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SUMMER STORMS, FOOD, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN BRIT BILDØEN'S *SJU DAGAR I AUGUST* AND AGNAR LIRHUS'S *LITEN KOKEBOK*

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ABSTRACT. ***Summer Storms, Food, and Representations of the Climate Crisis in Brit Bildøen's* Sju dagar i august *and Agnar Lirhus's* Liten kokebok.** This article discusses representations of climate change in contemporary realistic fiction from Norway. I first focus my attention on the depiction of extreme weather and "risk society" in Brit Bildøen's *Sju dagar i august* (*Seven days in august*, 2014) and then explore the concept of "ecological masculinities" and expressions of care in Agnar Lirhus's *Liten kokebok* (*Little cookbook*, 2016). Although the two novels I discuss thematise climatic disruptions in different ways, they are similarly intertwining characters' experiences of the natural world with personal feelings of loss and grief. I thus suggest that climate change imagery in Norwegian realistic fiction is often interwoven with an affective dimension. Finally, the aim of this article is to illustrate how the climate crisis has pervaded Norwegian literature, while providing some examples of how texts that lay outside of what is typically considered the cli-fi novel have the potential to engage with this theme.

Keywords: *climate change narratives, contemporary Norwegian fiction, risk society, extreme weather, ecological masculinities, care, Brit Bildøen, Agnar Lirhus*

REZUMAT. ***Furtuni de Vară, Mâncare şi Reprezentări ale Crizei Climatice în* Sju dagar i august *de Brit Bildøen şi* Liten kokebok *de Agnar Lirhus*.** Acest articol discută reprezentări ale schimbărilor climatice în ficţiunea realistă

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contemporană din Norvegia. Îmi îndrept atenţia mai întâi asupra portretizării fenomenelor meteorologice extreme şi a „societăţii riscului" în romanul *Sju dagar i august* (*Şapte zile din august*, 2014) de Brit Bildøen, iar apoi examinez conceptul de „masculinităţi ecologice" şi formele de manifestare a grijii în romanul *Liten kokebok* (*Mica cartea de bucate*, 2016) de Agnar Lirhus. Deşi cele două romane discutate tematizează perturbările climatice în moduri diferite, ele sunt similare prin felul în care experienţa lumii naturale e asociată cu sentimentele de doliu şi durere cu care se confruntă personajele. În felul acesta, sugerez că imaginarul schimbărilor climatice în ficţiunea realistă norvegiană se împleteşte cu o dimensiune afectivă. În final, scopul acestui articol este de a ilustra cum tematica crizei climatice a pătruns în literatura norvegiană, oferind exemple care arată cum texte care nu sunt considerate în mod tipic ca aparţinând genului cli-fi au potenţialul de a aborda această tematică.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: naraţiuni despre schimbări climatice, ficţiune norvegiană contemporană, societatea riscului, fenomene meteorologice extreme, masculinităţi ecologice, grijă, Brit Bildøen, Agnar Lirhus*

Introduction

In *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh argues that global warming defies rules of representation in contemporary realistic fiction. Underlining the idea that the modern novel was born "through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (2016, 17), Ghosh suggests that phenomena related to climatic disruptions such as storms, floods, and tornados are uncanny, improbable events that resist the modern novel's endeavour to create the illusion of realism. Thus, it becomes difficult to evoke such strange phenomena without entering the realm of fantasy, horror, or science fiction (24). Understanding cli-fi as "a new genre of science fiction", Ghosh indicates that the problem with this genre is that it is "made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future". As he explains, "[t]he future is but one aspect of the age of human-induced global warming: it also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present" (72). Therefore, if stories that thematise global warming are typically set in a temporally distant dimension, Ghosh suggests that the challenge in contemporary fiction is to depict climate change in a world that is not separated from ours, a challenge that few writers have undertaken.

When it comes to the Norwegian literary landscape, cli-fi writers such as Maja Lunde have prominently popularised the topic of climate change as a

literary theme. However, Lunde is not an isolated case. A series of studies that examine depictions of climate change in Norwegian literary texts outline the emergence of a rich literature that addresses the environmental crisis in a variety of narrative forms (Norheim 2017; Jakobsen 2020; Furuseth et al 2020).

In this article, I aim to explore how Norwegian fiction has been engaging with this topic outside the confines of what is typically considered the cli-fi genre, focusing on two recent novels, namely Brit Bildøen's *Sju dagar i august* (2014, translated as *Seven days in august* in 2016) and Agnar Lirhus's *Liten kokebok* ("Little cookbook", 2016). A similar endeavour was undertaken by Thorunn Gullaksen Endreson, Kristian Bjørkdahl, and Karen Lyke Syse (2017), who, taking as a point of departure Ghosh's thesis that global warming lacks visibility in "serious" fiction, sought to expound how the climate crisis is in fact present in Norwegian literature. In their study of four novels, among which *Liten kokebok* and *Sju dagar i august*, Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse contend that these texts only throw a pessimistic outlook on the relationship between humans and nature in the context of climate change. They conclude that these books "do not […] accomplish the potential that ecocritical scholars see in literature" (174).[2] In this article I take a different standpoint and, reading Bildøen's and Lirhus's novels through conceptual lenses that ecocriticism borrows from fields such as sociology or ecofeminism, one of my aims is to show that realistic literary renderings of climate change do show their potentiality to challenge readers' understanding of the Anthropocene.

On the other hand, while Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse (2017) see these texts as literary fiction, other scholars might refer to them as climate fiction. This is also the case in Rebecca Bærvahr's master thesis, where *Sju dagar i august* is analysed as a climate change novel (2021). While it is difficult to define it as a genre, cli-fi is generally understood as "fiction concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming" (Johns-Putra 2016, 267). However, probably due to the analogy with sci-fi, cli-fi is typically considered to describe those narratives about anthropogenic climate change that are set in a distant future. This is, at least, how Ghosh refers to cli-fi when arguing that global warming lacks visibility in mainstream literary fiction (2016, 72). Therefore, I argue that cli-fi is a confusing term and a loose label to describe these novels. To narrow down my perspective, I rather consider them as illustrations of what Adam Trexler (2015) names 'Anthropocene realism', as the effects of climate change are not imagined as apocalyptic scenarios of the end of the world but are entwined with the characters' everyday life and with their

[2] "disse bøkene [realiserer ikke] potensialet som økokritikerne mener ligger i skjønnlitteraturen" (Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse 2017, 174, my translation).

emotions. As Trexler suggests, contemporary fiction about the Anthropocene illustrates "a wider transformation of human culture", that no longer perceives climate change as "a final disaster that could be endlessly deferred" (2015, 233). In reality, the environmental crisis unfolds on a larger, global scale and has many-sided implications. In this way, "[t]he creation of Anthropocene realism marks a profound shift in the understanding of climate change itself, from something that ought not to exist to something that already does" (233).

Otherwise, it might be useful to make a distinction between dystopian cli-fi and more realistic climate change narratives. To underline how literary texts can engage with the topic of the ecological crisis in diverse ways, Juha Raipola (2019) also distinguishes between realistic and speculative climate narratives. As he explains,

> these two modes of cli-fi differ in their basic narrative orientation. For instance, in realistic climate novels, the theme of climate change is usually examined in a rather subdued manner. To support the illusion of literary realism, these narratives are set in relatively familiar surroundings of the present day or a very-near-future world, where recognisable human characters ponder the effects of global warming. Questions relating to climate change are usually brought up by the narrator or the characters in their dialogue, while the fictional world itself remains mostly quotidian (2019, 8).

Besides the construction of a familiar, recognisable storyworld, realistic cli-fi also differs in the manner it thematises the climate crisis. Raipola underlines that speculative texts represent climate change as a social-material process and portray the negative effects of environmental disasters on both human and non-human lives. In contrast, realistic climate fiction lays emphasis on "the various affective and cognitive responses – such as eco-anxiety, climate sorrow, or climate change denial – evoked by the global environmental situation" (2019, 8). The texts I discuss in this article depict realistic scenarios while invoking such affective responses as those mentioned by Raipola.

As such, the aim of this paper is to investigate how the climate crisis is addressed in two contemporary Norwegian novels: Bildøen's *Sju dagar i august* and Lirhus's *Liten kokebok*. I analyse the two books separately, using different conceptual frameworks in order to show how diverse literary responses to climate change can be. Despite these different approaches, I ultimately seek to show how this topic looms in Norwegian realistic fiction in close association with other themes, such as trauma, grief, and family relationships. In the next section, drawing on Ulrich Beck's "risk society" (1986), I cast light on the representation and perception of risk in *Sju dagar i august*, a novel which thematises climate change under the form of extreme weather. Afterwards,

taking into consideration the concept of "ecological masculinities", proposed by Martin Hultman and Paul M. Pulé (2018), I analyse how the protagonist in *Liten kokebok* explores forms of care towards nature and human others through the act of cooking. In the fourth section of this article, I cast light on the similarities between these novels, emphasising how their characters' perceptions of the environmental crisis are shaped by feelings and emotions, but also by their social identity. I thus finally suggest that climate change imagery in Norwegian realistic fiction is often interwoven with an affective dimension, that brings to light how individual experiences and emotions influence perceptions of climate change.

Extreme Weather and Risk in *Sju dagar i august*

In his book *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in ein andere Moderne*, originally published in 1986 and translated into English as *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity* in 1992, German sociologist Ulrich Beck outlines the emergence of a risk society, defining risk as "a systematic way of dealing with hazard and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (1992, 21). Risk society is understood as a 'break with modernity', because, as Beck explains, "[j]ust as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being" (10). As such, a new, reflexive modernity takes birth, which "is compelled to respond to the forces of modernization, to the 'unforeseen consequences' or 'side-effects' of the scientific and technological successes of an earlier, industrial modernity" (Mayer 2016, 497). Thus, if industrial society is characterised by technological and economic development, the emerging risk society is rather defined by the production of risk (Beck 1992, 13). Beck refers to those humanly fabricated risks that, as a result of globalisation, move beyond national borders and become global risks. In this way, 'world risk society' would be a better term to refer to the new phase of modernity (23). In a more recent study, *World at risk* (2009), Beck indicates that we are currently facing three major forms of global risks, namely economic threats, terrorism, and risks provoked by environmental crises (13).

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that "[r]isk always exists in the context of uncertainty" (Garland 2003, 52). Showing that risk is the anticipation of a catastrophe and not the catastrophe itself (Beck 2009, 9), Beck underlines that staging or mediating global dangers in order to render them more perceptible is essential for impending potential disastrous effects (10). Beck understands risk as "the perceptual and cognitive schema in accordance with which a society mobilises itself when it is confronted with the openness,

uncertainties and obstructions of a self-created future" (2009, 4). Thus, the sense of uncertainty generated by risk "involves perceptual, affective, evaluative, and imaginative processes", as Alexa Weik von Mossner and Sylvia Mayer underline (2014, 7). In this context, literature plays an important role, because fiction has the potential to "explore the complexity of *individual* risk experiences" (12). Staging extreme weather as an impeding environmental risk, Bildøen's *Sju dagar i august* illustrates such personal perceptions of climate change threats.

The novel depicts Sofie and Otto's marriage eight years after losing Sofie's daughter, Marie, in the terrorist attack on the Utøya island on 22 July 2011. Published in 2014, the story is thus set in 2019, a near, recognisable future for its contemporary readers. Sofie occupies a leading position at the Munch Museum in Oslo, while Otto is leader at the Foundation for the Romani people. In the span of one week, a series of accidents and unfortunate events menace to disturb their lives: Sofie is bitten by a tick, a violent summer storm ravages the country and damages their cabin, Otto gets injured after falling on the stairs, his son living in Australia has problems with his health insurance, and the two birch trees on their street are cut down.

After its publication, the novel was mostly read with a focus on the Utøya theme and the depiction of trauma (Langås 2016; Gjelsvik 2020). Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, scholars have also identified climate change as a central theme of the novel. Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse draw attention to the apocalyptic discourse of the novel (2017, 166). Bærvahr argues that, despite the gloomy scenario, *Sju dagar i august* has the ability to incite readers to find solutions towards mitigating the effects of the impending climate crisis, by engaging readers' emotions (2021, 48). Importantly, employing perspectives from affective ecocriticism, her study of the novel illuminates how the Utøya theme and the climate change theme are related. Building upon Bærvahr's valuable insight, I intend to add a new perspective upon the understanding of the novel and explore its portrayal of risk society. Thus, I seek to show that the materialisation of the climate crisis as extreme weather is rather a depiction of risk and not a doomsday portrayal of climate change, as it has been suggested by Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse (2017). The characters of the novel are not so much directly affected by the hazards generated by the environmental crisis that frames the narrative, but perceive the climatic instability as a risk that may or may not affect their lives.

The first lines of the novel illustrate a mundane scene in Sofie and Otto's life, who are discussing their plans for the evening while setting the table and having lunch together. They chat about the opening of an exhibition at the Munch Museum which they are going to attend later that day, while the narrator's voice offers insight into their life. They had moved from the west side of Oslo, the rich part of the city, to Tøyen, a central residential area that is

referred to as a 'multicultural' neighbourhood. With a comfortable financial situation and attuned to Oslo's cultural and artistic world, their problems seemingly turn around social events and their relationships with friends and colleagues. But an underlying sense of disquietude evoked by the unusual weather discreetly enters their home from the beginning: "The veranda door was cracked open, allowing air and noise to filter in. Dust from the street accompanied the air, leaving behind a thin, grey film on top of picture frames and books" (Bildøen 2016, 4).[3] When she leaves the house that evening, Sofie observes how the birch leaves have started to wither, wondering whether it is not too soon for the trees to lose their leaves at that time of the year, but acknowledging that "the late summer had been dry" (24).[4] Besides, Sofie has a tick bite on her arm, that Otto first observes during lunch, when he tells her she should get it checked by a doctor. Sofie, however, does not seem to take it seriously, not even when she wakes up during the night due to the swallowing inflammation on her arm. Ignoring what potential dangers she might be exposed to, she instead starts wishing for the materialisation of a change, as a foreshadow of the events that would unfold throughout the following days: "What was it that she hoped would materialize outside? Something unusual. That was what she wanted. A surprise. Change" (28).[5]

The next day, a more acute feeling of insecurity pervades the life of the characters. When Sofie reads the newspaper in the evening, she starts feeling uneasy about the forecasted rainstorm, although there has been a lack of rain for the last months:

> There had been talk throughout the week of an early autumnal storm expected to come over the southern part of the country, bringing an exceptional amount of precipitation. It had been so dry in the last months, so there were many who would welcome the rain. But these storms were unpredictable. Sofie was uneasy about what was coming (62).[6]

Sofie's bad feeling about the announced rain institutes a sense of insecurity that finally comes true when, the next morning, she and Otto wake

[3] "Verandadøra stod på gløtt og sleppte inn luft og lyd. Saman med lufta kom gatestøvet, som la seg som ein tynn, grå film på bilderammer og bøker" (Bildøen 2014, 8).

[4] "seinsommaren hadde vore tørr" (Bildøen 2014, 25).

[5] "Kva var det ho ville skulle openberre seg der ute? Eit uvanleg syn. Det var det ho ønskte seg. Ei overrasking. Forandring" (Bildøen 2014, 27).

[6] "Heile veka hadde det vore snakk om at ein tidleg hauststorm var venta inn over den sørlege delen av landet, med usedvanleg mykje nedbør. Så tørt som det hadde vore den siste månaden, var det mange som ønskte regnet velkommen. Men desse stormane var uføreseielege. Ho var uroleg for det som var på veg" (Bildøen 2014, 57).

up to the news of the damage done by the severe weather during the night. The TV broadcasting shows how the eastern part of the country had been ravaged by the heavy rainfall, causing floods that wreaked havoc on bridges and houses, while many people are missing or thought to be dead. Eating their breakfast in front of the TV, memories of the Utøya terrorist attack resurface as the tragedy caused by the extreme weather unfurls before their eyes:

> They could stay sitting like this for the entire day, as they had done during similar televised catastrophes. […] [Sofie] stared at the screen but seemed to be somewhere else. It's been eight years, he thought. Eight years and nearly one month since they sat on the same sofa, but in a different house, on the other side of the city, taking in another catastrophe on the screen, the start of the catastrophe that would envelop and take over their lives (76).[7]

Interestingly, both the attacks on Utøya where Sofie's daughter was murdered and the rainstorm are perceived as catastrophes. But the storm has not directly and catastrophically affected their personal life. Instead, the risk is rendered perceptible by television. The disastrous effects of the rainstorm are presented, almost with insistency, as a series of images unfolding on a screen: "On the screen, the water continued sweeping through buildings and towns, grinding anything it encountered to smithereens" (80), "On the screen, a report of a rural village where an entire mountainside had slid down" (82).[8]

Moreover, Sofie observes that the staging of risk in mass media has become an ordinary practice: "Words that at one time had characterized extremes had now become everyday speech. The experts could just as well have been discussing cheese and crackers" (74).[9] In one way, this suggests that the discourse about extreme weather becomes so normalised that it is no longer shocking. Beck shows that "[g]lobal risk, through its omnipresence in the media, normalises death and suffering, not just as an individual fate but also as a collective one, even though for most people suffering is synonymous with images of the suffering of others" (Beck 2009, 12). Dismayed and compassionate

[7] "Slik kunne dei bli sitjande heile dagen, som dei hadde gjort under liknande tv-dekte katastrofar. […] [Sofie] stirte mot skjermen, men det verka som om ho var ein annan stad. Åtte år sidan, tenkte han. Åtte år og om lag ein månad sidan dei sat i same sofaen, men i et anna hus, på ein annan kant av byen, da fekk dei også ein katastrofe inn på skjermen, starten på den katastrofen som skulle vekse inn i og ta over livet deira" (Bildøen 2014, 69).

[8] "På skjermen rasa vatnet vidare gjennom bygder og byar og mol alt det kom over, til pinneved" (Bildøen 2014, 73), "På skjermen var det eit innslag frå ei innlandsbygd der ei heil fjellside hadde glidd ut" (75).

[9] "Orda som ein gong hadde karakterisert det ekstreme, var blitt daglegtale. Ekspertane kunne like gjerne ha snakka om brunost og grovbrød" (Bildøen 2014, 68).

towards the victims of the rainfall, Sofie is still able to enjoy the comfort of her own home, watching the news wrapped in a blanket and eating her breakfast in the sofa. Therefore, it might seem that actual experience of the catastrophe is confused here with empathy.

Nonetheless, in spite of television's alarmist discourse, global threats, including climate change risks, do not become less real, as Beck also underlines (2009, 13). The novel ingeniously alludes to this by projecting the risk of climate change in the shadow of the terrorist attack. On 22 July 2011, the attack starts in Oslo, when a bomb is set off outside a block in the government quarter. When this happens, Sofie and Otto follow the news in dread, but they are relieved that all of their acquaintances are safe, only to soon find out that a massacre had started on Utøya, where their daughter was taking part in a youth camp. This time, although the catastrophe unleashed by extreme weather unfolds outside their reach, the characters are aware that, eventually, no one is fully protected from its consequences, just like eight years before the risk of terrorism became real when least expected.

A key point in Beck's understanding of risk society is that, although threats posed by global phenomena such as global warming affect all people regardless of their social status, these risks do nonetheless reinforce social inequalities. As he states, "[s]ome people are more affected than others by the distribution and growth of risks, that is, *social risk positions* spring up" (1992, 23). As Otto works with the Romani minorities in Oslo, the novel hints at the existence of these social risk positions by pointing towards Otto and Sofie's privileged status compared to the Romani people living in tents, directly exposed to the dangers of extreme weather.

Their privilege is best illustrated by the dinner party organised by some of their friends the evening after the rainstorm. They still attend the event, despite Sofie expressing her opinion that the dinner should have been cancelled. She wears a Channel dress denoting their financial comfort, while the other guests, psychologists, lawyers or journalists, are presented as rich and educated people, informed about political issues and human rights. As such, they inevitably start a discussion on the disaster provoked by the weather, debating on human responsibility in the context of climate change. Ironically, however, they have the privilege of doing this while enjoying a fancy dinner: "This evening the conversation veered naturally towards the bad weather deep into the main course. The large platter was sent around the table, light veal, artfully arranged vegetables" (Bildøen 2016, 88).[10] The way they allow themselves to comment on the unfolding catastrophe in such a context exposes how risks affect people in different social positions unevenly.

[10] "Denne kvelden dreidde samtalen seg naturleg nok om uvêret, til langt inn i hovudretten. Eit stor fat vandra rundt bordet, lyst kalvekjøt, kunstferdig danderte grønsaker" (Bildøen 2014, 80).

It is important to note that the tick bite on Sofie's arm adds to the sense of risk induced by the storm. Bærvahr interprets the rainstorm and the tick bite as literary motifs that generate the feeling of "Anthropocene horror" (2021, 30), a term used by Timothy Clark to describe "a sense of horror about the changing environment globally, usually as mediated by news reports and expert predictions, giving a sense of threats that need not be anchored to any particular place, but which are both everywhere and anywhere" (2020, 61). As this definition indicates, the concept of Anthropocene horror encompasses the same idea of threat, and I would therefore add that the tick bite is another example of climate change risk, although much more subtly represented, because Sofie is the only one affected by it in the novel. She and Otto observe that there had been more ticks than usual around their cabin, which could be a consequence of climatic disruptions. Bærvahr also notes that, although this is not explicitly presented in the novel, the tick bite can be seen as a side effect of climate change. She refers to a report presented by the Norwegian Directorate of Health in 2010, which underlines that consequences of climate change include an increase in the number of diseases spread for instance by mosquitos or ticks (2021, 32). The tick bite on Sofie's arm finally suggests that global dangers can materialise as personal risks, even though we do not always acknowledge environmental issues as the underlying causes of these risks. While extreme weather can be more directly linked to climate change, I would argue that, seeing the tick bite as an illustration of environmental risk, the demarcation line between personal risk and global dangers become blurred.

Otherwise, the only place where Sofie and Otto more directly experience the consequences of extreme weather is at their cabin. When they drive there at the end of the week, they find the entrance door open, and the inside ravaged by the storm. For them, and especially for Sofie, the cabin is a place of freedom where she can enjoy nature. Therefore, the storm looms as a threat to their own sense of stability and security. Another unfortunate event, albeit not necessarily related to climate change, but which similarly affects Sofie's feeling of stability is when the birch trees on their street are cut down. Showing how the cabin and the birches are symbols of nature, which are both menaced by extreme weather and human activity, Bærvahr suggests that Sofie's grief for the disappearing nature can be understood as solastalgia (2021, 40). Solastalgia is namely a term used by Albrecht Glenn to describe the feeling of melancholia or distress "caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (2005, 48). This concept thus illuminates how mental distress is illustrated in the novel as a negative effect of the environmental crisis. Considering Sofie's nervous breakdown when she witnesses the stripped tree trunks, the distress provoked by the loss of nature juxtaposes against her personal trauma.

It thus seems that, to deal with her emotions, Sofie needs more security and stability in her life. At the end of the novel, she and Otto decide to buy a house where Sofie could finally have her own garden, a decision which can be understood as a need to anchor themselves in nature's concrete presence and stability. As I have implied throughout my analysis, Sofie's perception and experiences of nature's disruptions cannot be separated from her privileged social status, that in a way diminishes risk or makes it seem it can be deferred. In my understanding, having the possibility to enjoy a retreat in nature at one's own cabin, affording to buy a house or even postponing to see a doctor, when one's life is in danger and has all the means to do so, are all symbols of privilege, that may give Sofie and her husband the illusion that they can keep control of possible risks that spring up in their lives. The novel's open ending suggests however that extreme weather, as an impending materialisation of global warming, menaces all lives, including their own. As such, when a new rainstorm is about to begin, the looming risk of climate change envelops the novel's ending and the characters' future in a sense of acute uncertainty.

The idea of finding solace in nature as a way of coming to terms with personal loss is also developed in *Liten kokebok*, which further explores forms of care towards nature as a way of mitigating the effects of the environmental crisis. Published two years after *Sju dagar i august*, Lirhus's novel interestingly depicts a different side of what it means to live in a climate changed world.

Food and Care in Agnar Lirhus's *Liten kokebok*

Liten kokebok tells the story of a man and a woman's separation, focusing on the unnamed male character's relationship with his two daughters. The novel renders the protagonist's exploration of the natural processes occurring in his environment and his attempt to become part of nature's cycle by cultivating his own food or cooking with ingredients he can find in the surroundings of his home and composting organic matter. His efforts to live sustainably and ecologically are linked to the larger context of global warming, as the novel suggests, for instance, when the main character observes that "[l]ast year it was two degrees warmer than the average. It was written in the newspaper that it is both an exception and a trend" (Lirhus 2016, 44).[11] Along the novel, the main character explores and questions his role and place in nature, while cultivating his relationship with his daughters and coming to terms with the separation from his wife.

[11] "Fjoråret var to grader varmere enn gjennomsnittet. Det er både et unntak og en trend, sto det i avisa" (Lirhus 2016, 44, my translation).

Liten kokebok has been read as a romantic depiction of the relationship between man and nature (Endreson, Bjørkdahl, and Syse 2017). In this way, as a reaction to the personal crisis provoked by the end of his marriage, the protagonist chooses to withdraw in nature, while food and cooking allow him to contribute in a certain way in the cycle of nature. While it is certainly true that his views on the environment are rather traditional and romantic, I argue that the story essentially shows how care for nature and care for children are fundamentally entwined. Bearing in mind that the novel's main character is a man, this double manifestation of care is all the more interesting to investigate if we take into account the question of gender. Because gender is considered to influence individual attitudes towards nature, I argue that this perspective offers a better understanding of the novel's potential to illuminate some of the most important challenges when dealing with the environmental crisis.

An important strand in ecocriticism, ecofeminism introduced the discussion about gender in the relationship between humans and nature towards the end of the twentieth century. Early studies in ecofeminism revealed how, in Western tradition, women are associated with nature, emotions and the unconscious, while men are associated with culture and reason, in a way that allowed men throughout history to dominate and exploit both women and the environment (Griffin 1978; Merchant 1980). To fight against this "logic of domination" (Warren 1990), the position embraced by the first ecofeminists was "to attack the hierarchy by reversing the terms, exalting nature, irrationality, emotion and the human or non-human body as against culture, reason and the mind" (Garrard 2004, 24). This standpoint thus suggests that women are the ones endowed with the ability to protect and take care of the environment. However, this "motherhood environmentalism", as Catriona Sandilands calls it, is in fact a dangerous discourse for both women and nature, as its neoconservative nuances entail a return to patriarchal family values (1999, xiii). In the meantime, other scholars, such as Mark Allister (2004), have tried to move beyond socially constructed ideas of masculinity and, joining together ecocriticism and men's studies, attempted at exploring the multiple relationships between men and nature.

A notable contribution to this discussion is Martin Hultman and Paul M. Pulé's study titled *Ecological Masculinities. Theoretical Foundations and Practical Guidance* (2018), where the authors essentially argue that masculine identities are plural and have the capacity to align with environmental goals. In this sense, they propose the concept of 'ecological masculinities', in the attempt to define a set of attitudes and values that pair male identities with ecological perspectives. Feminist care theory is one stream of thought that inspired their model of ecological masculinities as an alternative to the industrial/breadwinner

masculinities. In my analysis, I also focus primarily on the idea of care, which, as Teresa Requena-Pelegrí explains, "has historically been antagonized from normative definitions of masculinity" (2017, 143) because it is "[t]raditionally coded as feminine and thus relegated to the undervalued realm of emotions" (143). Arguing that, in fact, "men possess ethics of care, but how that care manifests is defined by gender identity, relationships and individual lived experiences", Hultman and Pulé advocate the need to embrace expressions of care that move beyond the preservation of male domination (2018, 166). In their conceptualisation of ecological masculinities, they thus contend that "*all masculinities have infinite capacities to care, which can be expressed towards Earth, human others and ourselves – simultaneously*" (2018, 228). In my reading of *Liten kokebok*, I am concerned with the concept of care, because I believe it illuminates best the way in which the main character uses food to explore his relationship with nature in a climate changed world. In what follows, I thus seek to shed light on how this novel depicts expressions of masculine care both towards human beings and towards the Earth.

The value of care in Lirhus's novel is notably illustrated by the act of cooking, which carries paramount significance in this context. While providing cooked food is traditionally considered to be an expression of feminine, motherly nurture (Szabo 2020, 408), in *Liten kokebok*, it is the male protagonist who takes responsibility over the preparation of food for his family. He cooks healthy meals for his daughters, while his wife, who is struggling with the rebound effects of a mental condition, is mostly isolated from her family, and decides to live with her parents for a period, until she and her husband finally decide to end their marriage. However, this does not imply that his wife's situation is the only reason that made the protagonist assume the role of the caregiver and, certainly, depicting a man in such a role is not necessarily surprising, especially when reading the novel in a Scandinavian context. As Michelle Szabo underlines, while in most of the countries around the world it is generally women who are responsible for food preparation in the family, "[m]en in Scandinavia in particular seem to have embraced home cooking" (2020, 407–408). Moreover, in *Liten kokebok*, meal preparation, along with other household chores, such as washing dishes, sweeping, and vacuuming, are everyday activities performed by the protagonist.

Importantly, however, cooking understood as caregiving carries a two-fold meaning, because it is a manifestation of care both towards children and family and towards the environment. Paying heed to what nature has to offer, the protagonist grows his own vegetables and fruits or makes use of what he finds in his surroundings, such as mushrooms, berries, nettles, or seafood. Concerned to find sustainable solutions, he stores food in his freezer for the winter and composts food waste, which he later uses as a fertiliser for his

garden and trees. His daughters often take part in these activities. They pick berries or nettles together with their father and help him in the work with the compost bin: "The older one helps him turn the compost bin upside down, they dig out the darkest material and strain it through a mesh frame, into the wheelbarrow" (Lirhus 2016, 48).[12] Involving his children in his work in the garden and in the process of food preparation is also a way of caring. In this way, the character builds a relationship with his daughters, while passing on knowledge about the environment and cultivating their respect for nature, as a way of ensuring that the earth will be taken care of by future generations.

From another angle, creating a relationship with the natural world also helps the protagonist cope with the feeling of loss caused by the separation from his wife. As a way of coming to terms with this personal crisis, the act of cooking and cultivating plants brings a sense of stability in his life, because it creates a connection with the concrete presence of nature. For instance, the day after his wife tells him she wants to buy an apartment for herself, he goes and plants a cherry tree in the garden. Besides, the rhythms in nature, the changing seasons which he pays great attention to impose a certain routine and balance in the character's life. Although unexpected changes occur both in his personal life and in the physical world, he is concerned with the ways one can best respond to these changes, without provoking more harm:

> Any change must be rooted in love, for change without love is to destroy. The farmer who ploughs the land must be loving. The hiker who walks over hyphae and root nets must be good. Those who lie together, with closed eyes and clenched fists, must be full of consideration. The forester who cuts down a tree, must plant a tree. The one who picks blueberries must be careful and not take the roots with them (Lirhus 2016, 74).[13]

In this paragraph, care for Earth is clearly intertwined with care for human others. Treating both nature and humans with love and kindness can be understood as an intentional act of overcoming negative emotions related to the separation from his wife and loss of nature. Requena-Pelegrí explains that "defining care for the environment as intertwined with the construction of an identity as a father and as a man, caregiving becomes an essential category in

[12] "Den store hjelper han med å endevende kompostbingen, de graver ut den mørkeste materien og siler den gjennom en nettingramme, over i trillebåra" (Lirhus 2016, 48, my translation).

[13] "Enhver forandring må være tuftet på kjærlighet, for å forandre uten kjærlighet er å ødelegge. Bonden som pløyer jorda må være kjærlig. Turgåeren som trekker over hyfer og rotnett, må være god. De som ligger sammen, med lukkede øyne og knyttede never, må være fulle av omtanke. Skogvokteren som feller et tre, må plante et tre. Den som plukker blåveis, må være forsiktig og ikke ta med røttene" (Lirhus 2016, 74, my translation).

formulating non-dominant definitions of masculinity" (2017, 149). As a father, the protagonist already finds himself in a position where he must care for his children. Aware of the Earth's vulnerability in a climate changed world, fostering love and nurture towards nature becomes part of the process of understanding the need to find means of living and providing for the family in ways that do not harm the environment. As such, a form of ecological masculinity emerges from his attempt to act caringly.

Although the protagonist does not conform to the image of the traditional, patriarchal Western figure of the man, the novel does not illustrate a "perfect" character, but lays bare some symptoms of malestream norms (Hultman and Pulé 2018, 231). For instance, the tendency to associate nature with femininity becomes evident when he states that "the buds on trees and shreds resemble the first hints of breasts" (Lirhus 2016, 53)[14] and his intention to take the hunting licence divulges the tendency to dominate nature through violence. However, manifesting violence is clearly not his intention, and I would argue that these are socially constructed ideas of hegemonic masculinity that he has yet to overcome in the process of building his identity.[15] This process also presumes becoming aware of certain ideas, behaviours or attitudes that are not always easy to identify as gendered socialisations. This paradox is best illustrated in the ending scene of the novel, when the protagonist hits a murre with his car, which is highly suggestive for the idea that men living in the structures of today's Western society often have to confront the causes that essentially lead to climate change as a result of a tradition imposed by malestream norms. The car is a strong symbol of ideals of masculinity in the Western world. Cara Daggett uses the term "petro-masculinity" to conceptualise "the historic relationship between fossil fuels and white patriarchal rule" (2018, 29) as a way of understanding "the authoritarian desires and anxieties aroused by the Anthropocene" (29). When the protagonist realises he had hit a murre, he gets out of his car, checks the bird and then takes it to the seashore where he sets it free. In a way, the scene is ironic, because the character's intention to take care of the animal, and to generally act with care towards the Earth, is overshadowed by the larger societal structures that are at the roots of the ecological crisis, which fossil-fuel industry has largely contributed to. Therefore, it remains a question of how petro-masculinities, and ultimately all forms of masculinities that place men in positions of authority and domination, can be countered to redress the negative impact of human activity. On a more positive note, this scene also suggests that

[14] "knoppene på trær og busker ligner de første antydningene til bryster" (Lirhus 2016, 53, my translation).

[15] For the concept of hegemonic masculinities, see Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005).

caregiving can be a good starting point to begin repairing the damage done towards the earth.

Affective Responses to the Climate Crisis

In *Liten kokebok*, care for children and nature ultimately becomes an expression of care towards oneself, because acting caringly is part of the process of overcoming negative emotions like grief, sadness, and anxiety. Likewise, Sofie in *Sju dagar i august* constantly tries to find solace in nature as a way of coping with the trauma caused by the death of her daughter. But the reality of climate change becomes more perceptible in Bildøen's novel, as the characters are confronted with the impending risk of extreme weather.

However, natural disruptions, although smaller in scale, also occur in Lirhus's novel. After their separation, when asked by his wife if he needs help with anything, the protagonist avoids the question and would rather prefer talking about the oak tree "that fell during the first winter storm" and is now lying "across the path, over the meadow covered in snow, like a wounded mammoth" (Lirhus 2016, 38).[16] Similarly to Sofie's attachment for the birch trees in *Sju dagar i august*, the protagonist in *Liten kokebok* is also visibly affected by the loss of nature. But feelings of solastalgia and eco-anxiety – understood as "a mash up of negative emotions like worry, guilt, and sadness" (Kurt and Pihkala 2022) give birth to care as a response to both the personal crisis and the environmental crisis. As I have tried to show through my analysis, this manifestation of care is expressed through food and cooking.

Interestingly, food also appears as a symbol of care in Bildøen's novel. For instance, when a woman comes to ask for Otto at his office at the Foundation for the Romani people, Sofie offers her money to buy herself and her child some food. Otto also expresses his concern for Sofie's health when he notices she looks thin and gives her his portion of food. In the numerous scenes where the two are eating together, sharing food is symbolically associated with love and care for each other. However, in *Sju dagar i august*, food does not become a symbol of care towards the environment as it happens in Lirhus's book. In fact, there is one particular episode that suggests the contrary. When Sofie and Karin meet at a restaurant, they decide to order wild salmon, despite Sofie's comment that wild fish colonies are menaced with extinction: "But should we really polish off the remaining salmon colonies?" (Bildøen 2016, 199).[17] Moreover, Karin does not even eat up all her food, leaving leftovers on her plate, which are later

[16] "eika som falt i den første vinterstormen", "ligger tvers over stien, utøver den snødekte enga, som en såret mammut" (Lirhus 2016, 38, my translation).

[17] "Men skal vi verkeleg ete opp den vesle laksestammen som er att?" (Bildøen 2014, 172).

simply thrown away. The dinner party discussed in an earlier section also indicates that food can be a symbol of privilege, especially in a context of crisis, as the one provoked by the rainstorm. As such, taking a closer look at the way food is represented in *Sju dagar i august* emphasises how eating habits in *Liten kokebok* are seen as a way of taking care of the environment.

Finally, these two novels remind us that the climate crisis, unfolding as a large scale, global phenomenon, affects our lives in the most intimate ways, questioning our relationships to the environments we inhabit, as well as our relationships to other human beings. My readings of these texts have brought up questions of social roles and identity. In the analysis of Bildøen's novel, I have underlined how economic privilege influences perceptions of risk. Despite the sense of control that social status might create, it is not less true that Sofie goes through a process of grief that is related both to the loss of her daughter and loss of nature. In this way, the novel thus shows that the climate crisis can provoke strong emotional responses, and casts light upon mental distress as an effect of climate change. On the other hand, Lirhus's novel explores masculine relationships to nature. Similarly to Sofie, the protagonist in *Liten kokebok* also deals with loss in his personal life, while he is deeply concerned with the destruction of nature. Caregiving as a response to these crises thus emerges as a form of ecological masculinity. It therefore seems that the reality of climate change is shaped by social identity and is strongly influenced by individual emotional experiences.

Conclusions

The two novels analysed in this article illustrate examples of what Raipola (2019) defines as realistic narratives of climate change, as they explore affective and cognitive responses to the ecological crisis. Using the concepts of risk society and ecological masculinities, I have tried to unveil the potential of realistic fiction to engage with the topic of climate change. My analysis thus shows how literary explorations of affective responses to climate change can reveal important questions about the many individual ways of dealing with the unfolding ecological crisis.

This article also tried to illustrate some examples of how climate change has pervaded recent Norwegian literature. On the one hand, texts engaging with themes related to ecological issues reinforce the value of nature in Norwegian literature, showing how writers are concerned to bring attention to the problems at stake for the environment. On the other hand, bearing in mind Ghosh's observation that climate change resists the modern novel, these texts show how realistic fiction has the potential to portray global warming. However,

it is true that none of these novels directly depicts those uncanny events Ghosh refers to, but both allude to them, almost as a commentary on the realist novel's incapacity to represent strange events related to climate disruptions. The severe effects of the rainstorm in *Sju dagar i august* are not perceived directly by the characters, but are mostly mediated by television and presented as an impending risk. And just as Sofie longs for the materialisation of a change out in nature, a similar wish, albeit more extreme, is expressed by the protagonist in *Liten kokebok*: "what he wishes most of all is a massive catastrophe. Land sinking. Mountains collapsing" (Lirhus 2016, 27).[18] This makes one wonder whether Norwegian writers' strategies to depict climate change is not so much addressing it directly, but rather disguising it under the mask of more common tropes, such as trauma or family. This is not to say that realistic climate fiction is not a legitimate response to the challenge of representing the environmental crisis. Instead, I would argue that the ways they reveal how the implications of climate change are extremely intricate and often subtle is precisely why this type of literary texts are worth further exploring with greater attention to the nuances they evince.

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[18] "det han ønsker seg mest av alt, er en diger katastrofe. Land som synkes. Fjell som kollapses" (Lirhus 2016, 27, my translation).

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