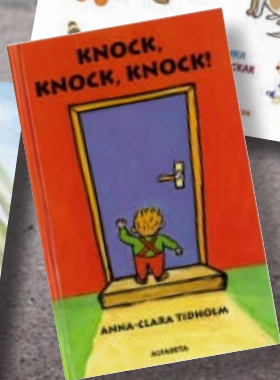


# ANNA-CLARA TIDHOLM





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NOMINATED FOR  
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by the Swedish Section of IBBY



ALFABETA  
BOKFÖRLAG



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# A child's perspective as a constant point of departure: Anna-Clara Tidholm and the road to a completely new picture book

*Picture book characters? I have hardly created a single one, at least no one of those 'beloved' ones as they usually say about picture book characters. If there is one it would be that little chap with the round hat and a dog called Hej.*



*My interest in such characters has been minimal. The main reason is in fact that I am so incredibly bad at drawing a figure that looks the same throughout a whole book. Another reason is that it is dull work drawing the same figure on every page in eighteen books. I have even made children's books without any characters. And I have a theory that children get more involved in picture books without any people in them at all – I make the child reading a book into the main character, quite simply. (Anna-Clara Tidholm in a letter to the author 2007, transl. by David Isitt)*

“To catch the child's perspective”, says Anna-Clara Tidholm, “is probably what most preoccupies and inspires me: to try to begin from the same level and perspective as that from a child's eyes. How do children perceive their lives? How can I as an adult recreate their perspective?”

This theory of 'the child's perspective' was developed over nearly 40 years of her own writing and illustrating children's books. This took place about a decade after her debut as an illustrator in the 1970's and a few years after her breakthrough with the experimental and still avant garde picture book “Åkeboken” (“The Åke Book”, 1983; text by her husband Thomas Tidholm, poet and musician.)



Then already by the beginning of the 1980's did they develop their joint view of the picture book as story telling without the need of traditional (adult) dramaturgy, since children have not acquired the same literary expectations as adults, they “assemble” a plot on significantly looser grounds, as in this case, scene after scene linked together into a rather loose, open and impressionist construction.

In 1987 their book “Resan till Ugri-la-Brek” was published (“The Journey to Ugri-la-Brek”, awarded with the Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis 1992). Here two children are looking for their grandfather.



Anna-Clara Tidholm shows how they, a bit afraid and lost, look into his apartment, the door ajar behind them and the dog in front of them in the room, the apartment is empty, his eye glasses still there thus leaving him without the ability to fill in the form for the foot-

ball pools. Then after the children after many adventures and a long journey to “the Other side of the World” find him to hand him his eyeglasses, she chooses the same composition, the same scenography, to demonstrate how limited and dependent on reality the imagination of children is.

In the parallel image, the children display the same hesitation as in the first picture, the open door behind them and the dog in front of them, in the same yet slightly different room. Their grandfather is sitting in his chair and reassures them that he is fine and that he does not need his eyeglasses any more.



They cannot imagine his new existence differently: that grandfather perhaps (probably) is dead is never mentioned or shown. This fact has to be concluded by every child who is prepared to do so. The pictures (as well as text) express their only possible perspective, the child's perspective, and they are in this sense profoundly “childological”.



Playing, the children work themselves toward their truth about their grandfather's disappearance. Anna-Clara Tidholm emphasises this perhaps mostly by letting them wear different clothes: in the framing pictures they wear one set of clothes while they have different sets during the travel, their play.

While the text demonstrates the child's perspective using children's choice of words, syntax, children's cognitive framework and concepts, Anna-Clara Tidholm expands on the child's perspective through a "naïve" style: this is how a child might draw. A rather common, typical human portrayal with more en face and camera-looks than profiles and abbreviations; naïve and unfolded spatial perspectives and simple, rough techniques typical for children. She mainly uses water color for her drawings with clear and soft out lines. Occasionally she resorts to children's crayons or color pencils of more pale nuances, giving the impression of a spontaneous and naïve formalizing, thus text and illustration cooperate in a naïve perspective in solidarity with the child. This is an artistic and aesthetic challenge, at the same time deliberately close to children's ways of expressing themselves in words and pictures.

### **Psychological/existential themes in picture books for pre-school children**

Anna-Clara Tidholm has repeatedly returned to difficult and psychologically dark and worrying themes in a number of picture books – jointly with her husband Thomas Tidholm in several books that have become classics, and also in co-operation with other authors. She has also produced picture books on her own, such as a story about psychological crisis in "Hanna, huset, hunden" ("Hanna, the House, the Dog"), which has attracted wide-



spread attention (nominated for the August Prize in 2004).

Her third cooperation with the author Ulf Nilsson for "Adjö, Herr Muffin" ("Good bye, Mr. Muffin") which also deals with death, rendered them this very prize in 2002. This is a soft and warm story

about the last and lonely time of an old guinea pig. His family has been scattered and only his own thoughts about their past remain. This is a tender story about a good aging process of integration while death is unavoidably getting closer. Anna-Clara Tidholm pictures, in a rather naturalistic way, a carefully personified guinea pig (not dressed) living in a relationship with a caring owner/person in a tiny house with small furniture, a mailbox and a working mail system. The death process is told on the seven last spreads from the moment he is too weak to rise from his bed until the funeral is over and the reactions to his death begin to show (e.g. in the TV-news) in mildly ironical final scenes.

While “Good bye, Mr. Muffin” won immediate acclaim also among adult readers the most recent book by the Tidholms, “Snälla barn”



(“Nice Children”, 2007), encountered more skepticism among adult intermediaries. The story is about two half sisters who spend their afternoons alone at home after school. On this particular day both parents are late and the girls have to manage on their own until their father/stepfather returns.

Basically the story is without drama, it is a realistic description of life in a modern step family. The children act as a liason between the two absent parents, who try to direct their lives via cell phones rather than to cooperate. Anna-Clara Tidholm attempted initially to illustrate the book with her usual water color technique but almost at once turned to her children’s crayon technique. As in “Åke-boken”, in the deeply philosophical “Lanas land” (1996) and in “Hanna, huset, hunden”, there is in “Snälla barn” something unstated that sets the reader’s imagination in motion.

One suspects that this family life is not easy and one does not really know why the mother is late. There is a suggestion that this family perhaps will not stay together.

“Crayons and colour pencils allow for a higher degree of naïvité than water colour”, says Anna-Clara Tidholm. “They reduce the psychological temperature making it less



energetic, more everyday and closer to the child.” In spite of this many critics are of the opinion that the book is a painful demonstration of how exposed modern children are. One critic regarded the book as an apocalypse over modern family life, while school children of the same ages as the children in the book without difficulties seem to recognize themselves and their modern technical world where cordless telephones, remote controls and electronic gadgets compensate for absent adults during long and lonely afternoons.

### **How to to render history live for children**

Another track in Anna-Clara Tidholm’s illustrations concerns the problem of describing the past in a way possible to understand by children of today.

In their book “Förr i tiden i skogen” (“In the Old Days in the Forest”, nominated for the August Prize 1993) the Tidholms write about the revolution beginning in the middle of the 19th century in a poor Sweden. This is when a comprehensive literacy campaign was launched and compulsory education was introduced for the first time. The book shows how the royal emissary reads a decree sitting on



horseback outside the little cottage in the forest. Natan’s father is annoyed with these modern ideas and forces Natan to shoot squirrels on his way to and from school for the boy to be of at least some use. For Natan however the school, the reader and the elegant teacher are a decisive light in a tough and motherless existence.

In a following picture book with a historical motif, “Långa ben” (“Long legs”, 1999) the Tidholms depict another historical time



through the eyes of a child. The unruly and insecure migration period where every day is a struggle between “us” and “the others” for survival. The story is told in the voice of an anonymous child. These books render a kind of poetical version of how it might have been as a child at various points in time, when children frequently were at peril – times from which the experiences of children had not been sorted out as worthy of attention or depiction.

A similar historical theme is found in a comprehensive fact book, “Flickornas historia” (“The Girls History”, 1997) with text by Kristina



Lindström. Here we find Swedish history pictured through the lives of seventeen young women from various social classes, from the stone age to modern times. This book is intended for readers of school age. It is richly illustrated with softly drawn black and white vignettes with pictures the size of half a page as well as a number of full page coloured illustrations by Anna-Clara Tidholm.

In a current exhibition (still open during the summer season 2009) Anna-Clara Tidholm tries her pictorial story telling in a new kind of exhibition for children, “Hela livet förr i tiden” (“Whole Life in the Old Days” at the Hälsingland County Museum).

In cooperation with the russian-finnish scenic designer Alexander Reichstein she has created a new, three dimensional exhibition model in which the children walk along a village street between different houses. In a suggestive and living display various stations through life are depicted, from birth to death. The houses are constructed from a light metal and transparent cloth; they are heavily “illustrated” with full scale persons in various activities and furnished with few simple tools and toys from the period.



When children enter the houses they are surrounded by the people there, and there is a strong and magical feeling of having been invited to take part in the picture.

### **Toward the poetics of the picture book for toddlers**

The direction mostly associated with Ann-Clara Tidholm in Sweden is her unique investigation over many years into the poetics of children's books and the exploration of the really young child's reading perspective. Is it possible to engage children younger than two years in the interplay with children's books? What would be the purpose of such an early engagement? To provide experience, impulses, stimulate the imagination or contribute to an energetic interaction with the adult? The book is an unknown

and fascinating object, Anna-Clara Tidholm argues, it can be handled, perused and browsed in various ways. Perhaps the story in and of itself need not be most important? Perhaps a consistent plot is completely unnecessary? Perhaps there is even no need for a leading character? Perhaps the book is primarily an incitement to new worlds of play or pure play?

She has told that she approached the browsing, the turning of the page" as the dramaturgical foundation and powerful basic condition of the book. Pages can be opened and closed like "doors"! Had one ever made full use of the browsing? A quick exploration of the history of the picture book demonstrated that some forerunners had touched upon this but there was much left to gain from the specific, physical quality of the book.

The result was the picture book for toddlers "Knacka på!" (Knock, knock, knock", 1992) where the pages on the right are doors in various colours to be knocked, so that the reader is brought into different situations, and new doors in the background lead to new rooms and new contexts. The child / reader soon learns to knock on every door and open them in optional order until she exits the house. One of the

secrets with this story is that the reader is its main character.

Once the illustrations were completed only a simple text was missing. "My own attempts were completely muted, they sounded like a reader for the first grade." Anna-Clara Tidholm then turned to her husband Thomas Tidholm, who wrote a short, rhythmical, almost rapping text which turned out to be perfect. However he declined to be named as author; this book was the creation of Anna-Clara, Thomas said. At the end of the book he has been thanked for his assistance with the text. "Knacka på!" has become a huge success not only in Sweden. And this is an early, interactive picture book! Happy parents tell stories about how their 8-9 months old children have learned to knock and open the doors of this book! However the second secret has unfortunately remained in Sweden: the original text which seems so simple is in fact a rhythmic and effective rap text written by a professional poet. In many translations to other languages the text has been transformed into a more traditional educational and altogether too obvious text.

During a large international exhibition of picture books at The Nordic Watercolour Museum the

guided tours for schoolchildren began at the wall where the original drawings for "Knacka på!" were shown. On one occasion while the art curator was presenting the origins of the book, all the boys (aged fourteen) requested "Let us knock! Let us knock!" All Swedish children now hold this "first book" in dear memory.

The book "Knacka på!" was followed by three books with similar planning for play ("Ut och gå!"/"Out Walking" 1993, "Hitta på!"/"Find Out" 1993, "Varför då?"/"Tell Me Why" 1994) and a cd-rom which makes it possible for children from age two to play with, transform and expand the contents of the book by pointing at figures and objects. It may be to put vegetables in a pot to prepare a soup for the rabbits, to water the old man's plants so they don't die, put laundry in the washing machine or discover what the little bears are dreaming.

In 1994 Anna-Clara Tidholm had another innovative idea for little children's picture books, "two-words-books", where two titles in a long series stand out: "Läsa bok" and "Apan fin" ("Read Book" and "Pretty Monkey", 1999). The former portrays a mouse boy who has to remain indoors because of rain.

Through the window he watches the scene: wild animals, high mountains, many trees and finally he sits down with a book: “Läsa bok” (“Read book”)! In “Apan fin” a little girl goes out into the world and meets a dog, she is scared and brave and returns home – wet but unharmed.

Male and female, yes, but for once passively and meditatively in the first instance, actively and enterprising in the second! Moreover these two books demonstrate that simple stories of 26 words on 13 spreads may expand the traditional children’s book for toddlers with respect to choice of words, motifs and objects in new and unexpected ways.

Throughout her entire production, especially from the 1990s and onwards, Anna-Clara Tidholm has switched between depicting animals or humans with ease. According to her sometimes animals are more suitable, when you look for something common and do not wish to disturb the story with too many social specifications. One example is the picture book “En liten stund” (“A Short While”, 2006) where it is more relaxed and permissive to portray the children as rabbits; the children can live alone, wash the

dishes, cook and walk over to each other without creating a number of questions. At the same time she fulfils a wish: to produce a traditional and friendly animal picture book in the spirit of Beatrix Potter. There are several references especially to Peter Rabbit. It has been said about this book that it is not the rabbit qualities of Peter Rabbit that are of interest to a child, but the possibility of recognizing himself in what is happening to the rabbit.

### **Movies**

In 2001 the first animated film was made based on one of the books by the Tidholms, “Jims vinter” (“Jim’s Winter”, 1988). This work stimulated thoughts about how to find an appeal and a suitable tempo for an animated film for toddlers. The result was “Snuttefilm” for small children (2008), five stories each of five minutes, based on three of her picture books: “Apan fin” (“Pretty Monkey”, 1999) and “Hela natten” (“All Night Long”, 2002) and “Alla får åka med” (“Everyone Can Ride Along”, 2004). The collection also contains two original manuscripts, “Simons anka” and “Nelly packar” (“Simon’s Duck” and “Nelly Packs Her Bag”, 2008) which later were published as picture books. One model has been the TV-series

“Teletubbies”, which has been much discussed among adults in Sweden for a number of years. Anna-Clara Tidholm defended the series from the start because of its perfect tone with respect to dramaturgy for small children: the slow tempo, many repetitions, typified characters and generalised personalities.

For a couple of decades Anna-Clara Tidholm has been considered one of the foremost picture book artists in Sweden, unique in her approach to children and in her constant perusal of theoretical questions concerning the being of children. Her naïve pictorial style may seem spontaneous and unaffected, but her background work is considered unusually deep and genuine among illustrators.

On her lecturing tours in the Nordic countries and in a series of new cultural and debate articles she reveals deep interests in modern theories of the brain, depth psychology as well as theories about the linguistic and cognitive development of children. She is a headstrong and independent thinker

prepared for struggle with many questions concerning the traditional views of children. Her methods of exploring the models of other writers and illustrators, building on traditions and concepts, make her texts rich in symbols of great diversity. One completely unexpected intertext can be found in “En liten stund” as a reference to Gillian Welch’s “One little song” from the cd “Soul Journey”!

While Anna-Clara Tidholm has come from the textual side as a poet, writer and student of literature, she lacks formal art education; this is both an asset and a deficiency, in her own opinion. This fact may explain why she approaches her assignments the way she does: with less focus on the main characters, and the way they look and other details, but the more concentrated on the reader as well as on the complexity and depth of the complete work.

*Ulla Rhedin*

Ph.D.

Picture book critic in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*

Translated by Marshall Ansell



## Anna-Clara Tidholm's previous books

For the last thirty-five years Anna-Clara Tidholm has been drawing for children in a naivistic style not far removed from children's own way of drawing and with a depth and feeling that are also closely related to child-hood. Her pictures have become increasingly poetic with the years. Her midnight blue skies full of stars communicate a longing for eternity. The bright, happy drawings from the beginning of time in "Kasper's alla dagar" (All Caspar's Days, 1994) fill the beholder with the joy of life.

The subjects that she portrays range from creation to death and, in between, such varied matters as space trips, everyday life at nursery school, love, the history of the universe, getting a sister or brother... She has retold and reillustrated fables and fairy-tales and she has brought new life to books for the very young with a series of simple, very colourful and playful books for infants. The first, called "Knacka på!" ("Knock, Knock, Knock!"), was published in 1992. Regardless of subject and of the intended age of the readers, Anna-Clara Tidholm is always on the side of the child.

Anna-Clara was born in Stock-

holm in 1946. After matriculation she studied literature at university and worked as a journalist and author before turning to drawing. Her first illustrated books were, on the one hand, politically critical in a manner typical of the period and, on the other hand, renarrations of fairy-tales such as "Jätten och ekorren" (The Giant and the Squirrel), "Sagan om osten" (Tale of the Cheese), "Korven" (The Sausage), "Pojken och hans ulliga får" (The Boy and his Woolly Sheep).

In 1970 Anna-Clara moved with her family from Stockholm to Hälsingland in northern Sweden where they still live.

### **Books in collaboration with Thomas Tidholm**

In 1983 "Åkeboken" (Åke's Book), which Anna-Clara had produced in collaboration with her husband, the poet and musician Thomas Tidholm, was published. It represents something new in her creative work.

The text of "Åkeboken" is simple and childlike. What happens in the story is seemingly unthreatening and common-place but there is an un-easiness, an uncanny feeling



“Åkeboken” (Åke’s Book)

under-lying the text. A mood that is rein-forced by the wild, expressive pictures. Anna-Clara makes use of ink drawings coloured with crayon and with broad strokes as a frame holding the picture together. Åke himself is a serious-minded fair-haired young man with a challenging expression and a stripy T-shirt. A character that reappears in various guises in several books.

“Not having any artistic training I have to work out my own solutions. I have to reduce and simplify and develop my own techniques”, Anna-Clara has explained in connection with “Åkeboken”. “Often it is time-demanding, problematic and laborious – my solution has often been to try to imagine how children would draw and then to imitate them. For a nine-year-old nothing is impossible or remarkable.”

“Åkeboken” was the first in a series of books by Anna-Clara and Thomas Tidholm dealing with existential problems at children’s level in a way that is both poetic and philosophical and which appeals both to children and adults. “Resan till Ugri-La-Brek” (The Journey to Ugri-La-Brek) is, perhaps, the best known and best loved. It was published in 1987 and deals with two children, Hinken and Myran and their dog called Strunt. The children’s grandfather has disappeared and their parents refuse to say where he is. His flat is empty and on the table by his armchair are his glasses and his pool coupon. The children determine to look for their grandfather and set out on a journey to the other side of the world. In order to get there they have to cross a wide, dark river. On



“Resan till Ugri-La-Brek” (The Journey to Ugri-La-Brek)

the other side everything is cold and frozen. But in the little village of Ugri-La-Brek (which means “village where the smoke goes straight up”) they find grandfather who is very well. The children can happily return home.

Nowhere is it stated that grandfather is dead. Indeed the reader does not even have to read the story in that light but can enjoy it as an exciting adventure in space and time.

The expressive illustrations use strong colours and generally spread over the whole page. They are not framed but Anna-Clara has chosen to make them fill the page or has brush strokes out to the edges. The perspective has been chosen so that one can see the earth’s curve and can understand that the children really wander “to the other side of the world”. Anna-Clara has explained that: “What is one to do when one gets such an impossible demand from the text that one is obliged to draw the whole world? Nobody can manage that, I think and I get angry at the author. But then I go over to my childlike perspective: a nine-year-old would merely get started. What do you mean impossible? This is what the world looks like!”

“Resan till Ugri-La-Brek” was awarded the Deutsche Jugendli-

teraturpreis in 1992 and it has been dramatized and performed by various theatre groups in Sweden. In the autumn of 1995 it was produced by the Swedish National Touring theatre which performed it in schools and at family performances. In 1996 it was premiered in Berlin. The book has been translated into Danish, Norwegian, German and Japanese.

“Balladen om Marjan och Rolf” (Ballad of Marian and Rolf), a further collaboration between Anna-Clara and Thomas Tidholm appeared in 1989. This is a modern Robin Hood story as well as a love story which takes place in the provincial Swedish town of Katrineholm. The illustra-



“Balladen om Marjan och Rolf” (Ballad of Marian and Rolf)

tions are in subdued colours and framed with powerful water-colour brush-strokes. They are not fully as boundless as the illustrations in the book on Ugri-La-Brek which are perfectly in harmony with the story. In this case the conflict takes place within and between people. The whole world is to be found in Katrineholm. Marjan loves Rolf who is a robber living in the mountains, a wildman who never washes his hair. He is a solitary boy who is without a mother and who has run away from everything. But Marjan's father, who is a policeman, arrests Rolf and locks him up. It is only when Marjan saves Rolf that he can accept that she, a girl, can also be a robber in the forest.

When the hour of liberty chimes for the two children there is no longer a frame to keep them within the picture. They are standing on a mountain with an optimistically red sky in the background.

“Vill ha syster!” (Want Sister!, 1991) is more difficult to interpret. It deals with a small boy, one of Anna-Clara's round-eyed, serious boy figures in a stripy T-shirt. He has no name but is called “you”. He tells his parents that he wants a sister and they promise him one in due course. But time passes and



“Vill ha syster!” (Want Sister!)

when he feels most lonely and sad he discovers a house that he has never seen before. An old man and his wife live there and they invite the boy in. He stays in the chaotic house for several days. One day is green and he can play in the Tivoli Woods that are in the house. One day is blue and he bathes in the Blue Sea. One day is yellow and he plays alone in the burning sand of the Sunshine Land. Then he feels homesick and, in spite of the protests of his hosts, he leaves them and the old man and his wife shrink and disappear entirely, as does the house. The boy takes a newly laid bird's egg with him and goes home – to discover that he has just got a little sister. “– I know, you say. It was hard work. But it was very strange and exciting too.” On the





“Förr i tiden i skogen” (In the Old Days in the Forest)

final page he holds his little sister tenderly in his grasp.

Anna-Clara’s way of using colour helps the book to communicate how chaotic and difficult the period before a brother or sister is born can seem. At home with mummy and daddy the colours are sunny and cheerful while in the chaotic house they are strong, glaring and obtrusive; hurtful to the eyes. When the boy flees home again the night is dark blue with only a few stars and thin strips of light but the sky gets lighter as he gets nearer home and when his mother and father

stand there with the new-born baby the picture is, once again, filled with sunshine. The same hopeful, happy sunshine is to be found in “Kaspers alla dagar” (All Caspar’s Days, 1994), a story, or rather a legend from the time when Caspar still wandered about in the world. Everything was newly created and there was no order yet. There are obvious allusions to the Bible but the book preaches a gospel of freedom, generosity and child-likeness.

The pictures too are generous. They fill the whole spread and, just like the illustrations to “Resan till

Ugri-La-Brek”, they cover the whole world. One sees the mountains and trees and the sea and houses and the curve of the earth all at once – and the world is beautiful and a delight to live in. “Förr i tiden i skogen” (In the Old Days in the Forest, 1993) is a completely different sort of book. It is a story about a boy who lived a long time ago when distances between the farms in the north were great and words were sparse. It was so difficult to say what one meant that people preferred to keep silent and let the one whom they wanted to retain travel on his way. Anna-Clara’s illustrations show the harshness of life and the austerity of human relationships. Her illustrations are like old-fashioned school pictures. Indeed, the whole book is reminiscent of Swedish picture books, such as those of Elsa Beskow, from an earlier epoch with the text and a black and white illustration on the left-hand side with the right side filled by a colour picture. “Förr i tiden i skogen” has been translated into Danish, Norwegian, French, Japanese and German.

Thomas and Anna-Clara Tidholm have also produced a number of easy readers for slightly older children, books with short chapters and black and white illustrations

including “Glöm inte jordnötterna” (Don’t Forget the Peanuts), “Jims vinter” (Jim’s Winter) and “Ett jobb för Jacko” (A Job for Jacko).

Two books for very small children appeared in 1995. “Ture blåser bort” (Ture Blows Away) and “Ture kokar soppa” (Ture Makes Soup). These books, with texts by Thomas Tidholm that are poetic in a fashion close to children, are in ‘look and say’ format which Anna-Clara has used to great effect. When little Ture is presented he takes up only a small part of the page. On the next spread his house, very logically, fills a larger space and when Ture, together with his dog, is borne out into the wide world by the wind the illustrations are large and generous, covering the whole page. They are realistic stories with a fabulous



“Ture blåser bort” (Ture Blows Away)



dimension. Perhaps one could class them as magical realism for the very small.

### **Collaboration with other authors**

Anna-Clara Tidholm has also illustrated the work of other authors. Among the most interesting are “Barnens svenska historia, del 1. När människorna kom” (Children’s History of Sweden, Part 1. When the People Came) by Sonja Hulth. It begins 70 000 years ago when it started snowing in Sweden. It snowed and snowed and snowed ... Many thousand years were to pass before spring returned. The book ends about 1000 AD. Text and illustrations show how the ice melts and makes room for animals and people, how the people co-operate and start settlements, how they get food, play and organize their lives. The illustrations are poetic and full of empathy. It is easy for children to identify with their comrades far back in history. There are also instructive drawings of runes and rock carvings.

“Pojken och stjärnan” (The Boy and the Star) with a text by Barbro Lindgren (1991) narrates a sad and dramatic story set in a circus. The star is a little pony that is born on the same night as the fire-eater’s

son. The boy and the pony become best friends but when the pony does not dare to jump from a high tower into a tiny pool, the circus director gets angry and decides to send it for slaughter. The star flees and experiences numerous dangerous adventures before he is finally reunited with the boy in the happy conclusion.

Anna-Clara’s pictures of the pony are tender and just as loving as are the star and the boy towards each other. The colours are rich and vibrant and the pictorial solutions unconventional. “Pojken och stjärnan” has been dramatized and performed in various theatres including a musical version at Sweden’s National Theatre with a score by Georg Riedel.

### **Own books**

Among books that Anna-Clara Tidholm has both written and illustrated is “Allihop” (All of Them) (1993) which was originally a TV programme or, rather, a series of programmes. The setting is a play-school and the children attending it are portrayed in words and pictures. It shows a section of Swedish society with the children’s varying social environments as a background but it is their personalities that are important. The reader



“Allihop” (All of Them)

meets Frida, who likes things to be organized and tidy, Evert who does not enjoy playing and who feels so lonely in the play-school, dark-haired Rosita who is much too kind, Jonny who is both strong and kind and Britta who has everything except her mother’s and father’s time and attention.

“Allihop” is very popular at nurseries because the children feel that it is about themselves. It is generously illustrated with several pictures on every spread.

“Ett fall för Nalle” (A Case for Teddy) (1988) is a detective story for small children in thirteen chapters, illustrated in black and white. Nalle starts a detective agency and, in the accepted manner of private detectives, he solves one case after another. “Ett fall för Nalle” was originally a radio series.



“Ett fall för Nalle” (A Case for Teddy)

In 1992 Anna-Clara Tidholm published a book for very small children, just above the ‘look and say’ level, that caused great rejoicing among reviewers – as well as children. “Knacka på!” (Knock, Knock, Knock!) in which the child and the adult go through different coloured doors and discover exciting things behind them. This book was followed in rapid succession by “Ut och gå!”, “Hitta på!” and “Varför då?” (Out Walking, Find Out! and Tell Me Why). “A book for the very young to rejoice about” the periodical *Vi Föräldrar* wrote. And *Lärarnas tidning* wrote that “She has created a classic on the level of the predecessor “Nalle” (Teddy). In *Opsis Kalopsis* Susanna Ekström wrote : “I believe that Anna-Clara Tidholm has done more than anyone else to renew picture books for infants in Sweden. Her way



“Knacka på!” (Knock, Knock, Knock!)

of using colour, of expanding the pictorial space and introducing unexpected motifs is revolutionary”. These books have been translated into Norwegian, Danish, German, Dutch, Finnish, Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, French, Faeroese, Icelandic, Hebrew, Polish, Italian and English.



“Varför då?” (Tell Me Why)

In her books for small children Anna-Clara shows how well she is able to empathize with children’s thoughts and feelings, what they find exciting and diverting. The books can be used for stimulating play involving children and adults at the same time as they provide children with artistic and aesthetic experiences. Every page is like a painting with rich, cheerful colours specially created for this particular age-group.

### **Manifold talents**

Anna-Clara Tidholm has by no means restricted herself to picture books. She has had several exhibitions at which she has shown book illustrations as well as water-colours and oil-paintings. She makes radio and TV programmes and her first publication was a collection of poems for adults (1966). From time to time she participates in public discussion of cultural issues and she visits schools to talk about books and art.

Her perspective is the child’s and she constantly maintains her solidarity with the children.

*Birgitta Fransson*

Translated by William Jewson

## Reading should be non-educational

To have fun, that's what reading is all about, says Anna-Clara Tidholm, illustrator and writer. All that other talk about how useful and important it is to read, she doesn't like.

Anna-Clara Tidholm is the author of picture books like *Apan fin* (Pretty Monkey), *Hela natten* (All Night Long) and of course *Knacka på!* (Knock knock knock!). Books that in the highest degree introduced and established the genre *småbarnsböcker* (infant books). An infant book is meant for children up to about three years. Infant books must, says Anna-Clara, be very carefully adapted to the lowest ages. They must be simple and small children's level. The content must limit itself to things that infants are supposed to have seen or experienced.

And that is a question for both the writing and the pictures. The picture book parts from the "pointing out-book" through its precise adapted text (words).

She is working with happy and strong colours and with pictures that are simple, distinct and in clear interplay with the text.

– When it comes to colours, I think you have to overdo it a bit working with infant books. And

besides, I like "toy-colours".

Talking about the clearness in the pictures, it is important but that doesn't mean that she only deal with reproducing reality.

– No, it should be boring. To the reproducing you must add a feeling, a tune or an expression. My task is not to be pedagogic. I have no ambition to teach the children about colours or anything like that. My task is to supply adventures, experiences.

Anna-Clara tells me about a mistake she has made about the clearness in her pictures. Like one with speed-lines.

It is in the book *Find out where a building of toy bricks is falling down*, accompanied with these words:

"Hitta på att rulla buller Hoppa dunså Ramla Brak! Faller leksaker ner på golvet med en farlig fart"

Among all the things that fall is a monkey. To mark the enormous speed, Anna-Clara painted white speed-lines. Lines that cover the arm of the monkey. Reading chil-

dren noticed with despair that the monkey's arm was broken.

– I felt very irritated by such a mistake. But when the story was to be reprinted in an anthology. I got a chance to correct the mistake, so I did. It was a good feeling.



The picture is the most important in an infant book, but the text is also important. The words themselves are not only significant, they form a rhythm, a melody and are by that an entrance to the language, explains Anna-Clara who very carefully has formulated two-words-sentences like

“Ute regnar  
himmel grå  
Vara inne  
Hitta på!”  
(Out raining  
Sky grey  
Be inside  
Find out!)

And

”Lilla huset  
Blåa dörren  
Ska vi gå  
Och hälsa på?”  
(Little house  
Door blue  
Shall we go  
Drop in?)

Books must have a way in, otherwise the supposed reader will be left outside the door, excluded from the bookpages and their content. A carefully formulated text in combination with interplaying pictures can open up the book wide to small children.

– Sometimes parents write to me and tell me that they have read for example Knock, knock, knock! with their child. “He is just nine months old and wow, it works”, they say with enthusiasm. They are happy and I am happy. You won't have that feeling, if the book is on the wrong level.

Round Sweden there are a lot of reading promotion projects going on, more or less successful. Municipalities that give money for reading-projects and give books to children who enter school or pre-school or celebrate one year or are newborn. A well-intentioned work

with uncertain results, Anna-Clara thinks.

– If you want to send out books to children, you must be aware of how and why you do it. You must come in the right time with the right books. In many places they are so pleased with having sent out a book, that they are quite satisfied with that. Many of them can not see the difference between an infant book and a picture book. But a book for a one-year old and a book for a five-year old are quite different things. And to give an anthology to a newborn child, is totally meaningless.

There are too many pedagogic thoughts behind the choice of books, says Anna-Clara. The ones who choose books are turning to the parents more than to the children.

– They don't put the child in the center, in spite of what many proclaims they do.

The parents often think the same and emphasize the utility aspect or they are forced by the delight to introduce books that meant a lot to them in their own childhood. Parents start to read books out loud too early. You can't pick up Astrid Lindgren's "Emil in Lönneberga" and read it to a two-year old child.

Many people yet do it, because they are so keen. Many read Pippi as well – but think about it! It is too difficult for small children. There is a whole world to experience and understand before you can understand Pippi.

The contents of Pippi, Emil and other wellknown children books are hidden for small children, but nevertheless the infants world is full of their symbols. It is Pippi dolls, Winnie the Pooh on the bib and Laban the ghost on the feeding bottle.

– Small children's culture is emptied of its content. There is just the surface left. Therefore the infants books will be of greater importance. They present a substance which the children can understand, Anna-Clara explains. It's not just about the book taking place in an arena which is familiar to the kid. There are other conditions that are as important to relate to. She tells about a boy who read just an opening in her book "Hela natten" (All Night Long). There was a picture of a for-





est and in the forest there was an owl. To him the book became “The Owl-book”.

My books are on purpose made in a way that you mustn't read from the beginning to the end. You can start from the middle or read only an opening. Infants are simply not interested in everything. Don't think that. Reading shall be non-educational and voluntarily. All that discussion about the useful reading is a bit stupid and moralizing. Like “read for your children otherwise they will be out of work when they grow up”.

The social interaction in playing and reading together, can the television or other media never compete with, is Anna-Clara's point. For the rest she thinks that the importance of reading is exaggerated.

– Actually, I don't know why reading should be so much better for the children than watching TV, she says and notices then that also infants watch TV and Dvd either we find it useful or not.

– Well, then you could make something good instead, which is adapted to them. Besides Tele-tubbies there are no programs specially made for this age-group, says Anna-Clara who now together with the animator, Gun Jacobson is

planning to do something about it. They have made a pilot study, but are preparing for a whole series of films under the title “Snuttefilm” and they are dealing with both old and new stories.

– First I didn't like the idea, but if it is good adapted, I find it okay. But I have never thought that my books should be used for anything else than reading.



Together with Ulla Rhedin, PhD in Literature, Anna-Clara some years ago was out in the pre-schools talking about infant books. She discovered then that infant books is a relatively new phenomenon.

– I used to mention the classics “Kattresan” (The Cats Journey) and the story about the little, little old woman. There are not so many more books, not in a historical perspective. Nowadays there are of

course some more but it's no abundance of them.

Siv Widerberg and Cecilia Torudd have made a book about chairs and one about pillows.

– They are funny. And I like Helena Davidsson Neppelbergs books about Vera. Or else there isn't much to read for the children when they are small.

Some books have dull texts. Others are badly translated. And there is not so much new thinking in the infant books, says Anna-Clara who is convinced that it is easier to think in new ways if you have a theory as a startingpoint for your creative work.

The theory she has worked from is that small children can not identify with main characters in books.

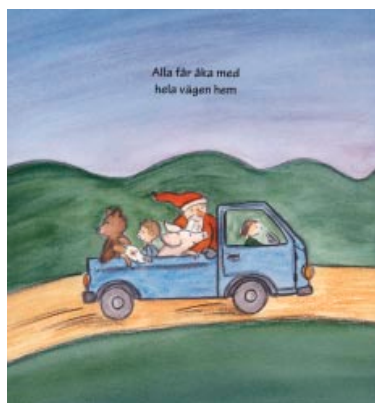
– Most infant books have a Totte, a Max or an Emma, but in my books it is the reader herself who is the main character. I don't know if I am right, but in my infant books there are no main characters. Eva Eriksson's and Barbro Lindgren's books about Max are some of Anna-Clara's favourites but there are young parents who don't like them at all, she tells.

– There are those who think that the Max books are boring and grumbling and that they give a negative outlook on life through stick-

ing only to the children's conflicts. So I decided to make a book with a more positive outlook on life.

The result was "Alla får åka med" (Everyone Can Ride Along) where a girl drives a big truck and picks up a boy who has tumbled down, a dog who is freezing and some other lonely and sad existences and everything ends up with eating and a feeling of solidarity in the big house. Linda Skugge named it a "progg-book". She didn't like it.

But perhaps it is that sort of books that are needed in this times, books about solidarity and generosity.



Anna-Clara has no new infant book going on. Her publisher tries to convince her about long series to sell abroad.

– I haven't agreed to that. I have said that I can make another book which in that case will be called

“Ingen får åka med” (Nobody can Ride Along). But joking apart, “Everyone Can Ride Along” has actually been sold to several countries, she tells, pleased with the thought that children get access to her and other’s infant books. She has been out touring and talking about this issue in pre-schools, BVC (children care centrals) and libraries. She wishes that the persons working on BVCs and at libraries as well as the parents should get more knowledge about infant books, their meaning and offers.

– When it comes to teaching in children’s literature at the institutes of education, it seems that it more often takes its startingpoint in the literature than in the children themselves. The pre-school teachers should learn more about which books are suitable for different ages. Projects about infant books must start from the childrens own basic level.

Anna-Clara was, as she describes it herself, a hysterically reading child and is very precise with separating different sorts of reading. Her own she calls lonely-reading.

– I used the stories of the books as escape and fantasy. That is not something I will recommend to others, she says.

The other way of reading you could call together-reading. That’s what small children do, and they should get the chance to do it much more.

– To infants reading is a very social thing. Children are very open for interaction and books give them possibilities for that. Many times it’s the person who reads, who is interesting, more than the book itself.

– A good book functions both with adults and children. The reading is a superior manner for children and adults to have fun together.

*Helen Lumholdt*

in the magazine *Förskolan*  
(The Pre-school) nr. 8/ 2005

Translated by Sven Hallonsten

## Anna-Clara Tidholm: One more time

Yes, books are outstanding. And of course it is excellent reading books. It is a truth, hard to questioning. In our culture every child needs an adjustment to the world of languages. Children's books are one of the most important tools in that schooling.

But in despite of my self working with children's books, I have sometimes problems conforming to the certainty of belief in reading promotion. Librarians, teachers, preschool persons – everybody are doing a marvellous work, helping those books we are producing reaching the children. Without their competence and work we would be helpless drifting in the sea of commerce. Where our sometimes curious and not-so-cute books would drown and sink (to the bottom)!

Of course children need books – but children need even more fairly stable grownups, clean air, warm clothes in winter and a lot of time and room and possibilities and freedom to *play*. Yes. Most of all play- because play is the real core of childhood, when it is allowed to



go on undisturbed and under the protection of adults, mentally close but on just sufficiently distance.

In playing are included all that we put into the conception of culture, play includes all the forms of art: music, theatre, architecture, dance, circus, art, language. But on children's own conditions and their own chosen levels.

The critic of children's books Magnus William-Olsson, who every year writes unpredictably surveys in the newspaper Aftonbladet, was in one of his texts surprised of the absence of play in children's books. He did not mean descriptions of

children playing, but the fact that children's books so seldom use the play as starting point and substance. Both in the books and in our way of using them, adult literary concepts is in fact dominating. The book shall have action, main characters, a conflict and a distinct ending. Like in books for adults. When we use a book for children we read it. Unconsciously we pass our adult way of assimilating literature to the children. And feel like good reading-promotioners...

When producing books for small children I have become aware of the potential of a picture book to pass the borders of the literary concept of the adult. Here you don't need action! And very few words. I have been able to work with text and picture more freely than in my story-telling picture books. The

book doesn't need to be so *finished* – but has to contain a substance, which the child can explore and experience, play with! Words and pictures can together make a whole, a meaning – if the child itself wants it. Some children focus on only one picture, which for them has a special meaning, that we adults not always understand. Other children love just the thrilling turn over of pages.

In fact everything is possible. And sooner or later the child, if there are books at hand, will get that aha-experience: the book, the pictures and the words has a meaning, just for me. One more time!

*Anna-Clara Tidholm*

Artist and author

Translated by Britt Isaksson

## Biography

Born in Stockholm in 1946

She has worked as

- a journalist on daily newspapers and a freelancer for radio and television
- self-taught illustrator (children's books, animated film, exhibitions, magazines, posters, cartoons, etc.)
- author (collection of verse 1966, children's books, children's radio, Chronicles in magazines and newspapers)

Anna-Clara Tidholm lives in Arbrå, Hälsingland in northern Sweden where she also keeps hens and sheep

## Prizes

Elsa Beskow plaque 1986

Expressen's Heffaklump 1987 for "Resan till Ugri-La-Brek"

Gävleborg County Cultural Award 1989

Litteraturfrämjandet's Award for Books for Children and Young People 1989

Deutsche Jugendliteraturpreis 1992 for "Resan till Ugri-La-Brek"

Pier Paolo Vergeri's Special Mention for "Resan till Ugri-La-Brek"

Wettergren's Barnbokollon 1993 for "Förr i tiden i skogen"

The August Prize 2002 for Adjö, herr Muffin (text by Ulf Nilsson)

Anna-Clara Tidholm is entitled to the Guaranteed Author's Allowance



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*What Bosse Saw*

Text: Thomas Tidholm

Rabén & Sjögren 1971

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*The Tale of the Cheese and other Tales*

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*The Sausage, a folktale*

Ägget 1982

## POJKEN OCH HANS ULLIGA FÅR, folksaga

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När människorna kom

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Japanese: Sakasu-nante y Ameta. Iwasaki

Shoten 1988

Danish: Et job til Jacko. Alrune 1992

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Alfabetta 1987

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Dutch, Querido 1995

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## VÄCK INTE DEN BJÖRN SOM SOVER: sagor och sägner

*Don't Wake A Sleeping Bear: Stories and Myths*

Text: Per Gustavsson

Alfabeta 2004

## HANNA HUSET HUNDEN

*Hanna the House the Dog*

Alfabeta 2004

## NÄR VI FICK FELIX

*When We Had Felix*

Text: Thomas Tidholm

Alfabeta 2005

## EN LITEN STUND

*A Short While*

Alfabeta 2006

Danish, Gyldendal 2006

French, Oskar Editions 2006

## SNÄLLA BARN

*Nice Children*

Text: Thomas Tidholm

Alfabeta 2007

## SIMONS ANKA

*Simon's Duck*

Tidholm, Anna-Clara; Jacobson, Gun

Alfabeta 2008

## NELLY PACKAR

*Nelly Packs Her Bag*

Tidholm, Anna-Clara; Jacobson, Gun

Alfabeta 2008

## VAD TÄNKER KNODDEN?

*What is Knodden thinking of*

Text: George Johansson

Natur & Kultur, 2009

## MIN FAMILJ

*My Family*

Olika förlag 2009

## CD-ROM

### KNACKA PÅ!

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

Alfabeta Multimedia 1996

Danish: Banke på! EMP 1996

German: Klopf an! Terzio 1996

## MOVIE / DVD

### JIMS VINTER

*Jim's Winter*

Lisbet Gabrielsson Film AB 2001

### SNUTTEFILM FÖR DE SMÅ

(together with Gun Jacobson)

Lisbet Gabrielsson Film AB 2008

Alfabeta DVD 2008





