



Illustration by Joanna Czaplewska in *Baltek* by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel (2020).

COURTESY: NADBAŁTYCKIE CENTRUM KULTURY, GDAŃSK

NARRATING THE CHILD

Childhood and the Baltic Sea

Narrating the Child and the Baltic Sea, the 2nd International Conference of The Graphic World of Children

Date and location: May 19–21, 2025, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden.

Organizer: Lisa Källström (Södertörn University).

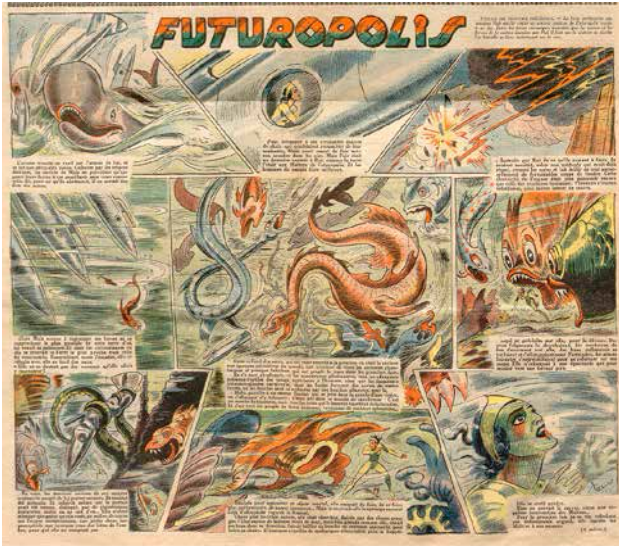
Advisory board: Maheen Ahmed (Ghent University), Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (University of Tübingen), Birgitte Beck Pristed (Aarhus University)/ The Graphic World of Children).

What we call a body of water is never merely a matter of cartographic convention. The naming of the Baltic Sea, for instance, reveals a quietly fraught geography of memory and orientation. In Swedish, it is *Östersjön* – the Eastern Sea – positioning the speaker in a western imaginary. Finnish follows suit with *Itämeri*. But in Estonian, the same body of water is called *Läänemeri*, the Western Sea, a striking inversion that unsettles any claim to a fixed perspective. Such linguistic dissonances are not trivial: they reflect how space is lived, narrated, and remembered through divergent histories. They signal that even the sea is not neutral.

This tension – between what is shared and what is situated – became the starting point for the international conference *Narrating the Child*, held at Södertörn University on May 19–21, 2025. Bringing together twenty-three scholars from eleven countries and ten fields of research, the

conference took the Baltic Sea not only as a geographic site but also as a cultural figure: a liminal zone where stories of childhood, memory, and identity intersect. Organized as the inaugural event of the research network The Graphic World of Children, the conference approached childhood not as a niche or sentimental object of study, but as a rhetorical and representational category with wide-ranging implications.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN, then, to study the child – or the idea of the child – in relation to the Baltic Sea? One starting point is to resist the automatic relegation of children's literature to a pedagogical or literary periphery. Instead, contributors examined how narratives for and about children engage central cultural and political questions: displacement, language loss, ecological grief, migration, and the transmission of memory. Presentations explored media as diverse as picture



Die Lebensstufen, Caspar David Friedrich, c. 1835, oil on canvas.

COURTESY: MUSEUM DER BILDENDEN KÜNSTE, LEIPZIG



Illustration by René Pellos in *Futuropolis-Junior*, no. 107, 14 April 1983.

COURTESY: FUTUROPOLIS, FRANCE

books (Elina Druker, Stockholm), comics (Maureen Ahmed, Ghent), paintings (Heidrun Führer, Lund), illustration (Anita Wincencjus-Patyna, Wrocław), cover design (Marcus Axelsson, Østfold & Charlotte Lindgren, Uppsala; Mette Moe, Oslo & Ruth Seierstad Stokke, Oslo) and publishing practice (Birgitte Beck Pristed, Aarhus; Krzysztof Rybak, Warsaw; Ave Mattheus, Tallinn & Mari Niitra, Tartu, Director of Juhan Liiv Museum). Many focused on the Baltic not as backdrop, but as a shaping presence, an ecological and symbolic space that holds stories of flight and return, silence and imagination.

The sea, it became clear, often figures both as a material boundary and a metaphorical crossing: between past and present, East and West, childhood and adulthood. In papers on postwar displacement narratives, researchers traced microhistorical accounts (Sara Pankenier Weld, Santa Barbara) about journeys of child refugees across the Baltic – in memory, in fiction (Jaanika Palm, Estonian Children’s Literature Center and Tartu University). Others read the sea’s presence in Nordic classics such as Tove Jansson’s *The Summer Book* (Mia Österlund, Åbo & Pia Ahlbäck, Petra Bäni Rigler, Muttenz), and Astrid Lindgren (Astrid Hennig-Mohr, Frankfurt) or in East German maritime literature for young readers, including the work of Benno Pludra (Bettina Kümmer-

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ling-Meibauer, Tübingen & Jörg Meibauer, Mainz; Leonie Heinecke, Granada; Lisa Källström, Stockholm). The Estonian and Polish tradition of illustrated books was another point of focus, revealing how aesthetic strategies shape the cultural imaginaries of maritime childhoods.

ONE THEME recurred: the child in literature is rarely just a child. Rather, the figure often serves to articulate broader social desires and anxieties, offering a lens through which national, ecological, and historical tensions can be narrated – sometimes refracted, sometimes intensified. This rhetorical approach, grounded in an understanding of communication as situated and meaning-making, gave the conference its conceptual coherence. The

child was not reduced to a demographic figure or recipient, but understood as a powerful signifier across genres and media.

A selection of the contributions will appear in the forthcoming anthology *Shifting Tides: Narrating the Child and the Baltic Sea* (working title), which seeks to further explore how ideas of childhood and sea are entangled in narratives of cultural memory, belonging, and loss. In doing so, the volume aims to push back against the habitual marginalization of childhood as a soft or private domain, and to insist instead on its analytical relevance within the study of the Baltic region.

THE CONFERENCE, generously supported by CBEES, marked the second scholarly gathering of The Graphic World of Children network. If the Baltic Sea is often imagined as a border, this initiative proposes it instead as a shared – if contested – cultural space, where stories of childhood, loss, resilience, and imagination continue to cross and recross the lines we draw on maps. ❌

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