



Without a Word: Bonding with Northern Nature in Lene Ask's *Du*

Sofija Christensen

Associate Professor of Norwegian literature and literature didactics, University of Stavanger

Sofija Christensen holds a PhD in Scandinavian literature from the University of Belgrade, Serbia. Her research interests include the work of Henrik Ibsen in different cultural contexts, Norwegian academic novels, textbook analysis and intercultural studies.

sofija.christensen@uis.no

Abstract

Lene Ask's wordless picturebook *Du* (2016) renders the story of a day in the life of a little girl who has recently moved with her mother and baby sibling into a wooden house in the middle of a birch forest. The forest is part of a wintery landscape in the Northern Hemisphere with leafless trees and subdued light filling several spreads. Using non-verbal means of communication, primarily a combined technique of watercolors and pencil sketching, *Du* (You) brings the reader close to the experience of displacement and wordlessness of the protagonist. The scarce verbal text, shifts of perspective, and mirroring and bleeding of images over the limits of the pages all contribute to the complexity of the narrative. This engages the reader to relate to, or even identify with, the girl's mental processes. The principal aim of this chapter is to discuss Ask's interpretation of the topos of biophilia, as well as the book's possible pedagogical aspects. This will be done by examining the role of nature in the protagonist's environmental adaptation and the ways in which non-verbal communication becomes a central element in the book's subject matter and form.

Keywords

non-verbal communication, visual narratives, biophilia, wordless picturebooks, multicultural literature

Introduction: Meeting as Equals

In a well-known children's novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (1911), we read about Mary, a young, wealthy British girl, born and raised in India but sent to Great Britain after she was orphaned. Arriving in Yorkshire, Mary finds herself all alone in another part of the world in the custody of an uncle whom she has never met before. The narrating voice explains that Mary has never experienced care from others, nor care for others, and consequently, she has grown cold and «contrary» (Burnett, 1999). However, exploring the gardens of her new Yorkshire home and its grounds, she is irre-

sistibly drawn to the springtime plants and to a busy little robin. The days spent outdoors bring about a change in the way the ten-year-old girl experiences others, life, and herself:

Oh, to think that he should actually let her come as near to him as that! He knew nothing in the world would make her put out her hand toward him or startle him in the least tiniest way. He knew it because he was a real person—only nicer than any other person in the world. She was so happy that she scarcely dared to breathe (Burnett, 1999, p. 58).

The above quotation is a rare instance of free indirect speech in the novel published in 1911. It renders little Mary's sudden experience of mutual understanding with a fellow being—the little bird. In her deep need for emotional bonding, Mary anthropomorphizes the bird. Although Mary imagines that the bird shares her thoughts, the robin is the first being that she seems to interact with as her equal. In the novel, the comforting communication between the girl, raised in India, and the natural, northern environment is bodily, intuitive, and freed from conceptions about existence or expectations. Freed from social, generational or cultural entanglements latent in verbal communication, the girl and the robin simply know one other, as little Mary formulates it.

Jacques Derrida once called the human being «an animal at unease with itself» (2002, p. 372). Discussing human-animal communication in his essay «The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)», Derrida posits that animals simply *are* that which they are. In the introductory quotation, we read how the novelist Frances Hodgson Burnett renders the liberating experience of when a little girl suddenly feels at ease with herself in the company of a robin. Throughout *The Secret Garden*, we read how the robin and the natural environment of Yorkshire in spring play a key role for an insecure child in unfamiliar surroundings.

A similar literary exploration of the non-verbal bonding of a young girl with unfamiliar northern nature can be found in the wordless picturebook *Du* (You) by the acclaimed author, photographer and illustrator Lene Ask (2016). This book suggests too that other beings — or more specifically, a little bird and the leafless plants in the winter season — may help a young female protagonist deal with troubling emotional, existential, and interpersonal questions as she adapts to a new and strange environment. In order to convey this non-verbal bonding, both *Du* and *The Secret Garden* turn to somewhat atypical modes of expres-

sion. When little Mary from *The Secret Garden* suddenly connects with the robin, the narrative abruptly changes to free indirect speech, which is otherwise not overly used in the book. Free indirect speech is a literary device which aims at coming as close as possible to the protagonist's unmediated inner voice. Ask's technique opts for even less mediation, as she eliminates words altogether. *Du* is a wordless picturebook; the narrative is non-verbal and predominantly visual. The reader of the picturebook *Du* is, therefore, entrusted to meet the inner mental state of the main character entirely without a guiding narrating voice. Solely by reading illustrations, the reader understands what the young girl goes through, and what role nature has in her existentially challenging adaptation process.

This article aims to inquire how the picturebook *Du* communicates the complex trope of human-nature contact as a ground for healing and for becoming habituated to an unfamiliar environment. The word «communicate» is especially important to note here. The article will discuss how the issue of communication is central both for the book's topic, form, and for the interaction with the reader.

I use the words «text» and «narrative» in a broad sense. When necessary, the article will specify whether a text or elements of a text are communicated verbally, visually, or through another modality. The article will have two main theoretical platforms: 1) research on picturebooks, and more specifically wordless picturebooks; 2) ecocritical perspectives concerned with social and biotic communities (Buell, 2014), and the interactions between nature and culture which Lawrence Buell understands as «mutual constructions» (2001; 2005, p. 29-61). In the last part of the article, I will briefly discuss the book in the context of its implied readership. Drawing on early work by Buell (2001; 2005), I will consider the inscribed cultural codes in the representation of the relationship between humans and their natural sur-

roundings in Ask's *Du*. In a more recent article, Buell addresses the way children's fiction represents social and biotic communities (2014). Buell discerns two main overlapping topoi concerning the environment in children's literature. Particularly relevant for this study is the literary topos of biophilia. According to Buell, this topos consists of the following: [D]iscovery or construction of special, often hidden outdoor places by children that are shown to have catalytic significance in bonding them to the natural environment and beyond that, by implication at least, in identity-formation over the long run, such that the natural environment comes to feel a catalytic agent and crucial ingredient of personal being (Buell, 2014, p. 409).

The primary goal of this article is to discuss Ask's interpretation of the topos of biophilia. Therefore, I will begin by first addressing the issues of wordlessness and communication as key formal and thematic aspects of the book.

Images Rather than Words

Du is a short book in A5 format. The main body of the text is narrated through sixteen double spreads consisting solely of images. *Du* is the first wordless picturebook by Ask. Before and after this book, Ask has illustrated and authored several picturebooks and graphic novels, many of which have a post-feminist undertone or deal with feminine microhistories (Oxfeldt, 2013; Waage, 2018).

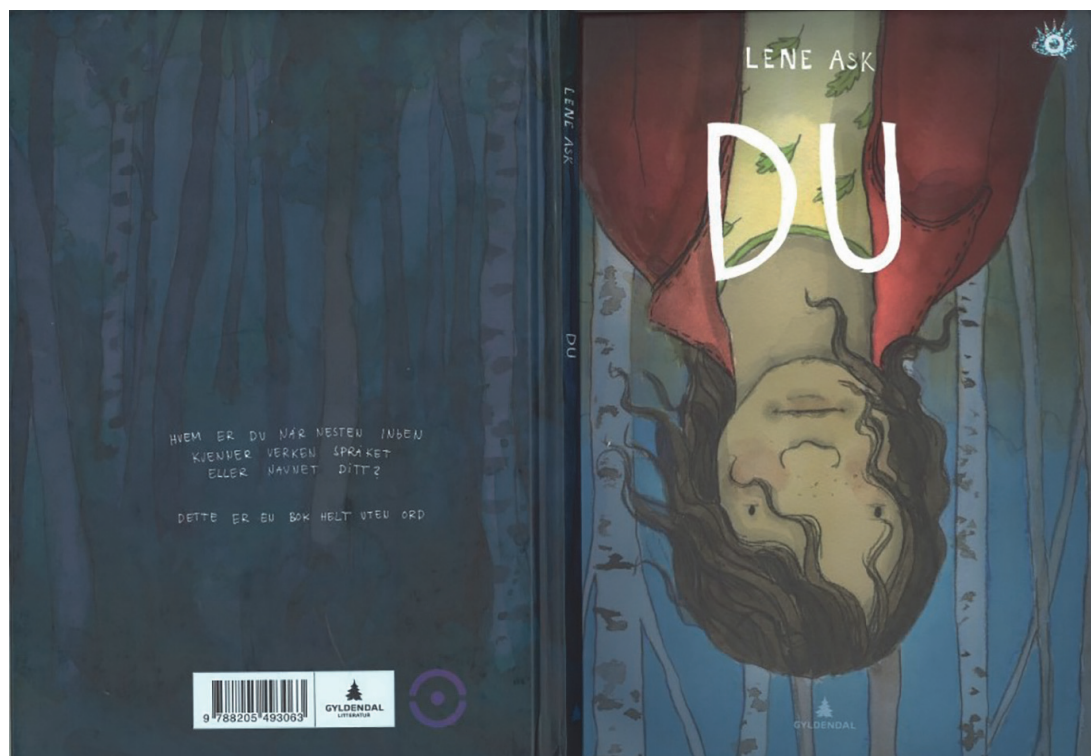
The visual narrative of *Du*, as I understand it, goes as follows. A little girl has recently moved with her mother and a baby sibling to a house in the woods. There is very little to do in the empty house, and the girl goes out to explore the wintery birch forest, perhaps looking for the house finch she saw through the window earlier that day. She finds the finch in a tree and climbs up to meet him. While hanging from a tree branch, she suddenly confronts a girl who seems to be her

identical twin. The two are excited to get to know each other and start playing in the forest. At dusk, they go back to the house. As the protagonist enters the house, her friend disappears, and we realize now that the friend was imaginary. The girl covers her sleeping mother and goes to bed. Before going to sleep herself, the girl wants to make sure that her imaginary friend is still outside. Looking at her reflection in the window, the girl re-establishes the connection with her «friend». The last double spread shows the girl in bed, fast asleep and with an expression of contentment on her face.

Definitions of picturebooks generally point out that this medium uses a collaboration between pictures and written words when communicating with the reader (see for instance Arizpe & Styles, 2001; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). In recent years, however, there has been a significant rise in picturebooks that consist purely of illustrations. In 2016, for instance, when Ask published *Du*, there was a small boom of such artworks in the Norwegian market with two other titles published in the same category. Consequently, scholars such as Emma Bosch (2018) have called for a revised definition of the medium, one that would stress «illustrations [as the] primordial» language in all picturebooks (2018, p. 191).

Without a single word, *Du* tells the story of a day in a young girl's life. In the book, words appear only as paratexts. The author's name and the capitalized word «Du (You)» appear on the book's spine and the front cover. These are repeated on the title page, along with other bibliographic information. On the back cover, using the same white font against a dark green background, one can read the blurb (Figure 1).

Inquiring into the function of paratexts in literature for children and young adults, Ingeborg Mjør (2010) points out that visual and verbal paratexts can be understood as strategic devices aiming to ensure a reception in line with the intention of the author



Figur 1. Ask Lene, *Du* (2016). Reprinted with permission from the author and Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

or the publisher. Mjør further notes how such elements, albeit often minimal in length, may have great influence on the meaning-making process. The verbal text on the back cover of *Du* is indeed minimal, but may lead the reader to a certain interpretation of the visual body of the text. Translated into English, it reads as follows: «Who are you when almost nobody knows your language and your name? This is a book entirely without words» (Figure 1). In a future project, it would be interesting to consider if the readings of the book would significantly change if one were to eliminate this verbal text.

Ask's book is wordless in the narrow sense (Bosch, 2018). The printed word is reduced to the book's paratexts, or according to Bosch, «apart from the title, the name(s) of the author(s) and the credits, no other words appear in the pages of the book» (2018, p. 191). Wordless picturebooks have specific artistic features; they call for a certain way of reading and may have special affordan-

ces in pedagogical contexts (see for example Arizpe, 2013, or Stokke, 2019). However, scholars agree that it might both be impossible and irrelevant to attempt to define exactly how many words a wordless or nearly wordless picturebook may have (Bosch, 2018, p. 191; Arizpe, 2013, p. 165). The triviality of such a criterion becomes apparent when one considers a book such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006). The book uses an array of symbols meant to represent written words; nonetheless, it is irrefutably wordless. Indeed, the absence of words in a book is neither just a formality nor «a simple feat of artistry. [Instead, it is] totally relevant and in keeping with the topic» (Nières-Chevrel, 2010, p. 137). Wordlessness itself becomes part of the topic of the text.

The narrative in *Du* is told by images in a combined technique of watercolors and pencil sketching. As no margins are used, the pictures «bleed» over the edges of the page, to borrow the vocabulary from comic book theory (McCloud, 1993, p. 103). Bleeding as

an artistic device is consistently used in *Du*, making it often challenging for the reader to discern whether the recto and the verso sides create a double spread or not. This device also makes the aspect of perspective highly interesting. Furthermore, as Scott McCloud points out, «when ‘bleeds’ are used [...] time is no longer contained» (p. 103.). Rather, images that bleed over the end of pages set the mood or a sense of place, and the story they tell seems timeless. Using this device consistently, *Du* subtly indicates that the dimension of time is an important element both *in* the book and for understanding it. This will be discussed further when I look specifically into the potential ways of reading the book and connecting its narrative to lived experience.

Although time is a highly significant resource in Ask's *Du*, the most important semiotic system is «the visual image [which] carries the weight of the meaning» (Arizpe, 2013, p. 165). Wordless picturebooks, including Ask's, rely «on the expressiveness of their images and on sequence to tell their stories» (Postema, 2014, p. 314), but also on the materiality of books themselves, «especially [since] one modality that is expected to have a significant role in the book is significantly made unavailable to us» (Alaca, 2018, p. 67). The sequence of images, which are in different ways connected to the protagonist, are highly suggestive communicative means. Like a wordless lyric poem, *Du* allows the reader to take in the little girl's experience of the world without any mediation.

Discussing the implied readership of picturebooks, Maria Nikolajeva elaborates on the general agreement that these books do not immediately address children. Rather, «[t]exts construct their implied readers according to the degree of complexity encoded in the text» (2010, p. 39). Wordless picturebooks may be even more challenging in this respect. With no written words to authoritatively guide the reading process, *Du* entrusts the reader with a high degree of autonomy to select and make sense of its semiotic potentials. As Evelyn Arizpe points out, wordless

picturebooks require the reader «to engage with the text, to read, re-read and reflect before being asked to make sense of [it]» (2013, p. 166). Therefore, the meaning one constructs from the visual narrative can be unstable, fleeting or significantly different for every new reading.

Although *Du* presents us with a juvenile female protagonist, it is a complex book dealing with difficult experiences and emotions linked to displacement in general. It is important to mention that *Du* is a publication within the Norwegian project «Books for Everyone» (Leser søker bok). The goal of this project is «to provide adapted literature for all kinds of people who have difficulties reading ordinary books» (Leser søker bok, 2018). Consequently, part of the book's intended readership may consist of the immigrant population in Norway who perhaps do not have the necessary command of written Norwegian, yet who may identify with the book's subject matter: the process of adaptation to a new environment during which one is often left without words. As an adult Serbian newcomer to Norway, I find myself fitting into this category. I believe that my immigrant experience has influenced my reading of the book. The following analysis of *Du* is a result of my multiple acts of reading of the book over more than twelve months. I have been reading the book both in solitude and in dialogue with others.

Communicating Bodily

The verbal text on the back cover of *Du* is a comment on the book's means of expression (Figure 1). As Ilgim Veryeri Alaca (2018) and Isabelle Nières-Chevrel (2010) have noted, when an author makes verbal text significantly unavailable to us, the book's wordless expression becomes inseparable from its subject matter. The wordless form of the book accentuates the difficulty or even the impossibility of verbalization which may occur in certain situations. Similarly to Tan's *The Arrival*, the wordless form of Ask's *Du*

is a device advancing the topic of the book, which by extension also renders the book itself «mute». The book's semiotic systems join together to communicate the notion that words and language often fail to explain a person's feelings when he or she is in an unfamiliar environment. This is particularly true in a story like *Ask's* where the point may be that such experiences are so unfamiliar that they are impossible to explain even to oneself. On the other hand, the book's wordlessness also seems to convey that this inadequacy of language can free one to understand oneself and bond with others using alternative, perhaps more suitable, means such as physical contact and bodily presence, gaze, intuition, and imagination.

At first glance, *Du* narrates a story about what seems to be a young girl's first day of a new life. The plot lacks dramatic moments, except for the highly symbolic one where the protagonist suddenly encounters her (other) self in the woods. By reducing the storyline to a minimum, and by carefully

presenting only a limited number of motifs on each spread, the book brings forth the story's emotional, ontological and existential component.

The narrative structure is simple and firmly guided by the temporal and spatial structure common in Indo-European fairytales, or the classical coming-of-age narratives. The story in *Du* begins at a place identified as home. This home is safe, yet the character lacks something. The sense of being unfulfilled drives the main character outside into the unknown, the forest. In the end, the protagonist returns home bearing with her important new knowledge about herself and the world. Although it is not clear whether the visual narrative in *Du* begins in the morning, it does end in the evening, with the main character sound asleep in her bed. However, the story in *Du* is not brought to a close when the protagonist returns to the safety of her bed. The last double-spread shows the curtains by the closed window of her bedroom billowing in a lively way (Figure 2).



Figur 2. Ask Lene, *Du* (2016). Reprinted with permission from the author and Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

Moreover, the forest seems to permeate the girl's sleep via the wooden pattern of the walls. The surprising dynamism of the last double spread may serve as an indicator that the story is not over, that the main character may not be at the end of her inner journey. This implication, that the girl will continue her exploration, is also supported by the illustrations on the book's endpapers.

The front endpaper of the book shows a white birch forest; on the back endpaper, the same forest is infused with green. As Mjør has elaborated (2010), paratexts often serve as cues from the author or publisher. On the other hand, Mjør also argues that paratexts may bring more complexity into the reading of books, not least picturebooks (2010). Indeed, the endpapers of *Du* seem to carry considerable semantic weight. First, the green birch forest represented in the back endpaper brings a final liveliness to the sequence of otherwise somewhat somber illustrations. Second, the two endpapers suggest the change of seasons typical for the Northern Hemisphere. In the front endpaper the forest is snow-covered, while in the back it is green. The time-lapse proposed by the two paratexts differs, however, from the period suggested in the body of the text. The endpapers indicate that the girl's story may, in fact, be longer than the visually narrated time. The sequence of pictures that constitutes the text of *Du* seems to follow the protagonist during a single day. However, the front and back endpapers seem to depict the time lapse between winter and high spring. One explanation might be that this is a device directing the reader to return to the book several times over a longer period; the single day presented in the body of the text is one of many similar days that the young girl fills with ordinary, yet significant experiences as the winter turns to spring.

This interpretation of the paratexts in Ask's book is in line with how literary scholars propose that wordless picturebooks might best be approached (Arizpe, 2013). The back endpaper in *Du* guides the reader

not only back to the beginning of the book as soon as s/he has ended it, but it also suggests that the reader should come back to the book several times over a period of several months. The endpapers might suggest that the reader return to the story repeatedly until his or her world has also transitioned from winter to spring. In a complex way, the book mirrors the passing of time necessary not only for book's protagonist to fully habituate to her new surroundings, but also for the northern forest to come to full bloom.

In this way, the book's material aspects communicate the intimate relationship between the little girl's psyche and the natural surroundings narrated in the text. According to Buell, the motif of hurt or insecure children bonding with outdoor niches is a literary trope (2014, p. 413). Buell explains how literature about children bonding with nature is often linked to trauma narratives or coming-of-age narratives (see also Khateeb, 2018). «Books of such kind», writes Buell, «highlight a type of experience that developmental psychologists have confirmed as being formative of adult identity» (2014, p. 413). Indeed, ecocritical readings of children's literature often explore how «children come to terms with existence» by engaging with their environment (Røskeland, 2018, p. 28), how protagonists, especially female ones, are dependent upon space (Posey, 2011, p. 103), and how literature often portrays the «response to the natural world [as] therapeutic» (p. 103). In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Neil Evernden claims that «[t]here is no such thing as an individual, only an individual-in-context, individual as a component of place, defined by place» (1996, p. 103). That place also carries its own cultural implications (see Buell 2001; 2005).

Du visually enhances the notion that the protagonist and her family are foreign to their surroundings, that they are defined by a place not illustrated in the book. The characters are, in fact, attributed with items that seem to disconnect them completely from the natural surroundings they have encoun-

tered as their new home. The protagonist of the story is dressed in bright green and red. Her colorfulness makes her stand out against the leafless forest and its subdued colors. She wears a shirt decorated with green leaves, and later she uses a blanket with a flower motif to cover her sleeping mother. On the one hand, this furthers the idea that the girl and her mother have yet to recognize themselves as part of a new biotic community. On the other hand, the natural print on the girl's clothes symbolically strengthens the bond between her and the leafless birch trees. Namely, the illustrations suggest that the trees will, in time, be covered in leaves, becoming more like the girl. The girl will, in time, recognize that she does not stand out from the nature around her. The flower blanket implies that the mother will also bloom again soon.

Du narrates how the nameless protagonist nests into her new surroundings, i.e. how she connects to a new biotic community. The forest landscape and the wildlife of the Northern Hemisphere in winter are integral elements of the book's plot and character development. The little girl's environmental bonding with the birch trees follows the established trope identified in writing about biophilia. Biophilia is, according to Buell, «the power of active interaction with the living earth (birds, flowers, trees, and animals) to reshape human being» (2014, p. 414). Indeed, if we observe how the book's protagonist interacts with other living beings, we notice that physical comfort comes primarily from bodily contact with non-humans.

Du suggests that physical contact and healing are situated in nature, rather than in social relations. The mother's body-posture and facial expressions indicate that she might be dispirited, apathetic or tired. This seems to imply that that the family has found itself in an unexpected or even difficult situation. The protagonist's little sibling is dynamic. In the illustrations, the sibling moves about energetically. S/he does not seem distressed by the family's changed life situa-

tion. The other two human characters in the book, the mother and the girl, seem quite affected by the experience of displacement. While indoors, the girl's postures are subdued and melancholic and mirror the bodily position of the mother. Outside, though, the girl's motions are much freer. She climbs trees, balances over logs, smiles, and runs with her chin up. Like the juvenile female protagonists of *Anne of Green Gables* (1907) and *The Secret Garden*, the anonymous main character in *Du* «seems to rely on the natural world for spiritual well-being» (Posey, 2011, p. 95).

The contact with trees and the protagonist's activity in the forest are principal elements of the main character's interaction with others. However, as the last double-spread seems to convey, the well-being experienced in the forest also fills the little girl indoors, as the walls of her bedroom seem to merge with the woods outside. She connects to the forest and to the trees because, like her, they are cold and barren. While the protagonist bonds physically with the birch trees, she communicates most intimately with one individual being from the natural world: the house finch.

Communicating by Looking

Initially, it was suggested that the book's different devices and semiotic means advance the idea that introspection, communication, understanding, and bonding with others may be achieved non-verbally. The previous section concentrated on bodily communication, particularly through physical proximity and touch. This section of the article will discuss the role of the gaze for the nameless heroine's inner processes of habituation and healing, but also as a formal device where the book plays with the issues of perspective in order to establish an intense communication with the reader.

The plot of *Du* is initiated when the girl sees a little bird through the house window (Figure 3).



Figur 3. Ask Lene, *Du* (2016). Reprinted with permission from the author and Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

The verso side of the spread shows a close-up of the house finch. The reader may not notice it, but they share the little girl's point of view. While the reader sees through the girl's eyes (and is thus rendered equal to the book's protagonist) on the verso side, the book separates the reader from the main character already on the recto side of the same spread. On the right-hand side of the first double spread the perspective changes to a third-person view. The author-illustrator introduces the reader to the figure of the book's protagonist within her home setting (Figure 3). The visual connection between the bird and the protagonist on the first double spread establishes biophilia as one of the key topics in the book. The first double spread also announces the dynamic changes of perspective that will be used throughout the book, bringing the reader closer or further from the protagonist's experience. This makes a discussion of the identification between the protagonist and the reader a pertinent one. These shifts of

perspective encourage attentive and repeated readings, which Arizpe argues characterize wordless picturebooks (2013).

The direct visual contact between the girl and the bird in Figure 3 inspires the girl to leave the house and seek the bird in the forest several double spreads later. In this way, the book visually elaborates how the gaze may function as a way to engage the other and to interact. Looking is also a means for humans to communicate with non-humans. As Derrida has discussed, drawing on Lévinas, the bottomless gaze we exchange with animals «allows [one] to see and be seen through the eyes of the other», while words present several filters and are hardly adequate to truly meet, or «know» the other (Derrida, 2002, p. 381). Indeed, as Ruth Seierstad Stokke (2019) points out, many environment-centered narratives are actually about healing through understanding one another. Stokke discusses how Ask's *Du* presents the communication between the little girl and the bird as simple. Yet, this interaction is profound and

can bring about an understanding of existential truths.

While the girl's eyes never meet the eyes of her mother or her sibling, they do occasionally meet the gaze of the bird. According to Derrida, to a human, animals seem to be «at ease with themselves» (2002, p. 372). He explains that «[b]ecause it *is* naked, without *existing* in nakedness, the animal neither feels nor sees itself naked» (2002, p. 374). The little house finch may represent an ideal existence: a being which simply *is*. Indeed, the bird in *Du* seems to have a sense of security which attracts the girl. The girl eventually seems to share this sense of security as she climbs up the tree and faces the finch without the filter of the window glass. The self-affirming, bottomless gaze exchanged by the two is elaborated in the following pages of the book. The meeting with the little house finch anticipates the positive outcome of the existentially turbulent period for the child.

Soon after meeting the finch on the birch

tree, the girl quite literally discovers herself. The book's wordless form seems particularly fitting to convey this metaphor. In two consecutive double spreads, the reader witnesses the surprising first encounter of the girl protagonist with herself. On the double spread preceding the one in Figure 4, *Du* dynamically changes perspective from a third-person view (verso) to a first-person view (recto). The reader is first in the role of an external observer, seeing the girl hanging upside-down from the birch branch. Then, as the reader's gaze moves onto the recto side, the reader is looking at the birch forest upside-down, through the eyes of the protagonist. The internal focalization is maintained as the reader turns the page to Figure 4. The reader (via the little girl's gaze) is suddenly confronted with an inverted figure of the protagonist appearing against the same background of the birch forest turned upside-down. Initially, the double spread in Figure 4 will probably be puzzling, as the reader will try to make sense of a triplicated



Figur 4. Ask Lene, *Du* (2016). Reprinted with permission from the author and Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

protagonist. The reader will probably need time to understand this doubling of the self by unraveling the book's playful shifts of perspective (Fig. 4).

The girl's discovery of herself in the forest brings life to the narrative. After the double spread in Figure 4, the book uses several consecutive double spreads to render the fulfilling activities and the overwhelming experience of joy that the protagonist, and her doubled self, share in the forest. The girl's great joy in finding «a friend» is paralleled by the finch also finding a playmate. Although the fun ceases as the girl walks into the house, her newly discovered self disappears only for a brief instant. When she looks out into the dark forest on one of the final double spreads, the little girl's window becomes a mirror, and she re-establishes the bond with her alternative, or newly discovered self, who exists outdoors.

Changing perspectives and focalizations from the indoors to the outdoors, from internal to external, advances the story about the little girl healing (Stokke, 2019) and bonding with nature, and comments on what Derrida calls «the bottomless gaze» (2002). This gaze allows the individual to meet someone at ease with his or her self, someone simply existing in the state in which that someone is. Further, *Du* relies on the reader's gaze not only as primary means of communicating its visual narrative, but also as a suggestive means that invites the reader to actively engage with the little girl's story. As Nikolajeva has pointed out, the reader is highly engaged by the visuals, they «affect the reader in an immediate and persuasive manner» (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 37).

LIKE A MIGRATORY BIRD IN UNFAMILIAR NORDIC WOODS

The direct, persuasive, and intense wordless communication that *Du* aims to establish with the reader is announced already by the book's title and its provocative front cover. In this section, I will discuss the front cover

(Figure 1) and consider the book in the context of its implied readership. This contextualization of the book and its representation of northern nature and its role for the individual will connect to Buell's understanding of nature and culture as «mutual constructions» (2001; 2005).

The front cover of the book shows a portrait of the young girl gazing directly at the reader (Figure 1). The title of the book is somewhat confusing, as it seems to define her as «you». The title indicates that the book might tell the readers something about themselves, if not show them who they are. The illustration and the title increase the tension between the reader and the protagonist. The girl identified as «you» is presented from the waist up and gazes directly at the reader. This is why the illustration on the cover might lead the reader to think of it as a mirror. If so, this peculiar mirror shows the depicted girl, that is the reader's metaphoric self, turned upside-down.

The information the reader gathers from the orientation of the different semiotic systems (the visual and the verbal text) on the front cover might initially be confusing. At first, one might have the impression that he or she is holding the book upside-down. However, as one turns the book in his or her hands to make the image of the girl appear conventionally oriented, one receives contradicting information from other semiotic systems. Namely, the title becomes illegible and the spine of the book is on the opposite side of what a western reader is accustomed to. The reader must finally consent that the girl on the cover, identified as «you», is supposed to face the reader upside-down. Nonetheless, the initial engagement with the book consists of a slightly unsettling sensation. Discussing the physical aspects of the act of reading picturebooks, Alaca stresses materiality as «a third narrative system», which might not only deepen the reader's understanding of a story but make the story physically connected to the real world» (2018, p. 67). Indeed, as we turn the book in our

hands, trying to make sense of its cover, we come closer to sharing the depicted girl's mental state. The book's cover, and the process of interpreting its modalities indicate that we will encounter an alternative version of ourselves in a topsy-turvy state, and that the story will both be challenging to understand, and also connected to the real world.

Furthermore, the book's cover takes the reader into a specific natural setting. Interpreting the totality of the multimodal front cover of the book, the reader may conclude that s/he is about to encounter an alternative version of him or herself in a leafless forest. The «magical mirror» of the front cover displaces the reader from his or her reality and takes the reader into a birch forest. The girl, i.e. the reader's metaphoric reflection, is embedded into a thick scenery of slender, leafless birch trees set against a dark greenish-blue background. This image takes the reader into a reality clearly defined in time and space. The image is realistic and has an inviting effect as it creates the illusion that one is physically embedded in this scenery. As the wind plays with «the reader's» hair on something that looks like an inverted passport photo, *Du* invites the reader into a realistic experience of arriving into a natural environment of a dormant birch forest in the Northern Hemisphere.

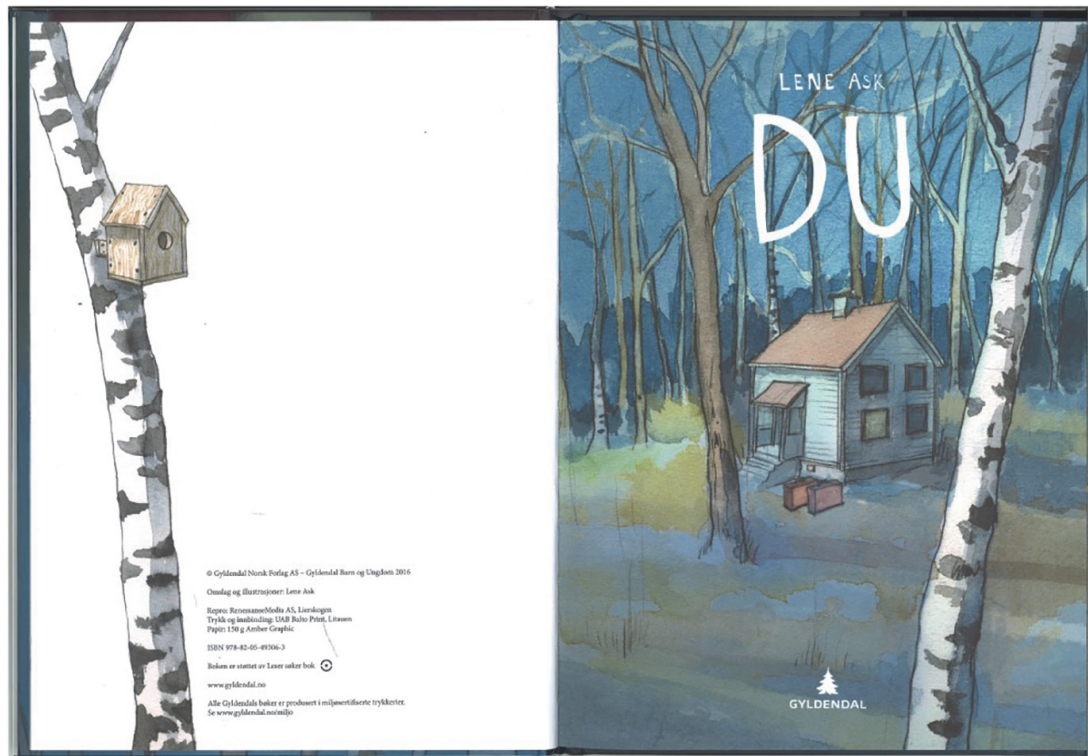
To sum up: Ask's book encourages the reader to take part in the story in several ways. Through design, its front cover, subject matter, and the different devices that it employs to forward the narrative, *Du* seeks to bring the reader intimately close to the heroine's experience of displacement and wordlessness. Previously, I have discussed the solutions the book offers for how one might overcome this experience and become a part of an initially unfamiliar biotic community. The book suggests that one may rely on communicative means other than language. *Du* seems to propose that bonding between an individual and his or her unfamiliar surroundings is marked by bodily communication, biophilia, and meeting someone via

a «bottomless gaze». Communication using such means is less mediated (Derrida, 2002), but also less stable and clear. It relies on intuition and acceptance of uncertainties.

Ask's book was published in the project «Books for Everyone,» which aims at providing adapted literature for people who have difficulties reading ordinary books (Leser søker bok, 2018). Based on the previous analysis of the book's subject matter and semiotic resources it uses to communicate with the readers, I suggest that *Du* might be most effective with readers who share the difficulty of conceptualizing and verbalizing existential and emotional issues tied to displacement. This would include Norway's rising immigrant population, especially those who do not have the necessary language skills to read a verbal argument as complex as the wordless argument presented in *Du*. This means that *Du* has a pedagogical usage potentially inscribed within it, which is also discussed by Stokke (2019). By extension, this means that *Du* can be read as a cultural product of a group seeking to bring the biotic community represented in *Du* closer to the ones who might find it strange, unfamiliar, or silencing.

As Buell points out, nature is largely a social construction where the physical environment and cultures mutually refashion or shape each other (2001; 2005). Buell argues that the process of nature's construction through culture and vice versa becomes clear in artistic representations of nature. Following Buell, in this last section of the chapter, I will discuss the complex interactions between nature and culture in *Du*; nature's «real and imagined versions» (Buell, 2005, p. 29-61) are perhaps another message the book seeks to communicate to the readers.

In Figure 5 we see the first flyleaf and the title page of *Du*. They present the reader with a picture of a birdhouse fastened to a birch tree on the verso side, and a white house situated among the birch trees on the recto side. The house is somewhat worn-out and is recognizable as a simple Norwegian wooden



Figur 5. Ask Lene, *Du* (2016). Reprinted with permission from the author and Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS.

structure. It seems magically placed in the forest. No visible roads lead to it; there are no other signs of civilization around it. For instance, there are no flowerbeds, vegetable gardens, postboxes, or road signs. Apart from the surrounding forest, one can only observe a couple of suitcases at the bottom of the stairs leading to the front door of the house (Fig. 5).

The juxtaposition of the two houses in the book's opening—one for birds, and the other for humans—suggests a metaphoric connection between the two. The reader is invited to see a correlation between the two houses and perhaps interpret that they might serve a similar function as a safe place for nesting. Birdhouses are specifically designed, made, and placed on tree trunks by humans with the intention of helping birds nest. In Figure 5, *Du* transposes the metaphoric qualities of the birdhouse to the little white house which, judging from the suitcases by the front door, is about to be inhabited. Just like the birdhouse is an arti-

ficial extension of the natural tree, a simple wooden house is designed to make the forest more suitable for the life of humans in need of shelter. The minimal furniture of the house—with not much more than a few odd chairs, a couple of open boxes, and two suitcases accompanying a family of three—seems to support an interpretation that the little girl and her family are perhaps refugees, runaways, or immigrants hastily placed in this new landscape. The metaphoric connection between the two houses suggested peritextually is furthered by the continuous association of the girl protagonist with the finch.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the metaphoric identification between a human and a bird is a central part of the plot, but it is also a device used to assist the reader in interpreting the story. The bonding of the little girl with the finch and the leafless trees in winter are motifs that

facilitate the reading. *Du* relies on the literary trope of biophilia to convey the inner state of the protagonist, her situation, and her feelings of strangeness, fragility, helplessness, and also hope in the face of a new environment. The book proposes that the unfamiliar forest may also provide the struggling child with a solution. The birch forest is where she quite literally discovers herself.

The endpapers strengthen the notion of hopefulness, promising that the trees will not remain cold and barren but will inevitably be plentiful and green. In order to convey the idea that things will eventually heal, the book seeks to make sense of human ex-

perience by explaining it with the inexorable security of the natural cyclic rhythms of the Northern Hemisphere. The book also does this through its form: the time necessary to adjust to new surroundings is presented by the uncertainty of the visual narrative in *Du*. If the reader returns to the book several times over a longer period, some of the initial uncertainties the visual narrative has left the reader with might be clarified. At the same time, this process of creating a satisfactory interpretation of the sequence of images in *Du* may also allow the reader to work on his or her own comprehension of who he or she is within the Nordic woods.

I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the workshop «Ecocritical Perspectives on Nordic Children's and Young Adult Literature», as well as the anonymous reviewers of this paper for useful feedback, ideas and comments. Special thanks goes to Ruth Seierstad Stokke for directing my attention to The Secret Garden as an intertext to Ask's picturebook Du.

References

- Alaca, I. V. (2018). Materiality in Picturebooks. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* (pp. 59-68). London & New York: Routledge.
- Arizpe, E. (2013). Meaning-Making from Wordless (Or Nearly Wordless) Picturebooks: What Educational Research Expects and What Readers Have to Say. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(2), 163-176.
- Arizpe, E. & Styles, M. (2001). A Gorilla with 'Grandpa's Eyes': How Children Interpret Visual Texts-A Case Study of Anthony Browne's *Zoo*. *Children's Literature in Education*, 32(4), 261-281.
- Ask, L. (2016). *Du*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Bosch, E. (2018). Wordless Picturebooks. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Picturebooks* (pp. 191-200). London & New York: Routledge.
- Buell, L. (2001). *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U. S. and Beyond*. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press.
- Buell, L. (2005). *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Buell, L. (2014). Environmental Writing for Children: A Selected Reconnaissance of Heritages, Emphases, Horizons. In G. Garrard (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (pp. 408-422). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burnett, F. H. (1999 [1911]). *The Secret Garden*. London: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, J. (2002 [1997]). The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow). *Critical Inquiry*, 28(2), 369-418.
- Evernden, N. (1996). Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy. In G. Glotfelty & H. Fromm (Eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader* (pp. 92-104). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

- Khateeb, A. (2018). Unrest in Natural Landscapes. In N. Goga, L. Guanio-Uluru, B. O. Hallås & A. Nyrnes (Eds.), *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures, Nordic Dialogues* (pp. 91-105). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Leser søker bok. (2018, 28. August). About Us. Retrieved from: <https://lesersokerbok.no/forside/om-oss/english/>
- McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Mjør, I. (2010). I resepsjonens teneste. Paratekst som meningsberande element i barnelitteratur, *Barnelitterært forskningstidsskrift*, Vol.1, <https://doi.org/10.3402/blft.v1i0.5856>
- Nières-Chevrel, I. (2010). The Narrative Power of Pictures: *L'Orage (The Thunderstorm)* by Anne Brouillard. In T. Colomer, B. Kümmerling-Meibauer & C. Silva-Díaz (Eds.), *New Directions in Picturebook Research* (pp. 129-138). New York NY: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2010). Interpretive Codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks. In T. Colomer, B. Kümmerling-Meibauer & C. Silva-Díaz (Eds.), *New Directions in Picturebook Research* (pp. 27-40). New York NY: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M. & Scott, C. (2006). *How Picturebooks Work*. New York: Routledge.
- Oxfeldt, E. (2013). Postfeministisk revisionisme i Lene Asks tegneserieroman *Hitler, Jesus og farfar*. *Edda*, 2(100), 104-112.
- Posey, C. (2011). Ethereal Etchings: Connecting with the Natural World in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *Emily of New Moon* (1923) and *Magic for Marigold* (1929). In T. Doughty & D. Thompson (Eds.), *Knowing Their Place? Identity and Space in Children's Literature* (pp. 95-108). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Postema, B. (2014). Following the Pictures: Wordless Comics for Children. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 5(3), 311-322. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2014.943541>.
- Røskeland, M. (2018). Nature and Becoming in a Picturebook About «Things That Are». In N. Goga, L. Guanio-Uluru, B. O. Hallås & A. Nyrnes (Eds.), *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures, Nordic Dialogues* (pp. 27-40). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stokke, R. S. (2019). Skjønnlitteratur i flerspråklige klasserom. In E. Selj & E. Ryen (Eds.), *Med språklige minoriteter i klassen. Språklige og faglige utfordringer* (pp. 109-131). Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Waage, L. R. (2018). Multimodale og subjektive uttrykk i Helga Sætres *Fallteknikk* og Lene Asks *Nestegang blir alt riktig*. In M. Rogne & L. R. Waage (Eds.), *Multimodalitet i skole- og fritidstekstar: Ein vitenskapelig antologi* (pp. 229-246). Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.