

# Literary Birding

Human–Bird Relations in Contemporary Novels  
from Norway and Sweden

by

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# Sammendrag

I denne avhandlinga undersøker jeg hvordan forhold mellom mennesker og fugler gjenspeiles i norske og svenske romaner fra 2000-tallet. Gjennom økokritisk analyse av fem psykologiske romaner, utforsker jeg temaer som ornitologisk praksis, identifisering og omsorg. Dette behandles i dybden i tre artikler, mens kapp gir en sammenfattende oppsummering og diskusjon, samt et overblikk over beslekta tematikk. I tillegg til økokritikk, bruker jeg miljøhermeneutikk, økonarratologi og økofeminisme, samt miljøhumaniora og animal studies i vid forstand, idet jeg setter allmenn litteraturvitenskap i sammenheng med ornitologi.

Fugler har alltid vært gjenstand for undring og fascinasjon. De har blitt tolka som varsler og budbringere, og har ofte hatt symbolsk betydning. Fra økonomiske ressurser til estetiske berikelser og økologiske indikatorer, inntar fugler en rekke kulturelle roller som gjenspeiles i kunst, myter, folketro, og ikke minst i skjønnlitteraturen.

Økende kunnskap om fugler og om inngrep som truer dem har medført at tradisjonelle og bruksorienterte natursyn nå utfordres av økologiske perspektiver. Dette kan knyttes til hvordan kulturen for fuglekikking og andre fuglerelaterte aktiviteter har utvikla seg de seinere åra, og til nyere ornitologisk forskning, men også til fuglers kulturhistoriske rolle. Folketroen er gjenstand for pågående gjenfortolkning og revitalisering, og denne prosessen er særlig påtakelig i litteraturen. Mens noen mennesker identifiserer seg med ville dyr, er andre fascinert av dem av estetiske grunner, eller oppfatter dem som sårbare skapninger med behov for beskyttelse.

Jeg viser at fugler i skandinaviske romaner ofte står for stedstilknytning, mens trekkfugler også knyttes til drømmer om å reise vekk. Fugler presenteres gjerne i lokale kontekster, men peker samtidig videre, mot hekke- eller overvintringsområdene sine og globale forhold. Fugler kan vekke glede eller miljøbevissthet, være en kilde til åndelig innsikt eller

kunstnerisk inspirasjon. I nyere skandinaviske romaner knyttes de imidlertid i de fleste tilfeller til omsorg, ofte i sammenheng med foreldre og barn, men framstilt på måter som også omfatter ikke-menneskelige dyr og leveområdene deres.

# Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine how human–bird relations are reflected in Norwegian and Swedish novels from the 2000s. Through ecocritical analysis of five psychological novels, I explore themes such as ornithological practice, identification, and care. While these themes are dealt with in depth in three articles, the extended abstract offers a comprehensive summary and discussion of my findings, as well as an overview of related topics. Besides ecocriticism, I draw on environmental hermeneutics, econarratology, and ecofeminism, as well as the environmental humanities and animal studies more broadly, aiming to bring literary studies into dialogue with ornithology.

Birds have always inspired wonder and fascination, variously appearing as auguries, messengers, and symbols. From economic resources to aesthetic enrichments and ecological indicators, birds occupy a wide range of cultural roles that are reflected in art, myth, legend, and literature.

With increased knowledge about birds and other wildlife, and increased awareness of anthropogenic threats to them, traditional and utilitarian views are being challenged by ecological perspectives. This can be linked to recent developments in the world of birding and ornithological research, but also to the role of birds in cultural history, as folklore and superstition are reinterpreted and revitalized—a process which is particularly evident in literature. While some people experience a deep connection with wild creatures, others are drawn to them for aesthetic reasons or see them as vulnerable beings in need of protection.

I find that birds in contemporary Scandinavian novels are often linked to specific places, thereby signaling local attachments but also—through migration—the dream of flight and the possibility of escaping to distant lands. Birds are presented in local contexts, but their significance nearly always points further, to their breeding or wintering grounds, to global

ecologies. Birds can foster identification in a spiritual or ecological sense and can be subjects of aesthetic inspiration or delight. Mostly, however, birds in contemporary Scandinavian novels are linked to care and caring practices, often involving parenthood and childcare but framed in ways that include nonhuman animals and their habitats.

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# 1 Introduction

From poetry and nature writing to novels and short stories, birds have made their mark in literature, and judging by the vast number of bird-related volumes published in recent years, interest in birds and their relations with humans appears to be increasing. This dissertation is focused on Norwegian and Swedish novels from the year 2000 to the present. Taking an ecocritical, hermeneutic approach, I draw on the environmental humanities and econarratology to explore how birds are represented and how this relates to topics such as environmental identity, environmental citizenship, and environmental ethics.

As Joseph W. Meeker (1997) points out, our lives are informed by the narratives we read, and “[l]iterature that provides models of human relationships with nature may thus influence both human perceptions of nature and human responses to it” (7). While literary narratives are an obvious means of disseminating information and raising awareness, they can also represent human–nonhuman animal relations in emotive and engaging ways, thereby providing insights that are rarely foregrounded in scientific reports. In what ways can Scandinavian literature contribute toward challenging anthropocentric assumptions? Can narratives about birds contribute toward fostering more sustainable environmental identities? How have representations of birds in Scandinavian literature changed over time, and to what extent do they correlate with literary developments elsewhere?

Five psychological novels (Bannerhed 2011; Gabrielsen 2017; Bildøen 2018; Lindstrøm 2019; Lirhus 2020) are the focus of the three articles included in this dissertation. While the field of bird-related literature is rich and varied, the insights offered by these novels are broadly representative of how birds tend to be presented in Scandinavian literary

fiction. On one hand, Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* (*The Ravens*, 2011)<sup>1</sup> and Agnar Lirhus's *Nå hogger de* (*Now They're Logging*, 2020) are set in rural areas and centered on idiosyncratic individuals who have a strong connection to the natural world. On the other, Gørril Gabrielsen's *Ankomst* (*Arrival*, 2017), Brit Bildøen's *Tre vegar til havet* (*Three Roads to the Sea*, 2018), and Merethe Lindstrøm's *Fuglenes anatomi* (*The Anatomy of Birds*, 2019) explore care relations through the trope of birds, offering complementary approaches to what can be described as an ethics of care and understood within an ecofeminist framework.

The main focus of this dissertation is on relations between humans and birds, on the way birds and humans interact with and exert influence upon each other. For humans, the benefits of having birds around range from exploiting them for food to using their eggs and feathers for decorative and ceremonial purposes. More pertinent here, however, are the spiritual, imaginative, and symbolic aspects of birds, which stand in sharp contrast to the notion that they are primarily resources to be utilized. As metaphors for time, imagination, and transformation, for values, beliefs, and emotions, birds are integral to how we understand our place in the world (Cocker 2013, 9–10). Birds variously function as aesthetic enrichments, personal totems, and vehicles for ethical reflection.

Meanwhile, humans impinge upon birds in myriad ways, from altering or destroying their habitats to feeding, ringing, or hunting them. While humans have driven countless bird species to extinction (van Dooren 2014b, 6–7), others have become commensal with humans, feeding on our spillage and nesting in our infrastructure, their population expansion correlating with the spread of human settlements (e.g., Smyth 2020, 32–33, 71–72). Though other nonhuman organisms—from plants to mammals—sometimes play comparable roles in their interactions with humans, “[f]amiliarity and transcendence have given birds a wider range

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<sup>1</sup> Translated into English by Sarah Death (2014).



of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal” (Lutwack 1994, xi). Whether imagined as wildlife, companion animals, symbols, or metaphors, birds hold a special place in the human imagination that renders them potent literary motifs.

Since birding and related terms will appear several times over the course of this dissertation, a few definitions are called for. The term *birding* refers to the study of wild birds, and a *birder* is a person who engages in it. The term can be further divided into three main categories: birdwatchers, birders, and twitchers. *Birdwatching* is a recreational activity or hobby that anyone can engage in, and includes backyard birding, where birds gather at a feeder; *birding* implies a certain level of knowledge and experience, actively seeking out birds rather than passively observing them; and a *twitcher* is a competitive birder focused on seeing as many species as possible, someone who goes looking for rarities reported on apps or logging systems and is in competition with other twitchers (Hundeide 2013, 275–279; Sheard 1999, 185–186).<sup>2</sup> In Scandinavia, a skilled birder whose competence is based on field experience rather than formal training is often referred to as a “field ornithologist.”<sup>3</sup> This is a helpful term, as it applies not only to twitchers but also to bird ringers, researchers, and conservationists. For active field ornithologists, birding is not a hobby but a lifestyle, and they are driven

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<sup>2</sup> *Birdwatching* and *birding* are both easily translated to Swedish with the term *fågelskådning*. The Norwegian *fuglekikker* is synonymous with *birdwatcher*, but there is as yet no good Norwegian term for the general term *birder*, though terms such as *fuglafolk* (“bird people”) are used regionally. In Norwegian, a twitcher is known as a *krysser*; in Swedish, a *hårdskådare*.

These terms matter to the people who use them: twitchers, for instance, are often keen to distance themselves from birdwatchers, while ecologically oriented birders may dismiss twitchers’ competitive focus on lists as reductive. Terms such as twitcher or birdwatcher can carry positive or negative connotations depending on how they are used, but it is worth bearing in mind that there is considerable overlap between these categories, and that most birders fit more than one. Many twitchers, for instance, are also backyard birders. Nature photographers constitute yet another distinct subculture.

<sup>3</sup> *feltornitolog* (Norwegian); *fältornitolog* (Swedish).

by what the cultural anthropologist Michael T. Hundeide (2013) describes as “naturalist enthusiasm.”<sup>4</sup> According to environmental sociologist Elizabeth Cherry (2019), birders perceive wildlife through “the naturalist gaze” (9), which is evaluative, concerned, integrative, instructive, and pleasurable (41–42).

I have titled this dissertation “Literary Birding” to reflect that the view is primarily on birds of literature rather than the originals to which they refer. As Jemma Deer (2022) reminds us, “birdwatching and wordwatching” have more in common than might be immediately apparent (10):

Watching birds and words calls for a particular form of attentiveness: an attentiveness that traces flight without arresting it, that listens and looks with patience and receptivity, and that is open to the dynamism of a more-than-human form of life. (11)

As field ornithologists might be alerted to the presence of birds by a muted contact call or a subtle rustling in the thickets, ecocritical scholars would do well to be mindful of polysemous phrases and subtle analogies. Literary representations of birds do not necessarily correlate with predefined models, and a keen eye may be needed to distinguish what they signify. Birding has been described as a process of what Tim Ingold terms “enskilment,” an embodied, continuous learning process that requires both empirical knowledge and perceptual sensitivity to nuance (Hundeide 2013, 19). The same might hold true of the analysis of narratives, which, as Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) points out, is also an embodied practice, requiring empathy, knowledge, and intuition.

While there are several subcultures of birders, there are also many subgenres of bird-related literature. Seeing birds through the lens of literature can be a means of transcending the empiricism of

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<sup>4</sup> While Hundeide’s (2013) Norwegian term “naturhistorisk entusiasme” literally means “natural historical enthusiasm,” “naturalist enthusiasm” captures its meaning more precisely.

ornithological description, but also brings into play the even more challenging domain of metaphor and hermeneutic interpretation. Beyond offering naturalistic descriptions of birds, literary texts often aim to describe the experience of seeing or hearing them, and how these experiences affect us. In the first article, “Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed’s *Korparna*,” I show that birding can be a route to what Forrest Clingerman (2004) has defined as “emplacement,” which, in addition to a sense of place rooted in engagement with one’s natural surroundings, also relates to aesthetics and cultural narratives (23).

I have generally delimited my primary sources to the 2000s, but in some cases, it is useful to draw on older sources for comparative purposes, to assess how changing environmental values are reflected in narratives about birds. In this regard, a key text for this dissertation is Tarjei Vesaas’s *Fuglane (The Birds, 1957)*,<sup>5</sup> perhaps the best-known of all the Scandinavian novels to expressly feature birds. The second article, “Of Birds and Men in Rural Norway: Self, Place and Landscape in Vesaas and Lirhus,” offers a comparative reading of *Fuglane* with Agnar Lirhus’s 2020 novel *Nå hogger de*, showing how *Fuglane* can be read as an ecological text and how environmental narratives have changed since Vesaas’s day.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Vesaas would be a significant presence in a dissertation about human–bird relations in Scandinavian literature, even though his work predates the period covered. In addition to being favored by literary critics, *Fuglane* is widely read, with folk appeal, and several of the texts I discuss are influenced by it. While the main character in Agnar Lirhus’s *Nå hogger de* can be seen as a modern-day version of Mattis in *Fuglane*, Tomas Bannerhed has cited Vesaas as a formative and enduring influence on his literary style, especially on the

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<sup>5</sup> Translated into English by Torbjørn Støverud and Michael Barnes (2019).

literary tone that he would come to use for *Korparna* (2012; see also 2018, 114).<sup>6</sup>

The sight of birds gathering nesting material, incubating eggs, feeding their young, and trying to protect them from predators can be particularly affecting for budding mothers or the parents of young children, as fledglings and children alike tend to be perceived as vulnerable and precious. Through breeding seasons and winter feeding, human characters see their personal struggles reflected in birds' struggle to survive, evoking thoughts of birth, death, and the passing of generations. While ornithologists and conservationists are emotionally invested in the bird populations they monitor and the habitats they work to protect, garden birders display compassion for the tits and finches they feed through the winter. The third article, "Human–Bird Relations and Ethics of Care in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction," delves deep into the association of birds with care.

The influence of folklore and superstition on Scandinavian public life was waning by the early modern period and faded into insignificance over the course of the nineteenth century, yet old stories have been passed on in the form of legends and fairy tales. An interesting facet of contemporary fiction is the tendency to bring old beliefs back into the light and revitalize them in a modern context. This is particularly evident in *Nå hogger de*, where the main character Knut, through his mother, is associated with *de underjordiske*, "the underground ones" (Lirhus 2020, 144), which suggests that ecological relations may be embedded in lost

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<sup>6</sup> There are considerable parallels between *Fuglane* and *Korparna* in terms of mood and setting; both novels feature a main character who is obsessed with birds and afraid of lightning, who experiences personal, highly subjective encounters with birds while engaged in a frustrated quest to achieve maturity. These similarities are striking, but a key difference is that *Korparna*, like *Nå hogger de*, is informed by environmentalism and ecology in a way that was simply not part of the cultural repertoire at the time when *Fuglane* was written. I focus more on the parallels between *Fuglane* and *Nå hogger de*, but to the extent that Vesaas can be said to have established a tradition, Bannerhed is also an obvious part of it.

traditions. Ravens warning of death and disaster are a recurrent motif in *Korparna*, evoking Norse mythology and folklore but reconstructed in modern form as symptomatic of mental illness.

Birds have been a topic of study and reflection since antiquity and are prominent in literature through the Renaissance, into the Romantic era, and onwards, but new times call for new readings. There is now growing recognition that we have entered a new epoch—tentatively dubbed the Anthropocene—in which humans have become a geological force, exercising disproportionate influence on other species and on earth systems as a whole (Crutzen 2002). Alternative terms such as Capitalocene and Plantationocene have also been proposed (Haraway 2016), but regardless of how we interpret the sequence of events and what aspects we emphasize, there is widespread evidence of drastic ecological change. This in turn changes the framework through which we read literary texts. Where Jemma Deer (2021), for instance, offers fresh readings of past literary texts by placing them in a contemporary framework, accentuating how the meanings of texts can change over time (2), the focus here is on contemporary texts, which are all informed by current discourses about environmental change in one way or another. In recent decades, vanishing birds have been placed at the forefront of environmentalist narratives, functioning as indicators of ecological crisis, but also as beacons of hope that traces of wildness persist. Contemporary Scandinavian novels in which birds feature are often written in an elegiac mode due to habitat loss, plastic pollution, and other threats. In some cases, this is tempered by hope (e.g., Bildøen 2018), while others are apocalyptic in outlook (e.g., Lirhus 2020). Levels of engagement with and awareness of the ecological crisis vary from author to author, but whether it is dwelt on or not, it forms part of the context.

A recurrent theme is parallels between bird behavior and human behavior. Kjersti Ericsson, in the novel *Hekketid* (*Breeding Season*, 2001), draws incisive comparisons between the breeding habits of birds and of people, often for comical effect but also to foster empathy across

species lines. She draws parallels between how ornithological research, which conservation measures are informed by, is based on ringing, counting, and keeping lists, while working for the child welfare services entails meetings, reports, investigations, and protocols. The daunting challenges and frequent setbacks of conservation work are thereby compared with those of child protection; despite the best efforts of biologists and social workers alike, neither can prevent misfortunes from happening, and both practices speak to “the terrible vulnerability of life” (72).<sup>7</sup> As their populations rise and fall depending on environmental factors and human activities, birds tend to be seen as vulnerable, and this remains the case even when they are thriving, like the expanding populations of great tits and blue tits that are regular visitors at bird feeders.

Distinguished painter Lars Elling, whose art often features birds—both as symbols and as objects of detailed study—displays exceptional insight into human–bird relations in his debut novel *Fyrstene av Finntjern* (*The Princes of Finntjern*, 2022). While some of the characters trap birds in the forests on the edge of Oslo to sell them as food, birds are also identified with people, as Elling shows how human–bird relations have changed since the early twentieth century. The narrator is a budding visual artist, and his descriptions of gulls and terns in flight (194) are evocative of what Marco Carraciolo (2020) calls “kinesthetic empathy,” where birds become objects of identification not primarily because of their sentience or their agency but because of the way they move through the air. Birds thus arouse feelings of empathy and fascination not only due to their similarities to humans but also to the things that set them apart.

Current events are reflected in Olav Løkken Reisop’s novel *Skriverholmen* (2023), where outbreaks of avian influenza form part of the backdrop and the local authorities’ response is reminiscent of

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<sup>7</sup> “livets fryktelige sårbarhet” (Ericsson 2001, 72). All translated quotations are mine.

government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (72, 288–290). In Ingvar Ambjørnsen’s *Natten drømmer om dagen* (*The Night Dreams of Day*, 2012), the main character is a small-scale criminal, living on the run in the woods much of the year, but he is also a birder,<sup>8</sup> while Gunnhild Øyehaug, in the short story “Fuglar” (“Birds,” 2020), writes about the three species of snipe that are known to breed in Norway from the perspective of an ornithologist with amnesia.

From the building of roads to cabins and electricity pylons, conflicts of interest form part of the background for human–bird relations in contemporary Scandinavia. Pertinent here is Lars Lenth’s *Norske tilstander* (*Norwegian Conditions*, 2020), a whimsical satire about wind farms, which have become a major threat to birds in Western Norway. Repercussions of cultural change are explored in more depth in Bannerhed’s *Korparna* and Lirhus’s *Nå hogger de*, where it is made apparent that these conflicts are not only economical, but also ideological, as human characters cling to irreconcilable worldviews. As bogs are drained and fields are paved over, birds are increasingly presented as victims of human activity. Vidar Sundstøl, in the short novel *En hellig lund* (*A Sacred Grove*, 2021), set in a postapocalyptic future, links the disappearance of birds to Ragnarok, drawing on Norse mythology. The narrator recalls that few noticed when the common swifts disappeared, but that many—including himself—were overwhelmed by loss when they heard about it on the news. The thought that swifts would never be seen nor heard again became a tear in the fabric of life, signifying a dramatic and irreversible change. Their disappearance coincided with the time when people began roving restlessly from place to place, when forests were obliterated in fire, infrastructure collapsed, and planes were stranded on the ground for good (68–69).

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<sup>8</sup> Ingvar Ambjørnsen is a birder himself (e.g., Ambjørnsen 2018).

In literary narratives, ecological and personal grief are sometimes bound up with each other, intertwined, so that a character's undoing seems to reflect environmental destruction and vice versa (e.g., Gabrielsen 2017; Lirhus 2020). In Kerstin Ekman's *Löpa varg* (*The Wolf Run*, 2021), the narrator Ulf and his wife Inga leave orange peel stuffed with dog hair in trees so that tits can use the hair for nesting (76). Remembering the sight of fractal patterns that resembled birds' wings in frost crystals, the narrator grieves the fact that such patterns are being replaced by the rigid geometry of objects crafted by humans, like the light pollution of large cities seen from an airplane: "As birds we do not fly," he thinks (36–37).<sup>9</sup> Considering how flexible humans are as a species, how readily they adapt to environmental change, he wonders whether anyone will notice or care if migratory birds stop arriving. After all, most people already live in areas where avian diversity is depleted and are unlikely to be concerned about species they don't know about (77). Here we are confronted with shifting baseline syndrome (Pauly 1995; Soga and Gaston 2018) and generational environmental amnesia (Kahn 1999): how environmental expectations are gradually lowered as wildlife experience becomes harder to come by with each passing generation. Participation in citizen science—including birding—can be a means of counteracting this tendency, as it fosters not only knowledge of but also enthusiasm about and care for the natural world (Soga and Gaston 2018, 227).

Somewhat surprisingly, however, recreational birdwatching—or, for that matter, twitching—is rarely a major theme in contemporary Scandinavian novels. Birds are mostly presented as integral parts of characters' life-worlds, as animals that they relate to whether they intend to do so or not, rather than from the perspective of birders. An important exception is the aforementioned *Korparna*, by Tomas Bannerhed, where the main character Klas is a birder, but also Vidar Sundstøl's short novel *Nattsang* (*Night Song*, 2023), where the narrator and his son go birding

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<sup>9</sup> "Som fåglar flyger vi inte" (Ekman 2021, 37).



together.<sup>10</sup> In *Nattsang*, the central conflict revolves around whether the son will keep his naturalist enthusiasm, which in turn relates to the broader question of whether or not coming generations will care about wildlife, a potentially decisive factor for mitigating the ongoing ecological crisis. In sections that read almost like nature writing, the narrator takes a deep time perspective, imagining what the landscape would have been like millennia ago, when the ice was retreating, before it was overrun by humans (2023, 7–9, 41, 51, 56–57, 81, 96). This puts him in a dream-like state of wonder, where imagining what existed in times past adds texture to the present but also awakens a keen awareness of what has been lost. As the British nature writer Robert Macfarlane (2019) suggests, thinking in deep time can be “a radical perspective,”

a means not of escaping our troubled present, but rather of re-imagining it; countermanding its quick greeds and furies with older, slower stories of making and unmaking. At its best, a deep time awareness might help us see ourselves as part of a web of gift, inheritance and legacy stretching over millions of years past and millions to come, bringing us to consider what we are leaving behind for the epochs and beings that will follow us. (15)

If recreational birding is less prominent than one might expect in literary fiction, it has long been an important aspect of nature writing, a genre of creative nonfiction that has been somewhat neglected by Norwegian literary scholars until fairly recently, though it has a stronger position in Sweden (Furuseth and Hennig 2023, 172). In Britain, nature writing, and beyond that, so-called new nature writing, is well established as a distinct genre (Moran 2014), but this is hardly the case in Norway, where environmentally oriented literary nonfiction still tends to be conflated with popular science. Karthon Håland (1974), for instance, writing during the second half of the twentieth century, could have been

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<sup>10</sup> Other examples would be Erlend Loe’s *Volvo lastvagnar* (*Volvo Trucks*, 2005), in which the climax involves a transformative encounter between a Swedish twitcher and a vagrant Amur falcon, and Magne Hovden’s *Hekser og fuglekikkere* (*Witches and Birdwatchers*, 2020), where birders looking for a vagrant cattle egret clash with New Agers seeking to harness energies in Vardø in Northern Norway. These are humorous novels that employ the motif of birding for comical effect.

considered a pioneer in nature writing, presenting breeding colonies of terns, rare vagrants, and conflicts between sheep farmers and golden eagles in literary form, but has been all but ignored by literary scholars. Yet, as several contemporary scholars and writers have pointed out, popular Norwegian narratives about adventure travel—from Fridtjof Nansen to Lars Monsen—promote some of the same values that are generally associated with nature writing and have contributed toward forming the Norwegian national psyche (Ellefsen 2022, 59–92; Furuseth and Hennig 2023, 156–158; Hessen 2023, 52–54).

There is no standardized Norwegian term for nature writing: while *naturskildring* refers to nature description, literary scholars have suggested *naturprosa* (“nature prose”) and, increasingly, *naturskrivning* (“nature writing”) as suitable Norwegian terms (Furuseth and Hennig 2023, 21). In recent years Torbjørn Ekelund (2014; 2018) has begun to craft a form of Norwegian nature writing that is influenced by but distinct from the American tradition, while the publication of Brit Bildøen’s *Over land og hav* (*Over Land and Sea*, 2020) and, in Sweden, Kerstin Ekman’s (2011) and Tomas Bannerhed’s (2018; 2021) works of nonfiction, suggest that a Scandinavian corpus of nature writing is beginning to take shape. In Bannerhed’s nonfiction books, the tone is characterized by enthusiasm for the more-than-human world, but also by nostalgia, as he dwells pensively on memories triggered by encounters with birds and plants. Bannerhed’s work fits the label of new nature writing in that it finds meaning “not in the rare or exotic but in our everyday connections with the non-human natural world” (Moran 2014, 50). A notable recent addition to Norwegian nature writing is esteemed biologist Dag O. Hessen’s *Jervesporet* (*Tracking the Wolverine*, 2023), which is ostensibly about wolverines but where birds feature far more prominently than mammals. In line with the conventions of the genre, it is part autobiography, part lament for the vanishing wilderness, but also acutely preoccupied with impending climate disaster, while canonical texts from the nature writing tradition are cited at length.

The line between nature writing and science writing is often unclear, and many books about birds contain elements of both. Martin Eggen's *Uten fugler blir ikke livet det samme* (*Without Birds Life won't be the Same*, 2023) is a prime example, a popular book whose stated purpose is to inform the public about the threats that birds face, written in the sober and informative style characteristic of ornithological magazines but also engaging with cultural history and the author's personal experiences as a birder. Books such as Jarle Rasmussen's *Norske fugler gjennom året* (*Norwegian Birds through the Year*, 2020) and Tom Schandy's *Fuglenes fantastiske verden* (*The Fantastic World of Birds*, 2021) are better described as nature photography or popular science than literature, but nevertheless present distinct aesthetics that invite comparison with illustrated works of nature writing. Neither should popular nonfiction books such as Andreas Tjernshaugen's *Meisenes hemmelige liv* (*The Secret Life of Small Birds*, 2015) and Hanna Bjørgaas's *Byens hemmelige liv* (*The Secret Life of the City*, 2021) be overlooked. Though more likely to be appreciated for their popular scientific than their literary merits, they incorporate environmental storytelling and represent forms of naturalist enthusiasm through citizen science that resonate with the views represented by Tomas Bannerhed, Brit Bildøen, Kjersti Ericsson, and Vidar Sundstøl. The similarity of their titles may speak to a lack of originality, but also to the emergence of a trend. This dissertation is focused on novels, but other narrative forms provide context and are referred to where relevant. Though poetry, children's literature, science journalism, and nature photography lie beyond its scope, they all bear further examination in terms of their representations of birds and human–bird relations.

My research is situated within the field of ecocriticism, but I take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on thinkers from other branches of the environmental humanities where relevant. Since the focus is on birds and birding, my research is also informed by ornithology and ecology (e.g., Ackerman 2016; Svensson et al. 2018), cultural histories of

human–bird relations (Svanberg 2013; Cocker 2013; Smyth 2020; Sax 2021; Birkhead 2022), and social anthropological approaches to citizen science (Hundeide 2013; Cherry 2019).

Literary narratives are an important part of discourses about sustainability in that they can create fictional worlds in which imaginary scenarios play out. When it comes to depicting environmental interpretations, and challenging them, one advantage of fiction as opposed to nonfiction can be that the author is free to construct the plot, attentive to what its various elements signify without being bound by a need for verifiability or defensibility. The fictional mode allows for a level of ambiguity that can be problematic in nonfiction: of real people, we can demand answers or explanations, but in a novel, characters' hesitancy can be a driving force and a narrative strategy. Through the lens of a novel, we can explore manifold perspectives, none of which necessarily correspond with the author's view, but which reflect a range of attitudes and potentialities. When these are at odds with each other, it opens a broad space for interpretation. This is one of the reasons why it is important to look at human–bird relations not only from anthropological or historical perspectives, but also from those of literature, where a wider variety of subjectivities are foregrounded. Close readings of literary fiction can reveal links that are otherwise only implicit, such as personal identification with birds and the association of birds with care. The purpose of this dissertation is to disclose such links and explore their ramifications, for birds and people alike.

## **2 Current State of the Field**

### **Overview**

While general and popular literature on human–bird relations continues to be published at a steady rate (e.g., Birkhead 2022; Bringsværd 2023; Smyth 2020), interdisciplinary research on the topic has come to the forefront of the environmental humanities in recent years (e.g., Jacobs 2016; Reinert 2013; Reinert 2019; Sax 2021). Thom van Dooren’s work (e.g., 2014b; 2019), bringing together anthropology, philosophy, and environmental history, is foundational for exploring the problematic aspects of human–bird relations, especially regarding conservation of endangered species. Though rooted in ecocriticism, my own interdisciplinary approach is informed by and shares many of the ethical concerns that are prevalent across the environmental humanities.

In Scandinavia, Michael T. Hundeide’s PhD dissertation in social anthropology (2013) is a major contribution to work on human–bird relations, exploring the sociocultural, philosophical, and phenomenological aspects of birding and related ornithological practices based on fieldwork in Norway, Sweden, and Britain. Though not specifically concerned with birds in literature, Hundeide provides useful background and is a source that I’ve returned to regularly during my research.

Literary scholarship on human–bird relations is broadening in scope, with recent studies of birds in poetry (e.g., Warren 2018; Wolfe 2020), nature writing (e.g., Nixon 2017; Bandyopadhyay 2022), and, increasingly, prose fiction (e.g., Major 2022; Schell 2022). In the following, I offer an overview of how birds have been approached as a subject for analysis in studies of Scandinavian literature. Since previous studies have largely focused on poetry, I begin there, before moving on to the novels and other prose fiction that are the focus of this dissertation.

## **Poetic Birds**

In an article originally published in 1978, Atle Kittang (1988) points out that birds are such a prevalent motif in poetry that it is hard to imagine the realm of poetry without them. Yet, he argues that “[t]he birds of poetry are generally far removed from all realism”<sup>11</sup> and rarely show any correlation with the species from which they are derived. For Kittang, birdsong in poetry is a means of amplifying the poet’s voice, while the flight of birds is the flight of the imagination. By turns representing spirituality, inspiration, the erotic, and the divine, birds are laden with positive associations, but are invariably reflections of the poet, the poem, or the creative process, never of themselves (51). When they are not confined to mere background, birds—according to Kittang—are at most metaphorical representations of human concerns.

Kittang’s arguments are consonant with prevailing views among literary theorists throughout most of the twentieth century. They are partly confirmed as late as 1994 in Leonard Lutwack’s *Birds in Literature*, a study of birds in the Western canon, though Lutwack at least includes a final chapter in which literary birds are placed in an ecological framework. As Lawrence Buell (1995) has shown, “modern ecologism” has revived the sense of “kinship between nonhuman and human” (180), so that Kittang’s view can hardly be proclaimed as confidently today. The idea of reading birds non-metaphorically may have been shrugged off as naïve during the 1970s and 1980s, but with the gradual emergence of ecocriticism as a distinct and increasingly influential branch of literary theory, insistence that birds of literature should be reduced to abstractions is no longer warranted.

Thomas C. Gannon (2009) echoes this point with regard to British Romantic poetry and Native American nature writing, showing how Beryl Rowland’s (1978) study of bird symbolism (strikingly published the same year as Kittang’s article), in which she relates to birds as

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<sup>11</sup> “Poesiens fuglar er som regel fjernt frå all realisme” (Kittang 1988, 51).

Jungian symbols “representative of spirituality and transcendence,” represents an untenable form of essentialism (Gannon 2009, 4). Where Rowland unequivocally states that the birds of the mind bear little resemblance to their natural counterparts (1978, vii–viii), Gannon points out that this “relative lack of concern for the ‘real’ bird may be symptomatic of an attitude implicated in the avians’ very vanishing” (2009, 4).

Rowland’s and Kittang’s studies of birds in literature date to a period in Western culture when anthropocentrism went unchallenged and the divides between literary scholarship and biology were rigidly enforced. By contrast, this dissertation takes as its starting point that birds should be understood as species, or—whenever possible—as individuals belonging to species, rather than abstractions. Even though humans tend to think symbolically and read metaphorical meanings into encounters with birds, an interdisciplinary approach combining literary theory with ecology allows us to explore how such interpretations relate to the birds in question and what they portend for “real” human–bird relations. Myth and symbolism play a role, but encounters with birds are also situated and embodied, ecological interactions, and the process of interpretation does not necessarily erode the immediacy of encounter. Lutwack (1994) shows that birds have been cast as poetic symbols and supernatural beings, sought after as pets and hunting trophies, and linked to the erotic. While all these points are also evident in contemporary Scandinavian literature, one connection Lutwack does not make—but which is central to my own findings—is that of care.

Kjersti Ericsson’s work is a case in point. In an article originally published in 1993, written in response to how critics interpreted one of her poetry collections, she argues that when she writes about minding a bird feeder, she means it not metaphorically but literally, that she is driven by empathy and care for birds, whom she sees as fellow beings in need of help (2017, 241–242). By anthropomorphizing the birds as

“street children” (242),<sup>12</sup> she is making the exact opposite move to that which Kittang and Rowland prescribe; instead of drawing on bird imagery while placing humans at the center, she lends human categories to birds in an inclusive gesture of interspecies solidarity. Ericsson primarily sees the birds as sentient beings deserving of care and consideration, and her view reflects an ongoing shift among literary scholars from anthropocentric views to an eco- or at least biocentric one.<sup>13</sup>

In Norway, Hans Børli (1995) and Harald Sverdrup (2003) are to bird-related poetry what Tarjei Vesaas is to bird-related fiction, their reach extending far beyond the purview of literary critics. For them, too, birds are not reducible to metaphor but are sources of enrichment and delight, beings one can feel an affinity with. Yet, it is only during the past decade or two that it has become acceptable academic practice for literary scholars to read their poems as environmental texts, to interpret the nonhuman animals that figure in them as agents rather than as symbols or metaphors. Writing about Hans Børli during the 1990s, Henning Howlid Wærp and Sissel Furuseth, both literary scholars who would later come to be associated with ecocriticism, found themselves focusing on the linguistic and structural aspects of his poetry, not on human–nonhuman animal relations, much less environmental change (Stueland 2016, 262–263).

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<sup>12</sup> “gatebarn” (Ericsson 2017, 242).

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Curry (2006) defines anthropocentrism as “*the unjustified privileging of human beings, as such, at the expense of other forms of life* (analogous to such prejudices as racism or sexism)” (43). Its opposite is *ecocentrism*, which finds value in life itself as well as the non-organic components that sustain it, while *biocentrism* and *zoocentrism* are intermediate positions, the former valuing all living organisms, the latter only animals (44). Ericsson’s position, finding value in a relational form of care that extends not only to birds but also to trees (2017, 247), would be a biocentric one, without thereby ruling out the potential for ecocentrism. Many of the perspectives that emerge in my readings bear comparison to Ericsson’s, but I generally use the term *ecocentrism* simply because it is the most inclusive (Curry 2006, 44).



The emergence of ecocriticism, according to the writer and critic Espen Stueland, signifies a paradigm shift that “entails greater openness to the real” (263),<sup>14</sup> to the possibility that poetry and other literary texts can be framed in terms of the world itself rather than in mere representations of it. Contemporary discourses of environmental crisis might suggest that the decline of birds in the cultural landscape due to industrialized agriculture is a recent development, but literary texts show otherwise. As early as 1978, in Halvor J. Sandsdalen’s poem “Vårnatt” (“Spring Night”), an unnamed farmer expresses concern for the well-being of lapwings and worries that the next generation of farmers will be so preoccupied with efficiency that they will destroy their nests without even noticing (42).<sup>15</sup>

Despite efforts by critics and scholars to insulate literary theory from wildlife experience, environmental awareness has long been in evidence among writers, who have recognized birds as sentient beings and presented them as such. Editors and critics play an important role in deciding which titles are worthy of review, and perhaps environmentally oriented texts have been less likely to be canonized than those primarily concerned with class or gender. This has been followed by an ongoing process of reorientation, as we cast about for new and better ways to articulate and conceptualize the lifeways of nonhuman animals and our relations to them.

Since the turn of the century, poets such as Kjartan Hatløy (2006) and Geir Gulliksen (2014) have explored the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, how birds’ life-worlds intersect with our own. In recent years, their efforts have been followed up by indie poets such as Adele Jaunn (2021) and Ingrid Halvorsen (2023), not to mention acclaimed author Gro Dahle (2017), who has published several poetry

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<sup>14</sup> “større åpenhet mot det virkelige” (Stueland 2016, 263).

<sup>15</sup> In another poem from the same period, Sandsdalen points out how capercaillies were threatened by illegal hunting, and that local hunters might see the last cock capercaillie in an area as a trophy (1978, 33).

collections suffused with bird imagery. What all these poets have in common is that they are drawn to birds not primarily as symbols but as living beings that they empathize or identify with. Where birds still function as metaphors for the poet's emotions, this now tends to be coupled with concern for the birds themselves and awareness of anthropogenic threats to them. In poetry, there has been a shift from presenting birds primarily as metaphors for human emotions to presenting them as endangered species, subjects of care, and indicators of ecological change. Does the same hold true of fiction?

### ***The Emergence of Ecocentric Narratives***

While environmental concern is nothing new, the fact that current extinction rates are unprecedented and accelerating, on a global scale, is now well-documented (IPBES 2019). As a result, contemporary environmental narratives are characterized by a deepened sense of urgency, the flipside of which is apathy and existential despair. While the ongoing surge of interest in environmentally oriented texts might suggest increased ecological awareness and curiosity about the more-than-human world, it can also be linked to anxiety about mass extinction and climate change.

Over the course of the past few decades, vast amounts of scientific data have been digitized and made available to the general public, while digital photography, identification apps, and social media have facilitated increased participation in citizen science. As a result, fiction and nonfiction narratives alike are increasingly drawing on databases, not only as an empirical foundation but also as a motif and a practice that characters engage in. Ursula Heise (2016), pointing out that databases require narrative for meaningful interpretation (66), suggests that “[b]iodiversity databases and Red Lists of endangered species can be understood as a new variant of the modern epic or world text and as a

new form of nature writing” (65). Sorting species into different categories of threat, for instance, amounts to a form of valuation that resonates with the “elegiac impulses” that have long been dominant in nature writing and other environmental narratives (72). While databases can be read as a form of elegy, they can also, conversely, contribute toward “desentimentalizing extinction” (76).

In the Scandinavian context, Margit Ims (2023) has showed how such processes apply to Agnar Lirhus’s poetry, where threatened bird species are accorded significance in themselves but also stand as synecdoche for ecological changes, their decline indicating environmental degradation on a broader scale (20). Perhaps it is no longer possible to write about, for instance, seabirds in a credible way without also referring to plastic pollution, overfishing, or climate change. Environmental problems that loomed on the horizon have now become so pervasive that they seem almost intrinsic to the species they threaten.

Databases as a means of ordering knowledge not only influence the ways in which wildlife and habitats are represented but can also be a framework for thinking about identity and place. In some of the novels analyzed in this dissertation, local environments are constitutive of characters’ personal identities (Bannerhed 2011; Lirhus 2020), and characters take statistics and data about biodiversity and climate into consideration when they reflect on existential concerns (Gabrielsen 2017; Bildøen 2018). Their experiences resonate with Timothy Clark’s (2020) contention that “[e]cological grief at the loss or destruction of a particular place is an emotion felt personally, as an affront to those who valued that place, creature or ecosystem: it has the sense of a personal assault” (65). Concurrently, the sheer scale of current ecological changes gives rise to a dislocated sense of panic that has been described as “Anthropocene horror,” where individual concerns are overshadowed by a collective, global, more generalized sense of powerlessness that is driven primarily by affect rather than emotion (61, 65, 66). As research accumulates on ecological grief, eco-anxiety, and solastalgia, and as their

effects are felt more widely (Comtesse et al. 2021), the links between databases and narrative are likely to deepen further.

In an article about Tarjei Vesaas's *Fuglane*, Sissel Furuseth (2017) makes much the same argument about prose fiction that Kjersti Ericsson makes about poetry. Even though human–bird relations play a central role in *Fuglane*, where some of the pivotal scenes feature the main character Mattis's encounters with a woodcock, past readings have centered on its symbolic, social, or autobiographical aspects (Furuseth 2017, 9). *Fuglane* can well be read metapoetically or allegorically (10), in ways that resonate with the approach outlined by Kittang (1988, 51, 60), but Furuseth suggests that it can also be read ecocritically, as an encounter with nonhuman nature that presents a challenge to anthropocentric assumptions (Furuseth 2017, 10). Vesaas was by no means an environmentalist, but he hints at the possibility of ecocentric perspectives that would be developed further by later writers. Even today, the dominant discourse remains firmly anthropocentric, but ecocentrism is no longer a marginal position.

Awareness of the ecological crisis is in evidence in most contemporary novels that are at all concerned with birds, variously resulting in nostalgia, grief, confusion, and calls to action. At the time of its publication, environmental readings of Vesaas's *Fuglane* would have been dismissed as naïve and sentimental, but today, a dead bird can very well be read simply as a dead bird—or as a forewarning of ecological devastation to come—rather than as a symbol of human emotions. The realities of climate change and ecological collapse have rendered Cartesian dualism and other anthropocentric stances indefensible, and as a result, nature writers and novelists alike are looking beyond humanist frameworks, attempting to represent nonhuman animals as members of ecological communities, as creatures with agency of their own.

Yet, even if symbolic and metaphorical interpretations have little in common with the actual lives of birds, they go some way toward

explaining how we relate to them. Fascinating, familiar, spiritual, and vulnerable, birds signify a wide variety of themes. In some cases, they function as characters, metaphors, ecological indicators, and aesthetic features all at once. Analyzing how such ubiquitous yet evanescent creatures are represented in prose invites a range of theoretical approaches including ecocriticism, econarratology, ecofeminism, and environmental hermeneutics.



### 3 Theoretical Framework

#### ***Ecocriticism***

According to Cheryll Glotfelty's influential definition, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996, xviii). Analogously to how feminist critics are concerned with issues of gender, while others look at questions of class or race, or offer postcolonial readings, ecocriticism has become an umbrella term for a variety of approaches that share a concern with how ecological and environmental issues come into play in literary texts (Buell 2005, 7, 12). Initially, ecocriticism tended to focus on the preservation of wilderness areas and pastoral landscapes, but soon expanded to take urban environments and questions of environmental justice into account (7). Swedish literary scholars Camilla Brudin Borg, Jørgen Bruhn, and Rikard Wingård (2022) suggest that rather than a series of advancing waves or progressive stages, the emergence of ecocriticism is akin to the building of a house with several rooms, each offering a unique view, or to a forest crisscrossed by paths (8). Ecocriticism enables us to explore narratives from a range of different but not necessarily mutually exclusive angles. Considering that birds are among the most conspicuous of nonhuman animals, often found at the interface of human and nonhuman worlds, straddling the border between the wild and the domestic, ecocriticism seems a fitting approach for analysis of narratives that feature them.

In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell makes a case for realism in environmental literature, arguing that "if environmental nonfiction shows itself ignorant of the known facts of nature, it does so at its peril" (97). In representing nonhuman organisms, from plants to birds, Buell argues that environmental knowledge—which arises through the combination of field experience and the study of scientific texts such as ornithological field guides—can be beneficial and even

crucial, “not just for nonfiction but for fictive genres as well” (97). Dana Phillips, however, takes issue with Buell’s reasoning, pointing out that

scientific realism and literary realism are not the same. In fact, they may be opposed to one another: scientific realism seems a lot less realistic, in the sense in which ecocritics would like to use the term, than literary realism because it is much less reliant on representation. However, the consequences of scientific realism are immediate, while the consequences of literary realism, if it has any, are not. (Phillips 2003, 180)

A significant question, then, in ecocriticism generally but perhaps particularly in relation to literary texts that feature birds, is how adherence to scientific facts relates to literary quality. Certain genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror, stake no claims to realism in the narrow sense of the term, but in psychological and historical novels, the reader assumes that the narrative will conform to certain standards of veracity, that it is true to past or present lived environments, at least in some respects. In texts that were written before the field of ornithology was fully established, determining what species the author is referring to can be an ecocritical endeavor in and of itself, but in contemporary narratives, we assume that the species and ecosystems represented are grounded either in common knowledge or in research.

Throughout this dissertation, I remain alert to inaccurate and fanciful presentations of bird behavior, but I also recognize that there are cases where this is not of decisive importance. While birders and other naturalists are likely to appreciate literary representations that correlate with biological research and resonate with their own field experience, non-birders may not notice or care if bird descriptions are flawed. Whether or not it matters depends on the type of text in question and within what parameters it operates. In some cases, literary birds are symbols, in others, they are simply birds. The most compelling literary representations of birds are often those that operate on both levels, where lifelike depictions of birds also carry metaphorical connotations.



In this dissertation I explore a wide range of theoretical and philosophical approaches to human–bird relations, but on a general level, I concur with Greg Garrard (2010) that one of the primary purposes of ecocriticism is to facilitate dialogue between literature and the natural sciences (22–23). While recognizing that ecology itself only becomes normative when it is combined with certain ethical or spiritual assumptions (Farrell 2015, 213), I am concerned with how ecological processes are reflected in contemporary fiction. Some of the transformational power of environmental texts such as Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* (1949) or Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) appears to be derived from their capacity to draw on the natural sciences without being bound by their limitations. Transcending disciplinary boundaries, they contextualize ecological knowledge, imbuing it with normative meaning. The impact of such narratives may be heightened further when they are presented in fictional form, as readers are then likely to empathize with characters in more direct ways through processes of transportation (James 2015, 20). A popular recent example from Scandinavia would be Maja Lunde’s climate quartet (2015; 2017; 2019; 2022). Though the actions and emotions involved take place in an imagined world, they can lead to changes in personal outlook. By raising awareness of environmental issues, narratives can thereby in some cases serve an environmentalist purpose (James 2015, 34).

### ***Environmental Hermeneutics***

Drawing on a range of disciplines, including literary theory, philosophy, and theology, environmental hermeneutics is an emerging field that can be useful for ecocritical analysis. Recognizing that traditional notions of text may be unnecessarily narrow, inadequate to the task of making sense of ecological relations, contemporary scholars have expanded the field of hermeneutics well beyond its traditional framework to include landscapes, life stories, and even ecological and bodily processes

(Treanor 2015, 391–392). Nathan Bell points out that “[i]nterpretation is at the heart of our ethical encounters with human and other-than-human others” (2014, 149). Interpretation is fundamental for understanding narratives about birds and human–bird relations.

In Articles 1 and 2 I show how ecocriticism and environmental hermeneutics can be fruitfully combined in a distinct, critical, interdisciplinary approach. I’ve found it particularly useful when discussing idiosyncratic, somewhat odd characters, such as Mattis in *Fuglane*, Knut Hovin in *Nå hogger de*, or Klas and his father in *Korparna*. When brought into concert with ecocriticism, environmental hermeneutics can shed new light on literary representations of place and of human–nonhuman animal relations.

Paul Ricoeur’s thought is central to environmental hermeneutics, especially his ideas about identity and the two concepts of self. Where *idem* identity, according to Ricoeur, refers to our physical being and is characterized by sameness and continuity, *ipse* refers to selfhood, which is subject to change, formed through experience and interpretation. In narrative, these two elements are woven together, resulting in narrative identity, and ultimately, “environmental identity,” which is often based on engagement with place, whether through aesthetic appreciation, embodied memory, or identification (Clingerman 2014, 253–257). Where some people identify with rural traditions, others may identify with neoliberalism, or with environmentalism, depending on what kind of perspectives they have been exposed to and how they interpret them.

Environmental identity is dependent on cultural background and personal interests. Where birds contribute toward forming one’s environmental identity, this can, for instance, be based on affective encounters with birds or on ecological awareness of the impact human activity has on birds and their habitats. One’s relation to birds is embedded in a broader set of cultural values, as one of several factors that influence environmental identity. In contemporary Scandinavian

novels, narrators are often driven by a desire to return to some lost—real or imagined—state of harmony or plenitude, which has its natural counterpart in ecosystem functioning (e.g., Gabrielsen 2017; Sundstøl 2021; Sundstøl 2023). In Merethe Lindstøm’s *Fuglenes anatomi* (2019), the narrator desires order, as represented by tidy gardens, but also unity, as represented by flocks of birds (103). While each article has its own topical and theoretical focus, they share a concern with issues of environmental identity.

Regarding place, Forrest Clingerman has developed Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “emplotment,” a means of accounting for temporality in written texts, as “emplacement,” a theory of how to interpret lived places and environments (Clingerman 2004, 21). Narratives of emplacement are both “natural and cultural,” temporal and spatial, and elucidating them can be a means toward understanding how our relations to nature result in different notions of meaning and value (23). Recognizing that “environmental imagination is essential to the narrative of place” (Clingerman 2014, 257), this framework can be applied to narratives about birds, as birds are often linked to specific locations and habitats, contributing toward creating a sense of place. Moreover, migratory birds alert us to the temporal aspects of place; coming and going in tune with seasons and cycles, theirs is an “ephemeral residency” (Clingerman 2008, 314), challenging human definitions of place while also enriching specific places (317). One could even argue that migration is an essential element of place, as all places are temporary manifestations of ongoing ecological processes—dispersal and evolution, growth and decay (320). For Clingerman, “the Book of Nature is a collection of metaphors and models” (2014, 252) that enables us to interpret places based on their natural history and aesthetic features in conjunction with philosophy and theology.

Material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2012; 2014) has been criticized for failing to distinguish meaningfully between matter itself and literary narratives about matter, in effect applying ecocritical theory

to questions that would rather seem to be the domain of the natural sciences (Furuseth and Hennig 2023, 118–119). Since this is a charge that can potentially also be leveled at environmental hermeneutics, it is worth bearing in mind that my approach differs from Clingerman’s in that my focus is not on places themselves but on fictional narratives *about* places: that is, on settings, which are channeled through narrators and focalizers who embody certain traits and may be unreliable. While many of these settings are based on actual places, my main concern is with how they are interpreted by fictional characters. This is not to imply that geographical and ecological data are irrelevant to my readings—on the contrary, ecocritical readings of texts that involve nonhuman animals are almost inevitably informed by the natural sciences one way or another—but rather that they form part of the context for cultural, fictionalized narratives. Novels may, for instance, take current conditions as their starting point but be set in an imagined future or past.

As for environmental values, John van Buren’s “critical environmental hermeneutics” (1995) provides a useful means of explication. Aiming for a “deep hermeneutics,” analogous to deep ecology, van Buren seeks to disentangle the “underlying epistemological, ethical, and political issues” that come into play in different environmental interpretations (261–262). He sketches out four criteria for interpretation—“biophysical, technical, historical and ethical-political” (268)—which help us distinguish between the objective and the relative so we can try to achieve a balance between them (273). Using the forest as an example, van Buren points out that it appears in widely different ways for foresters as compared to environmentalists, hikers, tourists, hunters, or local residents, and that a person’s self-understanding is significant for how they interpret it (260–261). Where foresters see economic value, environmentalists might see value in biodiversity; where the forest fulfils social and religious functions for the local community, hikers and tourists might appreciate it for aesthetic reasons (263–264). All these interpretations are embedded in narratives, which generally have a

“beginning-middle-end structure,” culminating in “a future goal, which tells us where the story is going or should be going” (263). Critical environmental hermeneutics thus posits “communicative discourse” as a procedural “meta-narrative” that would ideally enable us to work out the differences between such competing claims in a just and rational way (275). It is a means of assessing the validity of different interpretations without giving one absolute priority over the other, allowing us to identify any possible common ground, in the hope that it can provide a space for negotiation. Bridging environmental ethics, anthropology, sociology, and the natural sciences, critical environmental hermeneutics provides a versatile ethical and analytical framework that is consistent with ecocritical approaches.

Clingerman’s concept of “emplacement” forms part of the theoretical framework for Article 1, where I show that birds and plants can function as a substrate for identity, but that the ways in which we interpret the natural world are subject to change depending on our social and cultural context. This in turn relates to the fundamental values van Buren is concerned with, such as whether one’s outlook is based on environmentalism or instrumental rationality, as well as whether one is attuned to traditional practices or to modern technology. With increasing digitization, there is a risk that long-standing connections to the natural world might be lost, yet as biodiversity data have become more easily accessible, people increasingly mobile, connections may simply take new and unfamiliar forms. Such developments form a complex tapestry of diverse and often incongruous perspectives that can be approached through a framework of environmental hermeneutics.

## ***Econarratology and Cognitive Ecocritical Approaches***

A groundbreaking recent development in studies of literature and environment is the emergence of the field of econarratology, laid out by Erin James (2015), who defines it as

a mode of reading that combines ecocriticism's interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment and narratology's focus on the literary structures and devices by which narratives are composed. Econarratology studies the storyworlds that readers immerse themselves in when they read narratives, the relationship between these worlds and the physical/actual world, and the potential of the reading process to raise awareness of different environmental imaginations and environmental experiences. (242)

The field has been developed further by Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017), who takes an even more interdisciplinary approach. Focusing on the cognitive processes that are set in motion through immersion in narratives, Weik von Mossner primarily sees the reading or viewing of narratives as an affective experience, a perspective she tentatively refers to as “a cognitive ecocritical approach to narrative emotion” (4). She argues that reading narratives is an embodied activity in which our physical bodies respond to how we mentally simulate fictional emotions and actions (3). Immersion in literary narratives thereby offers embodied, affective experiences that can foster empathy (25).

Drawing on Marco Caracciolo's work on “consciousness-attribution” and “consciousness-enactment” (2014, 110), Weik von Mossner explores how readers can either attribute or enact emotions experienced by a given character in a narrative (2017, 25). Carraciolo, in turn, points out that narrative empathy can be felt not only for individuals but also for groups, through processes of “kinesthetic empathy” (2020, 239), which “can extricate itself from individual subjectivity and target an animal assemblage,” such as a flock of birds in flight (240). Even though “it is much easier to empathize with a single, well-delineated agent—a

narrative protagonist—than with a group of relatively undifferentiated agents,” Carraciolo argues that

animal assemblages occupy a crucial position in times like ours, when the ecological crisis blurs the boundary between our collective future as a species and the nonhuman life forms with which we are ecologically interrelated. (240)

Murmurations of starlings sweeping across the sky are an obvious example of a spectacle where the individual is almost wholly absorbed into the larger mass of which it forms a part. We sense the flock, feel the rush of its movement, in a manner that is distinctly different from an encounter with an individual starling. Such forms of “embodied collectivity” present a challenge to the tendency in narratology to focus on the individual (Carraciolo 2020, 241). In contemporary Scandinavian novels, however, empathy is still mostly directed at individuals—even if they, taken together, constitute a flock—while concern for declining populations, earnest as it may be, takes on more abstract forms such as concern for what the future will hold rather than immediate, embodied sensations.

Econarratology holds the potential to combine narrative analysis with attentiveness to how fictional characters reflect the ambiguity and ambivalence that tends to emerge at sites of environmental conflict. Where environmental philosophy can provide answers to ethical dilemmas, econarratology can explore the tension between different environmental perspectives as they are reflected in narratives. While many recent Scandinavian novels that touch on environmental themes are characterized by elegiac, pessimistic, or dystopian undercurrents, they also point toward alternative ways of thinking, often setting characters with different environmental values up against each other (e.g., Bannerhed 2011; Ekman 2021; Gilbert 2023; Lerstang 2023) so that the reader gets an insight into the issues at stake in a way that can rarely be gleaned through philosophical theory. Ultimately, narrative “is a means for making sense of the world” (Weik von Mossner 2017, 7).

## **Ecofeminism and Ethics of Care**

Ecofeminism in Scandinavia can be traced back to the work of the pioneering Swedish feminist and environmentalist Elin Wägner (Hennig, Jonasson, and Degerman 2018, 7), who points out that civilization, from the outset, has been engaged in a kind of war against nature (Wägner 1941, 13–14). According to Wägner, people have transgressed all limits in their quest for freedom and happiness, seeking to become lords of the earth and, in the process, becoming slaves to their own system (13–14). To describe humans' current relationship with the earth, she uses the term *herravälde* (13),<sup>16</sup> which is roughly synonymous with mastery or dominion but—with the masculine *herre* designating the rulers as men—is more accurately translated as *lordship*, pointing to the patriarchal aspects of environmental degradation. Wägner—along with the women's movement of which she was a part—took as her starting point that “peace *on* earth and a new peaceful relationship *to* the earth are inextricably linked” (Tamm and Wägner 1940, 6).<sup>17</sup> As early as 1940, she argued that each generation inherits the earth from those who came before, and that they, in turn, based on insights that have been passed down, have a responsibility to care for the earth for those who will come after, to not impinge upon the inheritance of future generations through irresponsible resource use (9). While written in a spirit of solidarity with global peace movements,<sup>16</sup> Wägner's texts anticipate both second-wave feminism and the environmental movement that emerged during the 1960s. *Väckarklocka* (*Alarm Clock*, 1941), one of her most polemical texts, was written during the early stages of World War II, when fascism was an overriding threat. Against the organized violence of fascism, which celebrated masculinity, she made a case for virtues that were traditionally associated with women, such as care and moderation, as a path toward peace and environmental sustainability (Ellefsen 2022, 144).

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<sup>16</sup> “herraväldet över jorden” (Wägner 1941, 13).

<sup>17</sup> “fred *på* jorden och ett nytt fredligt förhållande *till* jorden höra oupplösligt samman” (Tamm and Wägner 1940, 6, italics in original).



In contemporary Norwegian novels, ethics of motherhood in the light of anthropogenic climate change is a recurring theme (Iversen 2023). While Wägner's environmentalism mostly took the form of a critique of modern technology, especially regarding industrialized agriculture, climate change and global capitalism are logical consequences of the developments she warned against. According to Wägner,

[m]uch of humanity's priceless inheritance is already destroyed: if at all possible, what remains must be brought to safety, moved out of the racing car that might at any moment lie broken in a ditch. (1941, 8)<sup>18</sup>

Wägner was not so much concerned with specific issues as with our attitude toward the earth. At a time when industrialization and rampant techno-optimism were the order of the day, she advocated a humbler attitude of gratitude and respect, analogous to the outlook thinkers within the environmental humanities would later frame as an "ethics of gift" (Rose 2012, 127; see also Kimmerer 2013, 327 and Ginn et al. 2018, 215). Wägner's vision of responsibility for past and future generations and a high-tech racing car set on a collision course resonates with how Deborah Bird Rose (2012) would later describe ongoing environmental crimes against past and future generations as "aenocide," as "the mass murder of individuals that constitutes a sustained attack on the future of the group, and thus an attack on ethical time" (127). Consistent with Wägner's concerns, Rose cites ecological devastation as "an entropic vortex into which we are pushing life, and into which we too are being drawn" (Rose 2012, 139). The ecofeminist perspectives that emerge in Article 3 thus have a relatively long history in Scandinavia, and have been further theorized in international settings, applied to a range of socioecological circumstances. As an environmental ethic, ecofeminism can be seen as a "social ecology," sensitive to how human–nonhuman animal relations are situated in specific contexts (Warren 1990, 143).

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<sup>18</sup> "*Redan är mycket av mänsklighetens dyra arvegods krossat: det som återstår måste bringas i säkerhet om så är möjligt, flyttas ut ur den racerbil som när som helst kan ligga krossad i ett dike*" (Wägner 1941, 8, italics in original).

Wägner's thought can also contribute toward contextualizing Bannerhed's narratives about Småland, including *Korparna*. In the nonfiction book *Tusen år i Småland (A Thousand Years in Småland, 1939)*—a text that might have been considered nature writing had it been published today—she places Småland in a broader historical context. Wägner spent much of her life in Småland, and—like Bannerhed—is interested in the cultural and natural history of its landscapes, which have been shaped over the centuries through agriculture, forestry, and pasture. Appreciating the pastoral aspects of the region, she prefers traveling slowly on old, meandering backroads through varied, scenic landscapes that are relatively undisturbed by the forces of industry and modernization (Wägner 1939, 37, 44). Taking what we would now consider a deep time perspective, she reveals that the transitions from Old Norse religion to Christianity, as well as attempts at reclaiming the old traditions, should not be seen as abrupt shifts but rather as gradual processes in which different perspectives overlap and fuse with each other, a process that continues to this day (19–20). Her perspective is strikingly prescient in that it flies in the face of narratives of progress and resonates with how contemporary historians are showing that “the course of human history may be less set in stone, and more full of playful possibilities, than we tend to assume” (Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 25). Wägner is concerned with how belief systems that are generally seen as being in opposition, are in fact mutually informed by each other, and while she is far from dogmatic, her attitude verges on animism or pantheism. As a believer in the power of the earth, the soil, “the source, the sheaf, the blood, the eye and the word” (20),<sup>19</sup> she despises that which threatens the earth, namely modern civilization, which she equates with patriarchy, based on the power of violence and weapons, driven by a restless craving for speed, novelty, and control (20). Like Bannerhed, Wägner takes a somewhat nostalgic approach and rejoices in discovering remnant traces of bygone eras.

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<sup>19</sup> “källan, kärven, blodet, ögat och ordet” (Wägner 1939, 20).

While early ecofeminism was grounded in the assumption that biological qualities intrinsic to women were key for establishing less exploitative relations with the nonhuman world, such essentialist approaches have largely been abandoned for more constructivist views, where exploitation of the nonhuman world is seen as being rooted in culture rather than biology (Furuseth and Hennig 2023, 64–72). Much of Wägner’s thought places her firmly in the essentialist camp, as she implies that there are certain virtues that are universally intrinsic to womanhood, overlooking how cultural context contributes toward shaping different ecological outlooks, that women from different cultural backgrounds are likely to have diverging views as to what sustainability really entails. Yet, her critique of techno-optimism, skepticism toward industrial progress, and insistence on the necessity of adjusting our lifestyles and modes of production to align with ecological limitations, remain relevant today. To the extent that ecofeminism remains a valuable framework for environmental ethics, this is no longer primarily based on essentialist assumptions but rather on ethical values such as care and compassion.

Often associated with ecofeminism, but distinct from it, is the field of care ethics, which “implies that there is moral significance in the fundamental elements of relationships and dependencies in human life” (Sander-Staudt 2023). In Joan Tronto’s definition (1994), care is a practice “aimed at maintaining, continuing, or repairing the world” (104), and this requires “attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness” (127). Crucially, for our purposes, care not only relates to human interactions but also includes care for environments (103). In some cases—but far from all—care ethics correlates with Wägner’s suggestion that there is a link between care for children and care for the natural world. Like ecofeminism, care ethics is contextual and relational, and can be seen as an alternative to neoliberal capitalism (Schultz 2023).

María Puig de la Bellacasa’s work on care (2010; 2012; 2017) is central to my interpretive framework in Article 3. Though primarily concerned

with “care for earth” (2010, 151), with “human–soil relations” (2017, 21), rather than birds or other wildlife, Puig de la Bellacasa takes a broad, holistic approach to the “ethical and affective implications” of care (5). Using the permaculture movement as a case study, and drawing on feminist care ethics, in an approach indebted to the work of Donna Haraway (e.g., 2008; 2016), she insists that care is necessary, but highlights its problematic aspects, pointing out that rather than a “moral disposition,” care is a relational practice rife with ethical predicaments (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010, 166). Care entails embeddedness in relationships and has consequences not only for carers and those cared for but also for those who fall outside the circle of care (160). Even if “care holds together the world as we know it and allows its perpetuation” (164), it is also reflective of power relations that should not go unquestioned (166).

In using Puig de la Bellacasa’s work on care as a critical framework for human–bird relations, I take my cue from Thom van Dooren (2014a; 2014b), who has applied it to the conservation of endangered bird species. While care can be central to an environmentalist outlook, it is not always compatible with conservation biology (Soulé 1985), though the emergence of compassionate conservation as a distinct field offers hope that the two can be reconciled (Ramp and Bekoff 2015). Building on the work of Haraway, Puig de la Bellacasa, and van Dooren, I explore how care emerges through ornithological practices such as birding, bird ringing, and bird feeding, as represented in novels. Finally, recognizing that good intentions are often marred by vanity, ambition, and anthropocentric prejudice, I suggest that care for birds and other wildlife can be channeled in more ecologically sound directions when it is complemented by “the naturalist gaze,” which maintains an evaluative and concerned ecological perspective, even during the most affective of encounters (Cherry 2019, 41–42).

## **4 Methodology**

### ***Conceptualizing Human–Bird Relations***

My methodology largely follows from the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, taking a broadly ecocritical approach and employing hermeneutic interpretation while remaining attentive to the narratological features of the texts. My ethical orientation is grounded in the tenets of deep ecology (Naess 1989) and conservation biology (Soulé 1985)<sup>20</sup> but complicated by ongoing work in animal studies, which, as Greg Garrard (2012) points out, “is close kin to ecocriticism proper” (146), providing a wealth of approaches for conceptualizing human–nonhuman animal relations. Revealing entrenched linguistic, historical, and ideological assumptions, animal studies has contributed toward deconstructing human exceptionalism and imagining new paths to coexistence. Yet, as an interdisciplinary field that is often associated with advocacy and activism, animal studies is continually confronted with challenges (Shapiro and DeMello 2010).

Beyond engaging with a range of contentious ethical issues, animal studies is a posthumanist endeavor in the sense that it “fundamentally unsettles and reconfigures the question of the knowing subject and the disciplinary paradigms and procedures that take for granted its form and reproduce it” (Wolfe 2010, xxix). While Jacques Derrida (2008) has challenged the construction of “the Animal” as a category hierarchically situated as inferior to humans, Donna Haraway (2008) alerts us to the relationality and entanglement of multispecies encounters, how we are always “becoming with” others and that “[s]pecies interdependence” necessitates “response and respect” (19). Findings from ethology,

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<sup>20</sup> I recognize that some key assumptions of conservation biology have been questioned (e.g., Castelló and Santiago-Ávila 2023) and that compassionate conservation can provide important correctives (Ramp and Bekoff 2015), taking the field in promising new directions.

ecology, and biology, which show that nonhuman animals inhabit complex life-worlds and interact with each other and their environments in meaningful, intentional ways, have rendered human exceptionalism untenable. Where Heidegger once claimed that “not even the lark sees the open,” (1992, 160), that the animal is “poor in world”—in contrast to “man”, who is “world-forming” (1995, 163)—Giorgio Agamben reveals “the central emptiness” that “separates man and animal” (Agamben 2004, 92), suggesting that we are now forced to reorient ourselves toward the biological, to “being” itself (76–77). Rather than aiming to establish hierarchies, it is more illuminating to explore how species are ecologically entangled with each other in complex, messy “multispecies worlds” that are being uncovered through interdisciplinary work in the environmental humanities (van Dooren 2014b, 147). The emptiness revealed in the space between humans and nonhumans demands new stories, new narratives. A key task of ecocriticism might be to assess to what extent contemporary fiction—such as the novels analyzed in this dissertation—is able to rise to the task.

Nonhuman life-worlds can be approached from biological or philosophical perspectives, and these are sometimes joined together in literary narratives, where comprehensive representations of nonhumans can be grounded in biological knowledge yet elaborated on through interpretation and attentiveness to relations. More than mere descriptions, stories “are a part of the world” and “participate in its becoming,” holding the potential to foster new forms of connection with nonhuman animals (van Dooren 2014b, 10). Moving beyond entrenched hierarchies, such narratives can advance a sensitivity to context and relationality that allows us to engage with the nonhuman world in more just and meaningful ways.

While I would have liked to place birds first and reframe the relations I focus on as “bird–human relations,” I have settled on “human–bird” to acknowledge the limits of my own human perspective. After all, much of my analysis is focused on human characters and their relations to

birds, though I also try to take birds themselves into consideration. As Joshua Lobb points out, Linda Alcoff's work on the ethical challenges inherent in speaking for other groups of people may well be extended to nonhuman animals (Lobb 2022, 105). Narratives have the potential to influence attitudes, policy, and discourse, and, in many cases, keeping silent means giving up resistance to, or even acquiescing in, oppression. Some may balk at the idea of comparing nonhuman Others to oppressed human groups, but as Thomas C. Gannon (2009) reminds us,

after the decentering of (human) race, class, and gender, ecocriticism's decentering of the human per se as the sole viable site of subjectivity is the next logical step in a general theory of alterity. (36–37)

Our insistence on holding up human rationality as a moral exemplar tends to blind us to the intentionality and expressivity of nonhumans, with their embodied and often nonverbal forms of communication (Warkentin 2010, 115). For centuries—at least since Descartes—we have been warned not to anthropomorphize, but it is increasingly evident that conceptual confusion regarding human–nonhuman animal relations arises not primarily from anthropomorphism but from what Frans de Waal has termed “anthropodenial,” where we deny the possibility of “shared characteristics” between human and nonhuman animals (de Waal 1999, 258).

Greg Garrard (2012) distinguishes between crude and critical forms of anthropomorphism (and conversely, zoomorphism, where humans are understood as similar to animals) (154). Recognizing the statements made by de Waal and others that “using anthropomorphic assumptions to frame hypotheses for testing in field observation has proven scientific value” (157), Garrard argues that some form of anthropomorphism is necessary if we aim to understand nonhuman animal behavior, but that it should be used with caution. Widespread forms of crude anthropomorphism include disnification, where human emotions are sentimentally projected onto animals with neotenic features, but also mechanomorphism, the kind of anthropodenial associated with

Descartes, where animals are reduced to machines (154–156). While assumptions about nonhuman life-worlds should as far as possible be based on biological, ethological, and ecological knowledge, a leap of empathy may be required to be able to relate to them, and this becomes impossible if we deny their capacity for suffering. Anthropomorphism in one form or another is in evidence in most of the texts analyzed in this study, and my main concern is whether it takes a crude or a critical form, whether it contributes toward recognizing the agency and autonomy of the species represented.

For Thom van Dooren (2014b), the question of what makes humans unique is of less interest than the ways in which we are entangled with other species (133). Where it was once commonplace to dismiss birds as creatures driven solely by instinct, evidence of birds' advanced cognitive abilities has accumulated (Ackerman 2016, 1–5). We now know that different bird species are masters of a wide range of competencies, including “toolmaking, culture, reasoning, the ability to remember the past and think about the future, to adopt another’s perspective, to learn from one another” (11). It has become clear that the notion of birds as simple-minded is more a matter of anthropocentric conceit than of anything to do with birds themselves. Yet, considering that variety among birds is as great as in any biological class, that each species or group has its own “genius,” its own exceptional set of skills (10, 11), generalizations are not necessarily useful. We may for instance be struck by how certain corvids have a sense of self and a sense of humor that is exceptional even among primates, but other groups fascinate us for different reasons: sylviid warblers for their songs, falcons for their speed and precision, herons and flamingoes for their elegance. In some cases, mostly owing to our own ignorance of their lifeways, we may perceive birds as mysterious; this is particularly true of birds that are rarely seen, whether this is due to nocturnal habits or cryptic coloration, or because they spend most of their life on the high seas or concealed in reedbeds. The world we live in is shared, and once we move beyond self-centered,



anthropocentric assumptions, claims that it belongs more to one species than to any other do not stand up to scrutiny.

### **Text Selection**

The themes that structure this dissertation have emerged from my readings, sometimes in unexpected ways. In order to keep the subject matter manageable, I've delimited my study to Norway and Sweden, neighboring countries that share comparable cultures and ecologies. Both countries have been branded as humanitarian superpowers, have taken a leading role in promoting gender equality, and have also been seen as environmental leaders, though this is contradicted by Norway's economic dependency on oil exports (Witoszek and Midttun (eds.) 2018). In both countries, most markedly in Sweden, industrial forestry practices have led to large-scale ecological changes and local extinctions due to habitat loss (Stighäll 2015). Initially, the focus was on Norway, but was expanded to Sweden in order to include Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* (2011), as well as his other bird-related texts (2018; 2021), which are written in a spirit not unlike that of Vesaas, Lirhus, and some of the other Norwegian authors in this study. Furthermore, Elin Wägner's texts (1939; 1941) provide theoretical and cultural background for my research, especially regarding ecofeminism and ethics of care.

While there are Danish novels that raise interesting questions about human–bird relations (e.g., Nielsen 2010; Weitze 2013), Denmark is culturally and geographically closer to Western Europe, and ecologically part of the temperate Atlantic rather than the boreal zone. Ecocriticism in Denmark has also taken a different direction than in Norway and Sweden, being more theoretical and preoccupied with new materialist and posthumanist perspectives (e.g., Gregersen and Skiveren 2016).

Birds are arguably even more prominent in Sámi literature than in other Nordic traditions. Stories about birds abound in Sámi mythology and folklore—where certain species are considered to have shamanic qualities (Turi 2011, 118–120)—and human–bird relations constitute a rich, varied field in contemporary Sámi culture, often presented in multimodal forms (e.g., Valkeapää 1994; Holmberg 2018). However, Sápmi extends beyond Norway and Sweden into Finland and Russia, while the cultural context differs sharply from that of the narratives analyzed here. Aside from demanding a dissertation of its own, critical analysis of bird representations in Sámi literature would arguably also require proficiency in one or more of the Sámi languages. Considering that Sámi representations of birds reflect how ecosystems have been harmed by interventions from Norwegian and Swedish authorities (Moody 2017, 510), they could perhaps be approached through a framework of postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin 2015).

Throughout this dissertation, then, the focus is on Nordic literature from the Scandinavian peninsula, mostly from Norway but with some central texts from Sweden, and drawing on texts from elsewhere where they form part of a broader context or are relevant for comparative purposes.

In all three articles, the texts analyzed are psychological novels that touch on affective, emotional, and spiritual aspects of human–bird relations. While Article 1 offers an analysis of how field ornithology relates to ethics of place and shifting cultural values in Tomas Bannerhed’s *Korparna*, Article 2 offers a comparative reading of Agnar Lirhus’s *Nå hogger de* (2020) with Tarjei Vesaas’s *Fuglane* (1957). Article 3 explores ethics of care in human–bird relations based on Gøhril Gabrielsen’s *Ankomst* (2017), Brit Bildøen’s *Tre vegar til havet* (2018), and Merethe Lindstrøm’s *Fuglenes anatomi* (2019).

While I have chosen to focus on psychological novels, I recognize that there are texts from other genres that can provide different but no less valid insights. One of the most obvious examples is Arild Vange’s cross-

genre novel *Livet i luftene: Fortelling. Sang* (*Life in the Airs: Narrative. Song*, 2018), in which human–bird relations are reconceptualized in original and innovative ways. As the subtitle suggests, it transcends genre, but is closer to prose than poetry. Incorporating both history and natural science, the whole is held together by biographical stories interspersed with musings on aesthetics and the meaning of art. In content and form alike, it can perhaps be described as a kind of magic realism, and bears comparison to Thalia Field’s *Bird Lovers, Backyard* (2010). Set in Germany, *Livet i luftene* switches back and forth between the Norwegian language standards *riksmål* and *radikalt bokmål* depending on which character is being represented as narrator, frequently incorporating German terms that are translated to Norwegian in playful ways, touching on the themes of migration and translation that also come into play in *Tre vegar til havet*. With its open-ended narrative form and characters that are neither unambiguously human nor avian, *Livet i luftene* unsettles our assumptions not only about what it means to be human but also about the function of art, history, and other forms of narrative.

Despite its originality, *Livet i luftene* has largely been overlooked by critics, though the literary scholar Even Teistung (2020) offers an insightful overview and analysis. As Teistung points out, birdsong can be seen as a metaphor for literature, the act of singing as a metaphor for writing. Just as birdsong incorporates mimicry, imitation, and improvisation, literary authors influence and borrow from each other, riffing on well-worn motifs or weaving others’ work into their own through intertextual references. Like song, literary language is reliant on tone, melody, and harmony, which often take precedence over meaning (Teistung 2020, 79).

Knut Ødegård’s novel *Fuglespråk* (*Bird Language*, 2019) explores comparable territory. Here, the main character understands “bird language” and can communicate with birds, and again, elements of magic realism are in evidence, as birds are represented with some level

of scientific accuracy while certain universal laws are suspended. Though Ødegård, in contrast to Vange, is bogged down in anthropocentric assumptions and does not really attempt to engage with avian subjectivities, novels such as *Livet i luftene* and *Fuglespråk* raise important questions about how human–bird relations might be represented.

In Karl Ove Knausgård’s novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (*The Birds of the Air*, 2019b), birds are presented in a realistic way, yet mostly serve as personifications of human experience, functioning as allegories for a family’s life. For instance, Knausgård juxtaposes death and birth in a human family with a goshawk repeatedly ruining a pair of pigeons’ breeding attempts (25–26).<sup>21</sup> Owls, on the other hand, are linked to death (40), as Knausgård makes reference to widespread folkloric beliefs that the call of a tawny owl or an eagle-owl near a house means that someone in that house is going to die (Svanberg 2013, 156–158).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In “Birdland” (Knausgård 2019a), an essay in English that accompanies Stephen Gill’s *The Pillar*, Knausgård explains that this motif is based on a story Gill told him about how a pair of wood-pigeons would nest in the same tree four years in a row, only to have their young taken by a goshawk every time (8–9). In Knausgård’s later novel *Morgenstjernen* (*The Morning Star*, 2020 (translated into English by Martin Aitken, 2021)), where some sections are copied from *Fuglene under himmelen* with slight modifications (e.g., compare Knausgård 2019b, 5, 7, 9 and 2020, 157, 158, 164), the birds are specified as “et skogduepar” (2020, 175)—as stock doves (*skogduer*) rather than wood-pigeons (*ringduer*)—but this is an obvious misunderstanding where literal translation of the English common name refers to a different species in Norwegian. Since the birds in *Fuglene under himmelen* and *Morgenstjernen* alike are described as nesting on top of the gate (2019b, 25; 2020, 174), it’s reasonable to assume that they are in fact common wood-pigeons (*Columba palumbus*), an abundant species in southern Scandinavia that usually nests on branches in trees but sometimes on built structures, in contrast to stock doves (*Columba oenas*), which are relatively uncommon and nest in cavities in trees or cliffs, and occasionally in nest boxes.

<sup>22</sup> Agnes Ravatn, too, refers to this in passing in her novel *Fugletribunalet* (*The Bird Tribunal*, 2013, 172 (translated into English by Rosie Hedger, 2017)). Bannerhed, on the other hand, through highly selective use of source material, points out that, at least in Småland, the shriek of a tawny owl can also herald the birth of a child (2018, 11). According to Ingvar Svanberg, owls carry a wide range of negative associations in

The title is a play on the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard's *Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen: Tre gudelige Taler* (*The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses*, 1849),<sup>23</sup> in which the “lily of the field” and “bird of the air,” both of which appear in the Sermon on the Mount, are brought together in one sentence (32). Kierkegaard presents birds as silent and patient beings that, in contrast to humans, do not try to force the moment but meet it when it comes; the bird is close to the divine because it is fully present in the moment, in contrast to humans who are constantly striving for status and security. This resonates with the thought of the Indian Jesuit priest and spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello (1994) who—like Kierkegaard—draws on the motif of the bird in the Sermon on the Mount and regards the bird as exemplary because it is present in the moment.

During the early twentieth century, ornithology itself was marked by a tendency to interpret bird behavior based on both Christian and pagan worldviews, from the “ornitheology” of the Swedish nature writer Paul Rosenius to the animism of his Anglo-Argentine contemporary William H. Hudson (Kotva 2023, 94, 97–98, 104–106). These approaches bear striking similarities to the ecospirituality of contemporary nature writers, in which the divine is reframed as the “more-than-human” (92, 99, 105–106). In mythological representations, birds often function as symbols of transcendence, as if they inhabit a world that lies beyond the grasp of human understanding (Lloyd 2022, 39, 42–44). In recent years, theological perspectives on human–bird relations and the ecological crisis have begun to emerge, attempting to bridge the divide between the transcendent and the immanent, the divine and the biological (e.g., Clingerman 2008; Wallace 2018), while on a more terrestrial level, birding has been linked to mindfulness (Thompson 2017). Attempts at separating science from spirituality have never been entirely successful,

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Swedish folklore, the only positive example being the case from Småland that Bannerhed cites (Svanberg 2013, 156–158).

<sup>23</sup> Translated into English by Bruce H. Kirmmse (2016).

and it seems more than likely that dialogue between these traditions will continue to produce new insights and perspectives. While ecospirituality is not a central theme of this dissertation, the significance of folklore for contemporary cultural narratives is explored in Article 1, while Article 2 touches on animism in regard to the main characters of *Fuglane* and *Nå hogger de*.

Though this dissertation is concerned with textual narratives, it is worth noting that many contemporary novels and works of nature writing where birds figure are multimodal, illustrated with drawings, paintings, or photographs. Kjersti Ericsson's novel *Hekketid* (2001) and Brit Bildøen's nonfiction book *Over land og hav* (2020) both feature tasteful black-and-white paintings. The nine photos that appear in Knausgård's *Fuglene under himmelen* are taken from Stephen Gill's *The Pillar* (2019), an artist's book of photographs taken with a trail camera in Skåne in southern Sweden from 2015 through 2019. Both of Bannerhed's nonfiction books are illustrated, *I starens tid (In the Time of the Starling)*, (2018) with bird photographs by Brutus Östling, *En vacker dag (A Beautiful Day)*, (2021) with black-and-white sketches by Mattias Bäcklin. While Östling's high-resolution color photographs are spectacular, the sketches in the latter reflect fleeting glimpses of birds half-concealed in foliage or flashing across a clearing. Considering that one rarely encounters birds at as close range or in as good light as is suggested by most nature photography, sketches might be a more apt reflection of actual encounters with birds, as they leave some room for interpretation. Looking at the sparse sketches in *En vacker dag* or the blurry trail camera photos in *The Pillar*, one might be prompted to consider how Dana Phillips's distinction between literary realism and scientific realism might apply to visual art. Though it will not be dealt with in depth here, multimodality is often an essential aspect of literary narratives about human–bird relations.

Leaving aside magic realism, ecospirituality, and multimodality, I've settled on a broadly representative selection of psychological novels,

featuring women and men from Norway and Sweden and set in environments ranging from urban residential areas to remote rural outposts. While remaining attentive to themes and motifs, I've included texts with a variety of narrative structures, from the conventional to the experimental. Comparative readings come into play throughout as I assess how contemporary Scandinavian novels are informed by literary works from elsewhere. I've sought to discern whether there is anything uniquely Scandinavian about these texts and whether they break new ground in terms of content or form. There are many approaches to birds in literature, and though the selection of texts presented here should be of fairly broad interest, it is by no means intended to be exhaustive.

### ***Key Methodological Approaches***

From close reading to comparative analysis, this dissertation employs a range of methodological approaches. The articles complement each other in the sense that each relies on a distinct methodology fitting for the style and subject matter of the novels analyzed. Approaching human–bird relations from a variety of perspectives illuminates the diversity as well as the tensions within this field of study.

While each article has its own approach, there are certain ethical and aesthetic concerns that apply throughout. In addition to explicating how humans relate to birds and vice versa, I explore whether these relations emerge from personal experience or cultural tradition, what their ethical and ecological implications are, and whether they are changing. In some cases, where direct human–bird relations are not in evidence, I look to birds' functions as symbol or metaphor to reveal what they mean to us. All the articles are interdisciplinary in the sense that they, in addition to literary theory, are informed by environmental ethics as well as historical and ornithological sources. While the first article uses one novel as a starting point for exploring issues of environmental identity from a

hermeneutical perspective, the second and third articles rely on comparative analysis, placing different novels alongside each other to assess how they shed light on different aspects of their subject matter.

The major theoretical and methodological contribution of the first article, “Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed’s *Korparna*,” is that it brings ecocriticism together with environmental hermeneutics. Since environmental and cultural change are integral to the plot structure of *Korparna*, I am concerned with what values the different characters represent. Through hermeneutical narrative analysis, I explore how these characters weave birds and plants into their own understanding of the place and time they live in. These readings are then placed in an interpretive framework of environmental hermeneutics (Clingerman 2004; van Buren 1995) complemented by social anthropological work on birding as a perceptual practice (Hundeide 2013) as well as ecocritical theory (Buell 1995). Throughout *Korparna*, Bannerhed sustains a kind of dialectic between the natural sciences on one hand, folklore and mythology on the other, a complex mode of cultural representation that environmental hermeneutics is well-poised to interpret.

Environmental hermeneutics also forms part of the theoretical framework for the second article, “Of Birds and Men in Rural Norway: Self, Place and Landscape in Vesaas and Lirhus,” though this article relies on a more narratological and comparative methodology. Drawing on the work of David Herman (2018), I use narratological analysis to offer a comparative reading of *Fuglane* and *Nå hogger de*, showing how different narrative strategies align with different environmental perspectives. Drawing on a wider range of literary theory than the first, this article also examines how the novels in question relate to animal rights theory and indigenous, hunter-gatherer worldviews.

The third article, “Human–Bird Relations and Ethics of Care in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction,” relies on a theoretical framework of ecofeminism (Warren 1990) and ethics of care (Puig de la Bellacasa



2010; 2012; 2017). While Katarina Leppänen (2022) has examined links between literature and ecofeminism in the Nordic countries, I take this approach a step further by applying it to human–bird relations. Here I also draw on Donna Haraway’s work (2016), which aligns comfortably with ecofeminism, offering ethical insight into how to facilitate multispecies flourishing while maintaining attentiveness to social, historical, and ecological factors. Significant themes that emerge include the contrasts between captivity and freedom, domesticity and wildness, as well as parallels between migration and translation, and—above all—childrearing and care for birds. On the whole, however, the methodology is not entirely dissimilar to that used in the second article, employing narratological analysis of three novels and concluding with a comparative analysis of them, while maintaining attentiveness to allegory and intertextuality, exploring folkloric sources where relevant. As in the other two articles, I bring literary fiction into dialogue with ecology, and here I also touch on possible implications for conservation and for ornithological practices such as bird ringing and bird feeding.

Though the methodology varies from article to article, the overarching objective remains the same: to explore human–bird relations as represented in contemporary Scandinavian literary fiction. While each article can be read independently of the others, their methodological and thematic differences add up to a greater whole that offers a broader, more nuanced perspective.



## 5 Summaries of the Articles

### Article 1

Kvangraven, Endre Harvold. 2023. "Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna*." *Ecozon@*, vol. 14, no. 2. <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2023.14.2.4903>

#### Abstract

*In Tomas Bannerhed's Korparna (The Ravens, 2011), birds and trees not only function as backdrop and setting but contribute toward forming the characters' narrative identities and sense of place. In this article, I explore historical and literary sources from Småland—the historical province in Sweden where Korparna is set—to assess how Bannerhed interprets and elaborates on cultural values and traditions. Drawing on Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement," I explicate the interplay between conflicting environmental interpretations, recognizing that places can be described based on the historical record or on ornithological and botanical data, but that folklore and mythology also contribute to local meaning-making. In the context of Korparna, I argue that birding can be a meaningful way of engaging with a place, a form of naturalist enthusiasm that fosters deep local knowledge. Finally, I show that relations with nonhumans can be constitutive of a variety of conflicting but partly overlapping environmental identities.*

In this article, literary analysis of Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* (2011) opens up a discussion of how birding relates to place and identity, as well as raising broader questions about tensions between the rural and the urban, the resident and the migratory, the traditional and the modern. Since Bannerhed frequently engages with local cultural and literary traditions, I explore folkloric and mythological sources from Småland, the historical province in Sweden where the novel is set. For my theoretical framework, I use environmental hermeneutics, in particular drawing on Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement" (2004).

As in Vesaas's *Fuglane*, which *Korparna* is influenced by (Bannerhed 2012; see also 2018, 114), the main character's quest for identity is a central theme, and this is linked to identification with birds and plants, which he incorporates into his self-narrative. Encounters with birds and other nonhumans, as well as familiarity with certain landscapes, thereby foster a sense of place and local knowledge.

Since the main character, Klas, is a birder, *Korparna* also functions as a case study of how birding relates to environmental values and empathetic engagement with the nonhuman world. Birding is linked to naturalist enthusiasm, which can stem from contributing to science and conservation, or from competing with other birders (Hundeide 2013, 3). Naturalist enthusiasm often relates to a variety of factors and can be rooted in a sense of wonder or of aesthetic appreciation. Birding is thereby a framework through which ecological and social relations are perceived and a practice that informs one's worldview.

## **Article 2**

Kvangraven, Endre Harvold. 2024. "Of Birds and Men in Rural Norway: Self, Place and Landscape in Vesaas and Lirhus." Accepted by *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* and scheduled for publication in April 2024.

### **Abstract**

*Agnar Lirhus's Nå hogger de (2020) and Tarjei Vesaas's Fuglane (1957) both feature a main character whose self-narrative is formed through interaction with nonhuman animals and grounded in attachment to place. These characters break with the dominant cultural ontology by attributing agency and intrinsic value to beings who are otherwise ignored or pursued for utilitarian purposes. I consider the ethical implications of their encounters with nonhumans, exploring whether*

*these can be considered social interactions or are better understood as occurring on a spiritual plane. Finally, I show that the choice of outsiders as main characters can function as a literary strategy for questioning the dominant cultural ontology.*

This second article follows on from the first in that the novels analyzed are set in rural areas and deal with issues of place and belonging. To contextualize human–nonhuman animal relations in Agnar Lirhus’s *Nå hogger de* (2020), I first provide an analysis of Tarjei Vesaas’s *Fuglane* (1957), which the former makes intertextual reference to. I argue that *Fuglane* can be seen as a proto-environmentalist novel, whereas in *Nå hogger de*, an environmentalist perspective is evident throughout. Like the main character, Mattis, in *Fuglane*, Knut Hovin in *Nå hogger de* is dealing with psychological challenges, but he also has a unique ability to communicate with nonhuman animals—including birds—and is unable to face up to the idea that the forests and fields in his home area will soon be replaced by a golf course. This represents a case where a person’s identity is so closely bound up with the landscape he inhabits that destroying the landscape entails destroying the person. Even if his physical form can persist elsewhere, his selfhood, which has been formed over a lifetime of interaction with his local surroundings, will be lost.

Allegorically, *Nå hogger de* offers a sequential tracing of ecological crisis: part one can be read as a study of eco-anxiety culminating in ecological grief, and the brief second part offers a vision of a future scenario where all relevant tipping points have been reached, such that individual agency is no longer of any significance. The second part hearkens back to old Scandinavian cultural traditions in that it is evocative of the end times as described in Norse mythology, while its placement within the text, and the way it contrasts against or comments upon the rest of the novel, is vaguely reminiscent of Hamsun’s *Pan* (1894, 207–241).

*Nå hogger de* offers a fresh and rarely articulated view of the climate and biodiversity crises, presenting deep culture from the perspective of a disabled main character whose interactions with birds and other nonhuman animals can be read as a critique of neoliberal capitalism, industrial agriculture, and human exceptionalism.

### **Article 3**

Kvangraven, Endre Harvold. 2023. "Human–Bird Relations and Ethics of Care in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 00.0 (2023), isad076, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isad076>

#### **Abstract**

*In this article, I explore how human–bird relations are represented in three contemporary Norwegian novels: Gøhril Gabrielsen’s Ankomst (Arrival, 2017), Brit Bildøen’s Tre vegar til havet (Three Roads to the Sea, 2018) and Merethe Lindstrøm’s Fuglenes anatomi (The Anatomy of Birds, 2019). I find that characters in these novels see their personal struggles reflected in birds’ struggle to survive, and that care is directed at birds in ways that can be interpreted as sublimated parental care. Drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa and Karen J. Warren, I examine how these representations relate to ethics of care and to ecofeminism.*

The majority of Norwegian novels that feature birds also feature relations between mothers and their children—or, conversely, childlessness or the loss of a child—as a central part of their plot, which in turn leads to various expressions of care directed at or projected onto birds. This article explores the extent to which three novels—Gøhril Gabrielsen’s *Ankomst* (2017), Brit Bildøen’s *Tre vegar til havet* (2018), and Merethe Lindstrøm’s *Fuglenes anatomi* (2019)—might be expressive of an ethics of care (van Dooren 2014a) or of ecofeminism (Warren 1990).

Drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa (2010; 2012; 2017), I show that care—as represented in these novels—has problematic aspects, as there are inevitably some species or individuals who are favored over others, and that care can, in some cases, entail violence (van Dooren 2014a, 292). In *Tre vegar til havet*, care for birds goes hand in hand with conservation, and the same arguably holds true for *Ankomst*, though in the latter, the narrator’s approach to conservation seems less efficacious. In *Fuglenes anatomi*, however, care for birds does not lead to environmental concern but rather becomes a source of personal consolation accompanied by cognitive dissonance.

While this article is focused on *Ankomst*, *Tre vegar til havet*, and *Fuglenes anatomi*—which, taken together, offer a broadly representative overview of the topic of birds and care—there are many other novels that could have been used as case studies. Notable examples include Kjersti Ericsson’s *Hekketid* (2001), a humorous novel packed with references to ornithological science, and Karl Ove Knausgård’s novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (2019b). The association of birds with care even extends to children’s picture books, where children’s capacity for care can be activated when birds are represented as being more vulnerable than they are (Langvik 2023, 20).

Even though pronatalism is implicit in some of these texts, care is also linked to sustainability and care for the earth and can thereby be harnessed for environmentalist ends. The motif of birds and care is a prominent one in contemporary Scandinavian literature, but it is often implied by way of metaphor or ponderings on commonalities between humans and birds, and generally entails a high level of ambiguity that demands in-depth interpretation. Texts such as these thereby provide an underexplored perspective on human–bird relations that could have ethical implications for conservation and for the terms of coexistence.





## **6 Discussion and Further Directions**

### ***Key Findings***

The above articles trace a development from emplacement and naturalist enthusiasm in *Korparna*; to animism, identification, and existential despair in Vesaas and Lirhus; and, finally, to embodied, relational practices that transgress species boundaries, which are evident in many authors. Central themes that emerge include ethics of place, environmental identity, ecofeminism, and care.

In the following, I offer some reflections on these themes, moving beyond the conclusions reached in the articles to adopt a holistic, critical perspective. Do these themes relate to current events, or do they rather speak to timeless matters that would surface in any era? What societal and environmental concerns do they reflect, and what questions do they raise? While remaining attentive to aesthetic and narrative aspects, I explore whether these texts can contribute toward cultivating more sustainable relations with birds and other nonhuman animals. To provide context, I offer comparative readings with thematically related novels from Scandinavia and beyond, and toward the end, I touch on related theoretical approaches that may be relevant for further research, including ecomasculinity.

### ***Ethics of Place***

We have seen that birds in Scandinavian literature are often linked to specific places and landscapes, of which they can be iconic, as cultural symbols but also as ecological indicators. In *Korparna*, Bannerhed writes about lapwings as associated with traditional cultural landscapes in Småland, but he might as well have been writing about Jæren in southwestern Norway, where lapwings play an even more prominent cultural

role, being the Rogaland county bird. In Ursula Heise's terms, lapwings have become a "proxy," a species that is synecdochically taken to represent "all species" and even entire ecosystems (2016, 23). Though this is largely the result of sociocultural rather than ecological factors, securing habitat for lapwings is likely to benefit other threatened bird species that are associated with the same cultural landscapes, including Eurasian curlews, yellowhammers, and Eurasian skylarks. Lapwings function as an umbrella species and an indicator species, while their cultural role also makes them a flagship species.<sup>24</sup> Thus, they can be a useful proxy for conservation, and concern for them may have the knock-on benefit of fostering environmental identity and environmental citizenship.

Lapwings as a species have come to be associated with cultural landscapes that are seen as worth preserving, in part because they are characteristic of Norway. As a proxy, they are "a measure for what we value about nature as well as, more indirectly, about ourselves" (Heise 2016, 23). Even though changing agricultural practices are the main reason for their decline, lapwings represent a case where environmental and agricultural interests have been willing to join forces. Farmers who see the cultural landscape as part of their identity may be willing to accept some level of responsibility for the species associated with it, though it remains to be seen whether efforts at stalling the lapwing's decline will succeed.

Black-tailed godwits have not been so lucky: even though they, like lapwings, are listed as Critically Endangered on the Norwegian Red List and rely on agricultural fields and adjacent wetlands for breeding (Stokke et al. 2021), they have not achieved the same iconic status (Bøe 2012), and legislators have "deprioritized" their conservation due to opposition

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<sup>24</sup> See Foreman 1999, 546–547. Note, however, that the measures needed to protect lapwings in Norway cannot be considered rewilding. Rather, they involve a form of targeted landscape management that mimics past agricultural practices.

from farmers (Eggen 2023, 115).<sup>25</sup> Since black-tailed godwits were first documented breeding in Norway in 1955 and only established a breeding population around 1970 (Stokke et al. 2021), their place within Norway's natural heritage is contested. This goes to show how arbitrary conservation measures and what is considered worth saving can sometimes be. Furthermore, such ideas are strongly influenced by literary narratives. During the late nineteenth century, the lapwings of Jæren were immortalized in literature by Alexander Kielland (1891) and Arne Garborg (1892), well-known public figures whose works have since been canonized. The many references to lapwings in their texts, linking lapwings specifically to the fields of Jæren, have provided a place for lapwings in the Norwegian cultural imaginary. Comparable narratives about black-tailed godwits have yet to be written, and as a result, the lapwing is widely mourned, while the fate of the black-tailed godwit is a matter of concern primarily for birders and other naturalists. This shows how decisive literary narratives can be for what species we consider valuable.

Considering that humans have coexisted with birds throughout their evolutionary history, the appearance of birds in folklore is probably universal. A fitting contemporary example from Scandinavia is Roy Jacobsen's novel *De usynlige* (*The Unseen*, 2013),<sup>26</sup> the first in a series of novels set on the fictional island of Barrøy off the coast of Northern Norway during the interwar period. Eurasian oystercatchers, despite being presented as comical, mockingly compared to chickens and described as "an idiotic bird,"<sup>27</sup> are appreciated as harbingers of spring (28). Common eiders enjoy a more exalted position and are considered sacred (60), as down gathered from their nests has been a valuable source of income through the centuries. People are irritated by magpies "shitting

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<sup>25</sup> In Norway, the northern subspecies *islandica* breeds on natural wetlands, the southern *limosa* on farmland. Both subspecies are critically endangered in Norway, their total population adding up to at most a few dozen individuals (Stokke et al. 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Translated into English by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw (2020).

<sup>27</sup> "en idiotisk fugl" (Jacobsen 2013, 28).

and stealing,”<sup>28</sup> and talk of destroying their nests, but rarely follow up on it (25–26). Everyone knows where the white-tailed eagles are nesting (160), but they too, are tolerated, even though one of them kills a cat (50), while gulls and cormorants are woven into the narrative as an integral part of the setting. In the Norwegian island society described by Jacobsen, birds are a simple fact of life, part of what it means to be living in that particular place. In some cases, they provide benefits, and occasionally, they cause harm, but mostly they are commensal with humans. The inhabitants of Barrøy have a name for every species of bird and plant that occurs on the island (57–58), not because they are naturalists but because they are deeply familiar with the place.

Familiarity with local species is basic knowledge for the inhabitants of Barrøy, as it is for Klas and his father Agne in *Korparna*. But over the course of the past century or so, with urbanization and industrialization, as well as easy access to digital media and other forms of entertainment, this immediacy of human–bird relations has largely been lost, and many people are now entirely unaware of the comings and goings of migratory birds. Texts such as *De usynlige* can thus function as a reminder that birds are not only the province of ornithology but also of cultural history, that the tendency to ignore or overlook them is a modern phenomenon symptomatic of alienation from the nonhuman world. As Kerstin Ekman points out, we can hardly know, much less care about, relate to, or take joy in, what we don’t have a name for (Ekman and Eriksson 2011, 16).<sup>29</sup> Knowing the names of the species in one’s surroundings fosters recognition and can make a place a home; without such names, the place is reduced to a disorienting blur where one is likely to get lost (16–17). Naming begets knowing, the ability to recall and describe, which can in turn foster attachment and connection. It is also essential for identifying areas of conservation concern.

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<sup>28</sup> “driter og stjæler” (Jacobsen 2013, 25–26).

<sup>29</sup> See also Ellefsen 2022, 212–214.

Engagement with local place is a recurrent motif in Scandinavian narratives that feature birds, but an ecocritical approach soon reveals that concern for specific places is not sufficient for an environmentally sustainable outlook. In some cases, it can even be destructive. As Ursula Heise (2008) points out, globalization has led to a process of “deterritorialization” in which “new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place” are beginning to emerge (10). While environmentalists have sometimes had good reasons to resist this process, deterritorialization can also facilitate “new cultural encounters” that entail a “broadening of horizons” (10). This can lead to common goals and to transnational collaboration, which is necessary not only for the conservation of migratory species, but also for species that are shifting their ranges northwards and upwards in response to climate change. Some might construe cosmopolitanism as a privileged position, but it can also be seen as a form of solidarity, a willingness to look beyond one’s own immediate needs.

The interplay between the local and the global is an important aspect of environmental narratives that are informed by databases and statistics (Heise 2016, 65–66). While national Red Lists warn of local extinctions, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species shows how species are faring globally. Conservation strategies are often based on a comparison between the two and a weighing of options. From an ecocritical perspective, the interplay between the local and the global can be interpreted as a dialectic or as a hermeneutical circle, in which the whole and the parts are constitutive of each other. In some cases, deterritorialization might be met with attempts at “reterritorialization,” but regardless of the power dynamics at play, this is bound to result in some kind of “dual vision of the Earth as a whole,” which might result in “a new kind of eco-cosmopolitan environmentalism” (Heise 2008, 210). In the Anthropocene, global developments inevitably intrude upon the local, even in the most remote of locations—for instance, in the form of climate change, plastic pollution, or the accumulation of toxins. Local

narratives that entirely ignore the global have thereby become an impossibility; even if global circumstances are not explicitly referred to, they form part of the context. Ultimately,

the environmentalist emphasis on restoring individuals' sense of place [...] becomes a visionary dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle or a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature. Rather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world, and how human impact affects and changes this connectedness. (Heise 2008, 21)

Accordingly, the articles in this dissertation can be read as case studies of developments that are in evidence globally, albeit in a variety of forms. The kinds of changing agricultural practices that form part of the backdrop to *Korparna* will be familiar to people from many cultural backgrounds, though their scale and specific ecological effects vary locally. As for novels such as *Ankomst* and *Tre vegar til havet*, where migratory birds are in focus, comparative readings with novels set at other points along these birds' migration routes are likely to yield illuminating results. Read as allegory, migratory birds are messengers from faraway places and auguries of change to come. They represent not only the longing for flight and escape but also the fates of climate refugees and the potential for transcontinental and transoceanic cultural exchange.

### ***Environmental Identity***

We have seen that fictional characters often identify with birds, whether as individuals or species, with Mattis in *Fuglane* as a prime example. This is carried further with Klas in *Korparna*, who variously projects his weaknesses onto the common cuckoo and his dreams onto the white-tailed eagle, while charismatic rarities such as the great bittern enrich his world. Identification with birds is largely something ineffable, not meant

to be articulated fully, but it can clearly be empowering and lead to concern for the species one identifies with. The birder who sees his totem species decimated experiences it not only as an injustice, but also as a personal affront.

In this light, *Fuglane* can be read as a critique of hunting, though Vesaas may not have intended it that way (Mundal 2018, 63). It correlates with discourses that are prevalent today, and that would have been present to some degree also in Vesaas's time, the hunter coming across as callous and coolly rational (though at bottom quite sensitive), Mattis as sentimental and emotional, unable to face up to cruel realities. The latter position is represented with more perspicacity in J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967), where the narrator dreads the presence of hunters on the landscape because he identifies with the birds they pursue (127).

James Stanescu (2012) argues that "mourning the lives of other animals" can be seen "as a political act that produces new communities, rather than as an individuating and isolating emotion" (567). In a case such as Mattis's, however, the "social unintelligibility" of his reaction at the woodcock's death amounts to "an erasure of existence, an erasure of sense, and an erasure of relations" (Stanescu 2012, 579), which in turn renders a part of Mattis himself socially unintelligible (569). His grief for the woodcock goes unacknowledged by others, and ultimately, this makes his life less livable, pointing ahead to his eventual suicide. Yet, this social unintelligibility also speaks to the "ethical, political, and ontological" potential of mourning (568), which can—in some cases, where a movement gathers momentum—result in collective action (578). While subversive impulses might be rapidly quashed within the confines of small communities, literary fiction can be essential for rendering such experiences narratively intelligible.

When one's peers fail to acknowledge ecological grief and mourning for nonhuman lives, this can result in alienation, as in *Nå hogger de*, where Knut cannot relate to and is unable to engage with the pressures that are

placed on him. J. M. Coetzee (1992), referring to Kafka, argues that “alienation is a strategy open to writers since the mid-eighteenth century, a strategy in the service of skepticism,” that alienation can be seen as “not only a position but a practice as well” (203). In casting an alienated outsider such as Knut as a protagonist, Lirhus is employing alienation as a strategy for questioning dominant cultural assumptions, including human exceptionalism.

Tying elegies for vanishing species not only to the species themselves but also to humans who claim a connection with them can make for affective narratives. As an example, Australian novelist Charlotte McConaghy’s *Migrations* (2021) is set in a dystopian near-future of ongoing mass extinction. The narrator, Franny Stone, contemplates “[a] nameless sadness, the fading away of the birds,” and thinks of “how lonely it will be here, when it’s just us” (62). She identifies with the last Arctic terns and attempts to follow their migration from the Arctic to Antarctica. Comparing her own existential restlessness to the migration of terns, she reflects that her “life has been a migration without a destination, and that in itself is senseless” (92). Having lived a nomadic life—which stands in contrast to the main characters of *Korparna* and *Nå hogger de* but exemplifies the kind of “eco-cosmopolitan environmentalism” and “global connectivity” imagined by Heise (2008, 210)—Franny wonders what it must be like to be bound to a place, to have a “deep sense of home” (McConaghy 2021, 112). Yet, her lack of local attachments does not prevent her from acting on concern for vanishing wildlife. On the contrary, she goes to great lengths, eventually reaching a place in Antarctica with hundreds of Arctic terns and other wildlife (249–250). Though this offers hope that some wild things might survive and maybe even recover from anthropogenic pressures, it is presented more as an instance of personal redemption than a resolution to the ecological crisis. The fact that Arctic terns still exist makes Franny’s life more livable, but there is little she can do to ensure their continued existence.



Throughout *Migrations*, Franny is haunted by memories of her mother, whose death she has repressed (McConaghy 2021, 186), and who is metaphorically represented by a dead seabird (137). As in the novels discussed in the third article, a narrative concerned with threatened birdlife is thereby grounded in mother–daughter relations, while migration functions as a metaphor for escape or for the potential to reinvent oneself. Furthermore, Franny’s determination, stubbornness and personally motivated concern for threatened seabirds bear comparison to the main character of *Ankomst*. As in *Fuglenes anatomi*, captive birds feature, but *Migrations* goes a step further in that here their captivity is problematized. Sleepwalking, Franny lets her mother-in-law’s birds out of their cages, at which her mother-in-law is at first angry, then relieved, acknowledging that looking at these captive birds made her sad (McConaghy 2021, 172–173).

Comparative readings thus reveal certain themes that tend to recur in novels featuring birds. The metaphorical connotations of flight and migration are almost common sense, as are those of freedom and captivity, but issues of environmental identity are more complex, as they are always contextual and reflect ongoing cultural changes. As Richard Smyth points out, we grow up “within ecologies,” which contribute toward shaping us (2020, 31). Ecological grief may be more prevalent today than in times past, but the ability to identify with nonhuman animals is rooted in basic human instincts and survival skills. Personal identification with nonhuman animals can be empowering, but it can also render us vulnerable, and this tension constitutes one of the main sources of conflict in the novels discussed here. Awareness of the vulnerability of life is amplified further when entire species are threatened by human activity, to the point that concern risks slipping over into apathy and despair. This leads us to yet another theme that has emerged through my readings, namely that of care, which can often be related to ecofeminism.

## Care and Ecofeminism

Contemporary Scandinavian fiction is rife with examples of birds functioning as a motif linked to care. While environmentalist forms of care for the natural world are obvious even without deep reading, the association of birds with parental care—especially mother–daughter relations—is somewhat unexpected and points toward ecofeminism as an appropriate conceptual framework. Ethics of care in human–bird relations are exemplified by *Ankomst*, *Tre vegar til havet*, and *Fuglenes anatomi*, but evident in many other novels, indicating that this is a field deserving of further study, not only for empirical purposes but also to better understand how such narratives of care are formed and maintained. Though ecofeminism as a social and literary theory only emerged during the twentieth century, the ethical relations it describes are much older and literary fiction is a vital means of representing them.

Ingeborg Arvola’s historical novel *Kniven i ilden* (*The Knife in the Fire*, 2022), for instance, is set during the mid-nineteenth century in the far north of Norway, in an area where—in contrast to the rest of Norway—traditional beliefs have persisted into the present day (Krag 2012). When the main character, Brita Caisa, immediately after attending a difficult childbirth and helping to bring about a successful delivery, encounters an unfamiliar bird, a species she hasn’t seen before, she believes that *småfolket*—“the little people”—are showing it to her. She interprets it as a gesture of solidarity and a recognition of her skills and fortitude (142). Linking a small bird to childbirth and female strength, Arvola’s narrative resonates with the ethics of care and ecofeminist perspectives that emerge in other novels such as *Tre vegar til havet*. Later, when Brita and her love interest, Mikko, have just made love for the first time, Brita looks up to see an eagle staring at them and interprets it as if it “wishes us all the best,”<sup>30</sup> before it turns and flies away (Arvola 2022, 209). While Brita’s affair with Mikko has a tragic outcome (though the novel’s

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<sup>30</sup> “ønsker oss alt godt” (Arvola 2022, 209).

ending is open and there may be a sequel), her encounters with birds are suggestive of a feeling of solidarity with nonhuman animals that Christian priests and authoritarian legislators—representatives of progress and civilization—tried to repress.

Beyond being a token of empowerment, the sight of a bird can thereby be a blessing: while a small, unfamiliar bird symbolizes a child being brought into the world, the eagle symbolizes overpowering love, intertwining of destinies, and changes in the course of history. *Kniven i ilden* is an illustrative example of how the motifs that are prevalent in literature can differ markedly from those that gain traction in the press or in social media. While reindeer herders and politicians draw disproportionate attention to the alleged depredations of eagles on semi-domestic reindeer, Arvola shows that eagles have previously been imbued with spiritual powers, and there is no reason to believe that such associations have been lost to the public imaginary. Merging mythology and psychology, history and imagination, the general and the specific, novels can draw attention to the immaterial value of nonhuman animals, showing how sociohistorical settings are formed through a diverse interplay of cultural and ecological factors.

The association between human–nonhuman animal relations and ecofeminist ethics of care is by no means new or uniquely Scandinavian. There are several examples of comparable narratives from other parts of the world (e.g., Haushofer 1963; Owens 2018), but setting and sociopolitical context have some bearing on how they are presented. Hence, similar ecocritical methods applied elsewhere are likely to yield comparable results with subtle cultural differences. One might for instance expect care to manifest differently in Nordic-model welfare states than in more libertarian or authoritarian societies, though in *Tre vegar til havet* the welfare state's capacity for care is called into question, and in other novels such as *Ankomst* and *Fuglenes anatomi* it is conspicuous by its absence. Further questions to explore could be whether there is any correlation between narratives exhibiting care and

environmental policy, and whether there are examples of care for birds in literature carrying across into environmental action.

Ecofeminism can clearly be a useful framework for conceptualizing ethics of care in human–bird relations, but has limitations, at least in its essentialist forms. A recent development that might broaden the field is the emergence of what has variously been termed “ecological masculinities” (Hultman and Pulé 2018), “ecomasculinities” (Cenamora and Brandt 2019), and “ecomasculinity” (Yaşayan 2023).<sup>31</sup> In a similar manner to ecofeminism, ecomasculinity is not only an ethical approach but also a framework for ecocritical literary analysis. Based on the same fundamental values as ecofeminism, but applying its analytical lens to men, it can generate new insights about the significance of gender for relations between humans and the nonhuman world.

Contemporary Scandinavian narratives that might lend themselves well to ecomasculinist readings of human–bird relations include Vidar Sundstøl’s ecological novels (2021; 2023), Ingvar Ambjørnsen’s *Natten drømmer om dagen* (2012), Lars Elling’s *Fyrstene av Finntjern* (2022), and Olav Løkken Reisop’s *Skriverholmen* (2023). The character Walter Berglund in Jonathan Franzen’s epic novel *Freedom* (2010) would be an obvious American example, contrasted against his rival Richard Katz.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, however, the character Brandon Vanderkool in the American novelist Jim Lynch’s *Border Songs* (2009) best exemplifies an ecocentric form of masculinity. Embodying an “‘eccentricity’ that opposes the logics of global domination” (Umezurike 2021, 474), Brandon is dyslexic and awkward, but possessed of a singular sensitivity to the nonhuman world. Like Mattis in *Fuglane*, Brandon has “his own take on

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<sup>31</sup> In the following, I consistently use the term *ecomasculinity* for the sake of clarity and conciseness, recognizing that this is an emerging field where more theoretical work is called for.

<sup>32</sup> With the cerulean warbler, threatened by habitat destruction due to mountaintop removal, as well as predation by domestic cats, as one of its key themes, *Freedom* (Franzen 2010) is a central text for literary representations of human–bird relations in North America.

things” (Lynch 2009, 45). He sees things in way that is not accessible to others (4), mostly thinking “in pictures” rather than words (27), but his eye and ear for bird identification are exceptional (35). He also has an amazing memory (6) and can feel small earthquakes that other people are unable to detect (30, 193). As with Knut in *Nå hogger de*, large crowds of people make him disoriented and confused, so he prefers to stay in his home area (4), in this case the northern part of Washington State along the Canadian border. In contrast to Mattis and Knut, however, Brandon is eventually recognized by his community as an artist and visionary of sorts. According to Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike (2021), Brandon’s “refusal to be hegemonic is at the heart of ecological masculinities” (474):

The ecocentric man appears to be anyone who is comfortable in their dyslexia, their failures and gracelessness, but committed to nurturing human–nature bonds. (Umezurike 2021, 474)

Brandon’s ecocentric outlook is rooted in enthusiasm for and empathy with nonhuman animals. Sensitive to the body language of birds and mammals, he is prone to moments of intense “kinesthetic empathy” (Carraciolo 2020, 239–240) in which he identifies with nonhuman animals in embodied ways that are incomprehensible to the people around him. Caught up in the moment, he honks along with snow geese (Lynch 2009, 60) or feels himself taking flight with trumpeter swans (30) and barn swallows (289–291). Though he possesses deep knowledge of birds and other wildlife, he neither anthropomorphizes them nor appropriates them for his own needs, and certainly doesn’t reduce them to objects of rational calculation. His artistic pursuits and caring practices seem to arise spontaneously from his activities as a birder and wildlife enthusiast, and eventually he quits his job with the border patrol to tend his father’s cows instead, thereby relinquishing power for care.

Contrarily, in Norwegian novelist Carl Frode Tiller’s *Begynnelser* (*Beginnings*, 2017), the main character, Terje, a biologist, is fiercely dedicated to environmental conservation but also displays a capacity for

violence. Moreover, his utter dependency on his car—not only for getting around but also for escaping his problems—links him to an unsustainable “petroculture” that is generally associated with masculinity (Furuseth 2021, 132; Sandal 2021, 20, 71, 83–84). In his best moments, Terje can inspire others—including his young daughter—to care about birds, plants, and insects (Tiller 2017, 62–63, 116–120), yet a compulsion to live up to the norms of hegemonic masculinity leads to self-destructive behavior that harms the people around him as well as nonhuman animals (Sandal 2021, 33–35, 74–75, 83, 89). This confirms Hultman and Pulé’s (2018) insistence that ecomasculinity entails a radical reorientation away from hegemonic masculinity.

Rather than looking at how ecofeminist values can be projected onto men, a possible starting point for ecomasculinity might be to look at how traditionally masculine qualities can be sublimated for ecological ends. The obvious example here is that of hunting, a predominantly male activity that is subject to mounting criticism on both ethical and ecological grounds. Though some hunters are birders and may be knowledgeable about birds in their area—especially game birds—attempts to represent hunting as a caring practice are dubious at best (von Essen and Allen 2020). It is therefore encouraging to note that instincts traditionally expressed through hunting are increasingly being expressed through birding instead. Locating birds in order to observe, list, or photograph them entails chasing and stalking; the symbolic kill is done with binoculars or a camera; and the trophy consists of a new species added to one’s life list or photo collection (Sheard 1999, 190, 197). If, as Kjersti Ericsson (2017) suggests, care for backyard birds can be linked to maternal solicitude, perhaps field ornithology can be an integral part of an ecomasculinist ethics. Vidar Sundstøl’s *Nattsang* (2023)—where a father and his son bond through birding—would be a prime example of how this is reflected in literature. Keeping lists, field ornithologists can be seen as collectors, but they can also be seen as postmodern hunters seeking out their prey with camera and audio recorder, or—perhaps most

relevant in the context of ecomasculinity—as conservationists seeking knowledge of how to safeguard bird habitat.

Regardless of which approach we find more compelling, neither ecofeminism nor ecomasculinity is reducible to essentialism. Rather than universalist explanatory models, they should primarily be understood as ethical and analytical frameworks. Many women are dedicated twitchers, and conversely, many men mind their bird feeders with passionate devotion. Care can be stifled, but it is pervasive in all cultures and takes many forms.

As Puig de la Bellacasa's contends, care is problematic and far from innocent (2010, 166; 2017, 7–8). It can serve to promote favoritism or uphold hierarchies and often entails sacrificing one individual or species for the sake of another. In Norway, the ongoing killing of invasive species such as American mink because they threaten bird populations is a poignant example of how conservation sometimes necessitates “violent-care” that raises ethical dilemmas (van Dooren 2014a, 292). Since care and conservation are both fraught with predicaments where the moral high ground cannot easily be claimed, it is crucial to maintain awareness of the ethical assumptions that guide our decisions.

Even a seemingly innocuous activity such as bird feeding can be a problematic form of care, as it enables species that habitually visit feeders to expand their populations while others are left at a competitive disadvantage. Unless it is targeted specifically at one or more threatened species, the result is that common species that readily adapt to human activity benefit at the expense of others (Shutt and Lees 2021). Aesthetically pleasing and emotionally satisfying, bird feeding can seem like an ideal way to alleviate eco-guilt, but as Richard Smyth (2020) points out, the idea that birds are dependent on us for help, and that their meaning lies in the extent to which we establish mutual relations with them, often comes “with strings attached” (73). It suggests a sense

of ownership, of a part-share in the birds' lives; an insistent idea that we're allowing the birds—provisionally, on condition of decent behaviour—into “our” sphere, accommodating them, ushering them graciously [...] into our human worldview. (Smyth 2020, 73)

Such relations may be gratifying for humans—and for the relatively few bird species that benefit directly—but birds have worldviews of their own, and perhaps their indifference to our perspective is a notion we ought to embrace (Smyth 2020, 73–74). In some cases, anthropomorphizing birds as “street children” and anticipating a response from them can be decisive for awakening care (Ericsson 2017, 247), but ultimately, defining birds based on their relation to humans is yet another form of anthropocentric conceit. Rather than cultivating complex multispecies relations with birds, perhaps we would do well to respect their autonomy and let them flourish on their own terms.

An alternative to sublimated parental care is naturalist enthusiasm, which is not about projection but about discovery (Hundeide 2013, 3). Though birding is a culturally situated practice with several subcultures, birders generally are not motivated by a desire to read their own meanings into the nonhuman world, but rather to discover and understand it. This is not a nostalgic return to some idealized vision of nature, but rather a rediscovery of it through embodied field experience, and in a time of eco-anxiety and Anthropocene horror, of alienation and disenchantment, perhaps this is exactly what is needed. Rooted in direct experience rather than abstract theory, naturalist enthusiasm can motivate people to seek knowledge about conservation and environmental issues, and thus plays a key role in environmental education (Hundeide 2013, 26). Since this enthusiasm is complemented by “the naturalist gaze,” which is concerned and evaluative, but also pleasurable, it can offer a more responsible, less anthropocentric view of birds (Cherry 2019, 41–42). Care—whether it manifests as familial compassion or ecological concern—is subjective and personal, and it can be a starting point on the path to ecological awareness.



## **Concluding Thoughts**

Analyzing human–bird relations in contemporary Scandinavian novels from an ecocritical perspective, I have explored the key themes of environmental identity, place, and care. Alienated men (e.g., in *Korparna*, *Fuglane*, and *Nå hogger de*) and grief-stricken women (e.g., in *Ankomst*, *Tre vegar til havet* and *Fuglenes anatomi*) projecting their hopes onto birds are recurrent themes that form a distinctive pattern. Rather than being signifiers of biodiversity or representing the autonomy of wildlife, birds in contemporary Scandinavian fiction tend to be linked to emergent kinds of care rooted in compassion for fellow beings.

In terms of theory, I have demonstrated that environmental hermeneutics can be combined with ecocriticism as a theoretical framework for the analysis of narratives concerned with human–bird relations. I have also shown that ecofeminism can be a fruitful analytical approach, as authors often use birds as a vehicle for ecofeminist concerns. I have suggested ecomasculinity as a possible future direction which is in most cases compatible and sometimes even interchangeable with ecofeminism, while naturalist enthusiasm and the naturalist gaze provide a foundation for ecologically responsible relations.

Areas that could be explored further include the interplay between text and illustrations. Since encounters with and representations of birds are often focused on the visual, it could be worth looking into how photographs, drawings, and paintings can complement, echo, and sometimes distract from, textual narratives. Another topic that could be pursued in more detail is the relationship between literary narratives and biodiversity databases (Heise 2016, 65–66). This could for instance involve analysis of how narratives are informed by and provide interpretations of data from the Norwegian Red List for Species, Species Observations Systems, and other databases provided by the Norwegian Biodiversity Information Centre (Artsdatabanken).

The main conclusion of this dissertation is that birds in contemporary Scandinavian fiction tend to be associated with care. An interesting topic for further research would be whether comparable approaches to care and human–bird relations are evident in other cultural contexts. Comparative readings are likely to reveal nuances that are not immediately apparent, bringing to light different cultural interpretations and how they might contribute toward or undermine opportunities for human–bird coexistence.

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**Article 1: Emplacement and Narrative  
Identity in Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna***

Author: Kvangraven, Endre Harvold Title: Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed's Korparna

## Emplacement and Narrative Identity in Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna*

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### Abstract

In Tomas Bannerhed's *Korparna* (*The Ravens*, 2011), birds and trees not only function as backdrop and setting but contribute toward forming the characters' narrative identities and sense of place. In this article, I explore historical and literary sources from Småland—the historical province in Sweden where *Korparna* is set—to assess how Bannerhed interprets and elaborates on cultural values and traditions. Drawing on Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement," I explicate the interplay between conflicting environmental interpretations, recognizing that places can be described based on the historical record or on ornithological and botanical data, but that folklore and mythology also contribute to local meaning-making. In the context of *Korparna*, I argue that birding can be a meaningful way of engaging with a place, a form of naturalist enthusiasm that fosters deep local knowledge. Finally, I show that relations with nonhumans can be constitutive of a variety of conflicting but partly overlapping environmental identities.

**Keywords:** birds, emplacement, environmental hermeneutics, Tomas Bannerhed.

### Resumen

En *Korparna* (*Los Cuervos*, 2011) de Tomas Bannerhed, las aves y los árboles no solamente funcionan como telón de fondo y escenario, sino que contribuyen a formar las identidades narrativas y el sentido del lugar de los personajes. En este artículo exploro las fuentes históricas y literarias de Småland, la provincia histórica de Suecia donde está ambientada *Korparna*, para evaluar cómo Bannerhed interpreta y elabora los valores y tradiciones culturales. Basándome en el concepto de "emplazamiento" de Forrest Clingerman, explico la interacción entre las interpretaciones ambientales conflictivas, reconociendo que los lugares pueden describirse basándose en el registro histórico o en datos ornitológicos y botánicos, pero que el folclore y la mitología también contribuyen a la creación del significado del lugar. En el contexto de *Korparna*, sostengo que la observación de aves puede ser una forma significativa de relacionarse con el lugar, una forma de entusiasmo naturalista que fomenta el profundo conocimiento local. Finalmente, muestro que las relaciones con los seres no humanos pueden ser constitutivas de una variedad de identidades ambientales conflictivas, aunque a la vez parcialmente superpuestas.

**Palabras clave:** aves, emplazamiento, hermenéutica medioambiental, Tomas Bannerhed.

### Introduction

Set in a rural landscape undergoing large-scale changes, and packed with references to birds and plants, Tomas Bannerhed's debut novel *Korparna* (*The*

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*Ravens*, 2011)<sup>1</sup> would seem to lend itself well to ecocritical readings. Yet, despite winning the prestigious August Prize and being made into an award-winning feature film, it has received scant attention from literary scholars. While *Korparna* can be read as a coming-of-age novel and has some attributes of a historical novel (enacting and problematizing processes of cultural change), it is above all a psychological novel, and can function as an entry point for examining different interpretations of place and landscape. In this article, I examine how the main characters' interactions with nonhumans are mediated by norms, values and traditions that foster different ways of reading the environment.

Environmental hermeneutics takes as its starting point that we assign meaning to nature through historically situated processes of cultural interpretation (Drenthen 170). Of particular relevance for this study is Forrest Clingerman's concept of "emplacement." Analogously to how Paul Ricoeur, in his narrative analysis, resolves the paradox of temporality in narrative through "emplotment," Clingerman applies this approach to place, arguing that our interpretations of nature must account for how we are spatially and temporally situated within it (21). Even though we are clearly "part of nature," in our interpretation we rely on culture and philosophy to approach nature as an object, so that, paradoxically, we are "simultaneously transcending and situated beings" (19). Emplacement involves ecology, aesthetics, resources and community, and none of these categories on its own is sufficient to provide a full view of our situatedness in nature (23).

Reading *Korparna* as a narrative of emplacement, I explore how the character Klas and his father Agne are emplaced in contrasting but partly overlapping ways. Though these are round characters, who cannot be reduced to types, their differences refer to generation conflicts, at least to some extent, as socioeconomic conditions have changed and cultural values have shifted. Where labor and utility were once paramount, and still are to Agne, the rise of environmentalism, which informs Klas's worldview, calls for a cultural shift from needing to have control over nonhumans to striving for coexistence with them. Since Klas is a birder, I also consider how ornithological practice relates to emplacement, drawing on the work of the cultural anthropologist Michael Hundeide.

I begin with a brief presentation of the novel's setting and context, then move on to explore how emplacement in *Korparna* relates to (1) birding, (2) folklore, mythology and symbolism; and (3) cultural heritage and biodiversity. Finally, I place Clingerman's theory of "emplacement" in dialogue with John van Buren's critical environmental hermeneutics in order to analyze the environmental identities and values that emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> *Korparna* has been translated into English by Sarah Death and published as *The Ravens*, but, considering that her translation at some points diverges from the original in significant ways, I refer to the original Swedish text, and all translations are mine.

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### Setting and Context

*Korparna* is narrated by Klas in the first person, mostly in the past tense but occasionally shifting to the present tense for brief sections of inner monologue or dream-like sequences, some of which are italicized. Events are narrated chronologically, with references to the past mostly presented in the form of dialogue where characters refer to past experiences.

The novel is set in a rural area in the historical province of Småland in southern Sweden during the 1970s, where twelve-year-old Klas is set to inherit the farm *Undantaget* from his aging and increasingly unstable father Agne and dreads it. In Swedish, the term *undantaget* usually refers to a smaller house separate from the main farmhouse where, traditionally, the farmer's grandparents or other relatives would live. Calling an entire farm, with fields and all, *Undantaget*, thereby suggests that it was once part of a larger farm and consists of marginal land.<sup>2</sup>

On the whole, Klas is clever, curious and quick to learn, but he is wary of work, unable to summon any enthusiasm for mundane tasks like sowing and reaping the crops. The thought of spending his life working on the farm strikes him as crushingly boring, and besides, it is dubious whether the farm is even economically viable, as the plot of land is simply not large enough to be competitive. While Agne cannot face up to this, Klas is torn between his longing to get away and his eagerness to please his father. Migratory birds arriving from far-off corners of the world nourish his dreams of escape.

Klas builds a kite modeled after the dimensions of a white-tailed eagle—supposedly “the only bird that can't be killed by lightning” (*Korparna* 406)<sup>3</sup>—and when he flies it, he imagines that he himself takes wing, though another part of him hopes that his father is watching (403). Gazing at an aspen leaf, he sees its veins as “rivers flooding a foreign country” (8)<sup>4</sup> and falls into a daydream of distant lands. He lets it fall into the stream and thinks of its long journey to the ocean, all the landscapes it will pass through, until he can no longer see it in his mind's eye (12). “The aspen and me,” thinks Klas. “We who tremble at the slightest thing” (8).<sup>5</sup>

As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, freeing oneself from “the curse of purposefulness” can be a path toward engaging more directly with place, to the extent that the materiality of one's environment can be experienced as continuous with one's self (Buell 154). The act of questioning “the validity of the self as the primary focalizing device” and daring “to imagine nonhuman agents as bona fide partners”—be they an eagle or an aspen—is a form of literary ecocentrism that can allow the ego

<sup>2</sup> Translated directly to English, *Undantaget* means “the Exception,” as in an exception from the rule or something that holds an exceptional position. *Undan* can mean “away,” “aside,” or “out of the way,” while *taget* suggests something that has been “taken” hold of or “gripped.” It is implicit that, one way or the other, the farm has been “set aside.”

<sup>3</sup> “den enda fågeln som inte kan dödas av blixten” (*Korparna* 406).

<sup>4</sup> “floder som spröd sig över ett främmande land” (*Korparna* 8).

<sup>5</sup> “Aspen och jag, tänkte jag. Vi som darrar för minsta lilla” (*Korparna* 8).

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to be subsumed by its environment, of which it is already a part (179). Klas finds meaning in his encounters with nonhumans, though there may also be an element of escapism involved.

### **Birding as a Form of Emplacement**

Birds are Klas's great passion, but it is not made clear how he gained his extensive ornithological knowledge. Some of it could perhaps be traced to his father—who knows the birds that come and go on the farm, though he does not share Klas's obsessive enthusiasm for them—but much of it is obviously from ornithological literature. It appears somewhat unrealistic that a twelve-year-old would be as proficient a birder as Klas: his identification skills suggest not only knowledge, but extensive field experience that would normally take several seasons to acquire. Klas keeps paging through his bird book and—based on a direct quote, placed in quotation marks, that Bannerhed includes about the challenges of identifying different races of yellow wagtail (*Korparna* 231)—it is evident that the book in question must be a volume by Delin and Svensson (probably from one or other of their Swedish titles, but see *Philip's Guide* 208). Since these are well-known, influential bird experts, not only in Sweden but in Europe as a whole, mentioning the source is unnecessary, and avid birders familiar with the literature might nod in recognition.

New horizons open for Klas when he meets Veronika, recently arrived from Stockholm, who lived in East Africa when she was younger and has a cosmopolitan orientation. Her parents are intellectual, well-read and artistic, in sharp contrast to the people Klas interacts with in his daily life. Veronika has traveled the world, experienced foreign cultures and met a wide range of people. For her, Småland is boring, but she is not attuned to what is going on there, neither to changes in nature nor to human intrigue. Where Klas harbors a close familiarity with the place, including the various bird species that inhabit it and the plants that grow there, Veronika is not invested in it at all. She tells Klas stories of the African bush, and Klas is captivated. He would certainly embrace the same kind of adventure if it were available to him, but he is where he is, and as long as he is trapped there, whether he likes the place or not is beside the point.

Klas takes Veronika to a lake, Madsjön, where they listen to birds calling at night, a precious opportunity for him to share his world. As they follow the distant booming of a bittern, they happen to flush a female bittern at close range in the torchlight, and find her eggs, a once-in-a-lifetime experience made all the more magical by Veronika's presence (*Korparna* 170–75). He succeeds in showing her that Småland, too, holds potential for meaningful experience. Veronika, however, goes off to the French Riviera with her parents for summer holidays, and then, to Klas's huge disappointment, moves back to Väsby to live with her mother while her father stays behind in the village. As Veronika's parents separate and her father's drunkenness gets the better of him, it becomes clear that her family, too, is dysfunctional. This casts the comparison with Klas's family in a different light, suggesting that existential

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restlessness entails risks, that there might be something to be said for the predictability of tradition and the security of a solid base.

For Hundeide, increased knowledge of one's local patch through ornithological practice involves an aspect of what Heidegger and others have conceptualized as "dwelling": being at home in a place, inhabiting it actively (132). In times past, family affiliation was often crucial in determining where we cast our existential lot, and this still holds true to some extent. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the tendency to move more frequently, never settling down entirely, has led to a so-called rootlessness, or even "placelessness,"<sup>6</sup> which, in *Korparna*, is exemplified by Veronika and her family. This may lead to a desire to belong, reflected in attempts to compensate for the lack of local attachments through engagement with place, for instance through field experience with local flora and fauna backed up by scientific knowledge (Hundeide 132). The modern disruption of local attachments does not entail a disruption of attachments per se, but it appears that attachments have become dispersed, perhaps even compartmentalized. If Agne's insistence on subduing the landscape through labor, on carrying forward his forefathers' legacy, is no longer relevant, Klas's mastery of bird calls and pursuit of rarities may be a legitimate alternative—an ecologically informed, less anthropocentric way of engaging with place.

Hundeide conceptualizes birding as a form of "natural historical enthusiasm" ("naturhistorisk entusiasme"), a dynamic process that requires creativity and involvement, so that the birder can achieve a state of "flow," where the mind, body and senses are engaged in the experience of nature (396–97, 434). Considering that this enthusiasm is often driven by a quest for novelty, leading to a sense of discovery, it could also be described as a form of Deleuzian "becoming" (Hundeide 396–97). Where "dwelling" is centered on a home or a base, "becoming" involves movement, even if only locally (398). Applied to *Korparna*, it is obvious that Agne is a dweller who can no longer imagine living anywhere else, but it is not yet clear what Klas will become; his options are still open, and though he has a strong attachment to Undantaget and to Småland, he is drawn to the nomadic existence Veronika has experienced. "Dwelling" and "becoming" are not mutually exclusive: on the contrary, "becoming" can follow from "dwelling," as an expansion of it. The nomadic can begin with the local; in some contexts, "dwelling" can even be a prerequisite for "becoming" (Hundeide 397).

Even more significant than the concepts of dwelling and becoming may be that of familiarity. The Norwegian ecophilosopher and mountaineer Nils Faarlund coined the phrase "familiarity leads to friendship,"<sup>7</sup> which Hundeide applies to birding, arguing that familiarity based on perceptual engagement not only facilitates identification of regular species but also makes it easier to notice the rare species that stand out (117–19). When birders acquire a certain level of familiarity with and knowledge of the birds on their local patch, this can in turn lead to care. Moreover,

<sup>6</sup> "stedløsheten" (Hundeide 132).

<sup>7</sup> "kjennskap fører til vennskap" (Faarlund qtd. in Hundeide 117).



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this also holds true for place, as the species birders encounter in a given area are inextricably bound up with their “emplacement” (Clingerman 23). In *Korparna*, this is reflected in how Klas and Agne have widely different interpretations of the same patch of land, Klas seeing it for its biodiversity, Agne for its utility. Though some may dismiss the pursuit of rare birds as esoteric, it can be a means of understanding the landscape—of increasing its resolution, in a sense, so that it can be viewed in full. It enriches Klas’s life and, in the cases when he succeeds in conveying its significance to others, also the lives of those around him.

### Folklore, Mythology and Symbolism

Places are not only defined by the creatures that inhabit them but also by the stories that are told there. While places can be described based on the historical record, there are also literary, folkloric and mythological records that can be taken into account, which contribute to local meaning-making and form part of the fabric of residents’ lived experience. Barely a page of *Korparna* passes without a reference to some bird or plant, but in addition to ornithology and botany, the text is informed by tradition and folklore. Several species play symbolic roles, and the ravens that the novel’s title refers to are portents of impending disaster. Agne suffers auditory hallucinations in which he hears ravens crowing, and points out that, from the Vikings to the Romans, people have known that ravens flying across farmsteads are forewarnings of death (*Korparna* 113). As habitual scavengers and opportunistic predators (113), ravens are easy to condemn, but Klas takes their associations with Odin and death less seriously, and when he hears a raven crowing, interprets it as a greeting (252).

In bringing near-forgotten beliefs about trees and birds back into the light, showing how they can complement scientific knowledge and influence environmental values, Bannerhed reinvigorates the folklore of Småland. For Agne, the arrival of migratory birds in spring signals shifts in the weather, foretelling how the farming season will play out. As technical solutions have gained sway, these traditional ways of interpreting nature have all but disappeared, but for Agne, in the 1970s, it is still a living tradition and is not romanticized. Nor does he seem to be aware of any contradiction between reading the landscape through the language of birds and plants while relying on modern agricultural machinery and pesticides. Straddling traditional and industrial rurality, Agne epitomizes his time, and this appears to be one of the main causes of his woes and anxieties.

Cuckoos are rarely seen, but everybody knows their call (*I starens tid* 73). When Klas does a cuckoo imitation, a cuckoo comes flying, lands in a robin’s nest, shoves an egg out and lays its own. Realizing that he is complicit in the failure of the robins’ breeding attempt, Klas is aghast, and considers removing the cuckoo egg or destroying the nest so the robins will give up on it and build a new nest elsewhere

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(*Korparna* 63–66).<sup>8</sup> Agne talks about there being a morning service celebrating the cuckoo's return up at the village house, an annual tradition on Ascension Day, but Klas thinks to himself that there's "not much to celebrate about someone who lives off of others" (83).<sup>9</sup> Klas feels an affinity with the cuckoo, and this fills him with shame: after all, he, too, is dependent on others, and reluctant to do his share of work. In this instance, it seems that Klas, not entirely unlike his father, has incorporated tradition into his worldview, and though he does not confuse it with science, he is on the verge of taking it as a moral guideline.

In his later non-fiction book *I starens tid*, Bannerhed elaborates on the cuckoo's role in Swedish culture, pointing out that its return is still celebrated with a morning service in May in some parts of Sweden (72). Ushering in the spring, cuckoos are associated with "sun and budding greenery,"<sup>10</sup> though they also carry ominous, supernatural associations, having the ability to foretell not only the weather and the harvest, but also how long a child will live, when a farmer will die, and the circumstances of a maiden's future marriage (73). A newborn cuckoo is a prime image of voraciousness, quick to kill its foster siblings, soon outgrowing its foster parents. Raised by other species, in whose nests it will in turn lay its eggs, and rarely interacting with its own kind except for mating purposes, the cuckoo's life is an existential mystery (74, 77): "how does the cuckoo know that it is a cuckoo?" (74).<sup>11</sup> Aside from his feeling like a parasite, Klas's identification with the cuckoo can thereby be linked to a quest for identity.

Trees such as rowan, aspen and alder are present throughout the text, forming part of the backdrop but also functioning as signifiers and at times as forces, if not exactly characters. A *flygrönn*—"flying rowan"—is a rowan that grows from the fork of another tree, a phenomenon that has been associated with a range of superstitions since at least the Viking age. In *Korparna*, the dowser ("slagrutemannen"), Alvar, goes searching for one to make a divining rod. Veronika and her family are in the process of moving in, and Alvar has been given the task of trying to locate a well on their property up at Lyckanshöjd. He laments that flying rowans are hard to come by these days, as people no longer keep track of them (*Korparna* 67–68), yet another example of a form of traditional knowledge that has almost been lost. Scientifically, dowsing doesn't work, and flying rowans are just rowans.

Today, biodiversity is mapped in more detail than ever, but the information is stored in databases rather than in collective memory, based on specialist, or at least citizen scientist, knowledge, rather than that of local communities. One of the most striking aspects of *Korparna* is that it draws on both science and folk tradition without pitting these knowledge systems against each other. While tacitly assuming that his readers will be able to distinguish the scientific from the folkloric, Bannerhed adheres

<sup>8</sup> Bannerhed does not mention it, but in the folk tradition of Småland, one should avoid imitating the cuckoo's call, as this could excite the bird to spit blood (Karl Salomonsson cited in Svanberg 56–57).

<sup>9</sup> "Inte mycket att fira en som lever på andra" (*Korparna* 83).

<sup>10</sup> "sol och spirande grönska" (*I starens tid* 73).

<sup>11</sup> "hur vet göken att den är gök?" (*I starens tid* 74). Also see *Korparna* 313.

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to standards of scientific accuracy in his descriptions of birds and plants; yet he also allows room for myth and superstition, recognizing the fascination they continue to hold and acknowledging their place in the cultural imaginary.

Flying rowans take root when birds eat rowan berries and excrete the seeds up in trees; they are therefore associated with birds, and, considering that they are not rooted in the ground like other trees, also with flight. Alvar says that the flying rowan was “Frigg’s tree”—referring to the goddess, the protector of mothers, in Norse mythology—and that providing a house with water found with a flying rowan will lead to fertility and protection from harm for those who live there, as the home will then become a holy place (*Korparna* 69). However, he also refers to the mythological first woman on Earth, Embla, and claims that she was created from a rowan (69), leading the reader to doubt his narrative, as this contradicts the well-known theory that Embla originated from an elm.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that the anecdotes Bannerhed refers to need not be taken literally, that some of them have been playfully embroidered upon. Alvar’s warning that “[p]utting a flying rowan in a jar is like burying a raven alive,”<sup>13</sup> and that such a deed will not go unpunished (69), can lead us to think of flying rowans as a wild and unmanageable force that is not meant to be cultivated. Late in the novel there is a disturbing scene where Agne tries to get his family to eat rowan berries. His wife Gärd—accompanied by Klas and his younger brother Göran—has just picked him up at the hospital where he recovered from his collapse, and driving back home, they stop for a break. When Agne wanders off, his wife and sons fear he has lost his mind again and eventually find him proffering a fistful of the bitter berries, which he urges them to eat (270–71).

Another folkloric motif that plays a significant role in *Korparna* is that of the *lindorm*,<sup>14</sup> a mythological serpent or dragon that purportedly preys on livestock and feeds on human corpses. It appears in legends from various parts of Northern and Western Europe, but holds a special place in Småland, where alleged sightings of giant snakes—up to at least three meters long, sometimes with a horse-like mane—were reported as late as 1885. Gunnar Olof Hyltén-Cavallius, a scholar from Småland, collected eyewitness reports of the feared creature, and offered a reward to anyone who managed to collect a specimen. Stories circulated of men who had fought and killed particularly aggressive individuals, and when no specimen was ever collected, this was said to be because *lindorm* carcasses decay exceptionally fast and exude an unbearable stench that can lead to serious illness (Meurger 87–88).

Hyltén-Cavallius introduces his treatise on the *lindorm* by referring to the dragons or serpents of Norse mythology (3), the most iconic of which is Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, which encircles Midgard with the length of its body, holding the world together. When it loosens its grip, however, chaos and destruction will ensue; it provides security, while also carrying the threat that that security might be lost. The

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Nedkvitne and Gjerdåker 162.

<sup>13</sup> “Sätta en flygrönn i krukka är som att begrava korpen levande” (*Korparna* 69).

<sup>14</sup> While the Swedish *lind* means “snake” but can also refer to linden trees (*Tilia* sp.), *orm* can mean either “snake,” “dragon” or “worm.”

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Midgard Serpent is pursued by Thor, god of lightning and thunder, and during Ragnarök, the two will do battle and slay each other. In *Korparna*, this is echoed in the way that the lindorm has the ability to attract and swallow lightning.

Bannerhed also links the *lindorm* to the linden tree. When Gärd, Klas and Göran take shelter in the car during a thunderstorm, Gärd tells them a story about an old linden tree by her mother's parents' home which they called "the thunder-linden" ("Åsklinden") because it had blocked a ball lightning from striking the house. This was due to the *lindorm* that lived "down between the roots" and "drew the lightning strikes down into the earth and swallowed them" (197).<sup>15</sup>

In Hyltén-Cavallius's account, a *lindorm* is "thick as a man's thigh" (4),<sup>16</sup> and in *Korparna*, Bannerhed reveals his source, embroidering on it, when he has Gärd say that the *lindorm* "was seven meters long and as thick as my thigh" (197).<sup>17</sup> It would attack its enemies with a venomous sting, Gärd tells the boys, but could also bite its own tail and roll off "like a great wheel" (198).<sup>18</sup> Again, this is clearly based on the attestations collected by Hyltén-Cavallius, where the "Lindorm" or "Drake" (Swedish for "dragon") is also known as "Hjulorm," "wheel-snake" (6).<sup>19</sup>

The image of a snake biting its tail and rolling like a wheel is suggestive of an ouroboros, a symbol of cyclicity associated with archaic traditions such as alchemy. It can be seen as an embodiment of the turning of the seasons and generational cycles, the "thousand years in Småland" of which Elin Wägner writes, where ages merge into each other as traditions are abandoned only to resurface centuries later, rendering the concept of progress or even linearity problematic (Wägner 20). Applied to *Korparna*, this might be the vicious circle Agne is trapped in, bound by a generational pact that has become a curse for him.

There is no biological basis for stories of the *lindorm*, and none of the characters in *Korparna* really believe in it, but Bannerhed weaves it into the narrative so that it forms part of their experience, if only as a story they relate to. It is a part of their mythos, and even if science has rendered it obsolete, it is characteristic of mythologies that elements may be forgotten or overlooked for considerable stretches of time only to be brought back into the light and interpreted in new ways. Michel Meurger has pointed out that when Hyltén-Cavallius set about documenting the existence of the *lindorm*, in the hope that his findings would be recognized by the scientific community, his motivation was not primarily biological, but cultural. Since serpents or dragons in various forms feature prominently in Old Norse iconography and in medieval folklore, proving the veracity of the tales of the *lindorm* could have

<sup>15</sup> "nere bland rötterna. [...] Den drog ner blixterna i jorden och svalde dem om de slog ner i närheten" (*Korparna* 197). This is consistent with one of the eyewitness accounts Hyltén-Cavallius collected, where the *lindorm* is found near a large hole at the foot of an old linden tree (22-23).

<sup>16</sup> "tjock som ett mans-lår" (Hyltén-Cavallius 4). This detail of its girth being comparable to that of a man's thigh is confirmed by many of the eyewitness reports (6, 13, 14, 27, 30, 31, 34, 42).

<sup>17</sup> "Den var sju meter lång och lika grov som mitt lår" (*Korparna* 197).

<sup>18</sup> "som ett stort hjul" (*Korparna* 198).

<sup>19</sup> In one of the eyewitness reports, the belief that it could roll like a wheel is dismissed as superstition (Hyltén-Cavallius 29).

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provided a “natural bond with the past,” functioning as evidence of cultural continuity while exonerating the people of Småland, proving “the validity of an antique way of life, now confined within the bounds of a parochial enclave” (Meurger 96).

*Korparna* is not a celebration of Småland, but it is an attempt at doing justice to the place. Bannerhed depicts its natural beauty and the richness of its history, and despite Agne’s madness and the pervasive air of pettiness, the community is above all characterized by stability. Bannerhed’s portrayal is ambiguous but finely balanced, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions. Though the landscape has been drained and ditched, it has also been a place of flying rowans and has been seen as the last redoubt of the legendary *lindorm*.

Lightning is a recurrent motif in *Korparna*. Alvar has warned Klas that lightning tends to strike old oak trees because their deep roots “seek the groundwater”; this gives them a higher conductivity than “all other trees,” causing them to attract lightning “like a magnet.”<sup>20</sup> If one is struggling to detect water with a dowsing rod, one can supposedly go to an oak and start from there, where the source is (*Korparna* 69). Again, there is an implicit reference to Norse mythology, where oaks were associated with Thor.<sup>21</sup> It is unclear whether Alvar is reciting ancient wisdom or just making up stories (70), but later, during the storm that drives Gärd and the boys to seek safety in the car, “the Crown Oak” (“Kroneken”) at Undantaget does get struck by lightning, and two heifers that have taken shelter beneath it are killed, one of them pregnant, the other the best of their milk cows (204).

The references to lightning are too numerous to dismiss as incidental, yet their significance is not explained, apart from lightning being a source of fear, especially for Klas. Though it can be linked to mythology and folklore, it mostly functions as a representation of the primal forces of nature, of the elements. While the land and the animals are managed by humans, lightning is beyond their control, a dangerous, unpredictable, awe-inspiring force. As one never knows exactly where it is going to strike, it is a reminder that there is no such thing as total security.

Klas is camping in the woods at night when a storm takes him by surprise, rain and wind tearing at his tent. He imagines that the bog is finally about to split open and reclaim the farms and the forest (*Korparna* 321), or that perhaps the *lindorm* has “awoken to life”<sup>22</sup> and emerged to watch the lightning flashing one last time (322). Impulsively, in defiance of all good sense, he proceeds to pick a bunch of fly agaric, chopping the poisonous mushrooms up and mixing them with some cold pine needle tea, which he proceeds to drink in little gulps (324). He makes himself sick, punishes himself for never lending a hand, for being “cuckoo-like,” a “meaningless creep”;<sup>23</sup> he pushes himself to the limit in order to be purged of all this uselessness (327). It appears to be a catharsis of sorts, a way of proving to himself what he is willing to

<sup>20</sup> “ekrötterna går djupt, söker sig till grundvattnet, vilket gör att eken leder elektricitet bättre än alla andra träd. Den drar till sig blixten som en magnet” (*Korparna* 69).

<sup>21</sup> Though Bannerhed does not mention Thor in connection with oaks, he refers to Thor’s role as the bringer of thunder and lightning elsewhere in *Korparna* (406).

<sup>22</sup> “vaknat till liv” (*Korparna* 322).

<sup>23</sup> “gökaktigt”; “meningslösa kryp” (*Korparna* 327).

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risk, how far he is willing to go, in the hope that things can get better. Then again, such reckless, manic behavior also suggests that Klas might be susceptible to the same kind of delusions that plague his father.

### Cultural Heritage and Biodiversity

Though some of the traditional notions about trees and birds presented in *Korparna* are suggestive of a pagan past, the Swedish farming community Bannerhed writes about is deeply embedded in Christian, capitalist and even industrial systems of thought. As in other parts of Scandinavia, wetlands in Småland were drained with ditches during the nineteenth century. By 1875, it was reported that the fens and bogs in eastern parts of Småland had been replaced by farmland, the forests gone, while several bird species that were once abundant had all disappeared (Svanberg 15). The farming tradition Agne represents is by no means a pastoral idyll; on the contrary, it has long been dominated by an economic drive toward industrialized agriculture.

On one level, Agne is engaged in a futile struggle against the changing times, yet on another, he is wholly reliant on the destructive technologies of agroindustry, which he does not seem to question. DDT had already been banned in 1970, after causing severe declines in populations of predatory birds such as peregrine falcon. Agne, however, wears a cap with the brand name "Hormoslyr" printed on the sides (*Korparna* 180), functioning as a walking advertisement for another chemical—a herbicide whose main active ingredients are the same as those of Agent Orange—which would be banned in Sweden in 1977, as it was found to cause cancer and birth defects. In their different ways, Klas and Agne are both entangled in conflicts not only between tradition and science but also between traditional and industrial agriculture. *Korparna* reveals contradictions and paradoxes that result in friction between generations; at times, this comes across as nostalgia for what has been, but tradition is also revealed to be inadequate, necessitating changes in both agricultural and lifestyle practices.

Today, old stone fences around fields might strike us as scenic features of a time-worn cultural heritage landscape, but Agne is preoccupied with what a backbreaking task it was to remove the stones from the ground with a spade and digging bar, pointing out that his grandfather was unable to finish the task even though he was hard at it all his life (*Korparna* 184). He calls it "slave labor" ("slavgöra") and finds a cruel irony in the fact that people now tend to think that the stones are there for aesthetic purposes (185). Ranting on, he compares it to war, says that it was about survival back then (185); he never tires of emphasizing that the farm they live on is the result of generations of toil. Decades of hard labor have almost destroyed him, have worn him out physically and left him with severe psychological problems.

Agne doesn't want to talk about it, at least not in front of Klas, but during a quarrel, Gård lets slip that his grandfather, Klas's great-grandfather, drowned himself when Agne was a young boy (*Korparna* 186). Agne's father, on the other hand, was

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dragged away to a nursing home against his will and died there (373). "There was no one that could handle a scythe like father," says Agne (188), and tells Klas all about the techniques his own father used for cutting the grass and sharpening the scythe (189). The story repeats itself, as Klas and Agne appear to be replaying scenes that once played out between Agne and his father. In the library, a retired schoolteacher tells Klas that Agne, in his youth, was bookish and promising, that he could have gone far but had problems at home (95). We understand that Agne is bitter because he had to take over the burden of his father's responsibilities at a young age, and that he is desperate to justify his path in life, to himself and to his son. Meanwhile, Gård is a source of stability, a levelheaded counterweight to the darkness and obsession that have taken hold of Agne.

Bearing in mind that the reader's impression of Agne is filtered through Klas's gaze, we might do well to treat it with skepticism. Yet, if anything, Klas's reading of Agne's moods and behavior is more generous than an outside observer's would likely be. Through Klas's observations of Agne's actions and gestures, we perceive that Agne is obsessive and distracted, at times shockingly inconsiderate, so self-absorbed that he seems to have lost the capacity for empathy. Nevertheless, throughout the novel, Klas's gut reaction is to hold out hope that Agne will pull through, that he is not as crazy as some of the villagers would have him. When Klas finds the text "AGNE HEADED FOR THE MADHOUSE"<sup>24</sup> spray-painted in large, bold letters across the wall of the morgue by the church, his immediate reaction is one of denial, before he tries to surmise who might have done it and makes plans to remove it (*Korparna* 131–33).

Through the novel, crisis follows crisis, building up to a seemingly inevitable turning point. When Agne finally commits suicide by drowning, it is hardly a surprise (*Korparna* 409–14). The Canal ("Kanalen"), along with the danger of falling into it, is introduced as a motif at the very beginning of the novel (*Korparna* 7, 9), so when Klas receives a phone call from Alvar about having found Agne's cap down by the Canal (409), he rushes down to investigate while the realization of what has happened sinks in. Along the way, he is accosted by a "swarm" ("svärm") of lapwings, screaming and scolding, whisking through the air around Klas's head with their dark, scythe-like wings like "messengers from death itself"<sup>25</sup> warning him to turn back (410).

Readers familiar with northern lapwings will realize that they are probably defending their nests, but it is fitting that lapwings would warn of Agne's death as they represent the way of life that dies with him: a farming tradition, a certain way of reading the landscape. They are at home in these damp, low-lying fields, characteristic of the environment Agne was emplaced in. Lapwings have in recent years come to be seen as emblematic of traditional Scandinavian cultural landscapes, but are also in sharp decline due to habitat loss as a result of industrialized agriculture. "Näiii, näiii!" they wail, almost a "no," a bleating, insistent cry of denial (*Korparna* 410). Whether Undantaget is incorporated into a larger, industrial-scale farm, or whether it is left

<sup>24</sup> "AGNE PÅ VÄG TILL DÄRHUSET" (*Korparna* 131).

<sup>25</sup> "varnande sändebud från döden själv" (*Korparna* 410).

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untended and reverts to thicket and shrub, the lapwings are likely to disappear along with their habitat. It is unclear what Klas will decide, but if he does end up trying to keep the farm running, chances are that he will do it out of concern for the lapwings and other species that thrive in tended landscapes. In a world of monocultures bisected by highways, the cry of a lapwing can appear as archaic and nostalgic, but also as a warning, an alarm call, alerting us to the loss of biodiversity.

### Conclusion: Emplacement and Environmental Identity

On some levels, *Korparna* is an easy read, a story of different generations, of a young boy who is reluctant to take on the burden of toil his father has carried, while there are also the beginnings of a love story. Some readers might flip quickly past the ornithological and botanical details, but if one stops to consider the themes and context, these details are instructive elaborations on various aspects of Småland's culture and environment. Those familiar with Småland might find it particularly interesting, but even for locals some of the references are likely to be obscure.

As mentioned in the introduction, emplacement relates to ecology, aesthetics, resources and community, all of which contribute toward shaping our relations to nature (Clingerman 23). While the ornithological science Klas draws on in his interpretation of local birdlife would hold limited interest without the aesthetic dimension, traditional folk beliefs deepen his understanding of the birds' cultural significance. These folk beliefs, along with common knowledge about local flora and fauna, would once have played a significant role in cultural practices, for instance with the communal celebration of the cuckoo's return. Today, environmentalism and natural historical enthusiasm have the potential to play a comparable cultural role but can be divisive when they come into conflict with resource use. The resource perspective is at odds with the ecological perspective in that birds—serving as ecological indicators—are threatened by industrial agriculture. The place is still relatively rich in birdlife, but would have been richer in times past, and large birds of prey, such as the white-tailed eagles Klas models his kite on, are conspicuous by their absence.

In concert with Clingerman's concept of emplacement, John van Buren's critical environmental hermeneutics provides a means of explicating the environmental perspectives expressed in *Korparna*. Seeking to disentangle the "underlying epistemological, ethical, and political issues" that come into play in different environmental interpretations (261–62), van Buren sketches out four criteria for interpretation—biophysical, technical, historical and ethical-political (268)—which allow us to distinguish between the objective and the relative in order to achieve a balance between them (273). In this light, we might say that the objective characteristics of Undantaget are that it consists of low-lying land that has been drained and converted from marsh to farmland, and that it is home to a variety of plants, birds and mammals. What is at stake in our interpretation of it, however, relates to its relative characteristics: for Agne it is valuable because of the food it can



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produce, and he sees its cultivation as a prime intergenerational goal that affirms the narrative bequeathed to him. For Klas, on the other hand, it is valuable for its biodiversity, while the drudgery of cultivation is abhorrent—not only boring and unhealthy but harmful to the environment. Hence, there is a clash of values at play that cannot be solved with simple reference to scientific or historical fact.

During the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, Scandinavian farmers were engaged in a battle against nature, striving for control, for assurance of security. Today, food scarcity is not a major issue for most people in Scandinavia, but increasing numbers of people are worried about extinction and ecological degradation. Concurrently, the “war” Agne still appears to be living in has given way to a kind of nostalgia in the space that has been left behind as this war has become unnecessary. Tradition forms the frame of reference against which new understandings of nature, and humans' place in it, are renegotiated or reconstructed, and as traditional knowledge is superseded by science, this can evoke nostalgia among those who remain rooted in tradition.

Agne's values can hence be linked to a struggle to rise out of poverty, while Klas's can be linked to environmentalism and a more individualistic social context characterized by upward mobility. In his youth, Agne would watch the trains go by and collect old tickets and timetables down by the station (*Korparna* 81); he obviously dreamed of getting away, but over the years, he changed. One of the reasons why it is an overriding concern for Agne that his son should take over the farm is that he himself has had to make enormous sacrifices and now fears that it will all come to naught. As for Klas, even though he readily absorbs new knowledge, recognizing undreamt-of possibilities, he is firmly emplaced, with deep local knowledge and correspondingly strong local attachments. At the novel's ending, after Agne's suicide, it remains unclear whether or not Klas will finally break the circle, but it is implicit that his internal struggle will continue, that his task will be one of balance and compromise, trying to honor Agne's life's work without letting go of the opportunities available to him, opportunities that Agne too would probably have taken had he been in Klas's place.

Perhaps Klas's environmental identity can be considered ecocentric, Agne's anthropocentric, but it is misleading to think of these as polar opposites.<sup>26</sup> Rather than pitting them against each other, we might achieve a fuller understanding if we consider how relations with nonhumans are essential to both. Klas might draw inspiration from ecocentric perspectives, but he is neither willing nor able to disentangle himself fully from the culture he is embedded in; on the contrary, he clings to a desperate hope that the environmentalist ideas that resonate with him can somehow be reconciled with the tradition represented by his father. Agne's measured folk wisdom may appear antithetical to Klas's naturalist enthusiasm, but even though Agne is more concerned with nonhumans' utility to humans, this does not necessarily

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance Utsler 174.

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entail a denial of their intrinsic value. On the contrary, he takes them for granted as integral constituents of the place where he has always lived.

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## **Article 2: Of Birds and Men in Rural Norway: Self, Place and Landscape in Vesaas and Lirhus**

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**Article 3: Human–Bird Relations and  
Ethics of Care in Contemporary  
Norwegian Fiction**

ENDRE HARVOLD KVANGRAVEN 

## Human–Bird Relations and Ethics of Care in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction

In literature as in life, the significance of birds for humans is contextual, subjective, and culturally constructed. Their role may be interpreted as ecological, spiritual, aesthetic, or symbolic, depending on one’s preconceptions and capacity to be affected (Sax 15, 65, 149). Where birds figure as prominent motifs in twenty-first century Norwegian literary fiction, they tend to be associated with practices of care. More precisely, birds are often linked to relations between parents and children: mostly mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, women of different generations. Some texts deal with involuntary childlessness or the loss of a child, misfortunes that challenge the characters’ capacity for care and, in turn, lead to care being directed at or projected onto birds. This article will focus on three novels in which these associations are particularly evident: Gøhril Gabrielsen’s *Ankomst* (*Arrival*, 2017), Brit Bildøen’s *Tre vegar til havet* (*Three Roads to the Sea*, 2018), and Merethe Lindstrøm’s *Fuglenes anatomi* (*The Anatomy of Birds*, 2019). While contemporary Norwegian fiction is remarkably rich in examples of birds functioning as a motif linked to care, these three novels offer divergent approaches that, taken together, provide a representative overview.<sup>1</sup> Can the association of birds with care contribute toward fostering sustainable relations with nonhumans? How does it align with environmentalist aims?

Drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa’s work on the ethics of care, I argue that care can be problematic, and that “normative moralistic

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visions of care" are insufficient ("Nothing Comes without Its World" 198). Even though empathy and concomitant care, as presented in narratives, can be a motivating factor for environmental action, there is a risk of care being misdirected, such as when birds are held in captivity or when complex ecological factors such as invasive species come into play. While care for humans and care for nonhumans often go together, there is an obvious tendency to privilege humans at nonhumans' expense. This might especially be true of narratives about parenthood and childrearing, as a pronatalist stance tends to be taken for granted but is not necessarily conducive to mitigating the ecological crisis. Here, Donna Haraway's concept of "making kin" as a route toward "multispecies flourishing" (2) might provide a useful alternative.

The Norwegian psychologist, novelist, poet, and researcher Kjersti Ericsson has pointed out the significance of gender in human–bird relations, arguing that ornithology has been dominated by men and that this is reflected in how bird ringing and ornithological research are carried out ("Mitt fugleliv" 242–43). There is also a long-standing tendency among literary critics—especially male critics—to read birds as metaphors rather than fellow beings (241), to reduce birds to objects of contemplation or reflections of human concerns. Ericsson, for whom the birds on her feeder are like street children in need of help, notes that her view of birds is strongly influenced by the social heritage imparted by her mother, who saw them in the same way (242, 247).<sup>2</sup> She thereby anchors her interpretation of birds not only in care but in mother–daughter relations. Based on her own experience with bird feeding and ornithology, and drawing on Martin Buber, she makes a case for an ethics of care and for I–thou relations with the nonhuman world (247). Where ornithologists tend to focus on species, populations, and ecosystems, Ericsson shows that care can also be directed at individuals or flocks (241–42), in a line of argument that resonates with the tenets of the emerging field of compassionate conservation (Ramp and Bekoff). According to Thom van Dooren, conservation biologists are rarely emotionally detached from their work; on the contrary, despite pursuing objectives that are allegedly scientific rather than personal, they tend to be driven by care for the species they work with, if not always for individual animals (*Flight Ways* 108).

Gøhril Gabrielsen, Brit Bildøen, and Merethe Lindstrøm are all award-winning literary authors, widely recognized for exploring sensitive topics, including issues of gender, with keen psychological insight. Though none of them cite ecofeminist thinkers or make explicit ethical claims about human–nonhuman animal relations, the recurrent theme of motherhood, along with female first-person narrators whose attachment to birds can be interpreted as an expression of sublimated

parental care, calls for further investigation. As stated by Karen J. Warren in a seminal article, “[e]cofeminists insist that the sort of logic of domination used to justify the domination of humans by gender, racial or ethnic, or class status is also used to justify the domination of nature” (132). Since an end to “sexist oppression” would entail an end to “the logic of domination which conceptually grounds it,” this would in turn have consequences for human–nonhuman animal relations (132). Warren argues that first-person narratives are ideal for ethical argumentation because they place the narrator “in relationship with” other characters, including nonhuman animals (135), opening up the possibility of “an emergent caring-type relationship” which “grows out of, and is faithful to, felt, lived experience” (136). Considering that *Arrival*, *Three Roads to the Sea*, and *The Anatomy of Birds* are all first-person narratives told from a woman’s perspective, with an auto-diegetic narrator who is also the focal character, Warren’s notion of ecofeminism seems particularly apt as a framework with which to analyze them. I will begin with an analysis of *Arrival*, followed by analyses of *Three Roads to the Sea* and *The Anatomy of Birds*, before concluding with a comparative discussion of the three novels.

### The Weather Station: Arrival and Absence

In *Arrival*, a psychological thriller by Gøhril Gabrielsen, the autodiegetic narrator is working on a PhD dissertation about the impact of climate change on seabird populations, combining biology with meteorology (46–47). In the dark of winter, a boat captain drops her off on a remote peninsula in Northern Norway where she is planning to do her fieldwork. With an old cabin as her base, she is cut off from the outside world, anticipating the arrival of migratory seabirds while hoping that her lover Jo will be coming to join her there soon.

Narrative tension in *Arrival* springs from unresolved conflicts between people but also from discord between scientific rationality and the uncanny. Through her work, the narrator finds refuge in science and in scientific language, where everything is quantifiable, objective, and precise, in contrast to emotions, which are subjective and unpredictable (e.g., 14, 26, 85, 100, 151). When she is overcome by fear and anxiety, forced to question her own mental faculties, phenomena such as temperature, wind, and cloud cover “befester verden på et vis” (“fortify the world in a way”; my trans.; 39). Finding no solid ground in psychology or history, she clings to her research as a bastion of scientific rationality to stave off the personal tragedy that haunts her. Trying to think about seabirds and their breeding rates instead of the people—especially the daughter—she has left behind (61), she makes a list of



the birds and people in her life, incorporating birds into her personal story (159).<sup>3</sup> Drawing up a Red List, she places herself in the same category as the most threatened seabirds (159), her status having changed from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered (115).

This dialectic between science and psychology, rationality and emotion, is also reflected in the novel's structure. Though the language is literary, Gabrielsen includes a reference list at the end where all the sources cited are from the natural sciences (172). This is fairly unusual in fiction, but Carl Frode Tiller does the same in his novel *Begynnelser* (*Beginnings* 2017, 341–42), which was published the same year as *Arrival*, as does Arild Vange in his cross-genre novel *Livet i luftene: Fortelling. Sang* (*Life in the Airs: Narrative. Song* 2018, 243–44). Karl Ove Knausgård makes a comparable move in his novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (*The Birds Beneath the Sky* 2019), not citing references but including a list of Norwegian and scientific names of the species that are illustrated, using square brackets to indicate that one is juvenile (64). In the Norwegian context, *Arrival* thereby reflects an apparent shift toward integrating natural science into literary fiction.

The narrator notes how parental care in black-legged kittiwakes is shared between males and females, with both sexes contributing toward incubating the eggs and bringing food for the young, while in common murrelets and razorbills the young, upon leaving the nest, leave the mother behind and follow their father out to sea (Gabrielsen 61). She recalls seeing a breeding colony of kittiwakes surprised by a spring snowstorm, how the birds remained on their nests, only visible by their bills sticking out of the snow (61). This is presented as an example of the fierce dedication of breeding birds, held up as exemplary parenthood, almost as an ideal for human parents to strive for. It stands in contrast to the narrator, who is ridden with guilt for abandoning her daughter, Lina, in the hands of her abusive and apparently unstable ex-husband, S, whom she is deadly afraid of and recently separated from. Nevertheless, she figures that he will take adequate care of Lina, if only to cast himself in a good light. She reckons that for seabirds, care is instinctive, but for humans, it can be “et middel, en metode, . . . en maktutøvelse” (“a means, a method, . . . an exercise of power”; my trans.; 106); that care can be a gift, but also a performance. During a Skype conversation, Jo tells the narrator that he has to delay coming to join her out of concern for the well-being of his daughter from a previous marriage, at which the narrator feels a pang of guilt, as if he is implying that her “evne til omsorg er svakere, av en simplere sort enn hans” (“capacity for care is weaker, of a baser kind than his”; my trans.; 21).

For the narrator, traveling here seemed like a way of taking back control over her life, but having arrived, she is torn as to whether or not it was the right decision. Her research seems like an attempt to compensate for something, almost a form of penance. She is obsessively dedicated to her PhD project, seeing it not only as being of vital consequence for the seabirds she studies but as a path to personal redemption. Although she is dismayed to discover that the effects of climate change on seabirds will be even more severe than previously predicted, she sees the situation in a more positive light when she thinks of how her dissertation will contribute toward explaining those effects (Gabrielsen 92). She envisages that, in addition to revealing incontrovertible truths about the physical world, her work will give her own life “en ny, og kanskje uventet retning” (“a new, and perhaps unexpected direction”; my trans.; 44).

In the cabin, she finds a booklet about local history and reads that a family once lived there but experienced a fatal fire during the winter of 1870 and an unspecified tragedy the following year (Gabrielsen 23). She imagines that the couple lost their son in the fire, which resonates with how she has had to abandon her daughter, and tries to tear herself away from the text, realizing that it is only making the solitude harder to endure. Nevertheless, imagining what life might have been like for that family, especially for the woman, Borghild, becomes a form of escape from the narrator’s present circumstances (24–25, 30–32, 41–42, 51–54, 62–64). She becomes so engrossed in that family’s story that she experiences dreams, thoughts, and visions that verge on hallucinations, which begin to merge with her own memories (41–42).

Looking at the meteorological data and photographs she has collected, the narrator is shocked to realize that they all appear to date from 1871, the year the tragedy struck (Gabrielsen 152–53). Unable to explain her findings scientifically, she considers whether it might have something to do with the place itself; after all, she well knows that there are phenomena humans are unable to detect, “for eksempel jordas magnetfelt, som enkelte fugler, fisker og insekter kan navigere etter” (“for instance the earth’s magnetic field, which certain birds, fish, and insects can navigate by”; my trans.; 155). Cooped up in a cabin through swirling winter storms, hoping that Jo will eventually make it up there, it is unclear whether her increasing sense of unreality is due to paranoia resulting from protracted anxiety and solitude or to the actual place exerting its influence. Having settled for the security science can offer, she is horrified to realize that science is coming up short, and casts about for ways out of her logical and emotional quandary.

Fourteen species of bird are known to occur in the area (Gabrielsen 159), and it is mentioned at the beginning that “[i] mai vil støyen være

intens, fylt av skrikene til tusenvis av krykkjer, skarver, alker, teister og lomvier" ("[i]n May the noise will be intense, filled with the shrieks of thousands of kittiwakes, cormorants, razorbills, black guillemots, and common murrees"; my trans.; 6). Birds are a central motif, yet the only birds that are actually seen by the narrator over the course of the novel are a flock of king eiders (49–50) and some great black-backed gulls (73) quite early on. Mostly, birds elude her, and perhaps this is part of what draws her to them in the first place: their ability to fly, to disappear across vast seas to faraway wintering areas, only to return and breed on these rocky, inhospitable shores. In contrast to these birds, the narrator is trapped, not only in place but also in relationships and memories. Most of *Arrival* is a drawn-out process of expectancy, where she is waiting for the birds to arrive so that her work can gather momentum, but at the end, when the air has gotten warmer and the ice and snow are melting away, it is implicit that breeding season is near and that the birds are about to return (170). The narrator then hears footsteps approaching and a knock on the door (168–70), but the reader is left in the dark as to who it is and whether this is the moment of arrival that the plot has been building up to. It could be Jo (deliverance), S (disaster), or the captain come to check on her (continuance), if not a ghost from 1871; on a metaphorical plane, it could refer to birds, climate change, or the past catching up with her. The ending is open, the plot abruptly interrupted, so that readers can draw their own conclusions about what kind of peripeteia might be at hand or whether the narrator has lost touch with reality.

Considering that the narrator has made it her purpose in life to document and expose the effects of climate change on seabirds, to raise the alarm, there is no doubt that she is concerned about the ecological crisis. At the same time, however, she is obviously driven by vanity, aiming to make her mark, to prove herself to the scientific community. She is dedicated, determined, and stubborn, yet she misses her daughter and fears her ex-husband; eventually, her failure to assert control over interpersonal relations overshadows her commitment to conservation biology. While her goals may be noble, her motivations are ambiguous, and her engagement with the local ecology is more akin to what Warren calls "an imposed conqueror-type relationship" (135) than an "emergent caring-type relationship" (136). Having imagined that she might be able to escape or transcend her personal history through total dedication to her research, she arrives at the site of her fieldwork only to find a mismatch between her expectations and reality. She amasses data, but when they subvert scientific explicability, her worldview collapses, so that the narrative she tells herself hardly corresponds with "felt, lived experience" (136). If she is motivated by care, it

is a problematic kind of care, seemingly ineffectual but potentially validated by future achievements; even if she achieves her research objectives, chances are that she will have sacrificed her family to do so.

### The Ringing Station: Recovery and Loss

In Brit Bildøen's *Three Roads to the Sea*, the plot is based on personal experience of an intimate kind, as Bildøen, much like the novel's narrator, was denied the right to adopt a child, took the government to court and won, but was then barred from adoption on the grounds that she had gotten too old ("Å skrive om det vondaste"). The narrative present plays out on the coast of Norway, but much further south than *Arrival*, in a more tranquil environment, a landscape of windswept beaches. Bildøen's own involvement in birding is recounted in her later nonfiction book *Over land og hav: eit år med trekkfuglar* (*Over Land and Sea: A Year with Migratory Birds*, 2020), a work of nature writing in which she mentions that the setting of *Three Roads to the Sea* bears resemblance to Lista Bird Observatory in Southern Norway (62).

Like *Arrival*, *Three Roads to the Sea* features an autodiegetic narrator, but here she refers to her past self in the third person, as a means of establishing distance from actions she can no longer think of as her own. "Det var ikkje eg" ("It wasn't me"; my trans.; 11), reads the text, and then switches to the third person. There is a parallel with *Arrival* in that the narrator loses control of herself, but in *Three Roads to the Sea* the crisis is situated in the past rather than the present. Having gone into "exile" at a bird ringing station by the coast, the narrator looks back on the darkest period of her life, which she claims not to remember clearly, when she lived in Oslo and was "ei anna, ei slettare utgåve av meg sjølv" ("someone else, a lousier version of myself"; my trans.; 7). She visualizes "kvinna, denne andre, sitje i bilen utanfor heimen sin mens ei politikvinne er inne og snakkar med mannen hennar, får den nødvendige underskrifta" ("the woman, this other, sitting in the car outside her home while a policewoman is inside talking to her husband, getting the required signature"; my trans.; 143) but is unable to identify with the things that person did. Her struggle calls attention to the dehumanizing effects of rigid institutions, how the encounter between a citizen and a faceless bureaucracy can result in I–it relations that are toxic to all involved.

*Three Roads to the Sea* takes the form of three alternating stories that refer to (1) the narrator's present, (2) her past struggle against government bureaucracy, and (3), the period in between, the dark days when she was driven to desperation. After battling government bureaucracy for years, she suffered a breakdown, and, as her home life and

professional life alike unraveled, compulsively sought revenge, turning into a stalker. Convicted of breaking into the house of one of the bureaucrats, then of violating a restraining order issued against her, she had to do some time. Later, she started a new life working at the ringing station, and here she finds a constructive outlet for the care she would otherwise have manifested for children, projecting it onto non-human animals and eventually also her colleagues. In addition to working with birds, she adopts an abandoned, aging dog that she seems to identify with, perhaps because she, like the dog, feels expendable, in need of a home; this is highlighted by how the narrator and the dog both appear to be suffering from old hip injuries (146–47). Where the narrator of *Arrival* seeks redemption through her PhD dissertation, the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* becomes a carer, looking out for her fellow beings on a day-to-day level. In this sense, her activities and concerns correlate with Puig de la Bellacasa's assertion that "a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence" (*Matters of Care* 4).

From the outset, birds are established as integral to the narrator's daily surroundings: "Synet av ei vipe, helst eit vipepar, er teiknet på at det blir ein god dag" ("The sight of a lapwing, preferably a lapwing pair, is the sign that it will be a good day"; my trans.; *Three Roads to the Sea* 8). She notes that the lapwings in the area have not bred successfully in the past two years (8), reflecting how northern lapwings have recently suffered a precipitous population decline on the Lista peninsula and been categorized as Critically Endangered on the Norwegian Red List (Stokke et al.). This situates the narrator as a character who is attentive to and concerned about birds, while the lapwings' failure to breed echoes her own childlessness. Sitting with the dog in a sheltered spot by the coast, watching seabirds, she figures that the gannet is her favorite but then remembers how severely affected they all are by plastic pollution (*Three Roads to the Sea* 89–90). Rather than romanticizing her surroundings, she acknowledges that the view is deceptive, that things are neither as pure nor as clean as they might appear.

The practice of ringing birds is analogous to naming, a means of assigning them an identifier. It renders individuals traceable in datasets but can also foster recognition and even connection; recovering a ringed bird can be an affective experience, rendering birds' life stories narratively intelligible and potentially strengthening bonds of care. While bird ringing generally leads to clear conservation benefits that arguably outweigh the occasional mortality incurred in connection with it (Busse and Meissner 166, 168), it is nevertheless an intrusive form of care and reinforces a hierarchy that positions humans as

managers or stewards. Problematic yet in some sense necessary, it is a form of what Puig de la Bellacasa describes as “material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds” (“Nothing Comes without Its World” 198).

While mornings at the ringing station revolve around the comings and goings of migratory birds, the narrator spends her afternoons working from home as a translator. In the narrative present, she is working on a translation of Haitian Canadian novelist Dany Lafférière’s *L’énigme du retour*, which she finds deeply moving (*Three Roads to the Sea* 9–10, 42, 106–07). As Lafférière was exiled in Canada, the narrator is exiled by the coast, and they have both found it necessary to reinvent themselves, to look for meaning in new places and relations. Furthermore, in translation, Lafférière’s book is about to find a new home, or at least a foothold, in Norway. There is a resonance between migration and translation; while migratory birds pour into Norway along the coastal flyway, the narrator is preparing to bring a foreign novel into the Norwegian cultural sphere. The breaching of boundaries—psychological, linguistic, cultural, and geographical—is a major theme in *Three Roads to the Sea*, where the complexities of inter-species relations have their counterpart in intertextuality. Against this background, bird ringing can be read as a metaphor for writing or translation, for inscribing one’s mark upon the world, deciphering it, opening it to interpretation.

Birds aside, a conspicuous feature of the landscape is the *marehalm* (marram grass) that binds the coastal dunes, holding them together. Speculating on its etymology, the narrator links it to *mare*, as in *mareritt* (nightmare), which in various Germanic folk traditions is described as a state of being ridden by a malevolent entity. Looking it up in an unspecified online encyclopedia—a direct quote, in quotation marks, reveals it to be *Allkunne*, a now-defunct encyclopedia in Nynorsk (Ohrvik)<sup>4</sup>—the narrator ascertains that this entity tends to take the form of a female demon that strangles her victim, and that it can be the ghost of a spinster but in some cases resembles a nonhuman animal (*Three Roads to the Sea* 147). She links this to a male fear of the female, of what “dei både vil ha og ikkje vil ha” (“they both want and don’t want”; my trans.; 147–48), offering a feminist interpretation of marram grass as something that “tvingar seg inn og bind saman, fordi det skapar nytt liv. Og som er sterkt. Fordi det har djupe røter” (“forces its way in and binds together, because it creates new life. And which is strong. Because it has deep roots”; my trans.; 148). If Bildøen is aware of the more obvious etymological origin—*mare* being the Latin word for sea—she doesn’t let on, but the association of marram grass with female strength is compelling. Besides, the notion of the mare as a

female entity that can have nonhuman features suggests a link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nonhuman animals, though Bildøen does not explore this point. Incorporating marram grass into her self-narrative, the narrator establishes a personal relation to the local ecology that—along with her familiarity with birds—can contribute toward a sense of belonging. She hopes that her own roots might prove as strong as those of the marram grass.

Toward the end of the novel, Emma, one of the narrator's colleagues, becomes pregnant, and the narrator, shocked to hear that she is contemplating abortion, offers to share in the responsibility for the child, to be a help and support (*Three Roads to the Sea* 145–46, 148). The narrator calls it "fuglestasjonens barn" ("the ringing station's child"; my trans.; 146), and it becomes yet another surrogate for a child of her own. Birds, dogs, even the marram grass, are placed in relation to the narrator's personal tragedy; but even if they might alleviate her longing for children to some extent, nonhumans do not assuage it entirely. The narrator's breakdown happened because—for a while—she was barred from exercising her caring capacities. Since care for another, as van Dooren points out, is reliant on being "emotionally at stake in them in some way" ("Care"), it always entails the risk of loss and grief (*Flight Ways* 139), but it is also essential for "being meaningfully with others" (40), for being able to inhabit a "meaningfully shared world" (139–40, emphasis in original). Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that

a world's degree of liveability might well depend on the caring accomplished within it. In that sense, standing by the vital necessity of care means standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones. ("Nothing Comes without Its World" 198)

The narrator seeks to contribute toward others' flourishing, not despite the risk involved but because care makes life worth living.

As the narrator of *Arrival* deduces that seabirds are even more threatened than previously thought and intends to incorporate her analysis into her dissertation, the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* rounds up the spring ringing season by noting that migratory birds are in continuing decline and decides to write an article about it to inform the general public (151). In both of these novels, a sense of loss is pervasive—personal defeats appearing to mirror the ecological crisis—yet the narrators do not abandon hope that their caring practices may bear fruit, that meaningful remnants can still be salvaged. Near the end of *Three Roads to the Sea* the narrator observes a lapwing behaving as if it has young nearby—presumably giving an alarm call or swooping

toward an intruder—which suggests that, despite the pressures of modern agriculture, lapwings in the area might still be able to persist (151).

### The Aviary: Care and Captivity

Merethe Lindstrøm's *The Anatomy of Birds* is arguably the darkest of the three novels, dealing with depression, abuse, and neglect. It is also set in a more domestic sphere, at first in a Norwegian city and later in an English village. Again, the autodiegetic narrator is drawn to the beauty of birds, but in contrast to *Arrival* and *Three Roads to the Sea*, where the focus is on wild birds, many of the birds in *The Anatomy of Birds* are captive. This reflects the characters' experiences of being trapped, imprisoned in dark thoughts, stuck in places they want to escape from. Coming to terms with trauma, as well as betrayal and loneliness, the narrator, her mother, and her daughter are able neither to live nor love well; suffering birds become a symbol of their misery but also a potential light in the darkness.

*The Anatomy of Birds* begins with the narrator remembering the drive through Flanders in Belgium the autumn she and her partner moved from Norway to England. She was on the lookout for *de vinke-niers*: men who would sit lined up along the roadside, each with a chaffinch in a box in front of him, participating in traditional bird-call contests. Though the notion of keeping finches in captivity strikes the narrator as sad, her interest in the tradition suggests a fascination with the practice (7). Finches are thereby established as objects of desire, but also as victims. When the narrator was a child, her mother gave her a pair of zebra finches, but they languished, neglected in their cage, and soon began attacking each other. Placed there in the hope that they would brighten the human characters' surroundings, they had the opposite effect, only accentuating how miserable the narrator's mother's apartment was (22, 46–47, 134–35).

Later in the novel, the narrator thinks of how the goldfinch famously painted by Carel Fabritius was bound to the wall by a chain, and of how people used to blind finches to make them better singers. The novel's title—*The Anatomy of Birds*—alludes to the narrator's daughter Klara, focalized through the narrator, reflecting on how the names of certain structures of human anatomy—such as the coracoid process, the pterygoid muscles, and the pes anserinus or “goose foot”—are derived from those of bird anatomy. Looking at her own body, Klara sees no resemblance and finds it surprising that it “kan forklares av de beskjedne strukturene til en annen art, noe sånt som en fugl” (“can be explained by the modest structures of another species,



something like a bird"; my trans.; 56). In contrast to birds, she feels heavy, weighted down, taking everything in yet incapable of gaining a view from above. Chained, blinded finches, living in darkness, become a trope linked to Klara's depression (56–59).<sup>5</sup>

In the narrative present, the narrator channels her energies into having an aviary built in her English country garden, in the hope that birds will thrive there.<sup>6</sup> She imagines the birds as thoughts, flapping, gathering, and dispersing, moving from one place to another, the aviary as "en kropp, for fuglene, tankene" ("a body, for the birds, the thoughts"; my trans.; Lindstrøm 167). Her determination to have the aviary built could be rooted in guilt over the two finches that died because she neglected them, or in projected hope that her own situation can be improved. An aviary, though no doubt preferable to a cage, is not the same as living free, yet the practice of keeping birds in captivity is so socially and culturally ingrained that she does not question it.<sup>7</sup> This inability to look beyond the framework of captivity, a delimited capacity for care, reflects Puig de la Bellacasa's contention that even though care is always necessary, the forms it takes are specific rather than universal, formed in response to situated relationships, and that good intentions do not necessarily equate to taking "good care" ("Ethical Doings in Naturecultures" 166). The assumption that captivity can be consistent with flourishing, and that humans are fit to care for captive birds, evinces problematic caring relations. Pointing out parallels between birds in cages and traumatized or depressed women in difficult life situations could be a means of questioning anthropocentric assumptions, but ultimately, the aviary project seems more likely to make the narrator feel better about herself than to provide good lives for birds.

The narrator of *The Anatomy of Birds* dreams or imagines that she is standing inside the aviary surrounded by birds that flock around her, perching on her shoulders, picking and pecking at her skin yet wholly benevolent, a dense mass of colors and feathers that almost conceals her from herself (103). More than a dream of escape, the birds signify a desire to disappear, to become invisible. Perhaps a longing to be part of a flock, to surrender individuality for the sake of a more communal form of personhood, is implicit. For Marco Caracciolo, such "embodied responses to nonhuman assemblages" amount to a form of "kinesthetic empathy" (239) where the collective functions as "a unit of embodied subjectivity that complements and extends the individual" (242). Nevertheless, this vision of swirling birds is immediately followed by a waking dream where the birds are her thoughts spinning out of control, independent and unpredictable yet fragile. She longs to contain them, to gather them together, and remembers a dream where her

neatly tended garden was ravaged by starlings, blackbirds, and sparrows, causing her to feel ashamed of the disorder (103). This preoccupation with neatness and order, with keeping captive birds in and wild birds out, seems old-fashioned, like some vestige of nineteenth-century England, and might suggest a fear of going feral, of losing self-control.

When the narrator and her partner almost run over what they believe to be a pheasant with their car, it leaves an impression on them: “vi tenkte på alt som lever fritt, det ville ved sånne ting, alt det som beveger seg inne i krattet, i buskene. Rev, ekorn, grevling, til og med en fasan” (“we thought of everything that lives free, the wildness of such things, everything that stirs inside the thickets, in the bushes. Foxes, squirrels, badgers, even a pheasant”; my trans.; Lindstrøm 190–91). This close encounter becomes a precious memory and, placed on the second-to-last page of the novel, functions as a ray of hope comparable to the lapwing at the end of *Three Roads to the Sea*. The characters are blissfully unaware that pheasants are introduced game birds, native neither to England nor to Norway but regularly released into the wild for hunting purposes, often descended from semi-domestic stock. This lack of familiarity with wildlife is arguably symptomatic of a form of alienation from wild nature, probably rooted in lack of exposure to it, and might contribute toward explaining the narrator’s fixation on captive birds. Unable to imagine freedom for herself, she can hardly imagine freedom for birds either.

From her childhood, the narrator remembers a great black-backed gull landing on her grandmother’s balcony while their family was having Sunday dinner. It became trapped, unable to spread its wings in the narrow enclosure, but her uncle rescued it by placing a long broom against the edge of the balcony so it could climb up and fly away. All who saw it were quiet, but later, the narrator’s mother recounts that the gull had made her, and the others, think of her younger brother who had disappeared at sea, that the bird was “en påminnelse, sjelen hans” (“a reminder, his soul”; my trans.; Lindstrøm 18) that wanted to spend some time with them. Again, a link is established between birds and parental care—for the narrator’s grandmother, the gull represents her lost son. It is referred to by the common name *havmåke*, “ocean gull”—rather than the more widely used *svartbak*, “blackback”—establishing a clear association with the ocean, with the high seas (which is also reflected in the species’ scientific name *Larus marinus*). Like the pheasant, the great black-backed gull is presented as a glimpse of something free, an extraordinary creature whose wildness stands in contrast to the characters’ mundane surroundings.

*The Anatomy of Birds* is narrated in a cautious, deliberate tone, and it is evident throughout that care is a complicated matter, that there are

those who cannot be helped, and that acts of care can even cause harm. An elderly grey parrot in a pet shop is like “en innesperret mentalpatient fra attenhundretallet” (“a confined mental patient from the nineteenth century”; my trans.; 161), repeating snippets of conversation it has picked up from past owners but that make no sense removed from their original context. Even more poignant is an incident where some schoolgirls find an injured stock dove. Its wing has been cut clean off—perhaps it has been run over by a car—but still it tries to get away from the excited girls. They catch it, find its wing, and talk of bringing it to the vet, naively thinking of themselves as “snille hjælpere” (“kind helpers”; my trans.; 137), but are obviously excited about the news value of their find, the sensation it will create, the attention it will bring them. This kind of care recalls how, for the narrator of *Arrival*, raising awareness of the effects of climate change on seabirds becomes a way of boosting her ego, justified by the urgency of her message (Gabrielsen 92). As Puig de la Bellacasa points out, care is not innocent and does not refer to “a somehow wholesome or unpolluted pleasant ethical realm” (*Matters of Care* 7–8). On the contrary, those who express the most concern for the welfare of others often have something to gain from drawing attention to it.

### Forms of Care in Human–Bird Relations: Ecofeminism and Beyond

In all three of the novels discussed above, depictions of birds go beyond metaphor, pointing toward an affective ethic of care that includes nonhumans, even if that care has problematic aspects. In line with Warren’s approach to narrative and ecofeminism (135–36), these depictions are neither abstract nor reductionist, and rather than imposing ethical claims from some supposedly objective, external viewpoint, they allow ethical insights to emerge through interactions. The narrators navigate social, emotional, and ethical predicaments that cannot be dealt with through simple recourse to ethical norms but must be worked out in relation both to other people and to nonhuman animals within specific environmental conditions. Though the narrators strive for autonomy, and achieve it to varying degrees, their identities are formed in relation to multispecies communities, echoing Warren’s conception of ecofeminism as “a social ecology” where “[r]elationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be a human” (143). Rather than attempting to construct “a moral hierarchy of beings,” these narratives, while appreciating difference, are attentive to how beings stand in relation to each other (137), providing “a central place for values typically unnoticed, underplayed,

or misrepresented in traditional ethics, e.g., values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust” (140). Care is presented as essential and foundational, but also becomes a source of conflict and doubt.

In all these texts there is a conspicuous focus on the importance of children, which can be interpreted as a form of pronatalism. The narrators may empathize or identify with nonhuman others, but this is partly because they see their own care or longing for children reflected in them. Considering that human population growth is one of the main drivers of our current ecological crisis, this raises some tough ethical questions. For Donna Haraway, a shift away from pronatalism toward radical forms of care for the nonhuman world is not only desirable but necessary in the light of ongoing ecological catastrophe (209). Urging us to “make kin, not babies,” she argues that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages” (103). According to Haraway,

[w]e must find ways to celebrate low birth rates and personal, intimate decisions to make flourishing and generous lives . . . urgently and especially, but not only, in wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting regions, nations, communities, families, and social classes. (209)

Though population density remains relatively low, Norway’s high standard of living and average carbon footprint per person, along with continued oil extraction and oil exports, certainly qualify it as a “wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting” nation. Climate change denial is widespread in Norway, particularly among conservative men, and correlates strongly with xenoscepticism (Krange et al.). Nevertheless, many Norwegians are concerned about climate change to the extent that it influences their decision about whether or not to have children, and as Kristina Leganger Iversen points out, this is particularly true of women, who appear to be more prone to eco-guilt than men are.<sup>8</sup>

Here, *Three Roads to the Sea* seems to suggest a way forward: childless, the narrator has found other outlets for care, looking after an abandoned dog, seeking to raise awareness of ecological issues, and through bird ringing, contributing to data collection that can lead to better conservation outcomes. Then again, making kin with nonhuman animals should not be predicated on involuntary childlessness. One of the policies Haraway suggests could facilitate a reduction in human population is “adoption practices for and by the elderly” (209), a proposal the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* would be likely to embrace.

In her analysis of ecofeminism in Nordic literature, Katarina Leppänen is guided by the themes of “intergenerational responsibility, alternatives to prevailing power dynamics,” and “new ecological sensibilities” (223), all of which are evident in these novels. Anxious about climate change and plastic pollution, the narrators of *Arrival* and *Three Roads to the Sea* are preoccupied with securing a future for declining bird populations. On an interpersonal level, the narrator of *Arrival* is haunted by her failure to assert responsibility for her daughter, whom she still hopes to be reunited with, while the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* is willing to take responsibility for Emma’s unborn child. Moreover, the latter’s struggle against government bureaucracy presents a challenge to “prevailing power dynamics” in that it exposes the dangers of I–it relations, whether these are grounded in legal clauses and paragraphs or in ruthless anthropocentrism. *Arrival* and *The Anatomy of Birds* also deal with how victims of psychological and sexual abuse tend to internalize their traumas; how their anger is turned inward, with disastrous personal consequences. In *The Anatomy of Birds*, burdens of trauma are carried across the generations, yet the narrator continues to hope that the burden can be alleviated. All three novels explore “new ecological sensibilities” in that they highlight the plights of nonhuman animals. Through a delicate interweaving of human and nonhuman stories, they reveal parallels between human tragedies and the ecological crisis, showing how injustice can breed solidarity with other victims across species lines. This weaving together of different forms of care reflects Puig de la Bellacasa’s contention that even though care is a “matter of struggle and a terrain of constant normative appropriation” it is “vital to the fabric of life,” and that, rather than trying to pin it down, it may make sense to “embrace its ambivalent character” (*Matters of Care* 8, 11). Despite their troubled circumstances, the narrators remain steadfast in the face of adversity, and look toward the future.

#### N O T E S

1. Karl Ove Knausgård’s novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (*The Birds Beneath the Sky*, 2019), in particular, resonates with the texts mentioned here. In Aasne Linnestå’s *Krakow* (*Krakow*, 2007), Rannveig Leite Molven’s *Duelyktene* (*The Pigeon Lanterns*, 2020), and Lars Ramslie’s two *Liten fugl*-novels (*Little Bird* 2014 and 2016), the association of birds with care and mother–daughter relations is subtle yet central. Vidar Sundstøl’s short novel *Nattsang* (*Night Song*, 2023), in a somewhat different vein, engages with birding, care, and deep time perspectives within the framework of a father–son relationship. Birds are

also associated with care in Agnes Ravatn's *Fugletribunalet* (*The Bird Tribunal*, 2013).

2. This point is also reflected in Ericsson's semi-autobiographical novel *Far og mor* (*Father and Mother*, 1998), where the narrator recalls her mother feeding breadcrumbs to house sparrows in the backyard and how the helpless little birds "kalte på medynk og veldedighet" ("called for pity and charity"; my trans.; 117–18). For an in-depth, humorous, and incisive look at gender, breeding, and child-rearing in birds and people, see Ericsson's novel *Hekketid* (*Breeding Season*, 2001).

3. Where she lists the people with their individual names, however, she lists the birds as species, in keeping with the scientific tendency to reduce nonhuman animals to species and populations rather than individuals (Gabrielsen 159).

4. In contrast to *Arrival* and *The Anatomy of Birds*, which are written in the Norwegian language standard Bokmål, *Three Roads to the Sea* is in Nynorsk. Brit Bildøen is a former board member of *Allkunne*.

5. Later, however, the narrator relates that finches in Flanders that had their eyes burned shut were able to see again when their eyelids were gently pried open (Lindstrøm 152). In *The Anatomy of Birds*, the motif of finches—goldfinches, chaffinches, and zebra finches—signifies despair, as well as hope that despair can be overcome.

6. In the dilapidated barn, the boy she has tasked with building the aviary finds an old mark inscribed in the wood and claims to recognize it as a "heksetegn" ("witch mark"; my trans.; Lindstrøm 53), which the narrator believes was intended to protect the place (54). In Scandinavian tradition, a *marekors* or *drudefot* is a symbol—sometimes a pentagram, though other symbols were also used—intended to provide protection from witch-like entities of folklore. Similar marks appear to have been used in England, where this scene is set, but note that *bumerker* (house marks), used to indicate ownership, were often placed on buildings, as were builder's signatures, and that these could potentially be mistaken for pagan symbols.

7. See Sollund for an auto-ethnographic account, drawing on feminist care ethics, of how years of keeping parrots in captivity—observing them, interacting with them—can lead to the conclusion "that they should definitely *not* be in cages" (251–52). A former parrot owner can thus be compelled to "act on their behalf" based on insights gained through personal experience (251). Yet, when empathy clashes with "ingrained and widely socially embedded practices and denials" (256) or when care for nonhuman animals "is not a part of the cultural vocabulary," additional measures such as legislation are needed (257).

8. See Iversen for an in-depth analysis of two Norwegian novels that deal with the ethical dilemmas of motherhood in light of anthropogenic climate change.

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