

# “Nothing is for real, but everything is true”. The new trend of children literature exhibitions

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*Laura Gutman*

Celebrations often hide other reasons for creating an event. The Finnish National Museum decided to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first publication of a Moomin book, when there is already a museum entirely devoted to the subject in Tampere and a theme park in Naantali. This celebration was not meant to revive forgotten figures or events, as the Moomin figures are loved internationally thanks to translations and to the recent animation movie for the big screen *Moomins on the Riviera* (2014). Moomins are nowadays part of everyday life in Finland through merchandising. Quite the opposite, the challenge taken by the museum consisted in presenting a popular cultural icon in a multi-layered exhibition appreciated by children, their families, and specialists alike. In today's cultural context, children literature is indeed acknowledging a remarkable development in the museum world. I see several reasons for this.

## **A cement between generations**

Returning to childhood memories has a soothing effect in our chaotic time. Our past shines like a golden age when present and future are at hold. It represents a paradise lost, but easily regained with a smile. In many ways, comic strips' heroes are tired. The never-ending movie series and franchises have exhausted their original power. And in a frozen time like that of the pandemic, all their actions meet a wall. On the contrary, traditional childhood heroes have not aged, in particular when Disney has left them out from its catalogue.

Reading illustrated books has always been a great joy for children. Diving into a book is the best alley for imagination, for transcending reality and discovering other worlds. Looking at the pictures gives shape to characters and places, helping to share their emotions and adventures. Reading alone or being read by a parent is a delight nothing compares. It is a cut in time, spreading on several days or through long nights without sleep. It is a feast and a joy, although we are not always sure if we really want to reach the end of the story.

Museums have recently understood how they could benefit from children literature. The cultural value of some beloved stories can become a cement between generations. It is not by chance that the national value of a famous writer is culturally enhanced in the country where he or she lived. The original language is a reason for that, but also the familiar settings or psychological traits which belong to certain cultural areas. This national anchor has nevertheless been freed thanks to numerous translations, which point to the

universality of the story. The otherworld of a foreign story can easily be encapsulated in a faraway part of the world.

Nothing like an illustrated book creates such an immersive and illusionist experience. Turned into an exhibition, the pages of the book become physical spaces. The visitors walk through the book, with more interaction than they will ever have watching a movie. The interactivity at stake in museums becomes self-evident with children books. The time when a literature exhibition was limited to books in a showcase, and readings in a hall is over.

## A narrative turned into scenography

I would like to give three examples of new experiments presenting similarities: the new building for the Hans Christian Andersen Museum in Odense, Denmark, due to open in 2021; the forthcoming exhibition *Alice: Curiozer and Curiozer* opening in 2021 at the V&A in London; and the just mentioned *Courage, Freedom, Love! The Moomins 75* exhibition presently on show at the Finnish National Museum in Helsinki for the 75th anniversary of Tove Jansson's Moomins.

In all three projects, designers have worked closely with content specialists, in this order. The spacial and visual narrative stems from the story and involves the visitors, who are integrated in the narrative. In Odense, the museum will revolve around a magic tree growing throughout the whole building, from its roots in the lower floor, trunk, and upper branches high in the sky. The visual symbolic is developed throughout the museum, organising the material accordingly to the narrative and making sense for the visitors, with no need for a floorplan.

In London, the exhibition staging will also be dominant and promises to be immersive and theatrical. Stage designer Tom Piper will produce surprise effects inspired by Alice's rabbit dizzying run, and numerous secret doors opening to mysterious worlds. The exhibition will revolve around Lewis Carroll's book and its remarkable visual influence over 158 years, to return to the book with a new series of illustration commissioned to the creative designer Kristjana S. Williams.

In Helsinki, the exhibition project was based on a story both written and illustrated by the same author. Tove Jansson (1914-2001) was a Swedish-Finnish painter whose great distress during Second World War prevented her from painting. She wrote and illustrated instead a story, creating the characters of the Moomin family and their friends living close to nature in the enchanted Moomin Valley. The story developed in several books and comic strips, the first of them being published 75 years ago, in 1945. When Alexander Reichstein was offered to design the exhibition for the Finnish National Museum, he rejoiced as the illustrator and exhibition designer was familiar with the story he had read to his daughter in Moscow, long before moving to Finland. By then, he was imagining Finland after the small white trolls' world, its forests and seashores looking like the drawings in the books.

Recreating the magic of the reading is a key in the exhibition. In a time when screens pollute children's imagination, interactivity is addressing their sensitivity in another

fashion. Not that Reichstein ignores technology, technical devices are used to reach a required effect, but they remain unnoticed.

Waking in the exhibition equals entering the Moomins' world. The initiatory journey is conveyed in every room, and passing each threshold is experiencing a gradual emotional step. The deep dark forest, inhabited by fairies and dangerous creatures, and the menace of an approaching comet are giving way to the sunny Moomin Valley where their tower-like house is immediately identified by their fans. A floating theatre attended on small boats eventually leads to a lighthouse; after experiencing a stormy weather on the open sea, the muted white snow of winter fares the visitor goodbye.

Everyday objects are oftentimes transformed in tales, holding magical powers. Such is the magic ball in the Moomins' story, borrowing its shape and purpose from the snow globe and the fortune-telling crystal ball. In the exhibition, the Moomin family appears in an animation in a large crystal-ball, introducing the characters to the visitors. Another magic trick is played with a page of the manuscript, written down with no pen, words crossed over, reconstructing thus the creative process of the author. Visitors are taking part in the adventure, invited to burn prohibitions signs, getting excited when the more the sticks, the higher the flames of the bonfire.

The exhibition follows a mind-map, epitomizing the plural facets of the book, which is often described as philosophical. Alexander Reichstein has paid particular attention to the small secondary creatures present in the book, recalling the mere existence of the invisible next to the visible world. "Every living thing is worth some attention, even if mean, or coward, or outrageously selfish at times - as we all are", is his reading of Tove Jansson's central message of tolerance. Showcases built in the walls resembling small models present material evocating the author's life, her references, aspects of the characters, but also the many versions and adaptations of the story into stage performances, and their translations.

All visual idioms are borrowed from Tove Jansson's illustrations in their variety: drawings, watercolours, collages. At the exception of a few original items, loaned from Tove Jansson's collection such as her own palette, or the collection of stamps designed by her artist mother, "nothing is real, but everything is true", says Reichstein. Just like in fairy-tales where the reader becomes an accomplice of the writer, perfectly aware that the story is impossible, but still inspired by the character's emotions and hardships. In the exhibition, children are figuring the Moomins and everything is in their size. "I am convinced that the actual size of the Moomins is that of children", claims Alexander Reichstein pointing at a self-portrait of Tove Jansson among the characters of her book. As a result, only children are small enough to access a treasure box, enter a tent, or slink into a mysterious cave - even if a wheelchair can get remarkably close to these hiding places.

## Learning adventures

These new types of exhibitions are hybrids between theme parks and literature exhibitions. They fulfil the dream to enter a book, meet their characters, and share their adventures. They attract children and reconnect adults to their own childhood. They also

introduce foreign publics to cultural gems, cherished nationally and internationally. Such exhibitions offer a pre-digested analysis of children books, their creative production, their sources of inspirations, their promotion in different forms. Designers are endorsing the narrator's role, with the support of specialists responsible for the academic interpretations.

I can see here a new format for exhibitions, which will be appreciated by schoolteachers for their remarkable introduction to children literature. New pedagogy insists on playfulness as an efficient learning tool. I would think that the interactivity enhanced in an exhibition such as *Courage, Love, Freedom! The Moomins 75*, where children can dance on an outdoor summertime stage on jazz music, using their whole body and senses, has more impact than fleeting images scrolled on a screen. The lucky ones may even hear children asking for the books to read alone or to be read. These museum productions still differ dramatically from the Harry Potter commercial exhibitions thanks to their cultural value, and deep analysis. The fun is not just another way to attract consumers, but a mastered approach to literature and illustration.

If I had three wishes, I would like to see more of these well-planned exhibitions where visitors are learning by playing. When the exhibition revolves around the visitors and engages them in personally meaningful activities, the pedagogical benefits overpass the programmes of side activities.

My second wish would be to discover world children literatures thanks to touring exhibitions. There are signals that the post-pandemic cultural landscape will favour such projects avoiding the transport and hanging of valuable collections, adapting, and recycling exhibition scenography in the same fashion than stage productions on tour. Children literature is a safe and unusual topic for museums. The international success of stories from distant countries can also contribute to a better appreciation of world cultures in their wisdom, and unique iconography.

And I would keep my third wish to ever-live in the magic world of tales, where things always turn well in the end.

*Courage, Freedom, Love! The Moomins 75*, Finnish National Museum, Helsinki, 14.8.2020 – 14.3.2021

<https://www.kansallismuseo.fi/en/exhibitions/rohkeus-rakkaus-vapaus-muumit-75>

*Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser*, V&A, London, opening on 27.3.2021

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/alice-curioser-and-curioser>

New Hans Christian Andersen Museum, Odense, opening in June 2021

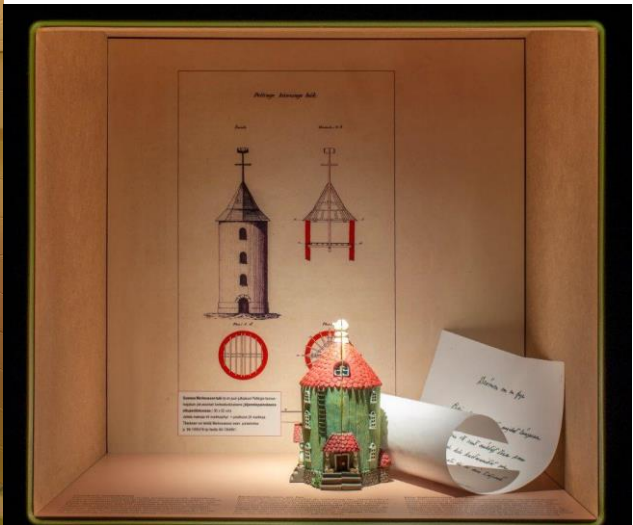
<https://www.visitdenmark.com/press/latest-news/new-hans-christian-andersen-museum-odense>

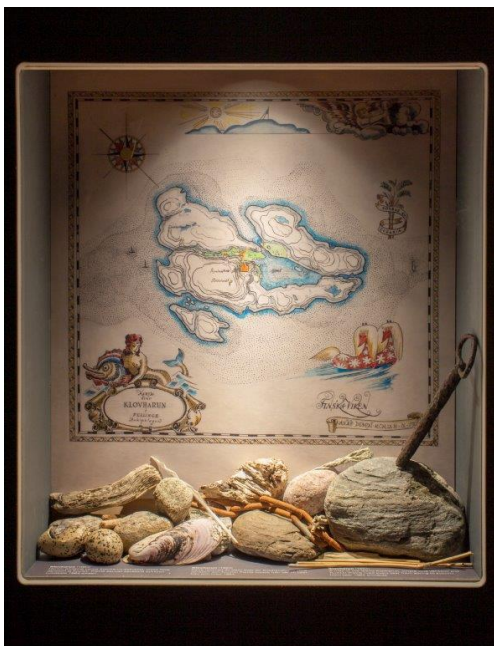
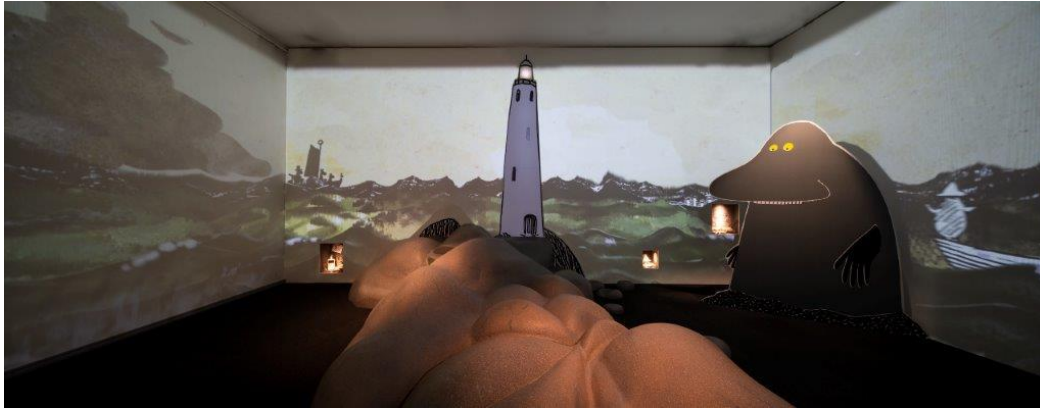
## ILLUSTRATIONS

Courage, Freedom, Love! The Moomins 75, Finnish National Museum, Helsinki

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Model © Alexander Reichstein

