

TOVE JANSSON, *THE SUMMER BOOK*

Professor Tess Maginess

TOVE
JANSSON



Photograph: <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/images/tove-jansson-5.jpg>



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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- **Tove Jansson** (born August 9, 1914, Helsinki, Finland, Russian Empire—died June 27, 2001, Helsinki, Finland) Finnish artist and writer-illustrator of children's books (in Swedish). In her books she created the fantastic self-contained world of Moomintrolls, popular especially in northern and central Europe, although translations in more than 30 languages have provided a worldwide audience.
- Source: [Britannica](#)
- Daughter of artists.
- She published 6 novels, including *The Summer Book*.



THE SUMMER BOOK

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‘THE MORNING SWIM’

- *The Summer Book* is hard to characterize. It is a **novel**, but with a very **naturalistic, almost documentary approach**.
- There are **two central characters**; an eighty-year old **grandmother**, who is also an artist and her seven-year old **granddaughter**, Sophia.

PERSPECTIVES

- Our first 'view' in the book, in this first chapter is of the **landscape**.
- This is to be very important because this reflects the **vision of both grandmother and granddaughter**. What we are enabled to see is a landscape which combines both **outer and inner vision** – it is both **naturalistic** and seemingly **magical**. The bare granite 'steamed... the colours everywhere had deepened the vegetation like a rainforest of lush, evil leaves and flowers' (p.21).
- Note the **mix of realism and the magical**.
- And the space made for **imagination**.
- The **first paragraph** of any work of fiction is very important – a little **microcosm** of the book's themes and approach, setting the tone, establishing a set of perspectives.

AND THEN THERE ARE HUMANS . . .

The description of the landscape is punctured by **human affairs**:

- The child, **Sophia**, is no picture book angel, but is **peremptory, sharp, demanding** to know what her grandmother is doing. **Grandmother** responds **angrily**, with the answer a child would give; “Nothing”. Before adding, “I’m looking for my false teeth.”
- The almost **Pastoral visual description** of the island (a cliché in which the island becomes exoticized) is swiftly replaced by an **incident** which has probably never before (or since) graced the pages of a novel.
- The **banality, precarity** and even **shame** are not what the reader expects to intrude so unceremoniously in this predictable urban representation of the wild island. Some readers will recognise the necessity of that hand over the mouth.
- This is evidently **no fairy tale grandmother and child**. The directness of the child is matched by the older woman.

PERSPECTIVES – POINTS OF VIEW

And it as if we see that landscape through the eyes of the **grandmother** – she is the **centre of consciousness** in the book, we see the world mainly from her perspective.

It is **often brusque, never sentimental**, but always open to both a **hyper close examination of nature** and the real world and how it contains also, naturally, an **otherworld**. Her imagination has not dried up.

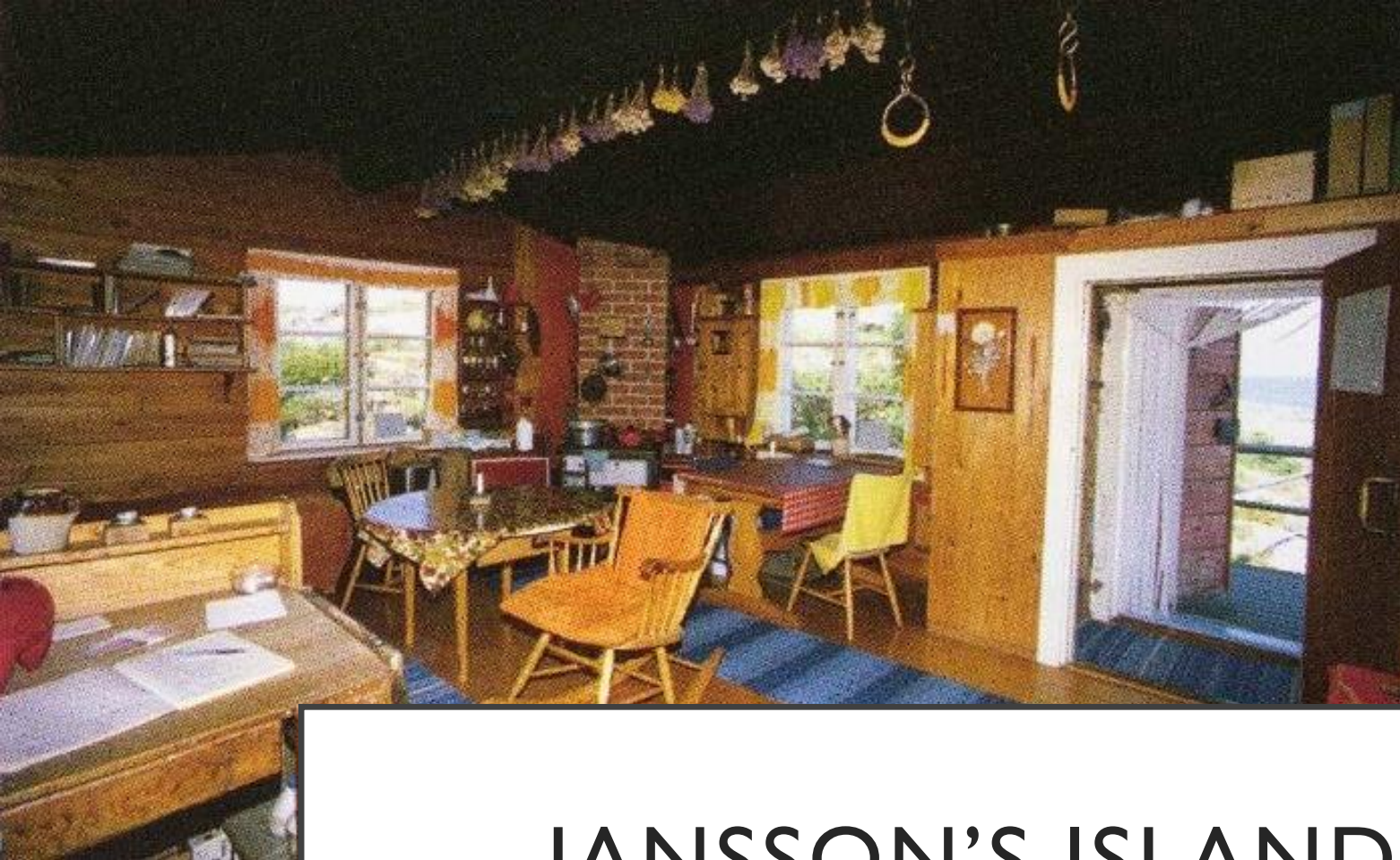
But, at the same time, we have another perspective – that is of the author, so we also have a kind of **external view** of the grandmother.

Our first view, or perspective on the **grandmother** is of a **fragile, uncertain** figure, 'she held her hand in front of her mouth and was constantly afraid of losing her balance' (p.21).



Picture source:

https://static.wixstatic.com/media/f38f33_9f8dd82d73c148c681da7235af6d37de~mv2.jpg/v1/fill/w_769,h_1061,al_c,q_90/f38f33_9f8dd82d73c148c681da7235af6d37de~mv2.jpg



JANSSON'S ISLAND HOUSE

Source: image search results on yahoo.com



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PERSPECTIVES

Sometimes we see the island as **impossibly small**, at other times, when the grandmother is lying on the ground, framing the scene with her body, and hat, like a triangle, the tiny space contained seems **momentous**, **huge**.

Pictures source: image search results on yahoo.com

OLD AGE AND DEATH: MATTERS OF FACT


- A **darker note** is sounded in this very first chapter when the child asks, matter-of-factly, “When are you going to die?” To which the grandmother responds, “Soon. But that is not the least concern of yours.” (p.22)
- What is the **tone** here? **Brusque, dismissive** or, is she **trying to spare Sophia?**

COMPLEXITIES

- Soon after we see that there are **many facets to their relationship**.
- While the grandmother has appeared to shut the child out, they are now, thick as thieves, **co-conspirators**, heading towards the ravine where neither of them is allowed to go.
- Their **shared sense of adventure** and a certain attraction to the transgressive, towards the **breaking of rules and norms** is, of course, what allows the relationship to be so extraordinary and what allows Jansson to **question conventional 'portraits' of children and older people**.

QUESTIONING GENDER STEREOTYPES

- And, indeed, to **question gender stereotypes** here also; here they are embarking on rather a **boyish sort of escapade**.
- The grandmother understands that she needs to give Sophia **freedom**, to be watchful, but to allow her to **'toughen up'** also.



A RAVINE, A DANGEROUS PLACE, A MAGIC PLACE



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FROM GRANDMOTHER TO CHILD: THE DRAMA OF SHIFTING CENTRES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- A further aspect of Jansson's concern with perspective is seen towards the end of the chapter as the **'angle of vision' or centre of consciousness** seems to shift from the child to the old lady. We become aware of how **frail** she is but also how **alert** she is about the child.
- The **subtle shifting between child and older person** occurs many times throughout the book, enabling the reader to **engage and identify with both characters**, offering an **alliance** rather than an alienation between generations.