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Plenary Lecture

*Fredrik Backman's Britt-Marie:
When the "Just" a Housemaker Becomes the Central Focus of the Narrative*

The Swedish author Fredrik Backman is the creator of a gallery of characters that may be labelled as marginal, or belonging to groups of marginality: orphan children, traumatized teens, poor disillusioned citizens of forgotten towns and villages, disabled people, men and women who have lost their identity, widows who cannot deal with their grief, alcoholics, dreamers, hopeless and helpless people, children who are bullied, and adults who cannot express themselves, sports people whose reason of living is shattered, and many others. They all march on the ironic canvas of Backman's narratives. Britt-Marie is a character who first makes an appearance in *my grandmother asked me to tell you she's sorry*, a novel published in English in 2015. As if asking for a story of her own, the character becomes the main focus of *Britt-Marie Was Here*, one year later. If the first book - somehow a book about meaning, about the mechanisms that keep people going after having gone through horrible experiences - presents Britt-Marie as a pedantic, narrow-minded, bitter pestle, compulsive cleaning housewife until almost the end of the story, the second book follows Britt-Marie in an adventure in which the reader is surprised to see how compassionate, humane, understanding and utterly likable this character can become. She is not 'just' a housewife, as there is no such thing as 'just' a housewife. In a world driven by all kinds of ambitions, where people seem to be conditioned mostly by money, power, and narcissistic self-indulging behaviours, Britt-Marie comes with her views on cleanliness, of making things nice, of trying to put order and follow certain rules that somehow give a little structure to a life of sorrow, despondency, sheer poverty and lack of hope. Soon enough, the reader hopes that she starts cleaning, that she dedicates herself to trying to get rid of the lack of interest in those around, and to take care of the many hurt people in the small town Borg. The book comes to re-evaluate the status of those who are many times considered marginal, un-important, and unimaginative women who dedicate their lives to others, to their households, their neighbourhoods, to fulfilling their duties in the best way they see fit. Britt-Marie might not be a character that opposes patriarchy in a traditional manner, who is trying to always put herself first, who even wants to tell her story, but when confronted with extraordinary events. She is a descendant of those women who got the world going, who gave stability and structure to family and social life, who were part of a complicated economical and social activity, which was the traditional lower-class household, as Mary Harrington advocates in her book *Feminism Against Progress*, a book that is considered as a feminist reactionary book, but which also brings some of the sensitive points of feminist theory: motherhood and the history of marriage as more than just enslavement of women. Also, this character reminds us of Rob Henderson's book *Luxury Beliefs* - those splendid ideas that only middle-class or upper class people can afford. Britt-Marie is the spokesperson of the neglected, the overlooked, the poor, the humiliated, the traumatized, and the orphaned, even if she is sixty-three, she has done nothing but take care of her husband and house for forty years, and she is 'just' a housewife. She proves that the world needs some thorough cleaning, and that cutlery do need to be placed in a certain order in all the kitchens.