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Negotiating Good Parenthood in Swedish Climate Change Fiction

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ABSTRACT

How can you be a good parent to a child who, with the current speed of global warming, will likely live their adult life in a world ravaged by floods, wildfires, and pandemics? In the absence of scholarship that centres the question of how to be a good parent in times of climate change, fictional literature can provide a way to explore this dilemma. This article analyzes how parenthood is conceptualized in relation to environmental consciousness as well as gendered and national ideals of good parenthood in two contemporary Swedish climate change novels, Jens Liljestrand's *Även om allt tar slut* (*Even If Everything Ends*) and Anna Dahlqvist's *Det är tropiska nätter nu* (*Now We Have Tropical Nights*). Liljestrand's novel depicts how ideals anchored in Swedish family politics trump environmental consciousness when it comes to good parenthood, and it suggests that parents need to take responsibility for the climate crisis. The climate-friendly motherhood represented in Dahlqvist's novel fails, but it also challenges Swedish family ideals and is in some respects an answer to the call in Liljestrand's novel: that parents take responsibility for climate change.

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How can you be a good parent to a child who, with the current speed of global warming, will likely live their adult life in a world ravaged by rising sea levels, wildfires, food shortages and pandemics? In many parts of the world, sea-level rise, droughts, wildfires and hurricanes caused by climate change already affect millions of people, and according to the latest report from the IPCC, released in March 2023, global average temperatures are likely to rise above the 1.5°C goal within the next decade. Beyond the 1.5-degree goal, the impacts of climate change, such as coastal flooding, heat waves, crop failure and diseases spread by mosquitoes, will be much harder for humans to handle (Plumer, 2023). In recent years, the dilemma of parenthood in times of climate crisis has been discussed intensively in the media (see, for instance, Annebäck & Holm, 2019; Beckman, 2019; Ivarsson, 2023; see also Bach & Hvidt Breenegaard, 2024; Kristensen, 2020), but it is not just a media phenomenon. More and more people factor climate change into their reproductive decisions (Schneider-Mayerson & Ling Leong, 2020). Climate anxiety among children and young people is a global phenomenon, and many young people are hesitant to have children because of climate change (Fjell, 2022; Helm et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2021; Nakkerud, 2021). The issue has also gained visibility through activist initiatives such as *BirthStrike* in the UK, *Conceivable Future* and *Stop Having Kids* in the United States and *No Future No Children* in Canada. These different groups bring attention to personal and collective anxieties around reproduction when facing climate crisis (McMullen & Dow, 2022).

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Despite the urgency of the question of parenthood in relation to the climate crisis, it has not received much attention in existing scholarship, and in the absence of scholarship, fictional literature can provide a way to explore current ideas about the dilemma. The twenty-first century has seen a wave of fiction, primarily novels, that engages with climate change and its consequences.¹ This body of literature can provide space for thinking through and making sense of the climate crisis. In this article, I analyze how parenthood is conceptualized in relation to environmental consciousness as well as gendered and national ideals of good parenthood in two contemporary Swedish climate change novels, Jens Liljestrand's *Även om allt tar slut* (2021; *Even If Everything Ends* [2023]) and Anna Dahlqvist's *Det är tropiska nätter nu* (2022; *Now We Have Tropical Nights*). Climate change fiction is a small but growing genre in Sweden, and so far, it has gained traction primarily within the field of children's and young adult literature, which in turn has generated a body of scholarship (see, for instance, Nyqvist, 2023, pp. 90–92, 159–83; Salomonsson, 2023; Skåve, 2015, 2023). Liljestrand's and Dahlqvist's novels are two of very few examples of Swedish climate change fiction for adults, and they are sometimes mentioned together when climate change literature is discussed (see, for instance, Tiberg, 2022; Wiman, 2022). They have been chosen for this study as they both deal particularly with parenthood in times of climate crisis, but as the following analysis will show, they approach this issue in different ways.

Parenting in times of climate change takes a particular shape in Sweden, a country that prides itself of being at the forefront of both environmental politics and family politics. Until recently, Sweden has been a forerunner in environmental politics internationally (Heidenblad, 2021)² and has fostered activists like Greta Thunberg, who started the global *Fridays for Future* movement, in which millions of young people around the world organized school strikes for climate change. Sweden is also known internationally for its progressive family politics, which centres support for parents to combine family life and career. Swedish family politics is intertwined with gender equality politics and linked to the building of the Swedish welfare state. When the public sector expanded during the decades following World War II, women were needed in the labour market. This development coincided to some extent with demands from the second wave of the women's movement, which led to progressive family politics measures, such as a new law on parental leave and state-funded childcare in the 1970s. At the same time, men were encouraged to share the responsibility for childcare and household work, for instance, through campaigns from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. Male-breadwinner households were gradually replaced with dual-earner /dual-carer households, in which both parents were expected to contribute to the labour market as well as care for children.

Although birth rates are currently on a decline in the Global North, the Nordic countries have had relatively high birth rates from a European perspective, and this is seen as a result of Nordic family politics (see, for instance, Björnberg, 2016; Eydal et al., 2018). Swedish family politics has had normative effects. The key position of the family, in particular a certain kind of family consisting of two adults with children, has led to a strong nuclear family norm. The possibility to combine family and career encourages the Swedish population to have children and creates implicit pronatalist pressure, especially on women (see, for instance, Engwall & Peterson, 2010). Furthermore, it has created norms of involved parenthood. Lucas Forsberg (now Gottzén) argues that expectations on Swedish parents to be involved in their children's rearing and education have increased. This is partly due to the marketization of education that started in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which demanded more parental engagement, through the possibility to choose schools and through a greater expectation of collaboration with teachers. Intensified relations between schools and parents can increase the influence state-based norms have on parenting and discipline parents into fulfilling ideals of involved parenthood (Forsberg, 2009, pp. 22–25). However, even if Swedish family politics have shaped ideals of Swedish gender-equal and involved fatherhood (see, for instance, Björk, 2017; Klinth, 2002), ideals of involved parenthood impact women more than men. Mothers are still assumed to be primary caregivers, and maternal guilt features in the everyday

lives of many Swedish mothers (see, for instance, Eldén & Anving, 2016; Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Forsberg, 2009).

Parenthood in relation to the climate crisis has received relatively little attention in existing scholarship on reproduction and climate change, which has mostly focused on how children and people of reproductive age factor climate change into reproductive decision-making (Arnocky et al., 2012; Fjell, 2022; Fu et al., 2023; Helm et al., 2024; Hickman et al., 2021; Sasser, 2024; Schneider-Mayerson & Ling Leong, 2020) or the experiences of people who have chosen to live childfree for environmental reasons (Demay & Krähenbühl, 2023; Helm et al., 2021; McMullen & Dow, 2022; Nakkerud, 2021, 2023, 2024). Studies that include parents are scarce, and most of these focus on whether parents worry more about climate change than non-parents (Ekholm, 2020; Ekholm & Olofsson, 2017; Milfont et al., 2020). Only a few touch upon the dilemma itself—how to be a good parent in times of climate change—and in these studies, it is just one of several topics discussed (Bodin & Björklund, 2022; Dow, 2016; Schneider-Mayerson, 2022).

Several scholars have argued that literature can provide space for thinking through and making sense of the climate crisis. Trexler (2015) argues that the novel is one of the sources that shape our understanding of climate change, and its ability to imagine the future through narratives allows its readers to live through different imagined scenarios and explore experiences and emotions (see also, for instance, Bracke, 2017; Mehnert, 2016). In an empirical study of readers' responses to climate change fiction, Schneider-Mayerson (2018) confirms that climate change fiction works "as a tool for enabling the imagination of potential climate futures" (p. 482). After reading climate fiction, several participants in Schneider-Mayerson's study said that their visions of climate futures had become less theoretical and more vivid and clear (pp. 482–83). The novel's imaginative capacities make it particularly useful for studying ethical dilemmas, such as how to be a good parent in times of climate crisis. Johns-Putra (2017) argues that posterity and the figure of the child play crucial roles in popular environmental discourses. However, the growing field of research on climate change fiction³ has not centred parenthood, even if parents and children are sometimes discussed in studies of climate change fiction. Furthermore, scholarship on parents and children in climate change fiction has primarily focused on the role of posterity, reproductive futurism and the figure of the child (Caracciolo, 2022a; de Waal, 2021; Johns-Putra, 2014, 2016, 2019; Sheldon, 2016). This article will focus on aspects that have not yet been explored in detail, namely what it means to be a good parent in times of climate change and how climate-friendly parenthood is represented and understood in relation to existing parenthood ideals. Moreover, scholarship has tended to centre climate change fiction in an Anglophone context, even if scholars have acknowledged that climate change literature is indeed a global phenomenon (Caracciolo, 2022a; Johns-Putra, 2017, p. 9; Trexler, 2015). This article will provide new perspectives from a non-Anglophone context by focusing on Sweden, where progressive family politics and environmental politics are key to the nation's self-image.

Jens Liljestrand: Irresponsible Fatherhood and Swedish Pronatalism

Jens Liljestrand's novel,⁴ which is set in the present or a few years into the future, portrays four protagonists during a few summer days when wildfires caused by climate change burn across large parts of Sweden. In the following analysis, I focus on one of the protagonists, Didrik, who flees from the wildfires with his wife and three children. I discuss how his parenthood takes shape in relation to environmental consciousness and Swedish ideals of gender-equal and involved fatherhood. Didrik fails to be a good parent, as he dodges his responsibilities both to mitigate climate change and to be a gender-equal father. Moreover, the novel reveals how ideals anchored in Swedish family politics trump environmental politics when it comes to good parenthood. Ultimately, Liljestrand's novel suggests that good parenthood in times of climate change is impossible until parents take responsibility for the impact of their actions on the environment.

Didrik is represented as aware of and knowledgeable about climate change. He used to be an activist who worked for environmental organizations when he was younger, and he often refers to

individual actions people should avoid to reduce their carbon footprints: flying, driving, eating meat, overconsumption and even having children. He has struggled to raise his children to be aware of climate change, shown for instance in his daughter Vilja's memories of how he tried to get them to watch "documentaries about Greta Thunberg and the climate" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 338). Publicly, he is outspoken about climate change, such as when he is interviewed on the radio and emphasizes the connection between the wildfires and human-induced climate change. However, Didrik himself fails to live up to his own ideals. He now has a high-paying job in PR and indulges in all the silver linings his socio-economic status offers, especially consumption. At the same time, Didrik is represented as ashamed of not living up to his own ideals of environmental consciousness: "*we were so ashamed of everything, of having bought plane tickets to the U.S. that we never actually used, of our electric BMW that we bought on a down payment, of all the milk and cheese and meat*" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 38; emphasis in original). Still, as the quotation shows, shame does not stop him from engaging in activities that have a negative impact on the climate. Instead, shame becomes a way of showing awareness of the importance of taking action to mitigate climate change, but showing awareness through shame seems to function as an excuse for being passive and not taking any action.

Shame as an excuse for not taking action also figures into Didrik's relationship to involved fatherhood. Didrik sees himself as a good parent:

I'm a good parent. I've been there for my children growing up. I've changed their dirty diapers, played with them, wiped their snotty, running noses, looked after them when they were ill, dropped them off at daycare and at school, gone to their parent-teacher meetings and piano recitals and sports days and Christmas pageants and end-of-term celebrations, taught them to cycle, swim and read. I've also listened to them, respected them, and repeatedly told them that I love them. I've never raised a hand to any of them. I think I've probably fulfilled most of the requirements of a modern Swedish father (Liljestrand, 2023, pp. 66–67).

Didrik links good parenthood to being present in his children's lives and engaging in care work. This is in line with Swedish ideals of good fatherhood, discussed in the introduction. Didrik's statement that he has fulfilled most of the requirements of a modern Swedish father connects these ideals to Swedish modernity, which stresses the importance of living up to the involved-fatherhood ideal in the Swedish context in which the novel is set. The shift in the quotation from the gender-neutral "parent" to "father" indicates that Swedish parenthood is gendered, an idea that is confirmed by other passages in the novel—passages that contradict Didrik's statement that he is a good, modern Swedish father and emphasize the gendered, unequal aspects of this ideal. For instance, as Didrik watches his wife Carola rearrange their bags to make sure their baby has all she needs, he remarks, "As ever I'm amazed by just how little I know, how little involvement I really have; this is my child and I like to think of myself as an equal partner, but the nitty-gritty of actually taking care of a baby is [Carola's] domain, always has been. I thought things would be different [the] third time around but of course they weren't, and I suppose I must have accepted that, it is what it is, we are what we are" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 97). Didrik explicitly refers to himself as "an equal partner" in parenting—the Swedish original even says "gender-equal dad"—but the quotation undermines this statement by pointing to how little Didrik in fact knows about his baby's needs and by showing that he is aware of his lack of knowledge. His insight about how little he knows is even presented as a recurring phenomenon ("as ever") and as a kind of status quo ("it is what it is, we are who we are") that cannot be changed. By being present in his children's lives and caring for them Didrik fulfills some of the expectations of good Swedish fatherhood, but the representation of him also reveals an unequal and gendered division of care work, as Didrik leaves the main responsibility for the children to his wife.

Even if the gendered division of care work in Didrik's family is represented as a kind of status quo, Didrik is ashamed of not being a gender-equal father. When the family has fled from the wildfires to a refugee camp and hopes to board a train to Stockholm, Didrik wonders what the baby is going to eat during the train journey "but assume[s] Carola must have thought about that already,

that she has prepared the water and bottles in the tiny kitchen in the cabin, she's usually the one to do that kind of thing, and the shame of no longer being in charge of any of my children mixes with the shame of not walking at the head of the line, not like yesterday, I'm two steps behind her and she's two steps behind [the oldest daughter]; I feel like a burden, a hanger-on" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 78). In this quote, Didrik fails to be a gender-equal Swedish father as he does not know what his baby is going to eat and does not share the responsibility for his children with his wife when he walks behind his family. His failure to be a gender-equal father is linked to shame, and the severity of this emotion is emphasized when the word shame is repeated twice in the quotation. At the same time, Didrik's shame does not lead to any change; he "drowsily" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 78) wonders what the baby is going to eat but leaves the responsibility to Carola. Just like the shame of not living up to his environmental ideals does not stop Didrik from engaging in unsustainable activities, the shame of not being a gender-equal father does not prevent him from keeping a distance from involved parenthood.

Didrik becomes a representative of a generation of Swedish involved fathers who leaves the primary responsibility for parenthood to their wives and who is aware of the effects of the pending climate crisis on their children's future but fails to do something about it. Liljestrand's novel does not depict any parents who take responsibility for the future of their children by acting to mitigate climate change. The novel also represents parents as incapable of handling the climate crisis; adults are passive, the refugee camp is chaotic, and the rescue operations are badly organized. Though Didrik is ashamed of his behaviour, interestingly, shame does not figure into Didrik's decision to have children, despite his knowledge of the effects of climate change. When Carola unexpectedly gets pregnant with their third child, they decide to keep the baby: "a child who, according to all established science, would grow old in an apocalyptic, nightmarish world of chaos on a level we can't even imagine" (Liljestrand, 2023, p. 99). Here Didrik refers to science, which underscores his high level of education about the effects climate change will have on his children's lives. He is also aware of the negative impact of human reproduction on climate change: "Having two children? That's just plain selfish.//Having three? Grotesque. Madness. Pure climate sadism. [. . .]//But I loved it. Unreservedly, *shamelessly*" (Liljestrand, 2023, pp. 98–99; my emphasis). Unlike engaging in unsustainable activities and failing to live up to gender-equal fatherhood, having children is something Didrik does "shamelessly." Children can even be an excuse for reckless shopping, as emphasized at the beginning of the novel, when Didrik, in anticipation for the arrival of the new baby, takes his family to an enormous baby store in a retail park and encourages a shopping spree by saying: "*Just grab whatever you want*" (Liljestrand, 2023, n.p.; emphasis in original). Liljestrand's novel thus seems to suggest that despite Sweden's commitment to environmental politics, an ideal formed through its family politics, namely pronatalism, has a stronger influence on parents' actions.

Pronatalist politics has been linked with the building of the Swedish welfare state. In the 1930s, Sweden had the lowest birth rates in the world. This population crisis caused the Social Democrats to launch social reforms, such as better housing, maternity and children's health care, and financial support for families with children, which were meant to encourage reproduction. Creating support to help women combine work and motherhood has become one of the cornerstones of Swedish gender equality politics, but it was initially linked to population issues in the 1930s, as married women's right to work was thought to make them more willing to assume motherhood (Hobson, 1993). Even if the family politics introduced in the 1970s, mentioned in the introduction, was not explicitly pronatalist, it has had pronatalist effects and contributed to higher birth rates. In recent years, birth rates have been decreasing in the Global North, including in Sweden. From an environmental perspective, this might not be such a bad thing, since reproduction in the Global North has significant impact on climate change (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017). Sweden's progressive family politics, which, explicitly or implicitly, has encouraged pronatalism, can thus be seen to have negative effects on climate change. When reading Liljestrand's novel in the context of Sweden's environmental politics and family politics, it becomes clear that national ideals based in family politics trump ideals of sustainability.

Ultimately, in Liljestrand's novel, good parenthood in times of climate change is linked to responsibility. Being a responsible parent not only involves caring for one's children—as the Swedish fatherhood ideal Didrik espouses stipulates—but also making sure they have a future by taking action to mitigate climate change. Didrik is not alone in his failure to be a good parent; the novel represents a world of adults who have resigned from their responsibility to deal with the effects of climate change, despite the fact that the world is literally on fire. The novel's ending reveals a quite pessimistic outlook on the future. Didrik's family boards a flight to Thailand, where they plan to spend Carola's maternity leave in a rented luxurious house. By increasing their carbon footprint, the parents again neglect their responsibility to mitigate climate change in favour of their family's comfort, thus perpetuating the status quo. Liljestrand's novel suggests that unless parents take responsibility and act for a better environment, good parenthood in times of climate crisis is impossible.

Anna Dahlqvist: Climate-Friendly Motherhood

Anna Dahlqvist's novel,⁵ which is set in the present, depicts Clara, a mother who is admitted to a psychiatric ward due to severe climate anxiety. Clara's anxiety is linked to her three-year-old son Vide, as she has realized that he will have no future with the current speed of global warming. In the following analysis, I discuss how Clara is torn between what in motherhood studies has been conceptualized as "cultural ideals of good motherhood" and Swedish ideals of involved parenthood, on the one hand, and her environmental consciousness and notions of being a good mother in times of climate crisis, on the other. While ideals of good motherhood and Swedish involved parenthood push her to be present in her son's life, good motherhood in times of climate crisis entails taking action as an activist to give her son a future. Clara initially experiences maternal guilt for being away from her son, but over the course of the novel she becomes more grounded in what I choose to call "climate-friendly motherhood", which prompts her to engage in illegal climate activism. At first glance, this kind of motherhood seems to break with cultural ideals of good motherhood, but, as I will show, it is ultimately governed by the same ideals. While conventional good motherhood is about practicing those ideals in the present, climate-friendly motherhood is oriented towards the future. However, Clara's climate-friendly motherhood is not represented as viable, and Dahlqvist's novel thus suggests that good motherhood in times of climate crisis is an impossible equation.

The novel centres on Clara's efforts to be a good mother, which entails negotiating cultural ideals of good motherhood. A wide range of previous scholarship has discussed how cultural ideals of good motherhood present mothers as intensely involved in their children's lives, embracing the role of primary caregiver and practicing what Hays (1996) refers to as intensive motherhood: "a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (x). Hays argues that this North American ideology gained traction during the post-war period but that its building blocks were laid out already in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (pp. 29–50). These cultural understandings of motherhood also affect Swedish mothers, despite strong national ideals of gender-equal parenthood. As discussed in the introduction and shown in the analysis of Liljestrand's novel, involved parenthood is gendered, and there are still expectations on mothers to assume the responsibility of primary caregiver.

In Dahlqvist's novel, cultural ideals of good motherhood figure in two distinct ways, and maternal guilt plays a crucial role in both of them. As a wealth of research has shown, there is a strong cultural expectation that a good mother will focus on her child's best interests, selflessly put her child's needs above her own and give her undivided attention to her child (see, for instance, Badinter, 1981; DiQuinzio, 1999; Hays, 1996). In the novel, Clara struggles to live up to these expectations, both in a more conventional way and specifically in relation to the climate crisis. On the one hand, she fails to be a good mother in the conventional way, as her climate anxiety keeps her in the psychiatric ward, and it prevents her from being present in her son Vide's life and attending

to his needs. On the other hand, Clara spends endless amounts of time thinking about Vide's needs in relation to the climate crisis, and her climate anxiety is directly linked to her son. She worries about not being able to protect him from future climate disasters and visualizes apocalyptic scenarios in which she and Vide are about to die in a wildfire:

I hold [Vide] in my arms and try to calm him with lies about how everything will be fine, shush, shush, while a storm of fire quickly approaches. The crackling increases, the flames rumble forward, they roar, and the air is emptied of oxygen. We stand in the middle, the smoke finds its way down to our lungs, and all escape routes are gone. *It is not just death, it's like being burned on a bonfire.* The panic is in Vide's eyes, the insight that his mother will not save him (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 35; emphasis in original).

In this imagined scene, Clara fails to be a good mother, as she is unable to protect and save her child from a climate disaster. But throughout the novel Clara also questions her decision to have a child in the first place and wonders whether being born into this world is really in the best interest of the child. Clara had a difficult delivery, and Vide had to be pulled out of her using vacuum extraction. Clara reads this as a sign that he did not want to come out and imagines him saying to her, "I wasn't the one who wanted to be born, didn't you feel my resistance?" (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 35). The decision to have Vide was Clara's and not Vide's; she has put her needs before his, which is what a bad mother does: "neglects her kids for selfish reasons, because she is more concerned with her personal fulfillment" (Hays, 1996, p. 125). At the core of bad motherhood is selfishness in relation to the child, which is precisely what Clara's guilt-ridden reflections on giving birth to Vide reveal; she had him because *she* wanted to, without taking *his* needs and best interests into account—which, in the face of the climate crisis, might have been to not be born at all.

However, Clara's maternal guilt is also in line with more conventional understandings of cultural ideals of good motherhood; Clara feels guilty because she cannot be home and care for Vide when she is in the psychiatric ward. The intensity of her feeling of guilt is emphasized as it takes material shape in her body: "The guilt is a physical weight, a pressure over my head, a racing heart" (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 24). Later, she discusses her maternal guilt with another patient, Sara, who is also a mother, and Sara reassures Clara: "We will return to our children, and the children will be fine. It's better that they have a healthy mother later, right?" (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 67). Both Clara's guilt and the comforting words from Sara are linked to being present in her child's life and thus in line with conventional ideals of good motherhood.

Vide is not entirely dependent on his mother, as he has a father as well, Clara's partner Micke. Micke is represented as a calm and responsible presence in Vide's life. While Clara is in the psychiatric ward, Micke has sole responsibility for Vide and constantly reassures Clara that they are doing fine. Micke is not only represented as a stable and patient father to Vide; he is also a supportive partner to Clara. The novel establishes that Clara has had a history of anxiety and depression, and Micke can handle her depressive periods: "Micke is not afraid of what he sees in me now, he has never been, even if he himself is so far from the darkness" (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 56). Micke is thus depicted as a stable partner in the relationship as well, even before Clara's current break-down.

With his calmness and responsibility, Micke appears as a contrast to Clara's anxious and depressive personality. The difference between them becomes particularly pronounced in relation to parenting: Clara's love for Vide leads to climate anxiety that keeps her away from her son's everyday life, while Micke's calmness makes it possible for him to care for Vide on a daily basis. Micke is keen to have a second child, and he promises to be a reliable, hands-on parent if Clara finds herself struggling and becomes depressed. But Clara does not want a second child; she finds it is impossible to imagine bringing another baby into the world because of the climate crisis. When they discuss the idea of a second child Micke says that he is worried about the future, too, but that he plans to go on with his life: "I'm going to go to work, pick up Vide and cook dinner, and I want him to have a sibling" (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 103). Clara has a different approach to caring for Vide, but when she tells Micke that she will attend a climate change meeting and might be home late, he

shows discontent: “Micke is quiet, he shreds carrots, fries fish sticks and rice, he demonstratively takes responsibility for feeding our child. Demonstratively, he serves himself and Vide fish sticks” (Dahlqvist, 2022, pp. 103–104). Micke thus appears as both more rooted in everyday life and more family-oriented, while Clara worries about the future and engages in political activism outside the family to achieve societal change that she hopes will lead to a better future for Vide.

In many ways, Micke is represented as the ideal Swedish gender-equal and involved father. Unlike Didrik in Liljestrand’s novel, Micke is perfectly able to care for his son, both when Clara is away and when she is not. Through his commitment to everyday life and his family, he appears in some respects to be a more involved parent than Clara. In comparison to Micke, Clara appears as the bad mother who prioritizes her own needs to go to meetings and engage in climate activism over being present in her child’s life and attending to his needs. In this regard, she seems to be a less responsible parent. At the same time, she takes responsibility for something Micke does not, namely Vide’s future, and she defies his pronatalist pressure. In the psychiatric ward she resists Micke’s attempts to make her embrace his parenthood strategy by sending pictures of Vide and their life at home: “Micke doesn’t coax anymore, he pushes Vide into my head. [. . .] As if I didn’t know, more than anyone, that Vide is my centre” (Dahlqvist, 2022, pp. 112–13). Vide is Clara’s first priority, her “centre,” suggesting she is just as invested in her son as Micke, but while Micke focuses on Vide’s needs in the present, Clara thinks about his future.

In this way, Clara practices a different kind of motherhood—climate-friendly motherhood—that seems to break with conventional ideals of good motherhood but also with ideals grounded in Swedish family politics. Unlike Micke and to some extent Didrik in Liljestrand’s novel, who both embrace Swedish family-centred ideals of involved parenthood and pronatalism, Clara challenges these ideals. As such, she assumes a more responsible motherhood that acknowledges both the impact of human reproduction on climate change and its effects on the lives of her children, and she also takes action to mitigate climate change. In Clara’s climate-friendly motherhood, Swedish family politics does not take priority over environmental consciousness.

While Clara initially struggles with guilt about not living up to conventional ideals of good motherhood, she changes over the course of the novel and comes to accept her own way of being a parent and caring for Vide. When she is discharged from the psychiatric ward, she engages in the underground climate movement behind her family’s back and volunteers to travel to Germany with Fabian, another Swedish activist, to assist in the destruction of a coal plant. When talking to Fabian about the psychiatric ward, Clara reflects on good and bad motherhood: “[The hospital staff] said they understood that I felt like a bad mother, that it was because of the anxiety and that it would become different later. But I *was* a bad mother. Because I didn’t do anything” (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 165; emphasis in original). Here, conventional ideas of good and bad motherhood are reversed: the bad mother only cares for her child in the home, while the good mother goes out into the world and does something to change it for the better. Clara’s approach to good motherhood is confirmed by Sophie, the climate activist who places the bomb in the coal plant. Sophie, who is also a mother, tells Clara that her daughter will probably not understand why Sophie is away if she has to go to prison, but that she will understand later, when Sophie comes back and can explain to her why she engaged in illegal climate activism. Clara also recalls a story about Baader-Meinhof group member Ulrike Meinhof and the male doctor who thought there must be something wrong with her because, in his mind, a mother could not become a terrorist: “He didn’t understand that the explanation was there in front of his eyes, for everyone to see. So obvious” (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 155). In these passages, motherhood is precisely what prompts activism; a good mother might have to be away from her child in the present in order to make sure the child has a better future—or any future at all.

At first sight, this way of conceptualizing good motherhood breaks with cultural ideals of good motherhood, as it gives the mother greater freedom. Clara leaves Vide at home with his father, travels, and even has a brief romance with Fabian. Engaging in these activities instead of being at home with her son could make Clara appear selfish, which aligns with bad motherhood. At the same time, Clara’s climate-friendly motherhood centres on precisely those ideals that are at the core of

cultural ideals of good motherhood. Clara participates in the climate action because of the best interests and needs of her child: “*I do it for Vide, because it’s the right thing to do, the only thing to do. [...] I do it to give him hope. To give him life again. It’s my duty, my responsibility. Because I was the one who brought him into this world*” (Dahlqvist, 2022, pp. 160–61; emphasis in original). She invests time, energy and money when travelling to Germany, and she is willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to give Vide a better life, as she breaks the law and takes the risk of going to prison. Thus, we might argue that cultural ideals of good motherhood are merely conceptualized in different ways in Clara’s form of climate-friendly motherhood. The best interests of the child, maternal selflessness, the investment of time, energy, and money are not linked to caring for the child in the present but to caring for his future.

Despite Clara’s mission to give her son a better future by engaging in the underground climate movement, Dahlqvist’s novel does not provide any clear answers to the question of what it means to be a good mother in times of climate crisis. The climate action fails; the bomb explodes prematurely and kills Sophie. She will never have the opportunity to explain to her daughter why she left her for a greater good. Toward the end of the novel there are indications that a somewhat similar fate awaits Clara and Vide. Clara tapers off of her medicines without consulting the doctors, which might lead to new periods of anxiety and even more time spent away from Vide in the psychiatric ward.

Moreover, the ambiguous ending suggests that she might even end up in prison. When the climate activists prepare to flee from their hiding place Clara does not move, even when Fabian calls her name. Before departing for Germany, Clara has seen a search warrant in the news for a climate activist in the United States, and she becomes preoccupied with the description of that woman. She compares it to her own appearance, and later, when looking at herself in a mirror, she describes her face with the same neutral language used in the search warrant: “Light brown hair, indeterminable eye color, and freckles” (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 152). The final words of the novel are another paraphrasing of the search warrant for the climate activist: “My height is 165 centimeters, normal body type, light brown hair, indeterminable eye color. They will call them blue” (Dahlqvist, 2022, p. 185). These words follow directly after Fabian has called Clara’s name, but in the print version of the novel, they appear on a new page, marking the beginning of another chapter; this both emphasizes their importance and the idea that this is the beginning of a new chapter in Clara’s life. The fact that this search warrant describes Clara indicates that she will be accused of the destruction of the coal plant.

The novel also questions whether her climate-friendly motherhood is viable. While Clara, in the final words of the novel, describes her eye colour as “indeterminable”, she states that “[t]hey will call them blue”, which suggests that her climate activism might be naïve, as the descriptor “blue-eyed” in Swedish connotes that a person is easily fooled. Moreover, the climate action has failed and led to the death of one of the climate activists—who is also a mother—and, possibly, to legal consequences for Clara. She might end up spending more time away from her son, without being able to care for him in the present, and she has not achieved any change through activism so has thus failed to care for his future.

Conclusion

Liljestrand’s and Dahlqvist’s novels show how the impending climate crisis presents parents with new and difficult challenges, and they raise questions about what good parenthood in times of climate crisis entails. The novels depict parents who fail; Liljestrand’s Didrik is unable to take responsibility both for his children and for the climate crisis, and in Dahlqvist’s novel Clara’s climate-friendly motherhood requires sacrifices but does not lead to any change. The novels do not give any clear answers to the dilemma. Still, by clearly demonstrating what good parenthood in times of climate crisis should *not* be like, Liljestrand’s novel also gives some direction in terms of good climate-friendly parenthood practices: taking responsibility for the future of one’s children by mitigating climate change in the present. Dahlqvist’s novel represents a mother who *does* take responsibility for her

son's future by engaging in climate activism, but it also shows that this practice is not unproblematic, which suggests that there are no easy solutions to the dilemma of being a good parent during a climate crisis.

Furthermore, the novels highlight how climate-friendly parenthood cannot be understood in isolation from other parenthood ideals. In both novels, climate-friendly parenthood is negotiated in relation to conventional—gendered and cultural—ideals of good parenthood that are anchored in the Swedish context. Didrik fails to live up to Swedish gender-equal and involved fatherhood, as he is unwilling to and incapable of taking responsibility. Clara struggles with maternal guilt for not living up to conventional ideals of good motherhood, and her inability to be present in her son's life is contrasted with her partner's involved Swedish fatherhood. The climate-friendly motherhood she embraces initially seems to subvert conventional ideals of good motherhood but ultimately supports their core values. Still, Clara's climate-friendly motherhood to some extent subverts Swedish family politics and gives priority to sustainability. In contrast to Didrik, who embraces pronatalism and puts his desire to have a third child before the need to act to prevent climate change, Clara refuses to have a second child, and she chooses climate activism over being an involved mother in her son's everyday life. As such, Clara's climate-friendly motherhood challenges Swedish family ideals and is in some respects an answer to what Liljestrand's novel seems to call for: that parents take responsibility for climate change.

Notes

1. For an overview of this literary movement, see, for instance, (Goodbody, 2020; Goodbody and Johns-Putra, 2019; Trexler, 2015).
2. However, since the latest election in 2022, the environmental politics of the right-wing government has been less ambitious.
3. This research field has emerged from ecocriticism and environmental humanities, but the last decade has seen the publication of a number of monographs and edited volumes that focus specifically on literature that deals with the effects of human-induced climate change (see, for instance, Andersen, 2020; Bracke, 2017; Caracciolo, 2022b; Mehnert, 2016; Nyqvist, 2023; Parham, 2021; Trexler, 2015; Vermeulen, 2020). Scholarly interest in climate literature has mostly been focused on questions of form, aesthetics and genre (see, in particular, James & Morel, 2020; Löschnigg, 2020).
4. Liljestrand is an award-winning journalist and author. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature and was deputy editor of the Arts section at one of Sweden's major newspapers, *Expressen*, between 2013 and 2020. Liljestrand's novel *Även om allt tar slut* (Liljestrand, 2021; *Even If Everything Ends* [2023]) was published by one of the most prestigious Swedish publishers and has been sold to 13 countries, including the United States and England. It was reviewed in all major Swedish newspapers and was mentioned in the *New York Times* upon its release in the United States. The quotations from Liljestrand's novel in this article come from the original English translation.
5. Anna Dahlqvist is lesser known than Liljestrand but since *Det är tropiska nätter nu* (2022; *Now We Have Tropical Nights*) came out less than a year after *Even If Everything Ends*, their novels have sometimes been mentioned together as two of the foundational works in a Swedish canon of climate change fiction. Like Liljestrand, Dahlqvist is a journalist and writer. She has published non-fiction books on abortion and menstruation, and the latter has been translated into English. *Det är tropiska nätter nu* was her debut as a novelist; it was published with a respected publisher and received critical attention in some of the major national newspapers and in local newspapers. The novel has not been translated into English, so all translations in this article are my own.

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