



CHAPTER 9

A Plea for Motherhood: Mothering and Writing in Contemporary Norwegian Literature

Christine Hamm

While mothers and motherhood have been thematized in Norwegian literature since the nineteenth century, mothering emerged as a dominant

This publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 952366, and from the Centre for Gender Research and the Department of Literature at Uppsala University.

C. Hamm (✉)
Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies, University of Bergen,
Bergen, Norway
e-mail: christine.hamm@uib.no

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H. Wahlström Henriksson et al. (eds.), *Narratives of Motherhood and Mothering in Fiction and Life Writing*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17211-3_9

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theme just after the turn of the last century.¹ In 2018, four well-established authors were among those who published novels with mothers as narrators and protagonists. Kjersti Annesdatter Skomsvold's novel *Barnet* [The child, 2018]² gives voice to a woman who has just given birth to her second child. The narrator describes the life-changing experience of giving birth and taking care of another human being, and she explores how she ended up having children at this point in her life. Heidi Furre published *Dyret* [The animal, 2018], a novel about a young woman who gets pregnant, gives birth and learns to take care of her baby in the first weeks of its life. In *Rase* [Rage, 2018], Monica Isakstuen explores a young writer's effort to deal with her situation as a mother to three small children. She finds herself becoming angry in a way she has never experienced before. Inger Bråtveit's novel *Dette er også vatn* [This is also water, 2018] tells the story of a woman who is forced into the position of a single mother of three children after her husband falls ill. She is also a writer who needs time for herself. Earlier, she had been a passionate swimmer, and she here compares both mothering and writing to moving long distances through water.³

Why did Skomsvold, Furre, Isakstuen and Bråtveit all choose to write texts about mothering in 2018? In the following sections, I will show that the decision to mother is the major issue for the narrators in all four

¹In the first ten years of the twenty-first century, Norwegian critics nevertheless ignored the subject of mothering in literature. I have earlier commented on the reception of novels dealing with motherhood that had appeared right after the millennium shift, such as Trude Marstein's *Plutselig høre noen åpne en dør* [Suddenly hearing someone open a door, 2000] and Vigdis Hjorth's *Hva er det med mor* [What is happening with mother, 2000]. I argued that literary critics at that time avoided reading those novels as texts about mothering, since they obviously thought that would lessen the novels' aesthetic value (Hamm 2013). The situation has now changed, and critics seem no longer to have problems with motherhood as a subject.

²All translations of Norwegian titles and texts in this chapter are my own.

³All four authors had written several acclaimed novels by 2018, and most of them had won prizes. Skomsvold was given the Tarjei Vesaas prize for new writers and shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2009, for her first novel *Jo forttere jeg går, jo mindre er jeg* [The faster I walk, the smaller I am]. Isakstuen's breakthrough novel *Vær snill med dyrene* [Be kind to the animals, 2016] was awarded with the prestigious Bragepris [Brage Prize] for literature in Norway. Bråtveit's *Siss og Unn* in 2008 gained her a nomination for the Kritikerprisen [The Critics' Prize]. She also was given the Nynorsk prize for literature and won a Bjørnson grant.

novels. I interpret the effort of the narrators to accept—and even defend—the decision they have made to be mothers in connection with the setting of the novels: contemporary Norway. This setting means that the narrators live in a country where women are strongly encouraged to have professional careers and where educated writers are familiar with the dangers of patriarchal ideology and its premise that all women would want to mother. To be a mother can to some women with professional careers even feel as a betrayal of feminist politics in a country with the declared wish to promote gender equality on all fields. The choice to become a mother in 2018, therefore, seems to demand an explanation, even a defense.

My argument is that the four Norwegian novels can be read as what I call “pleas for motherhood”—pleas that the narrators perform in order to understand and accept themselves. Since the 1970s, the Norwegian government has encouraged both women and men to be employed, and a major effort has been made to secure enough daycare-places for children.⁴ In 2016, Norway became the first country to have a “Gender Equality Ombud,” something that reflects the country’s long-lasting and outspoken effort to guarantee the same rights for women and men. A secure relation to the working sphere is crucial for receiving all benefits in the welfare-state, including a total of 48 weeks of paid leave from work for either of the parents when they have a child.⁵ In this way, the state promotes the idea that having a professional career and secure employment is the first task for a woman to achieve, while motherhood is still taken for granted.

I read the novels as a reaction to the place motherhood has in the Norwegian state-supported thinking about gender equality. My analysis reveals the narratives in the novels of the four writers as well-designed defenses against something the protagonists seem to feel accused of. This “something” is their own lack of support of earlier feminist positions, as

⁴Norway’s newest act relating to equality and prohibition against discrimination from 2018 (“Lov om likestilling og forbud mot diskriminering”) ensures that female employees receive the same treatment, work security, income and status as men. Further, the act is meant to prevent discrimination based on ethnicity, national origin, descent, skin color, language, religion or belief. [Lov om likestilling og forbud mot diskriminering \(likestillings- og diskrimineringsloven\) - Lovdata](#) (accessed March 25, 2022).

⁵Fifteen weeks must be taken by the father, which is regulated by the “Lov om folketrygd, part V. Lov om folketrygd (folketrygdloven) - II. Foreldrepenger - Lovdata (accessed March 25, 2022)

represented in their careers as successful writers. Hence, the theme of writing plays an important role in the novels; in the analysis I shall clarify how the novels deal with tensions and links between mothering and writing.

THE CHOICE OF GENRE: NOVELS OR MOTHERHOOD MEMOIRS?

I argue that the four authors share the project of exploring Norwegian women's felt need to defend their choice to become mothers. Further, I will emphasize that they chose to write novels, meaning complex and aesthetically refined works of art. The choice of genre can be explained by the complexity of the issue of motherhood and its relation both to feminism and to patriarchal ideology. The question of genre became relevant already when the novels first appeared. In an article in *Klassekampen's* book magazine on February 24 the same year, literary critic Silje Bekeng-Flemmen wondered why there were so few novels on mothering on the market. When looking for books dealing with the subject during her own pregnancy, she found that there was a vast amount of self-help material and non-fiction books on pregnancy and mothering in Norwegian bookstores, but, she claimed, she could not find "serious fiction" on the subject (Bekeng-Flemmen 2018). When this kind of literature appeared later that year, the authors of the novels, who all recently had undergone pregnancy and childbirth, were accordingly asked if they had experienced the same need for such literature as Bekeng-Flemmen.

As it turned out, the four authors differed in their answers. In an interview with journalist and book reviewer Astrid Hygen Meyer on July 23, Heidi Furre said, as the mother of a newborn, she went "to find a sort of confirmation in literature" ("for å finne en slags bekreftelse i litteraturen"). She said she was looking for a text that could grasp the difficulty and complexity of the experience she went through. The same journalist also interviewed Kjersti Annesdatter Skomsvold, who however explained that she did not look for books by others, but that she herself strongly felt the need to write about the experience of being a mother, and wanted to explore her anxiety and her fears (Meyer 2018).

The fact that all four authors themselves were mothers when they started writing about mothering aroused suspicions that they were using writing to "make sense of motherhood," a formulation used by sociologist Tina Miller in her classical narrative approach (Miller 2005). In the eyes of Norwegian critics, it seems, this would have lessened the aesthetic quality of the books and would have made their status as novels problematic. Norwegian critics like Frode Helmich Pedersen classified the four books

accordingly,⁶ claiming in a comment in *Dagbladet* on August 7, 2018, that “novels” about mothering are made possible by the ongoing tendency in Scandinavian literature to write “virkelighetslitteratur” [reality literature] (Pedersen 2018).⁷ As he saw it, this trend encourages white middle-class writers to deal with private problems in public. Without having studied the specific texts any closer, Pedersen seemed to imagine that novels about mothering that appeared in the year 2018 were what researchers elsewhere called “momoirs,” that is, motherhood memoirs.⁸

The Norwegian texts would then fit well with the global tendency of exploring motherhood through autobiographical narratives (two of the best-known examples in English-language literature are Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* [2001] and Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* [2018]).⁹ Seen in this way, the novels would belong to a genre that has in the past provoked ambivalent reactions, as Joanne Frye and Andrea O’Reilly described in their respective articles in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts* (2010). According to O’Reilly, motherhood memoirs as well as “Mommy-Lit” are mainly characterized by a writer’s effort to cope with the challenging situation of being a mother as honestly as possible (2010, 203). While one should welcome the attention devoted to motherhood, mothering and the related challenges (Frye 2010, 187), the problem is that overarching ideologies governing images of mothers in most cases are reproduced; for instance, the ideology that a mother should be totally devoted to her children and should think more about her children than her work, and that men and women in principle develop different attitudes toward their children. This, at least, is how Ivana Brown (2006) and Andrea O’Reilly (2010) concluded their investigations into the genre. They argued that motherhood memoirs are part of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels called the “New Momism” (2004), an ideology which includes

⁶Another critic was Endre Ruset, who claimed that the four Norwegian novels were too much alike and therefore aesthetically weak (Ruset 2018).

⁷“Virkelighetslitteratur” is a label for novels written after the year 2000 in which the writers and their close friends and family are among the protagonists. The most famous examples of this trend in Norwegian literature are Karl Ove Knausgård’s series of six novels *Min kamp* [My struggle, 2009–2011] and Vigdis Hjorth’s novel *Arr og miljø* [translated into *Wills and Testaments*, 2016].

⁸The genre is also called the “Mommy memoir” (Brown 2006) or the “Maternal memoir” (Frye 2010).

⁹Andrea O’Reilly is among those who have commented on this global trend (O’Reilly 2010). See also Fahlgren and Williams, Chap. 8 this volume.

the idea that career women can freely choose to give up their paid work and “return” to their homes and feel like better humans for making that shift.

However, the novels written by Skomsvold, Furre, Isakstuen and Bråtveit in 2018 are in fact not motherhood memoirs. In the following, my point of departure is the label “novels” attached to the texts. My analysis pays attention to the aesthetic form the writers have chosen in each case, and asks what the genre of the novel offers to the authors’ projects of bringing out the situation of Norwegian mothers. It will become clear that *Barnet* and *Dyret* develop the idea that motherhood lets a woman become engaged with other human beings, and that for the protagonists writing a novel is, it seems, part of this engagement. *Rase* and *Dette er også vatn*, on the other hand, stress the fact that becoming a mother demands that a woman accept the circumstances and let go of control. Writing an aesthetic text enables the narrators of these two novels to accept mothering as meaningful in the 2010s.¹⁰ Because the narrators in the novels do not take the meaning and the importance of motherhood for granted, the novels do not support what Sharon Hays has called “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996) nor the illusion of a free choice for women that is typical for “New Momism” (O’Reilly 2010). Instead, deprived of a free life with enough time for both work and relationships with other adults, the women in the novels somehow seem to feel the need to defend the choice to become a mother in the first place. When describing their experience of mothering, they try to formulate their reasons for choosing childbirth and mothering despite their awareness of patriarchy and its motherhood discourse. The genre of the novel enables the authors to perform serious investigations into motherhood, both as a part of patriarchal ideology and as an issue for feminist critique fueled by individualism.

MOTHERING AND WRITING AS OPENING TO THE WORLD: SKOMSVOLD’S *BARNET* AND FURRE’S *DYRET*

At a first glance, Kjersti Annesdatter Skomsvold’s novel *Barnet* comes very close to a piece of life-writing. The text has no chapters and contains a seemingly arbitrarily collected heap of fragments. A closer look reveals that the text is divided into three parts by two blank pages. The first part

¹⁰The challenge for women to relate to the question of motherhood and the lack of a convincing discourse on the subject is well addressed in Patrice DiQuinzio’s *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (1999).

contains the thoughts and reflections of the mother/writer-narrator during the second week of her baby daughter's life (her second child), while the second part includes reflections when the daughter is about six weeks. The third part starts with the mother telling her daughter that she is now three months old. While one first gets the impression that the mother is talking directly to her second child while staying at home with her, it turns out that she is writing down her thoughts. The text is revealed as a mask of a direct and spontaneous conversation.

Skomsvold's narrator, a professional writer, asks herself what status writing has in her life after she gives birth. She knows very well that, at some earlier point, she had thought to not be part of this world, that she thought she was only living in her texts. The narrator compares herself to the artist Agnes Martin, who after a while did not want to live with her lovers or her children. Skomsvold found she had a similar project: "I also wanted to write with my back against the world, I was afraid to do something else, and I could have chosen like she did, I could have asked God to not get pregnant. But then I just have this one life."¹¹ As becomes clear in *Barnet*, the narrator is conscious about the choice of motherhood as excluding the possibility of living "with her back against the world" (as did Martin). Mothering is seen as being opposed to writing, as something that would pull the writer into this world.

After the birth of her first child, the narrator had thought she might find a new language. She was expecting that something refreshingly new would start. However, it turned out that she could not write about the experience of having given birth at all. Rather, she relates how she went through a crisis that stole her words from her (Skomsvold 2018, 26). Having given birth to her second child, she therefore forces herself to write everything down; she needs to regain the words she lost two years ago.

She interprets her need to write as something that enables her to keep control over herself, something that paradoxically includes losing the very same control: "When I write, I decide who I am, but even when writing it is first when I give up protecting myself that I can recognize myself, when I get rid of the thought of what the whole thing should be, become, and

¹¹ Jeg ville også skrive med ryggen mot verden, jeg var livredd for å gjøre noe annet, og jeg kunne ha valgt som henne, jeg kunne ha bedt til Gud om å få slippe. Men så har jeg bare dette ene livet (Skomsvold 2018, 16).

it is just like that with love, too.”¹² It seems as if the narrator needs the written text to find out who she is. She needs to reconcile her writing, her words and her motherhood.

Reconciliation includes her recounting why she became a mother in the first place, thereby finding words for that experience. After scribbling down how she met her husband, how long it took for her to let him be part of her life, she suddenly finds that the idea of having a child has entered her mind. Inspired by her husband’s wish for a child, she visualizes her own childhood and recognizes that she is afraid of ending up alone, without a family: “I loved my family, and now I saw myself sitting in the kitchen alone, for the rest of my life. That was impossible. That should not happen. We need to have children, I said.”¹³ As becomes clear, writing the novel enables the mother-narrator to understand herself and her decisions. She finds an explanation for why she, a writer who had so much time for herself and who thought she did not need what she calls “the world” (prosaic everyday routines and other people to care for and relate to), suddenly longed for it, wanted to be part of it, as if she was about to lose it.

The importance of finding a language for making sense of the experience of motherhood is also stressed in Heidi Furre’s novel *Dyret*. Its structure—the numbering of the chapters—mirrors the time from the moment a young woman in her late twenties gets pregnant, to the point when her daughter is six weeks old (chapters 40 + 6, explained below). However, much like Skomsvold’s book, the text at first looks more like a piece of life-writing than a novel. It takes some time for the reader to become aware of the meaning of the structure; in fact, this realization happens only when she learns about the narrator’s pregnancy and her need to keep track of the development of the fetus from week to week with the help of an app. When the narrator gives birth and the chapters start afresh from 0 and onward, it is finally confirmed that the chapters follow the age of the child, first in the womb, then outside of it.

The short, episodically told chapters tell us that the narrator first lives together with her friend Henny. The women are close friends, but when the narrator becomes pregnant and subsequently a mother, they become

¹²I skrivningen bestemmer jeg selv hvem jeg er, men også der er det først idet jeg gir opp beskyttelsen, at det blir noe jeg kan kjenne meg igjen i, når jeg kommer løs fra tanken om hva det skal være, bli, og sånn er det med kjærligheten også (Skomsvold 2018, 44).

¹³Jeg elsket familien min, og nå så jeg for meg at jeg skulle sitte alene ved kjøkkenbordet resten av livet. Det gikk jo ikke. Det kunne ikke skje. Vi må få barn, sa jeg (Skomsvold 2018, 78).

estranged from each other. The last six chapters show the narrator in interaction with her little baby. The novel concludes with an epilogue, in which the narrator reflects on the famous picture of the drowned boy on the beach (Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old refugee from Syria). The narrator tells us that she does not know if having a child is important, but she knows that children matter and that adults are responsible for them: “I don’t know if it is important to have children, to be a mother or a father. I only know that all children are our children.”¹⁴ Thus, at the end of the text, the focus has changed from the perspective of the mother and the narrator’s effort to find out about the relationship to her own child, to the perspective of children, and that they principally need to be taken care of.

Furre’s novel concentrates less than Skomsvold’s on the experience of raising a child; rather, it describes the process of pregnancy and, consequently, having to change one’s life. As I see it, Furre’s text explores how this change comes about, and how it somehow forms a parallel with what happens to the body (childbirth after pregnancy includes a splitting of the self from one into two). The narrator wants to find her own way, becoming aware of her own, separated body. She first clings to the idea that she will find out what to do somehow instinctively, in the same way that animals do (therefore the novel’s title). At one time she feels that nature takes over her life: “Nature takes over, and me, I have walked around my whole life thinking of my body as a kind of tool, not the other way around.”¹⁵ The feeling of being no longer in control of her body, but being controlled by it, begins with the experience of nausea, as the narrator fights her way onto the bus to her job in a canteen, where she works with preparing food for about 100 persons. Nature has her also walking around with a big belly, something that needs to be hidden until she gets a permanent job offer. She manages to get one, cynically using the fact that her boss sends her sex texts for her own benefit. She threatens to send them to his wife, with the result that he offers her a permanent contract.

With the child developing in her body, the narrator’s perspective on her life changes. Having been a student without a clear goal, a woman flirting

¹⁴ Eg veit ikkje om det er viktig å ha eit barn, å vere ei mamma eller ein pappa. Eg veit berre at alle barn er våre (Furre 2018, 169).

¹⁵ Naturen har innhenta meg, her har eg gått rundt heile livet og trudd at kroppen er mitt verktøy, ikkje motsett (Furre, 2018, 26).

with new men every evening and dancing with Henny, even tolerating harassment, she now enters a permanent relationship, finds an apartment for the new family and buys books about mothering and child rearing. Having come out of the experience of being controlled by the fetus and just being part of nature, she now controls her life with language and by recounting her life in an aesthetic text. She has turned into a responsible adult, having eyes not only for her own daughter Lux but also for all children. The plea for motherhood in this novel, then, is that when becoming a mother, a woman is forced to be a human being who has eyes for the life of others.

MOTHERING AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE EVERYDAY
IN ISAKSTUEN'S *RÅSE* AND BRÅTVEIT'S *DETTE ER OGSÅ VATN*

The narrator in Monica Isakstuen's novel *Råse* [Rage] is a writer who lives in a big house with a husband who is supporting her in the effort to combine children and work. She has a daughter from a former relationship and young twin sons. As soon becomes clear, the narrator suffers because she is frustrated with the situation in the family. Each day, she ends up screaming at the children and she is afraid of how far she might go in the end: "I am afraid of my hands."¹⁶ The narrator tries to figure out how she got into the situation of having three children, and she asks herself, "How does one know when something starts? Are there clear moments that cut time into parts, one part before and one after?"¹⁷ The narrator wonders who she is, because she cannot recognize herself anymore: "What kind of human being am I, really?"¹⁸ She has an urgent need to confirm her identity, as if the situation of being a mother has forced her to accept someone else instead of herself.

As the narrator comes to learn, living with three children means having no time at all for herself or for discussing things with the man she loves. Everything is absorbed by daily duties. The narrator gets into a crisis and finally seeks the help of a therapist, who asks her to visualize scenes of her life. This explains why the novel is a collection of fragments, containing

¹⁶ Jeg er redd for hendene mine (Isakstuen 2018, 21).

¹⁷ Men hvordan vet man at noe begynner? Finnes slike klare øyeblikk som skjærer gjennom tiden og deler den i to, et før og et etter? (Isakstuen 2018, 16).

¹⁸ Hva slags menneske er jeg egentlig? (Isakstuen 2018, 27).

scenes from her life with the children. Before she started therapy, the therapist had explained his method to her:

Regarding the sessions lasting one hour, or sixty minutes, to be precise, they mainly meant that the patient closed her eyes and opened herself up for the thoughts to come, dreams or pieces of daily life, as he called it, loose fragments of thoughts or whatever drifted by, he said one could imagine being on a train and seeing how the landscape raced by fast [*raste*], and that one then should tell someone else what one observed on the trip.¹⁹

The fact that the therapist uses the verb “rase” (to race by) when describing what happens to the visualized scenes, and thus stresses the combination with the word for rage (the title of the book), is of course no coincidence. The reader is meant to see that the way the novel is told, with the fragments, is like the method used in the therapy of the person telling the story (= the narrator). However, the narrator in that way not only comments on what she sees (= she renders not only what has really happened), but what she thinks might possibly happen. In addition, she reflects on what she tells, as does the therapist in the novel. The therapist suggests, for instance, that one reason for the anger the narrator feels might be her fear of having to find out that she regrets her choice. He thinks she is afraid of finding out that she did not want the children after all.

The novel ends when the narrator sees that her children will develop and have a life independent of her. The last scene shows the narrator and her children at a performance, and one of her sons volunteers to get on stage and sing a song before the crowd. The narrator is astonished that he has the courage to do this; it is as if she only now gets to know him. She understands that she, wrongly, had thought of her children as things she owns, as things she would be fully responsible for. It is as if she only now recognizes that she does not own her son the way she thought she did, but that he is a separate human being. This understanding helps her to see that

¹⁹Når det gjaldt timene, klokketimer, presiserte han, gikk de stort sett ut på at den som ble behandlet lukket øynene og ga plass til det som kom, drømmer eller hverdagsrester, som han kalte det, løse tankefragmenter eller hva nå enn som fløt forbi, han sa man kunne forestille seg at man satt i en togkupe og at man, mens landskapet raste i vei på utsiden, skulle forsøke å formidle hva man så på togturen sin, til den man snakket med (Isakstuen 2018, 49).

what she does as a mother is not total destiny: “My words and hands are not the only things that form him. He is his own, he is free.”²⁰

Isakstuen lets the narrator find out that mothering is important, but not everything. It is in fact rather dangerous if a woman demands too much of herself as a mother. Instead of subscribing to what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have called the ideology of intensive mothering (2004, 6), the narrator on the contrary recognizes that she should accept that she can only reach so far. Telling the story, consciously using the device of ordering the sequences like therapeutic sessions, helps the narrator to work through her fear concerning mothering, and to realize that an explanation for mothering might not be so important. Rather, it is important to accept being a mother. The plea for motherhood in the novel turns out to be a plea for a kind of “ordinary” motherhood that differs from what Patrice DiQuinzio has called essential motherhood.²¹ Isakstuen asks for the right to be a mother who gives just enough attention and care to her children; she claims the right to enjoy an everyday life with her husband, her friends and her work, as well as with her children.

Inger Bråtveit’s novel *Dette er også vatn* [This is also water] is at first sight only loosely connected to the question of motherhood. However, a closer look reveals the book to be an exploration of the narrator’s identity. The need for this exploration is caused by the desperate situation that she suddenly finds herself in, as a writer and a single mother with three children. Having a daughter by herself, who is one and a half years old at the beginning of the novel and five and a half at the end, she also takes care of two older stepsons who need her attention because her husband has fallen ill with Lyme disease. The consequence of his illness is that she has no time to write, and when the text jumps from one subject to another, it gives the impression of the author-protagonist losing control.

One of the main themes, as the title indicates, is water, and especially saltwater, which is found, for instance, in the fjord outside the house

²⁰ Mine ord og mine hender er ikke det eneste som former ham. Han er sin egen, han er fri (Isakstuen 2018, 223).

²¹ In *The Impossibility of Motherhood*, DiQuinzio explains “essential motherhood” in this way: “Essential motherhood is an ideological formation that specifies the essential attributes of motherhood and articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood. [...] Essential motherhood construes women’s motherhood as natural and inevitable. It requires women’s exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children based on women’s psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the need for others, and self-sacrifice” (DiQuinzio 1999, xiii).

where the narrator grew up. The water that surrounds the narrator is associated both with her mother (“Vatnet er ei mor” [the water is a mother], *Dette er også vatn*, p. 15), or is even seen as being an alternative mother, surrounding the body of the narrator when she swims and dives, and in way gives birth to herself: “The sea is like velvet. The sea says now swim as far as you can.”²² But the water is also associated with mothering, not least at the moment when the narrator is swimming against the stream and sees it as a metaphor for just hanging in there, for not giving up on getting everything done, on tolerating pain due to pregnancy and mothering, day by day: “I swim through pelvic pain, mastitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, heart rates of your and my children, and I fall and swim like hell.”²³ To keep on swimming in saltwater, against the forces of the wind and the cold, is like looking after children every day, preparing food, changing diapers and cleaning the house. One hopes one makes it.

At the same time, swimming is also associated with writing. Writing demands, as swimming does, that the writer opens herself up to the experience, and that she just goes on, even if she finds things she does not like: “I think that swimming is like writing and reading.”²⁴ To write is to let scenes pass by, and the novel is built up accordingly of pieces of memory (of her father dying of cancer, of her sister being better than her at skiing and swimming, of her uncle and her grandmother working in the countryside when she was a child), of reflections on literature and historical events (stories by Tove Jansson, the Kursk submarine tragedy, the war in Serbia and Croatia), and of scenes from her present life (her journey to Sweden, her experience as a teacher). It is as if the reader is forced to dive through the text as the narrator does through her memories.

Because the narrator swims through her own thoughts, reflecting that action by associative writing, she finally manages to see that this is the meaning of mothering, like the meaning of swimming, and that there it is no other way to go on. She writes: “So what should one do? When one thinks and hopes one is right, but is wrong for a long time? One has to write. Administrate the writing through time and space. To swim into love, through hate, into ecstasy. I take charge and kick off, fall through

²² Havet var som fløyel. Havet sa at no sym du så langt du kan (Bråtveit 2018, 18).

²³ Eg sym gjennom bekkenløsning, brystbetennelsar, karpaltunnelsyndrom, hjartefrekvensane til dine og mine barn, og eg fell og sym som berre faen (Bråtveit 2018, 33).

²⁴ Eg tenkjer at å symja liknar på å skriva og lesa (Bråtveit 2018, 31).

blue-green water, fold out and pull together.”²⁵ Comparing mothering to swimming, however, poses the question of what happens when winter comes, and everything freezes to ice. The narrator asks: “What happens when one does not find a language to use? When language freezes over somehow, due to imagined responsibility, but when what we try to say is there, inside us, just beneath the ice?”²⁶

Luckily, winter will turn into spring and summer. In the fifth and final part (the book follows the age of the daughter), the narrator and her family are on a holiday in a town close to Zagreb. It is very hot, and she is teaching her now five-year-old daughter how to swim. She is happy she can teach her daughter how to keep herself floating in the water. The narrator registers that the waves are coming and going: “The waves are coming in, and then pull out again slowly. It is as if the waves try to escape the sea.”²⁷ In the same way that the waves come and go, motherhood has changed and is still the same. “You are my best friend, says my daughter, while I am thinking no, and answer yes.”²⁸ This passage seems to tell us that the daughter is just fine, as fine as one can be. The narrator concludes by telling the readers that motherhood is something beautiful but that it needs to be performed each day in small pieces, just like writing. In establishing her plea for motherhood, she now thinks that one can find a kind of text about mothering in the sea, that the sea takes care of bits of memories and pictures and sounds that one can pick up from the bottom and find a place for in the daylight.

THE PLEA FOR MOTHERHOOD IN NORWAY

Skomsvold shows with her novel how writing first excludes motherhood, then how motherhood excludes writing. In the end, however, it is writing that makes it acceptable for the protagonist to be a mother. At the same time, finding words for her mothering also means sharing her experience

²⁵ Så kva skal ein gjera? Om ein trur og håpar å ha rett, men i lange tider tek feil? Ein får skriva. Forvalta skrivinga gjennom tida og avstanden. Symja inn i kjærleiken, gjennom hatet mot ekstasen. Eg tek sats og fråspark, fell gjennom blågrønt vatn, faldar meg ut og klemmer meg samman (Bråtveit 2018, 33).

²⁶ For kva hender når med ikkje har språket å tala med? Når språket er frose fast av ulike årsaker og innbilt ansvar, men det me vil seia, finst der, i oss, like under isen? (Bråtveit 2018, 48).

²⁷ Bølgjene slår inn, for så å dra seg sakte ut og attende att. Det er som om bølgjene prøver å rømme frå havet (Bråtveit 2018, 161).

²⁸ Du er min beste venn, seier dotter mi, medan eg tenkjer nei og seier ja (Bråtveit 2018, 161).

with others. In Furre's novel, the narrator's recounting of having a child, even if it has not been planned, brings out how the experience of pregnancy turns a self-centered and lazy person into someone who takes responsibility not only for her own life and her child's life but also for others. Furre's narrator understands that she went through the illusion of being only a body, of being reduced to nature, before she finds her human voice and takes on responsibilities. In Isakstuen's novel, the narrator tries to deal with fears of harming her children. She is frustrated and angry, realizing that she is not living up to the ideal of a perfect mother. The collection of fragments containing episodes of her life is a kind of therapy, since it enables her to understand what is going on. She finds out that she does not own her children, that they also develop outside her influence. Similarly, the mother-narrator in Bråtveit's text needs the collection of memories, reflections and small essayistic pieces to find out who she is as a mother, daughter, niece and sister. She realizes that she must keep on swimming through her associations, through her thoughts, she must keep on struggling as mother as well as writer. Although the narrator never finds out why she mothers, the effect is nevertheless that the process is experienced as meaningful.

My analysis of the novels has shown how the four texts at first look very much like life-writing in that they (in part) come close to motherhood memoirs. Giving voice to narrators who are mothers simultaneously with giving interviews on their own situations as mothers, the Norwegian authors invite readers to approach the texts as pieces of autobiographical writing. However, a closer look shows that the texts are aesthetically refined, they use symbols and metaphors, and they are consciously structured. The authors reveal themselves as experienced writers of fiction who are using the genre of the novel to bring out challenges for mothers: some of the women in the novels must change, become someone different, and some of them must accept themselves and their situation.

Skomsvold, Furre, Isakstuen and Bråtveit let their narrators reflect on how they ended up having children, and on the fact that they chose motherhood. Precisely because they do not accept motherhood as something every woman necessarily must experience, they feel the need to account for why a woman nevertheless would want to become a mother and go on mothering. Writing helps the narrators understand their motivations for becoming mothers, while for them, writing in itself becomes part of being a mother.

Like in the US, Canada and the UK, expressions of New Momism are certainly also to be found in Norway. Especially in women's magazines

and blogs, Norwegian women publish on mothering, and many women stress that motherhood was their free choice. However, there are also strong feminist voices criticizing this kind of ideology. As early as 2004, the feminist literary critic Toril Moi reacted harshly in her column in the newspaper *Morgenbladet* to what she saw as a “harping on motherhood” (Moi 2004). She claimed that the many pictures of mothers and their children in Norwegian papers would make it hard for women to see motherhood as something else than destiny, and that motherhood therefore could not be seen as something women were able to choose freely. Moi thought Norwegian women talking about their free choices were suffering from false consciousness and she appealed to women to fight against this thinking (Gro 2012).

When Moi wrote her critique, most Norwegian women in fact became mothers at some point. Some years later, however, the situation had changed. While Norwegian women on average gave birth to 1.98 children in the year 2009, they only had 1.62 children in 2017. The fall in the fertility rate alarmed the Prime Minister Erna Solberg (conservative party) so much that, in her traditional New Year’s speech on January 1, 2019, she asked Norwegian women to choose motherhood. She no longer took it for granted that women would want to be mothers. But her speech was harshly criticized in the Norwegian press.²⁹ In a country that is proud of having gender equality as one of its core values, and of having most women in paid work, few Norwegians tolerate it when women are asked to become mothers. To appeal for motherhood is just not acceptable. My suggestion would therefore be that the plea for motherhood, which I have detected in the four novels discussed here, results from the narrators’ (and, perhaps, the authors’) felt need to defend motherhood against feminist attacks on motherhood and their felt need to problematize motherhood as taken for granted in contemporary Norway. The authors let their narrators investigate their own specific cases, why they have decided to become mothers, since they feel that convincing arguments for motherhood are no longer available in public discourse and on a general level.

While many previous Norwegian novels about mothers and motherhood have been devoted to debunking patriarchal ideals of motherhood, novels by women writers today also show a struggle with feminist

²⁹For reactions to the speech, see, for instance, Benedicte Sørum’s article in *Kilden*, January 29, 2019. <https://kjonnsforskning.no/nb/2019/01/be-kvinner-fode-flere-barn-bryter-med-norsk-familiepolitikk-mener-forskere>

expectations, as well as with individualistic ideologies. By using the genre of the novel, the writers discussed in this chapter bring out efforts to advocate motherhood in different ways. The texts are stressing the protagonists' ethical insights and artistic growth, while also insisting on the importance of acknowledging mothering as just another part of life.

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