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Equal to Life: Tove Jansson's Moomintrolls

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

EQUAL TO LIFE: TOVE JANSSON'S MOOMINTROLLS Nancy Lyman Huse Tove Jansson's moomintrolls, often described as "unusual" or "wholly imaginative," provide an interesting problem for the literary critic accustomed to discussing the way authors work within a tradition. As fantasies, the Moomin books resist description as quest-narratives, domestic tales, or beast fables. While humorous "trolls" constitute a tradition in Scandinavian storytelling, notably in the brilliant comedy of Topelius and the appealing illustrations of John Bauer, Jansson must be savored as an artist whose unique private experience is the true source of her universally significant fantasy world. Moominland is not a world which reflects a higher one, nor is it a country which satirizes our own. Instead, the books celebrate the reality a child knows, with its alternating terror and joy. Her autobiography, *Sculptor's Daughter*, and another of her books for adults, *The Summer Book*, help to explain the sources of Jansson's comforting yet strikingly modern world view, a view which emerges somewhat randomly in the early Moomin tales and with a powerful consistency in the later ones. The stories depend on continual movement between the core of physical security best

represented by Moominmamma's commodious handbag and the metaphysical risk involved in experiencing and even becoming one with cosmic phenomena like the sea, the seasons, and the sky. "Self-definition in a benevolent universe" is a possible description of Jansson's major theme, yet it fails to include the loving tension between individual and community essential to her version of self-definition, as well as the cataclysmic proportions of the floods, the storms, the alternately barren or lush topography, and the dark pools and hidden glades the creatures love and fear. The Moomin family, equal to life, actually savors catastrophe; they can do this because no principle of pure evil is at work in their world. The trolls and their companions are part of the tides, storms, and sunshine; the essence of life is experience, the unfolding experience of a child who knows the incredible terror of separation, yet knows even more fully the comfort and safety of a parent's presence and thus is eager for the adventure that brings the inevitable separation. In her experience as the daughter of artists and island-dwellers, Jansson has found a rich metaphor of childhood which is neither saccharine nor didactic. Moominmamma is the core of security in Moominland. She is the pivotal character whose meaning and presence make Jansson's work both distinctly personal and universal and who enables the artist to defy our usual expectations that serious literature is in some way about our need to improve. Although, in the later Moomin books at least, some of the creatures do change, Jansson sets up no imperative for change. The creature has a place and will be loved — regardless of its decision to change or not. Moominmamma does not view others as flawed. As nearly as I have seen it done, Jansson captures in art the notion of "mother" as it exists for the very young, loved child. Recalling her childhood impression of growing up in a "tremendously rich and problem-free home," the writer comments that she was unaware of the economic difficulties of her artist parents, as well as other problems they faced. "... anything was possible, everything was exciting My mother, especially, had an unusual capacity for mixing stern morality with an almost exhilarating tolerance, a quality I have never met with in anyone else." In the fantasy world, Moominmamma does provide essential values and norms, but she will not exclude those who do not meet them. Existence gives one an intrinsic right to Moominmamma's love. One of Jansson's best stories, "The Invisible Child," in *Tales from Moominvalley*, is a clear example of the troll mama's central role in the books. Ninny; like other creatures who are a part of the extended family whose nucleus is the Mamma, Pappa, and young Moomintroll; is the "invisible child" who has faded away because she was "frightened the wrong way by a lady who had taken care of her without really liking her," the "icily ironical kind" who ridiculed instead of scolded. Mama declines to...

EQUAL TO LIFE: TOVE JANSSON'S MOONINTROLLS

Nancy Lyman Muse

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The stories depend on continual movement between the core of physical security best represented by Moominmamma's commodious handbag and the metaphysical risk involved in experiencing and even becoming one with cosmic phenomena like the sea, the seasons, and the sky. "Self-definition in a benevolent universe" is a possible description of Jansson's major theme, yet it fails to include the loving tension between individual and community essential to her version of self-definition, as well as the cataclysmic proportions of the floods, the storms, the alternately barren or lush topography, and the dark pools and hidden glades the creatures love and fear. The Moomin family, equal to life, actually savors catastrophe; they can do this because no principle of pure evil is at work in their world. The trolls and their companions are part of the tides, storms, and sunshine; the essence of life is experience, the unfolding experience of a child who knows the incredible terror of separation, yet knows even more fully the comfort and safety of a parent's presence and thus is eager for the adventure that brings the inevitable separation. In her experience as the daughter of artists and island-dwellers, Jansson has found a rich metaphor of childhood which is neither saccharine nor didactic.

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