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**Doctoral Thesis**

**Narratives of a Changing Nature:  
Ecocritical Readings in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction**

*- Summary -*

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**Keywords:** climate fiction; Norwegian literature; risk narratives; Ulrich Beck, Sylvia Mayer; risk society; uncertainty; Christian Valeur; Brit Bildøen; Ingrid Tørresvold; Mette Karlsvik

### **Summary:**

Nature has always occupied a special place in Norwegian literature. Recently, fictional works that shed light on the way nature is disturbed by intensive use of resources, pollution and imbalance in the climatic patterns have received particular attention both nationally and internationally. Such examples include Jostein Gaarder's *Anna. En fabel om jordens klima og miljø* (2013, translated as *The World According to Anna* in 2015), and, perhaps most notably, Maja Lunde's *Bienes historie* (2015, translated as *The History of Bees* in 2017), the first novel in her internationally acclaimed climate quartet. At the same time, many other Norwegian novels engage with the climate crisis in a more subdued manner, avoiding dystopian scenarios and focusing on the present rather than the future. They imagine stories in which characters are not confronted with the dire consequences of the climate crisis, but confront uncertainty, while remaining ignorant of the actual extent of the crisis or struggling to understand it. My research is concerned with precisely this category of Norwegian fiction and discusses the following novels: Christian Valeur's *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* ("Steffen takes his share of the responsibility," 2009), Brit Bildøen's *Sju dager i august* ("Seven days in august," 2014), Mette Karlsvik's *Varmá* (2016), and Ingrid Tørresvold's *Hilsen Ruth* ("Regards, Ruth," 2020). Among these, only Bildøen's novel has appeared in an English version, translated by Becky L. Crook in 2016. While these texts seem to have little in common, I aim to show throughout this thesis that they can nonetheless be grouped together within the same literary tradition.

My research draws on the idea that fictional works about the climate crisis frame stories about the *risks* of climate change, rather than constructing climate change *per se* as a narrative. This perspective is inspired by sociological theories, notably by German sociologist Ulrich Beck's conceptualisation of risk society and reflexive modernity. I take as a point of departure the work of ecocritical scholar Sylvia Mayer who draws insight from such sociological understandings of risk and proposes to look at climate fiction in terms of risk narratives.

Arguing that climate fiction addresses what it means to live in a risk society, Mayer (2014) distinguishes between *risk narratives of anticipation* and *risk narratives of catastrophe*. In broad terms, the two categories differ in their temporal focalisation: while the works in the latter category imagine future scenarios in which climate change has already transformed the world, the former category sheds light on the present moment, and, importantly, conveys the sense of uncertainty and insecurity that possible threats awaken.

On these grounds, this thesis aims to answer the following research question: *how does Mayer's conceptualisation of risk narratives allow us to read Norwegian novels about contemporary threats related to the climate crisis as part of a common literary trend?* I argue that pairing risk theory and ecocriticism brings to surface common literary themes and formal strategies that characterise Norwegian risk narratives of anticipation. Furthermore, I aim to show that, although narratives of anticipation have received less popular attention than narratives of catastrophe, they are nonetheless equally important for understanding the present moment of uncertainty surrounding environmental debates, because they place focus on contemporary struggles we face when dealing with cultural, socioeconomic, or political changes provoked by climate risks, as well as with the affective dimension of these changes. Thus, I am interested not only in how Norwegian contemporary fiction reflects awareness of climate change, but also in how these texts participate in the public discourses about the ecological crisis, how they potentially engage readers and shape worldviews.

Studying the representation of risk in literary fiction, I pair ecocritical approaches with perspectives from sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, or cognitive psychology. Beck's risk society is a key-concept of this thesis, but I also rely on theoretical insights offered by other scholars, such as Mary Douglas or Paul Slovic. I therefore introduce my case studies with a presentation and clarification of the theoretical framework and the conceptual tools that support my analyses, showing how literary criticism has so far fruitfully engaged with interdisciplinary perspectives on risk.

Using close reading as a method, I pay particular attention to narratological aspects. Taking my cue from econarratology, I shed light on construction of storyworlds, and on narrative strategies that guide readers' experience of the fictional storyworlds. I am mostly concerned with those narrative strategies that generate uncertainty, and I attempt to show that, participating in larger discourses about climate change, such texts invite readers to further reflect on their own experiences of uncertainty and risks outside the fictional worlds. At the same time, I do not overlook the culturally specific symbols and elements present in Norwegian fiction. Many of these elements implicitly or explicitly reappear across the novels I study and

therefore, in chapter three, I provide an overview of what I consider to be some of the most important aspects related to the Norwegian nature tradition.

The present thesis is structured in seven chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. After introducing and contextualising my approach in relation to previous discussions of climate fiction within ecocriticism, chapter two explores how theories about the risk concept are pertinent for an ecocritical study of literary narratives. This chapter thus provides an introduction to interdisciplinary approaches to risk, focusing on Ulrich Beck's world risk society, as a key-concept in my literary analysis of risk representations. I discuss how risks in contemporary society are understood by Beck as side-effects of modernisation, meaning that threats such as the environmental crisis, nuclear or financial dangers are unintended consequences of technological development, which cannot easily be predicted nor mitigated. In public perceptions of risk, the importance of scientific knowledge is downplayed by culturally shaped worldviews that influence how lay people respond to different risks, a dimension I explore in the subsequent chapters of the thesis. Further, I explain how risk theory has been previously paired with narrative fiction in literary studies, and I concentrate on ecocriticism as a field that has paid particular attention to depictions of environmental threats in literary texts. Afterwards, I explain Mayer's approach to climate fiction and the conceptual distinction she makes between *risk narratives of anticipation* and *risk narratives of catastrophe*. I focus particularly on the former category, presenting the characteristics of risk narratives of anticipation in Mayer's thinking. Important traits are: the temporal focus on the present or the very near future; representation of climate change risks as a controversial reality, the reliance on a variety of narrative templates that move beyond the dystopian mode, suggesting the uncertainty and the openness of the future. I indicate how my corpus fits into this category, but I also seek to further build on Mayer's conceptualisation and suggest some other traits that, at least in the case of Norwegian literature, may define narratives of anticipation. Finally, in this chapter I also point out that Mayer's distinction offers valuable conceptual tools for approaching climate fiction, as an alternative to debates on the separation between genre fiction and realist novels about climate change.

Drawing on the observations made in chapter two about sociocultural responses to risk, chapter three further provides insight into the particularities of the Norwegian nature tradition. I investigate how different conceptions of nature have permeated Norwegian cultural imagery and argue that aspects related to the relationship between nature and culture are relevant for a study of risk narratives. This chapter is organised in two parts. First, I present how nature has been cemented as a symbol of national identity through various cultural artefacts, philosophical

ideas, environmental movements and international political decision and everyday life traditions. Drawing on sociologist Kari Norgaard (2011) I further explain how attitudes to climate change appear as rather paradoxical, given the close relationship with nature that is traditionally displayed in cultural representations. In the second part of this chapter, I focus more closely on literature and outline an overview of contemporary representations of environmental risks in Norwegian fiction. I thus aim to situate the novels that form the corpus of my thesis in a specific literary tradition, but also to demonstrate how Mayer's delineation between risk narratives of anticipation and risk narratives of catastrophe is pertinent for Norwegian literature.

Having laid out the background of my study, the following chapters represent the main part of this thesis, where I present my case studies. Chapters four, five, and six thus aim to demonstrate how the four novels under analysis align with Mayer's risk narratives of anticipation. Each of them is introduced by a similar structure: I first offer a brief presentation of the writers' authorship, followed by a summary of the novels I study and their reception in Norwegian press and academic scholarship.

Chapter four sheds light on Christian Valeur's *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret*. Showing how the text reflects risk society at the beginning of the twenty first century, I argue that the novel fits into Mayer's category of risk narratives of anticipation. To substantiate my claim, I present how the novel focuses on the present cultural moment, anchoring the story in a recognisable storyworld that features elements of popular culture from the beginning of the century. I further look at how climate crisis is portrayed as a controversial reality, by looking both at elements such as narrative unreliability, irony, and the polyphonic perspectives on climate change. Surveying how secondary characters position themselves in relationship to ecological themes and concentrating on the protagonist's thoughts and emotions of guilt and anxiety, I show that individual responses to the uncertainty surrounding climate risks can be explained through a sociocultural framework. I finally study how risk is narratively articulated in the novel via genre conventions and narrative modes, such as the pastoral, the satire and the *hyttebok* tradition.

Chapter five focuses on two novels, Brit Bildøen's *Sju dager i august* and Ingrid Tørresvold's *Hilsen Ruth*. Both novels thematise extreme weather and subtly play with temporality. Vague textual cues indicate that action in both novels is set in a very near future that strongly resembles the present world. In contrast with *Steffen tar sin del av ansvaret* where climate change explicitly appears as a theme, in Bildøen's and Tørresvold's novels, unusual meteorological phenomena are not directly linked to climatic imbalance. While this might not

legitimate an interpretation of the texts as risk narratives of anticipation, I do however argue that ambiguity related to the underlying cause of extreme weather is a feature of the uncertainty that characterises risk society. I discuss how characters experience risk, evidencing the role of mass media and the relationship between risk perception and privilege. Furthermore, I show how the novels depict conflicting emotions and controversial attitudes to imminent environmental risks, such as denial, apathy or anxiety, which, similarly to Valeur's novel, can be interpreted through a cultural filter. I show how the scenarios imagined in both novels draw on dystopian depictions, but, as a characteristic of risk narratives of anticipation, they also rely on other narrative templates, such as the pastoral, the domestic novel, biblical myths and symbolic narratives of national identity, which suggest that the future is not enclosed by some end-of-the-world perspective, but remains uncertain and open.

Finally, in chapter six I discuss Mette Karlsvik's *Varmá*. This novel distinguishes itself from the other novels I study not only because it moves the spotlight on Iceland, but also because of its high degree of formal experimentation and its focus on history. Although it might seem an odd choice, I argue that Karlsvik's *Varmá* dovetails with the other novels I analyse in this thesis and aligns with Mayer's conceptualisation of risk narratives of anticipation because it portrays the sense of uncertainty that characterises contemporary modern threats and presents climate change as a risk that pervades the fictional world. The novel portrays a whole riskscape, in which climate risk overlaps with other manufactured threats of the modernity, such as the atomic bomb and financial risks. Attempting to demonstrate that *Varmá* belongs to the same writing tradition as the other works analysed in the thesis, I show how environmental risks are articulated in the novel through an interplay with Norwegian ideas about nature. Furthermore, I discuss the diverse narrative strategies used in the novel to negotiate uncertainty at a textual level, such as experimentation with narrative focalisation, use of ambiguous temporal and spatial markers which blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, or the use of a spectre of linguistic registers. Another important characteristic I discuss is how the novel employs a variety of narrative templates, among which the pastoral, the historic novel or the family saga. Although Mayer defines risk narratives of anticipation as fictions focusing on the present or the very near future, my argument that *Varmá* falls nonetheless in this same category is premised on the fact that focus on the past is a strategy of highlighting the emerging risk society in relation to history, to the common human and non-human evolution, and in contrast to past dangers, which to a lesser degree were influenced by human action.

My conclusions finally show that we can identify several features that characterise the four novels analysed throughout this thesis: they portray life in the world risk society depicting

characters who navigate risks resulted from technological developments; they illustrate these manufactures uncertainties as risks that cannot be simply predicted with the help of scientific knowledge; uncertainty manifests both as a theme and as formal trait through techniques of storyworld building and narrative strategies that generate ambiguity; risk perceptions are filtered through affective and cultural lenses; elements of national identity are integrated in the story and sometimes critically addresses; media appears as an important motif, taking different functions in the story; they avoid narrative closure and use open-endings as a way of projecting an open future where catastrophe can still be avoided; finally, they are characterised by use of various narratives templates and generic conventions.