

HANNA DYMEL-TRZEBIATOWSKA ORCID: 0000-0002-7753-5463
University of Gdańsk

Reality, Fiction and Fantasy: *Landet som icke är* by Kristina Sigunsdotter and Clara Dackenberg as a Multiple-Address Picturebook

Abstract: Edith Södergran (1892–1923) was a legendary Swedish-speaking modernist artist. Today regarded as Finland’s greatest poet, she was barely recognized in her lifetime largely because since her poetry – replete with ecstatic, mystical undertones – broke from the lyrical conventions of her day and was a challenge to the reading public. Södergran’s enduring popularity inspired the Swedish artists Kristina Sigunsdotter and Clara Dackenberg to produce an oneiric picturebook titled *Landet som icke är* (2020). The article shows the complexity of the book, whose language imitates Södergran’s stylized idiom, and whose iconotext is intricately narrated, peppered with references to Södergran’s poetry and life, and interwoven with a range of intertexts. The study concludes that reading *Landet som icke är* requires a range of competencies and is an interesting proposition for children, provided that they are supported by experienced readers.

Keywords: Edith Södergran, multi-address, picturebook, intertextuality, fiction, reality

Edith Södergran (1891–1923)¹ was a pioneer of Finnish-Swedish modernism, credited with a leading role in the turn-of-the-century revival of Scandinavian poetry. In her avant-garde and symbol-laden verses, she sought self-definition and also prophesied a new era and reflected on the inherent limitations of language. As Ebba Witt-Brattström, Södergran’s scholar and her biographer, points out: “The inability of language to articulate the lesson of the new century – that God has died, taking with him man as woman’s master – is plain for all to see. Södergran offers a formula for an age of transition, in Nietzsche’s words” (Witt-Brattström

¹ In 2023, the centenary of Södergran’s death was celebrated, among others, by publications focused on her work as a photographer. See *Världen är min: dikter och fotografier* (Rahikainen, Sillanpää 2023) and *En annan Edith* (Ulmaja 2023).

2011). Anticipating her time, the young poet appropriated Nietzsche's figure of the *Übermensch* (overman) to create her own vision of a new woman, strong and independent of men. She believed that her second volume of poetry, *Septemberlyran* (*The September Lyre*) from 1918, "embodied a new creative spirit that would call forth a new kind of individual into being" (Lindqvist 2006: 813).

Echoing Södergran's tragic life story,² her poetry has long inspired researchers and artists. Her ecstatic and ambiguous works have been described from a biographical perspective with an emphasis on her illness, from the perspective of influences of modernity, and from feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer-studies viewpoints (e.g., Tideström 1949; Witt-Brattström, 1997; Reenkola 2004; Häll 2006; Toftegaard-Pedersen 2011; Rahikainen 2014; Mier-Cruz 2021). Her poems have been involved in intermedial transfers for years, with these practices expanding their audience and showcasing their enduring potential.³ *Landet som icke är* (*The Land That Is Not*),⁴ a recently published picturebook by Kristina Sigunsdotter (text) and Clara Dackenberg (illustrations), vividly exemplifies this trend.

This hardcover, 16x22 cm book includes 86 numbered pages. Its content is divided into 8 short chapters, followed by a factual afterword, whose two sections provide essential information about the poet's biography and her work. The generic classification of the book presents a certain challenge, as it teeters on the thin line between an illustrated book and a picturebook. Aware of the ongoing debate around differentiating between these two literary forms (Bird and Yokota 2018), I classify *Landet som icke är* as a picturebook, although some of its features, such as the number of pages and the possibility to comprehend a coherent story through the text alone, may controvert this decision. However, I argue that Dackenberg's illustrations are not merely decorative additions, but rather a significant contribution to the reception and interpretation of the book. I subscribe to the theory that a distinctive feature of picturebooks is the evocative and poetic role of images, which may create its mood, metaphorically refer to its theme, or poetically depict the essence of a situation (Bird and Yokota 2018: 282).

IN THE WEB OF INTERTEXTS

Landet som icke är narrates an iconotextual story of a girl named Edith who wakes up in a sanatorium from a feverish dream and follows a silver thread that

² The poet died of tuberculosis at the age of 31.

³ Södergran's poems have been set to music, for example by Kerstin Jeppesen, Anne Kruse, Ellen Hall, the Arosa Ensemble, and Molly Sanden (<https://sodergransallskapet.fi/edith-sodergran/tonsattningar/>).

⁴ The book has not been translated into English. However, since Sigunsdotter took many names and phrases from Södergran's poems, I use the published English translations of her verse here.

leads her to a golden-yellow cat, Luck Cat. Accompanied by this extraordinary guide, she passes through a mirror into the wonderful, heavenly Land That Is Not and is welcomed by her sister, who is waiting for her in a hall where the huge Strange Tree grows. The girls wander through twelve rooms, where Edith is promised to find everything, she has ever desired. However, the cat warns Edith not to go to the Tower Room, where an ominous lady called Dice Caster lives. Yet Edith finally meets the lady and rolls a dice that is to decide her fate and the future of the Land That Is Not. The red color means the destruction of Dice Caster and her kingdom, and the white color entails the continuation of her rule. All sides of the dice turn out to be white, and it is only the girl's strong memory of her beloved mother that makes it turn red. Dice Caster disappears into an abyss, the Land That Is Not is saved, and the sisters play together for the last time. Afterwards, Edith returns through the mirror to the sanatorium, where her mother is waiting for her. This story is narrated by a homo-intradiegetic narrator, a device that enhances readers' engagement, brings them closer to the protagonist's perspective, and thus promotes their greater identification with her. At the same time, the visual narrator is heterodiegetic, showing the character through the eyes of an external observer, which generates distance and offsets the potentially painful content.

The plot of this story follows the circular pattern typical of fantasy literature (Nikolajeva 1988),⁵ in which the protagonist leaves the primary world (the sanatorium) and enters a secondary world (the Land That Is Not), where they experience fascinating adventures with elements of horror, before returning to the primary world (the sanatorium). This pattern is redolent of Astrid Lindgren's numerous works, in which characters suffering from deficiencies in health, happiness, parents, or friends, venture into a fantastical fairy-tale realm, where their deficits are compensated for. In some cases, the magical world is pictured as a pure arcadia, while in others, children are exposed to evil and must face it on their own. Strengthened by this experience, they return to reality, which they are better equipped to confront. These works, which can be classified as therapeutic fantasy (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2004, 2014), include the novels *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Mio, My Son*, and the short stories "In the Land of Twilight," "Most Beloved Sister" and "Junker Nils av Eka."⁶ In each of them, the passage to the secondary world is rendered dually: as a genuine event for novice readers and as a (day)dream for experienced readers. Edith, who wakes up from a dream and experiences adventures in the Land That Is Not, strongly resembles Lindgren's three sick characters: Nils ("Junker Nils av

⁵ In this model, the world of reality is referred to as the primary world, while the world of magic is called the secondary world. The transportation to the magical realm empowers the child.

⁶ This fairy tale has not been translated into English. Its title might be literally translated as "Nils, the pageboy of the Oak."

Eka”), Bertil (“In the Land of Twilight”), and Rusky (*The Brothers Lionheart*). Like the boys, she is first bedbound and feels wonderfully healthy after crossing the magical passage.

The name of the secondary world in Sigunsdotter’s text – the Land That Is Not – is in sync with the parallel designation of the Land of Twilight in a story by Lindgren (“In the Land of Twilight”). This is not a coincidence since Lindgren deliberately used the title of Södergran’s poem as a recognizable metaphor for the afterlife⁷ among adult readers in Scandinavia. This makes for an original intertextual circle: Astrid Lindgren was familiar with Södergran’s poems and, fascinated by them, she collected quotes from them, as reported by her biographer Jens Andersen (2021: 26). Lindgren also incorporated certain elements from these poems into her works, which eventually themselves became the hypotext of a pictorial biography of Södergran.

Besides the basic compositional similarity between *Landet som icke är* and Lindgren’s books, there are other elements that interrelate these works as well. Many motifs from Lindgren’s short story “Most Beloved Sister” recur in *The Land That Is Not*; for example, Barbro travels to Salikon through a wild rose bush, and Edith, upon opening the door in the secondary world, enters a rose garden. In both stories, the protagonists meet their respective sisters, who are their kindred spirit, and both play with small animals, with Lindgren’s rabbits replaced in *Landet som icke är* with kittens, animals that were present in Södergran’s real life, as evidenced by her letters and numerous photographs. Anthropomorphized nature is another parallel in the construction of the fantasy worlds. Specifically, in Lindgren’s short story, flowers sing and streams whisper, while in Sigunsdotter’s book, water hides secrets, the forest whispers, and flowers tell tales of love. Both writers also draw from Södergran’s color palette and use gold and silver in their idyllic landscapes; in Lindgren’s work, Barbro’s sister lives in the Golden Hall, and her horses have manes and horseshoes of gold and silver, whereas in Sigunsdotter’s work, Edith follows a silver thread and is called the “golden sister,” the cat has golden fur, and a golden gate opens the first hall.

Some elements in the *Land That Is Not* evoke associations with *Mio, My Son*, where the main character receives a red apple that becomes his ticket to the world of fantasy; Edith is also offered an apple by her sister as a greeting in the Land That Is Not. Both books feature a bird of sadness that foreshadows misfortune, and the antagonists (Knight Kato and Dice Caster) inhabit a high castle and tower, respectively. Also, both works include a metaphorically pictured motif of storytelling. In Sigunsdotter’s story, Luck Cat weaves a morning tale, and elves weave silk clothes embroidered

⁷ The presence and readability of this intertext have already been pointed out by researchers of Lindgren’s works, such as Per Beskow (1987: 60) and Vivi Edström (1997: 78–79).

with fairy tales. In Lindgren's novel, a mysterious weaver creates fabrics from tales and dreams.

Besides alluding to Lindgren's books, *Landet som icke är* contains a range of intertextual references to other authors' works. The passage through a mirror positions the text in the context of Lewis Carroll's classic *Through the Looking-Glass*. Prior to the protagonist's entry into the secondary world, the text conjures the popular motif of thread, which symbolizes the spinning of stories and was used in classic Scandinavian picturebooks, such as *Historien om någon* (The Story about Someone, 1951) by Åke Löfgren and Egon Møller-Nielsen and *Den röda tråden* (The Red Thread, 1987) by Tord Nygren. In a similar vein, venturing into the realm of fantasy in a cat's company is reminiscent of *The Dangerous Journey* (1977) by Tove Jansson. The anti-heroine Dice Caster, who is depicted by Sigunsdotter in terms of ice and cold, brings to mind a range of iconic characters, from H. Ch. Andersen's eponymous Snow Queen (1844), to the White Witch from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950), to Lady of the Cold from Jansson's *Moominland Midwinter* (1957). Sigunsdotter openly admits that "there are others who have snuck into the text as well, authors I grew up with, books that have shaped me since I was little, that are there and whisper. Like, for example, my and my father's favorite book, Astrid Lindgren's *Beloved Sister*" (*Landet som icke är*, 16).

As can be seen, the popular circular journey pattern borrowed from fantasy literature acquires a particular value in *Landet som icke är* through dialoguing with numerous children's books, which embeds it in a dense intertextual context typical of modern picturebooks.⁸ Its expression and novelty are further enhanced by its interrelations with Södergran's poetry and life.

EDITH'S POEMS, EDITH'S LIFE

The verbal text of *Landet som icke är* is closely intertwined with Södergran's poems, which Sigunsdotter employed in various ways. She drew on their titles, phrases, recurring symbols, colors, and language, employing them under the artistic license to fashion a tale of a potential, albeit fictional, episode in the poet's youth, based on facts from her biography. Södergran's oeuvre surfaces most explicitly in the names that were the titles of her poems: "The Land That Is Not," "Luck Cat," and "The Strange Tree."

Landet som icke är, the title of both Södergran's posthumously published volume (1925) and one of her most famous poems, has been widely interpreted as a symbolic land beyond death, where the I-speaker longs to be reunited with

⁸ Contemporary picturebooks are variously labeled as postmodern, crossover, controversial, and fusion texts. These monikers often reference intertextuality (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2020) in its expanded meaning, encompassing not only literary works but also other media and art forms.

her loved one, and where her dreams will be fulfilled. In the poem “Luck Cat” (1916), the titular character spins a thread of happiness, and the I-speaker asks it to foretell her future and grant her a golden ring that will bring her happiness, a mirror that will show her beauty, and a fan that will dispel her cumbersome thoughts. The amalgamation of the content of both poems in the picture-book sends a clear signal to the readers familiar with them that Edith’s future predicted by the silver-thread-spinning cat lies in the land of death. In this story, the girl visits it briefly during a feverish dream, as evidenced by her final return to the sanatorium. However, the story ends with an explicit prediction that one day she will rush back to the Land That Is Not. In Södergran’s third poem, “The Strange Tree” (1916), the tree invites the “golden daughter” to place her hands upon it so that she learns where happiness comes from and where it leads. Transplanted into the picturebook, the tree welcomes Edith by paraphrasing the words from the poem and adding a warning of Dice Caster, whose garden is full of shards of glass.

The body of phrases originating in Södergran’s poems and recurring in the picturebook includes, for example, “wherefrom happiness came and whereto it goes,” the designations of Edith as a “golden daughter,” an “autumn wanderer,” and a “forest listener” (from “The Strange Tree”), and the expressions the “thread of luck” (from “Luck Cat”), the “moon’s dew” and a “sparkling crown” (from “The Land That Is Not”). The book’s climactic episode of dice rolling reverberates with lines from Södergran’s poem “The Reflecting Fountain”: “Fate said: white – you shall live or red – you shall die! But my heart decided: I shall live in red.” Such phrases and references abound, and in the background of the text, there are also echoes of other poems, such as “In the Great Forests,” “The Day Cools,” “The Imprisoned Bird,” and “Nocturne.” The book also resonates with peritexts, passages from Södergran’s letters, and her famous statement that “The inner fire is the most important thing that a person possesses,” expressed in her 1918 letter to the Helsinki newspaper *Dagens press*, in which she presented her informal poetic manifesto.

In addition to references to Södergran’s poems, the picturebook also contains numerous analogies to the poet’s life. The protagonist, who bears her name, suffers from a lung disease⁹ and is staying in a sanatorium, much like Södergran herself, who, afflicted with tuberculosis, was often a patient of sanatoriums in Finland and abroad, as documented by her biographer Gunnar Tideström (1960: 60). In the Land That Is Not, there are twelve rooms in which the girl finds what she has always longed for. This is an explicit reference to Södergran’s family home in the Finnish village of Raivola, where she spent most of her life with her caring and devoted mother. As noted in Södergran’s biography, the villa where the women lived indeed had twelve rooms (Tideström

⁹ The book does not explicitly state that Edith’s illness is tuberculosis. This is implied through the metaphor of a crow flapping its wings against her chest.

1960: 18). It was surrounded by a beautiful garden, which also found its way into Sigunsdotter's text through the poems.

The beloved sister with whom Edith plays in the book can be interpreted in two ways. Tideström's biography of Södergran mentions an adopted girl named Singa, who was supposed to keep little Edith company, but who died tragically (1960: 16). Sigunsdotter repeats this information in the factual chapter "Once upon a time" (Sigunsdotter, Dackenberg 2020: 84), implying that this story inspired the sister motif used in the book. However, this bit of information is challenged by Witt-Brattström, who claims that there is no convincing evidence for the existence of the girl (1997: 27). The presence of the beloved sister in the picturebook can be linked to Södergran's authentic and corroborated relationship and friendship with Hagar Olsson, a Finnish journalist, editor, and writer. The women shared a special bond, both championing modernist ideas and believing that it was time to revise the concept of femininity. As Reenkola states: "She called Hagar by the nickname 'gyllene barn,' the golden child and describes her 'golden locks' with tender words" (2004: 15). Their friendship resulted in a rich correspondence and has been explored by a number of researchers (e.g., Tideström 1960: 171–179; Witt-Brattström 1997: 226–238, Reenkola 2004). Many years after her friend's death, Olsson decided to publish those letters (Olsson, Södergran 1955), which served as one of the sources of inspiration for Sigunsdotter. Södergran also expressed her feelings for Olsson in a series of seven poems called *Fantastique* in the volume *Septemberlyran* from 1918, which resonates in the picturebook *Landet som icke är* as well, in the sentence "Did we not live in the fairy tale, where everything impossible is possible."¹⁰

IMAGES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The images created by Dackenberg enter into a subtle interaction with words, imparting an oneiric tone to the entire story. The visual text accentuates the double-address mode of the book, suggesting that Edith's adventure takes place in the realm of fantasy. Furthermore, the illustrations establish relationships with the extratextual reality (Södergran's biography), both intertextually (text – image) and interpictureorially (image – image), as well as metapictureorially (image as an act of writing/drawing a book) (Cabo, Suero, Campos 2018: 108–93).

Dackenberg crafted an original mindscape with features typical of psychological picturebooks, where the immersion in the irrational world of the psyche is visually expressed through different modes of communication (Nikolajeva, Scott 2006: 102). In her pictures, the chromatic differentiation between the primary world – the sanatorium – and the secondary world – the Land That Is

¹⁰ The same words were used in one of Olsson's letters to Södergran (Lehtonen 2009).

Not – is striking. Featuring depressing visualizations of empty corridors and bedbound patients, the former is rendered in a realistic style and depicted in white, blue, and gray, the faded colors corresponding to Edith's sickly and pale state. As the girl embarks on her fantastic journey, details in colors suggestive of health, play, and hope, such as yellow, green, and red, gradually appear. The red color is a vehicle for specific imagery and abounds in Södergran's poetry, frequently juxtaposed with white, such as in "The Day Cools," "The Unspeakable Is on the Way to Us," and "Vierge Moderne," where "the color red signifies consciousness and affirmation of life, Eros, and creativity, while the white color symbolizes innocence, purity, tranquility, death, and purification" (Packalen Parkman 2019: 167–168).

In Dackenberg's illustrations, red first surfaces after Edith's passage to the Land That Is Not in the form of red flowers. It further emerges in the visualization of the sister, who is wearing a brightly red cloak. In this way, the red color becomes a metaphorical confirmation of the life that the pallid, dying Edith desires so much. Interestingly, upon returning to the sanatorium, Edith is pictured in the final illustration with her hand resting on a white sheet of paper with a red pencil. The hand is wrapped with a "thread of luck," which is intended to convince readers of the veracity of the events in the secondary world, while the color red stands for hope for the afterlife. The conclusion of the story gives it a metafictional dimension by suggesting that the book we are reading was written by Edith.

The composition of the surrealist illustrations reflects the content of the text and, at the same time, interprets it by employing certain elements that reinforce readers' belief that the events occur in the domain of dreams. The girls float in a bathtub among trees, birds, flowers, and mysterious statuesque figures, or hover over a dark sheet of water. Although the text depicts an idyllic scene, the images signal a lurking danger; for example, dark tree trunks have no leaves, and large surfaces, such as the floor or water, are rendered in the ominous black color. The dark color palette of brown, black, and ashy tints is at its most pronounced when Dice Caster appears in the illustrations, visualized as a gaunt, long-haired woman dressed in rags. As readers are told, she was once beautiful but gambled with dice and lost her life. After Edith's victory, a sequence of four images depicts the distorted figure disappearing into a symbolic red abyss. In the final illustration of the secondary world, when the girls play for the last time and evil has been eradicated from the Land That Is Not, a full range of colors symbolizing the arcadian nature of this space appears for the first time, as the girls run happily hand in hand against the backdrop of a meadow in bright shades of yellow, green, and white.

The illustrations in the book contain inter pictorial references: Edith resembles the figure in the photographs of young Södergran, and the house she enters has a characteristic veranda that appears in the authentic photos of her

family villa in Raivola. Remarkably, Edith and her sister are visualized as almost identical girls of the same height and with the same facial features, differing only in their hair color and clothing. Throughout the journey, Edith wears the nightshirt she had on in the sanatorium, while her sister is dressed in pajamas and a red coat. These outfits reinforce the idea that Edith has not really left her bed, and that her beloved sister is her projection, her own longed-for healthy self. At the same time, the remarkable similarity of the characters, which the text does not mention, again brings to mind Lindgren's "Most Beloved Sister," where Barbro and Ylva-Li are twins.¹¹

In the layer of images, Dackeberg sought to balance out Sigunsdotter's interpretation of the text, facts, and her own imagination. As she explains, her way to the final form of the illustrations took some time to evolve:

In my initial sketches, I was quite faithful to the historical person. I drew Edith in period clothes and at the same age that Södergran was when she first fell ill with tuberculosis. But as the work progressed, Edith became her own, younger figure, and I let go of almost all claims to historical and biographical accuracy. It is the principles of poetry and dreams that apply within the covers of the book. [...] However, there are some visual references to Södergran's real external environments. I closely examined and also took some factual elements from her own photographs. (*Landet som icke är*, 16)

FICTION, FACTS, AND FANTASIES ENTANGLED

Landet som icke är is a sophisticated narrative picturebook in which two artists weave a story of the life and work of Edith Södergran, including references to her poems in the verbal and visual text. Moreover, the language of the book imitates the style of Södergran's poems. As Sigunsdotter points out, her idea was that Edith was both the protagonist and the author of the book. She read a lot about and by Södergran, and when she started writing, it was a feverish tale that came out. She imagined that Edith could have fantasized this way in the sanatorium in Nummela and used her words and her language as a kind of ghostwriter (*Landet som icke är*, 16).

Another layer of meaning in *Landet som icke är* is formed by intertextual references to the classics of Scandinavian and international children's literature, which are braided into both the verbal and visual narratives. The structure of the picturebook raises it to the heights of intersemiotic connectedness, and the interplay of reality and fantasy adds even more complexity to the world it conjures up. In her poetry, Södergran not only expressed her prophetic visions, personal fears, and enthusiasms, but also commented on the realities of the first decades of the 20th century. Her poems were published, read, and

¹¹ The text of *Landet som icke är* does not mention this similarity.

criticized, becoming an important fact in the history of Finnish and Scandinavian poetry. In the picturebook *Landet som icke är*, they serve as a starting point for a narrative story of the poet's life, which also belongs to the domain of reality.

However, it is not a traditional biographical picture story based on a linear plot with key facts from the protagonist's life. It is constructed in a particular way, based on an imaginary episode, enveloped in an oneiric, dark mood, and filled with symbolic textual and visual images, the recognition of which, premised on the knowledge of Södergran's poems and her biography, opens up the possibility of their full, synergistic reading. The book requires a considerable reading competence in both intertextuality and interpictureality and can be counted among those that need "re-reading, since a multiple reading of the same picturebook gradually reveals several layers of references to other art works and texts" (Cabo, Suero, Campos 2018: 100). This knowledge is probably not accessible to children, nor to all adults, either. *Landet som icke är* is one of complex, hybrid picturebooks that blend genres, facts, fiction, and fantasy. It presents facts and imparts knowledge, engages emotionally, entertains, and inspires. It is a hybrid biographical picturebook that exemplifies the subcategory of biographical picturebooks known as art fantasy, which is defined as "fantasies that bring to life past masters (and their works) in new, exciting – even surprising – contexts" (Nikola-Lisa 1995: 35, cited in von Leirop-Debrauwer 2018: 83).

All these aspects, particularly the intricate relationship between reality and fiction and the sophisticated play of words and images with Södergran's poems, make the reading of the book challenging, and the suggested age range of 9–12 seems underestimated. However, if novice readers encounter this book in and through shared reading, it can be an intriguing meeting with Edith Södergran for them. An adult can guide a child's reading in the privacy of their home or in classroom.¹² In this way, Sigunsdotter's intention can be fulfilled. When asked what children can find in Södergran, she answered: "She feels extremely current. I believe that there is a yearning for spirituality and nature among young people today, and in that regard, I think Edith Södergran can be a gateway, a guide to forests and meadows and poetry" (*Landet som icke är*, p. 16). Indeed, this kind of experience seems particularly relevant when, facing the challenges of the Anthropocene, we seek to make children grasp and embrace the symbiotic bond between humans and nature.

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¹² As exemplified by the inspiring lesson materials developed by Tove Frankow Crivellaro.

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