'Maybe that is not what they would choose'

Human-horse relations, faraway settings and identity exploration in Lin Hallberg's Vem är du Johanna and Adzerk: Den vita hingsten

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Abstract
Countless horse stories provide examples of young riders leaving civilization behind for shorter or longer periods of time, when going for rides in rural settings. But sometimes these journeys serve a more profound purpose. This article explores how the importance of the horse and the faraway rural setting are depicted from a human perspective in Lin Hallberg's *Vem är du Johanna?* and *Adzerk: den vita hingsten*. The article argues that the journeys of the young female protagonists to remote countries provide an opportunity to revalue life and explore their identity as young women, thus exemplifying how the horse and wild nature provide prerequisites for positive changes. Two kindred theoretical approaches are used as an analytic framing: a) human animal studies with its theories about interspecies relationship and power and b) posthumanism with its readings of animal stories. Not least are Donna Haraway's notion of companion species and the interdependency between human beings and animals (2003; 1991), as well as Cynthia Willett's concept biosocial network (2014) important to the analysis. The findings reveal that three different views on interspecies relationships are in play in Hallberg's two horse stories, thus bringing into question what characterizes a well-balanced and ethical relationship between the different species. The article contributes to filling a research gap regarding Swedish horse stories at large as well as highlighting their importance as an arena for exploring interspecies relationships in a YA literary context.

Keywords
Lin Hallberg, Horse Stories, Human-Animal Studies, Interspecies Relationship, Posthumanism, Power Relations

INTRODUCTION

For different reasons, two young horse girls temporarily leave their comparatively comfortable lives in Sweden and the riding school setting for potentially life-changing journeys to remote places where horses and nature come to have a great impact on them – Johanna to Iceland and Emma to Mongolia. This is, in short, the plot of the two horse stories in focus of this article: Lin Hallberg's *Vem är du Johanna?* (2011, *Who Are You Johanna?,* my translation) and *Adzerk: den vita hingsten* (2009, *Adzerk: The White Stallion,* my translation). In the following, references to the stories will be made using abbreviated titles – *Johanna* and *Adzerk* respectively.

There are countless examples from children's and YA literature of young protagonists who are on a quest for finding their place in life. Not least is it common in horse stories to thematize relations between human beings and horses in a manner where friendship and a process of maturity are in focus (Nyrnes 2019; Heinecken 2017).

Such a quest serves as a background to the present analysis. The main focus is on exploring how the importance of the horse and the faraway setting are depicted from a human perspective in two horse stories by Lin Hallberg, more specifically on exploring the interspecies relationship between horse and rider as well as the impact of the wild and rural setting. Thus, the article seeks to deepen the understanding of what characterizes the setting and the relationship between horse and protagonist, as well as of the horse story in general as an arena for such an exploration of interspecies relationships.

Despite its popularity among young female readers in Sweden, there is to date only a relatively small number of horse story studies in a Swedish context. Apart from Malin Eriksson Sjögärd's and Helene Ehriander's (2024) review of the horse story genre as

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part of girls' literary repertoire, several analyses have focused on the stable setting as an arena where socially constructed (gender) norms can be renegotiated and practiced (Hedenborg 2006 and 2013; Asklund 2013; Nygren 2023; Asklund, Manderstedt & Persson 2024).

Of particular interest to my analysis, however, are a few rather recent works where the interspecies relationship between the fictive horse girl and horse is explored, and where posthuman and human-animal studies are used as a theoretical framework. The first work is Ann-Sofie Persson's (2020) study of two Swedish horse story series, where she explores the narrative communication strategies using posthuman and animal studies theories. Persson concludes that the horse is both anthropomorphized and portrayed as the Other. The second work is an essay on Lena Furberg's series *Stallgänget på Tuva*, where Anna Nygren (2020) discusses the power imbalance in the relationship between horse and rider, which leads her to conclude that the rider must take on a certain responsibility for the horse due to the unequal interspecies relationship. A third study is Dawn Heinecken's analysis of Marguerite Henry's horse stories (2017). Just like Persson, Heinecken explores how horse stories relate to posthuman conceptions of interspecies relations, drawing on Donna Haraway's use of so called "contact zones", i.e. spaces that facilitate cross-species conversation and thereby holds an inbuilt capacity to change norms (Haraway 2008, p. 216). This term will be used in the analysis.

Hallberg, the author of the two horse stories analyzed, is a well-known Swedish writer of horse stories, with more than 60 published books for children of different ages. Quite a few books are written for young readers, but *Johanna* and *Adzerk* stand out by being two of only a small number of books written for teenagers. Hallberg wrote them after travelling to Mongolia and Iceland respectively with the aim of exploring other equestrian cultures than the Swedish. The cultural differences between these equestrian settings are important to the plots of the two YA horse stories. Paired with the close relationship between the protagonists and certain horses in the Swedish stable setting as well as in the faraway rural setting, this makes the two books well suited for my analysis.

It is clear from the beginning that both protagonists, Emma and Johanna, are struggling with who they are. Emma, the main character in Hallberg's *Adzerk,* feels that she is not running her own life but merely becomes what other people expect her to be. The stable setting with its horses, Ajax in particular, is the only place where she is free, and she claims to be more vulnerable than what is visible at first glance (*Adzerk*, p. 58). Whereas Emma struggles with such an outer stress, Johanna, the protagonist in *Johanna*, has instead lost track of who she is due to certain recent experiences. Not least has the loss of the much-loved riding school horse Kasper thrown her off balance and made her stop riding (*Johanna,* p. 45).

Their journeys to Mongolia and Iceland respectively mark the beginning of the quest for finding out how they want to live, and it is in those two settings that the lion's share of the analysis takes place. But before plunging into this exploration, it will be further contextualized below.

AIM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following, I claim that the stable and its horses initially are important as a stabilizing factor for both Emma and Johanna. In fact, the stable is often in the centre of horse stories where it becomes a room of its own, with its own rules that facilitate subversiveness and development of other (female) norms than those of society (Nikku 2005; Forsberg 2007; Asklund 2013; Heinecken 2017). When this safe haven is taken away from the two girls for different reasons, they fumble for stability and for finding their place in life. In her two horse stories, Hallberg explores how this affects them and works as a catalyst for maturing and finding their own paths in life.

The analysis takes as its starting point the somewhat ambivalent power relations that are common in the horse story genre (Eriksson Sjögärd & Ehriander 2024, p. 156). More specifically, the article seeks to show how Hallberg uses the power balance between the Swedish riding school and the faraway rural setting as well as the interspecies relations between humans and horses to depict Johanna's and Emma's inner journeys. It is consequently argued that their new experiences can be seen as liminal activities on the threshold to adulthood. Therefore, it is relevant to talk of the two horse stories as a kind of modern Bildungsroman for young girls. The Bildungsroman is a genre characterized by the exploration of self-realization, inner and outer directedness, attitude towards marriage and relationships to family and friends (Labovitz 1986).

The research questions are two in number. The first one concerns what impact the faraway rural settings have on the protagonists' identity exploration as opposed to their everyday life in a Swedish riding school setting. This question serves mainly as an introductory part with the purpose of contextualizing the second, and main, research question: What sort of

interspecies relationship is there between protagonist and horse? More specifically, what power relation is there, how is the relationship between humans and horses depicted and in what way does that affect the protagonists' inner journeys?

The theories used to answer the research questions and frame the analysis will now be thoroughly presented. These are 1) human-animal studies focusing on interspecies relationship and 2) posthumanism with its readings of animal stories.

To begin with, the theoretical framework is built on the idea that power relations are always present in children's and YA literature, since children depend on adults and cannot themselves make all decisions. Maria Nikolajeva (2010) suggests the term aetonormality as a way of describing how adults are understood as the norm, whereas the child becomes by necessity *the other*. In children's literature the child is, albeit for a limited time and depending on specific conditions, given the opportunity to be in charge. In the present analysis, both girls explore for a short time an unfamiliar setting populated by unknown or distant people. This creates new conditions where Emma and Johanna must take charge of their situation without the influence of the grown-ups they usually live with.

Just as the child can be seen as *the other* compared to the adult, such a dichotomy is also visible in posthuman theory and ecocritical theories focusing on human-animal relationships. As Persson suggests (2020, p. 5) – drawing on Zoe Jaques (2015, p. 2–3) – Othering can be described as a narrative technique which can simultaneously foreground and question traditional boundaries between humans and animals. Therefore, exploring horse stories from a human-animal perspective gives an opportunity to analyze the meeting between horse girl and horse by studying how the dialogue might give room for understanding *the other* and relations between species (Persson 2020; Calarco 2008).

In fact, children's literature has for a long time been an arena for challenging hierarchies between humans and animals, according to scholars such as Jaques (2015) and Amy Ratelle (2015). Whereas Ratelle states that the boundaries between humans and animals have been 'in a state of continual flux' (p. 4) for centuries, Jaques means that posthuman tensions have simultaneously served both as a building block and been neglected in YA canon literature (p. 105).

Research fields of human-animal studies and posthumanism have taken their form rather recently, and at least posthuman studies of YA literature have thus far been quite few (Flanagan 2014, p. 29–30). I have, however, mentioned a couple of rather recent horse story in this theoretical field. Another work of interest to my analysis is Heinecken's (2017) exploration of Henry's horse stories, since Heinecken provides useful arguments for how to use posthumanist and human-animal theories in horse story analyses. Haraway's use of so called 'contact zones' are at the core of her analysis. Heinecken argues that horse stories can work as contact zones themselves, since by reading them, children can start reconsidering the way they interact with horses (p. 22–23). Using Haraway's ideas, Heinecken argues that Henry's horse stories raise questions about ethical values and of animal agency by making their readers understand that communicating with horses means accepting them as the other, without trying to change or control them (p. 29).

In addition to Haraway's concept contact zones, her insights from *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) are fruitful. I use her way of seeing the relationship between animal (by Haraway exemplified by the dog) and human being as 'bonded in significant otherness' (Haraway 2003, p. 16). The normative power relations that commonly put the human being at the top of the hierarchy is thereby challenged by Haraway, since she suggests that different species co-exist side by side and that they depend on each other. Without each other, neither human beings nor animals would have become what they are. In connection to this, Haraway emphasizes that we should try to exclude our common way of categorizing and giving names and instead live outside of categorization. In my material, the habit of categorizing and naming is a recurring theme, which will be explored with input from Haraway's theoretical perspective.

Aslaug Nyrnes, who uses Haraway's theory of companion species in her article on another horse story by Hallberg (Nyrnes 2019), observes that the dialogue between horse girl and horse can be either anthropocentric, i.e. suggests that humans dominate other species, or challenge the anthropocentric worldview in a dialogue between companion species. In my exploration of Hallberg's two horse stories, this is highly relevant as a means for explaining how the interspecies relationship between horse girl and horse is depicted.

Nyrnes also discusses the stable setting and its potential for being a place where nature (more specifically horses) can be listened to as equal to human beings. Thereby, there is potential for horses and horse girls to personify companion species, and Nyrnes argues that the stable can be seen as what

Cynthia Willett (2014) calls a biosocial network (Nyrnes 2019, p. 4). Such a network is built on the notion of a horizontal human-animal relationship, or a liveable place where social norms can develop outside of normative hierarchical structures (Willett 2014, p. 132–133).

As already mentioned, the setting is of particular interest to my analysis of Hallberg's two horse stories. In these stories, both the protagonists leave the resort offered by the stable. Instead, the bulk of the stories takes place in rural and faraway settings, where nature and wilderness are self-evident parts of life in ways that are relevant to discuss in terms of Willett's idea of the concept biosocial networks.

Roni Natov has stated that nature and the so-called 'green world' in children's literature function as 'a retreat from the world's injustices – parental and the extended social world' (2003, p. 91). The faraway setting is in fact important in several ways in children's literature. By placing a character in an extreme setting of some kind, the text could 'initiate and speed up the process of maturity within the character […] thereby it works as a catalyst for development' (Nikolajeva 2017, p. 124–125).

To conclude this section, the ideas and concepts by the scholars above are used to expand and substantiate the analysis, with its focus on power structures relevant to human animal relations as well as the importance of the faraway setting as a catalyst for the personal exploration of the young protagonists.

THE FARAWAY RURAL SETTING: ITS IMPACT ON IDENTITY EXPLORATION

In the following, I analyze how the power relations linked to the faraway setting vs the familiar riding school setting come to play in Hallberg's two horse stories.

Back home at the riding school, Emma in *Adzerk* was looked upon as a role model for how to take care of the horses. It is in this role and setting that she feels some kind of self-confidence, and it has been her only stability when both her family and her own social life with friends outside of the riding school setting started shaking: 'How could I live without this, I think when riding on the path that leads into the forest behind the stables. This is the only place where I can be me' (*Adzerk*, p. 58).[1] The stable setting, with her favourite horse Ajax, is in many ways Emma's safe house, where she knows how to behave and where she can forget about other parts of her life that are troublesome.

The stable can partly be described in connection to Willett's biosocial network with its idea of interspecies communities that facilitate the development of social norms different from those in society at large. However, Willett also emphasizes that such a network is built on a non-hierarchical human-animal relationship (2014, p. 131–133). Since Ajax and the other horses never get their own voices and are depicted in terms of being groomed, there is not such a horizontal relationship between them and their riders. Thus, the stable setting in *Adzerk* cannot be described in terms of a complete biosocial network, but merely as a social network marked off from its surroundings by making it possible for the horse girls to feel that they master their own situation (c.f. Asklund 2013).

After having spent some time in Mongolia, Emma accidentally meets Baska, a girl of just about the same age, and follows her to her home in the countryside where the family's herd of horses is the centre of life. Her stay at Baska's becomes the gateway to the Mongolian rural setting. When visiting Baska, it soon becomes evident that Emma's background and knowledge is not worth that much in the rural Mongolian setting, something Baska's uncle Tömörsukh impress on Emma (*Adzerk*, p. 141).

When finally riding, nothing is the way Emma is used to, and the horse does not understand her way of riding at all. This makes her become the laughing stock of Baska's whole family. In addition, Emma gradually understands that horses and riding have quite another purpose than back home. Back home, taking care of Ajax and practicing in order to compete with him were central to her, but still a leisure activity. For Baska's family, their herds of horses are instead needed for their provision, so riding for pleasure is merely an occasional treat. As a consequence, Emma and Baska have quite different perspectives not only on horses and horsemanship but on life at large. Emma is surprised that Baska must do so many household chores, a reaction that Baska finds strange. It is her life, she says, and she likes it although there is not always that much time for riding (*Adzerk,* p. 154).

[1] All citations from the two horse stories are translated from Swedish by the author.

To Emma, this meeting with Mongolian rural life at first makes her ashamed of being considered a representative for modern Western life with all its conveniences, something she finds rather painful (*Adzerk,* p. 135). Still, the meeting with Baska's world, with its other norms and prerequisites, makes her start reconsidering what is important to her. In fact, these differences between them can be seen as a help to Emma when struggling to find her lifepath, and Baska stands out as a helper since she continuously questions Emma's standpoints both when it comes to horsemanship, women's conditions, family life and love.

The lack of freedom, as Emma sees it, makes her angry, and she starts to realize that what she takes for granted back home is unattainable in other parts of the world. Emma is also given certain privileges in Baska's village, which accentuates their different living conditions even more. To exemplify, Emma is allowed to ride with the men in Baska's village, whereas Baska and all the other girls must do household chores instead. Emma finds this highly unfair: 'She is like Cinderella! And I doubt that there will ever come a prince to save her' (*Adzerk*, p. 168).

In fact, there is rather a strong resemblance between how the conditions of Baska and the other female members of her village and the Mongolian horses are depicted. Both have to know their place and role and are more important as part of their family or herd than as individuals. From an urban Western perspective, this might seem harsh and static, whereas on the Mongolian steppe it is a strategy for survival. To Emma, however, it is not so clear that Baska approves of this situation. Even if she observes that Baska is more unselfish than herself in her way of reasoning (*Adzerk*, p. 238), Emma suspects that she has her own individual dreams for the future. From Emma's perspective, the similarities in how women and horses are portrayed can therefore best be described in terms of a lack of agency.

So, whereas the stable setting mainly works as a social network providing safety and stability to Emma, her meeting with the Mongolian equestrian culture serves the purpose as an eye-opener to her concerning many aspects of life. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term 'contact zones' (not to mistake for Haraway's use of the term) for spaces where 'cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' ([1992] 2008, p. 8). To Emma, Baska's village and the Mongolian steppe becomes such a contact zone, where differences in life conditions at large come into play.

Turning to Johanna, she gradually gets used to life in Iceland again. Her mother had made her go to the farm Vikur in Iceland, the place where Johanna originally comes from, after a long struggle where she quit school and riding and started hanging out with older boys. Johanna's whole life used to circle around the riding school – more specifically around the horse Kasper, since she is his groom. In fact, Kasper used to be a substitute for everything that she missed in her life. He was 'my Iceland, my father and my grandma and grandpa' (*Johanna*, p. 37).

It is clear from the depiction that the horses in Iceland are as important to life and well-being as those in Mongolia. Nevertheless, the Icelandic setting is even more closely linked to the people and horses in *Johanna* than the Mongolian setting to the characters in *Adzerk*. One thing that stands out quite soon is that her Icelandic family lives close to nature in a very thorough way, where not only living conditions but also the belief that human beings and nature depend on each other is put forward. Just like Baska's family, Johanna's grandparents and father depend on horses for their living – yet in a somewhat other manner. To her family, the horses are needed as a means of transportation when tending their sheep, but they are also given their own agency (see Haraway 2008). Her family's belief in the importance of maintaining a non-hierarchical power balance between human beings and horses/nature is portrayed in several ways.

Firstly, Johanna's grandpa often uses expressions and metaphors in close connection to nature. This is for instance shown when he states that Johanna belongs in Iceland: '– You do not know where you belong yet, but to us you are as self-evident as the mountains here behind' (*Johanna,* p. 148). In a similar way, the close bond between horses and the wild nature of Iceland can be related to Nikolajeva's (2017, p. 120–121) idea about the island as a setting associated with wilderness and rules of its own. Such specific conditions are made visible in the following words by Johanna's grandpa, when he explains why Icelandic horses can never leave the island:

> – [I]t's only here she [a mare] can be as she is meant to be, it is only here she can be wild and free. Once you have taken her away, there is no way back. A horse that leaves Iceland can never return. (*Johanna,* p. 251)

These words also hold his view of what is important to horses, namely being free and their own masters. As already stated, Johanna's grandpa has formed a pragmatic view of life where he is well aware of the

human power, but also of the responsibility it brings with it.

Secondly, there is a profound bond between Johanna and her grandma which is evident to her grandfather who states that 'You are so alike you and her' (*Johanna,* p. 248). This resemblance is closely connected to the Icelandic setting. Johanna's grandmother is portrayed as having a special relation to nature, something that Johanna also proves to have. For instance, her grandma understands the horses and their needs on equal terms, an ability that separates her from the male members of the family:

> But grandma never forces, not as dad and grandpa do. Grandma waits, strokes the muzzle until it gets smooth and nice and happy to take the bit.
> – Can you talk to the horses, grandma?
> – I can think like them, grandma answers.
> – How?
> – I listen to their instincts. (*Johanna*, p. 7–8)

Thereby, Johanna and her grandma are united in being able to understand and live in tune with the Icelandic nature in a more profound way than the others. Her grandma's ability to communicate with the horses resembles what Josephine Donovan (2017) calls an 'interspecies dialogue'. In the same way as we include facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice when interpreting infants, Donovan claims that we ought to communicate in the same way with animals, thereby giving them agency and a voice of their own. This view resembles Willett's idea of the biosocial network, with its focus on a horizontal interspecies relationship, where the animals' different ways of communicating is looked upon as equal to the human language (Willett, p. 133). Even if Johanna has not yet the same communicative skills as her grandma, she is connected to nature, spirituality and elemental beings in other ways, such as when elves come to guide her (*Johanna*, p. 135–136).

In contrast to the stable setting that both Johanna and Emma are used to from their everyday life in Sweden, the bond between Johanna, her grandmother and the Icelandic nature paves the way for an interspecies relationship where both parts are on equal terms, thereby exemplifying Haraway's companion species as well as forming a kind of biosocial network as described by Willett (2014). In addition to the communicative dialogue and the specific conditions on the island, a third aspect is relevant to this conclusion, namely that the Icelandic setting can be seen as 'a living landscape […] that provide[s] a sense of meaningful existence or "home"' (Willett, p. 133). This is highly relevant to Johanna, who little by little understands that she is interwoven with the Icelandic way of living.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HORSE AND PROTAGONIST

A common trope in horse stories is that there is a special bond between the young (female) protagonist and the horse in focus of the story. It is often described in terms of a complete understanding of each other and as a relationship where both depend on each other. In this way, it challenges the common hierarchy between human and animal which states that the human is the leader. In the following, this unique bond between the two protagonists and the horses will be explored, as well as the depictions of the human-horse relationship and its implications for Emma's and Johanna's inner journeys.

In *Adzerk,* such a bond is established right at the beginning, where the reader is told that Emma has always thought that she and Ajax understand each other completely. This sense of understanding is described with somewhat sexual undertones in the following passage:

> Ajax's strong back muscles pumping under me. How he pulls against the reins. He is just kidding. […] I do not have to say anything. […] Ajax knows what I want. (*Adzerk*, p. 13)

Emma's description of their ride and seemingly complete understanding of each other could also be described in terms of a centauric feeling, that is when the rider and the horse are joined in a mutual movement with no tensions between them (Bornemark & von Essen 2010, p. 7–8).

This seemingly complete understanding of each other is, however, complicated by the fact that we do not really get to know Ajax's view of their relation. As is always the case when studying the relationship between horses and humans, there is a risk of anthropomorphizing (Persson 2021, p. 5; Ratelle 2015, p. 1; Bornemark & von Essen, p. 16). In Emma's description of their relationship, there are certain anthropomorphizing traits that are visible through her interpretation of Ajax's feelings, and which are displayed in different situations. For example, Emma describes Ajax as a creature who is easy to nurture and satisfy: 'The best thing with Ajax is that his thoughts are not so complicated. If he can be in his enclosed

pasture and someone gives him food, he's satisfied' (*Adzerk,* p. 8).

Whereas their mutual understanding is put forward and displayed from Emma's perspective, it can also be noted that Ajax is portrayed in bodily terms. The emphasis on the horse's body, easy-to-handleness and wish to be domesticated can thereby be put into a wider perspective, drawing on similarities with how human non-normative groups are sometimes portrayed and objectified. Not least, I would argue that Ajax does not have his own agency in their human-horse relationship and that he is objectified as *the other*, i.e. Emma interprets his behaviour as completely different from that of human beings.

This objectification is even more emphasized by two different aspects. Firstly, Emma mentions recurrently the importance of giving horses personal names. This is first mentioned in a dialogue with Baska, where their different standpoints are illustrated by Baska stating that they do not name their horses (*Adzerk*, p. 107). Emma, however, persists in naming the white stallion she has come to adore: 'I do not care that horses do not get names here. If the white stallion cannot have another name, I at least want to give him a name. Adzerka means stallion, and I will call him Adzerk' (*Adzerk*, p. 170). By doing so, you could argue that she claims ownership, or at least power, over him, since the act of naming could figuratively be seen as branding him.

Secondly, Emma dreams of owning her own horse in the future (*Adzerk,* p. 214). This is not an uncommon wish for horse girls in a Swedish context, but compared with Baska, who holds quite another world view, Emma stands out as having Western colonial ideals, where ownership and power are conspicuous characteristics.

Building on such examples, it stands clear that Emma's approach collides with that of Baska and her family in several respects. As we have seen, according to Baska horses cannot have names since she and her family are unfamiliar with viewing animals as the property of people. This is difficult to understand and accept for Emma but is in line with both Jacques Derrida's and Haraway's theories about power relations in interspecies relationships. Derrida describes how human beings take power by naming animals and animal species. By their ability to use language in this way, he argues that they demarcate human qualities from non-human (2008, p. 13–14). To avoid such a power imbalance, Haraway is in favour of getting away from continuous naming and categorization and questions the common habit of dividing into different categories. Instead, she emphasizes non-exclusion and unity as a way of moving away from an anthropocentric outlook on life (Haraway 1991, p. 154).

Despite Emma's way of describing horses in terms of domestication, she is also very tender and caring, and she takes on a lot of responsibility for both Ajax and Adzerk. In this way, the somewhat unequal power structure is problematized. Especially when it comes to domesticated animals, like Ajax, we as human beings are by default put in a powerful position where the animals depend on us – for better or worse. We must bring them food, we decide on what to do if they fall ill or are hurt, to name a few examples. I´ll come back to this discussion later, when the responsibility that this power imbalance brings with it is brought to a head for Johanna.

Despite Emma's and Baska's differences in viewing the horse, it is made clear that there is a lack of freedom for horses in both cultures. Even though Baska and her family do not consider the horses to be their personal belongings in the same way as Emma, they place the human being on top of the hierarchy between species. Baska's uncle Tömörsukh states that the horse needs to know its place and that the humans 'shall not have to tell it to do its job' (*Adzerk*, p. 230). In addition, he declares that the humans make the decisions: '– It is not the horse that is the master here' (*Adzerk,* p. 208).

In short, then, an obvious difference concerns the interspecies relationship. On the one hand, Baska's family depend on the horses for their living, whereas the horses would manage quite well left alone on the steppe. Emma, on the other hand, is used to meeting horses in a situation where they depend on her for food and well-being, and where she can treat herself to build an affectionate relationship with individual horses. This worked well back home at the riding school but is much harder on the Mongolian steppe.

Emma's way of romanticizing her relationship with Ajax and Adzerk and talking in terms of possessing them can be related to Haraway's term 'humanist technophiliac narcissism', i.e. the notion that animals 'restore human beings' souls by their unconditional love' (2003, p. 33). In other words, you could say that the animal exists to fulfil human needs. Such an outlook is hard for Emma to leave behind, despite Baska's continuous attempts to make her understand both that horses have their own agency and that the human-horse relationship is not about the love and affection between an individual horse and an individual rider.

The relationship between horse and human being is further problematized in *Johanna*. Just like Emma, the protagonist Johanna is at first unwilling to leave Sweden. But when back in Iceland, she soon rediscovers the love of riding and feels that the Icelandic way of riding is better than that of the riding school. But it certainly is a process where her father and grandparents are helpers in different ways.

Johanna, as Emma and many other horse story protagonists, is depicted as having a special bond to horses: 'It was as if my heart knew that no horse was ill-intentioned. I felt what the horses felt' (*Johanna*, p. 17). This strong sense of kinship (there are several more examples in the book) gives at hand a certain kind of understanding built on communication. I have already commented on this in relation to Johanna's grandma and her relation to horses and nature at large in what could be described as a biosocial network (Willett, p. 133), but it is also visible in Johanna's own way of connecting to horses.

The impact of the relationship between Johanna and Kasper is further put forward by her strong sense of guilt after his death (*Johanna*, p. 108). It is a consequence of the riding school owner growing old and too tired to take care of the horses. Johanna and the other stable girls tried to manage everything for a while, but it proved too hard for them. Finally, a veterinary told them that some of the horses were in too bad a condition to survive – Kasper being one of them. Since Johanna was his groom, she thinks his death is her fault and that she is unworthy of riding anymore.

This brings me back to the discussion about the responsibility that follows with the interspecies power imbalance, where the human being takes the leading position. Whereas Emma balances between on the one hand being nurturing and caring and on the other acting as the owner of the horses, it is different for Johanna. Her responsibility is brought to a head rather harshly when she has to agree to Kasper being put down. That is what troubles her.

As Nygren (2020, p. 75) points out, being responsible for someone else's life is common in many situations and can often be associated with abuse, since you are in a position where you can take someone's life. But for Johanna, as well as for the horse girls that Nygren analyzes, the abuse actually could consist of letting the sick horses continue to live. Still, as she concludes, 'the responsibility is there in every part of the relation – which means that it could never be equal' (p. 75, my translation). Nygren's standpoint is similar to that of Jonna Bornemark (2010, p. 199) who emphasizes that this unequal relation can in fact become dangerous to both parts if the human being fails as the leader. Therefore, Bornemark says, '[i]n the relationship with the horse we must practice power, but a power that is not dictatorial but caring' (Bornemark 2010, p. 199, my translation).

With his long experience from living close to the Icelandic horses, Johanna's grandpa has come to the same conclusion. He shows Johanna that we as humans are in power, but that we must use the power correctly, and he tries to make her see that the horses are important to humans in many respects, such as 'means of transportation, our workmates, but also the food on our table' (*Johanna*, p. 162). For instance, we must understand that the horses cannot stay alive at any cost. In that way, he still objectifies them in one way but also shows compassion and awareness of their dependency on the will of human beings and of the caring power that Bornemark advocates (*Johanna,* p. 147). By that, his reasoning differs from that of Baska and her family, despite their mutual dependence on horses and horsemanship for a living.

Despite her grandpa's words, Johanna continues to struggle with what characterizes the interspecies relationship between humans and horses for quite some time. From Sweden and her old riding school, she is used to having domesticated horses led by humans – much in the same way as Emma. Her Icelandic friend Palli, however, makes her see the importance of a non-hierarchical relationship built on the idea that the will of animals matters just as much as that of human beings. In this, his view resembles Haraway's companion species and her idea that human beings and animals depend on each other and have taken their form due to such a bond (Haraway 2003):

> – Here [in the mountains] they learn to think for themselves, to search for food and understand where there is water. The foals learn to lift their legs among the stones. The larger horses can forgive human beings.
> – It sounds as though you think we are terrible to them, I say.
> – Are we not? We take their freedom away from them, domesticate them, fence them in and do not care about them being flight animals. We urge them to obey us and carry us.
> – But we give them food and take care of them, too, I say.
> – Maybe that is not what they would choose.
> – But still… (*Johanna*, p. 157)

Not least Palli's comment that the horses would not choose to be domesticated if they had the choice highlights Haraway's argument concerning animal agency (2008), whereas Johanna's final remark shows her ambiguity concerning the role of human beings in relation to horses.

Later, Johanna has a similar discussion with her father who clearly states his view that horses belong in the wild, even though it means that they are sometimes short of food. It is always better than being in a riding school, he says (*Johanna*, p. 218). Johanna does not want to accept his view of things, but deep inside she has the feeling that he is right.

Her father's words are modulated by her grandmother, who explains how the horses can be both free and owned by humans: '– The horses here are Vikur's, yours, mine, dad's…, grandma says. But they are also their own, they have their free life up in the mountains in the summer, you know that Jóhanna' (*Johanna*, p. 10).

Once more, there is a link to Emma and her discussion about whether horses belong to anyone. In Johanna's case, there are people around her balancing this whereas for Emma, it is a more radical clash between her and Baska's different approaches.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Emma's and Johanna's journeys to remote places with a focus on horses and nature are indeed life-changing. Their journeys, despite their many similarities, make them choose different directions where their meeting with rural settings, horses and human beings outside the familiar Swedish riding school setting make them realize where they belong and what is important to them. Their meetings with new prerequisites thereby serve as catalysts for change, a process in which the interspecies relationships between horse and protagonist are central.

This brings me to argue that Hallberg's two novels serve as examples of three sorts of interspecies relationships. All of them include an awareness that horses and human beings depend on each other, but the power balance differs widely between them when it comes to what agency and value the horses are considered to have.

1) At first, the two protagonists are used to domesticated horses and have a somewhat romantic fixation with individual horses that is challenged in both stories. This initial relationship with the riding school horses is certainly one of trust and comradeship. Yet, it is a relationship where the horse is anthropomorphized and portrayed as *the other* (c.f. Persson 2020) – lacking an agency of its own.

2) Baska's family in Mongolia is used to a strict hierarchy between humans and horses, where the horses are only valuable if they can perform the duties they are trained for. Still, the family's welfare is very much dependent on the horses. This relationship, too, is therefore one of mutual dependence and trust. It is however explicit that the (male) human beings are the leaders in a rather traditional patriarchal manner with little space for horses, women and men to deviate from the expected way of living.

3) Johanna's Icelandic family represents the sort of relationship that Nygren (2020) and Bornemark (2010) discuss, where a balance is found in their understanding of the human-horse relationship as a relation where both depend on each other, but where the human beings are in a position that force them to take responsibility for both them and the horses. Johanna's Icelandic family shows an understanding of the interspecies power relations that can be described as an ecocentric awareness, where horses and human beings live as equals – as Haraway's companion species. The context that most specifically Johanna's friend Palli and her grandma provide can consequently best be described as what Willett (2014) calls a biosocial network.

By this diversity, Hallberg's horse stories raise questions about ethical values and animal agency, just as Heinecken (2017, p. 29) points out in relation to Henry's horse stories. Therefore, I agree with Heinecken that horse stories indeed have the potential for introducing their readers to discussions about ethics and interspecies relations, in that way in themselves serving as what Haraway calls a contact zone (2008). I would actually argue that Hallberg's two protagonists are themselves involved in such a discussion. Palli's comment concerning the domesticated horses, that '[m]aybe that is not what they would choose' (*Johanna,* p. 157), shows how the value and agency of horses can be discussed.

This way, the two horse stories provide an opportunity to analyze the meeting between horse girl and horse by studying how the dialogue might give room for understanding *the other* and relations between species, just as Persson (2020) and Calarco (2008) advocate. In fact, none of the three interspecies relationships questions that horses differ from human beings and can be discussed in terms of *the other*. The difference lies instead in what this otherness includes and what implications it has for the interspecies relationships.

To conclude, there are different power relations in play in the two horse stories. These differences bring into question, without pushing the reader to take a definite stand, what characterizes a well-balanced and ethical interspecies relationship. I have also argued that the journeys at large serve as catalysts for change in the life of the two horse girls, leading to different life choices. Although Emma finally returns to Sweden, her experiences from Mongolia have made her come to terms with who she is:

> – To be here has changed me, I say.
> – Good or bad [asks Baska]?
> – I´m more Eema now. (*Adzerk*, p. 233)

This means that her quest of finding out who she is has now been fulfilled and she returns home to Sweden. As a contrast, Johanna is finally set free in the Icelandic nature, and she has rediscovered what life is like in Iceland. When returning to her mother in Sweden for a short while, her place of belonging stands clear:

> – It is so nice to have you home again, mum says with a happy sigh. – Vikur is home, I correct her. So it has always been, but I forgot it. (*Johanna,* p. 254)

Johanna's words clarify that she is at peace now, when she has rediscovered her roots in Iceland. Her journey was not *from* something but *to* something.

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