

# Narratives from the Margin? Welfare and Wellbeing in Kerstin Ekman's *Skraplotter*

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## **Abstract**

When Kerstin Ekman's *Skraplotter* (Scratch Cards) appeared in 2003, the novel was read as representing an impoverished version of contemporary Sweden, viewed from the margin. This article questions such easy conclusions by reading the text in terms of narrative and narration, drawing especially on feminist narratology and Susan S. Lanser's notion of narrative voice. The analysis demonstrates how the narration helps authorise three characters on the margin of the Swedish welfare state, one of them Saami, female and elderly, another elderly and male, and the third a middle-aged female minister in the Lutheran State Church. With the novel's narrative voices approaching Lanser's 'communal voice', the reader is prodded to reconsider the concepts of centre and margin and the relationships between them. Viewed in light of Rosi Braidotti's notion of 'nomadic becoming', subjectivation in this novel extends into the rhizomic mode; in other words, it is 'trans-personal [...], ultimately collective'. The text's allegedly impoverished version of contemporary Sweden turns out to point boldly ahead, away from the welfare state as we have known it and towards more inclusive and sustainable communities.

## **Key words**

Narratology, periphery, memory, landscape, community, subjectivation, nomadism, environment, ethics

Kerstin Ekman's novel *Skraplotter* (Scratch Cards), the final volume in the trilogy *Vargskinnnet* (The Wolf Skin), was published in 2003 and awarded the August Prize for fiction in the same year, the Prize Committee pinpointing the scratch card as 'sinnebilden för ett utarmat Sverige av i dag, sett ur marginalens perspektiv med snabbt avfolkade landskap, kyrkor och konsumbutiker' (the image of an impoverished Sweden of today, seen from the margin with rapidly depopulated provinces, churches and co-op shops) (Anon. 2003).<sup>1</sup>

The plot of the novel is indeed set pretty far from Stockholm, in northwest Jämtland close to the border with Norway; and in terms of the provision normally associated with the Swedish welfare state, not much is left in this remote corner in the 1990s. The plot of the trilogy covers the whole of the twentieth century with an emphasis on the first half, and the three volumes effectively survey the development of the Swedish welfare state, providing particularly detailed insights into some of the poverty and suffering out of which it arose. But in the final volume the local police station is about to be closed down, the premises due to be taken over by a group of women making decorations from dried flowers, and the owner of the hotel is having to come up with increasingly imaginative – or desperate – schemes to attract tourists to Svartvattnet. Indeed, recruiting a minister to the Lutheran State Church in this parish has also become a problem. However, is this an 'impoverished' Sweden, and if so, from whose perspective, and in what sense? I am going to argue for a rather different reading, one that – in line with an earlier article of mine about the trilogy (Forsås-Scott 2008) – approaches the text in terms of narrative and narration, drawing especially on feminist narratology and on Susan S. Lanser's notion of narrative voice. From the category Lanser terms 'communal voice' I will move on to look more closely at issues of subjectivation in light of some of the work of Rosi Braidotti, notably her concepts of 'nomadism' and 'nomadic becoming'. Perhaps the geographical setting and the characters of Ekman's novel are not so marginal after all?

Let me start by introducing some of these characters, some of the citizens of the *folkhem* as it survives in Svartvattnet. Kristin Klementsén is of Saami origin (we are talking here of the southern Saami whose distinct language is one of the most acutely threatened in Scandinavia)

and the widow of a reindeer-herding Saami; Risten, as she is known, is in her 70s, with two grown-up sons. Elis Eriksson, who also uses the name Elias Elv along with various permutations of these names, is an elderly neighbour of Risten's and once had a successful career as an artist. And then there is Ingefrid Mingus, previously called Fredriksson and frequently known as Inga, a middle-aged minister in the Lutheran Church, at this time the Swedish State Church, who turns up in the opening pages claiming to be the daughter of Myrten Fjellström, Risten's deceased foster sister.

If this seems like an overly traditional approach to *Skraplotter*, let me now quote Risten's narrative about Elis studying old and decaying timber:

Det var länge sen det här timret låg i kedjor och björnbindingar och drogs ner till byn av svartlurviga hästar. Det hade åldrats och lavarna hade förenat sig med det och lagt gröna skiftningar över det som grånat. Det kunde finnas andra färger också. Han tittade noga efter ockra och rost och svartprickigt. Och hur trät vidgades i sina ursprungliga växtfårar, hur insekter kröp in där och la ägg och hur larverna gjorde gångar och förvandlade timret till gult pulver.

En hästmyra i huset var ju skräcken för oss alla. Men han gick där med sin käpp och petade och såg det med en sorts nöje. Liksom det där spåntaket han låtit lägga. Det skulle ju inte vara, varnade man honom. Och han svarade:

Nej, det ska inte vara. (Ekman 2003: 136)

It was a long time since this timber had been held by chains locked with bear traps and pulled down to the village by shaggy black horses. It had aged and the lichen had combined with it and added green tinges to the grey. There could be other colours too. He looked carefully for ochre and rust and areas with black spots. And how the wood widened in its original lines of growth, how insects crawled in there and laid their eggs and how the larvae made passages and turned the timber into a yellow powder.

A carpenter ant in the house was something every one of us feared. But he walked around with his stick and poked and observed with a kind of pleasure. Like the shingle-roof he had put on. It wouldn't last, people warned him. And he replied: No, it won't last.

I am going to demonstrate that these characters, representing the margin of the welfare state in the eyes of the Committee for the August Prize, belong in a context, an inter-relational one of life and growth and decay involving animals and insects and plants as well as human characters. But before we explore this context, I want to take a closer look at narrative and narration and their implications in *Skraplotter*.

In common with the two earlier volumes in the series, *Skraplotter* is partially narrated by what Mieke Bal terms a 'character-bound narrator', an 'I' that can be identified with 'a character in the fabula it itself narrates' (Bal 1999: 22). This narrator is Risten/Kristin; and her sections combine heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative, i.e. they move from authorial voice to personal voice and back again. I am drawing here on Susan S. Lanser's analysis of narrative voice as 'situated at the juncture of "social position and literary practice"', and embodying 'the social, economic, and literary conditions under which it has been produced'; authorial voice, in Lanser's categorisation, characterises 'narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public and potentially self-referential', while the term personal voice refers to 'narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories' (Lanser 1992: 5, 15, 18). But there is an external narrator at work here too, as there is throughout the trilogy. Given the prominence of and variations in focalisation in *Vargskinnnet*, we are talking of a narrator who is kaleidoscopic and pretty much impossible to pin down. In *Skraplotter*, arguably, the boundary between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration sometimes becomes quite thin, because in addition to the focalisation of Elis, the artist, we get that of Ingefrid, the minister; and the increasing focus not just on what she sees but also on her words, including her prayers and conversations with God, sometimes has the effect of bringing the sections focalised by her close to character-bound narration. My point here is that these features of the narration

help authorise the characters involved, one of them Saami, female and elderly, another elderly and male, and the third a middle-aged female minister of the Swedish State Church. For despite her office, Ingefrid is no stranger to bullying and sexism, having once, at a staff meeting, had a sandwich with beetroot salad and meatballs thrown at her by an organist who has shouted: 'Nu står jag inte ut med det här kärringregementet längre!' (Now I can't stand this regiment of women any longer!') (Ekman 2003: 99). Seen from the perspective of the centre, from Stockholm, these characters along with the corner of Sweden where they are – or become – at home undoubtedly appear marginal but, I am arguing, the narration challenges this kind of conventional view. The character-bound narration and the prominent focalisations in the sections that are externally narrated exhort the reader to reconsider the concepts of centre and margin and the relationships between them.

Mieke Bal has written about narrative and memory from a post-colonial perspective:

Going back – in retroversion – to the time in which the place was a different kind of space is a way of countering the effects of colonizing acts of focalization that can be called mapping. Mastering, looking from above, dividing up and controlling is an approach to space that ignores time as well as the density of its lived-in quality. In opposition to such ways of seeing space, providing a landscape with a history is a way of spatializing memory that undoes the killing of space as lived. (Bal 1999: 147-148)

In *Skraplotter* history and memory are central not just to the sections narrated by Risten but also to the sections focalised by Elis and Ingefrid. While Elis' refusal to disclose more than odd fragments about his past has the effect of drawing the reader's attention to it (and especially, of course, the attention of those who have read the two previous volumes in the trilogy), the sections focalised by Ingefrid centre on this character's attempt to piece together her past as the child of a single mother in mid-1940s Sweden, brought up by foster

parents without any contact with her birth mother (a critical verdict, this, on the kind of moral stance taken by the authorities in the welfare state at the time), and on her efforts to understand something about the dead mother who has suddenly made her wealthy; while Risten in the sections she narrates recalls her childhood as Myrten's foster sister but also her married life as a nomadic Saami, close to other members of her family, the reindeer and the untamed mountain environment. Elements of Saami yoiking, the songs that traditionally reflect a place or a person, are central to Risten's recollections, her uncle Laula-Anut being renowned for his yoiks; and while the prominence of history and memory in the narrative of *Skraplotter* emphatically signals the role of story-telling, I would suggest that the development of the narrative voices in this novel brings us very close to the category that Susan S. Lanser has termed 'communal voice'. The combination of Risten's character-bound narration and the marked prominence of Elis' and Ingefrid's focalisations respectively, plus the recurrence of the Saami yoiks, do point towards a case of what Lanser has described as 'narrative authority [...] invested in a definable community and textually inscribed [...] through multiple, mutually authorizing voices' (Lanser 1992: 21). The communal mode, according to Lanser, 'seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities' (ibid.). Or, as we might amend Lanser, of communities that *were* marginal prior to being narrated. *Skraplotter* strikes me as an excellent illustration of Bal's point about the importance of providing a landscape with a history. But the novel, it seems to me, has still more to say about welfare and wellbeing, and I am moving on to look more closely at subjectivity and subjectivation in Ekman's text.

'Inget liv hänger ihop', claims Elis Eriksson on one of the last pages of the novel; 'Bildar inget. Det blir ingenting' (No life hangs together. Doesn't form anything. It doesn't become anything) (Ekman 2003: 386). This, then, comes at the very end of a novel, and indeed a trilogy, in which subjectivity is extensively problematised. As I emphasised earlier, the three characters in *Skraplotter* I am discussing here all have several names; but the focal point of the problematisation of subjectivity is Elis, who chooses his language depending on the circumstances – Jämtland dialect, Norwegian dialect, Norwegian *bokmål*, *rikssvenska*

– and who turns the constructions of his personae into a game. Rosi Braidotti makes a point in her *Metamorphoses* which I would argue is relevant for our understanding of the subjectivation and subjectivity not just of Elis, but of those of Risten and Ingefrid too:

My political passion lies with positive metamorphoses, the kinds that destabilize dominant power-relations, de-territorialize Majority-based identities and values and infuse a joyful sense of empowerment into subjects bent on becoming. (Braidotti 2002: 265)

Elis foregrounds the process of becoming throughout but so, in a rather different sense, does Risten. Arguably she, Elis and Ingefrid can all be read as nomadic subjects, Braidotti defining her term as a figuration (the term refers to ‘a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallogocentric vision of the subject’) of ‘a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular’ (Braidotti 1994: 1, 4). Nomadic becoming, Braidotti has underlined, is then ‘emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness’ (op. cit. 5); and here Risten’s affinity with the environment in which she lives, including the birds and the animals, and more especially her sheep, provides a neat example.

But the most striking instance of subjectivation as becoming, and nomadic becoming at that, is provided by Ingefrid. At the most conspicuous level, the implications of her initial visit to Svartvattnet where she wants to claim her inheritance and find out more about the mother who gave her up as a baby, are complicated as Elis, immediately after her departure in the opening pages of the novel, begins to calculate when she would have been conceived because, as he says, ‘Hu må ha en far’ (She must have a father) (Ekman 2003: 11) ; but it is only at the very end of the novel that he concludes this part of her quest by confirming to her that he is indeed her father. In the case of Ingefrid, the process of becoming is further foregrounded by her spiritual search. The religious experience she once had when listening to Bach’s St. John Passion has been unique, and her faith

never amounts to certainty but involves endless questioning, testing, indeed confusion. Her adopted son, Anand, comes from India and both looks and behaves differently from his peers, his development as a teenager and the unfolding of his artistic talent taking her into other unknown territories. In Svartvattnet, furthermore, she is able to explore her affinity with animals. When Risten has a heart attack and ends up in hospital in Östersund and Ingefrid has to take care of her ewes during lambing, her search for information on the web pales into insignificance in light of her powerful sense of physical identification, 'en kroppens inlevelse som hon förut bara hade känt med Anand' (a bodily participation of a kind she had previously only experienced with Anand) (op. cit. 251) that culminates in her tears when the first lamb has been born safely. Ingefrid is stunned by Elis' claim that, 'Ett liv utan djuren är ett gudlöst liv' (Life without the animals is a life without God) (ibid.), but the representation of her reactions throughout the lambing, and especially her joy when she manages to save a lamb initially rejected by its mother, would seem to illustrate his point:

Det var starka och oreflekterade känslor hon hade och till dels var de obegripliga. Hon såg en tussilago som växte i vägbanan, en köttig järnvilja som tagit sig upp rakt genom oljegruset. Då tänkte hon på sitt lamm och önskade honom den viljan. När alla tre hade lammat och hon åter fick sova på nätterna var hon lycklig. Jag kan inte säga annat tänkte hon. Vilket ord förresten. När använde jag det sist? Hon var lycklig för att lammet levde, för att hon fick sova, för att Anand var någorlunda lugn i skolan och för att hon hade hittat ett par stora skoterstövlar som hon kunde gå i utan att den brutna tån smärtade. (op. cit. 267-268)

Her feelings were strong and immediate, and in part she couldn't understand them. She saw a coltsfoot growing in the road, a fleshy will of iron that had pushed straight through the tarmac. Then she thought of her lamb and wished him that kind of will. When all three had lambed and she could sleep again at night, she was happy. I can't say anything else, she thought. But what a word. When did I last use it? She was happy that the lamb was



alive, that she was able to sleep, that Anand was reasonably calm at school and that she had found a pair of big snow mobile boots that she could use without her broken toe hurting.

Inspired by Deleuze, Braidotti has developed the notion of the process of nomadic becoming in the rhizomic mode (rhizome, according to the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, is a botanical term for a 'continuously growing, usu. horizontal, underground stem, which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals'), emphasising that it is 'not merely anti-essentialistic, but a-subjective, beyond received notions of individuality. It is a trans-personal mode, ultimately collective' (Braidotti 2002: 85). It is arguable that the subjectivation of all three characters, Elis, Risten and Ingefrid, represents a rhizomic mode of becoming, but the case of Ingefrid is particularly emphatic. In *Transpositions*, Braidotti argues for 'the possibility of a system of ethical values that, far from requiring a steady and unified vision of the subject, rests on a non-unitary, nomadic or rhizomatic view' (Braidotti 2007: 4-5). Drawing on her experiences in Svartvattnet and in the process of putting down new roots in the community Ingefrid, the minister of the Lutheran Church, maintains that, 'Det är människor som behöver våra gärningar, inte Gud' (Our fellow human beings need our deeds, not God) (Ekman 2003: 313) .

In this text in which Ingefrid develops a growing affinity with 'det omänskliga' (the non-human) (Ekman 2003: 366-367) in the form of the forest, there is a recurring metaphor for rhizomic growth: Anand's installations created from fragments of coloured glass, metal, feathers, buttons and pieces of tissue paper which are attached to threads that criss-cross a room and so transform it into a state of perpetual becoming. Anand encourages Ingefrid to touch a thread very gently:

Hon rör vid tråden och det ser ut som ett osynligt djur kilar iväg och nuddar vid silverknivar och silkespapperslappar. Knappar vaggas tungt. Kläppar till en kristallkrona klingar mot varandra och små fragment av yvig strutsfjäder rör sig som under vatten.

Först såg hon detaljerna: knappar, spegelglas, kristall, silver, silkespapper, skinn och fjäder och trådar. Trådar, snören,

strängar...

Nu ser hon mönstret. Anand har dragit ner henne på golvet. Råven däruppe i alabasterskålen är inte centrum. Det ligger någonstans i rummets bortre halva mot fönstret som är förhängt med en tjock filt. Därframme finns en hjärtpunkt, många trådar dras dit och förenas. Men den är inte orörlig. Den flämtar som ljuslågorna, drar sig tillbaka och träder fram igen. Blicken dras till den. Ändå går den inte att fokusera. (op. cit. 116)

She touches the thread and it looks as if an invisible animal runs off and brushes past the silver knives and pieces of tissue paper. Buttons rock heavily. Glass drops from a chandelier resonate against each other and small fragments from a bushy ostrich feather move as if under water.

At first she noticed the details: buttons, fragments of mirror glass, crystal, silver, tissue paper, leather and feathers and threads. Threads, pieces of string, metal strings...

Now she can see the pattern. Anand has pulled her down on the floor. The fox up there in the lamp bowl of alabaster is not the centre. The centre is somewhere in the other half of the room towards the window which has been covered with a thick blanket. Somewhere there is a centre-point, many threads run together there. But it is not steady. It flickers like the flames of the candles, recedes and emerges again. The eye is drawn to it. Yet it is impossible to bring it into focus.

In Svartvattnet Anand subsequently makes an even bigger installation in an old chapel, where Elis and he can share the moment when the setting sun brings his work to life, 'när det *blir*' (when it *becomes*) (Ekman 2003: 343; italics original) . Soon afterwards, the evening breeze sets fire to the installation, reducing both Anand's work and the chapel to ashes.

Fragile and transient the texts and the stories we tell and read in them may be, yet this is all we have. And to quote the previous volume in the trilogy, *Sista rompan* (The Last String), '[f]orm är glädje' (form is pleasure) (Ekman 2002: 258) . *Vargskinnet* foregrounds welfare and

wellbeing at several levels.

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According to the publicity, this symposium set out to test a claim such as the one that ‘we cannot fully understand the nature, history and future of the welfare state without considering the ways in which it is in part the product of literary and other works of art and the ideas and values they generate and put into circulation’. As I have tried to show, *Skraplotter* is not some sort of welfare-state museum piece about an isolated and impoverished corner of Sweden, but a text that points boldly ahead, away from the welfare state as we have known it so far and towards more inclusive, sustainable and, in the original sense, radical communities.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The translations into English are my own. I would like to thank Sarah Death for her very helpful advice on the translations from Ekman’s texts.

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