Tove Jansson (1914-2001) is known to most of us as the creator of the Moomins and their eccentric, enchanting, mysterious Nordic world. She wrote and illustrated a dozen of the most distinctive children’s books of the twentieth century, as well as a comic strip about the Moomins, which was continued by her brother Lars; she wrote several novels for adults, including the magical *The Summer Book*; and she illustrated books by other writers, including *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Hobbit*.

She began as a painter. Her father Viktor Jansson was a sculptor, her mother an illustrator: she was surrounded by the visual arts from her earliest years, and by the sense of value and importance attached to the work of an artist. Her memoir *Sculptor’s Daughter* gives a rich picture of the atmosphere of her father’s studio, not only the hard work of creating art but also the fantasy, the story-telling, the sheer fun her parents brought to the business of living.

Tove Jansson trained at the Finnish Society of Art in Helsinki, and later in Paris, and painted portraits and landscapes in a broad, vividly coloured style that seems to have owed a lot to the Fauves, to Derain and the early Matisse. She was never tempted by Cubism, or Surrealism, or abstraction of any sort. Boel Westin’s full and interesting biography contains several reproductions of her painting, which seems to me pleasant but derivative, and to have little of the power and originality of her purely graphic and illustrational work.
The exuberant inventiveness she inherited from both her parents, and learned from their example, couldn’t be expressed in only one form. From her earliest years she was a storyteller: by the time she was twenty, she had already published a short story, a picture book and a comic strip, and she continued to write as well as paint. As Ali Smith says in her introduction to *Sculptor’s Daughter*, in her parent’s house “the telling of stories is more than just an act of pleasure, it’s a ritual connected with warmth, security and home.”

The first Moomin book, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*, was published in Sweden in 1945. It set up a contrast between catastrophe and security that a number of the other Moomin stories also play with. The security is embodied in the nurturing, comforting, utterly reliable Moominmamma, who is perfectly happy to indulge the fantasies and playfulness of her top-hat-wearing husband and son, and always ready to paint flowers on the wall herself. The danger comes from all kinds of creatures: ghosts, the mysterious and silent Hattifatteners, the horrible Groke, as well as from the gleefully wicked Little My, and from natural phenomena like comets and floods. Jansson’s inventiveness seems effortless.

The Moomin books were soon translated into English and other languages, and in 1954 a Moomin comic strip began running in the *London Evening News*. I remember it well. I also remember being given a hardback copy of *The Exploits of Moominpappa*, published in English in 1952 by Ernest Benn, and being enchanted, at the age of eight, both by the story and by the information about the author on the back:

?Miss Jansson has a very large studio in Helsinki which is littered with designs for enormous murals, frescoes and all the paraphernalia of the artist. This studio is the centre of Helsinki’s artistic community. Artists, writers, and the leading actors and actresses from the Finnish and Swedish theatres meet there for long discussions, which sometimes extend far into the night. They also sing songs in many languages and dance many national dances. During these nights there is a Moomin atmosphere in Miss Jansson’s studio."

That was the way to live, I thought.

What strikes me most vividly now in the Moomin books is the perfection of the drawings. Jansson had mastered a style of utter simplicity in black and white line, and a drawing like that of the landing stage on page 89 of *Finn Family Moomintroll* seems like the sort of thing anyone could do, until you try and imitate it. The sheer ingenuity of the way she represents rain on water? a few separate lines each curving down to end in its own little oval? has never been surpassed.
The simplicity of the means could express a great complexity of texture and light. There’s a wonderful full-page picture in *The Exploits of Moominpappa* (p. 132) showing the amphibious submarine invented by Momminpappa’s great friend Hodgkins plunging beneath the waves under a dark sky. The foaming wave-tops are brilliant white, and so is the water all around the Amphibian, lit up by the lights blazing out of each porthole. Inside the vessel we can see the tiny silhouettes of five characters, each precisely recognisable, and escorting the craft under the water are a dozen fishes each with a differently-shaped electric light on its head, and a couple of friendly mermaids each carrying what looks like a bedside lamp, and a whale with a pair of bracketed candelabra like those you might see on an old-fashioned piano. The picture is so bright you almost have to shade your eyes, and yet all it’s made of are black lines and white paper.

The two books reviewed here have different origins and different intentions. Westin’s biography is a full, well-documented, possibly over-detailed work. All the facts are there, and plenty of pictures. *Sculptor’s Daughter* is a marvel and a classic. Jansson responded to the world with a freshness and originality that have hardly ever been matched in the field of children’s books, and she could convey all the excitement of wonder as well as the reassurance of comfort and familial love — and in her final Moomin books, such as *Moominvalley in November*, evoke a mood of apprehension, loss, and mystery. She should have had the Nobel Prize.


Finn Family Moomintroll, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140301502, £6.99 pbk

*The Exploits of Moominpappa*, Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0141328645, £12.99 hbk

*Moominvalley in November* Tove Jansson, Puffin, 978-0140307153, £6.99 pbk

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