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What's in a (hand)bag? Moominmamma's handbag in *The Moomins and the Great Flood* as an assemblage 'bundle'

This article argues that Moominmamma's handbag serves as a prime example of a bundle, a collection of items for medicinal, personal, or ceremonial use commonly associated with the archaeology of Indigenous peoples of a range of cultures. Here, I draw together examinations of archaeological bundles and Ursula K. Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction (Le Guin 1988 [2016]) to demonstrate the importance of the handbag as a participant in the Moomins' first literary appearance. The bag holds the keys to the Moomins' progress, a repository for healing and thriving in dark times, and plays a vital role as both a personal and medicinal bundle in *The Moomins and the Great Flood*. Using examples drawn from the new English translation of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, I show how Moominmamma's handbag contributes to the journey undertaken through the flooded valley, and how it acts as a critical example of Le Guin's conception of the bag as an essential tool for survival against the dangers of a hostile fictional world.

Keywords: Moomins, Tove Jansson, materiality, Ursula K. Le Guin, new materialism

Introduction

This article presents an analysis of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, specifically concentrated on Moominmamma and her handbag. The starting point for this is Ursula K. Le Guin's challenge to novelists and storytellers to shift away from considering a pointed weapon as the primary tool of survival in stories and to consider the importance of bags and containers. From here, it is possible to conceptualise Moominmamma's handbag as a bundle, a collection of objects held within a bag or container that can be carried about and used or held for both practical, emotional, and spiritual reasons. Drawing on the recent work by Meereboer and others considering the Moomin stories from a new materialist perspective,

it is possible to conceive of Moominmamma and her handbag as an assemblage committed to the preservation of the group.

In 1939, Tove Jansson found her artistic work strangled by the outbreak of war and, in her introduction to her first book, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, wrote that “one’s work stood still; it felt completely pointless to try to create pictures” (Jansson 2024: 13; cf. Westin and Ratajczak 2012). Instead, she began to draw and write stories, primarily for her own benefit, featuring the small trolls she had grown up hearing about from her uncle. *The Moomins and the Great Flood* is unusual in its storytelling for two reasons, as elucidated by the UK’s Children’s Laureate, Frank Cottrell-Boyce in his introduction to the new edition published in 2024. Firstly, rather than being a story about venturing out into the world from a “secure base” (Hindle and Ingram 2022: 22), it is about finding one’s way to a home, a place of safety: “The Moomins have not left home in search of fame and fortune. It’s the other way around. The end of their quest is to find a home.” (Cottrell-Boyce 2024a: 6)

Secondly, the most active agent, the driver of the story and, in effect, the “hero”, is Moominmamma and not young Moomintroll, who serves as the central protagonist of most of the later Moomin canon (Cottrell-Boyce 2024a: 5; Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017). While the majority of children’s, and indeed young adult stories, “get rid of the parents... Mother is not only coming on the adventure, she’s going to be the hero. It’s Mother who will guide Moomin through the darkness and into the light” (Cottrell-Boyce 2024a: 5). One could devote a great deal of time to Moominmamma’s role in this story, as it is one of the few where she is central, and she is usually the most active agent in each scene. Although the first sentence leads with “Moomintroll and his mother”, it is Moominmamma who takes on the role of leader, demonstrating her knowledge of the environment (“Glow-worms,” said Moominmamma (Jansson 2024: 17)). She is first to moderate her emotional responses and analyse this environment, as in when they encounter The Little Creature (an unnamed Sniff):

From the shadows behind a tree-trunk two eyes were staring at them. At first Moominmamma was frightened too, but then she said soothingly: “It’s really a very little creature. Wait, and I’ll shine a light on it. Everything looks worse in the dark, you know.” And so she picked up one of the big glowing flowers and lit the shadow up with it. (Jansson 2024: 18)

In a later scene, Moominmamma rescues a cat and her kittens when the flood waters rise:

In the chair sat a wet cat with five equally wet kittens around her. “Poor mother!” cried Moominmamma, and she jumped into the water all the way up to her waist. “Hold on to me, and I’ll try to catch them with my tail!”. (Jansson 2024: 38)

Moominmamma leads both Moomintroll and the Little Creature throughout the story, both driving the action forward and providing solace whenever things go wrong, the handbag acting as a participant in all these activities. Key to this agency is an unexpected item. Like many displaced persons, the Moomins carry few of their personal possessions, and are pictured throughout *The Moomins and the Great Flood* with only one item consistently: Moominmamma's handbag.

This article focuses on the primary tool Moominmamma uses to facilitate her journey with Moomintroll, the “little creature” (an early version of Sniff): her handbag. I argue here that Moominmamma's handbag serves as a quintessential example of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, as it is central to the Moomins' survival throughout *The Moomins and the Great Flood*. In addition, it demonstrates how an object can become central to a character or group of characters, an active agent in the quest to survive against great harm. Moominmamma's handbag and its changing contents constitute a bundle committed to surviving and thriving when faced with adversity that is not only practical but emotional in nature.

Theoretical Approaches

There is extensive literature on Tove Jansson and the Moomins, approaching them from a range of different angles (Meereboer 2022). In 2022, *Infant Observation* devoted a special edition to psychoanalytic perspectives on Tove Jansson's most famous creations (Raneberg 2022). Increasingly, however, the physical environments and the materiality of the Moomins have begun to draw more attention (Raneberg 2022: 18). This is perhaps unsurprising, as the Moomins' world is deeply embedded with ecological and community narratives that highlight the importance of engagement with the physical world. In recent years, Sara Heinämaa has investigated the emotional undercurrents embedded in Tove Jansson's illustrations of Moominvalley, while Zoe Jaques has considered the evocations of pastoral imagery and nostalgia in the Valley and the Moomins' world (Heinämaa 2018; Jaques 2014). Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska has analysed the character of Moominmamma herself, describing her as “multi-faceted”, her inspiration being Tove Jansson's own mother (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017: 20). Agneta Rehal Johansson includes an analysis of Moominmamma's own artwork in *Moominpappa at Sea*, remarking that: “le sac peint symbolise donc évidemment son rôle de mère de famille” [“the painted bag therefore obviously symbolises her role as mother of the family”] (Rehal Johansson 2018: 25; tr. I.B.).

In particular, Arwen Dagmar Meereboer has investigated Moominpappa's exploits and adventures as a helpful addition to Jane Bennett's seminal work on the interactions between the physical matter of the world and humans, *Vibrant Matter* (Meereboer 2022). Meereboer draws on Jane Bennett's argument that literature can act as an intervention in the typical understanding of the relationship

between humans and objects (Bennett 2009). Bennett challenged the assertion by Bill Brown that objects only attain individuality when broken (Meereboer 2022). Meereboer draws out Bennett's challenge that children's fiction can deploy an almost animist understanding of human–object relationships, whereby the object is individualised without being broken (Meereboer 2022: 19). However, when considering Moominmamma and her handbag, it is necessary to conceptualise not only the handbag but its contents as significant participants in *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, which is where the possibility of treating the handbag as a bundle becomes relevant. There is power in considering the Moomins and their interactions with a handbag's bundle function as a demonstration of Ursula K. Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* and Jane Bennett's argument about children's fiction and their interactions with the world around them. It serves to deepen our understanding of the complex interactions and supportive tools we rely on in desperate times and our emotional ties to objects we consider essential to ourselves beyond their obvious functionality.

Bags and Bundles

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the pre-eminent philosophers and writers of science fiction and fantasy (Haraway 2019). She wrote for children, young adults, and adults, and her stories were fearless in their exploration of complex philosophical and political points (Shin and Vickers 2019). In *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (Le Guin 2016), for example, she famously skewered the concept of utopia by examining the choices faced when one's security is based on the suffering of others.

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction built on her fictional explorations of feminist and leftist thinking by challenging the idea that the most important object in the hero's story was a weapon. She drew on research on the earliest human societies about the relative balance between food acquired by hunting and food collected and brought back to camp to argue that, whilst hunters in a group may have had a heroic story to tell, it was the gatherers and the bags they used to collect, who provided the majority of the support to the group (Le Guin 1988 [2019]: 25). Le Guin debates the merits of stories founded on the weapon versus collection:

It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another... No, it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood spouted everywhere in crimson torrents. (Le Guin 1988 [2019]: 27)

She counters all this by remarking,

We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news. (Le Guin 1988 [2019]: 29)

This presents an opportunity for writers to consider what objects are central to human survival that are not about committing violence against dangerous others in a hostile environment, but as supportive items that can provide comfort in times of distress.

Within the field of archaeology, the bag has long been viewed as a critical technology for human development (Fisher 1975; Le Guin 1988). Bags allow people to carry items they would otherwise have to hold, which is especially important when travelling great distances or gathering food for a group to eat later (Le Guin 1988: 28). They also hold a ritual function, and several indigenous societies have independently developed the idea of a small bag, pouch, or bundle, as a means of healing or protection (Brown Vega 2015). Early examples in the ancient Near East include carrying small obsidian rocks in bags to prevent epileptic seizures (Healey forthcoming), and a tradition amongst the Blackfoot to carry objects associated with a loved one for a year after their death (Zedeño 2008). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when traversing such a difficult landscape, the most essential tool for the little trolls and their friends is the bag.

Moominmamma and Her Handbag

Moominmamma is, throughout Tove Jansson's books, represented using traditional semiotics of motherhood:

W każdym widzi добро i nikogo nie wini – jej tolerancja i wyrozumiałość sięgają ideału. Doskonale opanowała sokratejską majeutykę, którą realizuje w sprawnie przeprowadzanych dialogach, chętnie przybierając maskę naiwności. [She sees the good in everyone and blames no one – her tolerance and understanding are ideal. She has mastered Socratic maieutics perfectly, which she realizes in well-conducted dialogues, willingly adopting the mask of naivety]. (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017: 14; tr. I.B.; cf. Matthiessen 2022)

She was initially drawn with only the handbag as an identifier, the apron being added later at the suggestion of Charles Sutton, the English publisher at Associated Newspapers (Moomin Characters 2016). These two objects function to underscore her key role as provider and supporter of the Moomin family's needs, as well as the needs of the many inhabitants of Moominvalley who come to stay (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017: 15). Conforming to stereotypes of the expectations

of a mother's role in the family, Jansson herself described Moominmamma as "never let[ting] them see when she is worrying about them, or notice when she is waiting for them" (Jansson 2024: 77).

Despite this, aspects of Moominmamma's individuality emerge from both Jansson's notes and her writing. In the former, Jansson describes Moominmamma as enjoying "collecting shells and making boats out of bark" (Jansson 2024: 77), highlighting her interest in collecting items and crafting. This creativity is reproduced in one comic, where Moominmamma takes up painting and produces a mural on the Moomin House walls (Dymel-Trzebiatowska 2017: 18). Agneta Rehal-Johansson includes an analysis of Moominmamma's artwork, remarking that: "le sac peint symbolise donc évidemment son rôle de mère de famille" ["the painted bag therefore obviously symbolises her role as mother of the family"] (Rehal-Johansson 2018: 25; tr. I.B.). The handbag makes it possible for Moominmamma to carry with her a range of emotionally and physically supportive items, very similar to a bundle, a collection of objects considered to have personal or protective value to her. Zedeño describes a bundle as "a complex object with a singular life history that begins in an individual's dream or vision", which becomes a powerful object regarded as a person in its own right by its owner, "each with its own life history, personality, and position in society" (2008: 364). It is possible to think of Moominmamma's handbag as both a personal and a medicinal bundle because although it lacks a defined ceremonial purpose, it does have incredible personal significance to Moominmamma and contains both personal and biographical items linked to Moominmamma's interests and creativity, as well as objects that come into use when they are required for healing or comfort by herself or others.

The handbag itself was drawn consistently, even from the earliest drawings of Moominmamma: it is large and black, top-opening with a metal fastening and catch on the outside, a single black strap, and four pockets on the inner (Ardagh 2024: 40). It resembles Art Deco, top-opening designs with chrome clasps and expandable bases, like the Ivo Collection's No. 284, or even No. 287 (Ivo Collection 2024). However, its design is most strikingly reminiscent of classic Cordé designs of the 1940s (Dager 2022). The physical bag as drawn initially appears to be primarily a fashion item, intended to be seen in urban contexts: Germany in the 1920s, Paris or even London in the 1940s. Its presence in the timeless world of the Moomins is unusual, especially its journey through the dark and watery landscape of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*. Its appearance points to a material-semiotic link back to the human world of the 1930s and 1940s. The handbag is and was a ubiquitous tool associated with a woman who needed something to carry necessities in (Haraway 2019: 6). Its very survival in a hostile landscape lends support to the narrative of dislocation the Moomins experience during *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, but also the tenacity of the Moomins; its survival and usefulness illustrates the similar tenacity of Moominmamma's

essential personality. Even in times of distress, she can rise to the occasion, with the assistance of her trusty bag.

Her emotional relationship with it indicates that it has talismanic significance to her. The handbag, which is almost ubiquitous in representations of Moominmamma, is an essential part of who she is as a person, providing care and support to others, and collecting items in the environment for both others' material needs and her creative flourishing. In her notes, Jansson remarks that Moominmamma "keeps things she may suddenly need in a large bag: for example, stomach powder and wire wool, sweets, dry socks and the like" (Jansson 2024: 78). It has such a strong relationship with Moominmamma that in *The World of Moominvalley*, it has its own double-page spread (Ardagh 2024: 40–41). Here, it is described as having "four pockets" and "full of very useful things" (Ardagh 2024: 40).

Moominmamma's connection to the handbag is intense: "Moominmamma never goes anywhere without her trust large, black handbag" (Ardagh 2024: 40), such that when the handbag is imperilled or goes missing, she becomes distraught. In *Finn Family Moomintroll*, the handbag is taken by Thingummy and Bob, who want to use it to sleep in. The handbag's loss makes headline news in the valley and a party is promised as a reward to the finder (Jansson 2009). In *The Exploits of Moominpappa, described by himself*, Moominmamma is depicted as concerned at even its potential absence, or at least is perceived this way by Moominpappa, the first-person narrator of the episode (Jansson 2002). Moominmamma is washed up on the beach in the final moments of Moominpappa's memoirs, and her primary concern, immediately, is for the location and safety of the handbag:

This was a Moomin, like myself, but still more beautiful, a little Moomin woman that I had saved!

Suddenly, she sat up and cried: "Save my handbag! Oh, save my handbag!"

"But you're holding it," I answered. (Jansson 2002: 124)

Moominmamma's ability to hold onto the handbag, even when submerged in the sea without any other mechanism for support, is a testament to how critical she finds it to herself and her survival. Recovering it provides her with a surge of relief and foundation powder to restore her general appearance:

"Oh glory be!" she said. She opened her large black handbag and started rummaging in its depths. At last she found her powder compact.

"I'm afraid my powder's sea-damaged," she said sadly.

"You're every bit as beautiful without it," I replied gallantly.

She gave me an unfathomable look and blushed deeply. (Jansson 2002: 124)

When a storm rages through Moominvalley, she even sleeps with the bag under her pillow, as if it might provide protection and reassurance from there (Jansson

2002: 66). This is also a *prima facie* example of Zedeño's (2008: 362–363) argument for a bundle (the handbag) being treated as a person, its safety and security as vital as any human – or Moomin – and as able to protect its owner from harm.

In the Flood

The compelling relationship between Moominmamma and her handbag is no better expressed in detail than in *The Moomins and the Great Flood*. The handbag and Moominmamma are tied together in the illustrations: a total of forty-six pictures are included in the new edition, reproducing the originals from the first publication. Of these, Moominmamma is visible and identifiable in twenty-five. The handbag appears with Moominmamma in fifteen. These drawings show the handbag either held by Moominmamma in action, such as climbing the rope ladder into the gentleman's sweet world (Jansson 2024: 28), held up when she approaches the Hattifatteners (Jansson 2024: 30), or set beside her while she interacts with others. These instances include her sleeping (Jansson 2024: 24) and evading the ant-lion (Jansson 2024: 35). The handbag even appears in a drawing of Moominmamma and Moomintroll hugging each other after hearing news of Moominpappa from a boy (Jansson 2024: 47). Here, the handbag hovers suspended in midair. She might have discarded it in her rush to the hug, but it remains present, even when Moominmamma's focus is elsewhere. This is similar to the way the handbag sits on the edge of the ant-lion's hole when Moominmamma falls in (Jansson 2024: 36).

It is not only the bag's presence that is important, however; its most critical role is as a carrier of useful items in the context of adversity. Its contents carry two functions, either to provide comfort and support to Moominmamma and those around her or as indicators of her creative nature, her propensity for collecting items for art or personal joy. As such, and especially regarding the former set of items, the handbag functions as a medicine bundle during *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, a protective set of objects that can be brought into use as and when required because they are carried with the characters as they move through the landscape (Le Guin 1988 [2019]).

Moominmamma uses the handbag to introduce vital items she always keeps with her, such as the dry socks she provides to Moomintroll (Jansson 2024: 21), and the corkscrew she uses to open the bottle containing Moominpappa's message (Jansson 2024: 56). She produces chocolate from the handbag when all three of them are hungry and cannot find enough food, or food that nourishes them for the journey (Jansson 2024: 51). This returns to the model of Moominmamma as a caring mother, especially through the constant presence and use of the handbag. In an early scene, the three travellers must cross a long stretch of muddy water. Moomintroll slips and nearly falls in, and Moominmamma not only catches him, but demonstrates the value of the handbag as a hold-all for necessities against harm:

Moomintroll slipped and nearly fell in, but his mother caught hold of him at the last moment. “We shall have to go on by boat,” she said. “Now your feet are soaked. You’re sure to catch cold.” Then she got out a pair of dry socks for him from her handbag. (Jansson 2024: 21)

Here we see the Moominmamma–handbag assemblage providing comfort and security, even though Moomins do not actually wear socks. Here, the socks cement the social bond between Moomintroll and his mother, even if he does not wear them. They provide a connection and demonstrate Moominmamma’s capacity and desire to comfort her son, exemplifying how the handbag–contents assemblage can function as an aid to this activity.

While Meereboer primarily deals with assemblages as causative agents of harm (2022: 21–22), the handbag functions as an assemblage protecting against harm. Bundles often appear to have had medicinal purposes, as Zedeño describes them as “objects that play contemporary roles toward specific targets, such as curing illnesses, making rain, or finding lost objects” (2008: 365). While Meereboer analysed harmful assemblages in the *Exploits of Moominpappa*, it is possible to view Moominmamma as part of a protective assemblage with her handbag bundle, i.e., Moominmamma–handbag–contents against the potential harmful assemblages of the environment. Perhaps the most emblematic moment for the handbag as an exemplar of protective assemblage is during a short scene where emotions for all three characters dip. As the rain falls and the waters begin to rise in the valley, the three main characters wake up to a dismal scene of rain: “Everything was grey and melancholy” (Jansson 2024: 51). Moominmamma shows foresight, care, and comfort to Moomintroll and the Little Creature, during this moment of gloom, providing both emotional and nutritional succour kept in the handbag for the right moment:

“It’s no good, we must go on,” said Moominmamma. “But here is something for you which I’ve been saving until it was really needed.” And then she produced a large bar of chocolate from her handbag. She had taken it with her from the old gentleman’s wonderful garden. She split it in two and gave them each a piece. (Jansson 2024: 51)

This latter instance stands out as a demonstration of the functionality of the bag in the context of adversity, as items can be added to the assemblage and carried along, to be taken out when required. It also points to that critical aspect of Moominmamma as a collector, and the handbag as a vital tool in this activity. Collecting the chocolate occurs off-page and is never described during the sequence in the old gentleman’s garden but provides an example of how Moominmamma operates in her environment, constantly identifying items that might become useful later and storing them away in the bag just in case.

In a later scene, the trio discover a bottle with a message in it. It is Moominmamma who not only notices the value of the bottle and the message it contains but has the solution to the problem of accessing it:

“But don’t you see?” said [Moominmamma], seriously. “It’s something very interesting, it’s a message in a bottle. There’s a letter inside.” And then she took a corkscrew out of her handbag and uncorked the bottle. (Jansson 2024: 56)

Here, the handbag unexpectedly provides the perfect tool to open the bottle, presenting another of its functions within the Moominmamma–handbag assemblage: the capacity to hold items for which a use has not yet been found but which may later prove essential.

The handbag’s presence is felt, and its importance can be noted even when the handbag itself is not drawn. The ten images where the handbag is absent are mostly those where Moominmamma is on the boat, during the flood itself, or providing care and support to other characters. These include the small picture of Moominmamma holding up socks for a wet Moomintroll (Jansson 2024: 21) and the illustration of her comforting the Little Creature on page 40. The handbag is still present on the boat, but as only Moominmamma’s upper half is seen over the gunwale, the handbag is obscured. Otherwise, even when the Moomins are shown from a great distance and are very small, such as in the first and last illustrations, the handbag is still stubbornly there.

Conclusions

Children’s fiction presents many opportunities to encounter the material world in new and imaginative ways. This includes as a mediator of, and refuge from, traumatic experiences, such as being lost refugees in a terrible, uncertain land. In October 2024, the artistic network Counterpoints and the International Federation of the Red Cross announced their intention to work with Moomin Characters Oy, which owns and manages licenses to use the Moomin characters created by Tove Jansson, on an exhibit to be held in Refugee Week in June 2025 (Counterpoints 2024; Moomin Characters 2024). This included four artworks to go on display in four UK cities in the following year, a competition for children to design their own perfect “Moomin House”, and the republication of *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, Tove Jansson’s first Moomin story, by Sort of Books.

The intention behind the collaboration is to highlight the need to provide support and refuge to those in need at a time when climate change, a proliferation of conflict globally, and resource insecurity have led to a rapid increase in those seeking shelter and a home elsewhere. It also highlights the difficulty for those seeking shelter to find creative expression in an increasingly uncertain world. In *The Moomins*

and the Great Flood, Tove Jansson demonstrates the possibilities of the carrier bag theory of fiction by representing that something as simple and quotidian as a handbag could be the tool key to the Moomins' survival without ever being used for violence.

While the Moomin House remains the objective, the image of shelter and refuge in uncertain times, when on the move, bags can provide security for itinerant travellers that is of unspoken criticality. As such, examining the role of the handbag and its importance to Moominmamma is essential in understanding the migrant experience and human entanglements with the objects that matter to them. It serves as an opportunity to consider the story as a bag, carrying all the hopes and fears of those on uncertain journeys through difficult worlds, as Ursula K. Le Guin and Tove Jansson hoped to achieve.

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