



Reclaiming Non-Motherhood: Abjection, Laughter and Failure in Twenty-First- Century Swedish Narratives of Childlessness

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Women who do not have children are often perceived in negative and stereotypical ways. Childfree women are commonly seen as selfish, while involuntarily childless women are viewed as desperate (e.g. see Letherby 2002). In a study of cinematic representations of childlessness, Cristina Archetti (2019) shows how portrayals of childless women are highly pessimistic: “the childless tend to die, either by suicide or killed by others; if



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they do not die, they acquire a child against all expectations; only men and female (super) heroes can overcome the trauma of infertility; and childlessness by circumstance practically does not exist” (182). Existing scholarship on cultural representations of childlessness has mostly been concerned with media, film and television and highlights how women who do not have children are stereotypically represented as selfish, (too) career-oriented, irresponsible and/or desperate (e.g. see de Boer et al. 2019; Graham and Rich 2014; Peterson and Fjell 2010).

In Sweden in the twenty-first century, childlessness has emerged as a topic in literature across genres. Margaretha Fahlgren (2018) has examined texts where (primarily) women write about their personal struggles to have children, but the theme of non-motherhood also appears in novels, short stories and autofiction. This body of literature on childlessness depicts a variety of ways of being a non-mother: through involuntary childlessness and infertility, through childlessness by choice and through childlessness by circumstance. Each narrative tends to focus on one way of being childless, but similar themes emerge within them, and these themes are not linked to the usual stereotypes of women without children, at least not in the ways discussed in previous scholarship. Instead, the narratives take stories about non-motherhood, which are often invisible and abjected from mainstream society, and tell them in new and defiant ways.

In this chapter, I explore literary representations of women without children in twenty-first-century Swedish literature.¹ I discuss fiction, autofiction and personal essays that deal with childlessness and analyse how these representations reclaim the position of non-motherhood in various ways: by telling stories of failed fertility treatments, by embracing the abjected position of non-motherhood and claiming it as a liveable life, and by using laughter and failure to turn things around and propose alternative ways of living. I bring together theories of abjection (Grosz 1994; Kristeva 1982; Longhurst 2001; McClintock 1995), on the one hand, and theories of laughter and grotesque realism (Bakhtin 1968) and failure (Halberstam 2011), on the other, to analyse stories that are usually expelled from the public domain in order to uphold the fertility norm. I show how laughter and failure are employed in these narratives to reclaim the position of non-motherhood, to criticise dominant discourses and to imagine different futures.

¹The texts analysed in this chapter have not been translated into English, so all translations of titles and quotes are my own.

REPRESENTING ABJECTION AND FAILURE: INFERTILITY NARRATIVES

In this section, I will discuss three contemporary Swedish stories of infertility, Tove Folkesson’s autofictional novel *Hennes ord: Värk I–III* (2019; “Her Words: Ache I–III”), Viktoria Jäderling’s short story “Oförklarligt barnlös: uppföljning av en ofullbordad graviditet” (2017; “Unexplained Fertility: Following Up on an Incomplete Pregnancy”), and Sara Lövestam’s novel *Ljudet av fötter: Första Monikabok* (2021a; “The Sound of Feet: First Monika Book”). Folkesson’s novel depicts Tove who tries to have children through artificial insemination with her female partner Hanna. Jäderling’s short story focuses on Hild who goes through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) with a male partner, and Lövestam’s novel represents Monika, who is single and does IVF with donated sperm. Rebecca Feasey (2019) has studied US and UK media representations of infertility and non-traditional family building. She shows that mainstream media tends to privilege happy miracle-baby-in-the-end stories, which stands in sharp contrast to the harsh medical reality where infertility treatments fail more than they succeed.² Feasey argues that infertility stories have become more visible in the media landscape. Repro-lit—female, first-person, confessional literature on infertility—is a growing genre, and celebrities, such as Michelle Obama and Sarah Jessica Parker, share their infertility stories in the media. While the visibility of infertility stories can have an educational purpose, they typically depict infertility only against the backdrop of a successful outcome: pregnancy and motherhood. Feasey shows that “repro-lit rarely produces stories about living with infertility, without children. Rather, infertility stories are routinely narratives about overcoming reproductive problems in the quest for biological children” (2019, 48). Moreover, the celebrity women “tend only to announce their infertility once they have secured a successful pregnancy outcome, which in itself sends out a rather misleading finale to the infertility narrative” (2019, 129).

Thus, according to Feasey, infertility is rarely represented as an experience in its own right but has to be framed against a successful outcome (see also Archetti 2020). This is not, however, the case in the Swedish fiction on infertility that I discuss here, which could be due, at least partly, to the difference between media and literary representations. While

²Feasey states that for women under the age of 35, the chance of getting pregnant from an individual IVF cycle is about 21% (2019, 15).

mainstream media, such as news articles, typically aims for broader audiences and focuses on a few highlights or messages, literature often consists of longer narratives with room for complex plots and detailed depictions of the thoughts and feelings of the characters. As such, literature might be able to add nuance to representations of infertility.³ The Swedish literary narratives I discuss here document all stages of the female protagonists' struggles to become pregnant in great detail but, in contrast to the media material discussed by Feasey, neither of them ends with children or even a pregnancy.⁴

The narratives depict the minutiae of the fertility treatments in question: gynaecological exams, hormone injections, ovulation tests, insemination, egg retrieval, embryo transfer and the period when the protagonists wait anxiously to see the results of the treatment. In Jäderling's short story, Hild undergoes a seemingly endless number of exams before beginning the treatment: "The investigation with troubleshooting continues. Hild is anesthetized. Carefully punctuated and rinsed clean. They insert cameras, knives, and needles into her. She is injected and inseminated. They look inside her. They measure and calculate" (2017, 296). During the exams Hild is represented with a lack of agency; she is a passive object while things are being done to her by an anonymous medical expertise focused on "troubleshooting", which also indicates that there is something wrong with her body. The malfunctioning body is highlighted in Lövestam's novel too, for instance, in the depiction of the waiting room at the fertility clinic: "To sit here is to be a failure. All of us, who sit here, can see that the others know, we see that, even if we struggle not to make eye contact. Those of us who sit here have not managed to do that which is every biological organism's only task" (2021a, 101).

However, the protagonists are not just represented as passive objects with malfunctioning bodies. They are also depicted as capable and

³That literature can add nuance to and challenge conventional representations of non-motherhood in other national contexts as well is indicated by Alexandra M. Hill's article (2022) on childlessness in German literature. Hill discusses two literary works that question neoliberal models of femininity and family structures.

⁴Both Tove Folkesson's and Sara Lövestam's books have sequels, and in Folkesson's second book Tove gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby (Folkesson 2021). Read together, Folkesson's two novels thus end in a more conventional way, but if each novel is viewed as a separate work of art, the first novel still breaks with the traditional infertility story plot line. Sara Lövestam's book is part of a trilogy, and Monika does not become pregnant in any of the novels (Lövestam 2021b; Lövestam 2022).

educated, such as when Lövestam's Monika injects hormones: "At a quarter past nine I clean my belly fat with a cotton ball. I take the protective paper off a needle, screw it firmly onto the injection pen and set the dose to 225. I take a breath. Then I use my hand to squeeze a piece of my fat together and perforate it. [...] I keep the needle inside and count to ten before I pull it out" (2021a, 50). Here the female protagonist is represented as active rather than passive, and the quote has an educating tone, since it follows the step-by-step instructions for hormone injection pens used in fertility treatments—even the dose is specified. The details and the educating tone also appear in the description of the egg retrieval: "To punctuate eight follicles in your inner organs feels like it sounds. A dull pain with peaks of something that feels like knife stabs. You can follow everything on a screen, how the thick needle pushes against every follicle until the membrane collapses" (2021a, 119). In this quote, Monika, who is first-person narrator, addresses the reader more directly when describing both the technical aspects and the pain. The descriptions of the fertility treatments in Lövestam's novel can be almost manual-like but the other two narratives do not shy away from in-depth descriptions either. To give the narrators space to describe fertility treatments in detail can be seen as a way of providing the female protagonists with agency to educate the readers about infertility. At the same time, the protagonists are given a voice to tell their stories about abjection and failure.

In Julia Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytical account, abjection refers to the process in which the subject becomes a social subject by expelling what that society views as impure, such as excrements, vomit, and menstrual blood. However, the subject can never fully expulse these abject elements, and they continue to threaten the subject's sense of self and provoke fear and disgust. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) points out when discussing Kristeva's concept of abjection, bodily fluids are particularly threatening to the subject's sense of self: "Bodily fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside [...], to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside" (193). Grosz argues that women's bodies have been constructed in Western cultures as particularly leaky and uncontrollable, and that "women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage" (1994, 203). Drawing on Kristeva, Grosz and others, Robyn Longhurst (2001) argues that pregnant women's bodies are seen as abject, since they are constructed as seeping, with unstable and unpredictable boundaries and thus as a threat to public spaces.

In Kristeva's, Grosz's and Longhurst's accounts, abjection is in one way or another associated with the mother or motherhood; to put it briefly, for Kristeva, the abject and the instability between self and other are linked to the separation from the mother; for Grosz, women's corporeality and their sexual difference are connected to their reproductive capacities; and for Longhurst, pregnant women's bodies are constructed as abject. In the Swedish fertility narratives, abjection is, rather, associated with failure to become a mother, but as with the theory discussed earlier, the process of abjection relies heavily on bodily fluids, in particular blood. During the period following the embryo transfer, all protagonists continuously scan their bodies for signs of the outcome of the treatment. What is most prominent here is the fear of blood, which would most likely mean that the treatment has failed. Jäderling's Hild and Lövestam's Monika, who both go through IVF, take progesterone, and these vaginal suppositories are a constant source of worry as they melt and seep out of their vaginas: "During the following weeks, Hild inserts a white pill. If she only clears her throat everything ends up like a white wet pulp in her panties. She walks carefully on the streets, focuses on inhaling inside. [Hild and her partner] wake up at night and realise that reality could have changed during sleep. Hild has to go to the bathroom, pull down her panties and check the colour" (Jäderling 2017, 297–298). Hild even checks for blood once when she is outside, hiding between a building and a hedge: "puts a finger all the way in, looks with horror at her moist finger. Smells it, tries to smell forth the red colour" (2017, 300). Like Hild, Monika constantly checks her panties for blood, and throughout the narrative, she reflects on her past periods and different kinds of blood, often with great detail: "Light red streaks that could be interpreted as implantation bleeding, a bleeding you can have even if you are pregnant and that everyone who has gone through in vitro fertilisation therefore hopes for when the first blood appears. More often: flowing, thick, and burgundy red. Thready or petrified, almost brown. Decilitres of disappointment, a reflection I won't share with anyone: how much blood pudding [a traditional Swedish food] it could have made" (Lövestam 2021a, 232–233).

In both Jäderling and Lövestam, the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, are exposed through detailed descriptions of blood and runny vaginal suppositories. These bodily fluids mark these stories as abjection stories. This is true also in the sense that they are stories that are not usually told in public spaces other than anonymous infertility blogs and online fora. As such, these stories can be seen as abject elements that

have to be expelled from society in order to uphold a certain narrative of fertility, a narrative that also permeates the infertility case studies described by Feasey, with their happy endings. Unlike the media representations in Feasey's study, Jäderling and Lövestam make space for these abject stories to be shared and told. The level of detail, both in relation to the process and the failure, and the educational tone also render these stories accessible to audiences who are less familiar with fertility treatments.

In Folkesson's novel, the need to talk about infertility and miscarriage and to share abject stories is more explicitly stated. When Tove starts to bleed, she cannot get any answers from the midwives about what is happening to her and what to expect. Tove suspects that the midwives know more than they share with her, and Tove cannot understand why every woman has to go through miscarriage on her own when miscarriages are so common. In contrast to the midwives' silence, Tove's miscarriage is described in great detail in the novel. When Tove feels something coming out of her, she pulls down her pants: "I put my whole palm between my legs and get a warm spheric seed capsule in my hand. Big like an iron marble. Heavy. Tight. Veiny" (Folkesson 2019, 254). This is just one of many passages describing blood and lumps coming out of Tove's vagina. Against the backdrop of Tove's questioning of the silence around miscarriage in the fertility and maternity care, the novel's detailed descriptions of Tove's miscarriage can be seen as a way to break the silence and the loneliness around it. The details are not expelled from society but visible in plain sight in an autofictional novel published by one of Sweden's most prestigious publishers. Miscarriage, in all its bloody, abject detail, is transformed into a theme for art and a story worth telling and sharing. The idea of abjection stories as a theme for art also appears in Lövestam's novel when Monika visits the opera and reflects on how the tragic parts of our real lives are rarely turned into music: "When I tried to become pregnant for eleven years—that would be a long aria" (2021a, 218). This is said jokingly but points to the fact that infertility without a happy ending is rarely seen as a story worth telling and sharing. By telling infertility stories of failure and abjection, Lövestam's, Folkesson's and Jäderling's narratives widen the representational space for infertility (see also Björklund 2023). They also serve an educating purpose; when being published, the blood, pain and sadness of failed infertility treatments and miscarriages are not silenced and hidden in fertility clinics and anonymous online infertility fora. These stories are shared with a general audience, who learn about injections, vaginal suppositories and lumps of blood.

RECLAIMING THE ABJECTED POSITION OF NON-MOTHERHOOD

In the previous section, abjection was mostly centred around the body and bodily fluids. My discussion of abject stories that need to be expelled from society in order to uphold a particular narrative of fertility points, however, to another way of understanding abjection, which is more in line with Anne McClintock's understanding of abjection. McClintock (1995) sees "the paradox of abjection as a formative aspect of modern industrial imperialism" (72) and argues that there are abject people that imperialism "rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on" (72). Abject people inhabit abject zones, which need to be controlled and policed in various ways. While imperialism is, of course, fundamentally different from non-motherhood, McClintock's analysis moves the discussion of abjection to a more societal level; it shows that abjection is not only linked to the body and bodily fluids but could be applied, for instance, to people and places. In this section, I will take my cue from McClintock and discuss non-motherhood as an abject position. I have shown how narratives of failed fertility treatments are abject stories that tend to be silenced. By telling these stories, Lövestam's, Folkesson's and Jäderling's narratives can be said to reclaim the abjected position of non-motherhood, from the perspective of involuntary childlessness. Here I will focus on two books that approach non-motherhood from other perspectives: Malin Lindroth's personal essay *Nuckan* (2018; "The Spinster") and the edited volume of personal essays *Ingens mamma: Tolv kvinnor om barnfrihet* (2013; "Nobody's Mother: Twelve Women on Childfreedom"). Both books reclaim the position of non-motherhood; Lindroth's book does it from the position of childlessness by circumstance, and the edited volume focuses on childfreedom, or voluntary childlessness. While there are undoubtedly differences between the positions of childlessness by circumstance and voluntary childlessness, my readings of *Nuckan* and *Ingens mamma* highlight similarities between these positions. Moreover, some of the themes that appear in the infertility narratives discussed in the previous section feature in Lindroth's and Adolfsson's books as well.

The purpose of Lindroth's book is stated clearly in the foreword: "With this book I want to reclaim the one [of the words associated with shame] that most suits a fifty-two-year-old, childless, involuntarily lonely human being who never felt at home in the narratives of single life that our

culture provides. I want to reclaim the word spinster” (2018, 5–6). Lindroth positions the spinster in opposition to our culture’s success stories of single women like Carrie Bradshaw in the TV show *Sex and the City*. The spinster did not choose single life; she was just never chosen by anyone. Leading one’s life as (involuntarily) single can invoke fear in others. Lindroth describes how acquaintances she meets at dinner parties hurry to tell her that she is not really lonely but rather in possession of precious time for travelling and other self-developing projects. She continues: “Involuntary loneliness was always linked to the others, to the mentally ill, to the addicts and the very old who could be dead for months before their neighbours noticed. Never among us, among Mediterranean dishes and white wine glasses, in the middle of life and affluent neighbourhoods” (2018, 24). Here involuntary loneliness is described as an abject position, as it is linked to “others” and abject people. The spinster becomes a threat through her association with involuntary loneliness, an abject position, and she has to be expelled from middle-class dinner parties and made into a kind of Carrie Bradshaw character with a glamorous single life.

In Lindroth’s book, the spinster position is primarily linked to lack of a partner but being a spinster also includes childlessness and involuntary loneliness. Throughout the book, the spinster position is tied to non-motherhood in various ways. The spinster is described as belonging to “the allegedly unfuckable” (2018, 28), which is of course connected to the position of not being able to attract a partner, but being “unfuckable” also, implicitly, implies that there will be no children. There are also more explicit references to how the spinster position is linked to childlessness. Lindroth tells a story of how she engages in a conversation with a mother in a toy store and is assumed to be a mother. She is unable to tell the other woman that she is not a mother, and when she leaves the toy store, she is angry with herself for her inability to reveal her identity as a non-mother.

This passage also contains explicit references to one of Lindroth’s friends who is gay and did not want to come out, which suggests that the norm to be a mother is as strong as the heterosexual norm and as difficult to diverge from. Lindroth’s life as a spinster is described as a life in hiding: “The feeling of living a semi-lie had accompanied me for several years. I wanted to talk about my life as alone in the same way as the couples talked about theirs, as a lived experience” (2018, 28). The book Lindroth writes is a way to do precisely that; to come out of the closet, break free from norms of coupledom and motherhood, and embrace an abject position. Lindroth points out that her spinster position is not her choice: “Perhaps

I will be a spinster for the rest of my life. That would be a loss. I would lie if I said something else” (2018, 114). In this quote, the idea of a free choice is undermined; spinsterhood is not what she chose but what happened to her. Still, as I have argued, the book establishes a case for this position as a life experience that deserves to be told and not hidden behind norms of coupledness and the nuclear family. Like the infertility narratives discussed in the previous section, Lindroth’s book highlights an abjected story about non-motherhood that tends to go unnoticed and presents it as something that concerns everyone.⁵

In the collection of essays *Ingens mamma*, Annina Rabe asks why child-free people are seen as such a threat and tend to invoke aggressions in people. Several of the 12 women in this volume who write about their experiences of being childfree by choice bear witness about how they are constantly being questioned about why they do not have children. Previous scholarship has also acknowledged that women who are childfree by choice are regularly challenged and subjected to other people’s efforts to make them comply with the norm to have children (see, for instance, Rodgers 2021). While stories of failed infertility and involuntarily lonely spinsters tend to be abjected from society through silence, childfree women have become increasingly visible (e.g. see Leimbach 2021, 155). However, the way in which childfree women are questioned and feared suggests that they occupy a similarly abjected position. Involuntarily childless women and spinsters can be constructed as having wanted but failed to achieve motherhood, which to some extent upholds motherhood as the norm for women. Childfree women are inscribed with non-motherhood as an active choice, which undermines the presumed link between femininity and motherhood. They need to be challenged in order to uphold normative motherhood, but, like the infertility narratives discussed in the previous section and Lindroth’s spinster, the childfree women in *Ingens mamma* embrace the position and use it to tell their stories. This is also explicitly stated in the introduction to the book where editor Josefine Adolfsson acknowledges that it is difficult to find other experiences, especially stories about women who are childfree by choice. She continues: “I decided to put together the book I was looking for myself” (Adolfsson 2013, 8). In

⁵That the spinster perspective can concern everyone is confirmed in Lindroth’s second book about the spinster, where the spinster takes up writing a love advice column, in the belief that she has something important to contribute with in these matters (Lindroth 2021).

particular, the childfree women in the book use the position to speak back to those who question them and to criticise parents' privileges.

Some writers highlight how non-parents end up working more than parents. Natacha López points out that non-parents are expected to work evenings and weekends to a higher extent than parents. Jane Magnusson argues that the Swedish welfare system, which has facilitated for parents to combine family and professional lives, has led to a situation where parents, despite complaining about stress, take on less of the general workload than non-parents. Parents leave the office early to pick up children from state-funded childcare, and they are absent from work several weeks every winter because the welfare state has provided them with the possibility to stay home to care for a sick child and get reimbursed by the Swedish social insurance agency. The non-parents, on the other hand, end up working more because they need to cover for the parents' absences.

Other contributors discuss how the time of non-parents is valued less than the time of parents. López writes about a childfree woman, Eva, who is expected, both by her boss and her colleagues, to work between Christmas and New Year's because she "doesn't have a family" (Adolfsson 2013, 44). In this passage, Eva herself is given space to question her colleagues: "I do have a family! I have a mother and a father and I'm very close to both of them. I have a brother and a new-born nephew and an older nephew and a sister-in-law. But just because I don't have children... What is family? Do only the ones I have given birth to count?" (Adolfsson 2013, 44–45; ellipsis in original). This quote highlights how Swedish norms around family—such as child-centeredness, the nuclear family norm and pronatalism—have contributed to a narrow definition of what family entails. But it also gives room for the childfree people to speak back to the parents by providing their own definitions of family. While López highlights how childfree people are less free to make decisions around vacation, Anna Sol Lindqvist discusses a different dimension of time. She shows how childfree people have to adjust their schedules around families' schedules: "As childfree among parents I have become used to that social life is often governed by how the parents have defined the needs of the children, while the needs of the adults who are not part of the family can always be negotiated. Suddenly I have, too, become included in a schedule where dinner is eaten at five o'clock sharp and where children are put to bed between quarter past seven and eight" (Adolfsson 2013, 87). Both López and Lindqvist point to how the time of parents and children are prioritised over the time of childfree people.

Together the essays in *Ingens mamma* highlight the privileges of parents and how these often impact childfree people in negative ways. Helen Peterson and Tove Ingebjörg Fjell (2010) have studied Swedish and Norwegian media representations of childfreedom, and they note that the media debate between parents and non-parents is less polarised in Sweden and Norway than in other European countries and the United States. Childfree people in Swedish and Norwegian media are represented as relatively friendly people who like children, and critique of parents' privileges and child-centeredness in society is virtually non-existent. Peterson and Fjell suggest that such critiques are too controversial to be given space in the media, and parenthood thus appears to be unassailable (2010, 140–146). Unlike the media representations discussed by Peterson and Fjell, the essays in *Ingens mamma* are explicitly critical of how non-parents need to adjust their lives to parents and families, both in the workplace and in their personal lives. Instead of adjusting to the unassailable parenthood norm, the writers embrace the abjected position that being a child-free woman entails and use it as a platform for critique of this norm and how it negatively impacts the lives of non-parents.

LAUGHTER, FAILURE AND NEW WAYS OF SEEING THE WORLD

While non-motherhood is linked to abjection and failure in the Swedish narratives discussed in this chapter, many of the stories also contain laughter, often in the context of the body. In this section, I use Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) theories of grotesque realism to discuss how the material bodily principle is used in some of the previously discussed Swedish narratives of non-motherhood to laugh at something usually not associated with humour, namely infertility. I also draw on Bakhtin's discussion of degradation and renewal and Jack Halberstam's (2011) theories of failure to explore what new possibilities degradation and failure can offer in narratives of non-motherhood.

In Bakhtin's discussion of Rabelais's work, the material bodily principle—images of the body, eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, defecation and urination—plays a key role. Bakhtin refers to Rabelais's use of such images as grotesque realism, an aesthetics grounded in the medieval carnival, and defines the material bodily principle as deeply positive, as it includes degradation and renewal at the same time: "To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something

more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (1968, 21). Another component of grotesque realism is the carnivalesque laughter—a universal laughter that includes everyone and everything. In the context of the medieval carnival, the whole world is perceived as ridiculous and humorous and the carnivalesque laughter thus challenges power, official truths and the current world order.

In the infertility narratives discussed above, the level of bodily detail and the protagonists’ reflections on them sometimes become humorous. The description of Jäderling’s Hild hiding in the bushes to check if she has started bleeding and Monika’s reflections, in Lövestam’s novel, on how much blood pudding she could have made with all her menstrual blood are not only abject stories but can evoke laughter. Read with Bakhtin’s theories on grotesque realism, the humorous images of bodily fluids open up another dimension of these narratives. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is not complete and closed; it transgresses itself and is open to and blends with the outside world. The grotesque body’s unfinished and open character is particularly visible in the act of eating, often in images of the banquet: “the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world’s expense. [...] [The banquet] is the triumph of life over death. In this respect it is equivalent to conception and birth. The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed” (1968, 282–283). While menstrual blood is connected to failure to become pregnant in Lövestam’s novel, Monika’s reflections on making blood pudding out of it also link it to food. Her menstrual blood represents the material bodily principle which both destroys and creates, and the creative dimension is particularly visible in the image of the blood pudding, something nutritious and life-preserving.⁶

⁶In contemporary French literature, menstrual blood is sometimes represented as purifying and sacred rather than as impure and abject. Maria Kathryn Tomlinson (2021) argues that these representations can be seen as a corporeal protest against societal discourses that define women’s bodies as abject (63, 93). Infertility and childlessness are, however, not the focus of Tomlinson’s study, which deals with literary representations of the female fertility cycle. In contrast, in Lövestam’s novel the creative dimension of the menstrual blood is linked to failure to become pregnant.

Food also appears in connection with fertility treatments in Jäderling's short story. When Hild and her partner drive home after the embryo transfer, "they buy a large cinnamon roll and take a picture of it while laughing. They think that the roll swells and that it is surrounded by a glorified light" (Jäderling 2017, 297). For Bakhtin, the official Medieval culture and its truth are primarily linked to the church and Christianity, which had a "tone of icy petrified seriousness" (1968, 73). The carnivalesque laughter challenged the official culture and truth by degrading it to the material bodily level, and the mockery "was deeply immersed in the triumphant theme of bodily regeneration and renewal" (1968, 75). The laughter in the quote from Jäderling is a carnivalesque laughter; even if it is not explicitly linked to religion, the idea of pregnancy as a glorified state can be seen as an official truth that is ridiculed and laughed at by being linked to food and eating, the material bodily principle. Lövestam's novel more explicitly references the Bible in connection with fertility and food. Throughout the novel, Monika's follicles, which start to grow as a result of the hormone injections, are compared to grape clusters. This simile appears, for instance, when Monika draws her family tree on a piece of paper, thinking: "*Stina slept with a strange man and gave birth to a son Micke. Micke took a wife who reminded him of Stina. She gave birth to a daughter Monika. Monika became the mother of twenty grapes*" (Lövestam 2021a, 80; italics in original). This passage alludes to the Biblical genealogies, which highlight kinship and heritage. By representing Monika's inability to conceive in a context where it breaks with a long genealogy this quote emphasises barrenness. At the same time, by including food and ovaries in the Biblical genealogy and thus invoking laughter and the material bodily principle, this passage degrades and challenges truths about the importance of these genealogies and paradoxically also links Monika's barrenness to renewal.

For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque laughter mocks and defeats power, "all that oppresses and restricts" (1968, 92). An element of mocking power is particularly visible in Lövestam's novel. For instance, when Monika visits the fertility clinic, the doctor makes some insensitive comments about Monika's age, and while Monika does not object explicitly, the reader has access to her inner monologue in which she constantly speaks back to the doctor and belittle him by comparing him to a mole (the animal). The mole dwells in the earth, and the comparison thus degrades the doctor to the material bodily level. Even if Monika's resistance is quiet, she is a

first-person narrator and controls the narrative; she can invoke the carnivalesque laughter and degrade the authoritarian doctor.⁷

In the infertility narratives, laughter thus works to turn things around and challenge what we take for granted. Degradation and laughter are used to mock power and to resist official truths of pregnancy as a glorified state and conventional kinship bonds like the ones in the Bible. In line with the material bodily as a creative principle, degradation and laughter also, perhaps paradoxically, change barrenness into renewal and regeneration. For Bakhtin, degradation and regeneration are intertwined in grotesque realism: “Carnival (and we repeat that we use this word in its broadest sense) did liberate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people” (1968, 274). The idea that degradation and negativity can carry with them a seed to renewal appears also in Jack Halberstam’s book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Key to Halberstam’s theory is how failure can be a way of resisting the norms of what it means to succeed in a society that is governed by a neoliberal ideology that prioritises individualism over collectivity. Similar to Bakhtin, Halberstam argues that the questioning of taken-for-granted truths can open up new ways of living in the world, but Halberstam ties those new ways of living closer to collectivity.

As we have seen, the Swedish narratives of non-motherhood are in various ways stories of failure. While the infertility narratives depict failing fertility treatments, *Nuckan* and *Ingens mamma* highlight failure to live up to norms of femininity and motherhood. In many of these stories, however, degradation and failure make possible new ways of living in the world. In the infertility narratives, grotesque realism and failure are intertwined, linked to bodily fluids and degradation, but this process leads to something new. At the end of Jäderling’s short story, Hild has miscarried, and even if the last paragraphs emphasise emptiness and lack of meaning, Hild is also filled by happiness when realising that she is at the bottom. Degradation leads to something positive, and even if it is unclear in Hild’s case what this happiness entails, it is obviously not associated with having children.

⁷In another twenty-first-century Swedish novel about a woman who struggles to have children, Martina Haag’s *Glada hälsningar från Missängertträsk: En vintersaga* (2011; Happy Greetings from Missängertträsk: A Winter’s Tale), laughter is used to challenge “official truths” about what a good life entails for women: husband and children (Björklund 2023).

In Lövestam's novel, new possibilities are connected to a relationship to a child who is not Monika's: her neighbour, 14-year-old Texas, who needs a stable adult in his life since his own mother has addiction problems. The novel depicts not only how Monika tries to become pregnant but fails but also how she receives a family by becoming a kind of mother figure in Texas's life: she feeds him, talks to him about his life, and even saves him from being sexually abused by an older man. The development of their relationship parallels Monika's fertility treatment, such as when Monika's embryos grow in petri dishes at the hospital during a weekend she spends growing closer to Texas. At another occasion, during an intimate conversation with Texas, she feels a movement in her cervix, which makes her think about the fertility treatment. But while the fertility treatment fails, her relationship with Texas thrives, and the references to growing embryos and cervix movements can be seen as a way to emphasise how caring for a child is linked to Texas rather than the embryo. This is even confirmed by Texas, who after learning about Monika's struggle to become pregnant reveals that he does not want her to have a child. At first, Monika gets upset, but then realises why:

“You don't want me to have children because you want to keep me to yourself, right?”

I see the answer in Texas's shrug.

“At least you're normal,” he says.

Rarely has a declaration of love felt so real. (Lövestam 2021a, 244)

By emphasising the relationship between Monika and Texas, Lövestam's novel challenges biogenetic motherhood as the only way to care for children and opens up new ways of leading one's life.

While Folkesson's novel includes grotesque elements in the representation of Tove's miscarriage, it does not invoke the carnivalesque laughter. Still, failure and the connection to the material bodily principle reveal the possibilities of new ways of living, as collectivity is presented as an alternative to the nuclear family. Tove, her partner Hanna, Tove's grandmother and Tove's uncle care for each other like family members, and when they all sit together in grandmother's kitchen, Tove refers to them as a family: “Grandmother looks so happy because we will stick together when she dies. A strange little family consisting of two + uncle + dog” (Folkesson 2019, 99). Even if grandmother is not included in this family, since she

will soon die, she is part of the community in the present. This is also a cross-species family, since the dog is included.

Some of the essays in *Ingens mamma* offer similar examples of alternatives to biogenetic bonds and the nuclear family. These essays do not evoke grotesque realism, but in light of Halberstam's theories, their representations of failure to live up to norms of fertility and femininity also suggest other ways of leading one's life. Similar to Lövestam, both Josefine Adolfsson and Faranak Rahimi highlight the possibility to care for children beyond biogenetic bonds. Adolfsson points to the paradox that lies in society's prioritisation of artificial reproduction over taking care of existing children in need, and Rahimi writes about her experiences of caring for the children in her low-income neighbourhood. Other essays in the volume argue for the need to upgrade other close relationships than parent-child relations. Anna Sol Lindqvist dreams of a large family that is only partly based on biogenetic connections; a group of friends who live together and who would not differentiate between their biogenetic children and the other children in the group. Natacha López highlights how childfree people spend quite a lot of time caring for others, such as ageing parents, lonely friends, their partners and even children who need more adults in their lives, and she states: "Maybe it's time to upgrade the significance of other relationships than the one between parents and small children?" (Adolfsson 2013, 49–50). In these essays, failure to adjust to motherhood norms frees human consciousness to reflect on other ways of organising close relationships.

CONCLUSION

The Swedish narratives of non-motherhood discussed in this chapter encompass a wide variety of genres and represent a range of women who do not have children for numerous reasons. And yet, similar tropes and themes emerge within these texts, including the reasons for being childless. Together, the texts recount stories that are usually invisible—stories of blood, loneliness and less-privileged positions—and they do so with an educating and defiant tone. In the narratives, non-motherhood is linked to abjection; in the infertility narratives, abjection is expressed through bodily fluids, in particular blood, and in Lindroth's *Nuckan* and the edited volume *Ingens mamma*, non-motherhood becomes an abjected position. Non-motherhood is also associated with failure; the infertility narratives are stories about failed fertility treatments, and the other two books

represent failure to comply with norms. Abjection and failure are embraced and reclaimed in these narratives and used to showcase non-motherhood as a liveable life and to criticise the motherhood norm and the rarely discussed parents' privileges. Abjection and failure are also combined with laughter in some of these stories, a laughter that is carnivalesque and thereby linked to degradation and renewal. Subsequently, laughter mocks power and offers new ways of being, making possible a world where close relationships are not necessarily organised around biogenetic bonds and the nuclear family. Even if the carnivalesque laughter does not appear in all the narratives discussed in this chapter, they are all characterised by a defiant attitude; they challenge motherhood and family norms and provide alternative ways of leading one's life. They suggest that happiness is unrelated to having children, they promote collectivity and/or caring for children beyond biogenetic bonds and they valorise other forms of relationality, including connections between friends.

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