



Jansson, Tove (1914-2001)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known for her series of children's books about the Moomin family of trolls, Tove Jansson also wrote fiction for adults and was an accomplished artist and illustrator.

Art was always at the center of Jansson's life. Her father, Viktor Jansson, was a sculptor, and her mother, Signe Hammarsten Jansson, was a graphic artist and illustrator. Her younger brothers also pursued careers in the arts, Per Olov becoming a photographer, and Lars a writer and comic-strip artist.

The family lived in Helsinki, where Tove Marika Jansson was born on August 9, 1914. They were, however, ethnically Swedish and part of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. This, combined with growing up in a rather bohemian family and eventually recognizing her lesbianism, gave Jansson a sense and appreciation of otherness; nevertheless, the closeness of her family and her deep understanding of a sense of place grounded her both in belonging to her social unit and her larger culture, a dichotomy that would inform her writing.

The Jansson family spent their summers at a cottage on an island in the Gulf of Finland, a place that delighted and inspired her. In later years, she stated, "Had it not been for my very happy childhood, I might never have started writing . . . I never wrote entirely for children at all--maybe it was just for myself, to find a way back to the lost world of adventures with happy endings, to the confidence, the constant curiosity, and the boundless possibilities, never questioned, . . . a way back to the endless summers in the archipelago of the Gulf of Finland."

Jansson would continue to return to the islands throughout her life. After World War II, she and her brother Lars, finding the nearer islands too peopled, built a small cottage on one of the outer ones. When this, in turn, became too populous for their taste, Jansson and her life partner, Tuulikki Pietilä, an artist and professor of graphics, moved to an even more remote island.

In 1930, at age fifteen and with her parents' encouragement, Jansson enrolled at the School of Applied Arts in Stockholm. Returning to Finland in 1933, she continued her studies at the Helsinki Art Academy and then went abroad again in 1938, studying at the École d'Adrien Holy and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris.

Jansson's mother was an illustrator for an anti-German magazine called *Garm*, and in 1940 Jansson also began contributing cartoons that featured Moomintroll, who would evolve and reappear as the principal character in her series of children's books, written between 1945 and 1970, and a comic strip that she drew for the *London Evening News* from 1952 to 1959. (Her brother Lars took over the comic strip and produced new Moomin cartoons until 1970.)

Moomins are fantastic creatures that are called trolls but that vaguely resemble a sort of bipedal hippopotamus. Central to the stories is a nuclear family consisting of Moominpappa, Moominmamma, and their son, Moomintroll, but theirs is a world in which a chosen family predominates, and a diverse one it is,



Tove Jansson in 1956.
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including animal-like creatures such as Moomintroll's friend Sniff and others who are--or at least seem to be--human, such as the anarchic Little My, seen by some as an autobiographical figure, and Too-Ticky, a character who is based on Pietilä, and whom Jansson described in *Farlig midsommar* (1954; English title *Moominsummer Madness*) as "much addicted to bathing-houses, the seaside in every particular, in fact, and quite a philosopher in a way."

Like other classics of children's literature, the Moomin tales have an imaginative genius that allows adults to enjoy them as well.

"The Moomin world is full of odd distortions of reality sufficient to create a feeling of otherness but not so great as to make what happens there simply unreal," observes Hal G. P. Cobebatch.

With threats from floods, comets, storms, and volcanoes, as well as the fun of fairs and circuses and the eventual security of a loving if unconventional family, the Moomin stories were bound to appeal to children, but with *Trollvinter* (1957; *Moominland Midwinter*), Jansson's work became more sophisticated, "making," writes Thomas Warburton, "a transition to a fantasy literature which has the power to entertain and fascinate adults beyond their enjoyment in reading aloud to children and grandchildren."

The transition from children's literature to fantasy literature derived largely from the psychological development of the characters. Along with the central figure, Moomintroll, "the rest of the family also became more clearly defined, and they do not always harmonize with each other, . . . and that," concludes Warburton, "is Tove Jansson's message, never obvious but always present in her Moomin stories: show consideration for your fellow beings and understanding for those who are different."

For her contributions to literature, Jansson won many honors, including the Stockholm Award for best children's book (1952), the Selma Lagerlöf Medal (1953), the Hans Christian Andersen Award (1966), the Swedish Academy Prize (1972), the Pro Finlandia Medal (1976), and the Finnish state prize for literature (1963, 1971, and 1982).

Jansson's Moomin books, originally published in Swedish, have been translated in more than thirty languages. They were so popular in Japan that they spawned a television series that ran to fifty-two episodes. The Moomins have also appeared on postage stamps and Finnair planes, among other things.

"I made designs for wallpapers, paper dolls, ceramics, chocolates, candles, cloths, curtains, towels, pens, records, jewelry, postcards, and I don't know what all," stated Jansson.

The Moomin Museum opened in Tampere in 1987 and has become a leading tourist attraction in Finland.

Jansson ended her Moomin series with *Sent i november* (1970; *Moominland in November*). "I couldn't go back and find that happy Moominvalley again," she said of her decision not to continue the saga.

By that time Jansson had already begun writing for adults with her semi-autobiographical collection of stories, *Bildhuggarens dotter* (*Sculptor's Daughter*), published in 1968. The stories are an appreciation of her parents' commitment to art and to the expression of personal freedom. That Jansson chose to fictionalize some aspects of a largely autobiographical work is a tribute to her parents' encouragement of her creativity.

She followed this work with *Sommarboken* (1972; *The Summer Book*), the remembrance of a woman who had spent the summers of her girlhood with her grandmother on an island in the Finnish archipelago. Critic Peter F. Neumeyer remarks that this "pastoral idyll is both undermined and sharpened extraordinarily by Jansson's shrewd and astringently unsentimental glance at the loneliness and encumbrances that attend old

age."

Aging was also a theme in Jansson's *Sun City* (1974), which Neumeyer calls "a wry, sharp, wise, funny, macabre tale set in an old-age home in, of all places, St. Petersburg, Florida."

The location is not as improbable as it might seem. Jansson and Pietilä spent time in St. Petersburg in 1972 when, on the way home from a trip to Japan, they made an eight-month tour of the United States, traveling by Greyhound bus.

The treatment of homosexuality in *Sun City* is subtle and the longing unrequited but undeniably present in the relationship of an older man and a younger one who is heterosexual and thus ultimately unattainable.

Rent spel (1989; *Fair Play*) addresses both questions of sexuality and literary form.

"Is it a novel? Is it stories? It's both; it breaks the boundaries of both forms in a series of linked vignettes about two women who live and work side by side," concludes critic Ali Smith.

Like *Sculptor's Daughter*, *Fair Play* is autobiographical without being an autobiography.

"It's a novel with a profound sense of discretion at its core," writes Smith, "but the flip side of silence is voice, and the flip side of nothing much happening, as always with Jansson, is that absolutely everything is happening This novel . . . is very much about how to shake off old ways of seeing, how to see things differently, get rid of what's 'hopelessly conventional' and replace it with something more hopeful."

A love story about two women in their seventies, *Fair Play* is, observes reviewer Andreas Campeonar, "a portrayal of the most intimate of human relationships," adding that "Jansson is unconcerned with conventional plot devices, content to let the narrative almost disappear into what Hegel called the 'prose of the world'; the beauty of the day-to-day. It is here, in between episodes of action, in the incidental detail, that we find the true meaning of the novel."

Lesbian themes can also be found in Jansson's short stories, including "Den stora resan" ("The Great Journey") in the 1978 collection *Dockskåpet och andra berättelser* (*The Dolls' House and Other Stories*). The tale, while eventually hopeful and healing, movingly represents the difficulties that people of that time and place had in publicly expressing their homosexual love.

Throughout her life Jansson was an artist as well as a writer. She provided the illustrations for a Finnish edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1966). In addition to producing numerous works of fine art displayed in galleries, she also undertook public projects, including frescoes in the Helsinki city hall (1947), murals in a vocational school in Kotka (1951), the town hall in Hamina (1952), and a kindergarten in Pori (1954), as well as an altarpiece for a church in Teuva (1954).

Touchingly, Jansson collaborated with Pietilä and both of their mothers to create a series of tableaux of the Moomins that is now in the Moomin Museum in Tampere.

Jansson, considered a national treasure in Finland, died on June 27, 2001 in Helsinki.

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