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Valuation and Vulnerability

An Analysis of the Reception of Two Illness Narratives in the Contemporary Swedish Literary Landscape

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Abstract

The proliferation of autobiographical accounts of illness, or autopathographies, has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Nevertheless, a notable gap remains in our understanding of how these narratives are received and evaluated. This article addresses this gap by examining the dynamics of value negotiation surrounding two autobiographical illness narratives in Sweden: Kristina Sandberg's *En ensam plats* (A Lonely Place, 2021) and Sara Meidell's *Ut ur min kropp* (Out of My Body, 2022). Theoretically, the article is grounded in a constructivist framework of value. In addition to exploring how Sandberg and Meidell address the value question in their illness narratives, it presents a detailed analysis of reviews and debate articles to uncover the underlying values expressed in the reception of these narratives. The analysis reveals that the value discussions center on aesthetic, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions, reflecting broader cultural debates about illness and its representation. While Sandberg's narrative raises questions about the portrayal of illness experiences, Meidell's narrative provokes discussions about its potential impact on readers. In sum, this article highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of value creation and negotiation pertaining to illness narratives.

Keywords: autopathographies, reception, value negotiation, Kristina Sandberg, Sara Meidell



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In the early decades of the 21st century, the proliferation of autobiographies centered around illness, commonly referred to as “autopathographies” (Couser 1997), has emerged as a notable literary trend in Sweden and Scandinavia (Bernhardsson 2021, Nesby 2021).^{*} In response to this trend, scholarly interest in literary illness narratives has grown. Within Swedish literary studies, Katarina Bernhardsson’s doctoral thesis *Litterära besvär. Skildringar av sjukdom i samtida svensk prosa* (Literary Ill. Portrayal of Illness in Contemporary Swedish Fiction, 2010), stands as one of the pioneering works exploring novels focused on illness around the turn of the millennium. Linda Nesby’s *Sinne, samhold og kjendiser. Sykdomsskildringer i skandinavisk samtidslitteratur* (Rage, Relations and Celebrities. Contemporary Scandinavian Stories of Illness, 2021), plays a crucial role in the Scandinavian context by adopting a comprehensive approach to the portrayal of illness experiences in Scandinavian literature across diverse genres and perspectives, encompassing both patients and caregivers. Since 2013, my research has focused on autopathographies about cancer and dementia, with a particular attention to how various media, including printed books, shape and convey the experience of illness in different ways (Lenemark 2019; 2022; 2023a; 2023b).

In line with Bernhardsson’s thesis, Nesby’s recent study, and my previous research, a significant body of literature on illness narratives has focused on how authors portray the specific illness under consideration. Whether explicitly or implicitly adopting a phenomenological perspective, the emphasis has been primarily on the texts themselves, exploring the aesthetic approaches to representing the experience of illness. In the broader context of medical humanities, and particularly within its sub-field of literature and medicine, discussions about the value of illness narratives often center around what might be termed their knowledge value – the insights they offer those residing in “the kingdom of the well” into the experiences of those in “the kingdom of the sick”, borrowing Susan Sontag’s opening words in *Illness as Metaphor* (1991:3). Alternatively, their social and therapeutic value, especially in terms of writing and reading illness narratives, is often underscored (Gubar 2016).

The aim of this article is to redirect the focus and emphasize the importance of examining the reception and evaluation of autobiographical illness narratives. This aspect has gained increasing significance with the proliferation of illness narratives in the contemporary book market, yet it remains relatively unexplored within the academic realm. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine the dynamics that unfold when the institutionalized literary-critical apparatus engages with autobiographical illness narratives. In particular, the study seeks to uncover the values expressed and the manner in which they are articulated.

I will approach these questions by examining the reception of two of the most debated illness narratives in Sweden during the early 2020s: Kristina Sandberg’s *En ensam plats* (A Lonely Place, 2021), which chronicles her life following a breast cancer diagnosis, and Sara Meidell’s *Ut ur min kropp* (Out of My Body, 2022), which offers an intimate portrayal of living with anorexia. As Nina Schmidt notes in *The Wounded Self. Writing Illness in Twenty-First-Century German Literature* (2018), illness narratives in contemporary society often evoke “extreme responses” (2018:24) within the cultural domain. In the Swedish context, this has been particularly evident with illness narratives authored by women, such as Sandberg and Meidell. Another noteworthy example, although not explored in this article, is Ann Heberlein’s *Jag vill inte dö, jag vill bara inte leva* (I Don’t Want to Die, I Just Don’t Want to Live, 2008), which, like the work of Sandberg and Meidell, sparked extensive debate and strong emotions (cf. Sarrimo 2012:63–88). These narratives, in various ways, exemplify the boundaries of what can be publicly articulated about illness and who holds the prerogative to do so at this specific cultural moment.

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Furthermore, Sandberg's and Meidell's illness narratives are compelling as they delve into questions of value associated with writing about illness. I will therefore begin the analysis by briefly examining how Sandberg and Meidell, in their illness narratives, meta-communicate about the question of what it means to write about illness in public. I will then focus on the primary aim of this article: to analyze the reception of *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp* based on a corpus of reviews and debate articles. However, before delving into the analysis, I will outline the theoretical perspective on value that informs the article and discuss some of the approaches within illness narrative research that align with the specific value-related issues that I am interested in.

ILLNESS NARRATIVES AND THE QUESTION OF VALUE

Theoretically, this article is grounded in a constructivist perspective on value. Drawing from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's conceptualization of value, as expounded in *Contingencies of Value. Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (1988), value is envisioned as an outcome of performative acts. In accordance with this framework, value is not seen as an intrinsic quality inherent in the literary text but as something that emerges through a constant doing and undoing by various actors – in this case, critics and debaters within the contemporary Swedish literary field. In line with Herrnstein Smith's theory, value is thus considered the result of negotiation. Ultimately, it is the manner in which this negotiation unfolds concerning *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp* that this article seeks to explore.

To operationalize the concept of value, this study will adopt the value categories delineated in the project "Negotiating Literary Value", which include style and form value, knowledge value, emotional value, social value, and economic value (Forslid et al. 2015:73–78). As will be demonstrated, all of these values came into play in the reception of Sandberg's and Meidell's autopathographies in various ways, though economic values were only indirectly addressed. This was particularly evident in the criticism directed at Sandberg and her publisher, with some debaters accusing them of exploiting private experiences for financial gain.

In the context of illness narrative research, one might consider G. Thomas Couser's perspective on the question of value, as outlined in the epilogue of his influential work *Recovering Bodies. Illness, Disability and Life-Writing* (1997). Couser asserts that critics are inevitably tasked with assigning value to illness narratives, just as they are with any other published work. These narratives, he argues, not only invite but also demand evaluation. Nevertheless, Couser also acknowledges the unique challenge posed by illness narratives, suggesting that they "put a critic in an awkward position" (Couser 1997:290). The dilemma arises from the question of how one, as a critic, should assess the sincere efforts of individuals to depict often life-threatening medical conditions. Couser does not consider refraining from judgment to be a viable option, as it would diminish the significance of the illness narrative in question. Consequently, he underscores the inevitability and necessity of valuation regarding illness narratives, although he does not delve into the intricacies of the valuation problem in his own analyses, as is done in this article.

As previously stated, the publication of autobiographical accounts of illness has increased significantly since the release of Couser's book in the mid-1990s. However, as Ann Jurecic argues in *Illness as Narrative* (2012), literary criticism, characterized by what she terms a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', has not kept pace with this development. Consequently, as Jurecic (2012:10) observes, there is no "critical consensus [...] about how to evaluate them." Autobiographical accounts of illness are frequently dismissed as "victim art" or "misery memoirs", and therefore often regarded as lacking literary merit (Jurecic 2012:10). Jurecic challenges this dismissive approach and proposes alternative modes of reading that avoid

falling into the trap of suspicion. She advocates for a reparative reading practice, which facilitates a more nuanced exploration of the emotional and intimate dimensions of illness narratives, drawing on the work of Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick and Rita Felski. As will become apparent in the subsequent analysis of the reception of Sandberg's and Meidell's works, both suspicious and reparative reading strategies are evident in the material.

SELF-REFLECTION AND ANTICIPATION OF CRITIQUE

The hermeneutics of suspicion identified by Jurecic also leaves its mark within these illness narratives themselves. In meta-comments, both Sandberg and Meidell demonstrate an awareness of this skeptical and dismissive attitude. One could argue that their writing actively challenges this stance in distinctive ways.

A central theme in *En ensam plats* is the challenge of expressing and communicating illness experiences from the perspective of someone grappling with illness. In alignment with the book's title, Sandberg metaphorically characterizes her illness as a solitary and isolated place. She frequently underscores the difficulties she encounters in sharing her experiences with family, friends, and a broader circle of acquaintances. This difficulty arises precisely because the disease, in this case breast cancer, remains a taboo subject in our culture.

An interesting passage in this context can be found towards the end of the book. Sandberg recounts a conversation with her friend Åsa, who is also diagnosed with breast cancer, thus sharing similar illness experiences: "Vi pratar om att bli paria, om tabut kring cancer, om känslan av att vara pestsmittad, föraktet för svaghet" (Sandberg 2021:355) [We discuss becoming a pariah, the taboo surrounding cancer, the feeling of being infected with the plague, the contempt for weakness]. In Sandberg's narrative, this culminates in the question of whether one should openly discuss the illness or not. Sandberg's response, which immediately follows this question, is affirmative. She writes that she has "alltid drivits mot det skambelagda, det pinsamma, för mig måste konsten syssla med det, konsten måste gå in i det allra mest komplexa inom oss, inom andra" (Sandberg 2021:355) [always been driven towards the shameful, the embarrassing, for me art must deal with that, art must delve into the most complex dimensions within us, within others]. Although this statement is addressed to Åsa, it also seems to be directed at the reader engaged with Sandberg's illness narrative. Notably, she attempts to justify her narrative's existence as art, despite the perceived low cultural value attributed to illness narratives in general. However, she also emphasizes the inherent risk associated with openly discussing and writing about illness. Sandberg argues that confronting the critical scrutiny of the public is precisely the challenge she and others with illness should embrace (Sandberg 2021:355f.).

In addition to embodying the rebellious rhetoric that characterizes *En ensam plats*, this passage illustrates how, as articulated by Schmidt, "[m]ost, if not all, contemporary authors of illness narrative can be presumed to feel the eyes of the public already on them at the time of writing" (Schmidt 2018:6). This issue is particularly pronounced in Sandberg's case because *En ensam plats* was her first publication following the significant success of her trilogy centered on the housewife Maj. This trilogy garnered substantial media attention and was quickly embraced within Swedish feminist literary research (Jansson 2023). Notably, the third part of the trilogy, *Liv till varje pris* (Life at All Costs, 2014), was awarded the August Prize for Best Swedish Novel in 2014.

In contrast to Sandberg, who had already established herself as a novelist before the release of *En ensam plats*, Sara Meidell made her literary debut with *Ut ur min kropp* in the autumn of 2022. However, Meidell was not unfamiliar in the Swedish cultural landscape, as she held the position of culture editor at the daily newspaper *Västerbottens-Kuriren*. In 2017, she had

been honored with the Swedish Publicists Club's prestigious Guldpenan [Goldpen], an award given since 1974 to individuals who uphold the Swedish language in their journalistic endeavors. Meidell's cultural capital can thus be considered substantial when *Ut ur min kropp* was published by the esteemed Norstedts publishing house. Similar to *En ensam plats*, the text itself prompts questions about the value of the illness narrative for Meidell and others, and does so in a manner that is even more explicitly anticipatory of its reception. As the narrative draws to a close, it becomes increasingly self-referential, addressing the act of writing the book itself. Meidell considers, among other things, the potential consequences of publishing her illness narrative for her children, acknowledging the possibility of reports of concern (Meidell 2022:190). Furthermore, in addition to emphasizing the relational dimension, which Nesby (2021) identifies as a central aspect of contemporary illness narratives, Meidell contemplates how her life narrative will be critically evaluated by future readers, especially considering how she intertwines her own illness narrative with a broader cultural discourse on self-starvation among women:

Vill jag verkligen skriva in mig i den här berättelsen, det kommer att sägas att jag skrev från ett sjukdomstillstånd, man kommer att betrakta mig som en intagen, på avstånd ser man hur hon sakta vandrar genom institutionernas intensivt gröna parker.

Vem är ansvarig utgivare? (Meidell 2022:190)

[Do I really want to write myself into this narrative, it will be claimed that I wrote from a state of illness, I will be considered an inmate, from afar one can observe how she leisurely strolls through the lush green parks of the institutions.

Who is the responsible publisher?]

The directive "äg din berättelse" (Meidell 2022:184) [own your story], imparted by her ex-husband, proves more challenging than anticipated when self-doubt creeps in, necessitating the presence of a compassionate listener – an "adequate witness", in Leigh Gilmore's (2017) terms. The opening sentence of *Ut ur min kropp*, which asserts that "[a]llt som sägs kan och kommer att vändas emot dig" (Meidell 2022:9, emphasis in original) [everything said can and will be turned against you], thus assumes a slightly different meaning toward the end of the book. If this sentence is initially framed as though the illness is addressing Meidell, it could now be interpreted as illustrating the challenges faced by individuals like her, who seek to publicly discuss their illness. This is especially true if the illness narrative diverges from the culturally sanctioned perspective on the illness in question, which in this instance is anorexia. As we will see, this was a pivotal issue in the debate surrounding *Ut ur min kropp*.

As these examples demonstrate, it is evident that Sandberg and Meidell address the question of value in their autopathographies in distinct ways. Both authors engage with the skeptical perspective on illness narratives, as discussed by Jurecic, seeking to validate the legitimacy of their narratives and anticipate potential critique. How, then, were *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp* received upon their publication?

ILLNESS AS REPRESENTATION

The review that garnered the most attention regarding Kristina Sandberg's *En ensam plats* was penned by Linda Skugge (2021) for *Expressen*. Skugge's critique epitomizes the skeptical and disparaging stance toward illness narratives that Jurecic highlights as prevalent in the public domain. Skugge offers a critical assessment of Sandberg's latest work, viewing it as a prime example of the commercialization of literature. Specifically, she highlights the exploitation of authors' willingness to reveal deeply personal aspects by publishers, an accusation aimed squarely at Sandberg in this instance. However, Skugge's critique extends beyond commercial

concerns, as she firmly dismisses *En ensam plats* on aesthetic grounds. She argues that the work fails to meet the criteria for literature and asserts that it should never have been published. The headline of the review effectively summarizes Skugge's criticism: "Det blir inte konst bara för att man skriver om cancer" (Skugge 2021) [It doesn't become art just because it's about cancer].

Skugge's harsh and provocative rhetoric immediately sparked a meta-debate about what is acceptable to write in a review. Many commentators felt that she had crossed the line of reasonableness by attacking Sandberg in this manner (see, e.g., Linderborg 2021; Levy 2021). But there were also those who defended Skugge's position in the debate, even if they did not necessarily agree with her tone. They echoed her concerns about the problematic commercialization of the book market and the contemporary culture's obsession with reality. Some even regarded Skugge's critique as norm-breaking, challenging the perceived taboo against criticizing the trend of publicly disclosing personal traumas, exemplified by Sandberg (e.g., Frändén 2021; Koli 2021).

Shifting focus from the debate to institutionalized literary criticism, it becomes evident that not all reviewers shared Skugge's critical perspective on Sandberg's autopathography. While Skugge found the portrayal lacking, the majority of reviewers praised Sandberg's writing and regarded *En ensam plats* as a piece of fine literature. Primarily, the reviewers emphasized the narrative's stylistic and formal qualities. Some even argued that these qualities elevate *En ensam plats* beyond a mere illness narrative. For instance, in her review in *Dagens Nyheter*, Åsa Beckman (2021), highlighted Sandberg's stylistic proficiency, suggesting that this contributes to positioning *En ensam plats* as more than just an account of cancer. Although this was not the intention of Beckman, this perspective reinforces the perception of the illness narrative genre as culturally inferior. If Sandberg had focused more on depicting the illness experience itself and displayed less control over her artistic expression, it is likely that the evaluation would have been less positive.

However, not all reviewers held a uniform perspective regarding the aesthetic value of *En ensam plats*. This indicates that it was this value that was subject to negotiation. For instance, Pia Ingström (2021) of *Hufvudstadsbladet* expressed disappointment over the new book's modest literary aspirations compared to Sandberg's Maj trilogy, while Maria Ramnehill (2021) of *Göteborgs-Posten*, noted a detachment in the storytelling that hindered reader engagement. Conversely, others argued that Sandberg's ability to address challenging topics with apparent ease contributed to the narrative's readability (Almqvist 2021). While most reviewers acknowledged the aesthetic qualities of *En ensam plats*, opinions diverged regarding the precise nature of these qualities.

In addition to considerations of narrative technique and aesthetics, the evaluation of *En ensam plats* centered heavily on the emotions it elicited among reviewers. A clear divide emerged between reviewers with personal experiences of illness and those without. The former group, citing feelings of anger and frustration, emphasized how Sandberg's illness narrative differed from their own experiences (Knutson 2021; Ekström 2021; Ingström 2021). In contrast, the latter group praised the book's gripping quality, comparing it to a crime novel that was difficult to put down (Häll 2021). These reviewers expressed being "hooked" by the text (cf. Felski 2020), underscoring its ability to resonate emotionally (e.g., Landström 2021; Almqvist 2021; Österman 2021).

From a feminist standpoint, the focus on emotional resonance aligns with the evaluative norms historically associated with works by female authors. Nevertheless, even those who valued the book's emotional impact emphasized the importance of narrative craftsmanship (Landström 2021; Almqvist 2021). Consequently, the book's aesthetic and emotional value were intricately intertwined. This was evident even in reviews that initially critiqued the

negative emotions evoked by Sandberg's narrative, where the aesthetic value was seen as outweighing its emotional deficits (Knutson 2021; Ekström 2021).

In her review in *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, Annelie Bränström-Öhman (2021) also in similar ways deliberated on the narrative's emotional impact, but she explicitly linked this to its political value. In contrast to some reviewers (Skugge 2021; Knutson 2021; Ekström 2021), Bränström-Öhman embraced the "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005) of anger and frustration expressed in the narrative, describing it as a physically painful reading experience: "Det gör ont, skrovlar mot ögat som läser" [It hurts, scratches against the eye that reads]. This sympathetic reading aligns with the reparative reading practice Jurecic views as a counterweight to the suspicious reading prevalent in the context of illness narratives. Bränström-Öhman accentuated the text's reluctance to please as consonant with Sandberg's unfettered expression of anger in *En ensam plats* and her consistent refusal to conform to the prevailing cultural logic that dictates that individuals with illness should never display weakness.

Bränström-Öhman further likened *En ensam plats* to Audre Lorde's seminal work *Cancer Journal* (1980), noting that both works challenge the optimistic, sanitized narratives typical of the so-called Pink Ribbon culture. "Nej, här finns inget om livet-ger-dig-citroner-gör-lemonad-tjafs" [No, there's no talk of making lemonade when life gives you lemons here], emphasized Bränström-Öhman (2021) – a statement that underscores *En ensam plats* distance from the literary feel-good genre, which experienced something of a breakthrough in Sweden with Kajsa Ingmarson's *Små citroner gula* (Love and Lemons, 2004) in the early 2000s. Moreover, it is the fact that *En ensam plats* offers a counter-narrative to the culturally sanctioned survivor narrative (cf. Conway 2007) often found in breast cancer discussions, which, according to Bränström-Öhman, underpins the book's knowledge value.

In addition to assessing *En ensam plats* from an aesthetic and emotional perspective, several other reviewers also emphasized that the narrative provided them with enriched knowledge and deepened insights into the world of the seriously ill (Beckman 2021; Holmlund 2021). Some also broadened their perspective and accentuated the narrative's existential and universal dimensions. Cecilia Blomberg (2021) reflected on how Sandberg's narrative prompted her to contemplate the impact of death on our life choices. Similarly, Rasmus Landström (2021) noted that *En ensam plats*, in contrast to other breast cancer narratives he had encountered, possessed a distinct existential undertone in its portrayal of the loss of trust in one's own body. These approaches recall the evaluation of 1970s female confessional writing, where universality and the ability to transcend the private and intimate were employed as evaluation criteria (cf. Sarrimo 2000).

Other reviewers praised Sandberg's work for penetrating deeply into the reader's innermost core, providing a space for the sharing of fears and vulnerabilities (Häll 2021). This highlights the high social value attributed to *En ensam plats*. Attention was drawn to Sandberg's illness narrative's capacity to engage the reader, demonstrating the shared vulnerability of all individuals, regardless of health status.

In light of the literary critical reception, Sandberg's apprehension about subjecting herself to public scrutiny, as expressed within the book's covers and in interviews (see, e.g., Stiskalo 2021), appears to be largely unwarranted. In contrast to the debate sparked by Skugge's review, which has since overshadowed the perception of the reception, the evaluation was generally positive, although reviewers varied in their degrees of favorability.

From a value perspective, it is noteworthy that the reception of *En ensam plats* focused on the literary depiction and representation of the illness experience. The value discussion primarily revolved around aesthetic perspectives. While reviewers did address other aspects, such as emotions, politics, and knowledge, the primary focus remained on the work's style and form. Even though the assessment of the aesthetic qualities differed markedly between most reviewers and Skugge, the overall reception suggests a predominant emphasis on the narrative's

artistic merit. In this regard, there appears to be a consensus on the central criterion for judging Sandberg's illness narrative: namely, the author's ability to capture the experience of illness in an artistically adequate way. This focus on style and form, in turn, reflects how the modernist value regime, which has been considered characteristic of Swedish literary criticism (Forslid et al. 2013:310–313), can also be discerned in the evaluation of contemporary autobiographical illness narratives.

BEING ILL IN THE RIGHT WAY

The publication of Sandberg's autobiographical illness narrative gave, as previously mentioned, rise to two concurrent value discussions. Firstly, there was the discourse primarily focused on the literary-critical evaluation of the book itself, which has been addressed above. Secondly, a broader discourse emerged among cultural journalists and other writers concerning the boundaries of acceptable tone and content in reviews, only indirectly touching upon the specific value of *En ensam plats*. The reception of Sara Meidell's *Ut ur min kropp* differed radically in this regard. Reviews from literary critics shared media space alongside debate articles and commentary written by a diverse range of individuals, including prominent figures in the Swedish cultural sphere and lesser-known names. This fact alone suggests that Meidell's illness narrative evoked, provoked, and necessitated responses to a greater extent than in Sandberg's case.

In her review for *Göteborgs-Posten*, Sara Abdollahi (2022) identified a significant challenge posed by *Ut ur min kropp* to reviewers and commentators. This challenge concerned Meidell's unwavering loyalty to her anorexia. However, Abdollahi did not extensively explore this issue, instead focusing on the exceptional quality of Meidell's writing. Thus, she prioritized the stylistic and formal aspects of the text, echoing the reception of *En ensam plats*.

This prioritization of the aesthetic value of *Ut ur min kropp* was soon met with resistance, particularly from Mikaela Blomqvist (2022a), who contested the largely positive reviews characterizing the reception thus far. In many respects, Blomqvist reiterated the same arguments that were presented in Skugge's critique of Sandberg's illness narrative. Similarly, she posited that not all narratives warrant dissemination. Additionally, Blomqvist questioned why no editor had intervened to correct what she deemed to be a deceptive and inaccurate portrayal of anorexia. However, Blomqvist's primary objection was not to the narrative itself, but rather to its presentation. She argued that the form did not align with the content. In another article, Blomqvist (2022b) further elaborated on this argument, claiming that the dreamlike language used in *Ut ur min kropp* obscured the misery of living with anorexia.

While Blomqvist (2022b) claimed to prioritize form over content and solely critique *Ut ur min kropp* on aesthetic grounds – stressing that it simply was “dålig litteratur” [bad literature] – her articles also exhibited a moralizing tone that contradicted her insistence on the primacy of form. Blomqvist's (2022a) characterization of Meidell's illness narrative as “ett reklamlblad för anorexi” [an advertisement for anorexia] highlighted the central question in the value discussion surrounding *Ut ur min kropp*: the potential impact the book has on its (female) readers. In his review for Swedish Television, Per Andersson (2022), acknowledged the aesthetic merit of *Ut ur min kropp*, noting its exquisite prose. However, he argued that instead of being awarded the August Prize, it “kommer bli en självskadebibel för flickor” [will become a self-harm manual for girls]. Similarly, Anna Smedberg Bondesson (2022), in a lengthy article in *Dagens Nyheter*, asserted that *Ut ur min kropp* could function as both a manual and an advertisement: “Boken är inte bara farlig utan livsfarlig för alla dem som riskerar att ‘thinspireras’ av den” [The book is not merely hazardous but life-threatening for those vulnerable to being ‘thinspired’ by it].

These value judgments illustrate that *Ut ur min kropp* was predominantly evaluated based on its perceived genre (as an advertisement or a self-harm manual), but more notably, on the presumed impact or influence the text was believed to exert on its reader. Underlying this criticism is the strongly normative myth of literature's inherent virtue, which historically has underpinned the dominant view of literary value (Johansson 2010; Persson 2012). In the review and debate material, it becomes evident that *Ut ur min kropp* is perceived by many to challenge the notion that reading literature should inherently be enlightening and conducive to personal growth. This belief appears to be particularly pronounced when it comes to narratives about mental rather than somatic illness. Several of Meidell's critics advocate for a more didactic narrative, one that demonstrates the potential for recovery from the debilitating illness of anorexia. For example, Per Andersson (2022) calls for a "restitution narrative", as described by Arthur Frank (2013), or what Conway (2007) terms a "triumph narrative", which emphasizes the struggle against illness and culminates in recovery and a happy ending.

As the debate unfolded, the fundamentally aesthetic and narrative question of how best to portray anorexia once again took center stage in the value discussion, increasingly assuming an ethical dimension. While Andersson (2022), Smedberg Bondesson (2022), and others argued that narratives about anorexia should depict the disease in negative terms and that the only ethically sound approach is to distance oneself from portrayals that romanticize the illness, others, such as Sara Andersson Vogel (2022), asserted that the ideal narrative is one that, like *Ut ur min kropp*, does not neatly fit into success narratives where the illness is triumphantly overcome. Vogel highlighted *Ut ur min kropp* as an exemplar of what, following Frank (2013), could be termed a "chaos narrative", signifying an illness narrative that eschews a linear trajectory from illness to health, instead allowing readers to experience the eating disorder through the perspective of the afflicted individual's psyche.

The potential of a chaotic and more nuanced narrative to deepen the understanding of anorexia was further underscored in the debate surrounding *Ut ur min kropp*. Anna Hellsten (2022) emphasized that it would have been more conventional if Meidell had written a book that was critical of norms and society, marked by anger. She claimed that the impact of *Ut ur min kropp* lies precisely in its deviation from the conventional manual on overcoming an eating disorder. Similarly, Abram Martina Lowden (2022), acknowledged the provocative nature of the book, but noted that a more traditional portrayal would not adequately capture the complexities of self-starvation. The strength of the book, she argued, lies in Meidell's avoidance of suggesting any escape from anorexia. This sentiment was echoed by Sinziana Ravini (2022), who posited that *Ut ur min kropp* represents a rebellious act of resistance: "Konstens höga ärende är ju att gå emot strömmen. Och i ärlighetens namn – vem vill vara sjuk på rätt sätt? [The noble aim of art is to go against the tide. And honestly – who wants to be ill in the right way?]."

The value discussion of *Ut ur min kropp* was, as we have seen, more intense than that of *En ensam plats*, underscoring that anorexia remains a highly charged illness within contemporary society. A pivotal aspect of the discussion was the nature of Meidell's work and its potential impact on its readers. Those who were critical of *Ut ur min kropp* predominantly viewed it as an instructional text addressing individuals struggling with anorexia. They regarded the text as an advertisement or a compendium of self-starvation strategies, perceiving it as potentially harmful for its readers. Although the term 'censorship' was not explicitly referenced in the debate, its concept was implicitly inferred as ethical and moral considerations took center stage. On the one hand, questions were raised concerning the author's responsibility towards her readers (Andersson 2022). On the other hand, the reader's responsibility towards Meidell and fellow sufferers of eating disorders was also considered, given that the condition was deemed severe enough to impede their judgment (Smedberg Bondesson 2022). Employing the framework of speech act theory, detractors of *Ut ur min kropp* predominantly viewed

it as a performative utterance (Austin 1975). The mere existence of the text was perceived as capable of affecting reality. Some participants in the debate even asserted that mere exposure to discussions about the book, in interviews and the like, could trigger fear and rekindle memories of past eating disorder experiences from adolescence (cf. Häyrynen 2022).

Those who held a more favorable view of *Ut ur min kropp* adopted a contrasting standpoint. They underscored the book's primary function as a literary portrayal that enhances comprehension of anorexia from the perspective of those afflicted by it. In contrast to the discourse on responsibility and ethics, the legitimacy of *Ut ur min kropp* was emphasized, with the argument being made that all experiences of illness warrant expression and literary representation. The intrinsic value of literature was perceived in its capacity to intricately explore rather than oversimplify. In stark contrast to those who condemned *Ut ur min kropp* in moralistic terms as an illness narrative unfit for public dissemination, proponents of this stance argued that discussions concerning such a stigmatized illness as anorexia should be democratized in order to comprehend its complexity. Some debaters even advanced the position that it was the critics attempting to silence Meidell who posed a threat, rather than the book itself. From a feminist perspective, this silencing was perceived to perpetuate the notion that women should not express their experiences in public and that their narratives are of little significance due to their marginalized status within society (cf. Edenheim 2022).

The discourse on the value of *Ut ur min kropp* swiftly entrenched itself into fixed positions, reflecting the broader scholarly debates on anorexia narratives from a reception perspective. Those who advocated for Meidell's work employed arguments closely aligned with positions articulated by Abigail Bray (1996) as early as the mid-1990s, contesting the assumption that media consumption, particularly engagement with literature, directly leads to eating disorder behaviors. In contrast, critics of Meidell's portrayal of anorexia aligned their arguments with the growing emphasis, particularly in the 2000s, on the adverse effects of consuming narratives about eating disorders, as opposed to reading fiction that does not address such themes (Troschianko 2018). As with scholarly research, a third, more dialectical perspective was notably absent from the reception of *Ut ur min kropp*. The closest to this position was articulated by Sara Berg (2022), who, in an article in *Aftonbladet*, suggested that *Ut ur min kropp* may hold different values and functions for different readers. Reflecting on her personal experiences with eating disorders, she acknowledged the potentially life-threatening nature of the book for those grappling with anorexia: "Det var länge sedan jag var så sugen på att sluta äta som nu" [It's been a long time since I've felt so tempted to stop eating as I do now]. Nevertheless, in contrast to other commentators, she also recognized the potential value of *Ut ur min kropp* as a source of knowledge, fostering a broader understanding of the disease.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to analyze the reception of autobiographical illness narratives from a value perspective, a largely unexplored area within illness narrative research. By examining the reception of two highly discussed autopathographies within a Swedish context during the 21st century, I have sought to highlight how critics and debaters in the Swedish literary and cultural field attribute various values to illness narratives. I will refrain from summarizing the value negotiation processes in these two specific cases, as they have been thoroughly discussed above. However, one striking observation when comparing the reception of these illness narratives is the markedly different impact Meidell's narrative of anorexia had in contrast to Sandberg's narrative of breast cancer. While the value discussion about *En ensam plats* primarily centered on inquiries about the text itself and how the experience of illness was depicted, the value discussion surrounding *Ut ur min kropp* revolved

predominantly around the impact of the text on the reader. This underscores how the evaluation of individual illness narratives is inextricably linked to the cultural valuation of the illness in question and its perceived cultural significance. In this context, it would be interesting to adopt a more comprehensive gender perspective and compare the reception of Sandberg's and Meidell's illness narratives with those written by male authors, like Niklas Rådström and Göran Greider, published during the same period. Are there discernable differences in how these male authors' illness narratives were valued, or do interesting overlaps exist?

In conclusion, I want to emphasize not only the importance of addressing the value discussion regarding illness narratives from diverse cultural and critical perspectives but also to acknowledge that this article has only scratched the surface of an important yet limited aspect of the value negotiation surrounding *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp*. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2009:32f.) notes, value negotiation processes typically unfold over an extended period of time and involve more than just literary critics and cultural debaters. These processes also encompass other actors and various forms of explicit and implicit value-creating actions (cf. Svedjedal 2009; Forslid et al. 2015:72f.). As Rita Felski has pointed out, the "transactions between texts and readers" are generally "varied, contingent, and often unpredictable" (2008:9), something that certainly applies to the evaluation of illness narratives as well.

To potentially gain a more multifaceted understanding of value creation and negotiation surrounding *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp*, it would have been compelling to compare the critical reception, which has been the primary focus here, with value judgments made in other contexts by actors with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and motivations. At the time of writing, *En ensam plats* has, for example, received 271 ratings and 27 reviews on the social reading platform Goodreads, while *Ut ur min kropp* has received 322 ratings and 35 reviews. Additionally, these works have been discussed in Facebook threads, Instagram feeds, and reviewed on blogs. Beyond examining value creation in digital media, it would have been interesting to investigate how Sandberg's and Meidell's illness narratives were framed with different values through the pre-publicity preceding their respective releases. Conducting interviews with individuals who have encountered and read *En ensam plats* and *Ut ur min kropp* in various contexts would also provide a deeper understanding of how "ordinary" readers relate to these types of illness narratives (cf. Radway 1991).

The list of potential approaches to investigating the value problem raised in this article could be much longer. However, my point is that the value perspective applied here could easily be expanded and applied in other contexts, and of course, regarding other illness narratives published in different cultural settings. An intriguing avenue of further research is the question of how illness narratives are valued by different stakeholders in other Scandinavian countries.

To conclude by advocating for an expansion of the analysis of value discussions, should not, however, be regarded as diminishing the significance of the critical reception of illness narratives, which has been the focal point here. On the contrary, this reception, as much as the illness narratives themselves, contributes substantially to both perpetuating and challenging the notions of illness circulating in contemporary culture. That said, it is important to remember that "values vary, of course, in literature as in life" (Felski 2008:20).

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