Taking Young Audiences Offshore: Petroleum Extraction in Norwegian Children's Literature[1]

Reinhard Hennig
University of Agder, Norway
reinhard.hennig@uia.no

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.1.5785

Abstract

Norway is a major exporter of oil and natural gas, and the fossil fuel industry constitutes the country's most important economic sector. Since all of Norway's petroleum production is located offshore in the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea, and the Barents Sea, it is unobservable from land. This invisibility and inaccessibility make it hard for children to picture and comprehend what this form of extraction involves. Authors of Norwegian children's literature have repeatedly tried to alleviate this imaginative deficit by conveying a child-oriented portrayal of working offshore in the oil and gas industry. This article applies a petroculture studies framework to the analysis of four such children's books, published between 1986 and 2013. The fictional stories in these books tend to present oil platforms as utopian places that offer pleasant and exciting experiences, but remain silent about the environmental and climatic risks connected to this industry, and the possible depletion of the nonrenewable resources oil and gas. While the oldest of the studied examples is most nuanced in its portrayal of offshore work, the newer books are considerably more ideologically one-sided, and two of them even aim to recruit children as future oil workers. The overtly didactic characteristics of these books have caused them to be disregarded in earlier research, though these same qualities have made them appealing for use in educational contexts. This indicates a need to enable educators to critically reflect on how works of fiction and nonfiction that are presented to them as benevolent, didactical tools may serve to normalize an unsustainable petroculture.

Keywords: Children's literature, Norway, oil, offshore, petroculture.

Resumen

Noruega es uno de los principales exportadores de petróleo y gas natural, y la industria del combustible fósil constituye el sector económico más importante del país. Dado que toda la producción de petróleo de Noruega está localizada lejos de la costa en el Mar del Norte, el Mar de Noruega, y el Mar de Barents, esta no se puede ser observar desde tierra. Esta invisibilidad e inaccesibilidad complica que niños y niñas imaginen y comprendan lo que supone esta forma de extracción. Los autores de literatura infantil noruega llevan tiempo intentando contrarrestar este déficit imaginativo ofreciendo una representación del trabajo en la industria del petróleo y el gas en el mar orientada al lector infantil. Este artículo aplica el marco de los estudios de petrocultura al análisis de cuatro de esas obras de literatura infantil, publicadas entre 1968 y 2013. Estas historias ficticias tienden a representar las plataformas petrolíferas como lugares utópicos que ofrecen experiencias gratas y excitantes, a la vez que se abstienen de hacer referencia a los riesgos ambientales y climáticos asociados a esta industria, así como al posible agotamiento de las fuentes no renovales de petróleo y gas. Mientras que la obra más antigua del corpus estudiado muestra la representación más compleja del trabajo en el mar, las más recientes son considerablemente más tendenciosas, y dos de ellas incluso intentan reclutar a los/as niños/as como futuros trabajadores de la industria petrolera. Como obras manifiestamente didácticas, estos libros han sido ignorados por la crítica académica, mientras que, precisamente por su carácter

[1] This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway (grant number 335373).

didáctico, han resultado atractivos en contextos educativos. Esto muestra la necesidad de posibilitar a las y los educadores una reflexión crítica acerca de cómo obras de ficción y no ficción que se les muestran como herramientas didácticas y benévolas pueden servir para normalizar una petrocultura insostenible.

Palabras clave: literatura infantil; Noruega, petróleo, deslocalizar, petrocultura

"My favorite book was *Oljeboka*,"[2] Norwegian journalist Helene Skjeggestad writes about her childhood in Rogaland, where the Norwegian oil industry has its headquarters (26). When it was published in 1985, *Oljeboka* (literally "the oil book") by writer Magnar Johnsgaard and illustrator Anders F. Kaardahl, was the first Norwegian children's book to address offshore work in the oil industry. At the time, it fulfilled a felt need to enable young audiences in Norway to picture this then relatively young industry.

Oil and gas extraction on the Norwegian continental shelf started in 1969 in the Ekofisk field in the North Sea and has expanded considerably since. Today, Norway, despite having a population of only a little more than 5.5 million, is the world's twelfth largest exporter of oil and the eighth largest exporter of natural gas (SEI et al. 68). All of Norway's oil production takes place offshore in the North Sea, the Norwegian Sea, and the Barents Sea, which basically makes it unobservable from land. This invisibility and inaccessibility have implications for Norwegian children. While they are likely to learn about the great importance of oil for the Norwegian economy and society at school and in informal educational settings, they have no possibility of experiencing the places where oil and gas are extracted. Children whose parents work offshore are unable to visit their parents' workplace, which makes it challenging for them to imagine what the adults are doing during their absence from home.

Authors of Norwegian children's literature have repeatedly tried to alleviate this imaginative deficit rising from the oil industry's physical elusiveness by providing a child-oriented portrayal of offshore work. While some of the resulting works of literature are presented as nonfiction, there are also examples of fictional narratives that try to help young audiences to understand and imagine the offshore production of oil and gas. In this article, I analyze and discuss four such books that were published between 1985 and 2013. The earliest of these is the abovementioned *Oljeboka*, followed by Kurt Rutledal's *Alfred Offshore* (2010), and finally, two books published in 2013, Anne Solsvik Aase and Øyvind Storm's *Pappa jobber på plattform* (Dad works on a platform) and Siv Merete Vervik Stousland and Stefan Carlhoff's *Mamma jobber på plattform* (Mom works on a platform). They are all overtly didactic works that have been disregarded in earlier research, although the same qualities that render them uninteresting to researchers have made them appealing for use in educational contexts. I argue that such works should be taken seriously, if not primarily for

[2] "Min favorittbok var oljeboka." All translations from Norwegian in this article are my own.

aesthetic reasons, then for their didactic role and potential influence on the minds of their audiences.

While the Norwegian oil industry often is considered the main source of the country's prosperity, it has also been contested for different reasons over time. Its inherent unsustainability due to the depletion of the nonrenewable resources oil and gas, as well as insufficient worker safety and the risk of marine pollution, formed the basis of much critique early on. In recent decades the need to phase out the use of oil and gas to mitigate climate change and to diminish plastic pollution has been at the forefront of criticism of the industry.[3] Seen from this latter perspective, the oil and gas industry constitutes a major threat to the future of those who are young today. The controversial character of Norway's largest industrial sector and the use of the aforementioned children's books in both formal and informal educational settings make it relevant to ask what image of this industry such literature conveys to its audiences.

Petroculture Studies and Children's Literature

The first to explicitly address the relation between oil and literature was writer Amitav Ghosh in a combined essay and book review titled "Petrofiction" from 1992. Ghosh not only coined the term *petrofiction* for works that deal with oil extraction but also claimed that what he calls "the Oil Encounter [...] has produced scarcely a single work of note" in literature (29). In research, petroculture studies, focusing on the relationship between oil, literature, and culture more generally, only emerged as a distinct area of inquiry during the past 15 years. It is often considered part of the larger, interdisciplinary field of the energy humanities. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden define petroculture (or "oil culture") broadly as "a dynamic field of representations and symbolic practices that have infused, affirmed, and sustained the material armatures of the oil economy *and* helped to produce the particular modes of everyday life that have developed around oil use" (Barrett and Worden xxiv; emphasis in original). They put weight on culture's, including literature's, role in "refiguring petroconsumption as a self-evidently natural and unassailable category of modern existence, and forestalling critical reconsiderations of oil's social and ecological costs" (xxv).

In the study of literary fiction, Graeme MacDonald adopts Ghosh's term petrofiction and defines it as "exuberant (and damning) extraction narratives, local and transnational stories of oil's development and its dramatic transformation of space, place and lifestyle" (Macdonald 12). Research by MacDonald and other scholars in petroculture studies has shown that the "Oil Encounter" is present in considerably more works of literary fiction than what Ghosh assumed in his aforementioned essay. However, most of this research has been limited to works intended for adult readers, whereas children's literature and culture have only exceptionally been studied as an

[3] For an overview, see Mork.

expression of petroculture. Of several major anthologies published within the field in recent years (e.g. Barrett and Worden; Szeman and Boyer), only one contains a chapter on children's culture, authored by Michael Malouf, who analyses several Pixar films as a form of "informal education that naturalizes the presence and significance of petroleum-based products for children in petrocultural societies" (Malouf 138). The most prominent monograph in the field so far, Stefanie LeMenager's *Living Oil*, focuses on adult literature and culture and only briefly mentions one work of children's literature (56). Even Heidi C. M. Scott's book-length ecocritical history of fuel derives only a very few examples from children's literature, and none of these are related to oil or gas.

No previous research exists on the four books that are the subject of this article. While differing considerably in their aesthetics, what these works have in common is that they attempt to alleviate the often remarked-on invisibility and inaccessibility of oil infrastructure through unfolding their narration around one central place: the offshore oil platform. The questions I will address in my analysis are therefore the following: How do these works attempt to convey a child-oriented portrayal of offshore platforms to their intended audiences? As what kind of place do such platforms appear in them? And, considering the controversial character of oil and gas extraction, to what extent do they normalize, legitimize, or question its past, present, and future?

Magnar Johnsgaard and Anders F. Kaardahl: *Oljeboka. Gutten som klatret til havets bunn*

Oljeboka (1985) was published by Gyldendal, one of the major Norwegian publishing houses, simultaneously in a Norwegian and an English version. The latter version was advertised in bilingual periodicals such as *Norsk Oljerevy – Norwegian Oil Review*, probably with the intention of reaching out to an international readership connected to the oil industry in Norwegian waters. The English title, *Children's Offshore Book*—unlike the Norwegian one—makes explicit reference to the book's intended audience, while its subtitle, *The Boy Who Climbed to the Bottom of the Sea*, is a direct translation from the Norwegian. I will in the following refer to the book's English version, since it is largely identical with the Norwegian version regarding both verbal text and illustrations.

Oljeboka consists of two major parts: the fictional story "The Boy who Climbed to the Bottom of the Sea," which comprises roughly the first two-thirds of the book, and a shorter, nonfiction section titled "Platforms: Oil & Gas at Sea." Both are illustrated by Kaardahl in the same style. The first part tells the story of a seven-year-old boy named Simon Solberg, whose father works offshore on the platform Petro 2. Simon has a strong desire to visit and see this place himself and refuses to accept that only adults are allowed to be there. One night, after Simon's father has departed for another two-week shift on Petro 2, a "platform doctor" named Adrian Swift appears in Simon's bedroom telling him that the platform is sick and that he needs Simon's

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

help to find a cure. Together with Swift, Simon immediately travels out to the platform by helicopter. Once there, he gets to see the different parts of the platform and meet and interact with a variety of the people who work there, before the cause of the contagion is found and Simon returns home. The book's second part, the nonfiction section, addresses numerous topics: how oil and gas emerged geologically; drilling permissions on the Norwegian continental shelf; the construction and structure of platforms; the drilling process; different jobs on platforms; safety equipment; possible accidents; pipelines; and products made from oil and gas. The book's first part has illustrations on every spread. However, most of these are relatively small, with only a few of them covering an entire page, while the verbal text takes up most space. This ratio is reversed in the second part, where pictures cover most of the space, while the verbal text only fills a rather small space on the bottom of every page.

Oljeboka solves the narrative challenge of conveying knowledge about offshore platforms to an audience who is prevented from visiting such places by telling the story of a journey with—in part—dream-like characteristics. That Simon is picked up in his bedroom at night by a "doctor" wearing something that resembles a space suit indicates that this is a dream, as do other nonrealistic elements of the narrative, such as the animation of platforms as living beings who can get sick. However, what is crucial is that the journey—whether it is to be understood as real or dreamed—makes it possible for Simon to experience platform work and life in a direct, unmediated way.

In accordance with this, the verbal text narrates the story about Simon in the third person, but mostly focalized through the main character, reflecting his perception, state of knowledge, and bodily experiences. Another way in which a child's perspective is applied in the verbal text and—at times—the illustrations is the use of clarifying metaphors, such as when Swift explains to Simon that wellheads "swallow crude oil from their drinking straws" (35), thus making the function of sucker rods comprehensible for Simon by linking them to something he knows from everyday life.

There can be no doubt that in the beginning of the story, the platform appears to Simon as an object of desire, as an almost utopian place that he is eager to see and experience. When the helicopter approaches the oil field, Simon sees "the sloping flare booms, and thought of fire-breathing dragons. That filled him with thrills" (21). He thus experiences his journey as an exciting adventure. The narration recounts not only what Simon sees on the platform, but also a variety of experiences that involve other senses and indeed his entire body. In the mess, Simon is overwhelmed by all the—from a child's perspective—highly attractive food he can freely choose from, and ends up eating pancakes, sausages, and "seven different sweets" (25). Later, Simon is amazed when he gets to see the "video room, where they could watch as many videos as they wanted and play 20 different video games," as well as the recreation room, which "was as nice as a sitting room and a lot bigger" (37) and equipped with a huge variety of books and games.

However, despite such pleasant experiences, the platform does not appear as a pure children's utopia, but also as a dangerous place. While Simon at first is annoyed

 ISSN 2171-9594

when he learns that climbing and running are prohibited, he learns from the safety officer about the dangers of not heeding safety rules: for example, freezing to death when one falls into the cold sea. Simon's idealized view of the platform is further tarnished once he has to explore it on his own, in search of Swift. He experiences how, at close quarters, the flare boom loses its dragon-like look, even though "[h]uge flames and black smoke poured out at the end" (31), giving it a more frightening appearance. Simon soon gets disoriented and becomes increasingly anxious when he enters a room with loud compressors and then another one "full of steam and terribly hot" such that he "could hardly breathe in there" (32). The next room, which according to a sign is a toxic area, conveys a truly claustrophobic experience to him: "He wanted to get out. But he found no more doors" (33). Utopia here turns into dystopia, until Simon finally escapes from this room and meets a worker who helps him find Swift.

When asked by his father, whom he encounters on the platform, whether he thinks platforms are suitable "places for kids" (37), Simon seems unsure, pondering both his positive and negative experiences. Simon thus undergoes a certain development that adds nuance to and reduces his initial enthusiasm about platforms. At the end of his day on Petro 2, the adventurous and utopian view comes to dominate again, when Simon looks out over the oil field: "In the distance a drilling rig sparkled like a waterborne Christmas tree. It was a strange world. During the day platforms were muddy and rusty iron dragons standing in the sea. At night they became illuminated castles standing in a world of fairy tales" (46). This refers to the Norwegian term *oljeeventyr* ("oil adventure" or "oil fairy tale"), which from early on has been used as a metaphor for the offshore exploration of oil and gas, linking it to the highly popular genre of Norwegian folktales (Ruud 25).

While such allusions further underline that the story is told from a child's perspective, they can also be read as a way of legitimizing offshore oil extraction by associating it with boldness, magic, and the possibility of acquiring enormous riches, which are prominent elements in many of the most popular Norwegian folktales. However, as already indicated above, the view of oil extraction as an adventure is destabilized several times in *Oljeboka*. The clearest instance of disenchantment occurs at what one would assume to be the story's climax—the "journey to the bottom of the sea," when Simon and Swift climb all the way down one of the platform's concrete shafts: "Simon felt deeply disappointed at the bottom of the sea. It was made of concrete!" (42). This anticlimax signals that working on an oil platform, unlike what Simon had expected, is not an exciting adventure. To be sure, Simon finds several of the platform jobs he learns about rather appealing. Having been allowed to try using the crane to lift a container, for example, Simon is keen to become a crane driver himself. However, when, at the end of his stay on the platform, the crane driver asks Simon when he will return to run the crane, Simon replies that he doesn't know and that he may become a veterinarian instead—to the crane driver's approval.

Regarding the question of whether *Oljeboka* normalizes and legitimizes offshore oil extraction, it is relevant to note that in the fictional story about Simon, oil itself does not figure prominently. It is only mentioned in the verbal text and never

 ISSN 2171-9594

depicted in the images. This is different in the book's nonfiction section, which depicts oil as a black substance several times. This section mentions the risk of oil spills, states that such spills "can do great damage to life in the ocean," and shows an image of a polluted beach with dead fish and seabirds (65). However, it leaves no doubt about the future of extracting oil and gas, emphasizing that "oil companies are constantly looking for more" (55). It also mentions many products made from oil and gas, without suggesting that these substances could (or should) be substituted with something else.

While anthropogenic climate change only emerged as a widespread concern toward the end of the 1980s and thus after the publication of *Oljeboka*, interestingly, the book does not indicate that oil and gas are nonrenewable resources that are likely to be depleted one day. To be sure, when Swift declares his diagnosis, the supervisors on the platform fear that "it would produce no more oil," that they "would lose their jobs," and that there "would be no more petrol for their cars" so they would have to walk or use horses instead (35). However, this vision of future depletion is framed as ridiculous, and not linked to an insight that the availability of fossil fuel resources is indeed limited. Furthermore, the imagined "disaster" (35) is successfully prevented when Simon and Swift manage to cure the platform. When read together, the fiction and nonfiction sections of *Oljeboka* thus do not idealize oil extraction but nevertheless normalize and legitimize its continuation into the future.

This may not be surprising, considering that according to its imprint page, the book was published "in cooperation with the Statfjord Group," which refers to the oil companies involved in extraction in the Statfjord field in the North Sea. What is more, in an interview, the author Johnsgaard explained that the publisher Gyldendal had cooperated with the state-owned oil company Statoil (now Equinor) on the book project, and that Statoil had ordered several thousand copies in advance of publication (Hæhre 27).

Its strong ties to the oil industry did not thwart the book's popularity. It received favorable reviews in many Norwegian newspapers, and reviewers tended to praise it for telling an exciting story about work in the oil industry and thus making offshore work imaginable and understandable for children (e.g. Jensson; Risvold). This benevolent reception seems to have created favorable conditions for the book's use in the educational sector as well. Starting in 1986 and lasting until 1998, *Oljeboka* was frequently included in teachers' instructional manuals that recommend works of children's literature for educational use in primary schools. These instructions pertain to different school subjects, such as *o-fag* (a former subject combining natural science, social subjects, and history), Norwegian, and religion. For example, a 1992 teachers' manual accompanying the fifth-grade Norwegian subject textbook *Sesam Sesam* recommends using *Oljeboka* in combination with brochures prepared by Statoil to teach about oil extraction (Elsness 60). The same recommendation is still included in a 1998 edition of this manual. It thus seems that *Oljeboka* has been very much present, both directly and indirectly, in Norwegian schools. This indicates that at least during the ten to fifteen years following its first publication, *Oljeboka* exerted

 ISSN 2171-9594

considerable influence in the educational sector. It can therefore be reasonably assumed that it has shaped many Norwegian children's perceptions and imagination of oil extraction and work in the oil industry.

Kurt Rutledal: *Alfred Offshore*

Despite its popularity, *Oljeboka* remained the only Norwegian children's book on oil extraction until 2010, when Kurt Rutledal's *Alfred Offshore* was published with the small regional publisher Selja from Western Norway. This book is similar in that it narrates a journey out to an oil field, but it takes a quite different aesthetic and narrative approach. The main character here is not a child, but a teddy bear named Alfred belonging to forms one to three at Bulandet school in Western Norway. Many classes at Norwegian primary schools have such toy animals that are taken home by one child after the other, and where a diary (often including photographs) is kept about what the toy has experienced when staying with these children. In *Alfred Offshore*, however, the class teddy bear does not follow a child, but travels with an adult man called "Kurten" to his workplace on the platform ship Åsgard A in the Norwegian Sea.

The 120-page book is presented as a travel diary covering a period from March seventeen to April third. The imprint page shows a picture of fifteen children from forms one to three, with a girl holding Alfred, who is wearing a red survival suit and safety glasses, and the caption states that this is before the children hand over Alfred to Kurten. At the end, Alfred returns to the classroom and the children draw pictures of the platform ship and of Alfred for the workers on Åsgard A.

The pages are filled with many photographs that document Alfred's journey to the platform and his stay there, accompanied by the narrator Kurten's description of what can be seen in the pictures. This gives the book in part the character of a photographic album, with snapshots from what Alfred experiences and observes on different days. In these ways, *Alfred Offshore* fulfills the genre expectations for the aforementioned class diaries.

The narrator is also the author of the book and is himself visible in several photographs. This use of photographs depicting real people and places conveys an impression of realism. However, the consistent anthropomorphizing of the teddy bear as the main character of the story justifies its treatment as fiction. Alfred is not only referred to as a real person by the narrator, but the various people working on the platform ship, who are visible in the photographs, also participate in this anthropomorphizing fiction by "interacting" with the teddy as if he was a human being. This is crucial for maintaining a child's perspective in the book: Alfred functions as a stand-in for the real children who cannot gain an unmediated experience of what is happening offshore.

Like *Oljeboka*, *Alfred Offshore* also has a clear didactic character, as it conveys knowledge about offshore work. The narrator explains not only what can be seen in the respective photographs but also provides information on technical details and

 ISSN 2171-9594

terminology. Alfred visits various parts of the platform ship, assists with different jobs there, learns about safety equipment and safety measures, and interacts with many of the employees. However, while Alfred's acquaintance with platform life and work bears considerable similarities to Simon's in *Oljeboka*, the massive use of photographs leaves less to the imagination than the—for the most part—small, painted illustrations in *Oljeboka*. Since Alfred is depicted in most of the photographs, the point of view here is not that of the child-substitute, but of the adult narrator who takes most of the pictures. Although Alfred sometimes serves as focalizer, with the narrator recounting his feelings, thoughts, and—at times—speech, most of the verbal text consists of the adult narrator's own observations and explanations. This creates a greater distance than in *Oljeboka*, where the verbal text almost consistently uses the child character as focalizer.

Another difference is that, whereas Simon occasionally experiences the platform as a dystopian place, this is never the case for Alfred or the narrator in *Alfred Offshore*. To be sure, potential dangers feature as motifs several times in the narration. For example, Kurt and Alfred participate in a course about "a scary substance called benzene that occurs in oil" (61) and learn about safety measures.[4] However, there is never a clear explanation of what the danger consists of and what could happen in the worst case. The emphasis is on the safety measures taken, conveying the impression of the platform as a safe place, even for child-substitutes such as Alfred.

The main focus is on Alfred's encounters with different parts of the platform and jobs there, some of which are potentially exciting from a child's perspective—driving a forklift, for example. Considerable space is also devoted to aspects and activities that are not directly related to work but rather to social life and recreation, with motifs including a recreation room with a TV in it, an outdoor Jacuzzi, a golf simulator, a fitness room, and a sauna, as well as playing minigolf with colleagues and eating ice cream cake, other cakes and sweet dishes, and candy. The overall impression conveyed in the book is one of the platform ship as a safe place, where one can discover and do interesting, fun things. It is also filled with nice people, who are all very friendly to the child-substitute Alfred. This lends the ship a utopian character.

What is remarkable for a heavily illustrated book about oil extraction is the invisibility of oil itself. While, during the time covered by the narration, several tank ships arrive and are filled with oil from the platform ship, oil as a substance is never visible in the photographs and thus only mentioned in the verbal text. One can see containers such as these tankers and the separator used to separate oil, gas, and water, but not the oil inside them. Oil and gas remain "contained," invisible, and thus rather abstract throughout the book: none of the many people depicted and described working on the platform appear to have any contact with these substances. Interestingly, the reason why all these people work on Åsgard A—namely, what the oil and gas are needed for—is not explained anywhere in the book.

[4] "eit skummelt stoff som heiter benzen og som finst i olje."

 ISSN 2171-9594

While *Oljeboka* ultimately leaves Simon unsure about whether he wants to work in the oil industry, Alfred's journey is explained in the book's preface as "a fine way of conveying knowledge to the pupils about future career choices. And not least to make them realize that it actually is possible to choose various career directions without having to move away from one's native district" (3).[5] The book is thus clearly future-oriented, with the recruitment of today's children as oil workers being framed as a benefit to the children and their home communities. While the story of Alfred's journey was originally only told to the children at Bulandet school, publishing it as a book means that it could potentially reach young audiences anywhere in Norway and influence their career choices. However, while the narrator historicizes the beginnings of extraction by explaining that Åsgard A was built elsewhere and brought to the location where it now produces oil and gas, he remains silent regarding the ship's future. Will Åsgard A stay there and produce oil and gas forever? Are these resources infinite? One would assume that these are relevant questions for the children to whom the book offers an offshore career.

Also, risks associated with the extraction and use of fossil fuels remain unmentioned in *Alfred Offshore*. To be sure, the gas flare is both depicted and explained in the verbal text, but unlike in *Oljeboka*, it is not lit and appears as a harmless, gray metal construction. The risk of marine pollution is never mentioned, and the same applies to anthropogenic climate change. While the absence of climate change is not surprising in the case of *Oljeboka*, *Alfred Offshore* was published shortly after the Copenhagen Summit (the United Nations Climate Change Conference) in 2009, at a time of increased concern about the risks involved in the further use of fossil fuels. The impression conveyed in *Alfred Offshore* is thus that working offshore is a safe career choice with no drawbacks, moral dilemmas, or future risks involved. The ambivalence present in *Oljeboka* is absent in *Alfred Offshore*, which clearly normalizes and legitimizes offshore extraction of oil and gas and even constitutes an attempt to recruit future oil workers. While *Alfred Offshore* did not receive the same media attention as *Oljeboka*, it soon developed into one of the publisher's bestsellers, with the first 3,000 copies sold out in a relatively short period of time and new editions printed in 2012 (Stadheim) and in 2024.

Anne Solsvik Aase and Øyvind Storm: *Pappa jobber på plattform*

In 2013, only three years after the publication of *Alfred Offshore*, the picturebooks *Pappa jobber på plattform* and *Mamma jobber på plattform* were published simultaneously, both through the authors' respective self-publishing companies. Although the books were released concurrently, had similar titles, were around the same length, and displayed parallels in narrative structure, the two authors did not collaborate.

[5] "ein kjekk måte å gje elevane kunnskap om framtidig yrkesval på. Og ikkje minst å gjere dei medvitne om at det faktisk går an å velje forskjellige yrkesretningar utan å måtte flytte frå heimbygda."

In *Pappa jobber på plattform*, a three-year old boy named Ulrik functions as first-person narrator. He presents his family to the reader and explains that his father works on an offshore platform and therefore is often away from home. Ulrik then describes how his father gets out to the platform by helicopter, how the platform is structured, what platform life is like—including sleeping, eating, working, and safety measures—and some of the different types of jobs there. In the last part of the book, Ulrik recounts that his father sometimes calls on the phone to have conversations with his son, how he comes home after a shift offshore, and that he then has time to be together with Ulrik.

This is a short picturebook, with the story spanning only over twelve double-spreads. There is little verbal text, while the images take up most of the space on each page. This aligns with the needs of the book's main target audience, assuming that this consists of children around the same age as Ulrik. The images, although mainly illustrating what is said in the verbal text in a symmetrical way, therefore become quite important, given the small amount of information contained in the verbal text.

The fact that the child serves as first-person narrator creates other narrative possibilities and restrictions compared to *Oljeboka* and *Alfred Offshore*. The most striking difference is that Ulrik cannot travel to the platform himself and only describes what his father experiences there. This makes the father, rather than Ulrik himself, the main character of the story. It also creates a narrative paradox, for how can Ulrik recount details of offshore work and life without having been "out there"? The logical answer would be that Ulrik's father has told Ulrik all of this before Ulrik's own narration sets in, and that Ulrik only recounts this information rather than narrating based on personal experience. The use of a child narrator seems to be meant to make the content more palatable for a young audience and to encourage greater identification than if the narrator had been an adult or remained unspecified.

While the verbal text consists of little more than fairly general statements, the pictures provide an impression of the platform's atmosphere and the surrounding maritime environment. The images mostly use warm colors, conveying a notion of the platform as a safe and even homey place. There are no traces of pollution, not even on a picture showing the platform's lit gas flare. Notably, all humans are depicted smiling and appear to be content with the different tasks they carry out on the platform. The verbal text mentions that the father must wear safety equipment but specifies no reason for this. Potential hazards remain unnamed in the verbal text and are not depicted in the pictures either. Like in *Alfred Offshore*, oil is mentioned several times in the verbal text but not depicted visually in any way. The overall impression conveyed is thus one of the platform as a utopian place, with the only problematic aspect being the father's absence from his family. While the book's primary focus is on conveying knowledge about offshore work, making it imaginable for a child, it puts almost as strong an emphasis on the emotional bond between the child narrator and his father, stressing how difficult it is for Ulrik to be separated from his father and how glad he is when he returns home.

 ISSN 2171-9594

However, the child's longing does not involve questioning the father's occupation, which in the beginning of the narration is established as a simple matter of fact: this is just how things are, and Ulrik has to accept and cope with his father's periodic absence. However, it is indicated that Ulrik may have asked his father to stay home rather than travel out to the platform. This is hinted at in Ulrik's recounting of his father's arguments for why oil extraction is necessary: "Dad says he must drill for oil in the North Sea so that we can have fuel. We need that for driving cars, boats, and airplanes" (no pagination).[6] This statement clearly serves to normalize and legitimize oil extraction, which appears as an activity that will continue for an indefinite period. It aligns with the fact that, just like in *Alfred Offshore*, the possible depletion of nonrenewable resources, as well as risks related to pollution and climate change, are absent in both the verbal text and the images.

Pappa jobber på plattform did not receive much media attention upon its publication but seems to have been noticed in the offshore industry itself, and municipalities assisted Aase in promoting it to kindergartens (Økland). According to a post on Aase's Facebook page for the book, it had sold over 7,000 copies as of March 2024 (Aase).

Siv Merete Vervik Stousland and Stefan Carlhoff: *Mamma jobber på plattform*

Mamma jobber på plattform follows a similar narrative trajectory by using a boy (who is likely five years old) as a first-person narrator who describes a parent's work life offshore, in this case, a mother who works as a nurse. However, this likewise short book is aesthetically somewhat more complex, as the images are considerably more detailed and convey many aspects that are not present in the verbal text—for example, through depicting humans in comical ways.

Providing information about working on an oil platform in a way that makes it imaginable for a young audience is central also to the story told in this book. The child narrator thus repeatedly uses metaphors and similes to facilitate understanding. For example, he compares his mother's room on the platform to a small hotel room, states that the platform is "much higher than the castle where the king lives" and that drilling for oil and gas is "almost like a treasure hunt" (no pagination).[7] Like in *Oljeboka*, the latter examples serve to arouse associations with Norwegian folktales, thus framing offshore drilling as an adventurous and rewarding activity.

However, whereas Simon in *Oljeboka* oscillates between a utopian-adventurous and a dystopian perception of the platform, the narration in *Mamma jobber på plattform* frames it one-sidedly as a utopian place. Many of the motives named or depicted in this book are, for example, apt to make working on a platform attractive from a child's perspective: there are many good friends there whom mom loves to be together with, and she has a TV in her room, which is described as cozy

[6] "Pappa sier han må bore etter olje i Nordsjøen, slik at vi kan få bensin. Det trenger vi for å kjøre bil, båt og fly."
[7] "mye høyere enn slottet hvor kongen bor." "Nesten som en skattejakt."

and with a great view overlooking other platforms. Similarly to *Oljeboka* and *Alfred Offshore*, the book highlights the good food available on the platform, emphasizing especially that one can eat as much ice cream as one wants, "entirely for free" (no pagination).[8] It also plays to children's fascination with animals, when the mother is quoted describing how she saw a huge whale close to the platform. While safety measures are mentioned in the story's beginning, the platform appears tidy and cozy, at times even idyllic. The only potentially problematic aspect of platform life mentioned is the risk of storms—which, however, do not appear as a danger to the platform and the humans on it, but rather a minor inconvenience that can be fixed with pills against seasickness.

The absence of risks to the marine environment or the climate in the text aligns with this idealizing imagery. The only pollution visible in the images is some thin smoke from the gas flare. In this book, too, oil is mentioned in the verbal text but not depicted visually—with one small exception, where in the corner of the pictures on one page, someone seems to be standing in a laboratory, taking a close look at some dark fluid in a glass container.

What oil and gas are used for, and thus the purpose of their extraction, is not explained or shown. However, on the second page, the narrator already states that when he grows up, he also wants to work offshore, and he is depicted drawing pictures of oil platforms. Some of the later spreads outline the requirements for working offshore, like being at least 18 years old, being physically healthy, and participating in safety training. In this way, *Mamma jobber på plattform* appears to be geared toward the recruitment of future offshore workers. This might explain why the book avoids mentioning in any way the risk of the depletion of oil and gas or the potential phasing out of the industry due to climate concerns. Like in *Alfred Offshore*, working offshore appears to be a safe and desirable career choice with no drawbacks or dilemmas involved.

Like *Pappa jobber på plattform*, this book did not receive much media attention, except for a few newspaper interviews with the author of the verbal text. However, it was ordered by the Norwegian Petroleum Museum, probably to be sold in its museum shop (Økland). Only one year after its first publication, a new edition was printed, which was commissioned by the Norwegian drilling contractor COSL Drilling Europe as a Christmas present likely intended for its employees and customers.

Conclusion

The four books differ considerably in the verbal and visual approaches they use to convey a child-oriented portrayal of offshore work. *Oljeboka* and *Alfred Offshore* narrate journeys that take a child or child-substitute out to a platform, whereas *Pappa jobber på plattform* and *Mamma jobber på plattform* utilize child narrators who stay on land and instead recount their parents' stories.

[8] "helt gratis."

 ISSN 2171-9594

What all books have in common is that the platform in them appears as a utopian place—a "petrotopia" in LeMenager's terms (74). Only in *Oljeboka*, nuance is added to this idealizing view through the scary experiences that the main character also has on the platform, which seem to make him hesitant about whether he wants to work there as an adult. This ambivalence is absent from the three more recent books, where offshore work is consistently portrayed as great and desirable.

Remarkably, oil is largely absent from the images in all four books, except for *Oljeboka*'s nonfiction section. It seems that oil can only be depicted in the form of the containers that hold it, as when it is uncontained, it is associated with pollution, the risk of which does not feature in any of the fictional stories. Even more striking is that neither the four fictional narratives nor *Oljeboka*'s nonfiction section indicate in any way the limited availability of the nonrenewable resources oil and gas. According to MacDonald, "[p]etroleum culture is consistently haunted by its eventual depletion," and "depletion anxiety" has been very much present in petrofiction since the 1960s (13). Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson note that this anxiety has become especially associated with oil platforms, as "existing sea-based rigs are rapidly becoming defunct," which turns them into a "metonymic marker" for "the transient nature of oil and gas exploration" (254). Considering that the fictional stories of all four books center around oil platforms, their lack of any signs of "depletion anxiety" (or, as in *Oljeboka*, the ridiculing of such anxiety), appears as an implicit denial of the oil industry's uncertain future prospects.

This denial is particularly striking in the case of *Alfred Offshore* and *Mamma jobber på plattform*, which openly target the recruitment of children as future offshore workers. At the time these books were published, it was already well known that fossil fuels, while being nonrenewable, are available in such great amounts that, if all of them were burned, this would lead to catastrophic climate change. This means that, if such climate change is to be avoided or at least mitigated, most remaining reserves must remain unused. Thus far, Norway has "no official strategy for winding down oil and gas production" (SEI et al. 69), but if the connection between fossil fuels and climate change were to be taken seriously in Norwegian politics one day, it would probably involve the end of the offshore industry even long before the depletion of extractable oil and gas reserves. However, these books avoid any indication of the climate problem and of the resulting insecurity in the career choices that they present to their young audiences.

As my analysis has shown, the four books not only do not question oil and gas extraction but instead normalize and legitimize it. They thus appear as products of a petroculture that, as Barret and Worden put it, prevents "critical reconsiderations of oil's social and ecological costs" (xxv). However, it is interesting to note that *Oljeboka*, as the oldest work, allows for some ambivalence and, when the fictional story and the nonfiction section are read in connection, presents a relatively nuanced perspective that also includes consideration of some of the risks connected to oil extraction. In contrast, the three more recent books paint a one-sided, idealizing picture of working offshore. This ideological one-sidedness, as well as the strong focus on the

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 1

recruitment of future offshore workers, may be a response to the increasing criticism against the oil industry. Children's literature is here used as an ideological-didactic tool that serves to legitimize and support the oil industry's continued existence.

While none of the more recent books has achieved the level of recognition within the Norwegian educational system as *Oljeboka* did in the 1980s and 1990s, they have been offered as educational resources to kindergartens, schools, and museums. The impact they have had on the minds of young audiences cannot be fully assessed beyond occasional anecdotal evidence, but it should not be underestimated. It remains to be seen if more children's books about work in the offshore industry will be published in the future. However, many other literary texts intended for children also arguably normalize and legitimize contemporary petroculture, often in more subtle ways than the examples discussed in this article. This highlights the need to systematically expand petroculture studies to include children's literature and culture, and to enable educators to critically reflect on the works of fiction and nonfiction that are presented to them as benevolent, didactical tools but that often serve to maintain an inherently unsustainable petroculture.

Submission received 10 March 2025 Revised version accepted 3 October 2025

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 ISSN 2171-9594