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Quality picturebooks and their role in Finnish Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to define what a “quality picturebook” is in the context of Finnish Early Childhood Education, and identify how quality picturebooks can support activities and goals based in the Finnish National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education.

In order to find a definition for “quality picturebooks,” three nominees for the Arvid Lydecken award, which are nationally acknowledged quality picturebooks: *Gorilla* (2020) by Miikka Pörsti and Anne Vasko, *Kaupunki Kukaties* (2021) by Pia Krutsin, and *Suomen Ämminkäiset Värivina: Otusbongaajan Opas* (2021) by Tuomas Kärkkäinen, will be examined by using criteria proposed by Bland (2016), Mallet (2020), and the Finnish National Curriculum. Each book was found to apply to specific topics: socioemotional development, language, and environmental education. Literature relating to the topics and the use of picturebooks in ECE is reviewed and then contextualized within the Finnish National Curriculum.

The overall findings of the literature review are that the National Curriculum is flexible enough to accommodate picturebooks of varying topics and genres, and that the approximate definition of quality picturebooks are that they have accessible language and content, are engaging and relatable to children, encourage new perspectives, and lend themselves organically to additional activities and discussions.

Key words: Children’s literature, picturebooks, diversity in ECE, Finnish National Curriculum for ECE

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1 Introduction

Picturebooks are a commonplace tool found in every Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting. Picturebooks, when read aloud, utilize visual and verbal components in order to tell a story and introduce or interrogate beliefs and concepts. Picturebooks have been used for a wide range of purposes, including the promotion of prosocial behaviors in toddlers (Brazzelli, Grazzani & Pepe, 2021), helping young children connect to ocean conservation (Burke & Crocker, 2020), discussing workers and animals' rights (Youngs & Lloyd, 2020), and countless other possibilities. It is up to individual teachers and ECE administrators to sort through these myriad learning opportunities and choose books for their groups and ECE settings. Naturally, ECE educators would prioritize quality picturebooks over low-quality picturebooks, but each educator has a different definition of "quality."

This thesis will explore both the concept and definition of 'quality picturebooks,' and examine their usefulness in the context of the Finnish National Early Childhood Curriculum. Currently, there is not a universally acknowledged definition of 'quality books,' so for the purposes of this thesis, three nominees for the Arvid Lydecken children's literature prize will be analyzed alongside the National Curriculum: *Gorilla* by Miikka Pörsti and Anne Vasko, *Kaupunki Kukaties* by Pia Krutsin, and *Suomen Ämminkäiset Väriskuvina: Otusbongaajan Opas* by Tuomas Kärkkäinen. The Finnish national ECE curriculum offers this guideline for texts in ECE, in the section 'Rich world of languages': "Rich and diverse texts are used in early childhood education and care. Children are familiar with versatile children's literature" (NCC, 2018, p.46). The adjective 'Rich,' as used in the national curriculum, means dense and filled with varied vocabulary, syntax, and other linguistic forms. This is a flexible guideline; the national curriculum clearly prioritizes variety and diversity but gives teachers the freedom to choose the picturebooks that suit their teaching style and children in their groups. However,

diversity and variety may mean different things to different teachers, so further definition would contribute to a more universally understood standard for literature.

Bland addresses the importance of diverse and meaningful narratives in her discussion of quality picturebooks thusly: “Narratives are an important pedagogic medium, they metonymically represent cultures of the language learner’s own world or cultures unfamiliar to the learner. They act as mirrors as well as windows—as the imagined world reflects a new light onto the familiar” (Bland, 2016, p.44). In quality picturebooks, “[...] the eloquent pictures [...] help create an archive of mental images in our memory—increasing retention of the language, the characters celebrated in these books, and their message” (Bland, 2016, p.61). Bland poses several questions to ask when choosing picturebooks in order to “[...] reflect diversity and practise intercultural understanding,” (2016, p.45), which are:

1. Is the language and content accessible for the target group?
 2. Do the pictures add meaning to the story?
 3. Does the characterisation in words and illustrations encourage empathy?
 4. Is the story compelling, e.g. exciting, humorous, surprising or moving?
 5. Can the children relate to the narrative –is the import of the story significant for them as individuals so that they will wish to revisit it?
 6. Is the representation of the world and of people accurate and respectful?
 7. Does the story encourage a questioning stance and genuine communication?
- (Bland 2016, p45).

She stresses the importance of picturebooks that accurately display diversity, saying that they “[...] can move even young readers towards flexibility of perspective” (Bland, 2016, p.45), one of the goals of the learning area *Cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression*, in which children learn about their and other worldviews and how to reflect on and understand different perspectives (NCC, 2022, p.22). Bland’s questions will be posed to each of the books in this thesis in order to evaluate their diversity. For the assessment of the overall base quality of picturebooks, the criteria from the book *Choosing and using fiction and non-fiction 3-11* by Margaret Mallet will be utilized: *design* (The book has a coherent structure and all of the elements work together in an engaging way), *combination of pictures and language*

(There is a strong narrative and a distinct authorial voice that holds attention.), and *originality* (There is a personal, recognizable style that offers new ways of seeing the world) (2020, p.27). As stated by Mallet, “Children need to be entertained, stimulated, surprised sometimes, intrigued and reassured.” (2020, p.27), which is done through the originality of a picturebook. The goal of using these criteria to analyze three Lydecken award nominated picturebooks is to understand the role of quality picturebooks in early childhood education, and the potential applications of picturebooks in everyday practice. There will be a review of the literature concerning the relevant subject areas for each book and an assessment of how the books correspond with the recommendations from the Finnish Core Curriculum.

2 Pedagogical Context

2.1 Arvid Lydecken Prize

The Arvid Lydecken prize is an annual award granted to a high-quality children's book in either Finnish or Swedish, and is funded by Kopisto, a joint copyright institution in Finland (Lukemo, 2024). The award's namesake was an influential poet and author in the first half of the 20th century, known for his writing for children and adolescents (Lukemo, 2024). A rotating committee of three people involved in Finnish literature, such as Finnish and special education teachers, authors, librarians, and journalists, receives submissions of Finnish children's books, chooses the nominees and then votes on the winner; the rationale for each nominee is published online (Lukemo, 2024). Thanks to the transparency of the Arvid Lydecken prize committee, one is able to identify the characteristics of the nominated books, and then apply said characteristics to those of quality books. The quality attributes of each nominee as stated by the award committee will be discussed in the sections for each book.

2.2 Finnish Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education

The Finnish Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) has a framework for pedagogical activity that consists of four factors intersecting upon the children in a group: children's interests and needs, the underlying values and conception of learning as presented in the early childhood setting, the learning areas of the core curriculum, and the transversal competencies. The values and culture of the ECE setting are largely dictated by the administration and all of the teachers as a group, and children's needs, desires, and perspectives are influenced by their upbringing and home environments. This means that the two factors early childhood educators can actually plan for are the learning areas and transversal competencies. The learning areas identify the main goals and content of ECE

activities (2016, p.44). The five learning areas are as follows: “Rich world of languages, Diverse forms of expression, Me and our community, Exploring and interacting with my environment, and I grow, move and develop” (2016, p.44). “Rich world of languages” covers linguistic skills (Language comprehension, speech production skills, language use, interaction and vocabulary), developing linguistic identities and language awareness (2016, p.44-45). “Diverse forms of expression” encompasses expression- musical, visual, verbal and physical expression through the arts and play (2016, p.46). “Me and our community” refers to the expansion of children’s worldviews and strengthening their understanding in the community they live in; it includes “ethical thinking, worldviews, the past, the present, and the future of the local community as well as the media,” (2016, p.48), as well as the development of ethical thinking and worldview and media education (2016, p.48-49). “Exploring and interacting with my environment” covers mathematical thinking and environmental and technology education (2016, p.49). “I grow, move and develop” involves physical development, food education and health and safety (2016, p.51).

A transversal competence “[...] is an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and will” (2016, p.25). The transversal competencies of the national core curriculum are collections of knowledge and skills that children can apply to their own lives (2016, p.25). The five transversal competencies are “thinking and learning; cultural competence, interaction and self-expression; taking care of oneself and managing daily life; multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology; and participation and involvement” (2016, p.25). “Thinking and learning” refers to the development of creative and critical thinking skills, exploring, questioning, problem-solving, and paying attention to their surrounding environment (2016, p.26). “Cultural competence” emphasizes social and interaction skills, understanding different perspectives, celebrating diversity, and understanding one’s own cultural background and respecting those of others. “Taking care of

oneself and managing daily life” covers independence and life skills; this includes personal hygiene, getting dressed, mealtimes, rest, and emotional regulation (2016, p.26-27).

“Multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology” cultivates multiliteracy, specifically the interpretation of different messages (written, spoken, digital, etc.) and familiarizing children with everyday technology and how to use it effectively (2016, p.27). “Participation and involvement” lays the foundation for a democratic society; it involves such activities as speaking in front of a group, voting, involvement, understanding shared rules, and further interaction skills (2016, p.27-28). Each book examined in this thesis has links to distinct learning areas, and the potential to contribute to several transversal competencies, which will be discussed in each book’s section.

3 Lydecken-Nominated Picturebooks

3.1 *Gorilla* and Emotions

Gorilla, written by Miikko Porsti and illustrated by Anne Vasko, was a 2022 nominee for the Arvid Lydecken prize. It is about a young boy named Eino, who literally falls apart whenever he experiences strong emotions. He is taunted by a gorilla that attends his day care, and he struggles to keep from falling apart emotionally. A new boy joins his day care with the same tendency to fall apart, and they quickly become best friends. Eino and his best friend learn how to regulate their emotions, and work together to get back at the gorilla, eventually finding common ground. *Gorilla*'s 2022 nomination for the Arvid Lydecken award was explained with the following rationale from Kirjasampo, the online literature service for Finnish libraries: "The multi-level book gives the child tools to process emotions and touches on important topics such as bullying and accepting differences" (Tulivirta, 2020). *Gorilla* was found to be exceptional because of its handling of common children's emotional and social problems, and its presentation of coping skills needed to overcome emotional and social difficulties in a constructive way, namely emotional regulation, friendship, and relating to others.

Gorilla relates to the learning area of "Diverse forms of expression," because it concerns expression, though it focuses on emotional expression and not specifically creative expression. Due to its theme of expressing emotions productively and in daily life, *Gorilla* fits neatly into the transversal competencies of cultural competence and managing daily life. This is not a precise intersection, which would make the planning and documentation tricky for a teacher seeking to include *Gorilla* in an activity. If the teacher is able to build an expressive activity, or an activity concerning interaction with the wider community (As seen in the learning area 'Me and my community'), around the book, the intersection will be more

precise and easier to explain within the planning paperwork. Cultural competence includes social skills like interaction, self-expression skills, and constructive problem solving (2016, p26), which are both found in *Gorilla*. The major transversal competence found in *Gorilla* is “Taking care of oneself and managing daily life”; managing emotions is a crucial life skill- if one cannot manage tough emotions, it would be nearly impossible to cope with a major crisis. In this transversal competency, “Children are helped in expressing and regulating their emotions. Children’s emotional skills improve as they practise perceiving, acknowledging and naming emotions” (2016, p27). In *Gorilla*, Eino ‘falls apart,’ in a non-judgemental depiction of emotional dysregulation and the inability to cope with surprises and strong emotions (Pörsti, 2020, p.1-2 & p.5-6, see Appendix 1a & 1b). His face is either blank or smiling, but his falling apart is dramatic and clearly a difficulty for both Eino and everyone around him. This vivid display could serve as a jumping off point for a small group discussion or circle time, in which a teacher could ask the children if they have ever ‘fallen apart’ during a difficult or strange situation. The image of Eino falling apart elicits empathy and identification with the reader but is also light-hearted in its visual impact. The pictures are an essential part of the narrative, as they set the emotional tone of the picturebook. *Gorilla* walks a fine line when characterizing Eino, making sure to show the severity of his emotional dysregulation, while also making him relatable and a good friend. It keeps a somewhat absurdist tone, which helps balance out the emotional intensity of the narrative. This is best exemplified in the way the book addresses the literal gorilla in the daycare: “Gorilla attended the same kindergarten as Eino. He didn’t understand why, though, because everyone else in kindergarten was a child, and Gorilla was a gorilla.” (Pörsti, 2020, p.9-10, see Appendix 1c). The strangeness of the gorilla attending kindergarten with him is not lost on Eino, but he accepts it along with the other unusual events in his life, such as his literal falling apart, his

new best friend Väino falling apart (Pörsti, 2020, p.19-20, see Appendix 1d), and being able to switch body parts with his best friend and Gorilla.

The vividly emotional and absurd imagery that is balanced by the matter-of-fact text that provides the narration is an example of the multimodality of picturebooks being used to elicit engagement with the narrative on an emotional level. Picturebooks have a significant capacity for depictions of emotion due to their multimodality; most picturebooks (though some are wordless) use at least two modes, images and written words. The written words are typically read out loud by adults, making picturebooks a visual and verbal experience for the majority of their child audience. The “[...] verbal information received by the brain is delayed by fractions of a second as compared to visual information,” (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.112), with the result that “[...] an emotionally charged cover image of a picture-book is ostensibly perceived before the title and affects the reader more strongly” (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.112). The visual and verbal components of a picturebook work together, but the visual component is noticed first and allows for a stronger emotional impact. Thanks to their format, “[...] picturebooks determine the duration and pace of engagement with the narrative” (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.113); the words direct the readers through the story like a map, and the images permit pause and exploration (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.113). As noted by Bland, “[the pictures] frequently provide gripping access to empathetic characters as well as individualised cultural details. They thus involve the affective dimension of children’s learning while [...] avoiding essentialising” (Bland, 2016, p.45-46). Children do not need to experience stories with large amounts of dialogue in order to identify with or engage with book characters; character design is an effective and expressive visual shorthand that draws in the reader/viewer and can activate children both emotionally and socially. Images are able “[...] to convey strong emotions for which words would be insufficient and inadequate” (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.114). While the images may deliver emotion in a more direct way, it works with the words to create

an elevated narrative. The modes do not have to work together, they can even conflict with each other, such as when “[...] words can state that a character is happy, while the images show them upset” (2018, p.114-115). Nikolajeva remarks, “This is where picturebooks offer a unique opportunity to engage with empathy and mind-reading, circumventing the inadequacy of language” (2018, p.114-115). This conflict or ambiguity can then be identified and discussed by children and their teachers, leading to moments in which socioemotional skills can be pinpointed and fostered. Kucirkova makes a case for empathy-building through children’s storybooks, saying that picturebooks could “promote children’s understanding of others’ perspectives if there is a judicious balance between a set of requirements: cognitive/affective empathy, in-/out-group identification, story immersion/character identification, narrative representation in words and adults’ conversational mediation” (Kucirkova, 2019). These conditions can certainly be met, provided authors and educators are aware of them and understand why they have been proposed.

Empathy is a broad category, encompassing different facets of emotional, social, and cognitive interactions, but the aspects of empathy that are actively fostered in early childhood education are affective empathy, perspective taking, and sympathy as described by Maibom (2020). Affective empathy is “[...] an emotion experienced by a person A that is caused by A perceptually experiencing, being aware of, or imagining person B’s feelings, affective expressions, or situation and has as its object B’s feelings about her situation” (2020, p.15). Perspective taking is picturing oneself in the same situation as the other person (2020, p.16), and sympathy “[...] is an emotion experienced by a person A for the wellbeing or plight of another person B” (Maibom 2020, p16). Developing these empathetic aspects consists of multiple socioemotional skills (Kucirkova, 2019). Nikolajeva names empathy and theory of mind as “[...] essential social skills,” which “[...] develop gradually and can be enhanced and trained. Picturebooks have a great potential for such training,” because they “[...] represent

fictional characters' emotions as well as their interpretation of each other's emotions" (Nikolajeva, 2018, p.114). Through narrative, which facilitates perspective-taking (Kucirkova, 2019), picturebooks are able to present a variety of relatable characters with whom children can identify and subsequently empathize. Being able to identify with someone is a major skill in social interactions, and it can be encouraged by picturebooks (Silva-Diaz, 2015). In- and out-group identification are listed in Kucirkova's conditions and should be fostered parallel to each other, so children do not start to over-empathise with their in-group and neglect to develop empathy for the out-group. Distinction between the two is needed to develop a dialogue about morality within fictional scenarios (Kucirkova, 2019), but the development of empathy for both the in- and out-groups, depending on the particular demographic context, is important. Some picturebooks have discussion prompts for perspective-taking on the part of the out-group members portrayed in the narrative, and this skill is aided with the mediation of adults who support children's understanding of these varied perspectives through meaningful conversations (Kucirkova, 2019). Adults read the narrative aloud, meeting the condition for narrative representation in words, but they also need to serve as a middleman between the children and their internalization of new and unfamiliar points of view and emotions, guiding them to a place of understanding and empathy in an informal, conversational manner.

Picturebooks are a way to introduce different social interactions from an overhead point of view, which permits their audience to imagine the experiences and emotions of other individuals (Kucirkova, 2019). Picturebooks are a way to examine and discuss social situations from an outside perspective, in order to understand why certain social practices are implemented, identify emotions, interrogate biases, and build on basic social skills. Picturebooks can act as a young child's possible introduction to learning about mental states and their related vocabulary due to their clear indications of mental states and their use of

varied vocabulary (Dyer et al., p.34). More sophisticated vocabulary can be introduced among familiar words, allowing children to build their socioemotional vocabulary in an organic, integrated way (Dyer et al., p.33). Due to their multimodality, picturebooks can introduce their young audience to concepts like deceptive language, “[...] a common strategy that picturebooks use to help the reader identify statements that try to trick you is to use the illustrations as a type of ‘visual lie detector,’ in other words as visual evidence that challenges the statement” (Silva-Diaz, 2015, p.7). By learning to engage with both modalities in order to find the truth of the situation, children learn how to navigate deceptive social situations with their own social skills and logic. The children’s engagement hinges on the teacher reading the book to the (not yet literate) children so they can encounter new mental state information and vocabulary (Dyer et al., p.33) and process them with the assistance of an adult.

A teacher selecting a picturebook with the development of social and emotional skills in mind allows for them to prepare a topic of discussion with their respective group of children and be ready for questioning and interrogation of social mores by the children. Using the Bland criteria for diversity and inclusion (Bland, 2016), the content of *Gorilla* is very relatable for the target group, due to big emotions, friendship, and bullying being common occurrences in early childhood. The language is uncomplicated and keeps a light, but earnest tone, taking the topic seriously, but not in a grave and frightening manner. The characterization encourages empathy through the endearing and humorous illustrations and the nonjudgemental way Eino’s falling apart is depicted. The story is compelling- the visceral but humorous depiction of falling apart, along with the absurd addition of a gorilla- renders it surprising and emotionally resonant. Children can relate to big emotions, difficulty making friends, and having a hard time socioemotionally at daycare. The world is respectfully represented- Eino is not depicted as bad for falling apart, and this characteristic is also used to

form his friendship with a new character. The story has many social and emotional aspects that can be identified and discussed to further understanding and growth; children can be asked if they have ever felt like there is a ‘gorilla,’ a threatening or stressful person or problem, in their lives; if they have ever felt like they have fallen apart, how they relate to Eino and Väinö’s friendship, and anything else they might observe in the book.

Gorilla also meets Mallet’s criteria for base quality (2020): it has a coherent narrative structure, and the illustrations work in tandem with the narrative to serve the story. The story keeps a distinct tone that permits the depiction of strong emotion without shame or distress. *Gorilla* is an original, distinctive work that permits a slightly detached perspective to promote reflection but is engaging and surprising to a young audience.

3.2 *Kaupunki Kukaties* and Linguistic Development

Kaupunki kukaties, written by Pia Krustin and illustrated by Jani Ikonen, is a 2022 nominee for the Arvid Lydecken prize. It is a book of poetry about life in the city, with poems about concerts, cars, cafes, and other everyday events. The poems make use of rhyme, alliteration, and other word play. There is a wide variety of poetic forms- visual poems (“Katukauppias,” 2021, p.35), shape poems (“Etänä-Etänä,” 2021, p.11-12; see Appendix 2a), list poems, rhyming poems, poems that focus on a specific syllable/phoneme/rhyme, among others. They are supplemented by expressive, colorful illustrations, which add visual interest to the book. The pictures are rich and engaging, so children would be drawn to the book even when it is not read out loud. Its nomination for the 2022 Arvid Lydecken award from Kirjasampo had the following explanation:

Versatile and insightful poems combine everyday life and adventure with numerous different text styles. The book is rhythmic and full of life: everyone is welcome in the poetic city, there is a place for everyone. Each opening is a new surprising world. The flight of the text and rhythm celebrate the materiality of language. Poetry's trump card is that it draws attention to the expressive power of language, which is so abundant in this book that reading it is pure joy. And, as is always the case with good rhyming, it is impossible to read this book without reciting the best passages aloud (Uotila, 2021).

Kaupunki kukaties was commended for its lively, joyous tone, playful and engaging use of language, and its suitability for read-alouds. The poetry collection uses a variety of poetic styles, and blends both the everyday and the imaginative in a way that echoes the often-wondrous interactions children have with the world around them. The interesting and evocative illustrations keep the eye on the page and on the text of the poems. *Kaupunki Kukaties* fits into the learning areas of “Rich world of languages” and “Forms of expression.” Being poetry, it demonstrates different linguistic characteristics of Finnish, such as vocabulary and syntax, and brings awareness to the phonemic qualities of words through alliteration and rhyme. Like in Mallet’s recommendations for children’s poetry (2020, p.204), it is active, lively, and involves listening and collaboration. *Kaupunki Kukaties* offers engagement with language, such as listening to the poems. It relates to “Forms of expression” because poetry is an art form and form of artistic expression. By interacting with this book, with its variety of topics and poetic formats, children will learn about poetry and the different forms poetry can take. *Kaupunki Kukaties* makes poetic devices such as alliteration, rhyme, and meter available in an early childhood classroom, priming children for further engagement with poetry as they move forward in their educational journey.

Unlike *Gorilla*, *Kaupunki Kukaties* does not fit neatly into a specific transversal competency. Being poetry, it could fit with ‘Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression,’ since it is a form of expression, and shows aspects of everyday life in Finland, such as living in apartment blocks (*Tylsäää!*, 2021, p.13; *Hei, sinä, sinä!*, 2021, p.4), going to outdoor markets (*Ravitlapäivää*, 2021, p.33) and coffee shops (*Kahvilaopas*, 2021, p.5-6), seeing public gardeners at work (*Haiku*), and enjoying nature (*Etänä-Etänä*, 2021, p.11-12; *Gränd Hotel Tähtitaivas*, 2021, p.31-32). *Kaupunki Kukaties* also somewhat corresponds to ‘Multiliteracy and competence in informational and communication technology,’ since it

contains texts that could be part of a rich textual environment and included in literacy education in an early childhood setting. While reading, listening to, and interacting with the book, children are exposed to different ways in which to put words together and create a creative message with poetic devices.

Picturebooks, being a written medium, offer specific syntactic forms that are not found in daily speech. Exposure to these forms expands children's grammatical and syntactical knowledge and supports their acquisition of language (Gressnich et al., 2008, p.404). In early childhood, children are acquiring language and also developing pre-literacy skills such as phonological awareness. "In the classroom, we can help children in their acquisition of phonological awareness by interacting with literature containing text that plays with the sounds in language, exploring written language through writing, and playing language games" (Griffith et al., 2008, p.46-47). Linguistic play is needed to develop the foundational skills that lead to literacy. Poems are a prime example of texts that play with phonological sounds and support phonological awareness in the process. *Kaupunki Kukaties* presents many examples of this play: "Taistelukyylikki" has the refrain "TAIS-TE-LU-KYL-LIK-KI," (Krustin, 2021, p.30) which practices differentiating syllables. "Hauttausmaan Takana" ends with an invitation to make zombie sounds: "Ja haudesta kuuluu _____" (Krustin, 2021, p.47-48). "Kahvilaopas" (See Appendix 2b) goes through the vowels in the Finnish alphabet and makes tongue twisters with them: "Rosvokahvilassa / tollon rosvopomon solo on nolo" (Krustin, 2021, p.5-6). "Ravintolapäivä" plays with a base word in each of its three stanzas, (Ruoka, soppa, katu), transforming them into longer words. "Ruoka ruoka tun tun / ruoka ruoka ti ti / ruoka tun / ruoka ti / RUOKATUNTI!" (Krustin, 2021, p.43) These instances of literal wordplay- playing with words and the phonemes and syllables contained within them- are how phonological awareness is built in a strategic and fun way that engages children. Instead of being focused on pronouncing things "correctly," the poems focus on the many fun

sounds that make up a language, which is less restrictive and lends itself to active exploration of speech sounds on the part of the children instead of rote memorization. With the above poems, children will gain awareness of syllables, vowel sounds, compound words, and nonverbal sounds without needing formal sit-down lessons. The poems are meant to be read aloud, which allows pre-literate children to work on their pre-literacy skills.

As children in early childhood settings are not yet literate, they rely on verbal and visual communication to interact with others, go about their daily routines, and understand stories. Pullinger states that children “[...] are in a state of transition from orality to literacy,” (2017, p.78); in early childhood, children move from relying on verbal communication to noticing the written texts around them, thus beginning their foray into literacy. Pullinger notes that “[...] children’s poetry exists on the orality-literacy continuum,” (2017, p.78); children’s poetry is the written word meant for pre-literate individuals, so it exists both as a verbal and written art form. An example of which is “Etänä-Etänä,” a shape poem in which the words are in the shape of a snail’s meandering trail on grass (Krustin, 2021, p.11-12; see Appendix 2a). The simultaneously verbal and visual attributes of poetry permit extensive experimentation with poetic forms, rhyme, humor, and other attributes of the genre due to the receptiveness of the intended audience (children) and the importance of exposing them to a variety of linguistic and phonetic forms. “[...] children learn (experience) poetry by listening to poetry, but in order to learn a particular feature of poetry, such as metre or rhyme, the feature has to be brought into the foreground of children’s awareness” (Pramling et al., 2009, p.124). The typically short length of children’s poems is a practical vehicle for presenting specific poetic features, such as rhyme and metaphor (Pramling et al., 2009), and poetry anthologies can contain multiple poetic forms and features in one volume (Mallet, 2020). Mallet recommends, when searching for a poetry anthology for children, that “[...] teachers look for imaginative editing, lively content, appealing design and sympathetic and exciting

illustration” (2020, p225). These features are all present in the poems contained in *Kaupunki Kukaties*. Haikus are introduced with the poem “Haiku” (Krustin, 2021, p.25-26; see Appendix 2c): “Nurmella bileet: / kaupunginpuutarhurin / harava tanssi,” which has the traditional 5/7/5 syllable structure. In “Kovis,” metaphor is used when the poem is likened to concrete in its stability and, for lack of a better word, concreteness: “Tämä runo on betonia / kovaksi keitetty / katuun kaiverrettu” (Krustin, 2021, p.14; see Appendix 2d). Different rhyme schemes (Ex. ABAB, AABBCC, AABBCDD) are demonstrated in the poems “Gränd Hotel Tahtitaivas” (Krustin, 2021, p.31-32), “Nyt Huudetaan!” (Krustin 2021, p.41-42, and “Illan Tullen,” (Krustin, 2021, p.55-56), among others. Some children’s poems permit audience participation (With a repeating refrain and/or actions that go along with the words, as in a fingerplay), which allows the children to interact with the poetry beyond passive listening. There is repetition/participation in “Erään Kerran Herra”: “Kävin mina, kävin minä kiskalla kerran / kiskalla näin minä kiireisen herran / ja sen herran suu sanoi joo joo joo” (Krustin, 2021, p.21-22). In “Kaupungin Järjestyssäännöt,” (Krustin, 2021, p.3), the phrase “on sallittu” is repeated between each line, which can be said by the listener when the poem is read aloud. List poems are also a way to introduce vocabulary, or to categorize vocabulary into a larger group. The list poem: “Tylsäää!” (Krustin, 2021, p.13) lists words ending in “-is.” They can also serve as a way to contain and sort the large volume of information children take in every day: “For children, then, the list poem acts as a container, even as it confronts the uncontainable” (Pullinger, 2017, p.93). Thanks to its ability to individually introduce poetic, lexical, syntactical, and grammatical features, children’s poetry builds emergent literacy skills. The musicality of poetry also assists in the memorization of these features, because: “Rhythm and rhyme are an aid to memory and learning poems by heart gives a resource for life” (Mallet, 2020, p.223), which goes on to support and reinforce literacy skills.

Kaupunki Kukaties aligns with Bland's criteria for quality picturebooks (2016, p.45).

The poetry in this anthology uses familiar words and experiences and the pictures are related to the poems and add to the reading experience. Empathy is encouraged by highlighting the importance of everyday characters, from enjoying the movement of a slug to having a sweeping, romantic illustration of a park groundskeeper. The poems are fun, thoughtful, fun to repeat, and are relatable to children through their subject matter. While a narrative is not present in this poetry anthology, its representation of the world is either accurate or heightened in a respectful way, and the individual poems encourages the examination and admiration of different everyday activities and phenomena.

Mallet's criteria for choosing books (2020, p.27) is also fulfilled by *Kaupunki Kukaties*: the book has a clear design, with the illustrations working in harmony with and often being part of the poems. Thanks to this, the pictures and language are well-integrated and harmonious. The poems are self-contained vignettes with a distinct and engaging authorial voice is distinct and engaging. Overall, the collection of poems has a clear point of view and style that gives multiple perspectives into different aspects of everyday life in a fun, enjoyable manner.

3.3 *Suomen ämminkäiset and Exploring/interacting with the environment*

Suomen ämminkäiset värikuvina, by Tuomas Kärkkäinen, is a field guide for creatures named 'Ämminkäiset,' which are native to cities and are the reasons for urban phenomena such as birds sitting on top of statues, concrete roadblocks, and graffiti. It was nominated in 2022 for the Arvid Lydgren award. It has entries for each of these imaginary creatures, which include information such as their diet, habitat, and other characteristics, alongside a detailed drawing. This book encourages children to engage with the urban environment in the same way one would with natural environments such as forests and wetlands, and to use their

imaginations when exploring their neighborhoods. Its 2022 nomination for the Arvid Lydecken award was explained with the following reasoning:

The inventive picture book is suitable for all ages and helps to observe the environment in a completely new way. Creatures living in an urban space make reality turn to a new light. The most valuable thing about literature is its ability to make you look at the world with new eyes. Reading this book, you realize that ‘ämminkäiset’ have always lived among us, but only now are they noticed. Fabulation is so inspiring that observations of urban space also entice the reader to come up with their own critters (Uotila, 2021).

Ämminkäiset was lauded for its ability to bestow a new outlook on urban spaces to the reader, and for inspiring the imagination to think up new creatures and other reasons why the urban environment has certain features. Its format is directly lifted from nature guidebooks and field guides, which are used to identify birds, plants, and other animals in one’s surrounding environment (See appendix 3a & 3b). Its specific layout drives the concept of *Suomen ämminkäiset*; by using a familiar format, Kärkkäinen primes the reader to suspend disbelief and accept the conceit of finding creatures in the urban landscape. *Ämminkäiset* is written as a report text, as defined by Mallet: “[...] non-chronological (or non-narrative), hierarchically organized accounts, usually in the present tense, which describe, inform, compare and contrast,” (2020, p.342) but is fully fictional. As seen in a report text, such as an encyclopedia or animal factbook, there are details such as the creature’s weight, scientific name, and size relative to humans, and the writing style is informative and non-narrative. By virtue of being a fictional report text, the book takes a metafictional, postmodern approach: the ämminkäiset are not real, but we as the readers are imagining they are. “The contemporary, postmodern picturebook is ‘metafictive’: it encourages the reader to reflect on the nature of fiction and its conventions, sometimes by playing with or turning those conventions on their head.” (Mallet, 2020, p.47). The book melds real aspects of urban life, such as the ‘identifying features’ of the ämminkäiset (Ex. graffiti, gravel patches on streets, unusual spots of melted snow, etc.) that are common in the urban environment, with the habits

of the fictional ämminkaiset. At the end of the book, there is a section detailing the guidelines for competitive creature spotting for the reader to use in daily life, which is an invitation to play along and be active in the world created by it. *Ämminkäiset* does not offer a conventional narrative, or a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but it does expand on our perception and understanding of the world around us. That makes it a postmodern picturebook that fosters multiliteracy. “Multiliteracies focus on the many modes of representation and forms of text that have been made available through multimedia and technological change” (Anstey, 2002, p.446). The field guide is a distinctive text that children have likely encountered, but in this case, it walks the fine line between the everyday phenomena of urban life and pure imagination. Antsey goes on to say that multiliteracy “[...] requires not only the mastery of communication, but an ability to critically analyse, deconstruct, and reconstruct a range of texts and other representational forms.” (Antsey, 2002, p.445). *Ämminkäiset* encourages this critique by blending reality (pigeons are always sitting on top of statues, graffiti is most common in train stations and under bridges, streetlights flicker sometimes, and other city phenomena), and the imaginative (graffiti is created by pen-nosed creatures called the siihteri (Kärkkäinen, 2021, p.28-29), the mercury in streetlights is sucked out by the immi (Kärkkäinen, 2021, p.8-9), and other creatures make odd things happen in urban spaces), in a way that allows children to either parse the differences between the two, or to dive into their imagination and contribute their own ideas as to why there are gravel patches on paved streets or why some graffiti is half-erased. Antsey lists several devices found in postmodern picturebooks, including “[...] new and unusual design and layout, which challenge the reader’s perception of how to read a book; [...] intertextuality, which requires the reader to use background knowledge in order to access the available meanings; and the availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of audiences.” (Anstey, 2002, p.447). *Ämminkäiset* presents a distinctive layout, the same as nature guidebooks, which is both

intriguing- children will want to know more about these imaginative, new creatures- and metatextual- children will have to separate the realistic layout and matter-of-fact writing style from the fictional content.

Ämminkäiset fits neatly into the learning area of “Exploring/interacting with my environment,” because it encourages investigation and observation of children’s immediate urban environment. As stated in the curriculum, “The children are guided to explore and act in the natural and built environment” (NCC, 2018, p.49) with the imaginative idea that there are creatures hiding in the city, not just in the forest. Children’s relationship with their built environment is enhanced through exploration, interaction, and imagination, making them care more about their immediate surroundings. *Ämminkäiset* best fits into the transversal competency of “Thinking and learning” because it encourages imagination, wonder, and creativity (the reader is encouraged to reconsider their urban environment as one with hidden creatures to discover), and critical thinking about one’s surroundings (“Could a creature live inside a mailbox? What about the train station, are there any signs of creatures in hidden areas?”).

Urban and environmental education, while originating in higher education, has been trickling down to middle, primary, and early educational settings over the past decade due to increased concern over global heating and other environmental issues. One of its main goals is to connect learners with their surrounding environment, primarily natural but also urban, in order to encourage care and maintenance for said environment (Russ, 2017). This fosters a “sense of place” (Russ, 2017, p.72), an awareness of all of the places and ecosystems one interacts with on a daily basis. It spurs learners to deeply consider the places they exist in, thinking about how they are meaningful to their lives and what they permit them to do (for example, playing, having a quiet moment, exercise, etc.). A suggested approach is “Hands-on activities that allow students to experience, recreate in, and steward more natural ecosystems

in cities [...]” (Russ, 2017, p.72), so any one-to-one interaction with the outside world can assist in the development of a sense of place, connection, and responsibility for both the immediate urban environment and the encompassing environment. Maddox et al. name three features that apply to all urban environments: “[...] people- and their communities [...]. Buildings, streets, and other gray infrastructure [...]. And nature is a third.” (2017, p.14). The urban environment is an intersection of human communities, the built environment, and the natural environment, and children’s engagement with it in the early years can lead to them being involved in the care and maintenance of this three-way environmental intersection in a way that benefits human communities and nature.

When children are able to engage with their towns and cities beyond the classroom via urban environmental education, they are able to offer their opinions when those surroundings are constructed or landscaped. This “[...] contributes to cities where human constructions and natural processes can productively coexist for all ages” (Russ, 2017, p.163). An example of this is a playground design project in Freiburg (Blinkert, 2004). While designing the playground, Blinkert noted that urban, child-friendly play spaces do not necessarily need to be a natural oasis in the middle of the man-made city. Instead, they only need a space that is safe, accessible, that caters to their interests (Skating, biking, soccer, etc.), and where they can meet and connect with others (Blinkert, 2004, p.105). Urban spaces are capable of facilitating children’s social connections, environmental exploration, and free play, even without lush plant and animal life. The playground designed in Freiburg was a large open space away from traffic, easily accessible to children in the nearby apartment buildings, and full of opportunities to dig, climb, and play with water. Giving children the ability to create and build in the middle of a man-made, built environment gives them some level of agency and participation in said environment. In a way, it becomes a positive feedback loop of children participating in their surrounding environment, feeling a sense of responsibility for

their environment, and then further participating in the construction/care of their environment, urban or otherwise. Connecting to the environment begins, as with most things in children's development, with play: "Outdoor play is one of the simplest ways to facilitate bonds between children and their environments (Kernan, 2010, p.203). It offers rich sensory experiences and opportunities to explore and be absorbed in the surrounding built and/or natural environments.

When holding *Ämminkaiset* up to the criteria presented by Bland (2016), the book is accessible to the target audience because the language is modelled after familiar report texts. The pictures contribute to the report text layout and reinforce the metatextual conceit of the book. While the characterizations of the creatures do not necessarily encourage empathy, they do foster curiosity in the urban environment, which is often seen as dull or soulless. There is not a traditional narrative, but the concept of fantastical creatures living in cities and causing odd environmental phenomena is compelling and surprising. The representation of the world is purposefully inaccurate, but it does represent everyday phenomena in a fantastical context. There are no human characters, but the creatures are creatively designed and not stereotypes or caricatures of any human groups. The book itself encourages questioning of the immediate environment and communication about different creatures the reader has spotted with the inclusion of the fictional *Ämminkaiset* spotting club ISAR (See Appendix 3c).

When evaluating *Ämminkaiset* with Mallet's criteria (2020, p.27), the design is coherent and engaging in its content, the authorial voice is distinct, but there is no narrative to strengthen through pictures. The pictures reinforce the idea of an imaginary reality in which urban creatures are real and live among us, which serves to intrigue the reader. The book is original in its concept, execution, and distinct illustrative style with primary colors and unique character design.

4 Discussion

Now that the educational and developmental benefits of the aforementioned picturebooks have been examined, the specific role that they could potentially play in an early childhood educational setting can be assessed. As noted above, picturebooks are tools that can foster linguistic, socioemotional, and critical thinking skills. They can also serve as jumping-off points for environmental exploration and discussions critiquing and evaluating social norms. In order to fully understand the role of picturebooks in ECE, one must consider how they are used on a practical level with children in an ECE setting. Books can be, and often are, used throughout the day; they are used for informal story times during free play and to introduce a topic or information to the children. They can serve as a support when children need to wait for outside time, and as an enjoyable activity with one or more children. Books can be read in many contexts: read-alouds by a teacher, children reading together in groups or pairs, and children reading/looking at a book by themselves. Books can facilitate group activities and discussions, and favorite books that are read repeatedly become part of the ECE centers group culture. For example, *Gorilla* is relatable to young children undergoing rapid and often overwhelming socioemotional development, and the imagery used in the book could be used as a reference point for socioemotional conflicts (For example, the teacher could discuss with the children how they can avoid being ‘gorillas’ to each other and play respectfully.). *Kaupunki Kukaties* has the capability of being a mainstay read-aloud book thanks to the short and diverse poems, and a wide variety of activities could be designed around the content and poetic features of each poem. *Ämminkäiset* can be used as an introduction to the neighborhood surrounding the ECE setting and serve as a reference point for the creation of a neighborhood guidebook and creatures designed by the children.

However, these books, even though they are quality picturebooks, are not suitable for every age group and developmental stage. Strouse et al. writes that “First, children's learning from a given picture book appears to be the result of an interaction between the particular features of the book, the type of information to be learned, and constraints on children's development [...]” (2018, p.12). Certain book features may be more engaging to certain age groups due to their developmental stage, and the learning of information contained within the book is also dependent on the prior knowledge and development of the children. For example, *Ämminkaiset* would be confusing for younger children who are still learning to differentiate reality and fantasy and have not engaged much with report texts to familiarize themselves with the format. *Kaupunki kukaties* would need to be introduced in different ways to different age and developmental groups- younger children could simply enjoy listening to the vocabulary and rhyme as it is read aloud, but older children could exercise their phonological skills by differentiating vowel sounds and repeating phonemes. *Gorilla* could be used as an introduction for emotional regulation for under 4-year-olds, and a jumping off point for discussion about more complex socioemotional concepts such as friendship and bullying. Books, even quality ones, require consideration of the group of children they are being read to and adjustment of related activities to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate and beneficial.

5 Conclusion

After examining three well-received, award-nominated picturebooks within the context of daily life in ECE environments, it can be concluded that quality picturebooks align with the Finnish national curriculum because the rich world of languages is a learning area, and literacy/language play a part in the transversal competencies. The near-infinite content possibilities of picturebooks can correspond to any transversal competency and/or learning area. The national curriculum is flexible to ensure teacher autonomy in their pedagogical choices and to ensure the fulfillment of their specific groups educational needs from day to day. When choosing picturebooks that lend themselves to learning and development, ECE teachers can keep the criteria for diverse (Bland, 2016) and quality (Mallet, 2020) picturebooks in mind. Bland (2016) requires accessible language and content, pictures adding to the story, characterization that fosters empathy, an emotionally compelling story, relatability, respectful representation, and the encouragement of asking questions and communication. Mallet (2020) prioritizes a coherent and engaging design, pictures and language working together towards the narrative and a distinct voice, and an original style that encourages new perspectives. The Arvid Lydecken award nominees discussed in this thesis are quality picturebooks because they connect to the curriculum learning areas, have engaging art and topics, are relatable to children, and lend themselves organically to activities and beneficial interactions with children. Quality picturebooks do not need to be award-nominated; they simply need to be engaging, compelling, respectful, and encouraging of new perspectives and interrogation of the world around oneself in a developmentally appropriate manner. One of the limitations of this literature review is the very narrow scope through which quality picturebooks has been examined. The sheer number of picturebooks out in the world meant that this review had to be restricted to three well-known books, but this discussion

should extend to all of the picturebooks being used in Finnish ECE and beyond. There should also be a parallel discussion involving books for different age ranges; a quality picturebook for 2 year olds is very different from a quality picturebook for 6 year olds, and these distinctions should be identified and solidified within ECE practice.

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Appendix 1

a.



b.



c.



d.



Appendix 2

a.



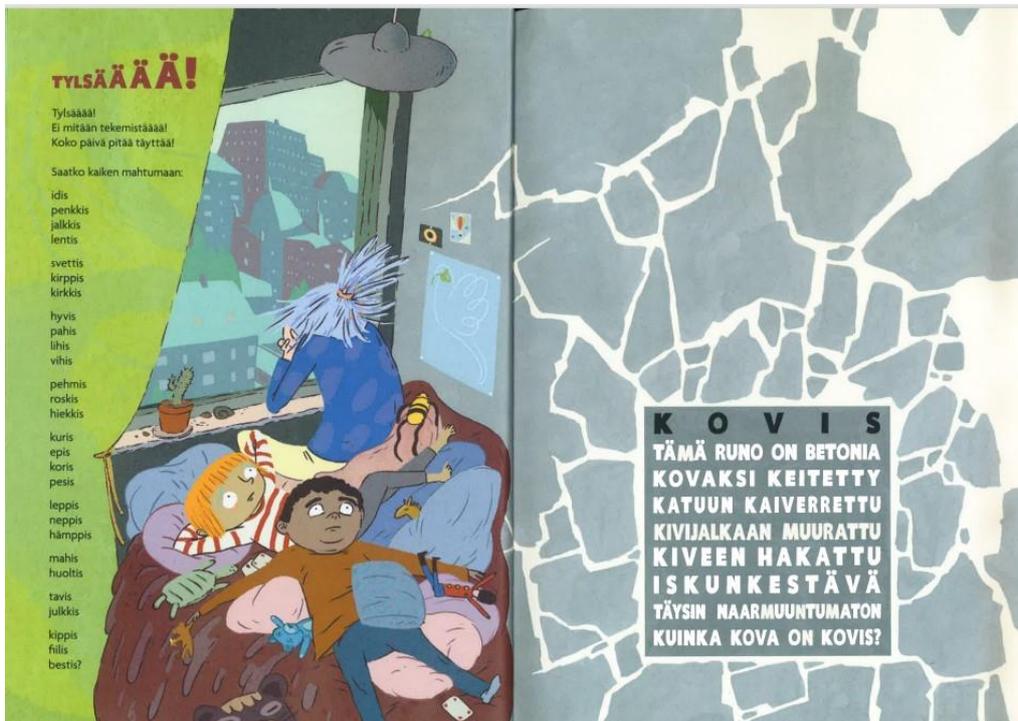
b.



c.

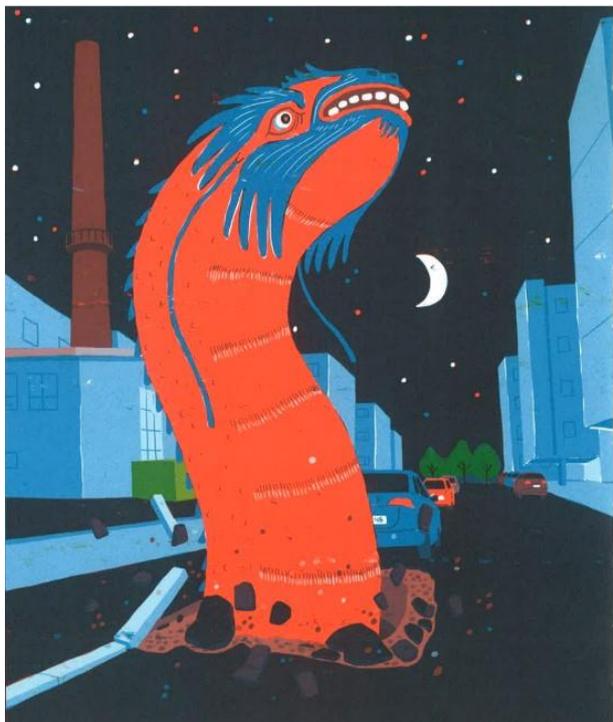


d.



Appendix 3

a.



Rohmiainen

Megaterpens exterreri

Kadulle on yhtäkkiä ilmestynyt valtava kuoppa. Ihmiset ovat ympäröineet sen aidoilla, jotta kukaan ei putoaisi sinne. Kuoppa on tietenkin valtavan madon, rohmiaisen, tekemä reikä.

Kadulla olevat kuoppat syntyvät, kun suunnaton käärmeä muistuttava rohmiainen puraisee kitansa täyteen asfaltia ja soraa¹ ja katoo maan alle.

Rohmiaiset eivät maan alla asuvia lyömeisiä, mutta myös erittäin, jota ihmiset panevat maanalaisten putkien suojaiksi. Tässä työkässä putket saattavat mennä rikki. Niinpä rohmiaisen syömissä kuoppissa näkee usein ihmisiä kovaamassa putkia.

Rohmiainen haukkaa kerrallaan valtavan määrän maata, josta sen mahti osaa valikoida ravinnoksi heljapaat osat. Loput se kallekaa tien varseen. Oletkin ehkä nähnyt näitä betoniporsaitakin kutsuttuja rohmiaisen pokaleita.

Kaikki betoniporsaat eivät tosin ole rohmiaisen jätkösiä: kirkkailla värillä maalatut ovat ihmisten tekemiä, kun taas jätönsäntöme jätkökset ovat luonnolta.

Bongauspisteet



Koko



Elinalue

Rohmiainen on kirkkakaite bongaustien pila, emt- se on kirkkakaite-aikeilla. On epäselvää, kirkkakaite-aikeilla on kirkkakaite-aikeilla. On epäselvää, kirkkakaite-aikeilla on kirkkakaite-aikeilla. On epäselvää, kirkkakaite-aikeilla on kirkkakaite-aikeilla.

Ravinto

Hylkäävät ja solmuavat.

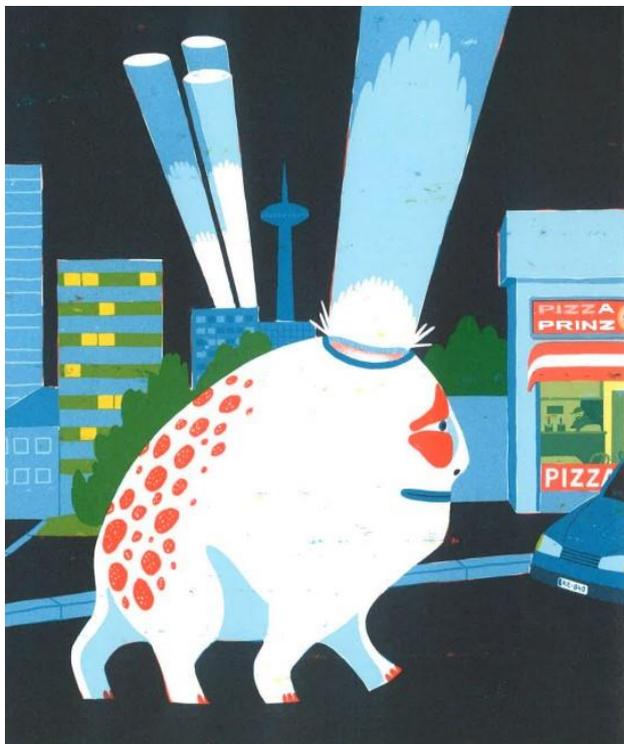
Ensimmäinen havainto

Luca, Pöytä, marraskuu 1997

¹ Tällaiset maanalaistekemät kuoppat ovat valtavia ja laajoja. Rohmiainen on bongaustien pila, emt- se on kirkkakaite-aikeilla. On epäselvää, kirkkakaite-aikeilla on kirkkakaite-aikeilla. On epäselvää, kirkkakaite-aikeilla on kirkkakaite-aikeilla.

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b.



Taapiolyhdikkö

Lucerna patientes

Pilvisenä iltana saatat nähdä taivaalla ympärää kiertäviä valokiekkoja. Olet onnekas, sillä olet bongannut vaikeasti havaittavan taapiolyhdikön!

Taapiolyhdikön päässä on samantapainen valonlähde kuin kiiltomatojen takapäissä, joskin moninkertaisesti voimakkaampi. Se käyttää valoa paitsi nähdäkseen pimeällä ympäristönsä myös sokaistakseen hetkellisesti niitä uhkaavat eläimet tai ihmiset.

Jos kaksi taapiolyhdikköä näkee kilpaileva samasta uroksesta, ne aloittavat kummallisen rituaalin. Kaikki kolme ryhtyvät kiertämään pientä kehää "otsalampun" taivasta kohti osoitettuna. Se, joka ensimmäisenä väsyä, poistuu paikalta. Kaksi jäljelle jäänyttä muodostavat pariskunnan.¹ Taapiolyhdiköt voivat siis muodostaa joko naaras-uros-pareja tai naaras-naaras-pareja.

Ämminkäsbongaajalle soidinnäytelmä näkyy pimeän aikaan pilvisissä keuhä kiertävänä kolmena valokiekkona.² Monet muutkin pilvisissä näkyvät valonkajastukset voivat olla taapiolyhdiköiden tekoita, mutta niitä on vaikea erottaa ihmisten tuottamasta valosta.

¹ Taapiolyhdikköpariskunnat pysyvät yhdessä lopun elämänsä. Ehdä se on merkki kirkkakaite-aikeilla, emt- se on kirkkakaite-aikeilla.

² Taapiolyhdiköt parituvat kuitenkin Suomen vilkkaissa ilmastossa melko harvoin, joten niitä ilmeisesti ei näe usein.

Bongauspisteet



Koko



Elinalue

Taapiolyhdikköitä elää Suomessa vähän, lähinnä suurien kaupunkeiden keskustoissa. Niiden valot saattavat näkyä kilometrien päähän.

Ravinto

Kiertämön eli mattapintainen paperi, esimerkiksi sanomalehdet.

Ensimmäinen havainto

Vera Palmer, Los Angeles, Yhdysvallat, joulukuun 1948

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