Football, crocodiles, and carnival - an interview with debutant Thoralf Fagertun

**Thoralf Fagertun is a cheerful man from Northern Norway. In the autumn of 2022, he made his debut as a children's book author with the wild tale of *The Gnork Family*, a book about jungle medicine, smart boys, and the world's most important football match.**

*­– Congratulations on your debut book, Thoralf! Can you tell us about* The Gnork Family*?*

­– I sure can! The book is about a boy named Tom. He misses his best friend Martin, who is in hospital with some terrible undefined illness. Together, the two of them were to play an extremely important football match against their arch-rival Preben, a nasty, rich guy, who is also, unfortunately, a very good football player. But Martin is an even better player, and Tom fears that they cannot win the match without him. Then a new kid starts in Tom's class, a mischievous fellow called Kompis Gnork. Through Kompis, Tom gets to know the Gnork family, who come from the jungle. Eventually, Tom gets to make a deal with the Gnork family: They prepare an herbal medicine that can make Martin healthy in time for the football match, while Tom must do something rather criminal in return. I won't reveal anything, but a couple of absurd things happen when Kompis and Tom test out the medicine. It takes a toll on both people, animals, and property. *The Gnork Family* is also a story about revenge, but not too intense, just some cozy Tarantino-inspired fun for kids.

*– How did you get the idea for* The Gnork Family*?*

– The idea came to me when I lived in a terraced house. There were terraced houses as far as the eye could see, and all the families were exactly the same. They had an eight-to-four job, a station wagon and were all involved in the local sports team. I began to fantasize about what it would have been like if a completely different family had moved to such a neighborhood. That family eventually became the Gnork family. I enjoyed myself a lot with the thought of someone who behaves completely wrongly in relation to all the unspoken rules that apply in such a neighborhood and in other social contexts.

*– There is a pleasant balance between play and seriousness in* The Gnork Family*, and as is well known, laughter is the best medicine. This is especially true for Martin, who is in hospital. Maybe we need more laughter?*

– I think we do. A little more laughter and a little more play. And more sunshine, summer flowers and kittens. That is perhaps my literary program, if I have one. Especially in combination with the freedom that characterizes children's literature. Growing up, I read a lot of Tove Jansson, who wrote about the Moomin Family, and I read a lot of Roald Dahl. I especially remember a scene from *Moominsummer Madness,* where Snufkin went around a park and pulled up prohibition signs. "Throughout his life, Snufkin had longed to tear down signs that forbade him to do whatever he wanted," the book says. And this scene captures the very essence of children's literature for me. There are so many rules, perhaps especially for children, but in literature you can do exactly what you want. The Gnork Family fits in well here. They care little about rules and norms. And they have a relaxed relationship with natural laws as well.

*– You have already mentioned that you read Tove Jansson and Roald Dahl, were there any other authors and books that made a strong impression on you when you were young? Who has inspired you in your work?*

– I have studied literature and read a lot of strange things, but my best reading experiences come from children's literature. *The Wind in the Willows* is a book I remember well and of course *Mio, My Son*. But both Tove Jansson and Roald Dahl have an extra element that I am especially fond of, and that is their mischievous, grotesque humour. In *The Exploits of Moominpappa*, the protagonists encounter the niblings, who kidnap Hemulen's aunt. We as readers do not learn whether they are going to eat her nose or not, but we do learn that they chew off people's noses if they are too long for their taste. Moominpappa also encounters the world's largest animal - Edward the Booble - who from time to time sits on people but is kind enough to pay for their funerals. And when it comes to Roald Dahl, we know that he has no restraints at all. Here, children can be eaten or turned into mice. This slightly grotesque madness made an indelible impression on me as a child. It was fun then, and it's fun now. Such literature has something carnival-like, where everything is turned on its head and the grotesque takes a prominent place. This is how I like my children's literature, and this is how I like to write it myself. Good children's literature is a carnival between two covers. Of course, I can write a thousand books without coming close to the level of Jansson and Dahl, but it's fun to roam around in the same landscape.

*– In* The Gnork Family*, the antagonist Preben has his own room for all his games, has golden shoes, his own swimming pool and gets everything he points to. But maybe he doesn't have that many friends?*

– Don't be so sure about that. I don't think you need to be particularly kind to have friends. But friendship is fortunately free, and the starting point for the story is the friendship between Tom and Martin. For Tom, it's about suddenly being without his best friend. Friends are a hugely important part of life, especially at this age, and Tom is willing to go to great lengths to get Martin back on his feet. But of course, there may be a few subtle hints to morality in the fact that the best football player is not necessarily the one with the most expensive shoes.

*– The book is illustrated by Line Halsnes. Did you imagine that this would become an illustrated book when you started writing?*

– I sure did. And it's no secret that we were hugely inspired by Quentin Blake, the man who illustrated Roald Dahl's books. And then we brought in Line, who is very versatile and has a drawing style with the same energy as Blake's. Shortly after she had said yes, Line was nominated for the biggest Norwegian literary award, the Brage prize. It is great for a debutant to work with such a skilled illustrator. Seeing how she translated my strange thoughts into illustrations and gave the characters life and personality is without a doubt one of the coolest things I've been a part of.

*– Do we get to read more about the Gnork family, or are there other sly characters we will get to know in the future?*

­– What's fun about the Gnork family is putting them in everyday situations and seeing how crazy things can get. There were many scenes that didn't fit in the book, and there are many more arenas to place the family in. In children's sports, for example, there are many pitfalls for a group like the Gnork family. We'll see. Otherwise, my head is full of characters and stories, so I hope I get the chance to write more books.

*– Are children not mischievous enough these days? Is there no room for pranks in an otherwise regulated everyday life?*

– I have children myself and clearly see tendencies towards that. I am very happy that nobody knew what we were up to when we were little. I am afraid to reveal anything here in case of retroactive legal consequences. But we were out on adventures a lot, and I wish the same for today's kids. You don't need to pay attention to prohibition signs all the time.