

»It seems to be a complicated question« Humour as Strategy in Scandinavian Facts- of-Life Books¹

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This article examines how a selection of Scandinavian children's books, spanning the 1970s until today, have addressed questions about how babies are made. Previous research has shown that various forms of humour have been used in the dissemination of information on intercourse and conception. In our article, we examine how and why humour is used when presenting adult sexuality in books for children. We consider humour a strategy for taking the edge off this challenging topic. However, this strategy comes with a cost. With reference to critical theory and humour theory, we problematise the strategic use of humour, as it may contribute to the perpetuation of heteronormative notions and patterns. We assess several recurring tactics, categorised into five forms of humour: transgression of taboos, humorous recognition, absurd humour, naive humour and anthropomorphic humour.

How do you get a baby in your belly? Children's literature answers this query in a variety of ways. »Det verkar vara en klurig fråga« [It seems to be a complicated question], write Asabea Britton and Louise Winblad in their picturebook, *Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?* [How was I made? And how did I get out?], as recently as 2022.² This article examines eleven Scandinavian children's books about conception from the 1970s to the present day. The topic is challenging: »Since talking about sex isn't easy even between adults, talking to children about such a topic is even more difficult,« states Lisa Jean Moore (2007, p. 45) in a study of English-language ›facts-of-life‹ books. In a review of sex-education books for children, Maria Andersson describes how children's books published in Swedish since the 1960s and 1970s are characterised by openness and detailed information. The information has nonetheless been adapted for children by presenting it in an easy-to-understand and often humorous manner (2015, p. 28). Eva Maagerø and Anne Marie Øines examine how sexuality, which they describe as a sensitive and taboo area, is communicated to children both verbally and through illustrations in four books (two Danish, one Norwegian and one English). They also assert that sexuality in children's literature is often couched in »amusing or harmonious stories« (2019, p. 29), even though we have become more open to children's literature involving more challenging subjects, in line with society's changing views of children.³ Andersson and Maagerø and Øines each conclude that sexuality in children's literature necessitates humour. Our article contributes to understanding how and why humour is used when presenting sexuality and reproduction in Scandinavian children's books,

¹ This article was first published in Norwegian in 2023, in the Scandinavian journal *Barnboken. Journal of Children's Literature Research*, Vol. 46.

² Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the authors.

³ In the book *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks*

in Education, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer emphasise that controversial content does not necessarily have to be challenging, as it depends on how the content is presented, while keeping in mind that the readers are children (2022, p. 26).

and what the implications are. We hypothesise that humour is used as a strategy for distraction when dealing with challenging topics – perhaps due to the perception that humour can make adult sexuality seem more innocuous to the child reader.

Sexuality and Reproduction in Children’s Literature: Material and Context

This article examines eleven Scandinavian children’s books published between 1971 and 2022, that address how babies are conceived. The selection represents publications from all decades and in all Scandinavian languages.⁴

Author/illustrator	Title	Year of publication	Country of publication
Per Holm Knudsen	<i>Sådan får man et barn</i> [<i>How a Baby Is Made</i>]	1971	Denmark
Grethe Fagerström and Gunilla Hansson	<i>Per, Ida & Minimum. En bok om att vara tillsammans</i> [<i>Our New Baby. A Picture Story for Parents and Children</i>]	1977	Sweden
Trond-Viggo Torgersen and Vivian Zahl Olsen	<i>Kroppen</i> [Our bodies]	1983	Norway
Liller Møller	<i>Sådan – får man altså børn!</i> [That’s how – babies are made!]	1992	Denmark
Peter Gotthardt and Kirsten Raagaard	<i>Da Emma blev Emma – og hvordan det gik til ...</i> [When Emma became Emma – and how it happened ...]	2009	Denmark
Kim Fupz Aakeson and Eva Eriksson	<i>Manden og damen og noget i maven</i> [The man and the lady and something in her belly]	2002	Denmark
Selma Lønning Aarø and Eivind Gulliksen	<i>Reidar og den store magen</i> [Reidar and the big belly]	2007	Norway
Sigri Sandberg Meløy and Motorfinger	<i>Ballongmamma</i> [Balloon Mama]	2009	Norway
Henrik Hovland and Torill Kove	<i>Johannes Jensen opplever et mirakel</i> [Johannes Jensen experiences a miracle]	2009	Norway
Anna Fiske	<i>Hvordan lager man en baby?</i> [How Do You Make a Baby?]	2019	Norway
Asabea Britton and Louise Winblad	<i>Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?</i> [How was I made? And how did I get out?]	2022	Sweden

In the past fifty years, there have been significant medical developments in the field of assisted reproductive technology, which means that there may be several answers to the question of how babies are conceived.⁵ Children’s literature reflects these changes (Kokkola / Van den Bossche 2020; Pesonen 2021). As many as 10 of 15 sex-education books published in Sweden in the 2000s address reproductive technologies. In fact, several of

⁴ Only three of the eleven books on the list have been translated into English: *How a Baby Is Made* (Knudsen 1973) (see a humorous account of its British reception as well as reproductions of pages from the book in McKenna 2020), *Our New Baby. A Picture Story for Parents and Children* (Fagerström / Hansson 1979), and *How Do You Make a Baby?* (Fiske 2020).

⁵ The world’s first test-tube baby was born in England in 1978, while the first such birth in Scandinavia occurred a few years later. Today, this method has become widespread. In 2022, the Danish Health Data Authority reported that nearly 10 % of Danish children were born using assisted reproductive technology, while 5 % was reported by the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board (cf. Helsedirektoratet, 2022; Sundhedsdatastyrelsen, 2022).

the books deal exclusively with this topic (Andersson 2015, p. 9). In our study, however, we focus on the connection between the sexual act and conception, and for this reason, the subject of our analysis is the heterosexual act.

A considerable number of Scandinavian sex-education books for children was published in the 1970s. Andersson partly attributes this to the sexual liberation movement in the 1960s, and partly to the growing focus on children and children's culture – where openness about sexuality is considered essential for helping children develop as free individuals. Sex-education books in the 1970s were characterised by directness, detail and everyday realism (Andersson 2015, p. 9). Similarly, Lena Kåreland (2023) shows that realistic depictions of everyday life dominated children's literature in the 1970s, and that taboos related to sexuality were transcended. This lack of reserve is evident in the two books from the 1970s in our selection: *Sådan får man et barn* [How a Baby Is Made] by Per Holm Knudsen, and *Per, Ida & Minimum. En bok om att vara tillsammans* [Our New Baby. A Picture Story for Parents and Children] by Grethe Fagerström and Gunilla Hansson, which both convey the typical level of openness at the time.

However, as attitudes towards sexuality became less open in the 1980s, fewer books on this topic were published (Andersson 2015, p. 9). In our Norwegian example, Trond-Viggo Torgersen and Vivian Zahl Olsen's *Kroppen* [Our bodies], humour is used as a more defined strategy in dealing with the topic. Humour is also central to Danish Liller Møller's *Sådan – får man altså børn!* [That's how – babies are made!], from the 1990s, while more awkwardness is evident in Peter Gotthardt and Kirsten Raagaard's *Da Emma blev Emma – og hvordan det gik til ...* [When Emma became Emma – and how it happened ...] of 2009.

Andersson observes that the sex-education books published in Sweden in the 1990s appear to distance themselves from the marked realism that characterised them in the 1970s, through what she refers to as a more playful approach to the genre (2015, p. 9). As she sees it, the books have more distinct fictional elements and thus tend to revolve around familiar perspectives (ibid.). This playful, more distanced quality, alternately absurd and naivistic, is evident in our selection of fiction from the 2000s, such as *Manden og damen og noget i maven* [The man and the lady and something in her belly] by Kim Fupz Aakeson and Eva Eriksson, *Reidar og den store magen* [Reidar and the big belly] by Selma Lønning Aarø and Eivind Gulliksen, *Ballongmamma* [Balloon Mama] by Sigri Sandberg Meløy and the design collective Motorfinger, and *Johannes Jensen oplever et mirakel* [Johannes Jensen experiences a miracle] by Henrik Hovland and Torill Kove.

According to Andersson, the increasing number of Swedish publications in the 2000s is a result of the growing need for sex-education books that highlight alternative reproductive methods and non-traditional family structures (2015, p.10). Thus, the traditional dissemination of information about conception through sexual intercourse appears to present new challenges. Assisted reproductive technology is a clinical procedure and appears to be a less challenging subject than sexual intercourse. The challenge for sex-education books in the 2000s was thus once again to convey the connection between sexuality and conception, this time in a way that seeks to achieve a gender- and value-neutral description. Clearly, the challenge is real, as we can see from the two most recent books in our selection, Anna Fiske's *Hvordan lager man en baby?* [How Do You Make a Baby?], of 2019, and Asabea Britton and Louise Winblad's *Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?* [How was I made? And how did I get out?], of 2022.

Our selection is partly motivated by previous studies, primarily by Andersson (2015), and Maagerø and Øines (2019). Both studies concentrate on nonfiction sex-education

books. We have expanded our material to include fiction that touches on the topic, but where conveying the facts is not the primary objective. The decision to limit the study to Scandinavian children's literature can be justified by the fact that over the fifty-year period covered by our study, it has distinguished itself as being particularly open to this topic, compared to, for example, Anglo-American literature (Andersson 2015, pp. 5–6). Scandinavian children's literature early on also includes non-binary characters and more diverse family structures (Kokkola / Österlund 2014). At the same time, it is interesting to critically examine this topic in light of the concept of ›Nordic exceptionalism‹, which involves »[t]he pervasive (self-)image of Scandinavia as a prosperous and socially just region« (Kokkola / Van den Bossche 2020, p. 16). The concept is generally used to describe the Scandinavian self-image in relation to ethnic minorities. However, we believe that it can also be applied to our project, since it may also involve self-image with respect to sexual minorities, different methods of having children and varied family structures.

Theoretical Perspectives: Comic Relief

As indicated above, sex-education books for children have traditionally used humour to address the subject matter for comic relief. We shall now look at a few basic theories of humour to illustrate how humour works in our selection of books. Humour theory often highlights comic relief as a device reliant on how situations perceived as embarrassing or threatening frequently elicit laughter (Critchley 2002, pp. 56–57; Hellesnes 2017, p. 21; Plessner 2020, pp. 107–108).

Classical humour theory identifies three basic types of humour: comic relief (the relief theory), humorous incongruity (the incongruity theory) and condescending or superior humour (the superiority theory), and they lay the ground for Julie Cross's reference work *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* (2010). Comic relief involves an understanding of humour as a means of releasing tension – »a release of pent-up nervous energy« (Critchley 2002, p. 3; see also Cross 2010, p. 6). In children's literature, we see this form of humour through the comical use of taboo words and transgressions of taboo themes (Cross 2010, p. 6).

Incongruity in humour is cognitively demanding and characterised by an unexpected but enjoyable juxtaposition of phenomena: »incongruity forms of humor basically involve the subject/reader's perception of something unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate, clashing with what s/he might normally expect, which strikes him/her as humorous« (Ibid, p. 7). This form of humour may also involve ambivalence: »incongruity humor can actually cause anxiety rather than produce amusement, especially if it is too disturbing« (ibid.). Henri Bergson links this form of unsettling incongruity in humour to laughable elements which consist of »a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being« (1913, p. 10). Furthermore, incongruity in humour can be disturbing when the recipient does not understand or perceive the joke, and the incongruity remains unresolved (Cross 2010, p. 8).

Condescending or superior humour hinges on a more sinister form of incongruence: a situation that divides a group into those who get it, and laugh, and those who do not. This is the oldest and most negatively charged of the three forms of humour, since the jokes here are at the expense of others (Critchley 2002, p. 2). However, this type of humour does not need to be malicious or directed at others. It can also play on past or present shortcomings of a person, thus having an edifying, didactic function. It can,

however, appear discriminatory. While Critchley uses this form of humour as a basis for his discussion of ethnic or racist humour, our article uses it as a basis for a critical discussion of gendered humour.

There are no strict divisions between the three main theories of humour, and in our context, they all constitute a form of relief when disseminating information about challenging subjects. As Cross points out, »the Relief group of theories« contains a complex combination of forms of humour, while also characterised by a perspective of humour as a means of relief from tension (2010, p. 5–6; see also Critchley 2002, pp. 2–3). In his essay on humour, Sigmund Freud (1928) also refers to a fundamental humorous attitude towards the world. The mature, humorous (as opposed to the suppressed, harsh) superego is presented as a confident adult who speaks benevolently to the frightened self as if to a child: »Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Child’s play – the very thing to jest about!« (Freud 1928, p. 5)

Thus the tension in children’s literature concerning how babies are conceived can be released with the aid of humour – if only for a short while. Humour can turn what is considered acceptable practice upside down (cf. Bakhtin 1984). Kerry Mallan, in her book *Laugh Lines. Exploring Humour in Children’s Literature*, also emphasises this as a starting point when the child as a reader encounters humour: »They find the accepted order frequently turned upside down as they are presented with deviations from conventional social behavior« (1993, p. 18). Here we find the critical as well as the therapeutic potential of humour – comic relief.

Analysis: Humour as a tool

We have categorised the various forms of humour used in our material as follows: transgressive humour, humorous recognition, absurd humour, naive humour and anthropomorphic humour. These forms are not mutually exclusive but rather serve as a structuring principle in our review of the material, and largely coincide with chronology. We use the three theories of humour presented above as tools for analysing the different types of humour.

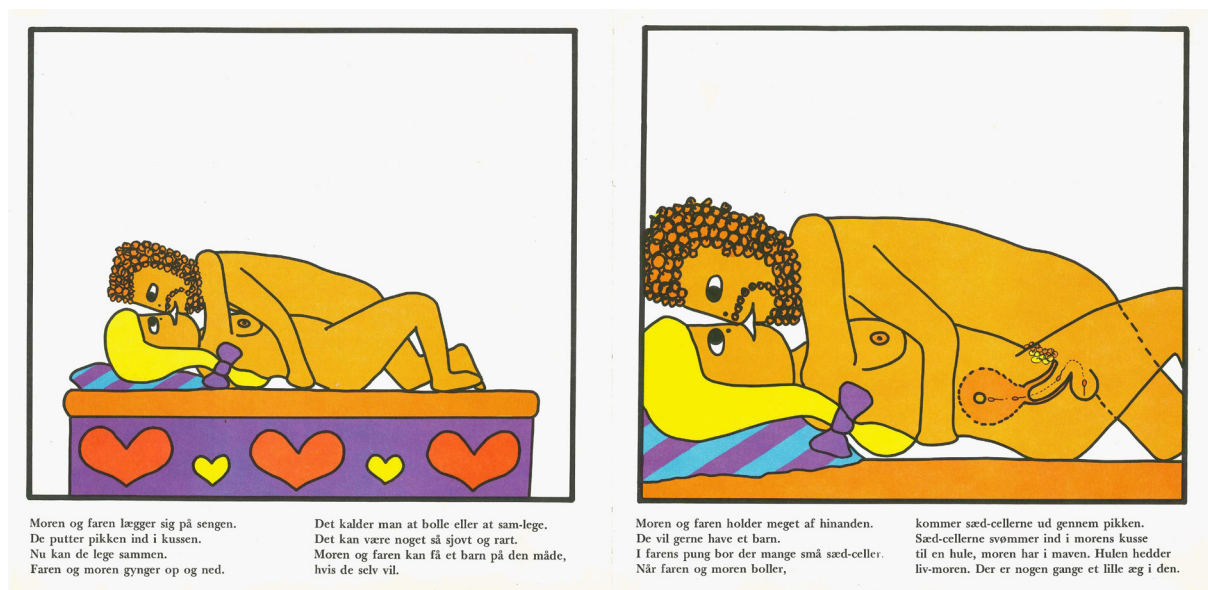
Using Transgressive Humour to Mediate Taboo

The first two publications in our selection, from the 1970s, are Knudsen’s *Sådan får man et barn* [*How A Baby Is Made*] and Fagerström and Hansson’s *Per, Ida & Minimum* [*Our New Baby*]. Knudsen’s book gained cult status, as well as renewed relevance, when it went viral on social media in 2015 under the hashtag »Traumatised!«⁶ Through verbal and visual texts, the book explains how conception, pregnancy and childbirth unfold. The narrator addresses the child reader directly: »Skal jeg fortælle dig, hvordan man får et lille barn?« [Shall I tell you how a baby is made?] (spread 1).⁷ As can be seen in Fig. 1, the simple, stencil-like illustrations are reminiscent of a how-to manual, and the verbal text is similarly straightforward: »Moren og faren lægger sig på sengen. De putter pikken ind i kussen. Nu kan de lege sammen. Faren og moren gynger op og ned. Det kalder man at bolle eller at sam-lege. Det kan være noget så sjovt og rart.« [The mother and father

⁶ The campaign was featured in both the Danish and Norwegian national press and was covered by journalist Lars Lindevall in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske*.

⁷ Books with no pagination will be cited by spread numbers.

lie down on the bed. They put the dick into the pussy. Now they can play together. The father and mother rock up and down. This is called fucking or playing together. It can be very fun and nice.]]⁸



Knudsen's matter-of-fact information appears humorous because it is mechanical. Maagerø and Øines note that there are few variations in the facial expressions of Knudsen's man and woman, stating that the man has the same expression on his face when he is drawn with an erection as when he is present during the birth of his child (2019, pp. 13–14). The couple thus appear both ridiculous and unsettling, as they are presented with a mechanical rigidity in situations where they would be expected to show human reactions (Bergson 1913, p. 23). Even if one questions whether Knudsen's humour is intentional, it falls within the category of incongruity, characterised by a surprising juxtaposition of phenomena that do not belong together. The only evidence of emotional engagement between the mother and father during the sexual act are the hearts that decorate their bed.

Fig. 1
Spread 4 from
Sådan får man
et barn (Knudsen
1971). © Per Holm
Knudsen. Reprinted
with permission of
the author/illust-
rator.

Fagerström and Hansson's *Per, Ida & Minimum* tells the story of a family with two young children and a third on the way. According to Andersson, the book depicts everyday realism in detail (2015, p. 9). »Pappa, hur gör man ett barn egentligen?« [Daddy, how do you make a baby?] Ida asks, after which her mother explains intercourse while her father draws pictures (Fagerström / Hansson 1977, p. 10). »Då blir min snopp stor och står rakt ut« [Then my willy gets big and stands straight out], her father explains (ibid, p. 17).⁹ Ida's mother elaborates: »När vi ligger så där vill jag att pappas snopp ska vara inne i min slida« [When we're lying like that, I want daddy's willy to be inside my fanny] (Ibid.).¹⁰

⁸ In this article, we have chosen to present our own translations of the books, even when English published translations exist. We observe that the published English translations use significantly more sober or medical terms than we find in the Scandinavian originals, which use more sexualized, or even slang ones. The English translation of the passage above, for example, reads: »Then, to show his love, the father puts his penis into the mother's vagina.

The father and mother hold each other tightly, and move together happily. They are *making love*, or *having intercourse*« (Knudsen 1973, our italics).

⁹ In the published translation: »My penis gets bigger and stands straight out« (Fagerström / Hansson 1979).

¹⁰ In the published translation: »When we make love I want daddy to push his penis into my vagina« (Fagerström / Hansson 1979).

On the one hand, when Ida's father draws the sexual act, it creates a certain distance to it. On the other, the situation is transgressive, as the father recreates the sexual act in front of his children, exclaiming,

»Här ligger vi så nära varann vi kan komma. Det känns väldigt skönt. Min snopp är inne i mammas slida. Det här sättet att vara tillsammans kallas att ha samlag. När man har samlag kan ett barn bli till. Så här gjorde vi det nya barnet.« [Here we are lying as close as we can to each other. It feels really good. My willy is inside mummy's fanny. Being together like this is called having intercourse. When someone has sexual intercourse, they can make a baby. This is how we made the new baby.] (Ibid.)¹¹

Per and Ida's father explains all this, while pointing to the drawing with his pencil, as seen in Fig. 2. Then he elaborates: »När vi hade det som allra skönast, sprutade jag in mina sädesceller i mammas slida« [When we were at our most comfortable, I sprayed my sperms into mummy's fanny] (ibid, p. 18).¹²

Unlike in Knudsen's ›how-to manual‹, there is no mechanical rigidity in the drawings made by Per and Ida's father. Instead, the humoristic incongruity appears in the way these children witness their parents' sexual act through drawings. Its depiction is transgressive and verges on taboo, because it is a visualisation of parents having sex, with the father even illustrating his ejaculation. The transgressive nature is made evident through Ida's older brother Per's amused expression and his use of taboo: »Jag vet, man knullar!« [I know, you fuck!] (ibid, p. 16).¹³ Awkwardness is more prominent in Gotthardt and Raagaard's more recent publication *Da Emma blev Emma – og hvordan det gik til ...* [When Emma became Emma – and how it happened ...], from the 2000s. In this book, the parents' feelings for each other are conveyed visually through hearts on the bedding and their closed eyes as they kiss and have intercourse. Emma, however, sitting beside the bed, covers her eyes. This gesture is mirrored by her teddy bear, who exclaims: »De er jo helt nøgne! Godt de har dyne på!« [They're completely naked! Good

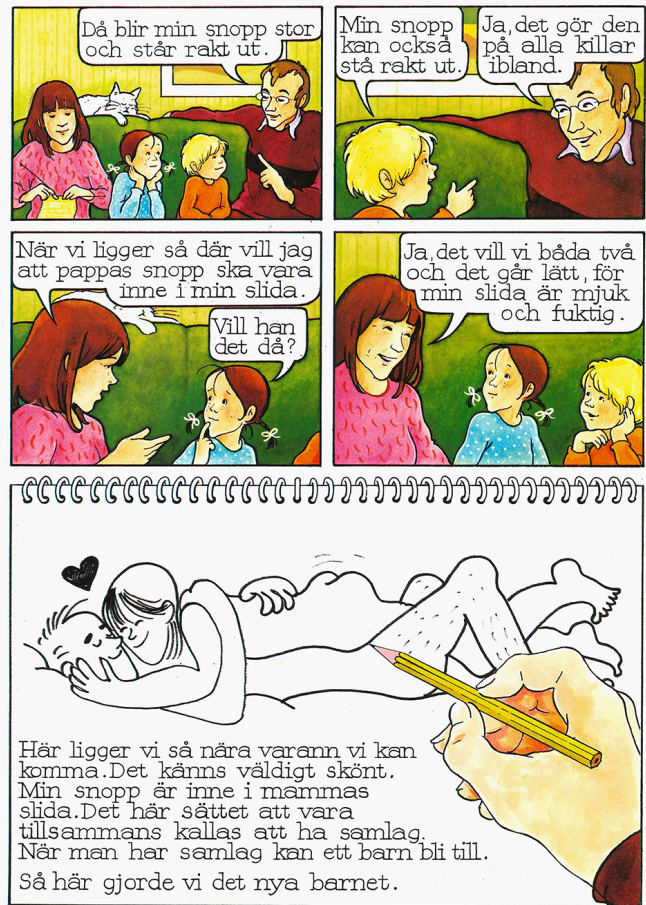


Fig. 2
Page 17 from Per, Ida & Minimum. En bok om att vara tillsammans (Fagerström/Hansson 1977). © Gunilla Hansson. Reprinted with permission of Gunilla Hansson (licensee).

¹¹ In the published translation: »Here we are lying as close as we can to each other. It feels marvellous. My penis is inside mummy's vagina. This way of being together is called making love or sexual intercourse. A baby can start to grow because of making love, This is how we made you two and the new baby« (Fagerström/Hansson 1979).

¹² In the published translation: »Because it felt really terrific I ejaculated, which means I let lots of sperm cells into my mummy's vagina« (Fagerström/Hansson 1979).

¹³ The published translation is clearly more coy, as it reads: »I know, you sleep together«. The mother responds »Yes we do and we make love as we call it« (Fagerström/Hansson 1979).

thing they have a duvet over them!]) (spread 4). The illustrations here serve to provide comic relief, similar to Per's statement »man knullar!« [you fuck!].¹⁴

Using Humorous Recognition to Mediate Embarrassment

Humorous recognition provides release and is therefore included in relief theory. Humorous recognition is a distinct feature of Torgersen and Olsen's *Kroppen* [Our bodies], of 1983. *Kroppen* is a nonfiction book presenting the entire body. Two spreads (3 and 4) explain how babies are conceived. The first spread is narrative, in the form of a conversation between a boy named Øyvind and his father, while the second is factual.

»Du, hvordan ble jeg meg?« [Dad, how did I become me?], Øyvind asks his father, insisting on concrete answers. »Far så seg rundt etter noen som kunne hjelpe ham« [Dad looked around for someone to help him], the text reads, and in contrast to the situation in Per and Ida's living room, it is clear that Øyvind's father finds the situation uncomfortable: »Noen ting er det flaut å fortelle om, selv for voksne« [Some things are embarrassing to talk about, even for adults], he admits (Torgersen/Olsen 1983, spread 3). The awkwardness Øyvind's father feels is both humorous and recognisable to the adult reader: the father is caught off guard by his son's question and looks around with bewilderment before finally telling it as it is, wearing a thoughtful expression:

»Ja, og det er at jeg putter tissen min inn i det lille hullet bak tissen til mor«. Far sa det fort og så rett ut i luften. »Og der inne er tissen stiv og hard, men allikevel kjennes det mykt og veldig, veldig godt [...] det er godt og hyggelig og fint, og litt morsomt.« [»Well, I put my willy into the little hole behind mummy's pee-hole«. Dad said this quickly, looking straight ahead. »And in there, my willy becomes stiff and hard, but it still feels soft and very, very good [...] it's good and pleasant and nice, and also kind of fun.«] (Ibid.) The father's explanation is direct but adapted for the child through his choice of words (»put,« »tissen« [willy], »the little hole«). The illustrations are more obscure. One of them shows the parents' sexual intercourse, where their bodies are naked, and the duvet has slipped to one side. The father is lying on top of the mother, and both of them have closed their eyes, but unlike the examples in the rest of the book, their genitals are not shown, neither externally nor internally. Instead, the emotional aspects of intercourse are conveyed. Øyvind's disgust is nevertheless evident both in the verbal text (»Det æ'kke sant!« [No way!]) and through his expression of disbelief in one of the pictures (Ibid.), which, like the other examples above, can be linked to the transgressive nature of Øyvind seeing or imagining his parents in the act.

Møller's 1992 comic book *Sådan – får man altså børn!* [That's how – babies are made!] is also structured as a conversation, but here the conversation takes place between children: »Jeg har bare set min mor og far, der *bollede!*« [I've seen my mother and father who were *fucking*], one of them says (Møller 1992, p. 4). Here, the situation in which the child sees the parents' intercourse is retold from the perspective of the uninformed child, triggering »superior« laughter from the others: »Ved du overhovedet, hvordan man får børn? Ja, sig oss lige hvordan!« [Do you even know how *babies* are made? Yeah, tell us how!] (ibid., p. 5) It soon becomes clear that the children have different levels of knowledge about the subject: those who know laughingly inform the others. They all know that people *bolle* [fuck], but only a few know what it means. Such taboo terms are frequently repeated, recalling Per's »knullar« (Fagerström and Hansson 1977, p. 16). The

¹⁴ Being caught in the act by one's children is a recurring humorous theme in sitcoms.

child reader is here supported in deflating a tense topic through (pre)pubescent tones and linguistic transgression, generating laughter. Thus, comic relief here operates on the child's terms (Mallan 1993, pp. 42–43): no adult ›experts‹ are involved. At the same time, there is never any doubt that an adult author or, a »hidden adult« (Nodelman 2008) with educational intentions, is hiding in the »shadow text«, deliberately using humour as a strategy: »I en *munter* blanding af saglig oplysning og *fnisende* sidespring fortælles, hvordan det nye liv bliver til« [In a *cheerful* mix of factual information and *funny* digressions, we are told how new life is created], reads the blurb on the back cover of Møller's book [our emphasis]. The discussion between the children in the book is undeniably both cheerful and lively: »Man tager en kone ...« [You take a woman ...], says one, »og ...en mand« [and ...a man], says another, »og så skal de *bolle* – så kommer der et barn!« [and then they fuck – and then a baby comes out!] (Møller 1992, p. 6) Abstract illustrations show – in thought bubbles – how a naked man and woman are placed together and have trouble figuring out how to have intercourse: the child's lack of knowledge is thus visualised (ibid., p. 9). This incongruity is clearly comical.

In Møller's book the tone of voice and body language imitate the way children talk to each other. Admittedly, more precise terms are also used (»vagina«, »ovaries«, »sperm«), but they are constantly replaced by so-called scatological humour: »Det er skeden. Den er lige mellem tissehullet og numsehullet« [That's the vagina. It's right between the pee-hole and the butt-hole] (ibid, p. 11). »Tisser han så ind i hende – når de boller?« [Does he pee into her – when they fuck?], asks the youngest of the children (ibid., p. 12). The fact that the older children find this funny is expressed through characteristic cartoon motion lines as they laugh, slapping their stomachs and thighs (ibid., pp. 12–13; see also McCloud 1993, p. 126).

Using Absurd Humour to Mediate Feelings of Fear and Threat

Absurd humour is a form of incongruous humour. It plays on elements of surprising, illogical and unreasonable connections. However, because it lacks resolution, absurd humour can be linked to underlying threats of violence and cruelty (Cross 2010, p. 8). In Aarø and Gulliksen's *Reidar og den store magen* [Reidar and the big belly] (2007), Reidar asks his mother how she got a baby in her belly. She tells him, »Da jeg var på ferie, fikk jeg et frø av en mann jeg møtte« [When I was on vacation, I was given a seed by a man I met], and then adds that she swallowed it (spread 2). This euphemism is humorous and is reinforced by a polaroid image showing Reidar's mother in a bikini, being charmed by a scantily clad cowboy and surrounded by subtle phallic symbols. The euphemism steers the plot in an absurd direction when Reidar accidentally swallows a pumpkin seed, which immediately begins to grow in his stomach. Both Reidar and his mother become visibly rounder and start farting uncontrollably. Humour involving large bodies is often aimed at children (McGillis 2009, p. 261). At the same time, the situation and the absurd humour cover a threat: Reidar is afraid that his stomach will burst, and subconsciously afraid that his mother's will, too.

The threat of his mother bursting or rising up into the air and disappearing is also found in Meløy and Motorfinger's *Ballongmamma* [Balloon Mama] of 2009, in which the father of the child narrator sneaks into the bathroom at night and blows air into the mother's belly button so that her belly inflates (spread 7). This action can be read as a humorous euphemism for sexual intercourse. The euphemisms in both this and the previous example play on childish ideas. The humour is absurd because it is incongruous. A pregnant woman's belly does not grow because she swallowed a seed,

nor does she inflate like a balloon: »Ein vakker dag kjem ho til å spreke« [One of these days she's going to burst], the father tells his child when the mother has actually become a balloon (spread 11). The mother then floats out the window and bursts – and out comes what is described as a »klump« [lump], which the picture shows to be a baby (spread 14). Absurd humour can also be found in Aakeson and Eriksson's *Manden og damen og noget i maven* [The man and the lady and something in her belly], of 2002. Sexual intercourse is hinted at in the following description: »Nogle gange elskede de hinanden så meget at de tog alt tøjet af og kyssede og kyssede og blev helt forpustede« [Sometimes they loved each other so much that they took off all their clothes and kissed and kissed and got all out of breath] (Aakeson/Eriksson 2002, spread 2), while the image shows the kissing faces in the foreground and the clothes strewn across the floor. One morning, the couple is sitting at the breakfast table, whereupon the lady exclaims, »Jeg tror jeg har noget i maven [...] Jeg har brød og kaffe og et barn i maven« [I think I have something in my stomach [...] I have bread and coffee and a baby in my stomach] (Ibid.). When it later turns out that it is not a child but a monkey that comes out, it all becomes absurd. Maria Lassén-Seger points out that this is not only comical but can also be read as a projection of the parents' subconscious shame (or fear) that their child might not be like other children (2008, p. 117), an example of a threat that characterises absurd humour. How the monkey appears is also a question left unresolved, as the act of love itself takes place without the reader as a witness. The reader never gets to know what happened during conception.

Using Naive Humour to Mitigate Contingency

Naive humour also plays on incongruity. It is comical when adult characters are portrayed with childlike qualities, such as when the man in *Manden og damen og noget i maven* first believes that the woman, after having breakfast, only has coffee and toast in her stomach (Aakeson/Eriksson 2002, spread 2). Similarly, the crocodile character, Johannes Jensen, in Hovland and Kove's *Johannes Jensen oplever et mirakel* [Johannes Jensen experiences a miracle] (2009) does not understand that his crocodile girlfriend Frida is pregnant. Both of these ignorant fathers, the character »Manden« [the man] and the crocodile Johannes Jensen, appear naive because they believe that pregnancy just happens, without grasping the context: »Hva har du inne i magen?« [What's inside your belly?] asks Johannes Jensen at the breakfast table. »Det er en baby« [It's a baby], Frida replies. When he asks where it came from, she answers, »Fra ingen steder [...] den blir bare til« [From nowhere [...] it just happens] (Hovland/Kove's 2009, spread 6). Eroticism is only hinted at visually: On the cover, Johannes Jensen sits brooding on a bench in the Vigeland Park in Oslo, surrounded by statues of naked couples. The life-like sculptures on the cover reference the activities taking place in the bedroom, hidden under the duvets (ibid., spread 3). Johannes and Frida's interactions are genuinely childlike: »Når babyen blir født, blir jeg mor, og du kan være faren« [When the baby is born, I'll be the mother and you can be the father] (ibid., spread 7), says Frida, as if they are just pretending. The analogy between play and sexual intercourse is also evident in several other examples; for example, the narrator in *Sådan får man et barn* (Knudsen 2019) describes intercourse as if the mother and father are playing in bed: »Nu kan de lege sammen. Faren og moren gynger op og ned« [Now they can play together. The father and mother rock up and down] (spread 4). In Torgersen and Olsen's *Kroppen* (1983) two smaller images are juxtaposed, one of which shows the father and mother curled up under the duvet, while the other shows Øyvind in a similar pose, cuddling a teddy bear. In his play, he is imitating his parents. Sexual intercourse, as we recall, is also described as »kind

of fun« by Øyvind's father. The book *Da Emma blev Emma – og hvordan det gik til ...* [When Emma became Emma – and how it happened ...] similarly describes intercourse as »really fun« (Gotthardt/Raagaard 2007, spread 4), which is emphasised when in the next spread Emma and her teddy bears play that they are swimming around together with egg and sperm cells.

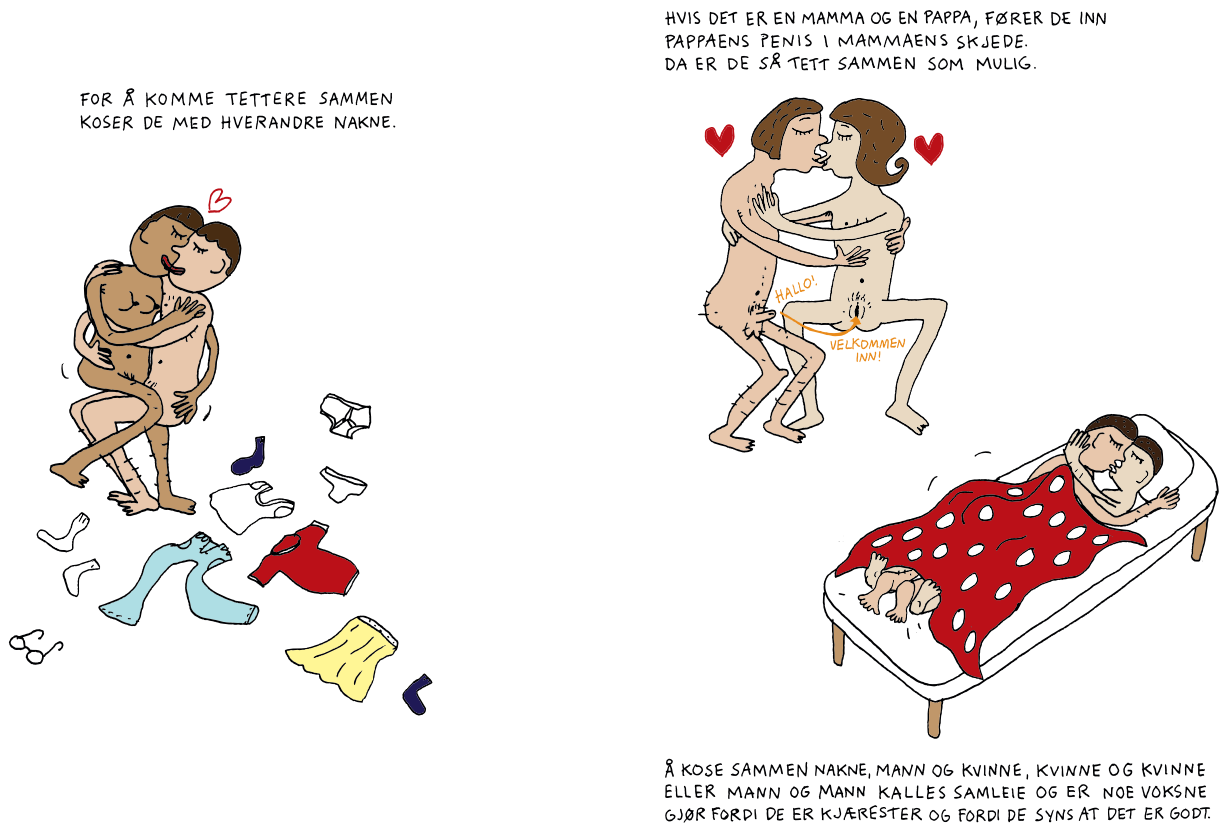
The naive characters in these examples all have the appearance of the *passéisme*, or regression, encountered in the neo-naivism in literature of the 1990s literature (Andersen 2003). Naivism can be read as a reaction to the threatening and frightening aspects of adult life. In sum, the focus on the playful and amusing aspects of sexual intercourse indicates an informal and humorous approach to adult sexuality, which can reduce the threat. At the same time, we recognise Freud's perspective on the therapeutic potential of humour. Unlike the original superego, which Freud describes as inherited from the authoritarian parent (generally the father) who suppresses the ego through Oedipal shame, the »new« superego is able to play, laugh or smile disarmingly at itself (cf. Freud 1928, p. 5–6).

Using Anthropomorphic Humour to Mitigate Objectification and Heteronormativity

Anthropomorphic humour is incongruous in that it lends animals or objects human characteristics. Transgressing the distinction between humans and animals is a humorous topos that dates back to antiquity (Critchley 2002, p. 31) and is also a common theme in children's literature (Lypp 1995, p. 186; Moore 2007, p. 52). This approach is evident in Anna Fiske's *Hvordan lager man en baby? [How Do You Make a Baby?]* (2019), a nonfiction book that outlines various ways to conceive. One of the most challenging spreads (Fig. 3) explicitly explains and illustrates intercourse using text and images: the bodies are naked, and the genitals are active, but illustrations are abstracted and characterised by »cartoon-like, comic-style humor« (Cross 2010, pp. 154–155; see also McCloud 1993, p. 60). Both the verbal text and the images are straightforward: »Hvis det er en mamma og en pappa, fører de inn pappaens penis i mammaens skjede« [If there's a mum and a dad, they insert the dad's penis into the mum's vagina] (Fiske 2019a, spread 6). The image shows the woman spreading her legs while the man's stiff penis is pointing towards her vagina. The genitals are anthropomorphized; the penis greets the vagina with a »Hallo« [Hello!] and the vagina replies »Velkommen inn!« [Welcome inside!].

In addition to Fiske's amusingly abstracted illustrations, the elements of anthropomorphic humour help render the subject both accessible and innocuous. However, anthropomorphism is not without implications. Moore (2007, pp. 61–62) has shown how, when gametes in facts-of-life books for children are anthropomorphised, the male ones are often portrayed as active participants and the female ones as merely waiting. Thus sperm cells are typically portrayed as active during fertilisation, while the egg remains passive (see also Martin 1991; Campo-Engelstein/Johnson 2013).

Anthropomorphism that mirrors cultural stereotypes can serve to solidify oppressive structures. The sperm cells in Fiske's book swim »for their lives« (2019a, spread 14), and the tone is harsh: »Unna vei!« [Out of my way!], »Fløtt deg!« [Move it!], »Jeg vinner!« [I win!] (ibid., spread 15). Such dialogue reflects expectations of how boys should typically act. As Moore states: »[W]hen sperm speak to one another, they use male terms to achieve male bonding« (2007, p. 56). Equally significant, Campo-Engelstein and Johnson have shown that enlivening the portrayal of reproduction with such anthropomorphism may result in a perpetuation of heteronormative gender roles as an unintended effect (2013, p. 210).



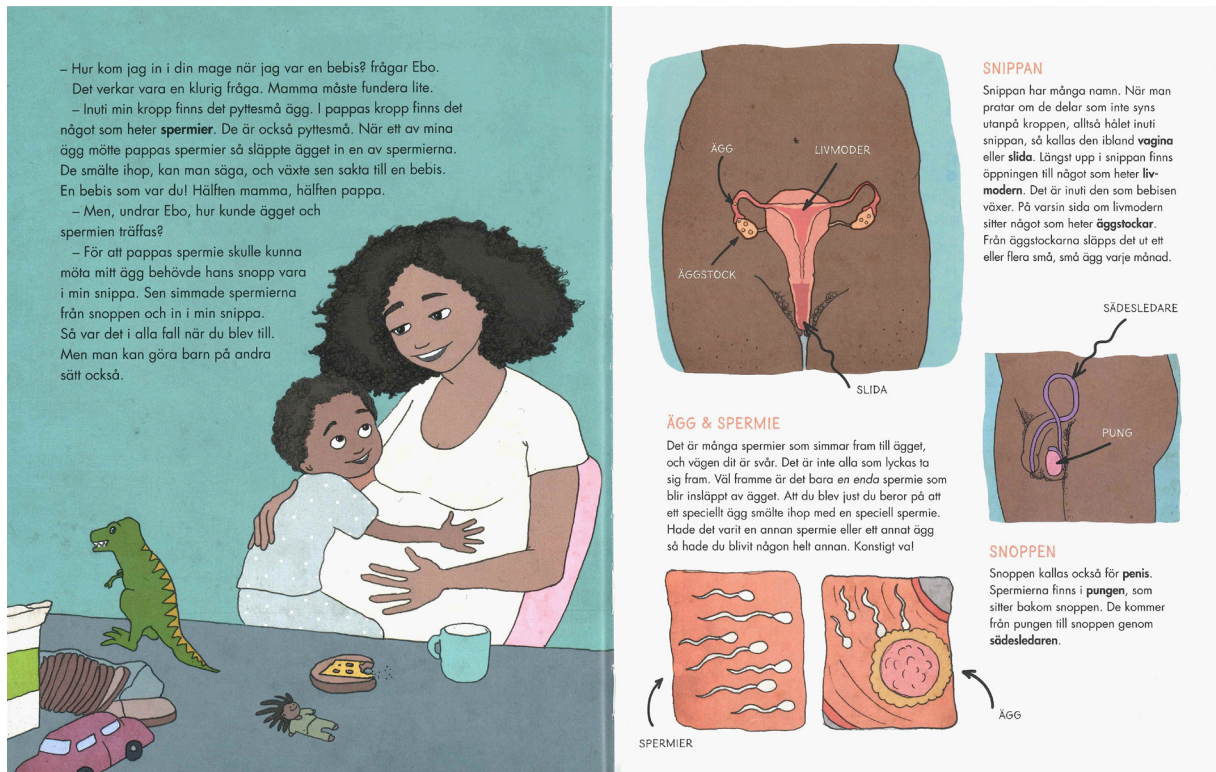
In Fiske's book, it is worth noting how the egg cell in the first edition of the book reads, »Velkommen inn!« [Welcome inside!] (Fiske 2009a, spread 15). In later editions, this hosting role is altered, and instead the egg asks, »Hvilken spermie skal jeg velge?« [Which sperm shall I choose?] (Fiske 2009b, spread 15). This fundamental change reflects Fiske's attempt to moderate the heteronormative and unbalanced idea that the sperm cells solely define fertilisation, by attributing an active role to the egg cell as well.

Absence of Humour

The most recent book in our selection, Britton and Winblad's *Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?* [How was I made? And how did I get out?], of 2022, distinguishes itself from the rest of our selection by its absence of humour. In this book, we meet Ebo, soon to get a baby brother, who asks his mother, »Hur kom jag in i din mage när jag var en bebis?« [How did I get into your belly when I was a baby?] His mother explains:

Inuti min kropp finns det pyttesmå ägg. I pappas kropp finns det något som heter *spermier*. De är också pyttesmå. När ett av mina ägg mötte pappas spermier så släppte ägget in en av spermierna. De smälte ihop, kan man säga, och växte sen sakta till en bebis [...]. För att pappas spermie skulle kunna möta mitt ägg behövde hans snopp vara i min snippa. Sen simmade spermierna från snoppen och in i min snippa. [Inside my body there are teeny tiny eggs. In Dad's body there are things called *sperm*. They are also teeny tiny. When one of my eggs met Dad's sperm, the egg lets one of the sperm inside. They melted together, you could say, and then they slowly grew into a baby [...]. To make sure Dad's sperm would meet my egg, his willy needed to be in my fanny. Then the sperm swam from his willy and into my fanny.] (Britton / Winblad 2022, spread 2)

Fig. 3. Spread 6 from *Hvordan lager man en baby?* (Fiske 2019a). © Anna Fiske. Reprinted with permission of the author/illustrator.



Ebo's mother explains how fertilisation takes place through intercourse. However, the explanation is quite clinical. The verbal text and the image on the opposite page also provide a clinical presentation: here, the narrative changes to a factual description of what occurs inside the body. As seen in Fig. 4, the genitals of both the man and the woman are depicted, but in separate images, reminiscent of sex-education posters produced for schools. In other words, the presentation of what occurs during fertilisation through sexual intercourse is just as detached as the description of assisted reproduction, which is given a significant quantity of space later in the book under the heading »Olika sätt att göra barn« [Different ways of making babies] (Britton / Winblad 2022, spread 5). Only one small picture on the endpapers of *Hur blev jag till?* hints at the intimacy between the parents (although in the picture they are both fully clothed). The sexual act between Ebo's mother and father is only superficially explained; a superficiality that is reinforced by the use of the euphemisms »snopp« and »snippa« for penis and vagina. In the earlier books, childish euphemisms for genitals in Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, such as »pikken« and »kussen« (Knudsen), »snopp« and »slida« (Fagerström and Hansson), »tissen« and »hullet« (Torgersen and Olsen), and »tissemand« and »tissekone« (Møller) also occurred, but they also used more medical terms such as »penis« and »vagina« (Fiske). The use of euphemisms in *Hur blev jag till?* makes the information somewhat obscure. Nevertheless, the publisher claims that the book is a »rättfram och spännande faktabok för alla vuxna som behöver lite hjälp på traven att förklara ett av livets allra största fenomen för nyfikna barn« [straightforward and interesting nonfiction book for adults who need a little help in explaining one of life's greatest phenomena to curious children] (Rabén & Sjögren, 2022). The assumption that adults need help when answering such a »complicated question« indicates that humour, after all, might be a better strategy than presenting dry facts.

Fig. 4. Spread 2 from *Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?* (Britton / Winblad 2022). © Louise Winblad. Reprinted with permission of author/illustrator.

Conclusion: Humour – A Necessary Strategy?

Children's literature has always been a subject for discussion about what may be appropriate in content and form for young readers, and adult sexuality is a prime example of this. Many are still unsure of how much children should be exposed to. This may help to explain why children's books about how babies are conceived are steeped in humorous euphemisms and metaphors.

Our analysis has shown that humour helps facilitate the dissemination of challenging subjects such as making babies by means of sexual intercourse. At the same time, we have seen that humour can also convey and perpetuate certain gender perceptions. This is reflected in traditional male discourse, in which the man and the male gamete take the role of the active and defining participant. As we have seen, humour may reinforce this discourse as an unintended consequence. In both the oldest book in the selection, *Sådan får man et barn* [*How a Baby Is Made*] (Knudsen 1971), and the more recent *Hvordan lager man en baby?* [*How do you make a baby?*] (Fiske 2019), the child reader encounters a direct approach by a confident adult. Knudsen's narrator asks: »Skal jeg fortælle dig, hvordan man får et lille barn?« [*Shall I tell you how to make a baby?*], while Fiske's narrator starts by stating, »Du har en gang været en baby« [*You were once a baby*]. We find this confident disseminator of knowledge in several places, often with the father as the primary disseminator – as shown in *Kroppen* [*Our bodies*] (Viggo/Olsen 1983) and in *Per, Ida & Minimum* (Fagerström/Hansson 1977). These fathers emphasise the man's (and sperm's) agency in fertilisation (Martin 1991; Moore 2007; Campo-Engelstein/Johnson 2013). In *Ballongmamma* [*Balloon mama*] the father blows air into the mother's belly. However, we also recall another type of father figure from our selection: the playful, ignorant, childishly naive, expectant father, as in *Manden og damen og noget i maven* [*The man and the lady and something in her belly*] (Aakeson/Eriksson 2002) and *Johannes Jensen oplever et mirakel* [*Johannes Jensen experiences a miracle*] (Hovland/Kove 2009).

In the most recent book, *Hur blev jag till? Och hur kom jag ut?* [*How was I made? And how did I get out?*] (Britton/Winblad 2022), the mother communicates this knowledge and tries to answer her child's questions. She does not use humorous strategies, but seems to struggle to provide a proper explanation of how Ebo was conceived. Conception through sexual intercourse on the one hand, and assisted reproduction technology on the other, is presented in the same clinical manner. This can be viewed as an attempt to give equal status to different forms of reproduction and could be read as an expression of so-called Nordic exceptionalism (Kokkola/Van den Bossche 2020), that is, the idea of a socially just and equal Scandinavia. However, by »exceptionally« steering clear of humour that could be perceived as gendered, and thus reinforce heteronormative majority discourse, a new fear of addressing the subject seems to have emerged.

»It is the responsibility of authors to make their stories manageable for the child and present them from a child's point of view. One way of helping to do this is to introduce moments of humor or passages of humorous tone,« writes Mallan (1993, p. 26). Perhaps we need humour to deal with challenging subjects. The idea of adult sexuality as something that children should be protected from can be avoided through the use of playfulness, humour and laughter. Humour makes sexuality less threatening (Freud 1928) and enables us to make jokes about it. Nevertheless, we have also seen how humour can make the content more charged, as humour often relies on simplification and stereotyping. This is the downside. By using humour in children's literature to convey how babies are conceived, there is a risk of perpetuating heteronormative patterns, despite the intention to give a balanced presentation of gender and family structures.

On the one hand, humour works as a necessary strategy; on the other, it can contribute to marginalisation and heteronormativity. A question that future writers and readers of facts-of-life books for children might consider is whether non-heteronormative humour on this important topic is also conceivable.

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