THE CONVERSATION

The Moomins at 80

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Introduction

Celebrating Tove Jansson's magical tales

Jane Wright

Commissioning Editor, Arts & Culture,
The Conversation UK

I have loved the Moomins since I was little. I remember my mum reading the stories to me and my two brothers as I listened, entranced, to their brave and exciting adventures. It was only recently when I saw the hardback edition of Finn Family Moomintroll (1948) with the original cover, that all those memories came tumbling back.

Tove Jansson's Moomin tales exert a strange pull on people – what else can explain the way these stories are met with such delight and happy memories that prompt this strong sense of nostalgia in so many of us? But why have the Moomins lodged in our collective consciousness, making us pass these stories on to the little people in our lives with such joy?

I think it's because, ultimately, they exemplify the very best in people. Of course the Moomins are as flawed and as imperfect as any of us. Their world is often troubled. But these creatures are about good things – generous instincts and a desire to always find the best in those they meet, whether that's a gloomy Hemulen, a sad Groke or the thieving Thingummy and Bob.

No one is excluded (unless they're an ant-lion kicking sand in Moominmamma's face). Kindness and compassion always win through and everyone is always welcomed, a meal provided, or a bed is found in the ever-expanding Moomin house with its round blue tower and pointy roof.

Whether it's a flood, a comet, a hobgoblin with a magic hat or an enormous fish caught with a penknife and a pancake – these tales reveal funny, ingenious little creatures who love to go out into the world, take on adventures and come up with solutions to the challenges they face. And on top, they have parents who positively encourage these adventures, so that their offspring develop courage and compassion and the resilience to figure out how to get themselves out of a scrape. They are inspiring.

These adventures are suffused with is a strong sense of the natural world and the love it stirs in the Moomin creatures. Such beautiful and often fantastical descriptions of forests, mountains and oceans fire the imagination and bring these characters and their environment vividly to life.

The Moomins love their valley and the world beyond. Jansson imbues her landscapes with such beauty and awe, that you cannot ignore the environmental message to take care of this wonderful Earth of ours, even though she wrote these tales when we did not yet understand the scale of the climate crisis to come.

I like to think of the Moomins as a primer for living a good life. The lessons are clear: be kind, be brave, figure things out and don't leave anyone behind. Relish this beautiful world and get out into nature, where there is so much to enchant and teach us. And of course, the one thing these tales always comes back to is love, embodied most fully by Moominmamma.

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Moominpappa of course is there, but always a bit head-in-the-clouds and self-absorbed. Moominmamma has time for everyone, always knows what to do and makes room for the myriad creatures that turn up with her beloved Moominchild, Moomintroll. She is the gold standard of mothers: warm, comforting, nourishing, fair and ever-loving. No one is turned away from her home and everyone is met with kindness and a door that is always open.

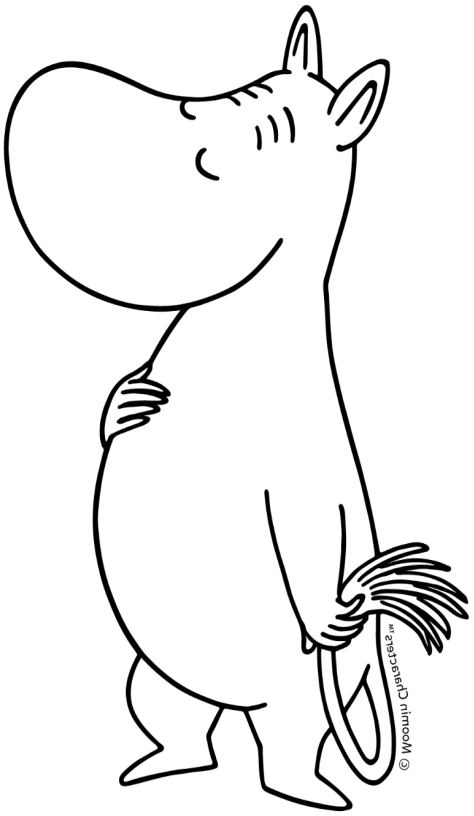
In this special ebook to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Jansson's Moomins, the little creatures she brought to life just as the second world war ended, are enduring gifts to adults and children alike. Jansson saw the devastation and pain the war had wreaked on people, many of whom were separated and displaced.

It would not be too much to say that she wrote these tales to heal and remind us of the good in people after six long years of unprecedented inhumanity. These tales are a reminder of our innate goodness; that when called upon, we can do the right thing and extend a hand to those less fortunate than ourselves.

We need Jansson's tales more than ever in our increasingly conflicted world, where unspeakable horrors are happening once more. In this ebook seven academics give their takes on the legendary creatures, bringing you new and fascinating perspectives that will make you think of the Moomins afresh

From a look at Jansson's extraordinary creative life, to myths that resist meaning, illustrations that encourage belonging and even the savvy marketing of Moomin merchandise – with which I am completely obsessed – there is much to think about.

We hope you enjoy these fresh and thoughtful examinations of the wonderful world of Moominvalley, they are both revealing and profound. We trust they will enrich your enjoyment of Tove Jansson's magical tales.



Tove Jansson | Per Olov Jansson

Tove Jansson: lessons in life from her beloved Moomin characters

Barbara Tesio-Ryan

ECDS Postdoctoral Fellow in European Languages, University of Edinburgh

This year marks the 80th anniversary of The Moomins, the Finnish/Swedish trolls that have delighted generations of children, becoming a cultural phenomenon in their own right. While posterity will likely remember her as the inventor of Moomins, Tove Jansson was in fact a strikingly multi-talented creative force.

Born in Helsinki in 1914, the daughter of artists, Jansson grew up surrounded by creativity, allowing her to develop her own in many different ways. During a career that spanned over 70 years, her work included illustrations, cartoons, paintings, murals, theatre productions, children's books and beautifully crafted novels.

"The main thing in life is to know your own mind."

Snufkin, Moominsummer Madness

In 1929, aged 15, Jansson began her career as a cartoonist. Her illustrations were first published in Garm, the Finnish satirical magazine for which she later became the in-house illustrator.

Her work as a cartoonist, before and during the war, gave her an outlet to be outspoken and express her militant anti-fascism and opposition to the war. For a woman at that time to assert her views so boldly and publicly was an act of defiance in itself, and she later recalled how liberating it had been to be able to be "so beastly to Hitler and Stalin" through her daring cartoons.

No one was spared, and her cartoons captured the megalomania of the main political figures of the time, as well as the impact of the war on everyday life.

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During the strenuous war years, Jansson refined her craft as an illustrator, and also, crucially, learned the importance of laughter in ushering light into the darkness. This is a skill that would characterise her entire output, both as an artist and as a writer.

"Everything looks worse in the dark, you know."

Moominmama, The Moomins and the Great Flood

She used humour as a tool to both critique and understand life and the world around her. Through the act of making art, Jansson brought light and lightness when life got darker.

While Jansson had been sketching some variation of Moomintrolls her whole life, it was during the war that she began creating their Moominvalley world and imagining stories for them.

In 1991, she wrote that the Moomins had come to her as an escape from the horrors of the war: "Perhaps it was understandable that I suddenly felt an urge to write something that was to begin with 'once upon a time'."

When her first Moomin book, Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen (The Moomins and the Great Flood), was published in 1945, Finland had been through the second world war, as well as the "winter war" and the "continuation war" with Russia. So, while it was published during a time of peace, darkness surrounded the origin of the Moomins.

This dichotomy of light and darkness pervades all the Moomin books. Often a catastrophe is waiting to happen, or has just happened, and how the Moomins react to those events is central to the story itself. This is what makes those books so universal and so timeless.

The Moomins are so special because they are normal. Not everyone is a hero and not every day is great. There is space for both sadness and joy in Jansson's tales, and this is why we keep reading them, because they are just like life itself.

"It would be awful if the world exploded. It is so wonderfully splendid."

Snufkin, Comet in Moominland

In the first two Moomin books, Moomins and the Great Flood, and Comet in Moominland, natural catastrophes mirror the horrors of the war and postwar era (such as the atomic bomb). Environmental disasters are also ongoing threats to the the creatures of Moominvalley.

These are often, and mainly, brought by the sea, and can be fully appreciated only by someone like Jansson who lived between coastal and island landscapes most of her life. The natural landscape of Finland and Sweden, Jansson's two homelands, are an essential part of her art.

Moominvalley in particular is a decidedly Nordic landscape, and was in fact inspired by her grandparents' house on the island of Blidö, and by the Pellinki archipelago. It was here that Jansson spent many happy summers with her family, and later, with her partner Tuulikki Pietilä.

There is a humbleness to be learned in living by the sea, and a respect for the power of nature that Jansson captured beautifully in so many of her creations, such as The Summer Book.

In Moominpappa at Sea, where Moominpappa goes on an existential journey to find his purpose in life again, the relationship to the sea also becomes pivotal to his personal development:

"There was the sea – his sea – going past, wave after wave, foaming recklessly, raging furiously, but, somehow, tranquil at the same time. All Moominpappa's thoughts and speculations vanished. He felt completely alive from the tips of his ears to the tip of his tail. This was a moment to live to the full."

The Moomins' unconditional love and respect for nature also translates beautifully into an acceptance of all of life's diversity. The Moomin's universe is one where everyone is welcomed and loved for whoever they are and however they feel.

One of the biggest teachings of Jansson's work for any reader at any age, is that all feelings are valid, and learning to accept this simple and profound truth makes life so much easier. As Moominpappa says: "For if you're not afraid, how can you really be brave?"

"You seem to be yourself again. Actually, you're nicer that way."

Mymble, Moominvalley in November

Jansson's motto, *labora et amare* (work and love), did indeed mark her existence. She worked incessantly and loved fiercely.

Well ahead of her time, Jansson lived her sexuality with a freedom that was truly revolutionary for her time (Finland, like many other countries, decriminalised homosexuality only in 1971).

What characterised this artist's life and career was the ambition and the courage to live differently. To create and to love without boundaries and without fear. And this is perhaps Jansson and her Moomins' most important legacy.

Jansson swimming just off the island of Klovharun, where she had a cabin | Per Olov Jansson

The Moomins drift through time like a myth – that's why they resist meaning and endure

Steve Nash

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The Moomins may look like hippos in aprons and top hats, but they're more than just adorable characters from children's books. Over the decades, these gentle creatures have become part of a living mythology – one that drifts across time, borders and generations.

Created by Finnish-Swedish author Tove Jansson in the 1940s, the Moomins live in stories that blur the lines between fairy tale, folk wisdom and quiet philosophy. And perhaps that's the secret to their enduring appeal: they resist being pinned down.

Unlike traditional children's characters tied to a tidy moral or neat storyline, the Moomins meander literally and metaphorically. Their world is one of seasonal migrations, long silences, floods, comets and unexpected departures.

Moominvalley isn't a safe haven – it's a landscape shaped by change. In that sense, Jansson's stories echo something far older than modern literature: the mythic rhythms of Nordic storytelling, where time loops, endings blur and characters return in altered forms.

A myth that moves

The Viking sagas, for instance, were not written down at first but passed from voice to voice, reshaped with each telling. They weren't concerned with tidy endings or moral clarity. Characters disappeared and reappeared. Time looped and fragmented.

Similarly, Jansson's stories don't build to a climax. They wander. One book might end with a mystery, a quiet mood or a long silence. It's a narrative style that feels strangely modern – and yet deeply ancient.

Jansson herself resisted giving her stories a single message. In letters and interviews, she said she disliked moralising and preferred ambiguity. “A good story,” she wrote, “has no need to be explained; its truth lies in its telling, not in its conclusion.” That idea – of a truth that doesn’t depend on being pinned down – is at the heart of what makes the Moomins mythic.

Of course, myths evolve. And the Moomins have evolved spectacularly. After the books found international success, the characters were adapted into Japanese anime, Nordic theatre, British radio and global branding campaigns.

Each version tells a slightly different story. In Japan, the Moomins became symbols of warmth and nostalgia – gentle mascots of a simpler life. In the UK and US, early translations softened the melancholy and existential tones. More recently, new editions and critical reappraisals have returned to Jansson’s deeper themes of loss, solitude and transformation.

The many lives of the Moomins

This global journey has parallels with the evolution of Viking mythology. Once oral stories shared around fires, Norse myths have been repackaged for everything from national pride to Hollywood action. Like the Moomins, they’ve become flexible cultural symbols – used and re-used in ways that often have little to do with their original context.

But unlike the fierce warriors of Norse myth, the Moomins are gentle, uncertain creatures. They worry. They drift. They don’t fight monsters – they reflect, explore, adapt. In Moominland Midwinter, Moomintroll wakes from hibernation to find the world cold and unfamiliar.

His journey isn’t about conquering the landscape, it’s about learning how to live in it. That emotional honesty resonates with readers of all ages. It also reflects something uniquely Nordic: an existential awareness of solitude, change and survival.

Folklore, loneliness and the Groke

One character, the Groke, captures this beautifully. She’s a shadowy figure who creates frost wherever she walks. She’s not a villain, she’s just lonely. Children often fear her, but readers grow to understand her.

She recalls Nordic spirits like the huldra or tomte – ghostly beings that live in the forests, blurring the line between human and otherworldly. In Jansson’s hands, this folklore becomes a way to explore anxiety, estrangement and the human need for warmth.

The Moomins’ refusal to settle – geographically or philosophically – also speaks to today’s world of cultural fluidity. Jansson was from Finland’s Swedish-speaking minority and grew up between languages, cultures and post-war upheaval.

The Groke | Moomin Characters

Her books reflect that liminal identity, and they've found a home among readers who don't always fit neatly into one place. That might be why the Moomins are particularly popular in countries dealing with identity shifts or cultural nostalgia.

A myth for a shifting world

As with all mythologies, there's also a commercial side. The Moomins are now a global brand, with theme parks, merchandise, museums and a thriving fanbase. Some of this has softened their original complexity.

But even through plush toys and animation, something essential remains: the feeling that these characters, like the stories they inhabit, can't be reduced to one message. They are always slightly mysterious, slightly out of reach.

In a world that often demands quick answers and strong opinions, the Moomins offer something gentler: ambiguity, openness and quiet reflection.

They remind us that not all stories are meant to be solved with a neat conclusion. Some are meant to be returned to – revisited like familiar places in the mind, reshaped each time we arrive.

That's what makes the Moomins mythic. Not just their age or popularity, but their ability to change – and to change us – with every retelling. They invite us to wander, like Snufkin, and to sit still, like Moominmamma.

They show us that myth isn't just about gods and monsters – it's about living with uncertainty, embracing return, and finding meaning in the stories that help us feel at home in the world

The original cover of Finn Family Moomintroll (1950) | Moomin Characters

Moominmamma, Moominpappa and Little My | Alamy

Tove Jansson's Moomin books explore the power of adventure and transformation

Sue Walsh

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This year marks the 80th anniversary of the first Moomin tale, The Moomins and the Great Flood. In the book, Moomintroll and his friends embark on a journey to find their home after a great flood devastates Moominvalley, meeting odd creatures and new friends along their journey.

The book was first published in creator Tove Jansson's native Swedish in 1945. However, the first Moomin book to have an English edition was in fact the third of the Moomin books, Trollkarlens Hatt (The Hobgoblin's Hat). It was translated by Jansson's friend Elizabeth Portch and reached its widest English-speaking audience when it was published by Puffin Books in 1961 as Finn Family Moomintroll.

At the beginning of the story Moomintroll finds a magical top hat. It can transform anything that is placed inside of it into something else entirely – and so the adventures begin.

Unlike the Swedish-language edition, Portch's translation of Finn Family Moomintroll begins with a letter from Moominmamma. It's written in a curly cursive and dotted with love-hearts and an image of an apparently "hand-drawn" troll. The letter is addressed to a "dear child" who is "overseas".

In it, Moominmamma expresses disbelief at the idea that there may not be any Moomins "there over" and that the child she is addressing may "not even know what a troll is" (hence the illustration).

Moominmamma's wonder at the differences in custom between her own land and "your country" is based on an assumption that the two must be somewhat alike. Similarly, her explanation of what Moomintrolls are depends on their difference from the "usual common trolls", which means there must be familial similarity between them.

Both Moominmamma's wonder at and explanation of difference assume an underlying essential similarity or sameness between Moominvalley, where she lives, and the reader's home. This is significant in a story that explores ideas of foreignness and translation, change and transformation.

Though the adventures in Finn Family Moomintroll might be said to only truly begin on the spring morning when Moomintroll, Sniff and Snufkin find "a tall black hat", the book opens with the Moomins settling down for their winter hibernation and closes with the valley in autumn.

The changes wrought by the Hobgoblin's hat are "quite different" because "you never know beforehand" what they will be. However, their extreme nature is framed and contained by a world in which there are known and predictable changes in the seasons, as well as routine – though sometimes dramatic – changes in the weather.

The Hemulen is unperturbed by the hat's transformation of eggshells into fluffy little clouds that Moomintroll and his friends are able to ride. That's because he is "so used to [them] doing extraordinary things". But when Moomintroll is transformed by the hat into "a very strange animal indeed", so much so that his friends do not recognise him, it's a very different matter.

A moment of real jeopardy occurs when Moomintroll's own mother does not seem to recognise him either. But this is soon dispelled when Moominmamma looks "into his frightened eyes for a very long time" and quietly declares: "Yes, you are my Moomintroll."

This moment of recognition breaks the spell and Moomintroll changes back into "his old self again". One of the crucial features of the hat is the changes it makes are only temporary and this, together with Moominmamma's reassurance that she will "always know [Moomintroll], whatever happens", suggests an ultimately unchanging essence to things that cannot be denied.

Changelessness as deadening

On the other hand, the book suggests that some change is to be embraced.

Sniff's desire for things to stay the same "for ever and ever" is portrayed as immature and wrong-headed. As is the Muskrat's obsessive quest for peace and stillness which ends up with his apparent, though temporary, transformation into a monster.

Snufkin's point that "life is not peaceful" offers a gentle rebuke to the Hemulen, who also wishes to "live his life in peace and quiet". But perhaps the clearest indication of the book's attitude to changelessness is the monstrous Groke.

She is motivated by an unwavering drive to recover the "King's Ruby", not because this thing which "changes colour all the time" is "the most beautiful thing in the world", but because it is "the most expensive".

The Groke's inability to appreciate the ruby aesthetically is presented as being rooted in her own immutability. That the Groke's hostility to change is itself deadening, becomes evident when she sits "motionless" before the Moomins and their friends, staring at them in a way that makes them feel "she would wait for ever" and eventually departs leaving the ground behind her frozen in the wrong season.

This, then, is key. Adventure, transformation and change in Finn Family Moomintroll are both necessary and desirable, but they are also contained within a reassuring frame of reliable predictability.

The final lines of the English translation are: "It is autumn in Moomin Valley, for how else can spring come back again?"

Moominmamma and her beloved handbag | Alamy

With Moominmamma, Tove Jansson created a hero who wields a handbag instead of a sword

Isabel Joely Black
Teaching Fellow in Anthropology, University of Manchester

In 1989, the science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin published The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction. In it, she notes that many stories depend heavily on a hero with a sword or weapon as a central object, while bags seem boring and insignificant.

Le Guin argued against the idea of weapons being the most important tool in a novel. Novels themselves are not "sword-shaped", she suggested, but bags of ideas bundled together. It might be unexpected to link Le Guin to Tove Jansson's Moomin stories. But Moominmamma is a perfect example of the kind of hero Le Guin was imagining.

The story Jansson tells in the first Moomin book, The Great Flood (1945), is not a conventional hero narrative. It is a bundle of experiences the Moomins encounter as they make their way through an uncertain environment.

If the story functions more like the "bag" – of ideas, people, places and their relationships to each other – then the ideal object to sit at the heart of the story is a handbag.

Moominmamma is, as children's laureate Frank Cottrell-Boyce argues in his introduction to the 2024 edition of The Great Flood, the "hero" of the story in that she is often the person who drives the action forward.

She approaches what appear to be dangerous situations with curiosity rather than fear. She rescues a cat and her kittens. She knocks on a door when she and Moomintroll are hungry and need help.

Heroes normally come with weapons, as Le Guin argues. But as a different kind of hero, Moominmamma comes with a handbag.

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She shows how it is possible to survive a long and arduous journey to find a home without a weapon, using her bag to carry and collect items to support them on their journey rather than relying on violence to negotiate with the world.

Le Guin remarks that it's hard, but not impossible, to rise to the challenge of telling a story where the bag is the heroic object.

With Moominmamma and her handbag in The Great Flood, Jansson fully rises to that challenge. Her courage, empathy and creativity encourage readers to think differently about how we live in the world and relate to others around us.

Moominmamma's handbag is ubiquitous in Jansson's illustrations. She carries it wherever she goes and panics when it goes missing.

The Exploits of Moominpappa (1950) depicts the first time Moominmamma met her husband.

She is introduced as she is washed up on shore, and her first worry is that she can't find her handbag: "Suddenly, she sat up and cried: 'Save my handbag! Oh, save my handbag!'"

In Finn Family Moomintroll (1948), the shy, elfish creatures Thingummy and Bob take the handbag and turn it into a home for themselves.

The whole of Moominvalley is involved in the hunt to return the bag and a party is thrown once it is found. Moominmamma is even shown to sleep with it under her pillow in A Comet in Moominvalley (1946).

Moominmamma wasn't drawn wearing her staple apron in the first few books, but the handbag has always been with her. In one comic strip, Moominpappa and Moomintroll know something must be seriously wrong when Moominmamma discards her bag before jumping into water.

In The Great Flood, it is even shown in the very first drawing as a small black square held by Moominmamma as she and Moomintroll enter the dark forest. They are on a terrible journey in a search for a home, and what could be more useful than a bag carrying all the essentials they need, and able to store new items picked up along the way?

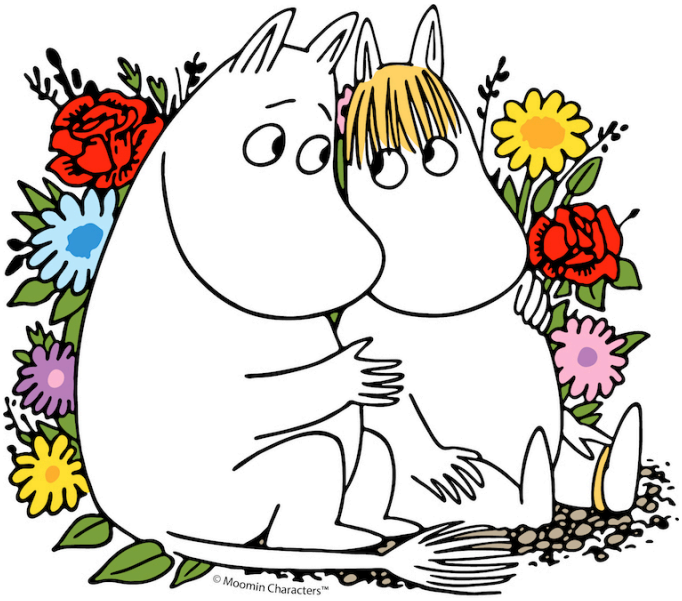
The handbag's many uses

The handbag's first value is carrying items Moominmamma or anybody else may need on their perilous travels. It is almost immediately put to use in The Great Flood, when Moomintroll falls in water and, once rescued, has wet feet. Moominmamma gives him a pair of dry socks that symbolise the comfort and reassurance Moomintroll needs (even though Moomins do not actually wear socks).

When they discover a bottle with a message in it, she even has a corkscrew in the bag to open it. She also collects things in the environment that might be useful along the way, proving the value of a bag on a great journey is not only what you have when you start, but what you can gather.

Moominmamma is always on the lookout for potentially useful things, including some chocolate she gathers off-page when the Moomins and a character described as the "little creature" are exploring. Much later, the Moomins are starving and can only find a few figs to eat. Moominmamma takes out the chocolate to keep Moomintroll and the little creature going when they desperately need it.

Le Guin argued that novels can be thought of as bags of ideas, people and things bundled together and that literal bags can be just as useful in a crisis as a weapon. Moominmamma and her handbag are an ideal example of how this plays out. She is the alternative hero Le Guin imagined, and her bag is the bundle she uses as support, the most vital tool for a crisis or a long journey.



Moomintroll and the Snork Maiden | Moomin Characters

How Tove Jansson's Moomins illustrations taught us to imagine, resist and belong

Amelia Huw Morgan

Senior Lecturer Illustration, Cardiff Metropolitan University

There is a world beyond our own, where imagination and reality meet, and where, for 80 years, Tove Jansson's Moomins illustrations have offered readers a way to recognise themselves.

Before Moomin books began to be published in 1945, early Moomin characters appeared, grumpily, in publications like the Finnish satirical magazine Garm. Jansson had started her career there in 1929. Her witty caricatures led to her making a name for herself, relishing the opportunity to be "beastly to Stalin and Hitler".

But as war engulfed the world in the 1940s, Jansson turned away from direct satire. Instead, she took the Moomins to the soft refuge of her newly imagined Moominvalley, to live more safely, simply and happily, where they continued to grapple with serious issues.

She later recalled that at the time she "felt that the only thing one could do was to write fairy tales".

Since then, her creations have provided a haven where melancholy, joy and wonder can exist side by side. Through their soft, contrary, strange and heavy lightness, the Moomins' theorise and share wisdom.

Illustrated children's books like the Moomins can turn into our forever books. For this reason, children's literature should always be taken seriously, as former children's laureate Lauren Child has argued.

But in today's publishing world, illustrations often seem designed simply to fatten pages up. They look like something but can feel like nothing.

Golden age

During the golden age of illustration between 1890 and 1930, illustrators gave children a new and vital aspect of childhood. They created books that supported young readers as they grew.

Illustrators like Kate Greenaway and Beatrix Potter who Jansson much admired, took children seriously. They met them unpatronisingly and valued their imaginations.

Greenaway's illustrations for songs, parlour games and nursery rhymes, as well as her famous drawings for the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and Potter's courageous problem-solving animals, charm the child who will one day become an adult.

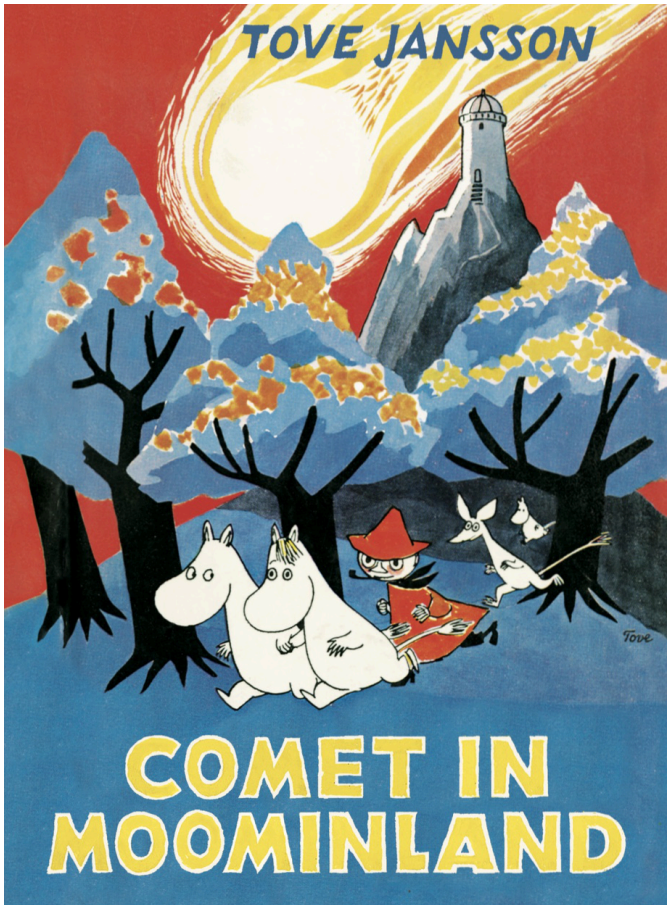
Jansson's tiny ink marks continued this tradition. As you travel through the expanse of Moominvalley, she holds the reader close, transporting them to the Moomins' consciousness. The texture of her illustrations make them almost tangible.

Our imaginations become fertile and awake. From the slippery feel of seaweed underfoot to the dim light of a cold room, everything is heightened by the Moomins' glowing whiteness. Their thoughtful eyes widen to produce subtle emotions.

Jansson's techniques are much like the methods used by writers such as Katherine Mansfield (1888 - 1923). She was a pioneering modernist and her work is now praised for its accessible approach to writing short stories. Mansfield threw her readers into her characters' experiences to feel their feelings and think their thoughts. Mansfield's astute observations and empathy entwined to sustain sophisticated stories which feel fresh to this day.

Similarly, Jansson's drawings refuse to patronise or simplify. They respect the reader's intelligence, offering stories that enchant and challenge in equal measure.

Jansson placed her characters between reality and imagination. Her comic strips had spoken to a world of dictators, of vanity and class.



The cover of Comet in Moominland (1948) | Moomin Characters

This allowed her to form, in Moominvalley, a place also to observe, make comment, fight back, perhaps even ridicule. She kept the satirical qualities but made them more palatable to children as well as adults.

Texture

Perhaps the 1977 to 1982 Polish stop-motion Moomin animations captured the texture of Jansson's world best. In these felted forms, the Moomins remained soft, slightly wobbly and imperfect, just as in the original ink lines.

The more polished, digital and sharp-edged the Moomins become, the more their truth seems to recede. Commercialisation has pushed the Moomins into the bright, glossy world of merchandise – mugs, theme parks and endless shelf life. But in the rush to perfect and brand them, we risk losing the open, imaginative spaces Jansson drew.

Her illustrations matter because they are portals, openings into parallel worlds that help us better understand ourselves. Early fairy tales were deliberately sparse and undetailed, leaving space for a child's imagination to roam freely. Jansson's illustrations do the same.

In the penultimate chapter of her second Moomin book Comet in Moominland,

Moominmama sings a lullaby to the children who have returned from their adventure:

"Snuggle up close and shut your eyes tight.

And sleep without dreaming the whole of the night

The comet is gone and your mother is near

To keep you from harm till the morning is near."

It's a moment of comfort, of deep protection. A mother willing her children to forget what they've seen. But viewed from today's perspective, in a world saturated with fear, uncertainty and noise, it also raises a question. Should we be lulled into forgetting, or, as Jansson's illustrations suggest, should we remain half-awake?

Her drawings never offer perfection. The ink lines wobble and hold tension and gentleness together, just as her stories balance safety with peril. Jansson's illustrations invite us to embrace the vulnerability and the danger, the wholesome and the pure. They give us space to feel deeply and think clearly, in a world that often discourages both.

The cover of Moominland Midwinter (1957) | Moomin Characters

How Tove Jansson used her Moomins comic strip to critique the financial and creative pressures of being an artist

A printing plate of the Moomins comic strip | Moomin Characters

Elina Druker

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In 1954, the Finnish artist Tove Jansson was commissioned by the Evening News in London to draw comic strips about the Moomintrolls. The strip was syndicated by hundreds of newspapers, introducing the Moomins to an international audience and marking a dramatic turning point in her career.

Between 1954 and 1959, Tove Jansson drew 21 comics, some in collaboration with her brother Lars Jansson, who continued to draw the comic strip until 1975.

The success of the Moomin in the Evening News brought Tove Jansson economic security and helped her with the mortgage of her studio in Helsinki. However, over time, the assignment also became a burden on her creative work – a time-consuming and demanding obligation.

Perhaps because of this personal conflict, the comics often explore themes such as the struggle of artistic creation, the role of the artist and the value of art.

Jansson had previously created humorous and satirical commentaries on the art world in various artists' magazines in Finland, but here she places the Moomin at the heart of the creative process.

Unlike the novels and picture books, the Moomin comic strips were created for adults and can be described as satire. Jansson uses the compact format to comment on society, including the art world. The growing conflict in her own life, between the Moomintrolls and her artwork, is brought into focus in the comic strips.

The theme of the purpose of art and artistic creation is playfully introduced in one of the first comic strips, Moomin and the Brigands. Here Moomin and his friend Sniff embark on a quest for fortune. They engage in several schemes, including capturing rare creatures and selling them to the zoo, marketing magic rejuvenation potions and creating modern art.

While visiting a Hemulen (a really uptight counterpart to the Moomintrolls who love rules), Moomin and Sniff accidentally break several precious items in her home. Among the broken objects is a large statue of Rebecca at the Well, which falls from its pedestal and shatters.

Rebecca at the Well is a classic biblical motif, which often portrays a model of feminine virtue, symbolising divine guidance and exemplifying ideals of hospitality and moral character.

The friends awkwardly attempt to reassemble the statue by gluing it together. The result is a strangely angular and expressive piece of art, referencing fragmented cubist portraits. Cubism, which emerged around 1907 to 1908, aimed to represent reality in a radically new way by bringing together subjects and figures, resulting in objects that appear fragmented and abstracted.

Sniff immediately sees the potential of the new Rebecca. "She's more modern now," he exclaims joyfully. The friends carry the statue to an enthusiastic art dealer who sells it for £500 in his gallery.

The episode with the deconstructed Rebecca is, of course, a funny caricature of the trend-sensitive art market. But the shattered statue with its intricate shapes was also a commentary on the debates about the "incomprehensible" and "obscure" nature of modernist art in Nordic countries during the time.

The destruction of the Rebecca can also be seen as an act of iconoclasm – the breaking of icons or monuments – or rather, a parody of it. While usually associated with vandalism, here, the iconoclastic act leads to the creation of something new. This expresses a desire for renewal and a liberation from restrictive conventions. It is, however, worth noting that Rebecca retains her symbol of virtue – the water jug – even after this pivotal encounter.

Drawing on the work of French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour, iconoclasm can be understood as both destructive and constructive – an ambiguity that also applies to Jansson's interpretation of the motif.

Later in the story, the money offered by the modernist Rebecca lures Moomin to the field of the arts. For a brief moment, he assumes the role of a painter and wholeheartedly embodies the romanticised ideal of the poor, misunderstood artist.

Tove Jansson with her Moomin characters | Alamy

Moomin dons a Rembrandtian black velvet beret, but despite this, appears lost and bewildered in his new role, muttering: "I only want to live in peace and plant potatoes and dream!"

In a scene of self-parodying metafiction, he is blinded by his oversized beret and ends up tumbling down a cliff, abruptly ending his artistic career.

Tove Jansson's Moomin comic strips for the Evening News use satire to explore artistic creation, the role of the artist, and the art world.

Through Moomintroll's and Sniff's pursuit of fame and fortune via the accidental modernist deconstruction of Rebecca, Jansson satirises romantic notions of the artist, the commercialisation of art and the professions surrounding artistic production. These themes are deeply connected to Jansson's own experiences as an artist and author, constantly balancing between various professional and artistic demands, between children's books, public obligations and painting.

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Moomin merchandise and fashion: 80 years of ultra-savvy marketing that taps into childhood nostalgia

Kiera Vaclavik

Professor of Children's Literature & Childhood Culture, Queen Mary University of London

On a visit to the British Library in London to research this piece, I was preceded by a woman with a lilac-coloured tote featuring a mischievous-looking girl with a severe top knot and black dress.

I instantly recognised the distinctive outline of Tove Jansson's Little My, one of the many brilliant characters of the Moominverse.

A committed researcher, I summoned up the courage to ask about the bag and the woman carrying it. Anna – visiting the library to work on her fairy tale novel – immediately told all about her hold-all. About how she felt a connection with "fiery and independent" Little My specifically and Moomins generally.

About how they took her back to her Swedish childhood, when she would hand-knit the distinctive rotund creatures. I had clearly hit the jackpot with Anna – Moomin owner, wearer and maker, all in one.

Anna had bought the bag in Sweden, but you don't have to go to the Scandinavian birthplace of the Moomins to buy into their world. Anna could have gone to the Moomin emporium 30 minutes' walk away in Covent Garden, or just shopped online.

Today's Moomin empire is vast and varied. The Moomins is a brand worth multi-millions, with 800 licencees worldwide. This 80th anniversary year will see capsule collections galore from the likes of Comme des Garçons, Acne Studios and Polarn O. Pyret.

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The products span interior décor, clothing and accessories, ceramics and much, much more. Driven in part by the extension into media that includes video games and TV, Moomins can be found on everything from planes to pencils.

It's very possible to eat, sleep, wear, play Moomin – to immerse yourself entirely in the Moomin world.

It's all very typical of the 21st-century media and entertainment asset landscape. And yet, as Moomin aficionados know full well, none of it is new. There has been Moomin merch for as long as there have been Moomins.

Their creator Tove Jansson took an active role in the development of the Moomin industry. Part of her training had been in illustrations for advertising and when the books and comic strips took off, she herself provided images for a drinks manufacturer selling themed whortleberry juice and other libations.

Jansson also designed a board game and supported and oversaw the development of several products and lines, taking immense care over their quality and details.

The scale of the operation soon became overwhelming and Jansson became increasingly frustrated and resentful of the demands on her creative time.

One of her characters, Snufkin, is bemused by why people "liked to have things" (Finn Family Moomintroll, 1948) and the books have a certain anti-consumerist bent. From this perspective, the vast Moomin industry today goes against the spirit of the works.

And yet. The same book in which Snufkin spoke this way is also a book (whose Finnish original title is The Hobgoblin's Hat) full to the brim with … things.

And those things are invested with immense fascination and power. As the Snork character points out "a top hat is always somewhat extraordinary, of course". Jansson herself had a strong impulse to work with others to extend and flesh out her creations, releasing them from the confines of the books.

She was actively involved in early stage adaptations, crafting sets and costumes, and later became absorbed in the long-term creation of a Moominhouse diorama (and series of associated tableaux) with partner Tuulikki Pietilä and physician friend Pentti Eistola.

Making her creations tangible and tactile was clearly a huge draw for this sculptor's daughter. One of the most striking features of the Moomins on paper is their smooth rotundity – they're almost begging to be made into three dimensions.

So much for the creator. But what of Moomin consumers? People around the world have clearly long wanted to feel closer to the Moomin world, and to buy into it. But why? The reasons are both aesthetic and affective. As for the Swedish-born writer I encountered at the British Library, the Moomins are often keyed into the nostalgia and innocence of childhood. And, as with Anna's sense of kinship with Little My, people often feel an instinctive affiliation with one or more of the Moomin's vast and varied cast.

The books also encapsulate and convey a whole host of associations (or "values" in brand speak) which people identify with, want to share and display. Some of these are relatively banal (though fundamental) and apparent elsewhere – things like friendship, warmth, family and acceptance.

But there are also features quite specific to Moomins and to Jansson herself: a relish of life and sensuous experience, gender fluidity, space for both light and dark, for wanderlust and the joy of cocooning at home. All of this is conveyed in words and images of exceptional quality and distinction.

The whimsy is delivered with distinctive Scandinavian style and flair: a clean, pared-back aesthetic and sharp lines accompanied by a rich and bold colour palette. Who wouldn't want to wear a hand-painted silk AALTO dress by Finnish designer Tuomas Merikoski that transposes the lush greens of one of the later Moomin books, The Dangerous Journey?

Eight decades after their first publication, Moomins continue to be highly covetable and to catalyse creativity. As with Anna's Little My tote, they are set to accompany and assist many more generations of writers and creatives in their imaginative endeavours.

Basel Zaraa

Q&A with Palestinian artist Basel Zaraa, creator of the Moomin 80 art installation in Bradford

To mark the 80th anniversary of Tove Jansson's Moomin stories, the Moomin brand has collaborated with Counterpoints Arts and Refugee Week to commission four public art works inspired by The Moomins and the Great Flood.

Basel Zaraa, the Palestinian artist behind the installation in Bradford, spoke to Anna Walker, The Conversation's Senior Arts and Culture Editor, about the project, called What Will We Do Without Exile.

Could you introduce your background as an artist, and how you became involved in this project?

I am a Palestinian artist based in the UK. I create interactive installations that use the senses to bring audiences closer to experiences of exile, war, displacement and occupation.

Starting in 2016, I collaborated with a Lebanese artist Tania El Khoury to create two live art pieces, As Far As Isolation Goes and As Far As My Fingertips Take Me. They tell the story of my sisters' and brother's journey when they escaped the war in Syria, crossing the sea and many borders on foot until they reached their destination in Sweden. Visitors passed their hand through a gallery wall, and as they listened to an audio piece through headphones, I etched the story on their arm. The idea was to mark the audience with the story we were living.

Then in 2022 I created Dear Laila, a recreation of my destroyed family home in the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, which I tried to rebuild to show my daughter where I grew up.

Image from What Will We Do Without Exile?

The audience sits in Laila's shoes to experience the story behind this home, learning about the people who lived there, how they became refugees, how the refugee camp became their second home, how this temporary home was destroyed again, and what happened to them after.

In this installation I used sound, smell and touch to help audiences get closer to this story.

My piece commissioned for Moomins 80, What Will We Do Without Exile?, is an invitation to imagine Palestine without occupation.

We always see how the oppressor tries to limit our imaginations to stay within the cage they have built for us.

But in this project I am trying to tell the audience that even in our tents and in the darkest times of our lives – even during occupation, ethnic cleansing and genocide – we still dream of a life when our land will be free. Not just for us as humans, but also as the land itself and our relationship with it, from its mountains to its valleys.

So, as you can see, most of my work is related to personal stories. Telling audiences what happened in these stories is also a way for me to process the trauma we are living with generation after generation, and to try to find a path through it.

I came to this project through Counterpoints Arts, who I have had the opportunity to collaborate with over many years.

How do the values of the Moomins stories resonate with your own artistic practice?

I didn't grow up with the Moomins, but when I knew about the story of the great flood and the blue house, as a Palestinian I related to it straight away. That's because what we are living as Palestinians since 1948 is the big flood for us.

Half of the Palestinian people became refugees and were displaced from their lands, and millions are still in refugee camps, waiting to return to their homes. As we grow up in exile, generation after generation, the idea of belonging is a big question in our lives.

What does belonging mean, and what does home mean? So the blue Moomin house is powerful as a symbol of home, safety and belonging.

How would you describe the artwork you're creating for Bradford and why was Bowling Park chosen as the location?

What Will We Do Without Exile? imagines a free Palestine and a world beyond occupation, inside a refugee tent.

Inspired by the refusal of Palestinians to stop imagining tomorrow, even in the face of genocide, it celebrates the natural and cultural richness of Palestine, past, present and future.

Audience members are invited to sit among orange and olive trees, listen to a soundscape and read a newspaper from the future, which transports them to harvest season in a liberated land.

The struggle for freedom and reconnection with the land is relevant to all of us. Bowling Park was chosen as a location that is open to all.

The official theme of the 80th anniversary of the Moomins is "the door is always open". How do you interpret that concept in your artwork?

We live in a world of ever-increasing borders. Closed doors prevent us from moving to safety, separate us from each other or – as is happening in Gaza – cut us off from the food and essentials we need to live.

In this reality, the idea of everyone being welcome can feel like a faraway dream. But actually this is the time when we need to imagine a world where the doors are always open. Our lives depend on it.

What do you see as art's role in addressing issues like migration, sanctuary and belonging?

The cover of The Moomins and the Great Flood (1945) | Moomin Characters

I think art is a very powerful way to change the narrative about migrants, exiles and refugees that we usually take from mainstream media. Art helps audiences connect with the experience of displacement on a human level, and artists and the art sector have the responsibility to play their part in moving us towards a place where we are recognised as equal.

Basel Zaraa's work, What Will We Do Without Exile?, commissioned by Moomin 80 and co-produced with Counterpoints Arts and Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture, is free to visit at Bowling Park, Bradford from May 31-June 22.

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