



## ‘Foreign Readers and the Imperishable Troll’ – travelling to locations with connections to Tove Jansson and her works

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The following piece is based on the lectio praecursoria presented at the defense of the doctoral dissertation ‘Ideal Absence and Situated Readers: Experiencing Space Through Connection to Tove Jansson and her Works’ which was publicly discussed on November 3, 2021, at the University of Jyväskylä. The full version of the dissertation can be found at: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8861-6>

As someone coming from the field of tourism studies, my initial intention with this dissertation was to study travel inspired by media productions. Books, films, TV series and games have the potential to attract audiences to locations associated with them and their creators. People come to places with ties to fiction for different reasons – as fans and devotees on a quest to pay homage to the author or find the ‘real’ locations featured in a favourite book; to check out filming sites of a popular series; or not out of dedication but to tag along with friends and family members. The motivations for visits differ among individuals, as do the meanings attributed to these sites, as do the ways visitors experience these locations. A profound experience for one visitor, the same site can be a ticking of the box for the other.

Places connected to Tove Jansson (1914–2001), who is one of – if not the most – internationally known artistic and literary figures from Finland, were initially the focus of one of my side projects, but later, they became the core of my dissertation research project. As with many ‘children’s’ book writers, the fame of Jansson’s characters, the Moomins, overshadow the author herself, her other artistic work and her other prose (Westin, 2014). For many adult readers, the danger, the longing, the loneliness, and other ‘adult’ topics in the Moomin books, are forgotten as time goes by. What remains is a nostalgic thought: fondly remembered rounded characters who are jolly and kind.

In recent decades, Jansson’s life and career have attracted public attention in Finland and abroad. A number of popular and scientific publications have been written about her, and events were held to honour her legacy, to emphasize the values of tolerance and inclusivity in her works, and to dispel the silences that surrounded her life, particularly her romantic relationships. Jansson’s sexuality and queer themes in her books are being openly acknowledged and discussed. The Moomin Characters Ltd. website published a three-part feature about her same-sex relationships in 2019, and it is also the focus of the 2020 film

Tove (directed by Zaida Bergroth). For many readers in Finland and abroad, knowing facts about Jansson's life invited different ways of reading. As her life and works are re-evaluated, places associated with her acquire new meanings.

While I was initially interested in the tourists' experiences of places with ties to Jansson in Finland, as the research project proceeded, I also started considering how the sites are viewed by local readers. This proved to be a suitable approach in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and offered an opportunity to look not only at how sites are perceived through their connection to known figures and literary works but also to consider how sense of place and relationships with places affect the visit and examine how familiar sites can be experienced through fiction. However, the study maintained an 'outsider' focus and concentrated on the accounts of both overseas visitors and Finnish residents of foreign background.

As a theoretical framework, I utilized theories of situatedness and belonging. Drawing on the concept of 'situated knowledges', introduced by Donna Haraway (1988), on culturally situated reader response research (e.g., Brooks & Browne, 2012), and spatial reading (Hones, 2014), I also incorporated previous studies on social and spatial belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016), which consider the importance of both individual and collective aspects. This theoretical approach allowed me to examine how readers' past and present geographical and sociocultural experiences, along with their personal reading histories, influence the interpretation of Jansson's texts and associated sites and affect the visitor experience.

My goal was to find out what readers read into spaces linked to Jansson. It might seem easy on the surface – childhood memories, idealized past, cute characters. But reading as a process is a very personal experience, and also personal is the relationships between the text and the reader. Members of the audience are not simply 'absorbing' the narratives but are often actively (re)interpreting and negotiating the meanings they attribute to the texts (Brooks & Browne, 2012), their authors and spaces associated with them (Hones, 2014). In essence, each reader's personal experience, spatial and social, shapes their interpretation of the text and manifests in the way they interact with literary and artistic sites during the visit.

On the other hand, media texts are often read collectively, with different groups attributing different, often conflicting, meanings to narratives (Brooks & Browne, 2012) as well as the associated locations. Places with ties to literature, for instance, can have a strong political dimension. With literary works often regarded as part of cultural heritage (Bom, 2015b), sites with connections to known writers and their works receive official recognition through practices of memorization such as plaques and memorials. Such spaces are where ownership of cultural heritage can be claimed, and national pride is manifested; they can be spaces of inclusion for some and exclusion for others. Furthermore, meanings attributed to spaces are constantly (re)negotiated, reflecting changing interpretations of the texts and the author's biography.

It might seem that all that doesn't really apply to children's literature, such as Jansson's Moomins, but on the contrary, places with ties to works of this genre are also spaces

of belonging and non-belonging. Examples of places related to Beatrix Potter in England (Squire, 1994), Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark (Bom, 2015a) and Astrid Lindgren in Sweden (Bom, 2015b) show that, apart from the personal importance of children's literature, cultural values are often associated with these locations and are reaffirmed during the visits. As previous studies show, notions of national and regional identity, romanticized past and imagined communities can be emphasized by the site management and local authorities and may be important from the visitor's perspective.

In light of all this, we can see that what places with ties to fiction and authors represent is an entanglement of individually and collectively attributed meanings; shaped by personal histories, collective interpretations, changing situations, perceptions and values; and perceived in relation to contemporary events.

### What does this mean for sites associated with Tove Jansson and her works?

The Moomin presence is explicit in Finland, where Moomin merchandize can be found in practically every shop, where famous Moomin mugs appear in almost every household, and where characters are used in nation branding. A number of commercial Moomin-themed attractions also exist, including shops and cafes, as well as a theme park. Although arguably inauthentic, they are popular with Moomin devotees. The characters are positioned as essentially Finnish, and yet, interestingly, the majority of the Finnish-speaking population reads the books in translation, and the familiar characters' names are different from the original Swedish.

In comparison to commercial attractions, a few years before this research began, sites with biographical ties to Jansson herself were relatively hard to find. At present, her artistic works and her life are the focus of exhibitions in the Helsinki Art Museum and the Moomin Museum. To mark 100 years since her birth, a park in Helsinki was renamed after her, and online itineraries were presented to help those interested in tracing locations with biographical connections in Helsinki. The spatial connection is also emphasized in a number of recent publications, including articles on the Moomin Characters Ltd. website and in a recent book, *Tove Janssonin Helsinki (Tove Jansson's Helsinki)*, by Juha Järvelä (2021).

After reviewing biographical publications and informational and promotional material relating to sites with factual and fictive ties, I looked at authored press articles covering visits to the Finnish sites and my own autoethnographic account to explore how places linked to Jansson and her works are experienced by reader-visitors in light of their personal histories of engagement with the texts and in a spatial and sociocultural context. The findings showed that both individual and collective factors shape how media texts and spaces are envisioned. Prior engagement with and personal importance of Jansson's work played crucial roles in the visitor experience. The fact that the books were read in translation does not seem to matter much and, as with other children's literature books, the Moomin books are often an important part of one's childhood and are tied to a time period and people with whom the books were read. In addition to the books, encountering the narratives in a different format (for example, animated adaptation) did not make it any less meaningful.

At the same time, the role of the public discourse surrounding the values and themes in the Moomin books cannot be ignored. The messages found in Jansson's works – that of inclusivity and care – are viewed as particularly relevant in light of recent political and environmental events. As expected, the fame of Jansson's hippo-resembling characters eclipses the author herself, but as more publications on her life appear, the changing interpretations of her biography affect the meanings attributed to spaces with ties to her.

The study also shed light on how reader-visitors address and engage with numerous absences – that of the author, of fictional characters, or, in some cases, of verifiable connections to writers and texts – and how they creatively fill in the empty spaces with their own experiences and histories, memories, knowledge and imagination based on their own situated reading. Thus, absences at the sites with ties to writers and artists, while often seen as a hindrance, can also act as an opportunity (for previous research on absence at literary places see e.g., Ridanpää, 2011; Jiang & Xu, 2016; Steiner, 2016; Thurgill, 2018).

The nature of the place itself – a city, a museum, a theme park – shapes the encounter and facilitates different modes of creativity. For instance, a walk in Helsinki in search of sites with biographical connections can inspire visitors to conduct an 'investigation', challenging them to find the locations, to refer to texts by and about the author, to correlate what they see to textual descriptions, as well as archived drawings and photographs. Furthermore, interesting insights were obtained from press articles into how Finland is imagined through connection to the Moomin stories and Jansson's biography: not only did the visitors fill the space with their personal histories and their knowledge, existing or recently obtained, about Jansson's life, but unrelated narratives were also attached to the space to reflect how Finland is viewed as 'fairytal-esque'.

While the Moomin sites are known to attract international visitors, in my work, I attempted to look deeper into the sociocultural positioning of Jansson's works, beyond the commercialization and past the trolls' cuteness. Comparing how 'foreign' readers read the texts and experience sites associated with Jansson provided curious findings and offered more questions for further inquiries.

Do foreign-born readers, like myself, have a right to claim Jansson as theirs? Whether they come to Finland as tourists after having read her books, or whether they have lived here for years, does Jansson 'belong' to them? Does she 'belong' to me?

As an interdisciplinary study in the field of tourism studies, cultural studies and literary geographies, this research contributed to the understanding of tourist experiences, particularly related to media tourism, and offered insights into how situated media engagement affects the experience of visitors. With this work, I tried to open up the discussion on what places with ties to authors, artists and their works in Finland signify for different members of the audience by taking an example of sites with ties to Tove Jansson. On a broader level, my aim was to acknowledge different voices, to find out what the sites mean for various readerships, and to invite future discussions.

Further inquiries can focus on the following questions, particularly relating to Jansson: do the Moomin books really have intergenerational, intercultural appeal, as often claimed,

or are some readers excluded? Does the overcommercialization devalue the message in the source texts, or does it really matter? How does the commercial nature of the sites affect the nostalgic experience of visitors?

On the other hand, how does proclaiming Jansson a feminist and LGBTIQ icon affect how places related to her are perceived? How is her life reconsidered by domestic and international audiences in light of the recent film *Tove*?

Considering the popularity of Jansson's works in other regions, notably the appearance of commercial Moomin sites in Asia emphasising the author's biography, transcultural perspectives would be particularly valuable in upcoming studies. Also, it would be useful to combine perspectives from other Nordic countries, for instance from sites with connections to Hans Christian Andersen, Selma Lagerlöf and Astrid Lindgren, in order to analyse how the discourse surrounding the author's life reflects the meanings attributed to places and how ownership of heritage appears in discussions.

Looking beyond Jansson, my invitation for further research would be to consider different readerships and groups of visitors at the literary places: whose cultural heritage is represented? Whose ownership claim is emphasized? Who or what is absent or present at the sites, how are these presences/absences discussed, and how do visitors engage with them?

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