

## SUMMARY

### *Becoming a Woman – And Out of Pleasure: A Study in the Reading of Teenage Girls*

The primary question posed in this thesis is: what do young girls read in their spare time—if they read—and what is their attitude to reading? To answer this question I examine different kinds of empirical material related to young girls' reading and in so doing I make use of a variety of scholarly methods: young girls' reading is studied in the light of reception theory—a branch of literary theory; novels are analysed with the help of narratology; young girls' lives are charted from the angle of cultural sociology and social psychology; finally, all aspects of the empirical material are tested by means of theories derived from gender studies. My thesis deals with the spare time reading of twenty 15-16-year-old girls over a two-year period. For the purposes of the thesis my initial question has been broken down into three segments. One of my aims has been to find out to what extent the girls actually engage in reading in their spare time, what they read, and what importance they attach to their reading. Another aim, which focusses attention on the connection between the girls' lives and their reading, has been to find out to what extent the girls' choice of fiction is determined by geographical, social, cultural, and religious factors and by the way literature is taught at school. The third aim of my project has been to find out how gender is constructed in the books that the girls choose to read in their spare time, how they construct gender while reading these books, and how they construct gender in their own lives.

Most of the empirical material has been collected in schools. The girls interviewed come from three different regions and milieus: a suburban school serving a multicultural population on the outskirts of a metropolis; a school in a distant, densely built-up area in a sparsely populated region of northern Sweden; and a school in a residential area situated in a densely populated part of the countryside of southern Sweden.

In the introductory chapter of my thesis I set forth the questions to be examined and the aims I wish to pursue. The theoretical considerations underlying these aims are discussed with special reference to the work of Ulf BoÏthius. BoÏthius stresses the need for reception studies to take into account young readers' reading preferences as well as their psychological development and social situation but also argues that gender considerations should be given their due place in reception studies. Gender research pursued along these

lines should, Boethius claims, transcend sex role research and sex-oriented ideology critique and also focus on how male and female identities are constructed in texts and in language. In my thesis I add yet another perspective: the importance of religion. Thus, in this chapter I also take into account religious background factors. This perspective has so far been neglected in Swedish reception studies and has seldom been given much attention in youth and gender research. One of the results of my study is to demonstrate that there is a strong connection between religion and reception. The religious background is discussed both as a factor influencing the construction of gender in the girls' lives, in their choice of fiction, and in the way they read.

The second chapter, "Theory and Method" ("Teori och metod"), focusses on the main theoretical underpinnings of my thesis, *reception theory*, *text theory* and *text analysis theory*, and *gender theory*. A short account of theories concerning culture, class, ethnicity and religion is also provided.

In the field of reception theory I have made use of the work of Wolfgang Iser and Louise M. Rosenblatt. Iser as well as Rosenblatt argue that it is the reader who creates the literary work. Both consider this process to be a dynamic one but their definition of the process involved differs: Iser emphasizes the interaction between reader and text while Rosenblatt prefers to describe this process in terms of a transaction. I use Rosenblatt's *transactional theory* for the purpose of analysing how the girls read the three novels at issue but also for analysing other novels mentioned by the girls. Two other critics, Kathleen McCormick and Pamela Gilbert, are important for analysing how works of fiction are read at school and how fiction is received by young readers in general. McCormick and Gilbert emphasize *the socio-cultural context*, and their work leads on to reflections informed by *ideology critique* which in their turn may lead on to discourse analysis. McCormick and Gilbert have exerted a decisive influence on the analytical perspectives adopted in the study. In my discussions of young people and their reading I have made use of Jon Smidt's theory of *subjective relevance*. I examine Lars-Göran Malmgren's theory of personal reading and functionalised reading driven by an effort towards ideology critique. The possibility of a *symbolical reading* is discussed. In the course of studying how the novels were received I have observed an ambivalent attitude to fiction and to the characters of the novels, and so Thomas Ziehe's theory of *progression* and *regression* has been brought into play.

In this chapter I also introduce relevant theories about text and textual analysis. Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about polyphony in the novel are discussed, intertextuality is approached by means of theories derived from Roland Barthes; and a narratological

reading is conducted with the help of theories put forward by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan. Furthermore, the notion of *the implied reader / the postulated reader* is discussed by means of theories derived from Iser and Bakhtin. The problematic of the concept of *genre* is discussed; in this context, Bakhtin's thesis about the heterogeneity of genres is emphasized while Alastair Fowler's discussion of the undecidability of genres and his definition of genres as types are emphasized. The element of interpretation involved in using the concept of genre is discussed. In my thesis I argue in favour of a functional use of the concept of genre as a way of facilitating communication. The use of the concept of genre in schools is discussed, and the *problem of the canon* and *the "struggle" for literature in the classroom* are examined in the light of the discussion of genre. As three novels play an important part in my thesis, I provide a survey of the genres these belong to. Thus, I discuss girls' books, books for young people, and popular fiction, and I do so from a reader's perspective. The popularity of popular fiction among young people—and the reasons for this popularity—is discussed from the perspective of social psychology, and the presentative symbolical function of literature is emphasized. I introduce a new concept: *didactic function*. The concept is intended to illustrate the didactic function of a text when read. The concept serves to answer the question what the girls in my study explicitly and implicitly say that they have "learnt" by reading.

Next I give an overview of gender theory the main purpose of which is to stress that distinguishing between sex and gender is of fundamental importance to my thesis. This distinction will serve as a theoretical basis for analysing gender constructions. Teresa de Lauretis' theories in *Alice Doesn't* are summarized; according to these, subjectivity is an ongoing construction and personal experience is seen as the basis of sexual identification. De Lauretis considers that these experiences are created not by ideas and values prevalent in society but by the individual's personal commitment to the practices, discourses, and institutions conferring importance (value, meaning, and feeling) to occurrences in the world. Like de Lauretis, Sandra Harding in *The Science Question in Feminism* argues that women's social experiences constitute a unique starting point for analysis. She develops a theory aimed at charting different variables of gender: *individual gender*, *structural gender*, and *symbolic gender*. Drawing on Harding's theory, I develop a method for analysing the girls' gender constructions, placing particular emphasis on the ways in which the girls negotiate the different gender variables with themselves.

I also provide a survey of previous research on women's reading and women's different ways of reading with particular reference to the work of Janice A. Radway and

Lisbeth Larsson. While Radway emphasizes the pleasure women derive from reading, demonstrating that their reading of popular fiction satisfies profound psychological needs on a symbolical level, Larsson marries reception theory to textual analysis in her study of women's subjective ways of reading, which is shown to involve reflection and an element of critical distance to the outside world. Both Radway and Larsson speak of the resistance of reading; Radway specifically refers to "reading as a form of individual resistance", which can be interpreted as women's silent rebellion. In this chapter, I also bring up the work of Valerie Walkerdine, Angela McRobbie, and Sue Turnbull on young women's reading of popular fiction and its personal importance to them.

The chapter concludes with a short survey of relevant theories proposed in the fields of sociology, ethnicity, and the science of religion by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Edward Said, Sandra \_hlund, and Jonas Otterbeck. The complexity of social and cultural life is emphasized and the stereotyping of ethnic, cultural and religious phenomena is questioned.

The aim of the third chapter, "Collecting the Material" ("Materialinsamling"), is to present methods employed in collecting the empirical material. The theoretical basis is derived from *Grounded Theory*, according to which the empirical material is allowed to determine the choice of theory. A *hermeneutical perspective* is discussed in this chapter, and I emphasize the element of interpretation constantly present in the research process. I indicate that my study is related to the *qualitative research tradition*, among other things by referring to Hanne Haavind's work.

In this chapter I also discuss the principles underlying my choice of towns, schools, and girls. An account is also provided of how the three main novels studied were selected: the three groups of girls were asked to pick a particular novel that they wanted all the three groups to read and discuss. The way in which the research was carried out is described as well as the way in which the reading of the novels was accompanied by log books, spontaneous and requested writing, and interviews. The reliability of the collected material is discussed just as my own role and the risk of my influencing the girls during the process of research; in this context I refer the reader to Turnbull's reflections on such matters.

In the fourth chapter, "Life and Reading" ("Livet och l%osningen"), I provide an overview of the geographical, socio-cultural and religious background of the girls. My study has a wide sociocultural perspective and the importance of the geographical factor—in what part of Sweden the girls live—is stressed. The thesis describes three discrete groups of girls living in three different places and attending three different schools. To emphasize

the religious perspective three distinct religious affiliations are identified in two of the milieus studied: among the girls of the multi-ethnic suburb there is a group of Muslims with varying degrees of religious activity ; there is also a practising Roman Catholic, and within the group from northern Sweden there are two practising members of a very strict Church of Sweden movement: Laestadianism.

An attempt is made to describe the different notions of what “svensk%omnet” (Swedish as a school subject) involves. The concept of “svensk%omneskultur” is derived from Lars-G`ran Malmgren’s three “svensk%omne” paradigms to denote the actual reality made up of a combination of different paradigms characterizing the actual teaching of Swedish in the three classes involved. In this chapter, the girls’ leisure reading is described, and in those cases where girls from different milieus have developed different reading cultures these are analyzed. The concept of *reading culture* has been developed to indicate how differently the girls’ reading manifests itself and what the characteristics of reading are in the three groups. Anthony Giddens’ theories provide the basis of my construction of the concept of *reading culture*; Giddens holds that people who spend a lot of time in specific groups often develop specific common values and preferences, and that these groups therefore constitute cultures. Giddens’ theories are of course reminiscent of Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities”. The three clearly delimited reading cultures are presented one by one under the headings *Literary Network in a Multi-Ethnic Suburban Milieu*; *Reading within a Women’s Culture*; and *Literature—A Conscious Marker of Habitus*.

The girls from the multiethnic suburb are avid readers, often borrowing novels from each other and engaging in spontaneous discussions of the books they read. I wish to emphasize that we are talking here about a very big number of novels. The girls’ activity in the literary field should be regarded as a literary network. This network and the circulation of novels, mainly from popular culture and distributed by book clubs, constitute a very important feature of the girls’ indoor life. In the suburb many of the girls who engage in cultural activities practise what Angela McRobbie refers to as *the bedroom culture*. The girls rarely meet in their spare time. They spend most of their time at home in their parents’ flats since they are not usually permitted to go outdoors on their own; hence, their network is most active in the school corridors during breaks. The novels studied at school and the girls’ literary network are two entirely distinct activities with no particular links to each other. The genres preferred by the suburban girls are tales of romantic friendship and classic girls’ books as well as adventure and horror stories; the former category predominates somewhat. The books they read are often Swedish translations of American

originals whose milieus and characters differ considerably both from what the girls encounter in ethnic Swedish society and from what they encounter in their own homes. The purpose of the girls' network is primarily to borrow books from one another and to discuss books and therefore I consider this network as chiefly a form of cultural activity. It is true that only girls form part of the network but the aim is not to form a women's culture, merely to read.

In the sparsely populated areas novel reading is mainly a female activity. The girls of my study borrow or inherit novels from an older generation of women. In this reading culture novels are often discussed across generational borders and it is quite common for three generations to share their reading experiences with each other. Women of different ages point out that men rarely read novels and that they cannot share their reading experiences with them. For this reason they consider novel reading a female activity. Since the girls choose to read novels instead of going hunting as many boys of the same age do, they construct their gender through this choice. They take their place within a female culture which they can share with their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. The novels chosen by the girls living in sparsely populated areas have almost exclusively female protagonists. Women's novels, often with an erotic content, as well as girls' books and horse books for girls are the predominant genres.

The girls from the residential area believe that reading novels will prepare them for adult life. One motive is very strong: they want to acquire a habitus which enables them to live according to the norms of "good taste". The girls often seek the advice of grown-ups, particularly that of their mothers, as to their choice of novels. They also wish for well-known literary classics for Christmas and for their birthdays, planning to include these in their future private library, which they begin to create even towards the end of their nine-year compulsory education. The girls look for books which convey women's knowledge and they are often advised by their mothers to read popular fiction on this theme, or they find novels of this kind on their own. Thus, they make a strange departure from the ambition to develop a conscious habitus. The girls strive after a habitus constituted by high culture classics; they expect to find this kind of literature by asking their mothers for advice but the result is often that they are given books of a different kind, popular fiction. Another interesting phenomenon within this reading culture is that the girls turn against American books about teenagers, questioning their credibility while at the same time accepting racist descriptions in women's popular fiction without doubting their validity.

The girls are not aware of their ambivalence on this point: they express a striving after the “right” habitus but fail to master the norm.

A prominent feature of all the reading cultures studied is that the *pleasure* afforded by reading is the most important factor underlying leisure reading. In this chapter, parallels are drawn between my findings and those of Janice A. Radway in her extensive studies of American middle-class women’s reading and those of Karin L^vgren in her study of the reading of Swedish teenage girls. The pleasure motive is strongly emphasized by both Radway and L^vgren.

The chapter concludes with portraits of three girls, one from each milieu. Here, I analyze the girls’ gender construction, paying special attention to their personal lives, their choice of fiction, and their reading. It is clear that some of the girls have an ambivalent attitude to the manifestation of gender as it affects their own lives, their choice of fiction, and their reading, and that they compromise about the way they construct gender in their own lives. It is also apparent from the girls’ attitude to reading that reading serves to foster resistance and silent rebellion; comparisons are made with Janice A. Radway’s theory of “reading as a form of individual resistance” and Lisbeth Larsson’s theory of reading as a criticism of, and reflection on, the surrounding world and one’s own living conditions.

The three novels examined in my thesis, Cherie Bennett’s *Wild Hearts* (Wild Hearts – Ny i stan), Mats Wahl’s *Lilla Marie*, and Nicholas Evans’ *The Horse Whisperer* (Mannen som kunde tala med h%oostar) are introduced in the fifth chapter, “The Three Novels” (“De tre romanerna”). I provide an account of my own close readings of the novels, based on narratology, ideology criticism, and discourse analysis, and highlighting the gender perspective. At times my own readings are very close to those of the girls. My close readings have a dual purpose: to increase our knowledge of the kind of literature that contemporary Swedish teenage girls prefer and also to make it easier for the reader to follow the discussion on reception in the next chapter. I discuss the didactic intentions underlying the three novels and their possible didactic functions. I make an attempt to determine to what genre the novels chosen belong, not so much for taxonomical reasons as in order to facilitate the discussion: *Wild Hearts* is defined as girls’ fiction, a sub-genre within the wider category of popular fiction; *Lilla Marie* is a young persons’ book; and *The Horse Whisperer* is tentatively defined as women’s popular fiction. These generic definitions will later prove important to my discussion of didactic intentions and functions.

The sixth chapter, “Receptionen av de tre romanerna” (“The Reception of the Three Novels”), centres on the girls’ reading of the three novels. It is shown that the girls differ as

to preferences, interpretations, and ways of reading. The differences that emerge are chiefly concerned with the ways individual readers react but can rarely be observed to obtain between the different reading cultures. One exception is the cultural factor determining gender construction in that *a mother-oriented reading* is noticeable among the girls in the suburban group. I have based the concept of *mother-oriented reading* on gender theorist Margot Bengtsson's notion of mother-orientation. Bengtsson has examined children's relations with their parents, discovering that some children live in strong mother-oriented relationships. My hypothesis as regards the mother-oriented reading of the suburban girls is that the mother's role is strongly emphasized in their families just like patriarchal authority; this is the reason why mother-fixation is a characteristic of the girls' reception. Furthermore, as regards the construction of gender, it is apparent from the reception of the three novels that several of the strong female characters serve as models for the girls while male characters who affront women are repudiated and made the subject of open disdain. Despite the prevalence of homoerotic scenes in parts of the three novels chosen by the girls, none of them makes a gender construction of a same-sex character. Nevertheless, they often express acceptance of homosexuality, recognizing that homosexual femininity is quite possible. One girl exemplifies a strong *mother-identificatory* reading both as regards the three novels included in my study and other novels. (The concept of mother-identificatory reading is analogous to mother-oriented reading.) This girl is strongly influenced by Laestadian culture which places great emphasis on motherhood. The girl is constantly busy looking after her younger sisters and brothers and helping her parents look after the house. Her account of her reading shows clearly that she identifies with the mothers of the novels. This is a case, I would argue, of religious persuasion influencing a reader's reception of a novel. Other examples of how religion and reception are closely intertwined concern descriptions of homosexuality and marital infidelity; several of the practising Muslims and Christians express moral indignation over such scenes, asserting that the characters commit crimes against religion.

The differences between the three kinds of reception are reminiscent of the different attitudes to the teaching of Swedish as a school subject, referred to in my thesis as "svensk%omneskulturer": the girls from the suburban school stress the value of reading novels as a way of improving their command of Swedish; the girls from the countryside look for depictions of complex characters in the novels they read; and the girls from the residential area emphasize the importance of realistic descriptions of setting in their



discussion of the three novels. The reason why they read differently is a result of the teaching they have been exposed to.

The girls' reception of the three novels shows clearly how coloured their readings are by the fact that they are young people at a specific stage of their psychological and social maturity. Strong empathy and clear idiosyncracies are typical characteristics of young people, and the girls' reception of the novels bears witness to this. One comes across regressive as well as progressive readings, sometimes exemplified by one and the same individual. The girls show an appreciation of themes such as love, romance, and sex, yet they also censure such elements in the novels. A number of themes in the girls' own life stories coincide with the themes they emphasize in the novels: looks, clothes, friendships, school, group formation, and strong, independent personalities able to withstand group pressure.

When the girls enter into transaction with the books, they rarely depart from the level of the literal action. They provide symbolical interpretations only occasionally, and ideological criticism is almost only voiced by those among them who are practising Muslims or Christians. It is clear that the girls enter into the plots of the novels, rejoicing and mourning with the protagonists.

In the last chapter, "Didactic Conclusions" ("Didaktiska slutsatser"), the relevance of the results of the thesis to the teaching of literature in Swedish schools is discussed. A dialogue is initiated with *Läroplanens värdegrund, Lpo 94* and with *Kursplan 2000*, the Swedish syllabus currently used. In this context four separate areas are identified: *the problematic of genre, the canon, ideology critique, and the connection between the students' lives and the books they read*. The importance of the schools making use of *the cultural capital of the pupils* when studying literature is stressed. In this context, theories derived from Charles Sarland and Bronwyn Davies are used, and it is proposed on the authority of the findings presented in the thesis, the school curricula, and the aforementioned theoreticians that the teaching of literature in schools must reflect this insight.

In conclusion, it can be said that my study shows that the fiction chosen by the girls themselves mirrors their lives. It is apparent from my study how different reading cultures and readings develop. It is obvious that cultural and social factors influence the girls' choice of books and the development of reading cultures and reading. Several clear examples suggest that a religious background influences reading and interpretations. The impression given by my results is that there is a comparatively weak relationship between the teaching of literature in schools and the girls' spare time reading. The word "woman" in the title of

my thesis, *Becoming a Woman – And Out of Pleasure*, does not refer to a particular female gender construction but to the wealth of versions of female gender represented by the twenty girls included in my study. The girls implicitly construct gender in their own lives as well as in the texts they read in a variety of ways. Sometimes one and the same reader reacts in an ambivalent way. The results of my study suggest unambiguously that pleasure is a strong factor governing the girls' reading and that there is a strong connection between the girls' construction of their identity, including the formation of gender, and their choice of literature and the development of their reading.

*English version by Lars-Håkan Svensson*