

New Versions of the Fantastic: Children's Books by the Danish Author Louis Jensen

Anna Karlskov Skyggebjerg

Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus

Tuborgvej, 2400 Copenhagen NV, Denmark

Email: aks@edu.au.dk

Abstract This article conducts a textual analysis of selected examples of contemporary Danish children's literature with a focus on the continued inspiration and influence from H.C. Andersen's fairy tales. The main examples in the article are texts written by the internationally awarded author Louis Jensen (b. 1943). The article begins with a brief description of Jensen's rich oeuvre and then continues to analyze the genre patterns in one of his first fantastic tales, *Skelettet på hjul* (1992) [The Skeleton on Wheels]. This particular tale is selected because of its remarkable combination of realistic and magical elements, which can also be understood as a clash between different levels and messages. The structure in Jensen's fantastic tales corresponds well with the concepts developed in Tzvetan Todorov's 1970 theory about the fantastic in literature, so this theory is the theoretical framework in this section. To conclude, the article, selected examples of Jensens's poetry, the so-called square stories, will be analyzed with a focus on the intertextual references to H.C. Andersen (1805-1875). Although they contain recognizable features and motifs, the square stories represent a new genre in children's poetry and thereby a development of the concept of children's literature.

Keywords Children's literature, fantastic tales, children's poetry, square stories, intertextuality, H.C. Andersen, Louis Jensen

Author **Anna Karlskov Skyggebjerg**, is Associate Professor in children's literature and literature pedagogy at the University of Aarhus. She holds a Ph.D. in genre studies and her research interests include genre theory, historical fiction, fantasy, realism, non-fiction and textbooks for children. She has contributed to several books and periodicals with different perspectives on children's literature, literature history and literature pedagogy.

Introduction

The influence of H.C. Andersen's fairy tales and stories on Danish children's literature is ongoing and visible for researchers as well as for child readers. Several contemporary authors show their respect for H.C. Andersen (1805-1875) with quotations, references and discussions of some of Andersen's key features, motifs or themes. In Denmark, well-known and established authors such as Louis Jensen (b. 1943), Bent Haller (b. 1946) and Cecilie Eken (b. 1970) openly acknowledge that they have been inspired by Andersen's fairy tales. They have published several works that reference specific Andersen fairy tales and that share in both their ideology and language. Louis Jensen, whose oeuvre is one of the most original in contemporary Danish children's literature and who is therefore the focus of this article, is particularly influenced by Andersen; he has even written a book, *Tinhjerte og ællingefjer* (2004) [Pewter-hart and Duckling-feather], with Andersen as the main character. The book is a portrait of Andersen as a person and a sample of some of his most famous fairy tales, and its genre can be described as a mixture of a novel, a biography for children and a literary introduction. Its aim is both pedagogical and poetic, which is already implied by its title, which makes reference to both "Den standhaftige Tinsoldat" (1838) [The Steadfast Tin-soldier] and "Den grimme Ælling" (1844) [The Ugly Duckling].

Among other commendations, Louis Jensen has been awarded the H.C. Andersen prize, which is hosted by the International Board on Books for Young People (Ibby). As mentioned above, Jensen's authorship has many things in common with Andersen's beside nationality and language of origin. Both of them are very experimental, innovative and concerned about the child as a character as well as a reader. And both of them have provoked non-written conventions about how to write for children. They often use difficult language and taboo breaking themes. Like Andersen's, Louis Jensen's language is highly poetic, metafictional and contains rich intertextual references, and the two authors share a humorous attitude even when the subject is very serious. They have often used humor to make difficult "adult" subjects as injustice or hypocrisy understandable for the child reader. Of course, Jensen has his own poetics, which is different from Andersen's artistic voice. In Jensen's works, there is a great deal of cruelty and evil, but also love and friendship between different creatures and humans. The stories are often closely connected to contemporary childhood and address recognizable problems for the child reader in a way that involves both magic and realistic features.

This article aims to describe some genre patterns and key features in

Jensen's works, from his debut as an author of children's literature in 1986 with *Krystalmanden* [The Crystal Man] until the present day. Throughout this period, he has published more than 35 books for children and young adults, including picture books, poetry, short stories, and novels. He has also written poetry, novels and memoirs for an adult readership, but his books for children are more numerous, more successful among readers, and even more acknowledged by literary criticism than his books for adults. In this article, I focus mainly on Jensen's special treatment of the fantastic tale as a genre and his 1001 square stories. The "square story" is his invention and takes the form of a small prose story graphically shaped as a square. The square stories are published in eleven books illustrated by the Danish artist Lilian Brøgger (b.1950). In the first ten volumes, 100 stories are included in each book, and, in the last volume, there is only one square story, named "the last story in the world." This last story is illustrated with 100 pictures, which refer to characters, motifs and themes from the magic universe constructed throughout the square stories.

Fantastic Tales for Children

In most of Louis Jensen's books, the main character has something to do with the supernatural, the magic or the fantastic. Although often rejected in connection with children's literature, the description and categorization of the fantastic by the literary scholar Tzvetan Todorov (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970) is very relevant in the understanding of Jensen's authorship. Tzvetan Todorov has never written directly about the fantastic in children's literature, but the central European tradition he refers to has clearly been an inspiration for Jensen. According to Todorov's theory, "l'hésitation" [the hesitation] (Todorov 29) or insecurity between a literal or metaphorical understanding of the magical is the hallmark of fantastic literature, and one can claim that this is often toned down in writings for children. The protagonists in children's literature are often quick to accept the existence of the supernatural, and, by using the narrator's voice in support of the main character, many works set the scene for a similar unproblematic acceptance of the supernatural by the reader. This is not always the case in Jensen's works, where the narrator and the inscribed reader position often represent hesitation. In all cases, the question of literal or symbolic reference has to be raised in a subsequent interpretation. The hesitation is directed towards the understanding of the magical events because these events do not refer directly to a symbolic or a realistic world, and the fantastic text is therefore open to more than one interpretation. This point is especially relevant in relation to some of Jensen's novels and short stories where characters, features and

events have both symbolic and realistic references and meanings.

In Todorov's system of genres, the purely fantastic text is bordered on the one side by "l'étrange" [the uncanny] and on the other by "le merveilleux" [the marvelous] (Todorov 47). Uncanny tales are related to realism, especially psychological realism, and a supernatural event is finally interpreted with a psychological explanation. The marvelous (or the fairy story) is characterized by a magical world in which there is no problem relating to the supernatural and the interpretation will quite naturally be allegorical. It appears that the fantastic tales in children's literature in general (or in a large number of them) in Todorov's sense border on the marvelous. Todorov distinguishes between different border categories, where the fantastic is closely related to the two other categories. These categories are named the fantastic-marvelous and the fantastic-uncanny.

In Louis Jensen's authorship, the category of the fantastic-uncanny is represented, for example, in the young adult novel *2 kroner og 25 øre* (2010) [2 Crowns and 25 Cents]. The main character is a young man who wishes to save people from starvation in Africa and therefore starts his own collection of money and emergency aid. Unfortunately, he becomes obsessed by his project and begins to steal in order to help more people. In the end, he steals a car because he wants to travel to Africa. On his way, he seeks help from an angel, but the angel is unable to save him or his project. He ends up in a mental hospital with severe depression. In this case, the representation of the magic can easily be seen a projection of the main character's dreams and a sign of his mental illness. The combination of recognizable problems (a kind of realism), exaggeration, and magical elements creates a novel that is difficult to forget. The fantastic-uncanny is the label given to works of literature in which magical elements or events tend to be explained as something uncanny, for instance using psychological reasons, but in which there is still room for doubt or hesitation in the interpretation. This book asks: Who represents the mental illness? Is it the main character, or is it the society in which both angels and aid projects are looked upon as crazy hallucinations?

It is also possible to place some of Louis Jensen's tales at the other end of the spectrum, in the category of the fantastic-marvelous. According to Todorov, the realm of the fantastic-marvelous is closely related to fairy tales, where the magic is naturalized and both the characters and readers quickly accept magical events. In this tradition, the magical events and creatures will often be interpreted as a sign of something else. The reader will understand that teddy bears and dolls represent human characteristics or perspectives. In Jensen's prose, picture books and poetry, it is possible to meet magical elements and other magical features in a setting

with references to both fairy tales and a contemporary realistic world. Jensen is also often inspired by fairy tale characters, and he has written several stories with animated toys and/or other anthropomorphized objects. Two recent examples are the illustrated novel *Kong Knap* (2013) [King Button] and the picture book *Tre venner* (2013) [Three Friends], in which animated toys play an important role. *Kong Knap* is a burlesque story in which a teddy bear loses his eye and seeks to find it on a trip that takes him around the world. On this trip, he meets other animated characters, such as a singing trio of hares and thirteen tiresome trolls. In *Tre venner*, a Swedish toy horse, a sugar cube, and a paper knife get involved in each other's lives and travel around the world together. The story is reminiscent of a fictional opera libretto about love, friendship, jealousy, revenge, and death. At the same time, it is a fairy tale in the tradition of E.T.A. Hoffmann's and H.C. Andersen's tales about animated toys. There are clear references to Andersen's fairy tale "Kjærestefolkene" (1844) [The Sweathearts], which is a sad and ironic love story about the relationship between a top and a ball.

It is also possible to categorize many of Jensen's books as purely fantastic in Todorov's sense, although the fantastic is a narrow category. As already mentioned, the narrator and/or the reader hesitate(s) when they have to explain magical elements, and, in a purely fantastic text, it is not possible to explain these elements with a fixed understanding of magic. It will always be possible to explain the magic in different ways; the reader will either accept the magic as something unnatural or interpret the magic as something natural; for instance, a dream, a hallucination, or a vision. The most moving and — at least in Denmark — well-known example of a fantastic tale by Louis Jensen is *Skelettet på hjul* (1992) [The Skelton on Wheels]. This novel has been read by several children because it has been part of the Danish national curriculum and represented in school textbooks for almost twenty-five years.

A Fantastic Tale with an Intertextual Dialogue in Children's Literature History

As already mentioned, Louis Jensen is very aware of his predecessors in children's literature, not only Andersen and other authors of Danish children's literature, but also internationally canonized books. In his works and especially in his novels, there are many intertextual references to well-known texts from the history of children's literature.

In this article, I appeal to Michail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva's definition of the concept of intertextuality as a statement of the dialogue and intersubjective connection between all utterances and individuals. The literature researcher Graham

Allen says that “[i]ntertextuality, or transposition becomes that which foregrounds, celebrates and plays with the dissolution or abandonment of the single subject” (Allen 56). In the case of literature, it is not possible to neglect the predecessors, because they will still be present in language, but, as Louis Jensen demonstrates, it is possible to meet the tradition and the literary predecessors and reflect earlier examples in an open space.

In *Skelettet på hjul*, Jensen refers to both E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Das fremde Kind* (1817) [The Strange Child] and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), which are two of the earliest and internationally known examples of fantastic literature for children. These two works show the beginning of the fantastic genre in partly a Germanic and partly an Anglo-Saxon tradition. According to Maria Nikolajeva, fantastic literature takes a new step towards the child audience with Hoffmann, and Carroll innovates the genre when he takes “the main character into an absurd, illogical world where the normal, natural laws cease to function.” (Nikolajeva 1993, 15).

In Louis Jensen’s *Skelettet på hjul*, the main character, Martin, learns that his parents have killed their pet dog, Trofast, because he was a nuisance. From the outset of the novel, there is a conflict between the parents and their son. The adults’ world and their perception of reality stand in contrast to the child’s world. The adults are rationalistic, insensitive, narrow-minded and indifferent to both their son and the dog. By contrast, Martin is independent, active and open to the supernatural, although he is surprised when confronted by it. Martin is visited by an angel of light, which is a variation on the theme of the strange child in Hoffmann’s famous tale. The angel asks Martin to cleanse the skeleton of the dog and put the bones on a cart. Martin follows the orders and, afterwards, he goes out into the world to search for the dog’s soul. Martin and the dead dog undertake a voyage of self-discovery, and Martin learns to find his own position with regard to good and evil. The world Martin travels in resembles the world we recognize. Martin travels by rail and on the motorway, and, when he gets a lift in a lorry, he hears on the radio that there is an official search out for him, too. During the journey, however, Martin meets several magical figures which represent both good and evil and which clearly come from another world.

Like E.T.A. Hoffmann in *Das fremde Kind*, Jensen exhibits great faith in the child. However, in Jensen’s work, the strange child (the angel of light) is only a contributory element and a catalyst for the actual child’s, that is, Martin’s, own will to act. At the beginning, Martin has to bear the lack of understanding and the callousness of the adults on his own, and, to a large extent, he has to act to free

himself from the evil. In Jensen's works, the main character is not only receptive to magical power but is also a capable person. Jensen, like Hoffmann, shows in this way that his view of the child coincides with that of the time. Jensen's view of children is that they are capable, independent beings who should be regarded with respect from the adults

Another similarity between *Skelettet på hjul* and *Das fremde Kind* is the inclusion of grotesque elements, that is, hyperbolic, gruesome and tragi-comic features. However, in *Das fremde Kind*, the grotesque is tied to the supernatural, for example, a teacher's metamorphosis into the violent monster, while, in *Skelettet på hjul*, the grotesque is part of Martin's daily routine and apparent normality. His parents' ignorant behavior and their sneering laughter when their son confronts them with the dog's death is the most grotesque episode in the book. His parents are watching *Laurel and Hardy* on TV while he tries to establish a dialogue about life and death. Martin's situation is both gripping and extreme; it is incredible that he manages to hold onto his integrity against this background. In summary, one can say that the real world in this fantastic tale is a great deal more problematic than the magical world.

In his fantastic tales, Louis Jensen essentially sharpens the focus on familiar problems; for example, the conflict between the child and the rationalistic world of adults. The gruesome, tragic element in the opening situation is violent, but it simply means that the main character will appear as someone correspondingly strong and independent. The magic serves to strengthen the contrasts between good and evil, and the magical events serve to emphasize the fact that there is a symbolic struggle and a spiritual development taking place in Martin's mind.

Louis Jensen's writing is serious but it is not without humor. Martin's confrontation with his parents should be seen as tragi-comedy. The passion of the situation is juxtaposed partly with the slapstick comedy droning away on the television and partly with the absurd, almost laughable, argumentation of the parents. In the same way that laughter accompanies the sinister in *Alice in Wonderland*, the same is true in *Skelettet på hjul*. Jensen also shows some similarities with Carroll in his use of language. There is a consistent playfulness with words and letters throughout Jensen's works. In *Skelettet på hjul*, the dog, while alive, is called Trofast [faithful], but its skeleton is called Tsafort. The anagram is a code, showing that there is a connection between the dog and the skeleton. But Tsafort is a word without a soul, that is, without any semantic content, and that is why Tsafort must become Trofast again before the events gain meaning and the book can finish.

This short analysis shows that Martin is astonished by the supernatural characters he meets, and, in the beginning, he asks himself whether the angel of light is real. The reader must repeat this hesitation and ask him/herself how Martin's voyage and confrontation with the magic should be understood and interpreted. Does he experience the magic "for real" or does he hallucinate because of the cruelty of his parents?

In an earlier article about genre patterns in Danish children's literature, I analyzed and discussed more examples of fantastic tales by different authors and their play with the fantastic tradition from the 19th century. My conclusion was that Louis Jensen's renewal of the fantastic genre in particular "lies in taking tensions to extremes and in emphasizing the image of the child as someone who can act with conviction" (Skyggebjerg 109). It is not only the child character, but also the child reader, who is addressed as competent in understanding the complexities of both the real and the textual world.

Louis Jensen's 1001 Square Stories

In 2016, Louis Jensen finished a voluminous project in which he told 1001 small square stories inspired by *One Thousand and One Nights* using different folk tales and fairy tales by H.C. Andersen. Very often, magical elements and anthropomorphized creatures are included and many intertextual references are made to Romanticism; for instance, to hymns written by the Danish poet B.S. Ingemann (1789-1862). The stories are often set in nature and trees and flowers play a central role. The sea and the sky are also represented as normal environments where these stories take place. The favorite themes are existential and there is an ongoing discussion of the meaning of life, love and death. Although it sounds pathetic, the stories are often told with a great deal of humor. The contrast between the theme and the ordinary, familiar characters is a great motor for an implied absurd humor. This occurs, for instance, when a romance between two loafs of bread is described. The poetic language is filled with symbols and original metaphors and attention is paid to the sound of the language through the use of many homonyms and onomatopoeic words. Furthermore, there is a celebration of special letters (could be X, Z and Q) and unusual combinations of letters. These language experiments occasionally result in new names, words or phrases with some affinity to nonsense poetry. Meta-textual comments are often included and, in several of the stories, the main character is an author. The following example appears relatively simple from a superficial perspective, but, underneath the surface, there are different interpretative possibilities:

En otte og fyrrety-
 vende gang var der
 en blåmejse der sad i
 et træ i sin rede og så
 ud over landet på de
 grønne marker og en
 å der løb forbi på
 en eng foran skoven.
 (Jensen 1992, unpaget)

[A forty-eighth time there was
 a bluebird who sat in a tree
 in its nest looking out
 over the land at the green
 fields, and at a stream that ran
 into a meadow by the forest] (Translation by Lise Kildegaard)

Jensen's square story project began in 1992 with the collection named *Hundrede historier* [A Hundred Stories], from which this story is taken. This square story is an example of an almost naïve description of an idyllic summer in the rural part of Denmark, and it could be interpreted as a homage to romantic poetry for children. Such a picturesque description of a peaceful landscape without any human interaction is perhaps meant as a contrastive comment to a very busy and industrialized agriculture in which humans and not bluebirds dominate streams, meadows and forests.

The following example from the third collection represents a more ludic and satiric text, where supernatural and grotesque elements are celebrated and the use of concrete motifs are recognizable from Andersen:

En to og halvfjerdsindstyvende
 gang var der en stolt kniv der af
 ren og skær stolthed havde
 gemt sig i to hunderede år på et
 loft. Til sidst blev det alligevel
 for kedeligt at ligge helt alene
 oppe på loftet. Derfor lod den,

som om den faldt ned gennem
 en revne i loftet. Så blev den
 samlet op af drengen i huset, og
 allerede den første dag snittede
 de et meget fint skib sammen. (Jensen 2000, unpaget)

[A seventy second time there was a
 splendid knife. Out of sheer pride, it
 had hidden itself away in an attic for
 two hundred years. At last it got to be
 too lonely, lying all by itself up in the
 attic. So it allowed itself to fall down
 through a crack. Then it was picked
 up by a boy in the house, and right
 away on the very first day, they
 whittled a fine ship together.]

Translation by Lise Kildegaard

Like many other square stories, this story is characterized by an anthropomorph object, which was also Andersen's specialty. Andersen wrote about the life of needles, teapots, and different toys. Here in Jensen's text, it is the knife that behaves like an old and proud human being. Finally, after 200 years of pride, he starts to cooperate with other beings, and they begin to play. In the line of Romanticism, it is of course a child who finds and rescues the knife from its overestimation of his own personality and capacity. The excessive pride and the foolish behavior of the knife is contrasted by the immediate and very natural reaction of the child. The use of contrasts and the comic effect that follows in this very short narrative is very much reminiscent of Andersen's fairy tales about objects, for example "Den standhaftige Tinsoldat" [The Steadfast Tin-Soldier] (1838), where the dichotomy between artificiality and natural behaviour is also essential.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I emphasized the connection between H.C. Andersen and Louis Jensen, and, as I have shown in the analytical parts of the article, Jensen is clearly inspired by Andersen's fairy-tale motifs, characters and settings. However, this is not his only source of inspiration. Jensen's inspiration comes from the entire history of Western children's literature, where Andersen as well as Hoffmann and

Carroll play an important role in the interpretation of the fantastic and furthermore influence the view of the child as an important character and a competent reader. In relation to Andersen and the less known romantic author B.S. Ingemann, the Danish children's literature researcher Nina Christensen points out that these authors have had a significant impact on the development of children's literature, not only in Denmark, but not least in Denmark. Christensen has written a chapter entitled "Romantisk tankegang som forudsætning for børnelitteraturen" [Romantic thoughts as basis for children's literature] (Christensen 29), in which she argues that children's literature authors of today and the way we think about children's literature today would not be the same without these romantic authors' pictures and praise of the child.

Another common aspect between the 19th century children's literature writers and a contemporary author like Jensen is the relationship with genres. Neither Andersen, Hoffmann, Carroll nor Jensen use genres as fixed categories. Instead, they play with already existing genres and make their own innovations. Andersen's innovation was the modern fairy-tale with a flexible form, which could fit with the romantic ideas of the child and the magic. As already mentioned, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Lewis Carroll grounded the fantastic tale for children in different languages and areas, and, as Maria Nikolajeva has pointed out in several articles, fantastic literature has undergone an enormous development over the last 200 years, and today, this genre is dominated by complexity and ambiguity in relation to plot, character and messages. Still, many of the concrete tales in the realm of the fantastic "have similarities to fairy tales" from the 19th century (Nikolajeva 2003, 139). This is definitely true of Jensen's authorship.

Beside his work on the fantastic tale, Jensen's generic innovation is the square story, which can fit with a (post)modern idea of openness and creativity in the processes of both writing and reading. In the beginning, readers and critics were skeptical of the whole idea of poetic square stories, and it was discussed if there was a target group for literature like this. Were the square stories for children or adults, or were they simply too artificial to be understood by anyone? However, Jensen's stories were gradually accepted by critics and educators, and, after a couple of collections had been published, the genre seemed normalized. When book number eleven, the last book with only one story included, was published, it was reviewed very positively in all Danish papers.

Children's literature researchers have also found it interesting to discuss the square stories, and reception studies have been conducted with readers of different

ages.¹ In short, these studies have shown that children in general have been more open-minded to these stories than adult readers. Young children between five and ten years old valued their reading experiences more positively than older children and enjoyed both the interpretation process and composing their own square stories. Louis Jensen can be described as a relatively demanding author for readers who prefer clarity and who do not accept ambiguousness as a part of children's literature, but the paradox is that young children do not question the experiments and ambiguities present in his texts.

Over recent decades, Jensen's books have been illustrated by a range of different artists, but, in the case of the square stories, all 1001 texts were illustrated by the same illustrator, Lilian Brøgger, who was able to give the texts new meanings without closing their openness to different interpretations, which is one of their hallmarks. Brøgger's interpretation of the characters and the tone in the stories is as innovative as the texts. Together, the author and the illustrator have created 1001 stories that are not identical but that are able to stimulate the reader's fantasy and reflections about nature, language, and the meaning of literature and life.

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1 Louis Jensen's square stories have been discussed by Line Beck Rasmussen in the article, "Playing with Language and Literature: Louis Jensens 1001 Stories." In *Bookbird*. Vol. 46. 2008. 30-36. Reception studies have been conducted by Bodil Kampp in the article, "Man flyver da ikke væk når man bliver kysset! – Elevers og læreres læsninger af moderne kompleks børnelitteratur." In *Nedslag i børnelitteraturforskningen 5*. Roskilde Universitetsforlag 2005. 157-188