

Invisible Girls: Discourses of Femininity and Power in Children's Fantasy

SANNA LEHTONEN

*In children's fantasy, invisibility is a popular motif, typically achieved by using different magic items. Invisibility also serves an important role in feminist discourses of femininity and power. In feminist theory, invisibility has been used to describe the status of females in patriarchal systems, while in fantastic texts invisible females have often literally served as the monstrous Others. However, invisibility has also been seen as a form of empowerment, particularly in fantastic contexts where it can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. To open up and explore these questions, this article examines the feminist discourses of invisibility, femininity and power in two British children's fantasy novels: *The Time of the Ghost* (1981) by Diana Wynne Jones and *The Ghost Drum* (1987) by Susan Price.*

Key words: *invisibility, femininity, children's fantasy, Diana Wynne Jones, Susan Price.*

INTRODUCTION

In the far North, somewhere back in time, a young female shaman sings a Song of Invisibility, enters a Czar's palace unseen and rescues a prince. In Britain, sometime in the 1970s, a young girl slips into her past after a severe accident and floats around familiar places as a ghost trying to remember who she is and what has happened to her. In the first text, *The Ghost Drum* (1987) by Susan Price, invisibility is a valuable form of power, whereas in the second text, *The Time of the Ghost* (1981) by Diana Wynne Jones, invisibility is connected with almost complete powerlessness, non-existence, and fear. These contrasting functions of invisibility – invisibility as a form of power or invisibility as a state of complete powerlessness – are the two typical ways to employ the motif in fantastic texts. While *The Ghost Drum* and *The Time of the Ghost* rely on the typical functions of invisibility, in both novels the girl protagonists' invisibility is related to feminist concerns, which makes the texts different from typical invisibility narratives in children's books. In this paper, I will examine the connections between invisibility, femininity and power in Price's and Jones's novels by focusing on the ways the texts reflect feminist discourses of women's and girls' (in)visibility.

In children's fantasy, invisibility is a popular motif, typically achieved by using magic items, such as rings, cloaks or potions. Invisibility, here, is a physical

state in which a living character – in contrast to the ghost of a dead one – cannot be seen by others, a state achieved through magic or supernatural means. As in myths, legends and folktales, in children’s fantasy invisibility is always in some way connected with uses of power. Influential examples in the Western tradition would include the use of the invisibility ring in the story of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic*, and the uses of the invisibility helmet in Greek mythology, as well as the invisibility cloaks in *Eddas* and *Nibelungenlied* – persons who can turn invisible in these stories are either gods or goddesses or people with superhuman powers. However, as Maria Lassén-Seger has plausibly argued in her study of metamorphoses in children’s fiction (3), fantastic bodily transformations as motifs are not always about unlimited powers or empowerment, but can illustrate very effectively all kinds of changes in power relations, including disempowerment. Invisibility as a motif can function in both ways and be used for two opposite purposes: to raise the question of whether, as a consequence of their invisibility, invisible persons have almost unlimited power, since no one is able to monitor their behaviour; or to illustrate how invisible persons are completely powerless in a state in which they are outside all social contacts and recognition. Stories such as the ring of Gyges speculate about the corruptive effects of being able to turn invisible and possess unlimited power, whereas in stories about powerless persons, invisibility illustrates the characters’ social role and status rather than their (in)ability to behave in a morally acceptable way.

When associated with unlimited power, children’s fantasy offers both serious and humorous takes on the invisibility motif. A typical use of the motif in both cases is to address the moral aspects of being able to turn invisible in stories where invisibility is gained through different kinds of magic gadgets. In a more serious vein, this scheme is introduced in famous texts such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937), and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) – as well as in Robert Cormier’s young adult novel *Fade* (1990), with its tragic outcomes. In humorous children’s fantasy stories about encounters with magic items turning one invisible, such as Martha Jocelyn’s *The Invisible Day* (1997) and Sally Gardner’s *The Invisible Boy* (2002), the emphasis is on the funny situations one will get into when being invisible, although the moral aspects of invisibility are also involved.¹

In contrast to invisibility as a superpower achieved by using different magic ‘tools’, more interesting from the perspective of feminist theory are instances where invisibility is either a more permanent state or a personal gift of a girl character. In these cases, invisibility – whether self-chosen or imposed – is more crucially linked to the character’s identity, often particularly connected with femininity, and not always a positive feature. In examples such as Tove Jansson’s ‘Berättelsen om det osynliga barnet’ [Story of the invisible child] (1962), Else Fjaerden’s *Den usynliga damen* [The invisible woman] (1997), and in Patricia Kindl’s *The Woman in the Wall* (1997), turning invisible is connected with being shy, scared and powerless in the sense that the characters are unable to participate in social networks and communication. In Jansson’s story, the girl becomes invisible under the cold and sarcastic treatment of her guardian, while in Fjaerden’s book a very

shy lady turns invisible every time someone tries to talk to her. Kindl's novel features a young girl who is too scared to leave her home and is so antisocial that others cannot see her. While there are also humorous features in these texts, invisibility is not considered as mere play or fun and it is certainly not seen as a kind of superpower. Thus, in the case of invisible girls the motif of invisibility can become ambiguous: is it actually a form of power or a state of powerlessness, or perhaps a combination of both?

In *The Ghost Drum* and *The Time of the Ghost* invisibility is not achieved by the help of magic gadgets, nor is it portrayed as humorous or funny. While in stories of invisible girls invisibility does not always have any specific associations with femininity, or, more particularly, with feminist concerns, I will argue that in these two novels these issues are related. The two novels make for an interesting comparison since they are both stories of girls' empowerment, but draw on different feminist discourses of (in)visibility. With regard to the time of these novels' publication, Julia Eccleshare (20–1) notes that in Britain in the 1970s it was mooted that children's books failed to reflect the society in which children were growing up—a view which led to an emphasis on socio-cultural concerns in children's books in the 1980s. Both novels were published well after the beginning of second-wave feminism in a cultural context where feminist discourses and influences were circulating both in and outside children's fiction. Earlier readings by Farah Mendlesohn (34–5), John Warren Stewig (122) and Brian Attebery (75–8) have recognised these novels as young girls' successful quests for agency and power. None of these readings, however, focus on the ways in which invisibility is used in negotiating the connections between power or powerlessness and different femininities. I do not intend to speculate about any direct feminist influences on Jones and Price, but rather, following the ideas of the feminist critical discourse analyst, Jane Sunderland, to map out traces of different gendered discourses in the novels, here with a focus on the feminist discourses of invisibility and femininity. These discourses circulate outside fiction but are also reflected in and affected by fiction itself. Sunderland emphasises the multivoicedness of fictional texts for children (81): in the context of children's literature, a single text can include traces from several different, and even opposing, discourses.

FEMINIST DISCOURSES OF INVISIBILITY

Invisibility as a metaphor is commonplace in all kinds of discourses—probably because of its effectiveness in illustrating power relations and because 'invisible' can refer to anything that is unnoticed, non-existing, marginal, or 'as-if-not-there'; depending on the context, anything can be invisible. Usually, in discourses of cultural invisibility in particular, the metaphor is used as a part of identity politics which aims at the *visibility* of marginal groups in society. In general, in realist contexts and discourses, invisibility is not a desirable state.² There are more possibilities for invisibility as a motif in fantastic texts, since in a fantastic context it can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically.

In feminist discourses, there are, basically, two opposite ways to understand invisibility in relation to girls and women—whether fictional or real. These are, however, somewhat different from the two uses of the invisibility motif as explained above. In feminist discourses, invisibility is defined either as an undesirable state or as a desirable state or a form of *power* for women.³ In fantastic texts, invisible females—such as ghosts or witches—have often literally served as the horrifying female Others, belonging to the mythic and literary tradition of female monsters that Marina Warner tracks from antiquity to the present day (7–9). In addition, in feminist theory—according to Lynda Stone (328), particularly in theory based on liberal or pragmatist feminist discourses—invisibility, in the sense of cultural invisibility, has been metaphorically used to describe the problematic status of all females in patriarchal orders of history and culture. Consequently, one of the main projects of liberal feminism has been to make women visible, both in real and fictional worlds. While these discourses of invisibility as a troublesome state for females emerged in the 1970s with second-wave feminism, they have by no means disappeared since then but have taken new forms. For instance, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (121) argues, in the third wave feminist discourse of media visibility the commercial media visibility and the power connected with it are both embraced and celebrated, while invisibility (absence from the media) is connected with non-existence.

These rather negative interpretations of invisibility might, however, be challenged by other feminist discourses of invisibility as a form of power, especially in fantastic contexts in which it can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Firstly, invisibility can be understood as a form of magic power used by witches; in the fantastic context, an invisible witch can have almost unlimited power. While in myths and folktales invisible witches often are the frightening and monstrous female Others, in radical feminist discourses the figure of the witch has been completely reimagined. In her study on the witch-figure in history and literature, Diane Purkiss describes 1970s and 1980s radical feminist rewritings of earlier literary traditions and histories that portray the witch as an attractive and powerful character, a suitable role-model for all females (13). Secondly, women's *visibility* itself—as an object of (the male) gaze—was problematised by feminist film theorists, such as Laura Mulvey (11). During the early phases of second-wave feminism, such theories, appropriating the psychoanalytic concept of gaze, contrasted with pragmatist feminist discourses that regarded cultural invisibility as an undesirable state for women. While early feminist theorists did not see invisibility as the solution, even at a theoretical level, in Peggy Phelan's poststructuralist feminism in the early 1990s invisibility is seen as a form of power: to remain invisible and 'unmarked' is a powerful state in contrast to becoming visible and thus an object vulnerable to gaze and domination (Phelan 6–7).⁴ Phelan calls for a more critical stance towards the politics of visibility and representation and warns against connecting greater visibility automatically with enhanced (political) power. She does not suggest that continued invisibility could be 'the "proper" political

agenda for the disenfranchised', but 'rather that the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying' (6). Thus, while it is necessary to become temporarily visible—or temporarily represent some fixed identity—through a performance, afterwards one should return to the less vulnerable state of invisibility, or become 'unmarked' again. Although Phelan's theory is firmly grounded in psychoanalysis, being 'unmarked' or invisible is not merely a theoretical concept or position. As an example of 'active vanishing' Phelan describes the Guerrilla Girls—a group of artists who make their thinking visible in their artwork but remain anonymous making public appearances only in gorilla masks and mini-skirts and thus 'resisting visible identities' (19). Strategic 'invisibility', then, can become political action. While in the real world the Guerrilla Girls or any other artists might have difficulty turning literally invisible as an act of resistance, in a fantastic text, the concerns with visible identities can be addressed by introducing literally invisible characters.

THE GHOST DRUM: INVISIBLE WOMAN AS THE 'WOMAN OF POWER'

The Ghost Drum introduces invisibility as a form of a witch's power. Susan Price's text is a feminist reworking of both Russian fairy tales and Nordic mythology, constructing the shaman, or the witch, not as a wicked old crone, but as a woman of power. In the story, situated in some obscure past of Russia, the female protagonist, Chingis, is a young shaman, adopted and trained by her witch grandmother (Baba Yaga). She has asked her real parents, who are slaves, to give Chingis to her, since, 'In my care she will never be hungry or frozen or cruelly treated; she will not be a slave. Give her to me, and she will be free; she will have Power.' (*The Ghost Drum* 5). The (foster) grandmother as a mentor who teaches her granddaughter the secrets of magic echoes the radical feminist discourse of witchcraft as matrilineally inherited, a discourse that, according to Purkiss (21–2), is popular among both contemporary wiccans and (radical) feminist fiction writers. The grandmother, Baba Yaga, is a reworking of the witch in Russian fairy tales in which she is sometimes a cannibalistic ogre, elsewhere a helper of a brave heroine or hero, but not the sympathetic mentor and mother she is in Price's text.⁵ The representation of Chingis and her grandmother follows the conventions which John Stephens has called the wise witch schema: they are 'conservers of nature and tradition, healers, and agents of renewal' (198). This schema, as Stephens suggests, can be used to critique contemporary social attitudes and practices (201). Chingis and her grandmother are indeed sympathetic outsiders whose way of life offers an alternative to the totalitarian Russian czardom in the story-world—the czardom representing any kind of totalitarian regime. In this respect, the text clearly reflects the radical feminist discourse of witches—and, as Stephens suggests, the wise witch schema—but how does the ability to turn invisible fit into it?

As a fully trained shaman, Chingis has many powers, the ability to turn invisible among them. As John Warren Stewig (122) has noted, invisibility is among Chingis's most useful talents and she has two ways in which to turn

invisible: she can write a spell by using the shaman alphabet, or she can sing a song. To add a third form of invisibility, Chingis can also spirit-travel and observe others without being noticed (*The Ghost Drum* 64). In all cases, invisibility is strictly controlled by Chingis herself, certainly an empowering ability, and in comparison with her other powers, the ability to turn invisible is the most effective and useful one. Moreover, invisibility is a power that is achieved through several years of training; thus it is the result of a hard work rather than simply, or accidentally, achieved by swallowing a magic pill, powder or potion, or wearing an invisibility cloak, ring or helmet. In the story, Chingis uses invisibility to help the young Safa Czarevich to escape from the Czar's palace, where he has been locked up in a tower since his birth:

Chingis followed a broad marble path, and climbed wide marble steps, to the massive bronze and gold doors of the Palace. As she climbed the steps she held both hands stretched before her – and the doors shuddered and clanged in their frame, and slowly moved inward, as if her hands were pressing a weight of air against them. ‘But you shall see nothing, nothing that I do,’ Chingis sang, and the guards on the steps and in the entrance hall did not see the doors opening, though they heard them open, and heard the singing. They heard the crash, too, and felt the floor shake, when Chingis dropped her hands to her sides and let both the bronze doors slam shut. The brazen noise reverberated far through the Palace, and every guard who heard it jumped and brought his pike into the fighting position. But there was no enemy to be seen, and the doors they heard slam had not, to their eyes, been opened. Only a singing passed through the hall and on into the jewel-coloured gloom of the Palace. The soldiers stood to attention, and feared ghosts. (*The Ghost Drum* 66–7.)

There are two crucial points about Chingis's invisibility. Firstly, here, the power of invisibility here comes with restrictions: the singing spell only functions when her voice is heard. While this is a restriction, it could also be interpreted as a feminist take on invisibility: a girl/woman who can be heard but not seen is, of course, the total opposite of the conventional ideal of women as beings which should be seen but not heard. Secondly, her powers arouse fear in others: here the guards think of her as a ghost, while later a male shaman – envious of Chingis's powers – makes a plan to kill her and indeed succeeds (although Chingis does return from the dead to set things straight). Killing Chingis is the only way to disempower her – because Chingis's invisibility and other powers are learned abilities, parts of herself, they cannot be stolen from her, as some magic gadget might. This fear of the (invisible) female monster/witch/Other is a convention from earlier tales, which *The Ghost Drum*, however, rewrites. Since the text represents Chingis's opponents, the male shaman and female Czaritsa, as people who are obsessed with the idea of power and ready to do away with anyone threatening their position, this particular text shows that the invisible witch-woman is actually feared because she is powerful and a threat to the social order, rather than because she is evil or frightening as such. Seeing things from the protagonist Chingis's perspective invites readers to sympathise with the witch-character, rather than with the people who fear her.

While the text reflects the feminist discourse of witch-women/Women of Power as attractive characters, and rewrites the conventional evil-witch-type

femininity by showing that Chingis is both a powerful and good person, it does not rewrite the fact that the witch-woman, a Woman of Power, remains outside society. Living in the Baba Yaga's hut on chicken-legs, Chingis is feared not only by the power-craving, mean characters, but also by the common people who do not understand her powers. When Chingis and Safa, whom she has taken as an apprentice, want to help poor, common people during the winter, Safa suggests that they could invite the people to live with him and Chingis. In response, Chingis laughs and says: 'They wouldn't want to live with us, little brother; but yes! We shall help them.' (*The Ghost Drum* 97). Chingis recognises that she and Safa as witches are outsiders, but this does not prevent her from helping other people, a good witch as she is. Invisibility as a form of power fits well into the feminist discourse of the witch as a powerful and attractive character. Nevertheless, the femininity that the invisible witch represents is still, in this text, represented as the Other's, an outsider's identity. This is, of course, the case with many other (radical) feminist stories of the witch as Stephens points out (201). However, although outsiders can represent alternative ways of life and critique of society, in the margins their powers always remain limited.

Thus, invisibility as a form of a witch's power fits neatly in the radical feminist discourse of the witch—but invisibility in relation to this discourse is no different from any other magical powers. In this respect, invisibility as such is not significant, but is merely a part of Chingis's identity as a witch. However, Chingis is not just any kind of witch, she is a Lappish shaman, and the text makes use of the representations of shape-shifters, shamans and witches in Nordic mythology. In Nordic myths, which are also incorporated in the text, invisibility and shape-shifting have specific meanings. In her study of female shape-shifters in Scandinavian traditions, Catharina Raudvere explains that whether the shape-shifters were males or females, gods or humans, shape-shifting—and invisibility, or spirit-travelling as one form of it—was considered a predominantly evil form of power (47). Moreover, females who turned invisible (or spirit-travelled) during the night and visited other people's homes were regarded as particularly suspicious. As Raudvere states:

By contrast to many of the male characters with the same [shape-shifting] abilities, the women act almost exclusively out of greed, envy, depravity, corruption and unrequited love. The stories of female shape-shifters are almost always connected with sexuality and witchcraft. (47)

The positive image of a female shape-shifter in *The Ghost Drum* is indeed a rewriting of the version of the witch-woman in Nordic myths. Not only are her motifs different—altruistic rather than selfish—but since Chingis is not represented as a sexual being at all, the problems with the connection between witchcraft and (dangerous/threatening) female sexuality are omitted. Chingis is represented as a morally superior, inhuman character—her only flaw is her inexperience, which makes it possible for the evil Kuzma to trick her. By suggesting that something good can be achieved through shape-shifting, the text rewrites Norse mythological traditions—as well as other famous stories of the

corruptive effects of invisibility, as equated with power: Plato's story of Gyges and Wells's and Tolkien's later extended versions of it. This, again, brings us back to the radical feminist discourse of witches, which tends to see the power of the witch as a positive force. In this discourse, moral questions concerning the use of power are introduced only in the sense that the (female) witches are represented as morally exemplary characters who do not abuse their powers, nor are corrupted by them.

THE TIME OF THE GHOST: INVISIBILITY AND THE POWERLESS GIRL

In contrast to the use of invisibility in Price's text, Diana Wynne Jones's *The Time of the Ghost* uses invisibility to illustrate a girl's powerless status. In the story, situated in Britain in the 1970s, Sally, the protagonist, is invisible only when she visits her past (although neither the reader nor Sally is aware of this in the beginning). In the past, other people think Sally is a ghost, while in the present time she is lying in a hospital bed after being thrown out of a moving car by her violent boyfriend. In this respect, the novel resembles both time-slip stories and traditional ghost stories. In the former, characters from a certain time (whether past or future) appear in another time sometimes as ghosts; in the latter, the ghost disappears at the end when, after whatever horrible state of affairs has been brought into daylight, the mystery is solved and the ghost is set at peace.⁶ However, in *The Time of the Ghost*, the motif of invisibility also has functions other than representing the state of a person visiting her past (as in time-slip stories), or the state of a person who is either dead, or has suffered some horrible event or accident (as in ghost stories). This further set of functions is partly achieved through the ways in which the novel deviates from the conventions of both time-slip and ghost stories.

Here, the discourse of invisibility serves mainly to address issues of powerlessness. This is effectively represented through Sally, the ghost, as the main focalising character who during most of the story does not know who she is or what has happened to her—as in several other of Jones's novels, the mystery of what is really going on and what are the characters' true identities is gradually revealed as the story unfolds. The reader depends completely on Sally's perceptions and thoughts and thus has to share the ghost's restricted point of view. As Ruth Waterhouse writes in her analysis of the narrative structure of *The Time of the Ghost*, presenting the events from the ghost's point of view is a deviation from the conventions of ghost stories (135). Waterhouse concludes that in addition to subverting the readers' assumptions of ghosts, the restricted point of view 'can self-reflexively play with exploring the reading process itself, and so it teases this reader into seeking to escape her ghost-like status, and to communicate with the author and with others' (141). I agree that the restricted point of view encourages the reader to seek for a more informed position by looking for clues in the dialogue of other characters. However, the restricted point of view also puts the reader in a powerless position alongside the ghost, to share the fear and anguish caused by her *invisibility* as much as her unawareness of

what is happening. The horror of invisibility is the result of losing one's body and being cut off from all communication – in contrast to Chingis, Sally is not only invisible but her voice cannot be heard either. Although later in the novel Sally can voluntarily visit her past and, thus, turn invisible, in the beginning Sally cannot control her invisibility at all. For her it is a terrifying state in which she feels almost non-existent:

After a while she managed to make herself look down again. There was still nothing in there. *I've turned into nothing!* she thought. Panic swelled again. *There's been an accident! STOP IT!* she told herself. *Stop and think.* She made herself do that. It took awhile, because thinking seemed so difficult, and panic kept swelling through her thoughts and threatening to whirl her away again, but she eventually thought something like: *I'm all right. I'm here. I'm me. If I wasn't, I wouldn't even be frightened. I wouldn't know. But something has happened to me. I can't see myself at all, not even a smear of shadow on the road.* (*The Time of the Ghost* 3–4, italics in original.)

Invisibility here is an undesired state of almost complete powerlessness and non-existence, since, indeed, a bit later Sally feels that it is impossible even to think when she is invisible: '*It probably comes of not having a proper head to keep my thoughts in*' (*The Time of the Ghost* 5, italics in original). This condition contrasts with the representation of invisibility as a powerful state, represented in Chingis's story, as well as with the typical use of invisibility in children's fantasy as a kind of a superpower or a humorous device. As in conventional ghost stories, ghosts and horror are connected, but here the horror is experienced by the ghost and caused by her powerless, unexplained bodily state.

Sally's literal invisibility and powerlessness are also related in many ways to Sally's metaphorical invisibility in her own life. The fantastic, literal invisibility helps Sally, and the reader, to realise that she has already been invisible, in the metaphorical sense, before her transformation. For her, invisibility is a metaphor turned into reality, connected with the idea of being non-existent, or dead:

Oh good gracious, am I dead? Sally cried out. *I'm not dead, am I?* she asked her sisters. It did no good. Unaware that anyone was asking them anything, they all went back to their own concerns. Then all at once it became very important to Sally that they should know she was there. It was even more important to her than the reason why she was here. (*The Time of the Ghost* 21, italics in original.)

With Sally, the readers learn that she has been invisible in many ways in her life. The differences are explored between Sally's present and past selves and her memories of the past as opposed to the past 'as it really happened', while she slips between the present and the past. Sally's story resembles other post-war British time-slip narratives in which, according to Linda Hall, visits to the past are a way to explore the sense of personal identity and of personal and cultural inheritance (46). However, *The Time of the Ghost* is an unconventional time-slip story because Sally slips only seven years back into her own personal past – not into some distant (family) past. Thus, the novel does not explore any issues of cultural inheritance but focuses on Sally's personal identity and the role of memories in shaping and maintaining identity. By contrasting Sally's memories to the 'real'

past, the 20-year-old Sally's nostalgic views of her own past are shown to be very different from the past scenes that she witnesses as a ghost. In her re-visioning of the past, Sally's invisibility serves an important narrative function – because she is invisible (and inaudible), for most of the time she cannot really participate in the past events but can merely witness them. During her visits to the past Sally is forced to realise that her parents are not the 'most perfect parents anyone could have' (*The Time of The Ghost* 28) as she first remembers them, nor is she herself the person she has believed (or made herself to believe) to be. However, Sally's invisibility is not only a condition of a person who has slipped into a different time but also serves a thematic function. During Sally's visits to the past we find out that as a young girl she has been neglected by her parents, and later in her relationship with the violent boyfriend she has not really known who she is. She has only played out the role of the nice girl listening to and obeying the two males in her life, her father (whom the girls call 'Himself') and her boyfriend. Between them, as she later realises, 'she had scarcely been a person' (167), thus, non-existent, or invisible. In this respect, she has also been invisible to herself, and the novel is really about Sally's quest for identity; while visiting her past, she comes to see how other people have seen her and realises that she is only beginning to learn who she is and what she wants to do. She must also learn to challenge the patriarchal control, represented by Himself (the father's nickname works as a rather explicit clue) and Sally's boyfriend, as well as her angel-in-the-house mother who supports Himself unquestioningly. In this sense, the novel reflects the pragmatist feminist discourse of invisibility: it is an undesirable and horrifying state for women – strongly connected with conventional femininity as a powerless and passive status – and the only way out is to become empowered by gaining visibility, voice and agency. This is exactly what happens to Sally at the end of the novel, when she decides to become a painter and, thus, to make herself visible in her work.

However, considering the uses of invisibility as an indicator of the conventional, powerless female status, it is also interesting that Sally finds her horrifying state partly liberating. It is in her invisible state that she is able to forget her past self and reinvent herself – during her visits in the past she tries to identify herself in different kinds of femininities represented by her sisters; a passionate and beautiful artist, and a noisy but brave, goblin-like sister. This idea of self-reinvention whilst invisible echoes Phelan's poststructuralist formulation of invisibility as a powerful state: to remain invisible is to be able to move fluidly between different identities. As Phelan suggests, while it is necessary to become temporarily visible – or temporarily represent some fixed identity – through a performance, afterwards one should return to the less vulnerable state of invisibility.

Furthermore, for Sally invisibility is a state where she can escape the male gaze. Wandering in the school yard she remembers how she has been ashamed when boys looked and laughed at her, and she describes her new invisible condition as 'the ideal state for not being noticed' (*The Time of the Ghost* 33). Indeed, as an invisible person she can go where she wants, since she is free from her visible body and the shame of being looked at by the boys. Invisible, Sally

avoids becoming an object of gaze and domination. Her condition represents a fantastic response to the problem of visibility introduced in the feminist discourses of the 1970s. In the novel, it is the male gaze that she escapes – and thus the novel is very much a product of its time. At the beginning of the 1980s the term ‘the male gaze’ had not yet become a feminist cliché. It has since been criticised by other feminist scholars, such as Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, who call for a poststructuralist, queer theory of the gaze in which identities of both the object of the gaze and the subject viewing positions are formulated as fluid categories (41). Thus, in such more recent arguments, the gaze can be also female, it can be directed towards any gender and it is not necessarily sexualised. While it might be fascinating to interpret the novel from a queer theoretical perspective, I would claim that the original text itself exhibits no traces of queer discourses of the gaze and (in)visibility. Other gazes apart from the boys’ gaze are not perceived or presented as problematic or as something to avoid. The queer(ing) aspect is lacking also from Phelan’s poststructuralist feminism which, relying heavily on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, does not deconstruct the male-female binary but continues to see the male as the norm/subject and the female as the Other/object, who is unmarked and unseen, ‘like a ubiquitous ghost’ (6). Thus, in both Phelan’s discourse and in *The Time of the Ghost* invisibility is connected with femaleness in particular – albeit that the femininity of the invisible girl/woman is not fixed. Invisible, the girl/woman can escape the dominating male gaze that attempts to fix the femininity of its object. In this sense, Sally’s invisibility is a state of unrealised potential and fluid identity.⁷

The Time of the Ghost seems to include traces of both poststructuralist and liberal feminist discourses of invisibility and femininity. By the end Sally finds her voice and agency – she decides to become an artist – but we are left with the image of her still lying in the hospital bed, covered in bandages. It depends on the reader, whether one sees Sally as finding a stable role as an empowered female artist, or whether one sees a suggestion that she might remain invisible, becoming only temporarily visible through her paintings. (As a Guerrilla Girl, she could, perhaps, do both.)

CONCLUSION

Children’s fantasy can suggest many different kinds of connection between invisibility, femininity and power. For fictive girls, invisibility can be either a form of power or a state of powerlessness, or indeed both at the same time. These different functions of invisibility are also present in feminist discourses of (in)visibility and femininity. Price’s *The Ghost Drum* rewrites the discourse of evil invisible witches by introducing a Woman of Power for whom invisibility is literally a form of power – and as such only possible in a fantastic context. Jones’s *The Time of the Ghost* represents a different feminist discourse of invisibility and femininity: even though invisibility might offer some positive outcomes for the girl character, as in pragmatist feminist discourses, invisibility is considered to be an undesirable state which is abandoned at the end of the story. However, the text also involves aspects of invisibility and femininity that can be fruitfully interpreted

from the perspective of poststructuralist feminist theory, and thus makes an interesting example of a fantasy novel that incorporates several different uses of the invisibility motif. Both novels show that the invisibility motif in children's fantasy can be much more than a simple magic trick. The motif of invisible girls can become a means as subtle and complex as any in feminist criticism to examine discourses of femininity and of power.

NOTES

1. In Jocelyn's story the girl protagonist accidentally puts invisibility powder on her face, while in Gardner's story a visitor from outer space puts an invisibility patch on the boy protagonist's leg. In another example, Margaret Meacham's *Quiet! You're Invisible!* (2001), a boy from the future can turn himself invisible by using a special gadget called a 'dematerialiser'.
2. Invisibility as a state of powerlessness is used in a similar way in realist novels as well as in actual, socio-historical, contexts, in which invisibility serves as a metaphor for people who are neglected, ignored, or whose voices are not heard – thus we have invisible girls (or sometimes boys/ children in general), for instance, in classrooms and third world countries (see Myhill and Jones, 'Working Group on Girls'). This kind of cultural invisibility can concern whole groups of people – such as ethnic minorities, women, children – as well as certain individuals. Examples of realist children's books discussing the cultural invisibility of (certain) children include Kerstin Johansson's *Som om jag inte fanns* [As if I wasn't there] (1978), Natalie Honeycutt's *Invisible Lissa* (1985), and Hazel Townson's *The Invisible Boy* (2002).
3. I should note that power is here understood as the power *to* do things and make choices, rather than power *over* others, as in the definition of the feminist scholar Marilyn French (507–12). Power in this sense is connected with agency and voice, and thus, empowerment.
4. While Phelan, partly relying on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, sees invisibility as a potentially positive status, in earlier feminist interpretations of Jacques Lacan, such as Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* and her other writings in the mid-seventies, the whole sign 'woman' was interpreted as a gap, a silence, invisible and unheard, and clearly an undesired status (see Millard, Mills and Pearce 156–7, Stone 333).
5. Baba Yaga as the villain or the cannibalistic ogre, see 'Marya Morevna' in Afanasév (37–50), 'Vasilisa the Beautiful' in Afanasév (57–68); Baba Yaga in the role of a helper of a brave heroine or hero, see 'Finist the Falcon' in Afanasév (25–36), 'The Frog Princess' or 'Vasilisa the Wise' in Afanasév (69–77).
6. Examples of time-slip fantasies in which a character from a different time appears in the present time as a ghost would include Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), Elisabeth Beresford's *Invisible Magic* (1974) and Gene Kemp's *Jason Bodger and the Priory Ghost* (1985). On the typical structure and closure of ghost stories, see Judith Armstrong's 'Ghost Stories: Exploiting the Convention'.
7. Interestingly, Sally's newly-found identity is significantly shaped by the *female gaze* – that is, by the ways the other females in the novel, her mother and sisters, perceive her. However, since this part of Sally's quest for identity is more closely connected to feminist discourses of intersubjectivity than discourses of (in)visibility, I will not pursue the subject further here.

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Sanna Lehtonen earned her M.A. in the Department of Languages at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland in 2003. Currently she is a PhD student in the same department and in the Department of English at Macquarie University, Australia, working on her dissertation on bodily transformations and gender in contemporary British children's fantasy.