

# **Per Petterson and Kirsten Thorup's Fictions of Old Age Well-Being in the Welfare State**

**Peter Simonsen**

University of Southern Denmark

## **Abstract**

The article presents findings from the social sciences which suggest that quality of life and subjective well-being is higher in universalist welfare states such as the Scandinavian because of the system's generous supply of benefits and services for all citizens, not least the elderly, who report a very high degree of life satisfaction or happiness. This high degree of self-reported happiness is then contrasted with readings of novels by Per Petterson and Kirsten Thorup, which tell other more skeptical stories of old age well-being. The paper concludes that both kinds of sources (happiness statistics and fictional stories) contain valuable information about the nature of and our ideas about how to achieve the good life in the modern welfare state.

## **Key words**

Old age, well-being, welfare state, empathy, Per Petterson, Kirsten Thorup

The Scandinavian welfare state is characterized by being a primarily tax financed and public sector driven societal experiment in redistributing resources from those who have more to those who have less, and in providing a large number of services to all citizens largely free of charge once taxes have been paid (Christiansen *et al.* 2006: 11-12). One thing that characterizes the Scandinavian welfare state in comparison with other models is that the individual citizen's well-being and quality of life is to a greater extent seen as the responsibility of the state, which aims to enable all citizens to realize their full potential. Scandinavians, Danes in particular, for instance, typically expect, allow and prefer the state to take primary care of them in their old age (Leeson 2008; Rostgaard 2004). In the Scandinavian model, the state treats every older citizen more or less in the same generous way irrespective of the person's history in the nation or on the labour market. And Scandinavians tend to trust the state to do so in a fair manner, and to trust one another to enable it to do so by supporting it. This universal welfare model with generous benefits and services to all and the concomitant general trust in society has been seen as conducive of the very high degree of self-reported well-being or happiness among Scandinavians, given that happiness is both something that comes with material, social security, and something that is relative to how one's neighbours fare (Pacek and Radcliff 2008a&b; Greve 2010a&b; Rothstein 2010).

However, the point of this essay is not to causally relate the specific Nordic model of welfare to the region's very high level of self-reported happiness, which is a contentious claim as causality might also be reversed (Ridge, Rice and Cherry 2009). It is, rather, to explore the paradox that while the life being led in the welfare state *is* perceived by the majority of Scandinavians as the good life, some of our most respected novelists still represent this life as perhaps not unequivocally the good life. This paradox is explored through close attention to two novels, Per Petterson's *Ut og stjæle hester* (Out Stealing Horses) (2003) and Kirsten Thorup's *Ingenmandsland* (No Man's Land) (2003). Why do the novels counter official statistics? Why don't they represent the life lived in the bosom of the welfare state as a happy, good life?

What is meant by happiness and well-being? Economist and pioneering

happiness researcher, Richard Layard, enumerates seven 'big' factors that most crucially affect happiness: family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom (including quality of government) and personal values and capacities such as being able to care for others (Layard 2005: 62-73). Research into life quality and well-being tends to combine some hard, quantitatively measurable aspects of life (basic living conditions regarding safety, food, shelter, income, health status, social contacts) and some more soft, qualitative aspects of life given as the answer to a question such as: 'Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?' (Easterlin 2002). This is a question e.g. of the meaning of health to the individual, his or her expectations about the future, and the quality of his or her relations to others. For instance, many social contacts for an older person is not necessarily indicative of high life quality, it surely depends on who is seen, when, why and under what conditions (Bonsang and van Soest 2011). Recent research by political scientists has as mentioned suggested that the high level of happiness among citizens in the Scandinavian welfare states, who are among the happiest in the world, may be caused by the specific universalist welfare state that generously supports all citizens when e.g. unemployed, disabled or of a certain age. Using Gösta Esping-Andersen's term (Esping-Andersen 1990: 35-55), the Scandinavian welfare state provides a high degree of decommodification and thereby, as Pacek and Radcliff have argued, can be seen to enhance their subjective well-being:

The degree of market independence [decommodification] a society provides has a substantive as well as a statistically significant effect on the degree to which individuals tend, on average, to find their lives satisfying. (Pacek and Radcliff 2008a: 271)

Thus, although quality of life 'is a personal and fluid concept', it is conditioned by the society in which one lives and also by one's age (Bond and Corner 2006: 158). Old-age well-being in itself is not only dependent on a long life, but also on criteria such as health,

good cognitive skills, social competence, personal control, and life satisfaction, that is, the experience of one's life as meaningful and purposeful (Lupien and Wan 2007). When seen in terms of the life-course of an individual, subjective well-being is now increasingly understood to be U-shaped (Blanchflower and Oswald 2008). A Gallup survey from 2008 of some 340.000 Americans documented that their subjective well-being in fact peaks around the age of 85, a fact that may correct the sometimes rather gloomy connotations our youth-fixated culture tends to associate with old age (Stone *et. al* 2010). An anthropological study from 2006 asked a representative group of Danes between the ages of 19 and 99 what they thought of as a 'good life in old age' and it came up with qualities such as activity, independence, autonomy, respect and dignity, close family ties and the freedom to make choices (Nielsen 2006). What the interviewed persons fear most about growing old is to become dependent on others, to be a burden on society and become an institutionalized object – a senile 'vegetable' in a nursing home at the mercy of indifferent, underpaid and undertrained caretakers. Data from the HSBC Global Survey, The Future of Retirement, conducted in 2006, where 20 nations of different kind are compared, indicates that Danes between the age of 60 and 79 score highest when the degree of control over one's life is measured, even to a significant degree (control is here measured by asking people if they feel that they can do what they want, that life is full of opportunities and the future looks bright, or if their age, economy, family or things outside their control keeps them from doing what they want). One thing that may explain this high degree of control is that very few Danes +60 feel their self-control hindered by family responsibilities, of the kind the welfare state has taken upon itself (e.g. care of grand children and old parents/siblings). In addition, the same data measure life quality by asking whether respondents in the previous week have been depressed, lonely, sad, felt everything was too much or if they have enjoyed life, looked ahead to the future and been happy. Again, Danes in their 60s and 70s score highest, maybe because of the relatively high degree of self-control as well as the high degree of social equality facilitated by the universalist welfare state (Leeson 2008; Greve 2010: 30).

The good life is continually extended as we live longer, and it is made available to more people as we live more healthy lives in control, assisted by the welfare state. Yet at the same time, the negation of the good life is also increasingly a *risk* we must calculate as various forms of dementia and other age-related and -biased illnesses as well as the loss of life-sustaining interpersonal relations become more likely due to our longevity. The happier we are the more we may fear losing the conditions that make this happiness possible. This essay suggests that narrative fiction and the empathetic reading experience which novels in particular thrive on (Nussbaum 1995, Keen 2007), is a privileged means to open our imaginations and help us acclimatize ourselves to this new, ambivalent future of longer and better lives lived in the shadow of our worst fears of immobility and senility.

The novels discussed in the following were both published in 2003 to great critical acclaim and have won prestigious prizes as well as large readerships. This may reflect the readers' felt need and common interest to acquire more knowledge of life's last stages, an aspect which the different books engage with in different ways. Petterson represents a hopeful, non-institutionalized process of accommodating oneself as older person to a new life in retirement from job, society and family deep in the Norwegian woods. Translated by Anne Born in 2005, reviewed favourably in the *New York Times*, the novel won the prestigious IMPAC award in 2007. Thorup on the other hand represents a very old, senile person's painful loss of self when left by his family in a modern nursing home. This novel has not been translated into English, and might also to be too closely bound by the cultural norms, values and dilemmas of the Scandinavian welfare state to lend itself to translation for a global mass market. Yet it has found a large readership in Denmark, where it has been issued in several paperback editions, featured as book of the month in a large book club, Samlerens, and in 2004 won a large money prize given by the BG Bank, which let readers (and anyone else) vote for one of three books chosen by a jury.

To read and understand Thorup's novel, we must have firsthand knowledge of life under the conditions of the Scandinavian welfare state. This is a context that Petterson's narrative seemingly transcends but that, I will argue, is deeply relevant to fully understand this text.

The novels address the issue of life quality both at a distance from the welfare state, and from within its very centre. Compared to other welfare regimes, life in the modern Scandinavian welfare state entails as mentioned that as we age we become increasingly dependent on others who are not our family – the state assumes the position of the parent (Szebehely 2005). That the state assumes this responsibility means that families can now more easily consist of two people working out of the house, which is to say that women (who would typically end up taking care of the older generation) are given more life choices than traditionally to cultivate their own personality and their working career. This reformulation of the traditional family can be seen as a gain achieved by the Scandinavian welfare state's family policy even as the (perhaps) more compassionate caretaking role of the family is professionalized, leaving (some would argue) the family an empty functionless shell. Typically interested in the dynamics of the family and its degree of happiness, the novel gives its readers privileged knowledge of the meaning of these intimate lives and dilemmas of the welfare state.

Petterson explains his novel's appeal by saying that it expresses a kind of Norwegian Buddhism: The dream of the simple life, which we also find in e.g. Erlend Loe's *Doppler* (2004). The dream, as Petterson says in an interview, of 'framing the everyday world in terms of meaningful rituals like getting food and heat. It's not religious, but maybe sacral' (Andersen 2005). It is a dream of autonomy and inaccessibility. It is an attractive dream of taking care of yourself in old age – yet what Petterson actually shows in the novel, I suggest, is the insufficiency of this dream and the protagonist and first person narrator, Trond Sander's gradual realization that he depends on others for his well-being.

I want to focus my reading on a pivotal passage where Trond and his neighbour are using their chainsaws and where important things about Trond are being said and implied. It is a passage that may too easily slip by when we read either for the novel's atmospheric evocations of Norwegian pine wood, the bodily-sensual descriptions of cutting hay and running around naked in pouring rain as a child, or when we read to find out what really happened in the summer in 1948 when Trond

came of age as he found himself at 15 betrayed and abandoned by his father and left with his mother and the idea – inherited from his father – that unless you take care of yourself, no one else will. Trond's philosophy of life has been that 'vi bestemmer jo sjøl når det skal gjøre vondt' (Petterson 2003: 247) ('we do decide for ourselves when it will hurt', Petterson 2005: 264), as the young Trond says in the novel's very last sentence. The adventurous boyhood story is told from the retrospective perspective of a few months before the millennium in 1999 by the now 67-year-old Trond, who has sold his firm, retired, and moved from the city to a small cabin in the woods by a lake. His second wife died in a car accident three years earlier and he has moved because he wants to change his life and be alone: 'Jeg mener vi sjøl skaper våre liv, jeg har nå iallfall skapt mitt eget, for hva dét er verdt, og tar det hele og fulle ansvaret' (68) ('I believe we shape our lives ourselves, at any rate I have shaped mine, for what it's worth, and I take complete responsibility', 68). Or as he puts it early on in the novel:

Hele livet har jeg lengta etter å være aleine på et sted som dette. Sjøl når det var på det fineste, og det har det ikke vært sjelden. Så mye kan jeg si. At det ikke har vært sjelden. Jeg har vært heldig. Men sjøl da, for eksempel midt i et favntak nåe noen hviska ord i øret mitt jeg gjerne ville høre, kunne jeg plutselig lengte meg bort til et sted der det bare var helt stille. (11)

All my life I have longed to be alone in a place like this. Even when everything was going well, as it often did. I can say that much. That it often did. I have been lucky. But even then, for instance in the middle of an embrace and someone whispering words in my ear I wanted to hear, I could suddenly get a longing to be in a place where there was only silence. (5)

This is quintessential Trond: even in intimate company he'd rather be alone, he says. He has even forgotten to tell his adult children that he has moved. To his daughter, Ellen, age 39, who has found him after six months silence he says, 'Jeg har forandra på livet mitt .... Jeg solgte det som var igjen av firmaet og flytta hit fordi jeg var nødt, ellers ville

det gått meg ille. Jeg kunne ikke fortsette som det var' (207) ('I have changed my life .... I sold what was left of the firm and came out here because I had to, or things would have turned out badly. I couldn't go on the way it was', 222).

Trond tells us things in the manner of Ernest Hemingway, which means that most of importance seems left unsaid, and that the task is to figure out to what extent Trond knows and really means what he is saying and doing. We know from early on in the novel that Trond fears the onset of winter:

En eller annen gang mens jeg sov, begynte det å snø, og jeg var sikker på at jeg visste det, i søvnen, at været slo om og ble kaldere, og jeg visste at jeg frykta vinteren, og jeg frykta snøen hvis det ble mye av den, og at jeg hadde satt med i en umulig situasjon ved at flytte hit. Så da drømte jeg innbitt om sommer og hadde den fortsatt i hodet da jeg våkna. (19-20)

At some point while I was asleep it started to snow, and I am sure I was aware of it, in my sleep, that the weather had changed and grew colder, and I knew I feared the winter, and I feared the snow if there was too much of it, and the fact that I had put myself in an impossible position, moving here. So then I dreamt fiercely about summer and it was still in my head when I woke up. (14)

His dreaming of the summer of 1948 is a way to escape this winter that he fears. When Trond's single neighbour, Lars, with whom Trond shares a traumatic childhood memory (Lars accidentally shot his own twin brother), at a crucial, revelatory moment some time later asks, 'Er du red for å snø inne?' (158) ('Are you fearful of being snowed in?', 168), which we know is something very much on Trond's mind, but something he has already fixed with another farmer-neighbour with a tractor, and Trond replies, 'Ja, sier jeg og kjenner at jeg rødmer. – Det også' (158) ('Yes', I say, feeling my face flush. 'That too', 168), much lies hidden in that flush, that dash and in that 'Det også', such as a fear of change, isolation, immobility, old age dependency, death and

oblivion. Lars is helping out with his chainsaw clearing the yard of a birch tree that has fallen in a storm. They have been working hard, are taking a break when Lars shrugs and says nevermind about the snow, let's carry on with the work at hand. Trond then thinks:

Jeg kjenner at holdninga hans smitter, jeg *har* lyst til å gå på igjen. Men det overrasker meg også, og bekymrer meg, at jeg plutselig skal være avhengig av et annet menneske for å orke å gå på en så enkel og nødvendig jobb. Tid er jo det jeg har nok av. Noe i meg forandrer seg, *jeg* forandrer meg, fra en jeg kjente godt og stolte blindt på, kalt gutten med gullbuksene av dem som var glad i han, som hver gang han stakk hånda i lomma kom opp med skinnende mynter i rikelige mengder, til en jeg kjenner mye dårligere og ikke vet hva han har av rask i lommene, og jeg lurer på hvor lenge denne forandringa har vært på vei. I tre år kanskje. (158-159, Petterson's italics)

His attitude is contagious, I do feel like going on. But it surprises me, too, and worries me that I should depend on someone else to give me the strength to take on such a simple and necessary job. It's not as if I didn't have the time. Something inside me is changing, *I am changing*, from someone I knew well and blindly relied on, called 'the boy with the golden trousers' by those who loved him, who came up with an endless supply of shining coins whenever he put his hand in his pocket, into someone much less familiar to me and who really has no idea what kind of rubbish he has in his pockets, and I wonder how long this change has been under way. Three years, perhaps. (168-169)

This is the novel's most explicit recognition that something is happening to Trond in the now of the story – in the very moment of his narration. He may have intentionally changed his life in its outer, material form by settling in the cabin, but he is also changing on the inside, unbeknownst to himself it would seem. He realizes that he is no longer the radically self-sufficient person he thought he was, and that he must learn to recognize dependency on another person as the

premise of his new life. It is a slow and awkward recognition. Trond and Lars would much rather talk about the weather than about their fears and newfound friendship, and a few pages later, Trond again talks in his masculine Hemingway manner about how he *could* take care of himself, if he had to, and how there is really nothing to fear, 'jeg veit ... at jeg har den i meg, evnen til å være aleine, og , og jeg har ingenting å være red for ... det skulle vært godt å få hvile litt nå' (165; Petterson's italics) ('I know ... I have it in me, the ability to be alone, and there is nothing to be afraid of ... it would be nice finally to have some rest', 176). Yet, he clearly protests too much and immediately goes on, 'Men så er det Lars, som jeg antakelig ikke kan la være å like' (165) ('But then there is Lars, whom I probably cannot avoid liking', 176). It would be out of Trond's character to reflect on how lucky he has been in finding someone to share his old age solitude with, but that is in effect what he does in this passage. Later, when his daughter, Ellen, after some detective work suddenly turns up at the cabin after six months, Trond again inadvertently reveals being pleased by Lars' company (202); and when Ellen, before she leaves, says that now she knows where he lives, he says: 'Det er bra ... det er jeg glad for' (208) (That's good ... I'm glad you do, 223). No need to gush when this is just enough: he cannot avoid liking Lars and he is glad that his daughter knows where he lives.

The novel looks back to explain who this narrator is: his identity was created in the intense months he spent with his idolized father in the Norwegian woods and in the increasingly consciously recognized experience of being betrayed by his father, who stayed behind in the woods and sent Trond to live with his mother in Oslo. The intimate blend between various pasts and the present suggests the extent to which the aged, narrating I is organically connected to the younger, narrated I – the past lives in him, he *is* the past. This summer with the father taught Trond to take care of himself and not rely on others, to be a *man* in the sense of learning to live by his father's *credo* ('vi bestemmer jo sjøl når det skal gjøre vondt', **after all we decide for ourselves when it's going to hurt**). This searching process of looking back in order to understand the self is also something Trond seems to do in order to avoid talking too much about and having to deal

with his immediate present, his old age and his dependency on others. He speaks about his own and his father's youthful selves and their perfectly fit bodies to avoid his aged and more frail self and body in the now of the telling. Trond takes us back to his father and to a masculine ideal of self-reliance and self-sufficiency in order to convince himself that in his old age he can take care of himself. What he seems to realize, however, in looking back is 1) that his father was never really able to take care of himself (he relied on a wife, a mistress, a best friend Franz) and that when he acted on his own and insisted on sending timber downstream even though it was out of season, he was a huge failure who accidentally ruined Jon's father's life and made a mere pittance as he lost most of the timber; and 2) that in his present Trond is dependent both on the help and human presence of his neighbour, Lars, and on the company of and emotional connection to his daughter. He is *not* exactly who he was. Trond never says outright that his father was a failure, who set him on the wrong course in life, but the novel implies as much even as it suggests that there may be new life and meaning for Trond beyond that hard recognition. What Trond realizes in his own wooden, awkward and never quite articulated manner is that he does *not* decide himself when or if it hurts, that his personal welfare is partly determined by others, and that this is not necessarily such a bad thing. In a minimal way Trond recognizes that he is a part of a community, a society even, on which his well-being depends. This is a community on the borders of the welfare state, literally as well as figuratively, and it may serve to open the mind of the reader (Scandinavian as well as international) to the possibilities of living, happily, in that borderland in relative independence of the central state.

While Trond is hardly old at 67, the protagonist of *Ingenmandsland*, Carl Sørensen, is very old at 94. He has been moved into a modern nursing home facility against his will even as there are no realistic alternatives. He is rapidly losing bodily and mental functions. In the first chapter we are introduced to him in a state where his language has lost reference to time and place. He thinks it is day even though it is night, he does not realize he is to stay permanently at the nursing home, he swears even though he is a distinguished gentleman who

would never do such a thing. He is also hallucinating (he thinks his daughter visits him in the shape of an angel) and losing his memory. Clearly he cannot take care of himself any longer, and there is no one but the state to do so. His two grown-up children, Ulf and Ellen, either will not take care of their father any longer, or they are incapable of doing so. Their *welfarist* life-styles militate against the demands of a 94-year-old person who struggles to maintain a sense of personal identity and integrity. The daughter is modern and fully emancipated with her own career in advertising, and the son is busy with the business he inherited from the father and wants to take his family to Thailand on a long vacation, which means there's nobody to take care of the father. Because Carl is denied autonomy – a central motif is that he is not allowed to leave the nursing home to visit his wife's grave – he chooses to assert his sovereignty in the most radical manner imaginable: he starves himself to death while the children are having a bitter argument about what to do at his bedside. Thorup imagines them through his eyes:

Han så tydeligt deres kære ansigter. De var ikke børn længere, men grånende midaldrende, der snart skulle ældres som han. Han ønskede ikke for dem, at de skulle lide hans skæbne. Men hvis det alligevel skete på trods af videnskabens prognoser, der lovede evigt liv, så håbede han, at ingen af dem havde arvet hans ubøjelige sind, men kunne tilpasse sig alderdommens undtagelsestilstand. (175-176)

He saw their dear faces clearly. They were not children any longer, but graying middle-aged, who would soon age like him. He did not wish for them to suffer his fate. But if it were to happen anyhow, despite science's promises of eternal life, he hoped that none of them had inherited his unbendable mind, but could adjust to the state of emergency of old age. (My own translation<sup>1</sup>)

This state of emergency refers to the routine suspension of Carl's freedom and use of force to regulate the body of the old person in the

nursing home, where minding your own business can be experienced as impossible, despite all the best intentions and provisions of the welfare state.

Thorup may tell her story in a way that entails breaking the rules of the realist novel in order to give us privileged access to the mind and feelings of the victim of old age and its institutions. She experiments throughout her narrative by mixing first and third person perspectives and by blending various rhetorical registers and modes of writing. In chapter one she e.g. alternates between dialogue and third person point of view. The chapter opens *in media res* with the abrupt and rather absurdly sounding reported dialogue between Carl and a nurse that is worthy of Beckett, where we learn that Carl does not see things straight, has no command over language, and is subject to a violent regime he resists:

Jeg vil gå ud.

Du skal ikke ud. Du skal ind i seng.

Jeg vil ud og gå. Ud i solen.

Det er over midnat.

....

Kom med mig. Du kan ikke blive stående her.

Hvem er du?

Birgit. Nattevagten.

Lille pige, luk mig ud. Jeg skal hjem.

Lad mig nu få frakken.

Mær, luder.

Sørensen dog. Sådan en pæn mand.

Det her er ikke et pænt sted.

Du kan lige så godt vænne dig til det.

Her lugter af bordel.

Du har aldrig været på bordel.

Jeg passede en besætning på 175 malkekøer.

Nu mister jeg snart tålmodigheden med dig.

De skal ikke sige du til mig.

Kom Sørensen. Så går vi ind i seng.

Nej, ikke den vej. Udgangen er derhenne.

Du får mig snart til at græde.  
Ikke græde. Det har jeg ikke tid til. Det er allerede for sent at lægge kartofler.  
Jeg bliver nødt til at kalde lægen.  
Jeg fejler ikke noget.  
Han kan give dig noget beroligende at sove på.  
Vær venlig at ringe efter en taxa til Søndergade 10.  
Nu kommer du med.  
Av, det gør ondt. Møgkælling.  
Det ligner ikke dig at bruge sådan et sprog. (11-12)

I want to go out.  
You're not going out. You have to go to bed.  
I want to go out and walk. Out in the sun.  
It's past midnight.  
....  
Come with me. You can't remain here.  
Who are you?  
Birgit. The night watch.  
Little girl, let me out. I have to go home.  
Let me have the coat.  
Bitch, hooker.  
Dear me, Sørensen. Such a nice man.  
This is not a nice place.  
You might as well get used to it.  
It smells like a brothel.  
You have never been to a brothel.  
I took care of 175 dairy cows.  
I am about to lose my patience with you.  
You [De] are not to say you [de] to me.  
Come on, Sørensen. Off we go to bed.  
No, not that way. The exit is over there.  
You are making me cry.  
Don't cry. I don't have the time. It's already too late to plant the potatoes.  
I have to call the doctor.

I'm not ill.

He can give you a sedative to put you to sleep.

Please call a taxi for Søndergade 10.

Now, you come along.

Ouch, that hurts. Bitch.

It's not like you to use such language.

After this opening and the hallucinatory dream of being rescued by the adult angelic daughter, Ellen, who turns out to be no angel after all, but all too human like the rest of the novel's cast, the chapter closes as it fades into a third person narrative that gives us Carl's stream of consciousness in the form of a series of verbal images of how he was found like a vegetable sitting immobile in a chair having wet himself and in addition is losing his memory. In the closing sentences we see images of a landscape that is beloved and familiar, but which 'ikke fik nogen klokke til at ringe' (19) ('no longer rings any bells') for Carl: we know what he no longer remembers and we sense with pain that he knows there is something he has forgotten. In contrast with this reported dialogue and third person inner vision, two early chapters are narrated by Carl in the first person, where he sentimentally and melodramatically recalls his childhood, but where we are also shown that life was hard when the generations more often lived together under the same roof before the modern nursing home (47). Carl's first person chapters are fluent narrations, but they are impossible: we know that Carl really has no fluent speech, he suffers from aphasia and struggles to find the right words and ends up swearing. Yet after the first chapter's various perspectives on Carl from the outside, these first person narratives with interior focalization restore Carl to us as a full human being with whom we can sympathize. This is also the effect of the chapters narrated in third person, which are variously focalized on Carl and Ellen (which fade into stream of consciousness) or given in a weird prophetic/mythic narrative mode, in certain places close to allegory, but gripping and effective in their desperation (see e.g. the chapter 'Flygtningen', 'The Refugee', 90-94). One of the most significant characters in the novel, Carl's adult son Ulf, who took care of his father but also placed him in the nursing home when he

had to go to Thailand with his family, is never given such an inner life in the form of either first person narrative or direct access to his mind through free indirect discourse, making it more easy to have no sympathy for him and his dreadful wife, Lilian, who are never allowed for instance to reveal any bad conscience or mixed emotions. Through this experimental mix, Thorup both approximates the experience of what it may mean to be very old and to be treated like a thing, *and* to be a more or less concerned bystander.

Petterson's story bespeaks our dreams of maintaining relative autonomy into old age and he enacts this through the intimate first person perspective by means of which the aged person clarifies and completes himself by taking control of his lived life and now achieved identity (for the time being at least). Thorup's story feeds our nightmare of the impossibility of maintaining this control beyond a given point in life and she enacts this experience through a mix of perspectives by which the old subject is split into both subject and object. To not be able to decide for ourselves is what we fear most of all when asked about 'the good life' in old age, yet it is something we might perhaps get used to insofar as it has become, for the first time in human history, 'normal' to expect to grow old and gradually lose control. What may be important in terms of perceived well-being, the two novels suggest, is on the one hand for the aged person to realize and accept that he or she is and will increasingly become dependent on others, as seems to happen in Petterson's novel. On the other hand, it is equally important for family members to communicate with the aged person about this and not seemingly at random put him or her into institutionalized storage overnight, as happens in Thorup's novel. Yet, the *unlikeliness* of this, that is to say, the extreme difficulty involved in the matter, is finally what the novels are most interested in. From opposite sides of the wide spectrum that encompasses 'old age' and from within different novelistic traditions these texts open our imaginations to some of the challenges and dilemmas of the long life in and out of the welfare state even as they do not resolve them to provide easy solutions to complex issues. They both show the importance of inter-generational and inter-personal communication in old age: Thorup shows a failure to communicate between and within the generations and a victory of

the self against its imprisonment in the nursing home, yet a victory defined by suicide and achieved through hunger strike which no one in Carl's nearness recognizes as courageous. Petterson shows a victory of friendship and family over Trond's self-imposed regime of solitude, but this victory is a mute underplayed one which we cannot be certain Trond either embraces or even really recognizes. Yet its tentatively pronounced nature makes it all the more convincing and meaningful; just as Carl's unheard narratives, his silenced voice, as told and given voice by Thorup, makes it all the more audible.

The novels illustrate the conditions under which a person may either achieve a certain new meaningfulness in life – a better if not a good life – after retirement without interference from the welfare state (as illustrated in Petterson's novel), or experience the last period of his/her life as a torturous nightmare both despite and because of the best and most compassionate welfare state intentions and institutions (as represented in Thorup's novel). From this perspective the novels may make one wonder what the point of the welfare state is; yet, surely it was never the role of literature to blatantly support welfare state ideology and describe the degree of happiness and kind of well-being produced by the state, in a sense literature is somehow more interested in the exceptions and the problems (Klausen 2010). As we know from Tolstoy, the happy families are alike and uninteresting (if they exist) while the unhappy families are unhappy in a unique manner that claims our attention – the generalization that Thorup's violent and dehumanizing nursing home *is* the welfare state is certainly not made by the novel, nor does Petterson's novel say we should all go and live in the woods and make do without the old age provisions of the state. They may show us what we have, what we need and who we are by showing us extreme exceptions to what we are not and do not need but might either wish or fear to become and to have. My point in raising the fundamental question of the very purpose of the welfare state in the light of these fictions and letting it close the reading is in other words not political, but moral. I have suggested that we broaden what Martha Nussbaum calls our 'moral imagination' and learn and experience new and important things about old age – our own and that of others – when we confront it by inhabiting fictional, novelistic

worlds: by stepping into the shoes of a 67-year-old Norwegian, who is suddenly finding out who he may really be, realizing himself as it were, or into the, well-worn leather slippers no doubt, of a 94-year-old Dane, who is losing himself in the end. What to do with this empathetic experience is up to the individual reader to determine, not the novel, not the critic.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Note that the translations into English from Thorup's *Ingenmandsland* are all my own.

## References

Andersen, C. (2005): 'Når nordmænd går I kloster – interview med Per Petterson', in: *Politiken* 10/5.

Blanchflower, D. G. and J. O. Andrew (2008): 'Is Well-Being U-Shaped over the Life-Cycle?', in: *Social Science & Medicine* 66, 1733-1749.

Bond, J. and Lynne C. (2006): 'The Future of Well-being: Quality of Life of Older people in the Twenty-first Century', in: J. A. Vincent, C. R. Phillipson and M. Downs (eds.), *The Futures of Old Age*. London: Sage, 154-160.

Bonsang, E. and A. van Soest (2011): 'Satisfaction with Social Contacts of Older Europeans', in: *Social Indicators Research* (15 June 2011): first published online, open access.

Christiansen, N. F., K. Petersen, N. Edling and P. Haave (eds.) (2006): *The Nordic Model: A Historical Reappraisal*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.

Dutt, A. K. and B. Radcliff (eds.) (2009): *Happiness, Economics and Politics: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Easterlin, R. A. (2003): 'Explaining Happiness', in: *PNAS* 100:19 (16 September 2003), 11176-11183.

- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990): *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
- Greve, B. (2010): *Et lykkeligt land? Hvad skal der til og kan velfærdssamfundet bidrage?* Frederiksberg: Nyt fra samfundsvidenskaberne.
- Greve, B. (ed.) (2010): *Happiness and Social Policy in Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Hansen, N. G. (ed.) (2010): *Velfærdsfortællinger: Om dansk litteratur i velfærdsstatens tid*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Huppert, F. A., N. Baylis and B. Keverne (eds.) (2007): *The Science of Well-Being*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Keen, S. (2007): *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Klausen, S. H. (2010): 'Hyggeligt, men lavt til loftet, eller er det plat at have det godt?: Litterære og fænomenologiske udforskninger af velfærdsidealet', in: N. G. Hansen (ed.), *Velfærdsfortællinger: Om dansk litteratur i velfærdsstatens tid*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 171-190.
- Layard, R. (2005): *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*. London: Penguin.
- Leeson, G. W. (2008): *Fremtidens ældre i Danmark: Resultaterne fra HSBC's Global Survey Future of Retirement*. Ældre Sagen.
- Lupien, S. J. and N. Wan (2007): 'Successful ageing: from cell to self', in: Huppert, Felicia A., Nick Baylis and Barry Keverne (eds.), *The Science of Well-Being*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 75-103.
- Nielsen, M. K. (2006): *Et godt liv som gammel (A Good Life as Aged)*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag.
- Nussbaum, M. (1995): *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Pacek, A. and B. Radcliff (2008): 'Assessing the Welfare State: The Politics of Happiness', in: *Perspectives on Politics* 6: 2 (June 2008), 267-277.
- Pacek, A. and B. Radcliff (2008): 'Welfare Policy and Subjective

Well-Being Across Nations: An Individual-Level Assessment', *Social Indicators Research* 89, 179-191.

Petterson, P. (2003): *Ut og stjæle hester*. Oslo: Forlaget Oktober.

Petterson, P. (2005): *Out Stealing Horses*. Translated by Anne Born. London: Vintage Books.

Ridge, C., T. Rice and M. Cherry (2009): 'The causal link between happiness and democratic welfare regimes', in: A. K. Dutt and B. Radcliff (eds.), *Happiness, Economics and Politics: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 271-284.

Rostgaard, T. (2004): *Dagpasning, skole og ældrepleje: Velfærdsyndelser i fire europæiske hovedstæder*. Copenhagen: Social Forsknings Institutet.

Rothstein, B. (2010): 'Happiness and the Welfare State', *Social Research* 77:2 (Summer 2010), 441-468.

Stone, A. A. et. al. (2010): 'A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States', *PNAS* vol. 107, no. 22 (1 June 2010), 9985-9990.

Szebehely, M. (ed.) (2005): *Äldreomsorgsforskning i Norden: En kunskapsöversikt*. Copenhagen: Nordiska ministerrådet.

Thorup, K. (2003): *Ingenmandsland*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

Vincent, J. A., C. R. Phillipson and M. Downs (eds.) (2006): *The Futures of Old Age*. London: Sage.