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# **Chasing writers' ghosts through a modern city: Augmenting urban space with literary connections during the Tove Jansson walk in Helsinki**

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The article employs the theme of a literary walk (Watson 2009), a practice of encountering places with literary associations on foot. Urban areas present especially suitable settings for such themed walks, as cities can have multiple literary connections, and literary places are located within a short distance from one another. In this paper, I focus on the sites associated with Tove Jansson (1914–2001), a Finnish-Swedish artist and writer, internationally known for her books about the Moomins. The study utilises an autoethnographic approach and draws on observations at the sites with connections to Jansson in Helsinki, organised spatially into a walk around the city. I analyse how urban space can be augmented (Sandvik and Waade 2008) by literary associations through narrativization of the author's biography and a visitor's own knowledge and imagination.

Keywords: literary walk, literary place, literary travel, augmented space, Tove Jansson

## **Introduction**

Exploring urban space on foot through a themed walk is a common contemporary practice (Plate 2006; Solnit 2014). In many European cities, historic city centres feature multiple heritage landmarks, which act as popular attractions and are within a walking distance from one another (Plate 2006). A city walk is spatially organised and follows a path connecting the chosen landmarks on the basis of an underlying theme. A brief online search provides plenty of options targeted at audiences with specific interests – be it antique books, local food, or a specific architectural style. Organised walking tours or downloadable maps for independent navigation offer to guide visitors through a city, taking them to places which match their interests.

Literature, as part of cultural heritage, often plays a key role in attracting visitors to the cities, and a literary walk is a common leisure activity for urban vacationers (Plate 2006). Such walks can centre on authors' personae and include sites with biographical ties, such as homes and graves; alternatively, story-centred walks emphasize connections to fiction and often incorporate places which are important to the narratives, such as locations that act as settings for fictional events (Herbert 2001; Robinson and Andersen 2002; Watson 2006).

Recognising well-known writers as part of cultural heritage is strongly linked to the politics of national and cultural identity and belonging (Plate 2006). Acts of commemoration, such as unveiling plaques and monuments, renaming streets and buildings, and introducing themed itineraries – usually tied in with significant dates, such as birth or death anniversaries – establish tangible ties between literary figures and urban space (Robinson and Andersen 2002; Watson 2006; Bom 2015a).

In this paper I focus on one example of commemorative practice dedicated to a nationally celebrated author by analysing the so-called Tove Jansson walk in Helsinki, Finland, from an autoethnographic perspective. Tove Jansson (1914–2001), a Finnish-Swedish artist and writer who achieved international popularity as the creator of the Moomins, was born in Helsinki and lived and worked there for most of her life. Following the centenary of her birth, several private and public organisations published information on their web pages about places with biographical connections to her and to her famous characters.

This study draws on observations at the sites with biographical ties to Tove Jansson in Helsinki, organised geographically into a walk, using itineraries published on the web pages of the Helsinki Art Museum and Moomin Characters Ltd. for reference. In recent years, the growing use of personal mobile devices and the availability of an Internet connection have made it easier for independent visitors to arrange self-guided tours in the cities, to find locations (e.g. by using mobile applications such as interactive web maps), and to consult websites for information. Using an autoethnographic approach, I analyse how urban space can be augmented (Sandvik and Waade 2008) by literary associations through adding a biographical layer to the places encountered during the walk, enabling visitors to “dive” into the author's time.

### **Literary walk, urban space and literary icon-cities**

The practice of the urban “literary ramble” (Watson 2009) was established in Britain by the mid-nineteenth century. Westover (2012) traces one of the earliest written descriptions of the

phenomenon back to the Romantic era and the writings of Leigh Hunt, one of the first to present his readers with the literary attractions of London arranged into themed “walks”. Hunt’s essays enlivened the city with literary associations, recreating it as a walkable space for literary enthusiasts and providing a “memorial and affective map” (Westover 2012, 9) of London.

In the late twentieth century, in light of the emerging public initiatives to preserve and commemorate local cultural heritage, the tradition of the literary walk enjoyed a revival, manifesting in the trend of “chasing” after authors’ ghosts in metropolises (Plate 2006). Nowadays, in many promoted walking tours and itineraries, visitors and residents alike are invited to “walk in the footsteps” of writers or follow the routes of their fictional characters (Plate 2006; van Es and Reijnders 2018). The supply of author-centred tours caters to people’s desire to experience the imagined past through biographical connection to a known literary figure. Places typically included in the itineraries based on factual ties with authors are birthplaces, homes, and burial sites. In comparison to a bus tour, the physical activity and the slower pace of a walking tour allows visitors not only to observe the surroundings but to achieve an embodied experience of the places in a presumably similar manner to that of the famous writers themselves (Plate 2006).

The tradition of a literary walk has been predominantly associated with *literary cities* like London and Paris. While such cities pride themselves on having multiple famous literary connections, *literary icon-cities* (Bom 2015a, 2015b) are known for being predominantly associated with one iconic literary figure. In the Nordic context, for instance, the cities of Odense (Bom 2015a) in Denmark and Vimmerby (Bom 2015b) in Sweden have been represented primarily through their connections to literary icons, the former being the birth place of H. C. Andersen and the latter – of Astrid Lindgren. Interestingly, the capitals of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland are each associated with a famous children’s writer: Copenhagen is known for its connection with Andersen (Steiner 2016), Stockholm with Lindgren, and Helsinki with Tove Jansson.

### **Diving into Tove Jansson’s Helsinki**

Tove Jansson (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki and lived in the city for most of her life, although she travelled extensively, resided in other countries for periods of time and, later in life, divided her time between the city and an island home which she shared with her partner (Westin 2014). Having been born into an artistic family and having received visual arts education, Jansson worked throughout her life as a painter, an illustrator, and a cartoonist. In addition, she authored novels and short stories, and wrote and illustrated the Moomin books and comic strips. She considered herself

first and foremost an artist and only then a writer (Westin 2014), though ironically today she is predominantly known as the author of the Moomin stories. In Finland she is regarded as a national literary and artistic icon, although her fictional creations – the Moomins – tend to overshadow Jansson's persona as well as her other artistic work (Westin 2014).

A number of commemorative events were held in Finland after Jansson's death in 2001. During 2014, which marked the centenary of her birth, and in subsequent years, more events followed: a park in Helsinki was renamed in her honour; itineraries were published to guide interested visitors to places which Jansson frequented during her life; exhibitions of her works were held in Finland and abroad; a new Moomin Museum opened in the city of Tampere in 2017. While Helsinki had been home to many known artists and writers, the international popularity of Jansson's Moomin characters makes her one of the most recognised figures, thus designating Helsinki as an icon-city. In order to see how the city of Helsinki is experienced through its connection to Jansson and to find out the ways in which urban space can be augmented during a literary walk, it was necessary for me to take on the role of a visitor (van Es and Reijnders 2018) and to participate in a self-guided walking tour myself. For this study, I have adopted an autoethnographic approach, which draws on the researcher's own lived experience and reflections in order to provide insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Bolen 2017). While ethnography is often employed when studying visitors'/tourists' experiences (e.g. Bom 2015a; van Es and Reijnders 2018) and autoethnography has previously been used to study urban walking experiences (Stead 2009), in the current study I wanted to find out whether an autoethnographic approach would prove useful in studying the perceived spatial augmentation.

The research material is comprised of my field notes, written as narrative accounts of the walks and documenting observations made at the sites with connections to Tove Jansson in the historical centre of Helsinki. The field notes are supplemented by visual data in the form of photographs taken at the sites. Fieldwork was carried out over the course of two days – in June and December 2017 – together with a fellow researcher, Elina Huttunen, who, similarly, has a professional and personal interest in Tove Jansson. In June, the two of us embarked on a walk through the western, central and southern parts of the inner Helsinki area. The walk was recommenced in December of the same year, covering the central, and eastern parts of the city centre. The choice of the sites and their spatial organisation into a walk was prompted by itineraries provided on the web pages of the Helsinki Art Museum<sup>1</sup> and Moomin Characters Ltd<sup>2</sup>.



## Constructing the narrative of Tove Jansson's life during the walk

On a surprisingly sunny day, we finally went on a Tove-adventure. Before that, I'd spent days browsing through maps (old and new) of Helsinki, reading biographical material, translated letters, and excerpts from *Sculptor's Daughter* [Jansson's childhood memoir, 1968/2013]. So I was all prepared. (Field notes, June 2017)

Our self-guided walking tour was driven by a biographical interest in Jansson, rather than her fictional creations. I had already been familiar with Jansson's literary and artistic works prior to conducting fieldwork and had done my "homework" by getting acquainted with biographical sources and itineraries in advance.

In themed urban walks, sites are often arranged for convenience rather than in order corresponding chronologically to the author's life (Plate 2006). If one were to follow the numbering order of both itineraries, the trail would start from Jansson's first family home in the eastern part of the city, followed by several sites in the centre in random chronological order, with Jansson's grave to be encountered close to the end of the walk. The walks taken in the course of the fieldwork were similarly arranged for convenience. However, the trails which we followed in the course of the two days formed a winding path going in the direction opposite to the one proposed in the itineraries – from west to east, beginning from one of the family homes and the grave. The visit to the cemetery, which is generally taken to indicate finality, nevertheless did not give the tour a pessimistic hue, serving only as a "...reminder that she is dead – plaque on the building, her grave; and then in my mind she's alive again. The walk started with a visit to a cemetery, but I managed to forget it as we walked to the next site" (June 2017). The connection between Jansson and the city, mapped in the itineraries gets confirmed by what I see – commemorative plaques; the gravestone; her teenage self, embodied in public space through her father's sculptures. The actual physical objects indicate that she indeed had been present there, or at the least – that she indeed existed.





Figure 2. Convolvulus by Viktor Jansson (modelled after teenage Tove Jansson). Photo by author, 2017.

In their analysis of crime scenes as mediatised spaces, Sandvik and Waade (2008) observe that spatial augmentation – the enhancement of space through senses and emotions on the basis of media connections and through the use of media – can occur, among other means, by narrativization and fictionalisation. During our walk, it is the narrative of Jansson’s life that gets told and laid out across the city, as is reflected in the title of the Helsinki Art Museum’s itinerary, “The life path of Tove”.





Figure 3. Tove Jansson's grave, Hietaniemi cemetery. Photo by author, 2017.

While no augmented reality software was used during the walk to enhance the urban space (Sandvik and Waade 2008), personal mobile devices were used for consulting the itineraries, navigating, and fact-checking. Because it is not a guided tour, visitors (like my colleague and myself) act as their own guides, so much depends on one's ability to find the required information and to utilise it during the tour. Instant access to biographical information via mobile devices enabled our independent navigation through the city and allowed us to correlate the places visited with specific events in Jansson's life.

Plate (2006) points out how literary walks, by leading visitors from one place associated with an author to another, create narratives of the author's life, embedded in urban space. I cannot follow every month and year of Tove Jansson's life precisely, but only "see her in [...] pockets of time", when occupying the same space as she once did (Watson 2013) and recreating her spatial movements (Plate 2006). While physical movement through urban space turns this narration into an

embodied experience, the city where we walk at the same time disrupts it – we have to pause for traffic, occasionally get distracted, or have a sudden need to “stop by a tea shop” or “have a coffee break at a café we’ve deemed worthy” (June 2017).

In the course of this non-chronological walk, places encountered are connected to “different stages of Jansson’s life: here she’s a teenager, posing for her father’s statue; here she goes to art school that she disliked; here is her as an adult walking through the city” (December 2017). Because not even twenty years have passed since her death, many places likely stayed the same as they were in her later years. However, many sites included in the walk are connected to an earlier time in her life – first as a child, then as a student and young adult, and later as a known artist and writer.



Figure 4. Tove Jansson’s memorial plaque (by Viktor Jansson). Photo by author, 2017.

The reconstructed biographical narrative is by no means linear; it jumps back and forth in time. It consists of flashbacks – not Jansson’s own, but mine, when I consult the sources and discover a new piece of information or remember a random detail from her autobiography:

Suddenly there’s just us – here and now – walking through the Christmas market in 2017, sipping coffee in a café next to Senate square, and then we dive back again into Jansson’s Helsinki; here’s her childhood home, a block of flats for artists. Resurfacing again into the present to buy Moomin souvenirs. Then again diving into the past, following Jansson’s timeline. (December 2017)

Similar to how a “crime tourist” (Sandvik and Waade 2008) might reconstruct historical and fictional crime scenes based on provided cues, placing pieces of an author’s biographical narrative together might require some “detective work”:

My edition [of *Sculptor’s Daughter*] featured photographs and drawings from family archives, so before we resumed the walk [in December], I checked Google Maps satellite view [of the street where she lived] to see whether her drawing of a view from the window can somehow be traced – and it was there, that building, the gate (perhaps, looking different now). The angle from which she drew the street indicated where the windows were, and approximately the floor on which they lived. This little investigation of mine afforded some satisfaction, so when we actually went there, I was able to check it out “in reality”, standing on the same street, somewhat 90 years later. (December 2017)

As follows from this excerpt, I compared archive pictures to web maps and to the “reality” to deduce which apartment the Janssons used to occupy. While the cityscape had undergone rapid changes since her childhood, I assume that I am able to “see through”, or “see past”, the city as it is in 2017 and into the city that *was* – and how her life was connected to it: “The city I see is the city of today, so I project her onto the city as it is now, trying to bring out the city as it was then. Is it my attempt to make the urban space meaningful, to envision it through her life?” (December 2017).



Figure 5. Apartment block where Jansson lived in her tower studio. Photo by author, 2017.

Based on the field notes, it is not only factual knowledge – long-held or recently obtained – of the author’s biography which allows me to “activate” (Westover 2012, 7) the surroundings. The often-mentioned act of “seeing” is recurrently paired with “in my mind”: my own imagination plays a key role in creating glimpses of Jansson’s life at associated places and piecing the biographical narrative together. Plate (2006) and Bom (2015a) observe that historical facts can become less important for literary visitors, as perceived experience – for example, of going back into the past – relies more on

emotions and feelings of visitors, rather than hard facts. Sandvik and Waade (2008) similarly note that spaces can be enhanced through visitors' emotions. The narrative of Jansson's life and the past I am immersed in at the literary sites are essentially imagined.

The deceased author becomes fictionalised, as her life story is narrativized and embedded into the urban space (Bom 2015a). Just as with elusive fictional characters (McLaughlin 2016), literary walks, centred on following in the footsteps of someone who is no longer living, make visitors pursue authors' ghosts across the city, driven by visitors' imaginations and an author's perceived temporary proximity (Steiner 2016).

## Conclusion

In this article, I examined how urban space can be experienced through biographical connection to writers during thematic walks. With the help of the autoethnographic approach, drawing on observations made during a self-guided walk centred on Tove Jansson in Helsinki, I looked at how biographical narratives of known authors can add new dimensions to the urban space. With regard to methodology, I found that utilising the autoethnographic approach in the study proved useful by allowing me to focus on my personal embodied experience of the walk and to reflect on the thoughts and emotional responses resulting from it.

Drawing on the idea of spatial augmentation by fiction proposed by Sandvik and Waade (2008), this study has shown that urban space can be augmented by narrativization of the author's life during a literary walk. Though nonlinear and easily interruptible by the city itself, the biographical narrative is constructed spatially as visitors move from one site to the other through urban space, enabling them to "dive" into the writer's time when encountering associated sites.

The results indicate that visitors are able to piece the narrative of the author's life together, placing the author into the surrounding urban space through their own factual knowledge and imagination, thus envisioning the author's personal narrative tied to the geography and history of the growing city.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Helsinki Art Museum: The life path of Tove. <https://www.hamhelsinki.fi/en/exhibition/tove-jansson/>

<sup>2</sup>Moomin Characters Ltd.: Discover Tove Jansson's life and art through this map of Helsinki. 4 April 2014.  
<https://www.moomin.com/en/blog/discover-tove-janssons-life-and-art-through-this/>

<sup>3</sup>Moomin Characters Ltd.: Discover Helsinki – see the beautiful sculptures of Tove Jansson. 28 July 2015.  
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