



## Special Issue Article

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# *Et oppgjør med sykdommen. The Body as Emotional Geography in Jan Roar Leikvoll's Novels*

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**Abstract:** Jan Roar Leikvoll's (1974–2014) novels, set in dystopian, indeterminate worlds, portray captivity, physical, psychological, and socially imposed. This article argues that while the architectural cages featured in these stories (such as walled cities and cloistered monasteries) are significant, it is the body itself that emerges as the central point of confinement. Drawing on biographical criticism, affective narratology, and insights from narrative medicine, the study reveals how Leikvoll's confrontation with illness intensifies his representations of bodily entrapment, shaping the darkness that characterizes his fictional landscapes. Through a close reading of motifs such as decay, gender constraints, and enforced isolation, Leikvoll's works are shown to function both as explorations of embodied vulnerability and as critiques of societal norms that reinforce exclusion and control. The interdisciplinary approach highlights how Leikvoll's distinctive style combines personal affliction with broader cultural anxieties, ultimately highlighting the fragile link between physical being, identity, and power.

**Keywords:** Jan Roar Leikvoll; biographical fiction; Dystopian literature; illness and literature

## 1 Introduction

Jan Roar Leikvoll's (1974–2014) literary production is, both thematically and temporally, intimately connected to his personal experiences of illness. His debut novel, *Eit vintereventyr* (published by Samlaget in 2008), was written shortly after the diagnosis of the resurgence of a brain tumour that had plagued him since he was 12, a tumour that ultimately claimed his life in 2014. Two further novels, *Fiolinane* (2010)

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and *Bovara* (2012), were also published by Samlaget. Together with *Eit vintereventyr*, they form a trilogy characterized by comparable stylistic features and recurring motifs. The trilogy was followed by a fourth, standalone novel titled *Songfuglen* (2013, Samlaget). Posthumously, Samlaget published *Forkynnaren* (2015) and *Heimatt* (2019).

All of Leikvoll's novels are set in dystopian worlds, where spatial and temporal coordinates remain deliberately vague. Their dark, foreboding atmospheres offer a unifying backdrop to the author's oeuvre: in each novel, characters move through decaying societies and face confinement that's physical, mental, or rooted in social and gender pressures. In *Eit vintereventyr*, the protagonist lives as a guard in a concentration camp under conditions that parallel those of the inmates. In *Fiolinane*, human tribes struggle to survive in a post-apocalyptic desert where the strongest endure; the characters know a different world exists beyond their desolate waste landscape but cannot venture out. In *Bovara*, an abused, disabled monk named Frrok imprisons a pregnant prostitute in the monastery cellar, reflecting how the roles of victim and abuser can fuse. *Songfuglen* follows thirteen-year-old Jakoba, who is compelled by his mother and aunt to pass as a girl to remain in a village where all men have been cast out; beyond the city walls, exiled male tribes survive in the woods. Leikvoll's literary merit was recognized in Norway with prizes such as the Nynorsk litteraturpris (2010) for *Fiolinane* and the Stig Sætrebakkens minnepris (2013).<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the numerous prizes and the positive reception within the intellectual circles in Norway, very little has been written on Leikvoll.<sup>2</sup>

Though they differ in setting and plot, the three novels of the trilogy and *Songfuglen* share one crucial stylistic hallmark: pervasive captivity in enclosed spaces. However, it is not merely walled cities, monasteries, or barren deserts that shape the notion of entrapment in Leikvoll's fiction. This paper argues that the most significant form of captivity is the body itself, indeed, the body emerges as the core 'cage', reflecting the author's own experience of illness and paralysis. More than merely depicting harsh exterior structures, Leikvoll's writing illuminates how the experience of having a body altered by serious disease triggers deeper reflections on life and meaning. By unifying a literary analysis of his novels with testimony from author interviews, I argue that these recurrent 'cage structures' can be understood as imaginative projections of his physical infirmities.

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<sup>1</sup> Prizes and nominations include: the *Sigmund-Skard stipendet* in 2010, the nominations for the *Kritikerprisen* and the *Ungdommens kritikerpris* in 2010 for *Fiolinane*, the *Nynorsk litteraturpris* in 2010, the *Bjørnsonstipendet* in 2011, the *Stig Sætrebakkens minnepris* in 2013 and the *Bokhandelens forfatterstipend* in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jacobsen 2020; Guddal 2014; Tjønn 2012.

Here, I use the term ‘cages’ to refer to both physical enclosures, like camps, monasteries, or walled towns, and, more importantly, the body itself. While the external settings may seem most restrictive, the real entrapment often lies in the body’s own fragility. Drawing on recent work in affective narratology and findings in narrative medicine, I argue that Leikvoll’s visceral depictions of enclosure are best understood as emotional geographies, in which the fuzzy line between author and character suggests reading of these cages not only as external structures but also as profound reflections on the limits and vulnerabilities of the human body.

In this paper, I use a two-part approach. First, I analyze textual evidence and recurring motifs of confinement, captivity, bodily decay, sociopolitical restrictions, and the desire for an alternative embodiment. These themes appear steadily across Leikvoll’s works, forming a cohesive concern with ‘cages’ in both tangible and metaphorical senses. Second, I consider paratextual materials such as interviews, wherein Leikvoll openly addresses the impact of illness on his worldview and creative praxis. These insights illuminate the resonance between his personal encounter with paralysis and his fictional portrayal of confinement.

Although I acknowledge the potential oversimplifications in biographical criticism, I suggest that Leikvoll’s case calls for an approach that intertwines textual analysis with an understanding of his personal history. Drawing on theories by Leon Edel (1959) and later expanded by Linda Hutcheon (1988) and Stanley Fish (1991), this study approaches Leikvoll’s biography not as a direct explanatory tool but as a means to contextualize his narrative preoccupations. Biographical criticism does not simply draw a direct line between an author’s life and their work, rather it considers how personal experience is transformed, reimagined, and embedded within literary structures. Modern critical methods similarly assert that personal experience can inform recurring structures and motifs, without collapsing the text into mere autobiography. As Benson observes, “biography provides an important clue to the philosophy that informs an author’s work” by uncovering how words resonate through lived experience “to search for the experience the author has intended to communicate and to relate it to both the experience and imagination of the reader” (1989, 107, 112).

This argument aligns with affective narratology as exemplified by Patrick Colm Hogan (2011), which highlights the role of emotional structures in shaping narrative. The analysis employs affective narratology to examine how emotional states are embedded within literary structures, alongside insights from narrative medicine, which considers storytelling as a means of coping with illness. Drawing particularly on Arthur W. Frank’s (1995) concept of “embodied stories,” I illustrate how the ill body can generate original narrative modes. This interdisciplinary framework highlights that while Leikvoll’s own experiences of serious disease are fundamental to his creative imagination, his stories also address broader social and existential

questions. By combining close textual analysis with an understanding of Leikvoll's life and culture, we see how his novels merge personal hardship with social criticism in a shared imaginative realm.

Bringing these critical perspectives together shows that even though Leikvoll's experiences strongly shape his work, his novels also address wider social and existential issues that go beyond simple biography. The combination of a text-internal approach, close reading of recurring motifs, character arcs, and settings, with a framework external to the text that considers biographical and cultural context offers a more nuanced understanding of how Leikvoll's fiction intertwines personal confrontation with illness and a broader meditation on the fragility of human embodiment.

## 2 From Unease to Understanding: The Evolution of Leikvoll's Critical Reception

From the initial publication of *Eit vintereventyr*, reviewers focussed on Leikvoll's unsettling brutality and poetic force, often noting the bleakness that pervades his narrative worlds while admiring the literary merit of his style. In *Dagsavisen*, Gerd Elin Stava Sandve labeled Leikvoll's "original debutroman" as "brutal og øm," lauding its "høg språkleg kvalitet" (2008, 38). Turid Larsen highlighted the extremes of human nature in his work, quoting Leikvoll's own obsession with "hvilke krefter mennesket har i seg på godt og vondt" (2008, 36). In a *Klassekampen* review, Guri Kulås wrote about the ominous gravity beneath the fairy-tale reference in the title: "det er alvor. Blodig alvor" (2008, 18). Critics thus placed *Eit vintereventyr* in a framework undisputably grim and stylistically elevated.

Responses to *Fiolinane* largely mirrored these opinions. Kjell Olaf Jensen famously declared it "175 sider med kvalme" (2010, 28), implying that its unrelenting horror was overwhelming. Nonetheless, he noted its aesthetic depth, underscoring how horror and lyrical beauty intersect in Leikvoll's storytelling. Similarly, Cathrine Krøger stressed the delicate tension between the horrible and the beautiful, rooted in "språklig enkelthet og [...] poetisk naivitet" (2010, 36). Such ambivalence revealed an ongoing critical struggle to reconcile violence and poetical expression in Leikvoll's work, a paradox that also shaped responses to *Bovara* and beyond.

Upon the publication of *Bovara* (2012), critics persisted in observing the unsettling bleakness of his fictional worlds. Elisabeth Frøysland Pedersen highlighted the reviewers' tendency to fixate on oppression in Leikvoll's universe:

Likevel veier grunnene til å lese Leikvoll tålmodig og begeistret tyngre enn de aller fleste innvendinger. [...] Skjønnheten har særdeles lovende vekstvilkår i elendigheten, skal vi tro grunntonen i mottakelsen. Hvorfor denne stadige insisteringen på å gjøre onde språkblomster til trosgrunnlag i seg selv? (2012, 39)

Pedersen's remark reflects a crucial turning point in Leikvoll's reception. Despite recognizing the poetic achievements in his works, readers and critics were continually perplexed by the harshness. His fiction was admired but also met with a sense of bewilderment and concern. Yet once Leikvoll began disclosing the severity of his long-term illness, these texts took on new significance: their haunting, often grotesque content seemed more comprehensible when viewed as an expression of personal physical suffering. He described this transformation in an interview with Ane Nydal (2013, 33), observing how public awareness of his illness "normalised" both his writing and himself: "Men etter at jeg fortalte en liten del av historien bak bøkene, endret folks reaksjoner seg til det bedre. Jeg ble på mange måter normalisert". In that conversation, Leikvoll revealed that *Eit vintereventyr* was composed "fort, i protest, det er et utropstegn" in response to learning in 2007 that his brain tumour had started to grow again. *Fiolinane*, in turn, was shaped by radiotherapy, marked by "tørre følelsen av strålekniven under behandlingen" (ibid.). The personal link between medical trauma and fictional creation becomes even more striking with *Bovara*, which he wrote after Guillain-Barré syndrome left him paralyzed for months. He described the terror of being unable to protect himself, and how that dread underpins the fabric of his books: "I flere måneder lå han lammet i en seng, med mareritt og fantasier. Den største skrekken var at noen skulle komme inn i rommet, gripe gaffelen fra matfatet og skade ham" (ibid).

Leikvoll drew parallels between his own deteriorating body and those of his protagonists: "Alle hovedpersonene er psykisk og fysisk skakkjorte," he said, linking each character to an aspect of his personal decay (ibid.). Consequently, once readers were apprised of the real-life illness fueling his emphasis on suffering, critical disquiet receded. The persistent grimness of his narratives became intelligible as a response to unavoidable hardships, rather than inexplicable morbidity.

Although critics rarely make explicit connections between Leikvoll's dire fictional settings and his medical history, this study contends that acknowledging his experiences of disease enriches our interpretation of his books. The recurring references to "kvalme," "blodig alvor," and "elendighet" align with his repeated images of violence, imprisonment, and bodily decay in *Eit vintereventyr*, *Fiolinane*, and *Bovara*. Read through the lens of chronic illness, these suffocating environments gain a deeper resonance, one reflecting an arduous, extended encounter with a failing body. Pedersen's remark, "skjønnheten har særdeles lovende vekstvilkår i elendigheten", captures the paradox of Leikvoll's writing, which draws stark beauty from

excruciating circumstances. Ultimately, the trilogy transcends mere dystopian spectacle to offer a creative meditation on human frailty, endurance, and the combination of suffering and artistic expression.

In this light, Leikvoll's literary production can be understood not merely as an exploration of dystopian horror but as a literary space where individual trauma is transmuted into a broader meditation on human vulnerability, endurance, and the complex interplay between destruction and aesthetic expression.

### 3 Confronting Illness Through Literature

As noted, Jan Roar Leikvoll's medical history is inextricable from his novels. In a 2012 interview aired on NRK's *Bokprogrammet*, he remarked: “*Eit vintereventyr kom plutselig til meg, og grunnen var enkel: Jeg tok en test på sykehuset og fikk beskjed om at en hjernetumor vokste*” (Sigvartsen 2012). This simple linkage between renewed diagnosis and creative outpouring crystallizes in the same interview, where he called the tumour “one of the best things that ever happened to me”:

Det høres kanskje helt absurd ut, men hjernetumoren er noe av det beste som har hendt meg. Det gjør at jeg får utfolde meg i det jeg har lyst til å gjøre i dette livet, og det er å skrive [...]. Jeg hadde kanskje hatt noen små noveller på trykk et eller annet sted, men hadde ikke vært i nærheten av å skrive de bøkene jeg har skrevet. (Sigvartsen 2012)

The creative literary process seemed to represent for Leikvoll a way to control and understand the anxiety deriving from the disease: “Jeg tror ikke at man kan ‘skrive seg ut’ av angst, men jeg har lært å forstå angsten og angstens vesen bedre” (Sigvartsen 2012). Crucially, he also identified a turning point in his work: upon discovering the aggressive return of his tumour, his writing style shifted radically, allowing him to approach what he deemed *the truth*: “Alt jeg holdt på med før jeg debuterte, var fullstending annerledes. Jeg skrev dårlig om helt vanlige ting. Jeg skrev om forelskelser og reiser, for eksempel, men jeg var aldri i nærheten av sannheten” (Sigvartsen 2012).

The search for truth in Leikvoll's novels is pursued through the use of highly poetic *nynorsk*, with brief, luminous passages describing the beauty of the human condition, the connections among people. Love and affection are contrasted with longer, gloomier descriptions of the darkest and most gruesome aspects of the individual and human society, where violence, atrocities and cruelty define the daily experiences of the characters. According to the author, the darkness of his own writing is the result of the underlying anger connected to his condition, which accompanied him throughout most of his life: “Mye av raseriet jeg opplevde var et raseri som oppstod da jeg var i slutten av tenårene på grunn av opplevelser knyttet til

sykdom. Når man ser på bøkene mine som helhet, er raseriet knyttet til sykdom veldig sterkt” (Sigvartsen 2012). The need to write about the most gruesome aspects of our society and of the human condition, the attempt to turn the anger and anxiety resulting from his sickness into literary work is, according to Jan Roar Leikvoll, his “confrontation with the illness,” *et oppgjør med sykdommen*.

Although he rejected the idea of writing purely as therapy, his reflections resonate closely with perspectives in narrative medicine and palliative care. For instance, Bolton observes that engaging in artistic endeavours “can offer primary support in the rewriting of a hopeful, helpful life-toward-death narrative” and “reflective processes upon memories, hopes, fears, anxieties and angers” (Bolton 2008, 41). Even though writing was already present in the author’s personal history, it is evident how the experience of the illness triggered a change in the quality of his narration: “Illness and dying bring pain, disfigurement, disorientation, lack of mobility or sense impairment; moreover, people have to readjust their notion of who they are [...]. Their sense of the story of their lives has been disrupted; they have to work hard to develop a new, appropriate, yet satisfying story” (Ibidem). Illness thus pushed him to adopt new thematic and stylistic directions, aligning with Frank’s (1995) concept of “embodied stories” where bodily suffering spurs a recalibration of an individual’s sense of self. The body, in Leikvoll’s case, becomes a critical site of creative impetus, reflecting how the trauma of disease is transposed into fictional captivity:

The story that ill people tell come out of their bodies. The body sets in motion the need for new stories when its disease disrupts the old stories. The body, whether still diseased or recovered, is simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument of whatever new stories are told. These embodied stories have two sides, one personal and the other social. (Frank 1995, 2)

Each of Leikvoll’s novels features a cage that confines the characters: in *Eit vinter-eventyr*, the concentration camp imposes a stark boundary; in *Fiolinane*, the protagonists are trapped in a merciless desert environment; *Bovara* places much of its tension in the monastery and the hidden cellar within it; and in *Songfuglen*, women protect their society behind a fortified wall that ironically doubles as a self-imposed prison. Leikvoll’s own commentary clarifies that this recurring structure is intimately linked to his experience of physical paralysis, especially during his struggle with Guillain-Barré syndrome:

Det er denne innestengtheten som har mye av mitt personlige raseri. Grunnen er veldig enkel, jeg ble liggende lenge fastlåst i meg selv og kunne ikke gjøre noe annet enn ligge i en seng og se i taket [...]. Det skapte en total lammelse og i den lammelsen ble jeg fryktelig, jeg var innelåst i meg selv. Og der ble det mye av grunnlaget for de virkelig mørke sidene av meg selv ble skapt. Det å være sperret i sitt eget sinn over så lang tid ga meg tilgang til alt fra mareritt og fantasier som kunne vare lenge. Underlige drømmer, følelser og lukter som jeg fremdeles kan hente frem

og bruke når jeg skriver. Men samtidig, hvis jeg ikke skriver veldig mye så øker marerittene alltid. (Benneche 2012)

He highlights the close bond between fear and entrapment, an anxiety heightened by his months of immobility. This claustrophobic element, as he told Bjarne Riise Gundersen, is “angstfylt” and central to his fascination with enclosed fictional worlds: “Jeg tror det handler om det klaustrofobiske ved dem. Det begrensede universet i alle disse bøkene har noe angstfylt ved seg, som jeg har vært interessert i” (Gundersen 2012). The stark, minimalistic settings that result from this narrative choice spotlight the human condition in extremis:

Det blir mindre å forholde seg til, og dermed rom til å utforske det jeg er mest opptatt av: hvordan det er å være menneske. Når jeg skriver, ser jeg ofte for meg et menneske på en naken scene, med bare noen få kulisser som gir fylde. De gangene jeg har prøvd å plassere figurene mine i mer detaljerte verdener, føler jeg ofte at mennesket forsvinner. (Gundersen 2012)

By stripping the setting back to stark enclosures, he trains attention on the fundamental experience of having a body and the dread that arises when that body fails to function, thereby making the architectural cage secondary to the all-encompassing trap of physical embodiment.

## 4 Emotional Geography: The Body as Emotional Location

Leikvoll’s representations of paralysis, weakness, and physical imprisonment are defining elements of his fiction. While it is tempting to read them solely through an affective lens, an analysis of these bodily cages reveals how they also embody and critique sociocultural and political frameworks. This section first explores how paralysis and captivity shape the characters’ subjective experiences; it then expands on how the body itself is the site of broader social demands, reinforcing the central idea that corporeal constraints surpass even the most oppressive architectural structures.

Affective narratology provides a useful point of entry. According to Patrick Colm Hogan (2011), the narrative structure often reflects the emotional landscapes of its creators, defining the *emotional geography* as the representation of the connection between the experience of location and the emotional experience: “The existential experience of location is fundamentally an emotional experience” (Hogan 2011, 29). Building on this concept, Andersen (2016) emphasizes how authors embed characters’ feelings in specifically crafted “emotional spaces.” In Leikvoll’s works, constrained, desolate landscapes mirror and magnify physical frailties, presenting the body not only as shaped by space but also as shaping the emotional resonances of

that space. Consequently, the characters' emotional states arise in tandem with architectural enclosures, and, more crucially, from the vulnerabilities of their own bodies:

By means of narrative devices the author creates specific affective or emotional spaces, and allows the affects of the characters to take place within these spaces to attain definite effects. Consequently the localization of emotional incidents do not emerge as neutral surroundings for individual outbursts of feeling. (Andersen 2016, 42)

Leikvoll's literary landscapes can be understood as a projection of how bodily experience is interwoven with space, and how illness and decay map onto his characters' physical environments. The way Leikvoll constructs his settings, often barren, confined, and oppressive, mirrors the corporeal and emotional states of his protagonists. Among these cages, the body is inescapably central. In a recurring pattern, characters reckon with the disintegration of their bodies as an existential puzzle, echoing the author's own confrontation with disease. *Fiolinane* illustrates this dynamic when the protagonist ponders why life is created only to be "knust" by decay:

Igjen ville eg forstå, kvifor sette nokon oss saman, gav oss liv, lèt oss vekse, tenke våre tankar, ta oss omkring i eigen kropp, for så knuse oss att. Kvifor alt arbeidet med å skape alle dei bøyelege ledda, som glei jamt eller gav frå seg knirk, var kanskje vonde i nokre dagar, kanskje lenger.

Likewise, in *Eit vintereventyr*, the protagonist questions what purpose life serves if our bodies inevitably fail:

Kvifor skape mykje eller lite kjøtt på beina, skape oss, berre for at vi skal forsvinne, kvifor auge og hender, berre for å miste andre av syne eller miste festet, miste dei ein greip etter og fekk halde, kvifor føter som trødde seg av garde når alt likevel skulle kvile, stilne, dekkast av lag på lag med sand og jord, som gøynde ein så lenge, kvifor gi oss så mykje når alt likevel skulle takast bort.

This persistent focus on corporeal collapse, mirroring Leikvoll's lived reality of chronic illness, underscores the body as his characters' truest prison, a site of fear, dread, and inexorable vulnerability. Anne Helene Guddal (2014) notes that *Fiolinane* is marked by "en tiltakende kroppslig nedbrytning," a phrase equally applicable to his broader oeuvre. Yet Leikvoll also shows that the body's captivity is both personal and collective, reflecting societal norms and prohibitions. We must therefore shift from a purely inward, affective study of bodily limitations to a more broader view: in Leikvoll's novels, personal suffering merges with social control, revealing a network of forces that bind characters in place, sometimes more unforgivingly than any physical enclosure could.

## 5 The Body as a Socio-Cultural Entity

From this perspective, Leikvoll's fiction illustrates that the body is not merely a private emotional location, but also a socio-cultural one, regulated by structural forces like law, gender restrictions, and social scripts. Personal distress over one's physical constraints cannot be dissociated from these collective pressures. The notion of the body-as-cage therefore gains renewed significance when we recognize how quickly social norms turn it into a prison. This shift from an inward, emotional focus to an outward, sociopolitical lens reveals how Leikvoll's concept of emotional geography extends beyond the individual to encompass collective cultural dynamics. As a social and political construct, the body becomes a second, more encompassing cage, one that traps individuals within societal expectations and norms. Many of Leikvoll's characters confront questions of gender and identity, frequently engaging in acts of cross-dressing. These moments reveal how bodily constraints are not merely personal but shaped by external structures of power.

In *Bovara*, after locking the prostitute up in the cellar, Frrok starts to wonder what it would be like to be like her:

Var eg ei som henne, kva klede kom eg gåande i, og dei som såg meg, kva såg dei, og kva tenkte dei, og sa dei noko til meg om håret og kjolen og skoa, sa dei eg var vakker [...] såg dei lengsla si i meg, såg dei raseriet, eit tap. [...] korleis var det å vere i to grøne sko, korleis ville kjolen hennar sitte på kroppen min, korleis voks slike hår om dei først slo rot i skallen, korleis vart nokon slik og andre slik, kvifor desse forskjellane, kvifor nokon fin og nokon stygg, kvifor fekk nokon gå langt og nokon kort, kvifor alle kjenslene og lengslene når alt eg ville, var å sovne inn og stå opp att i ein annan. (2012, 102)

Frrok envies her physical attractiveness and capacity for connection, wishing he could inhabit an alternative body to secure closeness and acceptance. In *Eit vinter-eventyr*, the nameless protagonist dresses like a woman to dance on stage for the man he was in love with – another guard in the concentration camp – in an attempt to remind the man of his then dead girlfriend. After entering a depot where the bodies of the dead prisoners were amassed, the main character stumbles upon abandoned clothes that once belonged to other prisoners. After wearing a long-haired wig, high-heeled shoes, a dress and stockings (“Grøn kjole og tynne, fine strømper. Grøne sko. Ho bevegde den slanke kroppen sin som berre dei aller finaste og friaste kunne” [Leikvoll 2008, 137]), he enters the room where the guards are having a party, and starts singing and dancing on stage:

Eg var sikker på at han visste kven eg var. Eg var henne på det vesle biletet han hadde i skinnnetuet sitt, som no kvilte mot brystet hans, ho som var med han overalt, det kjæreste han hadde, [...] no akkurat no var ho her, kroppen hennar pusta, pusta og venta på han, [...] og låg ikkje klemt saman to meter under jorda i ei massegrav eller i ein bombardert bygning. (138)

In a similar way to what is described in *Bovara*, the protagonist of *Eit vinterevntyr* dresses up like a woman because of his desire of being loved and accepted, and while his male body was not allowing him to obtain these things, the only opportunity is to try and inhabit a different body:

For eg var òg berre ein kropp, eg var òg berre tarmar og vatn og eit hjarte som slo inni alt dette, eg var ikkje meisla ut av stein eller betong, eg var ein av dei alle som drøymde om å vere nær, om varme, om forståelege og uforståelege ord, berre dei var fine, ein som lengta etter å få sleppe inn i eit høl der noko for meg aleine venta. (2008, 138)

In these passages, the body emerges as a socio-cultural entity subject to capitalistic mechanisms of evaluation. The body is understood, accepted, or rejected according to how well (or poorly) it performs in the socio-cultural environment in which it is situated. As observed by Johnson (2008) in his study on models of embodiment, the body is shaped by the multiple, dialogical social relations that come into play when it encounters its social others.

The human environment of which the body partakes is not just physical or biological. It is also composed of intersubjective relations and coordinations of experience. It is not just that we would have no body without other people (our parents); rather, our bodies develop in and through our inter-personal dialogical relations with our social others (Johnson 2008, 165). The intersubjective relationships that surround the body make it intrinsically social, molded by the web of relationships and interactions with others. Furthermore, the body is also a cultural entity, continually influenced by the societal values and meanings attributed to it in different settings:

Besides our physical, biological, and social environments, our bodies are constituted also by cultural artifacts, practices, institutions, rituals, and modes of interaction [...]. These cultural dimensions include gender, race, class (socioeconomic status), aesthetic values, and various modes of bodily posture and movement. [...] but cultural differences in the shaping and understanding of the body are real and significant. (Johnson 2008, 165–66)

The socio-cultural values and expectations applied to the body push both Frrok and the unnamed protagonist of *Eit vinterevntyr* to seek a different body, a body that might perform significantly better within the sociological field of inter-relations with other bodies.<sup>3</sup>

But in *Songfuglen*, the body becomes the locus for political battle, and when the body is before the law – in its Kafkaian understanding – being in a body that does not conform to the norm, to the rules and to the law, makes the individual illegal in his or her (or their) own body. In Leikvoll's standalone novel, Jakoba's existence is based

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<sup>3</sup> On emotions as social construct, see also Nussbaum 1992, 2001.

(and allowed) on the precondition that he hides his real body. In fact, there are only two kinds of men that are allowed to live within the city walls: those who work at the brothel and the castrati that sing in the choir. Jakoba's mother decides that Jakoba – whose masculine features start to become evident due to his age – needs to be castrated to be able to remain and live with the society of women. This decision is taken in agreement with his singing teacher, who knows someone that is able to perform the surgery. In this respect, the passage where the voice instructor informs Jakoba about the operation is crucial:

Ho gir deg noko slik at du sovnar og ikkje merkar nokon ting. Ho ordnar alt. Dette kan ho, du er ikkje den første. Når du vaknar, vil du kjenne deg fri. Fri frå å måtte vere på veg til å bli ein mann. Bare slik kan eg ifølge lova ha deg i lære. [...] Eg skulle gjerne hatt deg som du er, Jakoba, men då ville du alltid leve ulovleg.

The transition from the male body to the female body is connected to the idea of freedom, the freedom of not having to grow into the body of an adult man. It is exactly in the policing of the body that its right to exist resided, to be legal: “Eg skulle gjerne hatt deg som du er Jakoba, men då ville du alltid leve ulovleg”. The diversion from the norm needs to be acted upon, so that the individual can conform and be accepted, they can be integrated into society as long as they give up (part of) who they are and comply to society's expectations and rules.

## 6 Conclusions

Although Jan Roar Leikvoll's fiction is frequently reduced to its unsettling portrayal of violence and despair, “Bekmørkt, svart, gråtonet” (Guddal 2014), reading it in light of his severe health struggles clarifies the deeper metaphorical power of the enclosures his characters inhabit. As Asbjørn Grønstad suggests in his film studies work, a setting can be interpreted through both its performativity (what it does) and its sensibility (what it is) (Grønstad 2010, 320). Applying these twin categories to Leikvoll's literary landscapes, we see that while these closed worlds intensify the exploration of human nature, their evocative power transcends the fictional realm by reflecting Leikvoll's personal battle with paralysis and illness.

These emotional spaces are “coded through psychological means” (Andersen 2016, 71), functioning as projections of the author's thoughts, feelings, fears, and anxieties. Two distinct layers of captivity thus emerge: one involving concrete, architectural structures, and another, far more critical, where the body itself is the final cage. Although the architectural enclosures (like the concentration camp in *Eit vintereventyr* or the monastery in *Bovara*) are bleak, they pale in comparison to the deeper constraints of physicality. The body, shaped by cultural and social norms, can

function as a prison from which there is no release. Leikvoll's grandfather's words in *Fiolinane*, "Kanskje er ikkje dette den beste staden, men ein må vere der ein er og i det ein er" (Leikvoll 2010, 88). The body in Leikvoll is therefore, in Grete Jacobsen's (2020) terms, a "situated body," inextricably embedded in its social and historical coordinates.

While the body's entrapment naturally draws on the author's personal experiences, these novels also address how larger social structures, including laws, gender constructs, and cultural biases, can intensify bodily vulnerability. Leikvoll thus combines personal fear (pain, disability, a sense of fragility) with the pressure of external rules and institutions that punish or exclude "unfit" individuals. Each minimalistic, claustrophobic setting becomes a microcosm where biological weakness and political power converge, illustrating that the boundary between internal paralysis and external control is porous, how personal and collective captivities reinforce one another.

Ultimately, Leikvoll's works occupy a space where personal confrontation with illness meets broader reflections on how societies regulate and ostracize certain bodies. The recurring motif of entrapment highlights that cages can be as much social as personal, shaped by legal frameworks, gender norms, or financial imperatives. By weaving together his own health crises and a sweeping critique of bodily policing, Leikvoll advances a nuanced portrait of how constraints on human freedom can originate both outside and within the body.

This dual perspective not only clarifies the role of biography in interpreting his narratives but also shows the fiction's broader cultural resonance. Building on theories of embodied subjectivity (Johnson 2008) and studies of bodily regulation (Grue 2014, 2018), this reading underscores that Leikvoll's landscapes of enclosure critique more than just personal suffering. They expose and interrogate the myriad ways in which human bodies, particularly those deemed deviant or disabled, are circumscribed by societal pressures.

By centering the body as the ultimate cage, Leikvoll's novels simultaneously become narrative projections of his own medical history and social commentaries on vulnerability, regulation, and survival. The depth of this vision aligns with approaches in affective narratology and narrative medicine, showing how personal suffering merges with collective anxieties about the fragile limits of human embodiment. As such, Leikvoll's literary dystopias do more than depict bleak worlds; they challenge readers to consider how easily the body itself can become a lifelong prison, shaped by, but also shaping, the cultural forces that enclose it.

By employing this perspective, this study posits that Leikvoll's literary landscapes, marked by enclosed, oppressive spaces and characters grappling with entrapment, function not only as dystopian settings but as narrative reconfigurations of the author's own confrontation with illness and bodily deterioration. The

paralysis due to the Guillain-Barré syndrome and his lifelong battle with a brain tumour introduce aesthetic, psychological, and existential dimensions into his depiction of captivity, both physical and metaphorical. In this sense, Leikvoll's writing transforms lived experience into literary space, where personal history and broader socio-cultural anxieties coalesce into a singular aesthetic vision.

It may prove especially illuminating to compare Leikvoll's works with broader traditions of illness narratives or to examine how they inform contemporary debates on disability, trauma, and representations of bodily suffering. By exploring both the author's personal struggles and universal questions of physical confinement, Leikvoll's oeuvre transcends autobiography to illuminate enduring anxieties about human frailty and systemic constraints. Viewed through this lens, his 'cages', however grim, encompass not only the tangible walls surrounding his characters but also the inescapable confines of the body itself.

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