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Arrival to a fictional total institution

The Swedish folk high school as a liminal space in literature

Abstract

Arrivals have an unexplored significance as a phenomenon in sociology. This article studies depictions of arrivals to art education courses at Swedish folk high schools in fiction. These arrivals are liminal transitions between two states, warranting personal change, either being the solution to a previous problem or creating a problem (to be solved). Many spaces in society have lost their status as total institutions physically and symbolically detached from the rest of society. The rarity of and desire for totalizing milieus create possibilities for self-exploration and self-development in characters, enabling authenticity and revealing truths of social life. The depiction of the folk high school as a total institution of isolation and a liminal space for change is effective in (re-)producing cultural images of the folk high school and as a literary device to contain characters and develop conflicts that arise from the milieu. At the same time, these arrival stories demonstrate the importance of liminality in arrival and suggest that arrival be studied as a general phenomenon to uncover hidden facets of institutionalized social life.

Keywords: arrival story, folk high school, liminality, sociology through literature, total institution

This article studies depictions of arrivals to art education courses at the Swedish folk high school in fiction. Folk high schools are post-compulsory educational institutions common in the Nordic countries that often offer education within a boarding school setting. The present article illustrates the idea of arrival as an encounter that shapes the meaning of the folk high school in fiction and as a more general way of studying society. In a pragmatic sense, the first encounter creates tension; routines and pre-conceptions break down, giving rise to reflection, experience, and sometimes emotionality, which eventually become layered as habits and pre-conceptions (Mead 1934). Arrival stories demonstrate the importance of liminality in arrivals and suggest that arrival, as a general phenomenon, can be used to uncover hidden facets of institutionalized social life.

Arrivals in stories address one's own or others' arrival at a site. In anthropology, first-hand accounts of arrival stories can be part of the researcher's self-reflection, providing an account of "meeting the field", gaining access to the site, and general first impressions (see Agar 1980; Wulff 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson 2019). In an ethnographic sense, one can only arrive once at a site. Furthermore, what one sees during the first day is more than one will see on any other day (Goffman 1989:130).

When arrival stories of those other than the researcher are analyzed in narrative or literary research, arrival is often understood as the voluntary or involuntary territorial movement of people between countries, that is, as the arrival experiences of refugees or migrants (Wästerfors 2009; Wulff 2022). In hindsight, the arrival story or the first encounter may be turned into an origin story and myth as a transition event regarding an individual or collective identity able to reconstitute identities in the present (Engel 1993; Berta 2021).

Arguably, arrivals have an unexplored significance as a phenomenon in sociology. The more general experiential and sociological importance of arrival is indirectly noted in the account of fieldwork given by Goffman (1989): The process of “entry” creates tensions that may highlight some hidden structures of the place where one is arriving. Hence, the arrival stories of others could and should be studied beyond the most notable types of arrival in the migrant experience, for example, arriving at a school for the first time (cf. Whelen 2008). More specifically, arrival can be studied as the physical movements and symbolic transitions experienced by individuals during their first encounters with various sites, which may reveal underlying structures through the tensions they bring to light.

The folk high school provides a valuable context in which to study arrival due to the secluded lifestyle it imposes, which symbolically and physically separates students from their ordinary lives. The arrival stories in fiction studied in this article cover receiving an acceptance letter to an art course at a folk high school, traveling to the school, and the first encounters with the milieu and people of the school and the associated visceral reactions. The liminality of moving between states enables personal change, either by being the solution to a previous problem or by creating a problem (to be solved). Fictional stories create resolutions to these societal problems by referring to social justice, recovery, and the undoing of patriarchy (cf. Radway 1991). The complexity of life at the folk high school is reduced through the characterizations of the persons and properties of the milieu as belonging to a total institution, thereby rendering a stereotypical cultural image of the folk high school. Nevertheless, as many spaces in society have lost their status as total institutions, the rarity and desire of such totalizing milieus create possibilities for self-exploration and self-development in characters, enabling authenticity and revealing truths of social life. The folk high school as a total institution is thus emblematic of the importance of arrival as it signals difference and opportunity for reflection and transformation.

What is the Swedish folk high school?

Within the context of international education, the folk high school is a curious institution. Folk high schools are educational institutions commonly found in the Nordic countries and some other European countries. The first folk high school in the Nordic countries was established in Denmark (1844). In the following decades, folk high schools were established in Norway (1864), Sweden (1868), and Finland (1889). While there are many differences among the various educational institutions in the Nordic

countries, common denominators include a focus on self-directed learning without degrees, informal relationships between teachers and students, and the prevalence of boarding schools (Bagley & Rust 2009; Lövgren & Nordvall 2017). Additionally, many folk high schools offer art courses. In contrast to their Swedish counterparts, which were founded with a “social and democratic perspective” (Korsgaard 2002:11), the Danish, Norwegian, and Finnish folk high schools, founded in the 19th century, had a focus on national identity due to the countries’ geopolitical history of wars and unions (Lövgren & Nordvall 2017).

There are more than 150 Swedish folk high schools in operation in 2022. These schools offer “second chance” education for people to complete their upper secondary degree and specialized courses at the post-compulsory level, which may include art courses, such as music, creative writing, visual arts, theater, photography, and filmmaking. Tuition in Sweden is free, but the students must pay for trips, materials, food, and housing, which may be covered by normal financial aid. A regional council may run the folk high school. As the ties between folk high schools and civil society are close, many Swedish folk high schools are also run by popular movements of political or religious origin.

Historically, the Swedish folk high school was influential in developing practical know-how for farmers and the working class and as an alternative for those without access to a university (Furuland 1971; Bagley & Rust 2009). A consequence of this initial orientation is that folk high schools are often found in the countryside and offer boarding schools for students. At the heart of the idea of folk high schools in Sweden is the notion of *folkbildning*. This term includes the German concept of *Bildung*, which refers to personal and cultural maturation through self-cultivation and free and voluntary education (free from state governance and voluntary in terms of participation among students).

Despite the centrality of folk high schools in Nordic and Swedish culture, there has been little previous research on depictions of folk high schools in literature. Furuland (1971) shows that the earliest literary depictions of Swedish folk high schools from the late-19th to the mid-20th century were used as propaganda and recruitment tools for the new school form. During the early-to-mid-19th century, the folk high school also became important for self-taught authors from the working class, and depictions of the folk high school entered into some of their books (Furuland 1971, 2007). Research has further revealed a strong connection between participation in the most prestigious creative writing courses at folk high schools and the achievement of publication (Fürst 2018, 2019). Accordingly, some of the associated authors have depicted life at these schools in literary and journalistic forms. Despite the prevalence of descriptions of folk high schools, there has been no systematic study of how the folk high school is portrayed in contemporary literature. This article fills this gap by focusing on arrival as an event of particular importance in understanding the cultural conceptions of the folk high school and its function in literature.

The concepts of total institution and liminality

The concept of a total institution is here used to understand depictions of the folk high school in literature and as a literary device to introduce the folk high school through the distinct experience of arrival. In a study of mental hospitals, Goffman (1961:xiii) defines a total institution as follows:

A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.

As exemplified in the original case of mental hospitals, the concept of a total institution encompasses and emphasizes personal regulation and repressiveness. Other examples of total institutions include cargo ships (Zurcher 1965; Sandberg 2014), boarding schools (Wakeford 1969; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009), military units (Sundberg 2015), and monasteries (Sundberg 2020). The music education program at Framnäs folk high school in Sweden during the 1950s and 1960s has previously been described as a total institution (Brändström & Larsson 2011). The distinction to be made between the original definition of a total institution and that used in Brändström and Larsson's study is that, in the latter case, the participants were voluntarily participating in the education, and the teachers did not live very different lives from the participants (they also lived at the school and were supposedly on equal footing with the participants). The aspect of voluntary rather than involuntary engagement in the institution is also salient to other examples of total institutions where people may desire to freely involve themselves in the totalizing experience (Scott 2011).

The original concept of a total institution relates to the process of becoming a mental patient. The idea of becoming suggests that selves governed by total institutions may be transformed to take on new roles or identities (Scott 2011). Total institutions thus have the characteristics of a liminal space (see Turner 1979), that is, they are an in-between position between two states. On the one hand, the in-betweenness of liminality may, in the case of folk high school students, relate to the gradual transformation of a person, such as while moving into adulthood. On the other hand, it may also refer to the space as such, especially regarding the travel to a place that appears to hold two contradictory states (e.g., being a part of yet symbolically and physically outside of regular society). The space and position of liminality thus carry with them a destabilizing and transformative potential and are especially salient in stories of arrival that involve symbolic and physical transitions.

Method

Sociology through literature

In this article, I follow a strand of the sociology of literature related to “the society in literature” (Svedjedal 1996). In my take on this sociology of literature, or rather sociology through literature, the selection of material becomes akin to an “experiment” (Edling & Rydgren 2011). Keeping the first encounters and the phenomenon of arrival to folk high school as a constant, I explore the depictions of people, experiences, settings, and situations as literary tropes in the material with possible real-world underpinnings and implications.

Using fiction as empirical material to study arrivals to the folk high school leads to intriguing possibilities and limitations. One benefit of using fictional accounts of arrival is that it allows for further investigation when a common pattern is identified in the emotions and expectations generated by the first encounters, which might otherwise be hard to study and retell (see Hyvärinen 2019; Pyyhtinen 2019). The fictional accounts also come close to “qualitative simulations” of hidden aspects of the social world, through which we learn about what we might find from observing such settings (Edling & Rydgren 2011). Perhaps even more powerfully, it is assumed that fictional representation can provide knowledge of some of the tropes, “deep stories” (Hochschild 2016), or what I call “cultural images” of what a folk high school is believed to be, how it is experienced, and what role it plays in society. The fictional accounts relate to the sometimes romanticized “folk high school experience” and are used for the characterization, plot, and motives of the persons in the stories.

The fictional accounts are regarded as resources for conceptualizing the public idea of folk high schools and stories of arrival. Nevertheless, scientific facts and fictional accounts cannot be easily separated, not only because societies are shaped by post-truth politics but also because facts are not discovered but interpreted and put into context to become coherent. Using this line of constructive reasoning, Pyyhtinen (2019:1, italics in original) sees scientific statements as “distinguished from fiction only *a posteriori*, not *a priori*.” The goal is not to question or relativize the validity of scientific claims in general but try to understand what we use as a basis for our knowledge of society.

Material and analytical approach

A breadth of contemporary fiction covering art education at the folk high school is used in this article, including literature, plays, and graphic novels. Identifying books about folk high schools is nonetheless a difficult task. For instance, to prepare an anthology with excerpts of accounts about the folk high school spanning 125 years, Höjer (1993) sent out a request to people at the folk high school for suggestions of literature. Rather than relying on network-based recommendations, I attempted to be more systematic in my approach by searching for mentions of folk high schools in (1) the content of digitalized books, (2) book reviews, and (3) book descriptions at online bookstores. While this approach was systematic, there are probably books about folk high schools

that have not been digitalized or reviewed and do not contain mentions of folk high schools in their online bookstore descriptions. For example, a book might depict folk high school experiences, while, at the same time, the term “folk high school” is not used in its reviews, descriptions, or in the book itself.

As a first approach, relevant material was identified by searching Google Books for the keyword “*folkhögskola*” (folk high school). The digitalized books in this database are sourced from a partner program and a library project; while it covers many Swedish books, it is not exhaustive. For example, authors and publishers may opt not to have their books shown on the Google Books platform. A second approach was taken in an attempt to find books about the folk high school not covered by Google Books. Using an online newspaper database called Retriever Research, the keywords “*folkhögskola*” and “*recension*” (review) were used to search through the last 30 years of newspaper book reviews covered in the database. A third approach was employed to cover additional books by searching through internet bookshops using the keyword “*folkhögskola*.”

While not exhaustive, this research endeavor resulted in the identification of 67 fiction books, two graphic novels, and two plays. Among the collected material, I identified whether each book was a reprint of an older book or not and whether the book included the folk high school as a major theme or whether it was merely mentioned. For example, some books mention a folk high school once without any further elaboration on the theme. I decided to focus only on the fiction books, plays, and graphic novels that had folk high school as a major theme, included an arrival scene to a folk high school, were published within the last 15 years, and were written for adults. The period of 15 years was used because the databases were considered most effective at identifying more-recent books. Almost all of the resulting books were about a person’s arrival to an art education course. Thus, I decided to focus solely on arrival to art education courses at folk high schools, leading to a final sample of seven books.

In contrast to the approach used in this article, Coser (1972:xvi) argues that sociological theorizing should use mainly high-brow literature as these works provide “an intensity of perception” more astute than the accounts of “ordinary” literature. I argue that any fictional account, high-brow or not, that describes the arrival encounter at the folk high school is sufficient to provide a detailed view of the experiential trajectory of the encounter and provide access to cultural images related to the folk high school experience.

The final material was analyzed through a narrative approach (Riessman 2008). First, the selected books were read in full through a “naïve reading,” after which sections covering arrival to the folk high school were chosen for further analysis. Second, the sections about arrival were analyzed as entire stories in themselves through a thematic narrative analysis (*ibid.*) to identify oppositions and turning points in the text.

A re-storying of the results was undertaken to present the analysis. This re-storying focuses on excerpts from the literature, plays, and graphic novels to depict an imagined journey from receiving an acceptance letter, traveling to the folk high school, encountering the surroundings for the first time, and meeting the other students. The excerpts are a mosaic of arrivals interpreted through oppositions and turning points in each phase of the journey.

Analysis

The first excerpt deals with receiving an acceptance letter and comes from Sara Bergmark Elfgren's play *Oscar Liljas försvinnande* (2019) (*The disappearance of Oscar Lilja*, my translation). The play debuted at Malmö City Theatre in 2019 and has a tone similar to Bergmark Elfgren's previous books, with gothic themes, supernatural beings, and a group of young adults as the protagonists trying to fend off an evil entity. Bergmark Elfgren's books, some of which are co-authored, have reached a large young adult readership both in Sweden and abroad (Haglund 2021). Her first book *Cirkeln* (*The circle*, co-authored with Mats Strandberg), a fantasy book about witches at a high school, became a bestseller and was made into a film and translated into several languages. *Oscar Liljas försvinnande* was also designed with a young adult audience in mind and was accompanied by study material for use by the school classes attending the play. Its experimental performance drew heavily on scenic audiovisual experiences.

In the play, former folk high school students return to their now-abandoned school. The story is told as a remembrance of what had once passed at the school, especially with regard to the teacher and "genius poet" Oscar Lilja. Following traditional vampire stories like *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, the teacher feeds on the students' energy. The students see the folk high school as a way to realize their artistic dreams and leave a life they once lived. The acceptance letter to the folk high school signals that this new life will soon be starting, as is depicted in the play's first scene:

MINA

I want to be a writer, but my mother wants me to have a stable income. So, I study hydrocarbons, cell organelles, exponential functions. I study and lose all my friends, it's just me and my books, my homework, and the poems I write for myself.

RÉMY

People always ask if I am named after a cognac. Rémy Martin. But my name is Rémy after my grandfather, who was a Frenchman and a pig. Grandpa did not care for my mother, and he did not care for me. But I inherited his "artistry."

MINA

My mother dies three months before my graduation. It's spring when I apply to the creative writing program.

RÉMY

It's spring when Kurt Cobain shoots himself in the head. I try to get away from my mother, hitchhiking south. A guy talks about a school in the forest. Smedjeby.

JONAS

It's the summer when I'm waiting for the admission notice. I change diapers and give the senile dementia patients juice before the World Cup. When I cycle home, I think: Soon, I will leave this shit town.

MINA

It's summer when I throw bags in a baggage belt. Bags that go to places I've never been.

RÉMY

Dad invites me to London. He asks nothing about my mother.

MINA

Paris. London. Tokyo. In other places, people are killing their neighbors.

RÉMY

I'm coming home, and someone has slept in my bed.

JONAS

Soon, I will go to Smedjeby.

MINA

I do not deserve Smedjeby.

LOUISE

That summer, we travel to Tokyo, my boyfriend and me. There, he ends the relationship. "I thought you would be crying," he says, sounding almost disappointed. But I'm on my way to something bigger.

RÉMY

The envelope is on the hall floor.

LOUISE

The letter of admission from Smedjeby.

MINA

I got in.

JONAS

I'm going to start my real life at a school deep in the forest. (Bergmark Elfgren 2019:2–5, my translation)

The experiences described by the students in this first scene of the play suggest that the folk high school will be a solution to the difficulties in their lives. It is a space where they may become the persons they want to be by detaching themselves from their ordinary lives. They are all young adults transitioning, in lust of new experiences but also wanting to steer their lives in new directions, creating liminal experiences of in-betweenness. The folk high school represents self-expression, gaining a sense of individuality, and doing something for one's own good, well-being, and deep interest. The space offers something new because it is both a different geographical space and different from one's previous life and life trajectory. In this way, the folk high school is depicted as a place for second chances, for people realizing a dream, escaping, and transitioning into adulthood.

While the students accepted to the folk high school escape destructive relationships, their experience at the school deep in the forest is also destructive, with the teacher pushing them psychologically towards a mental breakdown. The seclusion of the folk high school and life within a total institution are effectively used to keep the main protagonists in the same place with the same scenery, which they cannot escape once they arrive. The liberating character of the school is not realized but halted by its confinement and the destructive power of the teacher made possible by the total experience of being at the school.

Anna Fohlin Mattsson's (2006) novel *Vägar utan nåd* (*Roads without mercy*, my translation) also covers the folk high school as representing an escape from a destructive relationship, in particular, that of a young woman who has been raped by her stepfather. The book is the third in a trilogy, with the first published in 1994, covering the protagonist from the age of four until she begins attending an upper secondary school. The second book, published in 2004, covers a period in upper secondary school during which the protagonist struggles with the experiences of sexual assault. In *Vägar utan nåd*, the protagonist is close to completing her time at the upper secondary school and is having difficulty finding any meaning or joy in her life. She learns about folk high schools and considers attending one as a way to break away from her life. She is eventually accepted to a creative writing course and travels to the folk high school:

The train departs from the train station in the early morning hours. There is a cool fog over the city, and I leave it behind me in the gray haze. I'm almost alone in the carriage. The seats are dusty and musty, and it smells as it usually does on trains. The brown wood panels of the walls close around me, and the train pounds against the rails. Now I'm on my way.

I have to change trains several times before I arrive, and it's tricky to find the right one at the different train stations. Everything is chaotic. But I finally manage to get on the right bus, which will take me to the folk high school. I soon understand that several of those who are on the bus are going to the same course. A girl with glasses and a nice warm look sits opposite me on the bus and smiles a little questioningly. Then, the bus driver says on the loudspeaker that the next

stop is the folk high school. A whole crowd of people jump off and start walking, with backpacks and suitcases, up towards the school, which consists of low white buildings, surrounded by tall leafy trees next to a stream. I follow the crowd of people to the main building, where a woman who is apparently a matron at the school ticks us all off a list and makes sure we each get a key.

I stroll towards the room, dead tired after the long train journey. I just unpack my backpack and lie down on the bed and breathe for a couple of minutes. The room is very nice, with a large window facing the greenery. A private bathroom is next to the room as well. (Fohlin Mattsson 2006:152–153, my translation)

The protagonist wants to start a new life and sees the folk high school as a potential solution to her existential issues. By entering the school, she enters a liminal state of transition and experiences an initial confusion and unease in traveling to a place she has not been before. Her first impressions of some of her classmates are received during the bus ride to the school. They travel as a group of strangers but will soon get to know each other over an extended period. There is silence while arriving at the school as the participants are not yet transformed into students with mutual relationships. There is no difference in the accommodation between the students at the school. To be equalized in terms of sleeping arrangements makes it more important to become distinguishable by decorating one's room and one's personal style. As with the protagonist in Bergmark Elfgren's (2019) play and many of the other depictions and uses of the folk high school in fiction analyzed in this article, the folk high school becomes, in Fohlin Mattsson's (2006) book, an attempt to start anew through the liminality created by arriving at a total institution cut off from ordinary life.

The protagonist in Amanda Svensson's (2014) *Allt det där jag sa till dig var sant* (*All that I said to you was true*, my translation) is a young woman who attends a creative writing program at a folk high school in the south of Sweden. The book is the third in a trilogy about young women. Svensson has first-hand experiences of the school format, having herself participated in a creative writing program at a folk high school. The protagonist in the book travels to the folk high school to write and look for love but finds herself in an ambiguous and destructive relationship, eventually being sexually abused by a young man with artistic ambitions who is a student in the general course (*allmän kurs*). Participants in the general course usually do not have complete grades from an upper secondary school and take corresponding missing courses to finalize their degrees. The protagonist does not know her boyfriend's identity, and he talks about their destructive relationship as if it were part of an old Russian novel or through relationships and people in the history of literature, such as Sylvia Plath's life with depression and suicide. Other people take control over her life, and she is sometimes unaware of what is real and what is part of her fantasies. The folk high school becomes a backdrop for an inclination to escape reality. She wants to find a way to be confident and tries to emancipate herself from the destructive relationship with the young man through a new female friend. The new friend transports her to a story of women pirates

surrounded by male pirates. The following excerpt describes the protagonist's first impressions of the school:

A schoolhouse with a dining room and porch and substandard library. A music house, a theatre house, an apple grove. A dormitory where I live and have my lessons, in a room on the ground floor, which for natural reasons is called the writers' room. It is the eastern dormitory (there is one to the west and one to the north as well, the latter divided into the Red, Yellow, and Blue sections). Eight plus eight rooms located on two floors and miles of clay fields in all directions outside the windows. Fluorescent lamps and linoleum, the food leftovers from sixteen people that become larger and larger calluses around the hobs. The smoke from the far-too-expensive cigarettes you buy at Pressbyrån by the overgrown mini-golf course in the village center. From the gaps under the doors of the dormitory, the sounds of Hallelujah with Jeff Buckley and Hallelujah with Rufus Wainwright and Hallelujah with Regina Spector and Hallelujah with Imogen Heap flow out into the corridor, but never Hallelujah with Leonard Cohen. Here are the girls' snuffboxes in metal that smell of mandarin, mint, and suede. The TV room with its dusty VCR player and kilos of cracker crumbs wedged between the worn sofa cushions. The thin walls, the even thinner skin, and the afternoon hour when there is nothing to do, which is popularly called the wolf hour. You can get athlete's foot here if you do not wear bath slippers in the shower. You can climb out of a window on the second floor onto the roof above the writers' hall and sit there and watch people or have secret conversations. That's where I used to sit and watch him. Alone. I'm still sitting there alone most of the time.

I have two posters on the wall in my room. They come from an exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. I've had them for quite some time without knowing where to put them. When I moved here, I thought this must be the place.

The posters are white with thin black text in the middle. On one it says: *Nowhere better than this place*. On the other: *Somewhere better than this place*. (Svensson 2014:18–19, my translation)

The folk high school appears akin to a total institution, such as a prison or hospital, with a long history of holding many people secluded and under control. This appearance is further emphasized by the impression that it is old and worn down. The school also has different buildings for different activities and is secluded from the nearby small town and surrounded by farmland. This view of the folk high school is common in the literature examined. For example, Henrik Bromander's (2015) graphic novel *Kurs i självtuplåning* (*Course in self-extinction*, my translation) is about a young woman attending a clown school where young women are subjected to a teacher who is considered a "genius" but is also a sexual predator. Here, the seclusion of the folk high school becomes the backdrop for sexual violation. When introducing the idea of

being at a folk high school, Svensson (2014:17) writes, “we cannot escape this place no matter how much we want to.” Likewise, in *Kurs i självutplåning*, the protagonist cannot escape the place nor the predator. The story takes place at a folk high school but primarily covers only three people, furthering the social isolation of the protagonist already initiated by the predator. The story deals with a coming-of-age; it is not necessarily about finding one’s place in life and to a greater extent addresses the protagonist’s attempts to find self-direction and self-determination without having power over life and the totalizing experience of the folk high school.

Svensson continues by making fun of the folk high school soundscape through the much-covered song Hallelujah, one that was perhaps part of a rite of passage of musical taste during adolescence for the generation represented in the book. The folk high school is an uninviting and shabby place but one where the protagonist can dream and imagine a relationship with a person from afar. The words on the posters (“Nowhere better than this place” and “Somewhere better than this place”) summarize the school, on the one hand, as a total institution cut off from wider society and, on the other, as a space for liminality between a willingness to escape the space for something better and the determination to stay for the lack of better alternatives.

In Inger Edelfeldt’s (2021) *Om snö och guld* (*About snow and gold*, my translation), Miranda listens to Leonard Cohen when she arrives at her folk high school. She is 19 years old and has been struggling in life for a while, having spent time at a mental institution and having attempted to kill herself. At the folk high school, she will not only take art classes but also achieve the grades necessary to finish upper secondary school. She arrives at the school a day early, in the middle of a forest, and is struck by the beauty of the manor and the chestnut trees. At the same time, she is reluctant to engage with and distant from others when she first arrives. Initially, she hides in her room and tries not to make any noise. She describes her room in detail:

Without exaggerating, I can say that the residential barracks at Alavik contained the most boring, most impersonal rooms I had ever seen. Everything was standardized. The bed, the free-standing wardrobe, a chair, a chest of drawers, and a small table – everything was made of the same matte lacquered wood in a color reminiscent of golden pea soup. From the curtain rod hung a pair of greyish, sparsely woven curtains in a somewhat vague pattern, but fortunately, there was a tree just outside. On the wall hung a framed paper with instructions in case of fire. At the chest of drawers, there was an injunction, also framed, to keep it clean and locked.

I had thought about a longer reconnaissance trip in the surroundings, but it did not work out. I heard the sound of someone stepping into the house. Instinctively, I locked the door. I thanked higher powers for having my own toilet; it meant that I could barricade myself here if needed.

Inside the toilet, strangely enough, there was no mirror, but when I opened the closet in the room, I was confronted with my own unglamorous, terrified figure; it looked wrinkled and dusty. I sank down on the bed again.

Only after a while did I manage to start unpacking some things. I had planned to change shape, so in the suitcase there was a full set of “Urimaira” [witch] equipment: two black, wide, long skirts, one with a lace edge at the bottom. A black tank top with snibs hanging from the neckline. A black crocheted shawl. Earrings with clips because I did not have holes in my ears. And of course makeup. (Edelfeldt 2021:359–360, my translation)

Miranda does not want to fall back into old habits and avoids discussing destructive patterns and mental health issues. At the folk high school, she can be far away from her mother, who she feels has a harmful impact on her. When describing her room, it becomes clear that it is close to a room in an institutional building. Cheap and durable material is used. Privacy is possible, but they live close to other students. To have a room of her own becomes an escape, as a space within a space she cannot escape, where she can recuperate before encountering others.

Marie Hedegård’s (2019) novel *Dit vägen bär* (*Where the road carries*, my translation) is the second book in a series. The plot revolves around a woman who makes new female friends from a course on textile design and sewing at a folk high school as well as from a house close to the school. The protagonist is newly divorced, and her children have moved out. She struggles to find a new path in life regarding work, who she is as a person, her relationship with her body, her female friends, and her love life. The book starts with her experiences in a one-year-long course for textile design. The book’s second half is an adventure traveling through Europe by bus. Throughout the trip, the friends discover their close connections and joys in life. Following the acceptance letter, a trip to the school, and encountering the premises, the students meet other students for the first time in the classroom:

After the tour, we gather in the sewing room, and now it’s time for the presentation round. I soon discover that several of the students have their parents’ homes nearby and commute to school every day. Somehow, I had a romantic idea that we would be like one big family where everyone would run in and out of each other’s rooms in the evenings. Like when you were in camp in your youth.

Ilona tells a long story about when her family fled Bosnia and how all the women in her family have for a long time been engaged in sewing. I wonder what she thinks she believes she will learn here, but of course, I stay quiet. Next in line is Emmy from Gothenburg, who dances ballet. Her biggest dream is to become a fashion designer. And a dancer of course.

Soon, it's my turn. What should I say? A mother of two from Stockholm who has worked as a teacher for almost thirty years. Divorced, burnt out, and lost. What am I excited to tell you? I look at the girls around me. No one knows me, and no one knows anything about me. I can actually choose to be exactly who I want to be. (Hedegård 2019:16, my translation)

Similar to the protagonist in *Om snö och guld*, the protagonist in *Dit vägen bär* wants to start anew. She no longer wants to be defined by her relationship with her previous partner, her children, or her work as a teacher. She has been in the background for a long time and wants to change, speak out more, and take up more space. She is the oldest person in the course and worries about having children the same age as her classmates. She labels them as six young women, one being the quiet one, and herself as “a lovesick middle-aged woman looking for adventure” (Hedegård 2019:19, my translation). The folk high school is cut off from the rest of society by the total institutional setting. It offers a transitional experience involving the liminality of moving from old relationships and identities to new ones.

The labeling of schoolmates is a common feature in the books. In Anneli Furmark's (2010) graphic novel *Fiskarna i havet* (*The fishes in the ocean*, my translation), a young woman arrives at a folk high school. She lives off-campus and rents a room in a house where the landlord, an older woman, also lives. The protagonist takes her bike from her home in the small coastal town to the school. As with Bromander's (2015) graphic novel, the author provides a page with a collage of the different participants' traits, which includes their desirability (similar to what Zetterberg (1966) calls the “secret erotic rank” of people) and also their mental stability, their general emotionality, and the degree to which they are an “introvert” or “extravert.” The students paint, and some of them spend evenings painting at the folk high school. The social types in Furmark's (2010) graphic novel include women who are classified as being passionately committed to making art, a man who appears to be psychologically unstable, a teacher with a distinguishable style of wearing corduroy, a serious man, a quiet and withdrawn girl, and a young and happy girl. Those who have physical attractiveness are flawed, either being married or perceived as angry.

Finding a romantic or sexual interest at the folk high school is a recurring theme in all the books. The folk high school is an educational establishment as well as a market for finding a partner or a hook-up. Svensson's (2014) protagonist attends the folk high school to find a romantic partner but ends up in a destructive relationship with a man. In Bromander's (2015) graphic novel, there is a sexual predator who is coordinating and discussing with a colleague how he lures women to have sex with him. At one point, the protagonist finds herself attracted to him, but the story ends with her revealing the teacher as a sexual predator, while the predator in Svensson's book vanishes.

Returning to Mattsson's (2006) *Vägar utan nåd*, after arriving, the protagonist notices it is time for the regularly occurring coffee break, during which she encounters some of the course participants at the folk high school for the first time. The placement at the folk high school and the history of Swedish *folkbildning* are emphasized in the scene by the large portrait of the educationalist Ellen Key on the wall:

Then I go up to the big house, where coffee will be served. Everyone should gather in the dining room. I sit down at a table where there are some others, who look older than me. In fact, everyone looks older. Everyone's a little different in age, but I'm probably the youngest, I note. I have a cup of coffee and some cookies. I end up next to a guy who looks to be a bit over thirty. He seems friendly and has a very soft and soothing voice.

I tell him briefly about where I come from and what I do when he asks. It's ringing in my ears. Everything is so embarrassing. I stare stubbornly at the flowers in the vase on the table, at the row of windows at the other end of the room, at the large portrait of Ellen Key hanging above the doorway. After drinking my coffee, I get up. (Fohlin Mattsson 2006:153, my translation)

The protagonist is wary about her age, whether or not she will fit in, and who will be nice to her. She struggles with her past in every encounter. Eventually, she hides in her room, being lonely but not wanting to feel lonely. The time at the folk high school will change her, and on the last day of the course, she feels like a new and better person. She has fallen in love. For the protagonist, the liminal experience at the school had her carrying the past into the new setting of the folk high school, where she transitions, by her initial encounters, from her old relationships and identities to new ones enabled by the cloistered way of living at the school.

Discussion

The fictional accounts studied here largely reveal dark stories of the folk high school. These dark stories are about violations made possible through the institutional freedom and isolation of the school, where the intimacy, trust, or power of other students or the teacher is turned into destructiveness. The folk high school may also be an escape from previous experiences of violations or life crises. In this respect, it is something radically different, sometimes a place for creating a communal spirit of like-mindedness.

The participants begin from a state of expectancy, building up a potentiality for transformation, usually due to some distorting dilemma (Mezirow 2000). While not all participants in the accounts change in any radical way during their encounters at the folk high school or through the distorting dilemma, the folk high school at least offers the potential for change and transformation (e.g., by disengagement from a previous identity or becoming civically engaged or artistically or socially proficient). The folk high school thus becomes an agent in a liminal experience of self-transformation into a new role or identity. It is a place similar to yet outside of regular society where new habits and ways of life may emerge. At the folk high school, the students realize truths about society and what it means to have an authentic attachment to life through processes of exploration and self-development.

The encounters with the folk high school are the first chance for the protagonists to live away or flee from home. In the stories, the school is usually situated in a rural

area, with old buildings, sometimes manors, and most of the protagonists live on the campus grounds. The protagonists are all females and often young, addressing their coming-of-age from this perspective. In the first meetings, they tend to classify or rank other participants regarding desirability. A movement from the first encounter of being nervous or even scared is common but becomes part of the narrative as something that is overcome.

The folk high school appears as a place for difference, a space outside of regular society, a micro-society of its own. The often-stale setting of the folk high school, with its standardized rooms and routines for eating, sleeping, and teaching also offers a potential for exploration in a craft, other people, or the milieus and materials of the school outside one's living arrangement. While the accounts are fictional, they all speak to the general significance of the folk high school as a place not only for exploration and change but also for the dark sides of isolation, breeding violations and violence made possible by the space as a total institution.

Dark stories from the folk high school are seldom told in public and are usually absent in students' narratives in previous research (Fürst, Levelius & Nylander 2018; Fürst & Nylander 2020; Fürst & Nylander, forthcoming), which may speak to problems of revealing transgressions in such a research setting. The use of dark stories in this fiction may also relate to the potency of the folk high school as a practical trope for narrating transformation in a single location. The boarding school and its secret societies have been effectively used in various works, such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997–2007) books, Donna Tartt's *The secret history* (1992), and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005). In Sweden, well-known examples include Jan Guillou's novel *Ondskan* (*The evil*, my translation) (1981) and the TV series *Young royals* (2021–2022), which depict life at Swedish boarding schools. The boarding school format becomes a way to represent adolescence in a cloistered way of life, often referring to economic elites. Here, the folk high school becomes yet another option that includes, to some extent, cultural elites as well as groups other than the societal elite (or would-become societal elite).

Part of the current attraction of depicting total institutions is that, since the 1960s, when the concept was developed, many such spaces have been dissolved. The concept was created during a distinct period of history when the anti-psychiatric movement revealed the harmful effects of mental hospitals in the United States at that time (Scott 2011). Globalization and the development of technologies for communication have since made places more interconnected and less cut off from the rest of society. Additionally, the desire to be part of a total institution seems to be part of a general desire to subject oneself to being governed for a foreseeable period (Scott 2011). While many students attend folk high schools only during the day, the folk high school is generally presented as a space for boarding school students and as being, to a large extent, cut off from the rest of society. Hence, labeling the folk high school as a total institution may not fully account for the experience of participating in art courses in today's folk high schools (Fürst & Nylander forthcoming). Nevertheless, the total institution is effective as a literary device to contain characters and develop conflicts that arise from a particular milieu.

From a broader perspective, the accounts of arrival to the folk high school are an example of a sociological process of arrival. The pivotal role played by arrival and first encounters in ethnographic reports (Agar 1980; Goffman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) also speaks volumes to the general social significance of arrival as a social phenomenon for learning about what structures experiences. As noted in the introduction, one can only arrive once to a particular setting, and what one experiences is generally viscerally intense. Phenomenologically speaking, it is the meeting of perspectives, creating a break in one's perception and understanding of a setting. Rather than focusing on arrival stories only as a consequence of forced or voluntary migration (see, e.g., Wästerfors 2009; Wulff 2022), studying arrival as a social phenomenon provides access to cracks in the institutional fabric of social life.

Acknowledgments

The writing of this article was possible through research grants from the Swedish Research Council (VR 2018-06708) and Stockholms Arbetareinstitutsförening. I have received valuable feedback on earlier versions of this text from the Cultural Matters Group at Uppsala University and Erik Nylander, Julia Pennlert, Sofia Pulls, and Helena Wulff. I am also grateful for the insightful comments offered by the anonymous peer reviewers.

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