see, but in that case, we will adopt together. I want Jocke. I want children too, but together with him" (Haag 2011, 235).[19] Jocke also

[19] "Nej, men det viktigaste av allt just nu är faktiskt Jocke. Jag vill vara med honom. Om det blir barn eller inte får vi se, men i såna fall ska vi adoptera det tillsammans. Jag vill ha Jocke. Barn vill jag också ha, men då tillsammans med honom."

chooses Nadja over reproduction; when she tells him she is infertile before they get married at the end of the novel, he responds that it is okay since they have reindeer.[20] Nadja and Jocke do not have children at the end of the novel, though Nadja receives a letter from the adoption agency on the last page.

The ending of Glaser's novel challenges the nuclear family norm in a similar way. Emma and Jimpa have a conversation where Jimpa admits that he, too, grieves their inability to have children, and at the end of the novel their relationship is better than ever. Even though they acknowledge that they both want to have children, they do not make any concrete plans for new fertility treatments, and the novel ends with the restored intimacy between Emma and Jimpa, which reinforces something Jimpa has said earlier in the novel: "We are already a family. We do not need a child to prove that" (Glaser 2010, 204).[21] Thus, the novel's ending showcases other ways of being a complete family and highlights Emma's happiness with this family constellation.

Similar to Haag's, Folkesson's novel challenges the nuclear family norm by representing other ways of organizing close relationships. Tove resists the idea of the nuclear family as the only way to happiness and community, like when she thinks about her uncle Arne who is not alone even if he had led his adult life without a nuclear family of his own (Folkesson 2019, 41). The novel also sets up an alternative to the nuclear family: Tove, Hanna, the grandmother, and Arne form a kind of family, and they care for each other. When Arne needs to go to the hospital for cancer treatment, Tove takes him, and Tove and Hanna care for grandmother and the farm while he is away. Arne, who is a hunter, makes sure Tove and Hanna have a supply of meat. When they all have tea together in grandmother's kitchen, Tove refers to them as a family: "Grandmother looks so happy because we will stick together when she dies. A strange little family consisting of two + uncle + dog" (Folkesson 2019, 99).[22] Here the dog is also included in the family, and while grandmother is not, since she will soon die, she is part of the community in the present.

At first glance, Folkesson's novel also challenges heteronormativity by representing a lesbian couple. As mentioned above, lesbian couples have

[20] Jocke belongs to the indigenous Sámi population and owns reindeer.

[21] "Vi är redan en familj. Det behöver vi väl inte ett barn för att bevisa."

[22] "Mormor ser så glad ut för att vi håller ihop, när hon ska dö. En liten märklig familj om två + morbror + hund."

had access to assisted reproduction in the tax-funded Swedish health care system since 2005, and, similar to gender equality, a progressive attitude about LGBTQI+ issues can be seen as a kind of Swedish-branded value. However, as Ulrika Dahl (2018) argues, only a particular kind of lesbian mother figure is accepted and celebrated in the Swedish context: "Cast in white cis-gendered femininity, this figure is entangled in homonationalist ideas about gender equality and sexual exceptionalism that extend rather than challenge heteronormative white middle-class kinship ideals" (1034). The concept of homonationalism was coined by Jasbir K. Puar (2017), who builds on Lisa Duggan's term homonormativity, which refers to a neoliberal gay politics which rests on domesticity and consumption and does not challenge heteronormativity, but instead maintains and supports it. Puar uses homonationalism to describe how sexual exceptionalism is linked to the nation and regulates who is excluded from the national imaginary: "this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. There is a commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness" (2).

Folkesson's novel reproduces homonationalism by depicting how Tove and Hanna, as a white, cis-gendered, middle-class couple, can take advantage of Sweden's lesbian-inclusive reproductive laws and by linking sexual exceptionalism to Swedish whiteness. As discussed above, the novel's use of nature imagery counters the discourse of lesbianism as against nature, but, at the same time, the positioning of Tove and Hanna and their reproductive process in a traditional Swedish farming landscape reinforces homonationalist ideas of Swedishness, visible also in other cultural representations of white Swedish lesbian couples (Dahl 2018). The connection to Swedishness and whiteness is underscored in other passages, such as when Tove thinks about the child she will have as being legitimized by the state (Folkesson 2019, 204) or when it is stated, repeatedly, that the donor will be a nice guy, a Swede with blue eyes (Folkesson 2019, 125, 173–74, 176), and these passages also link sexual exceptionalism to the nation and Swedish pronatalism. Moreover, Tove's struggle to become "normal" through having children, discussed in the previous section, does not really challenge heteronormativity but, rather, supports it. As such, the novel reproduces and extends certain "heteronormative white middle-class kinship ideals" (Dahl 2018, 1034), but it can also be said to reinforce (hetero)normative temporality, as parenthood is represented as key to a normative life course.

Glaser's and Haag's novels, which also depict white, middle-class protagonists, reproduce (hetero)normative temporality in a more forceful way, as they position reproduction within a heterosexual framework. At one point in Glaser's novel Jimpa tells Emma that he wants to stop trying to have children, and she considers leaving him to increase her chances of becoming a mother (Glaser 2010, 64, 119).[23] But for Emma the heterosexual relationship and children are linked; she wants Jimpa and her to fight together to have a family (Glaser 2010, 64). Emma learns to be content with her relationship instead of leaving Jimpa to pursue motherhood on her own, which confirms (hetero)normative temporality, according to which reproduction should not happen out of coupledom. Similarly, instead of pursuing motherhood on her own, Haag's Nadja focuses on getting married and finding a father for her future children. The ending of Haag's novel can be read in the Scandinavian context where the dual-earner/dual-carer and involved fatherhood ideals are prevalent and where research shows how single motherhood by choice is seen as a Plan B when women have been unable to find a man (Andreassen 2019, 66, 93; Bodin et al. 2021; Henriksson and Bergnehr 2021). Both Glaser's Emma and Haag's Nadja choose the prospect of reproduction within a heterosexual framework over pursuing single motherhood, thus reinforcing Swedish family norms as well as (hetero)normative temporality.

In many ways Glaser's, Haag's, and Folkesson's novels undermine the nuclear family ideal; they critique it and represent alternatives. Moreover, none of the novels ends with children or even a pregnancy, which disrupts the nuclear family ideal and (hetero)normative temporality. At the same time, by positioning motherhood as key to a normative life course and reproduction within a heteronormative framework, they also reproduce these ideals.

Conclusion: Challenging the Miracle-Baby-in-the-End Narrative

Glaser's, Haag's, and Folkesson's novels represent involuntary childlessness from three different perspectives—one protagonist is in a heterosexual relationship, one is single, and one is a lesbian. The books also belong to different genres; Glaser's and Haag's novels are popular literature,

[23] The reader is never informed of the medical reason for the couple's infertility, and Emma considers leaving Jimpa because he retreats from their struggle to have children.

while Folkesson's is critically acclaimed (auto)fiction. Despite the differences in perspective and genre, these novels represent involuntary childlessness in similar ways. They all focus on white, middle-class protagonists, and they all reinforce and challenge norms around femininity and reproduction, as they are conceptualized in the Swedish context.

On the one hand, these representations of non-motherhood illustrate the centrality of motherhood to normative femininity; infertility makes Glaser's Emma and Haag's Nadja feel like malfunctioning women, and Folkesson's Tove hopes that motherhood will make her "normal" and compensate for her non-normative sexuality. The link between motherhood and femininity is, of course, not a Swedish phenomenon, but it takes particular shape in the Swedish context where pronatalist measures date long back and have facilitated motherhood for women, contributing to a kind of mandatory motherhood (Björklund 2021). The novels also represent motherhood as intertwined with heteronormativity; Emma and Nadja choose heterosexual coupledom over pursuing motherhood on their own, and all three novels reinforce heteronormative temporalities by positioning motherhood within the nuclear family and as key to a normative life course.

On the other hand, the novels also resist norms around femininity and reproduction, at least to some extent. In Glaser's novel Emma is critical of the gender structures that both give Jimpa a more promising career and frame parenthood as key to adult femininity but not to adult masculinity. Haag's novel challenges normative femininity by highlighting its performative character through excess and humor, and it resists the normative position of the nuclear family by portraying it as a failing project. Folkesson's and Haag's novels also provide alternatives to the nuclear family: friendships and cross-species families.

However, the novels' most radical and norm-breaking dimension is the fact that none of them ends with children or even a pregnancy. In Glaser's novel Jimpa tells Emma that they do not need a child to prove that they are a family, and even though they both want children when the novel ends, they are not making any plans for new fertility treatments. In Haag's novel Jocke and Nadja do not have children at the end of the novel, and it is unclear what the future holds for them; the last sentence of the novel describes a letter that arrives from the adoption agency, but the novel ends before it is opened. Jocke's response to Nadja also indicates that he is just as happy with a cross-species family consisting of him, Nadja and reindeer. In Folkesson's novel Tove and Hanna plan to continue the fertility

treatments, but Tove is not pregnant at the end of the novel. The process around the fertility treatments, including the miscarriage, is depicted in great detail—from the first blood streaks on the toilet paper to the lumps coming out of Tove's vagina. These details together with the fact that the novel does not end with a baby or a pregnancy suggest that experiences of failed fertility treatments can be represented in their own right and not only as steps toward a happy ending.

The letter from the adoption agency in Haag's novel can, of course, be interpreted as an indication of a child-to-be, and in Folkesson's novel, Tove and Hanna will continue trying for a baby. Folkesson's novel is also the first volume of a trilogy in progress, and the second volume (Folkesson 2021) depicts a successful fertility treatment, pregnancy, and the birth of a child. Still, there are no children or pregnancies at the end of these novels. We do not know what the letter from the adoption agency says, and Tove never gets pregnant in Folkesson's first novel. The representations of infertility in the three novels studied thus provide a different picture than the one Rebecca Feasey (2019) has identified in mainstream media: the miracle-baby-in-the-end narrative. Instead, these novels offer narratives that break with the conventional infertility plot line and frame the struggle to become a mother as a story that can be told in its own right. As such they widen the representational space for infertility and non-motherhood.

Acknowledgments I am very grateful to those who have given valuable feedback on earlier versions of this text: Maja Bodin as well as the editors of and contributors to this volume, especially those who served as assigned readers at a workshop, Margaretha Fahlgren and Valerie Heffernan. I am also greatly indebted to my line editor Rebecca Ahlfeldt.

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