

Moomintroll in a snowstorm. Made on scraper board by scraping black paper with a knife.



Tove Jansson



Stylized flora in Moominvalley. Trollkarlens hatt (Finn Family Moomintroll) 1948. Photo: Jukka-Pekka Juvonen

"An illustrator must bear both author and reader in mind, and sometimes even the publisher"
(Tove Jansson: Bildhuggarens dotter, Sculptor's Daughter)

Peggy Enbom

signed Tove

There are not many people who bequeath a whole world when leaving this world, but Tove Jansson did just that. She wrote and illustrated books about Moominvalley, familiar to and lived in by generations of children. She also made a great number of drawings and illustrations.

Few people have talent, and even fewer people have two talents. The truly unusual have two talents that support one another. When topping the list off with a passionate feel for life and a roguish eye, we must speak of a complete rarity.

Tove Jansson (1914–2001) was the daughter of a sculptor and an illustrator. Her choice of an artist's career may have been self-evident, but

her rich and diverse talents and her respect for what she apprehended as real art did not offer any ready-made solutions. In an interview she was once asked how she became an artist, to which she replied: "It just came out of me once on the tram when I was a child!"

She began her career with a short story which she wrote and illustrated: "General Mannerheim set foot on Helsinki's strand, after hunting tigers in India land." She was only fourteen at the time, but even then her drawings employed different angles, as in a filmed sequence, and the rhythm of the verse sounds familiar. The double talent is already at work, like a cartoonist with ambitions in the fine arts. Tove saw herself neither as an illustrator who writes, nor an author who illustrates, but above all as a visual artist, a painter.

During the 1930s, Tove Jansson regularly drew for the satirical magazine *Garm*, alongside many other

kinds of graphic work. At that time there were many short-lived publications, magazines and monthlies, with titles ranging from Christmas to Lucifer. Tove contributed to most of them, and also made posters, Christmas and Easter Cards, ex libris and book covers. She made illustrations for a construction company but never used them, as well as advertisements for a brand of mineral water with the strange title of *Källe-Syra* (Källe Acid), but realized that advertising was not her field. She later went on to make frescoes, stained-glass works, scenographic designs, stage costumes, an altarpiece, and festive decorations.

Tove worked in tusche or with a brush, using a great deal of black, washes and water colour. In the beginning, she would adapt her style to the task at hand, except for *Garm*. For this magazine, she drew, among other works, a caricature of Hitler stamping the ground and screaming



for "More cake!!", more territories, mocking the dictator who never gets enough. She felt strongly for the anti-nazi movement and had no understanding for those who did not.

In the mid-1940s, Tove Jansson illustrated the first of children's books, written by another author than herself. Gradually, the assignments came from the famed ones, including the Swedish translations of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*. Tove Jansson appears to have succeeded the very best in illustrating her own writings, and a critical look at her works will reveal features from her own fairytale everywhere, even in her illustrations for Carroll's classic *Alice in Wonderland*.

A characteristic feature of Tove's style of drawing is her manner of shading with small lines hatched in differing density and in different directions. Those of us who have grown up in Moominvalley associate the technique with those books,

A balloon to the rescue in *Den farliga resan* (*The Dangerous Journey*), 1977.

Photo: P.O. Jansson



Tove Jansson drew the cover for a Swedish translation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or *There and Back Again* in 1962.

Photo: Petri Nuutinen

vegetation of home, though no such flora exists.

When looking closely, one finds a large-nosed character as part of Tove Jansson's early signatures, but the very first Moomintroll is said to have been the result of a philosophical discussion in the family, which left Tove lost for an answer. It was then that she drew "the ugliest figure she could imagine", signing it "Kant!"

Tove Jansson's name was often suggested in connection with the Nobel Prize. Kruskopf notes that the prize hardly had made her any different, and he is most probably right. If one does not become boastful from receiving almost all the prizes, awards and decorations that are to be had, the Nobel Prize won't change anything. In 1995 the President of Finland gave Tove Jansson the honorary title of professor.

The Moomin Liberation Front

In her autobiographical novel *Bildhuggarens dotter* (Sculptor's Daughter) Tove Jansson elegantly offers the reader the keys to Moomin Valley through her own childhood. She lets one recognize a number of settings and characters who were obvious examples for the Moomin books.

The Sculptor's Daughter begins with a description of her grandfather, who finds "a long, green meadow rimmed with forest and rocks, looking like a vale of Paradise. At only one end did it open onto an inlet of sea, where posterity could swim and bathe." It sounds strikingly like a site where happy trolls would live.

She tells of the cold and the dark creeping along in the winter gloom, like a living grey creature with shaking hands that she can see - evidently the Groke of the Moomin books. She also tells of her intractably gentle mother, and of a father who is excited by storms out in the archipelago, rowing out at sea when the weather is at its worst.

The ingredients of Moominvalley do not seem to be far removed from Tove's own childhood. The Moomins became a world in themselves that could ultimately be related to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*.

Moominvalley is inhabited by a flexibly defined family, living in a lifestyle that could be characterized as the bohemian bourgeoisie, with some contempt for lesser authorities and a curiosity for adventure and magic wildlife. The fantasy creatures of the surrounding forest have both human and animal traits, and descriptive names, such as hemulens, fillyjonks, hattifatteners, and toffles. The Moomins keep an open door to those who seek them up, loyal both towards the family and the guest, as if holding on to a core and at the same time giving each individual the space needed for fulfillment. Compassion is all-embracing but not pathetic.

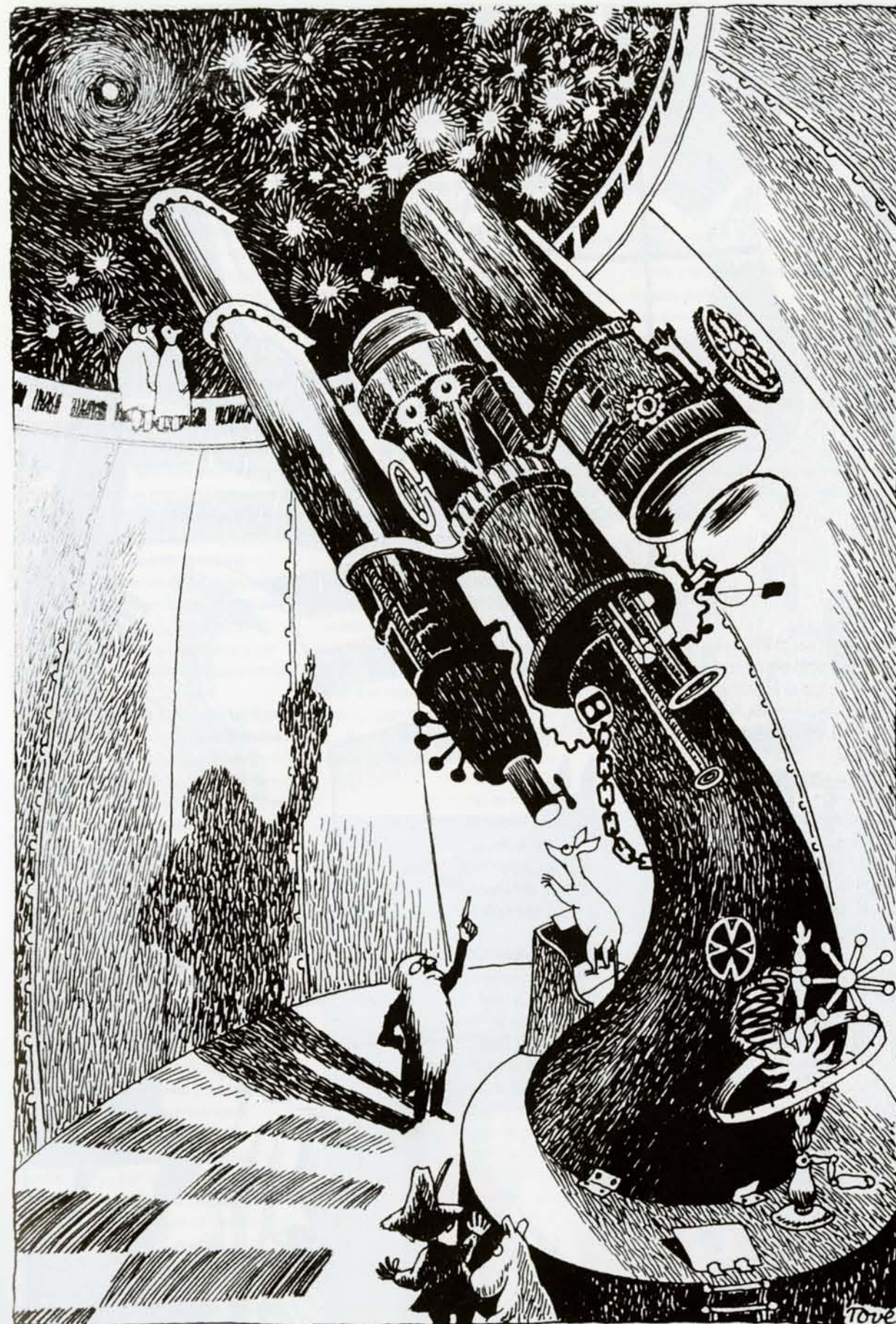
*But who will comfort Toffle now,
and say consolingly:*

*At night, you know, things aren't as bad
as they appear to be.*

(from the English translation by
Kingsley Hart)

The first Moomin novel appeared in 1945, with illustrations spaced at intervals of a few pages. The early reviews make hardly any mention of the pictures. The stories in themselves have been praised by critics, but the drawings were simply described as "nice" or "amusing", without any comment on the artwork. To be true, the *Times Literary Supplement*, noted that the Moomintrolls were "small, pleasant characters who look a bit like intelligent heraldic hippopotamuses." But it was to be a long while, after many books and decades of works, before the Moomin illustrations were seriously recognized. In some of the East European translations of the books they have even been replaced with other drawings.

At present, the eight Moomin novels, a collection of short stories and four picture books by Tove Jansson have been translated into 33 languages, including Hebrew, Japanese and Icelandic. The Moomins have appeared in more languages than the *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, and their unique world is on permanent display in a museum in Tampere, South Finland.



A successful illustration makes its way from Garm to Moomin. Illustration to *Kometjakten* (Comet in Moominland), originally published in 1946. Photo: Heikki Välimäki

giving the style itself a secure and slightly melancholy look.

The lines can become a lawn with flowers, or sky and sea, leaves and shadows. They can be a movement in the sea, under the surface.

"The shading itself is extremely time-consuming, but prior to it she has planned the whole graphic composition, which also functions in terms of printing technology. Everything is thought out," says the art critic Erik Kruskopf in impressed tones.

"Look at this," he says, showing a drawing of two girls sitting in their swimming rings. "Look how skilfully the movement of the water is done, with only the lines.

We are browsing through his books *Skämttecknaren Tove Jansson* (The cartoonist Tove Jansson) and *Bildkonstnären Tove Jansson* (The artist Tove Jansson). "The clever details," sighs Kruskopf, pointing to a few examples. "She excelled in decorative things".

Another characteristic of her drawings are the stylized flowers that we discover to be presumably inspired by Persian miniatures. The flora becomes fantastical, vaguely Oriental, with large flowers in the trees, which strangely enough looks like the



As every child knows, furniture can come alive in a dark house. From *Trollvinter* (Moominland Midwinter) 1957.

Photo: Jukka-Pekka Juvonen

Tove Jansson's picture book *Hur gick det sen?* (The Book about Moomin, Mimble and Little My) is a masterpiece of composition. Each page has an opening onto the previous and the following opening pages, back and forth, calling for a graphic design that has to match on six pages instead of on a two-page spread. Tove herself mixed the exact tones used on each double page, without separation. Strangely enough, new four-colour printings have less character, as if the tones and hues have become garish and stale at the same time. In this case, progress has not been for the better.

Tove Jansson wrote in the Swedish language, and specifically in the tone of voice that is spoken in Finland, with words and expressions that are used only here, not in Sweden. She achieved precisely the right tone, giving a linguistic identity, which in Sweden has almost become attached to the trolls. A Swedish-speaking theatre director from Finland once phoned a colleague in Stockholm and a child answered the call. After a moment there was a shocked cry on the line: "Mother, there's a Moomintroll on the phone!"

In the 1950s, the Moomins became a daily comic strip in *The Evening News* of London, which sold the rights to have it translated into some twenty languages. Over the years, the Moomins have become plays, operas and coffee mugs, but the real Moomin boom came in the early 1990s.

During the 1980s, the visual idiom had caught up with the written work instead of being subordinate to it. By its sheer momentum it then appears to have taken a further step to discriminate in turn against the word, to yawn at the grey boredom of print. The flood of imagery is no doubt one of the reasons why the Moomins were rediscovered to become a global brand with its own international television series.

The booming Moomin got the market going, but it did feel awkward to find one's childhood guide on shocking pink packages of nappies in a supermarket. Today, there is a Moomin Liberation Front seeking to safeguard the integrity of the trolls, maybe not to be seen as the most fanatic of organizations.

Many books have been written about Tove Jansson. The Swedish

scholar Boel Westin carried out a thorough literary analysis of the Moomins, in which their gentle philosophy was surprisingly given a Biblical frame of reference. At first, Westin's theory was received with consternation, as if someone was trying to suffocate the Moomins' spirit with a biblical agenda, but on closer inspection one discovers minor revelations – the flood, the comet, the valley, the Dantesque woods, the sea as a symbol of the subconscious, Moominmamma born ex nihilo and cast on the shore by a wave. The patterns have an echo in the past, but also vice versa. Maybe Moomin isn't going biblical, but the Bible goes Moomin. The comparison is not unheard of. There is another study about Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* as a Christ figure, and Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* is said to be the world's third most-read book, after the Bible and Koran.

"Tove was annoyed by half of the allusions and references, and she said that it was by no means what she had in mind. Her grandfather was a vicar and she heard the Bible stories in her childhood, but she said laughingly that she misunderstood most of them," says Kruskopf.

But Moominvalley must bear a close resemblance to Paradise.

Perhaps Tove Jansson didn't misunderstand, but rather understood it much better than any clergyman can. ■

Transl. J.K

■ Tove Jansson died in Helsinki on the 27 of June 2001 at the age 86. The last Moomin book appeared in 1970.

Sources:

Erik Kruskopf: *Bildtecknaren Tove Jansson*, Schildts (1992) and *Skämttecknaren Tove Jansson*, Schildts (1995)

Tove Jansson: *Bildhuggarens dotter*, Schildts (1968); transl.: *Sculptor's Daughter*.

The original drawings belong to the Moominvalley collection of the Tampere Art Museum

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The illustrations have appeared in books published by Schildts förlag, Bonniers and Harper Collins.

The illustrations to a Swedish translation of *Alice in Wonderland* exhibit a surrealistic mood.

Photo: Raija Grahn

