


Feelgood literature: Entrepreneurial Robinsonades for the 21st century woman

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of entrepreneurship and feelgood literature, addressing Coşgel's argument about the impact of metaphors and narratives in shaping economic theories and the role of the entrepreneur. In entrepreneurial studies, there has been limited examination of how *literary* narratives influence entrepreneurial conceptualization. Analyzing feelgood literature can challenge male-coded entrepreneurial roles and offer alternative perspectives on women's entrepreneurship.

Feelgood literature echoes themes from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and the study argues that feelgood literature serves as entrepreneurial Robinsonades for modern women, offering socio-economic commentary on their attitudes towards work. The genre both repeats and rewrites the Robinson narrative, thereby reshaping the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative.

The article concludes that feelgood literature represents a new type of entrepreneurial imaginary, sharing features with what Dahl and Helin call an “*economy of homecoming*”, in which local community and caring supersede the individualistic and expansive/exploitative economy of the Robinson-type entrepreneur.

KEYWORDS

Coşgel; Defoe; Economy of homecoming; Entrepreneurial narrative; Feelgood literature; Robinson Crusoe; Socio-economic imaginary

Introduction

In the 1990s, Metin M. Coşgel argued that the “*metaphors and stories*” used by economists not only “*serve pedagogical or heuristic purposes – they frame our thinking*” (Coşgel, 1996, p. 60). His aim was to address “*the neglect of the entrepreneur*” in neoclassical economics and to clarify with the help of narrative theory why (then) current theories of entrepreneurship produced such

“distinct interpretation[s] of the role of the entrepreneur” (Coşgel, 1996, pp. 57, 72).¹ Since the 1990s, the neglect has been remedied, and the interest in narrative has expanded within the field of entrepreneurial studies.² Nonetheless, most studies focus on ‘storytelling’,³ on how actual entrepreneurs narrate their journey toward entrepreneurship, whereas the entrepreneur in literary narratives has not been studied with equal interest. Anders W. Johansson’s article, *Narrating the Entrepreneur* (2004), provides an example of research on entrepreneurial storytelling, while also touching on the methodological risks of the “storytelling interview” as “an artificial setting”, and the possible effect of the informants’ varying skills in storytelling upon the results (Johansson, 2004, p. 285f). However, Johansson does not address how entrepreneurial narratives prevalent in literature, film and in economic textbooks might influence the storytelling and life choices of the informants and, in turn, their conceptualization of entrepreneurship. Has Coşgel’s warning about how narratives frame our thinking been overlooked by scholars of entrepreneurial narratives?

Not entirely. For instance, researcher’s studying women entrepreneurs have noted that entrepreneurial narratives tend to be male-coded and that “the concept of entrepreneurial activity is gender-biased, supporting a hierarchical valuation in which the masculine is prioritized over the feminine” (García & Welter, 2011, p. 385; Hamilton, 2013). From these studies, we now know that women entrepreneurs are highly affected by the way the entrepreneurial role is gender coded (Ahl, 2002; Bruni et al., 2004; Lewis, 2006). Other studies question the effect metaphors of “management” and “equilibrium” have had on the theory and praxis of economics (Parker, 2002; Wyatt, 2004). In a recent publication, Matilda Dahl, Jenny Helin, and Elisabeth Ubbe identify and challenge the dominance of the metaphor of “conquest” (erövring) within economics and business education, business models, and business consulting, arguing that this metaphor tends to suppress alternative conceptualizations of economics and business administration (Dahl et al., 2023). Hence, there are some studies within the field of economics and entrepreneurship that adhere to Coşgel’s call for a critical examination of economic metaphors.

From Coşgel’s point about the impact of metaphors and narratives in entrepreneurship and economics theory, it follows that entrepreneurial studies would benefit from exploring multiple and different entrepreneurial narratives. But what narratives can we find that could stimulate a re-conceptualization of entrepreneurship today? In this article, I suggest that the emerging genre of feelgood literature comprises noteworthy narratives that could, when analyzed, motivate a re-investigation of the entrepreneurial narrative. Furthermore, such a re-investigation can provide insights about contemporary women’s livelihood challenges and expectations, and what ‘counsel’ readers of feelgood literature may receive for addressing these challenges.

¹ Coşgel’s article was written in the context of “the new economic criticism” that was initiated by Deirdre N. McCloskey’s *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985).

² Consider for instance the anthology *Narrative and Discursive Approaches in Entrepreneurship: A Second Movements in Entrepreneurship Book* (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004), and the 2007 special issue of *Journal of Business Venturing*, in which several articles address links between theories and methods in narrative and entrepreneurship, and William B. Gartner concludes that entrepreneurship scholars no longer face a “story deficit”, but “a deficit in how entrepreneurship stories are told” (Gartner, 2007, p. 624). Robert Smith’s 2002 conference paper *Inspirational tales: Propagating the Entrepreneur Narrative Amongst Children* should also be mentioned as an example of how entrepreneurial research has broadened the scope of study to include entrepreneurial narratives as inspirational tales for children.

³ I make use of ‘storytelling’ here to distinguish between non-fictional and fictional entrepreneurial narratives since the term is frequently used in studies where entrepreneurs are interviewed about their entrepreneurial development. It would be interesting to analyze such studies to establish whether the use of ‘storytelling’ acknowledges that these narratives follow the established (male-coded) entrepreneurial pattern, or if it results from the introduction of the storytelling concept in marketing and business administration.

Feelgood fiction has a strong economic theme; the narratives often portray entrepreneurship as a solution to personal and financial crises or endeavors that require lifestyle changes. I argue that the imaginaries of gainful employment and preferred professions within feelgood bear strong resemblance to the socio-economic imaginaries in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and to stories with similar narrative patterns written in the wake of Robinson's success, so called *Robinsonades*. Hence, I will show, with the help of key points from Ian Watt's analysis of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*,⁴ that today's feelgood literature both repeats and rewrites the *Robinson* imaginary, and by doing so, challenges the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative while also constituting a socio-economic commentary on contemporary women's attitudes to work and livelihood. What kind of entrepreneurs do we meet in feelgood literature? How are they related to the entrepreneur in economic history and theory, and in established entrepreneurial narratives?

I begin by introducing the genre of feelgood literature since it is a relatively new and under-researched genre of popular fiction. This is followed by a brief historical contextualization of the entrepreneurial character and the significance of *Robinson Crusoe* in both economic and literary studies. An analysis of the similarities and differences between the typical feelgood narrative and the Robinson narrative is then provided. Lastly, the discussion turns to feelgood literature as social commentary on contemporary times, examining how it re-writes the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative.

What is feelgood fiction and is it entrepreneurial?

Over the last decade, a set of popular fiction narratives called feelgood has emerged and gained a vast readership. In Sweden, the popularity of the narratives is on such a scale that an annual Feelgood festival has been established (since 2018), some publishing houses publish mainly feelgood (e.g. Printz Publishing), and there is a very active Facebook group called Feelgoodfredag (Feelgood Friday) where readers and writers socialize and share reading and writing tips. Feelgood literature is found in most European countries and is published mainly in English, German and Swedish (some English and Swedish novels have also been translated into Danish, Norwegian, Finnish and Polish). There are however no statistical studies available at the moment; my description is based on random sampling of major Swedish and European online book shops, and on a quick inventory of the translation pattern of the most popular narratives. Swedish feelgood fiction seems to be influenced by British feelgood, for example by bestselling writers like Jenny Colgan. However, it has been argued that the way certain types of popular fiction are categorized as feelgood in Sweden may be different from other countries (Nilson, 2022), indicating either that there has been a market-conform by Swedish publishers, book sellers and distributors, or that Swedish feelgood writers may be developing a nationally distinct feelgood literature, or both in conjunction.

What is certain, however, is that feelgood fiction is quite neglected in research. Up to date, there is only one comprehensive study of feelgood literature, the Swedish anthology *Speglingar av feelgood: Genre, etikett eller känsla?*⁵ (Nilson & Posti, 2022). Feelgood is frequently used as a label for a wide range of films and narratives, but as I have previously shown in my research on the genre, it is possible to identify a set of elements within a larger group of feelgood labelled narratives, and that they should be understood as genre specific (Posti, 2022). This core is distinguished by how the narratives thematize and depict ten significant elements: the protagonists' age, profession, economy, driving force, lifestyle, and relationships; the setting; the

⁴ See chapter 3, *Robinson Crusoe*, Individualism and the Novel, in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957).

⁵ Title in translation: Reflections on feelgood: Genre, label or feeling?

take on love; the degree of gloom; and the ending. Feelgood is related to the romance and chick-lit genres but differs from them since the narrative focus is on the protagonist's self-discovery and development rather than on finding romantic love. In fact, Maria Nilson has suggested that feelgood might be a development of chick-lit and that chick-lit writers shifted focus to narratives about older protagonists as they themselves grew older (Nilson, 2022). Although writing from somewhat different perspectives, Nilson and I agree on feelgood being a genre in its own.

The typical feelgood narrative tells the story of a woman in her 40s or 50s (sometimes even older), whose life is suddenly changed by a crisis. This change is often paired with financial stress or a job change, or both. The main character finds herself in a new situation that involves a downscaling (e.g. a move to a smaller town or the countryside) and she makes lifestyle choices that tend toward a slower pace of life. There may be a love interest in the narratives, but the relational focus in feelgood is predominantly on friendship and self-discovery and development. Feelgood rarely includes any sex and could even be described as chaste in comparison with modern romance. The narrative arc involves some conflict and gloominess (but never despondency and doom), and always ends on a happy note or at least with the hope of a future happy end for the protagonist. Among the more known narratives (for English and Swedish readers) that can be classified as feelgood, we find Jenny Colgan's *Little Beach Street Bakery* series (2014-2021), Ewa Klingberg's *Huskvarna* series (2017-2023), Sharon Gosling's *The House beneath the Cliffs* (2021), and Emma Hamberg's *Je m'appelle Agneta* (2021).

Although related to romance and chick-lit fiction, feelgood differs from them not only through its focus on friendship and self-discovery and downplay of romantic and sexual love. More importantly, they stand out by their depiction of protagonists who experience challenges with work and income (Posti, 2022). The protagonists often leave secure employment or so called 'career professions' (e.g. corporate business, media, and communication), and instead start or inherit small businesses. In *Little Beach Street Bakery* (2014), the protagonist leaves a career within graphic design and finds her true calling by rekindling an old bakery. Feelgood novels abound with small businesses: bakeries, cafés, book shops, small hotels, flower shops, and spas (Nilson & Posti, 2022).

In an earlier case study of Ewa Klingberg's *Huskvarna* series, I noted the many innovative women-owned small businesses that are depicted in the novels and argued that Klingberg writes entrepreneurial narratives that challenge both the narrative of the Småland entrepreneur⁶ and the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative (Posti, 2020). Hence, feelgood narratives constitute a promising corpus for investigating alternative entrepreneurial narratives.

In the subsequent sections, I explore feelgood as entrepreneurial narratives and demonstrate how this genre is related to the Robinson narrative, which functions as a kind of *ur-narrative of entrepreneurship* in both economic and literary studies. I will show that feelgood fiction can be read as entrepreneurial Robinsonades for women. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how feelgood constitutes both a resurfacing as well as a rewriting of the *ur-narrative*.

⁶ The Småland narrative is a local version of the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative and includes the narratives of IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad and the narrative of 'Gnosjöandan' (the Gnosjö spirit). Gnosjö is a small community in Småland, Sweden, which is famous for its many entrepreneurs and innovative businesses.

Robinson Crusoe: *Homo economicus* and prototypical entrepreneur

Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has long been a popular epistemic device in economic history and theory, and Defoe's main character is referred to in influential studies and textbooks as an example of *Homo economicus*. Economic scholars as different as Frédéric Bastiat, Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, Israel M. Kirzner, Ludwig von Mises, Mark D. Packard, and Murray Rothbarth have made use of the Robinson narrative to different degrees to illustrate classical economic and entrepreneurial theories and principles (Grapard, 2011; Horwitz & Skwire, 2020; Kirzner, 1979; Lavoie, 1991; Packard, 2020). In literary studies, however, Ian Watt was among the first to theorize about the literary importance of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in an economic context when he argued that the novel must be understood as an "embodiment of economic individualism" (Watt, 1967, p. 63).⁷ In his seminal analysis, he not only provides a model for understanding the novel as a significant societal commentary of eighteenth-century economic individualism; but also, he fortifies Robinson's position as the prototype for narratives about self-made men who trailblaze new markets based on innovative hunches.⁸ Although never using the term entrepreneur, Watt nonetheless lists traits that scholars have come to theorize as entrepreneurial when he draws attention to Robinson's endeavor to "better his economic condition" (p. 65), his innovative resourcefulness, and his risk-taking (in travel and exploring new markets). Since then, *Robinson Crusoe* has been read and used in countless literary (and other) studies as the decisive example of entrepreneurial narratives, as an ur-narrative.⁹

In fact, the Robinson persona has become so commonplace and detached from the original narrative, that arguably, the character has gained the kind of metaphoric status which Coşgel claims should be investigated. It seems impossible to consider Robinson without the epithet 'entrepreneur'. Even in recent studies, Robinson continues to be referred to as an entrepreneurial character (Benfares, 2023; Kłosiński, 2021; Tauchmann, 2023). Rachid Benfares argues in *Reading Defoe Today. Robinson Crusoe: an Inspiring Entrepreneur* that "the study of literature can [...] help to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset" and provides an extensive catalogue of Robinson's entrepreneurial characteristics and activities (Benfares, 2023, p. 21). In a study of contemporary digital games that engage with the Robinson narrative (*Don't Starve, Minecraft,*

⁷ Ian Watt's study of *Robinson Crusoe* is influenced by Karl Marx who also wrote about Robinson from an economics perspective. For example, Marx pointed to how "*Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favorite theme with political economists*" (p. 110). It should be noted that Watt's analysis of Robinson as a *Homo economicus* has been critiqued by other literary scholars since his years on the island limited him from partaking in capitalism proper. See for instance Diana Spearman's *The Novel and Society* (1966). In a more recent study, Pat Rogers argues that Robinson should rather be understood as an example of *Homo domesticus*, providing an analysis that emphasizes the strong themes of husbandry, gentility and property improvement in the novel (Rogers, 2018).

⁸ I borrow "hunch" from Kirzner who regards Crusoe's ability to "act[...] on his hunch" (ital. in orig.) as indicative of his entrepreneurial capacity: "*Crusonian profit emerges as the result of human action, that is, of deliberate planning to implement the entrepreneurial hunch adopted only at the very instant of action itself*" (Kirzner, 1979, p. 168).

⁹ The image of Robinson as entrepreneur has become so established that it is mentioned even when entrepreneurship is not the theme of the study. See for example Martin Green, who describes the novel as "the success-story of an entrepreneur" in his article on Robinson Crusoe and imperialism (Green, 1989, p. 37); and Terence Dawson's post-Jungian analysis of modern identity in which he refers to Robinson's interest in money not as an enjoying of wealth but a "fear of being 'dematerialized'", considering such fear as the "driving force behind entrepreneurial capitalism" (Dawson, 2008, p. 28). For an extensive source on economic and entrepreneurial analyses of *Robinson Crusoe*, see Grapard and Hewitt (eds.), *Robinson Crusoe's Economic Man: A Construction and Deconstruction* (2011).

and *The Forest*), Michał Kłosiński argues that these survival games “*remediate the myth of Homo economicus present in both literary and televisual form, by turning the castaway into an entrepreneur, engineer and inventor on an unprecedented scale*” (Kłosiński, 2021, p. 226). We can safely say that Robinson still functions as both metaphor and narrative for entrepreneurship, and the metaphor is forged even stronger through such remediations.

Digital survival games constitute the most recent variations of the Robinson narrative, thus joining a long history of so called *Robinsonades*. Following upon Defoe’s success with *Robinson Crusoe*, several similar narratives emerged within just a few years of its publication. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Robinsonades continued their popularity in Europe, thus establishing the Robinson narrative as an international cultural phenomenon. The popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* has been attributed to Rousseau, who recommended it as an edifying text and made the Robinson narrative available to a broad readership through *Emile* (1762). To Rousseau, Defoe’s Robinson embodied the rationalistic ideals of the time, and he claimed that *Robinson Crusoe* is “*a complete education in itself*” (Green, 1989, p. 37; 1990; Richetti, 2018). Similarly, many of the earlier Robinsonades were written and read for educational purposes, such as Johan Heinrich Campe’s *Robinson der Jüngere* (1779) and *Der schweizerische Robinson* (1812–27) by Johann Rudolf Wyss. Whether an ideal of rationality or prototypical entrepreneur, the Robinson character clearly constitutes a significant metaphor in Western cultures and epistemologies, and the popularity of the Robinsonades contributed to this metaphoricity.

The Robinsonade shares key features and narrative pattern with *Robinson Crusoe*, while also presenting variations. In Arthur Blaim’s definition of the Robinsonade, a “*structurally central position is occupied by the desert island section depicting the life of a single man or woman, or a group of people, placed in isolation by other men or forces of nature*” (Blaim, 2016, p. 8). Although many of the early Robinsonades are no longer read, the Robinson narrative is continuously returned to, and the body of texts and adaptations is so vast that the Robinsonade is firmly established as a genre in both literature and film. Just like Watt maintained that *Robinson Crusoe* provides a societal commentary, it has been argued that the Robinsonades also deliver commentaries on their times since “*each age [...] reveals the Robinsonade that best fits its needs*” (Fisher, 2018, p. 104). In recent years, the Robinson narrative has been revisited by writers and film makers to explore topics such as colonialism and climate emergency, and the narrative lends itself well to social and cultural commentary (Fisher, 2018).¹⁰ As Ruprecht L. Tauchmann maintains, the Robinson narrative “*resurfaces throughout different times, media, cultures, and countries while incorporating the cultural desires, anxieties, and prominent discourses of their particular moment in time*” (Tauchmann, 2023, p. 191).

¹⁰ Robinsonades can be found in both popular and ‘serious’ cultural output. For example, “*in the century following its 1719 publication there were [...] 151 chapbook editions of Robinson Crusoe*” (O’Malley, 2011, p. 18). Also, *Robinson Crusoe* is an important intertext for literary classics such as Jules Verne’s robinsonade *Deuz Ans de Vacances* (1888) which in turn inspired William Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies* (1954), an anti-robinsonade in which the time on the isolated island does not foster the characters’ rationality and civility, but rather causes their downfall (Green, 1989). Verne’s novel also functions as an intertext in Julieta Campo’s experimental anti-robinsonade, *The Fear of Losing Eurydice* (1979) (Fallon, 2018). On screen, the following robinsonades are among the more well-known: *The Edge* (1997), *Cast Away* (2000), and *The Martian* (2015). For an overview and discussion of the many screen adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe*, see Mayer (2018).

Entrepreneurial Robinsonades for the 21st century woman

Another resurfacing of Robinsonades has occurred through the development of feelgood fiction. By combining my genre analysis with Watt's economic analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*, I will show that feelgood narratives can be described and classified as Robinsonades for the twenty-first-century woman. I will consider three major similarities between *Robinson Crusoe* and the typical feelgood narrative: crisis, setting, and economy/work.¹¹ I will also explore a few important differences, which I argue are significant for the feelgood genre's adaptation of the Robinson narrative and support both an analysis of how these Robinsonades embody the desires, anxieties, and discourses of the women of our times, and of how feelgood proffers a re-writing of the male-coded entrepreneurial narrative. As Tauchmann maintains, comparisons between adaptations and intertexts "can give insights into the complex filtration of narratives and allows one to analyze variations within a group of texts in relation to the economical and sociocultural pressures of their particular historical context" (Tauchmann, 2023, p. 191). In such an analysis, source texts do not take precedence; rather, they are "approached through their adaptations as 'merely' individual nodes in a much more complex network of texts" (Tauchmann, 2023, p. 191). Hence, in my analysis I will compare the feelgood narrative with the Robinson narrative through Watt's analysis since his economic contextualization of Defoe's narrative has gained such status in literary history that it too should be considered a node within the textual network that is formed by the accumulated Robinsonades and the entrepreneurial narrative.

Watt and later scholars of the Robinsonades emphasize crisis as a key feature of the Robinson narrative. In *Robinson Crusoe*, it is the combination of the family's economic status, Robinson's desire for financial gain, and his travels with the ensuing shipwreck that set off the crisis necessary for the plot to lead to the central setting of the desert island. In the words of Watt, "profit is *Crusoe's only vocation, and the whole world is his territory*" and "the shipwreck [...] is the deus ex machina which makes it possible for Defoe to present solitary labour [...] as the solution to the perplexities of economic and social reality" (Watt, 1967, pp. 67, 88). In later variations of the narrative, it can be any outer interference in the protagonists' lives that puts them in a state of isolation or unfamiliar setting. As Green points out, the core of the Robinson narrative is that Robinson "has to adjust to, and learn to survive in, a new world" (Green, 1990, p. 23). In feelgood, the most common setting for the protagonists' new world experience is the village, the small town, or a small neighborhood that forms a kind of village within a larger city. In Colgan's *Little Beach Street Bakery*, protagonist Polly Waterford relocates from Plymouth to a quiet seaside resort after the bankruptcy of her graphic design business and a ruined relationship.¹² Similarly, in Gosling's *The House Beneath the Cliffs*, Anna Campbell leaves London and moves to an isolated seaside village after a break-up with her romantic partner. In Emma Hamberg's *Je m'appelle Agneta*, we find another version of the feelgood pattern of relocation. Agneta leaves the north for the warmer climate and culinary passions available in a small village in Provence (Hamberg, 2021). Mediterranean villages constitute yet another group of stock settings of feelgood fiction.

¹¹ A fourth category would be sexual desire. Watt astutely points out that for an Island narrative, "love plays little part" in *Robinson Crusoe*, "even the temptations of sex are excluded" from the island. This constitutes "a revolutionary departure from the traditional expectations aroused by desert islands from the *Odyssey to the New Yorker*" (Watt, 1967, p. 68). As mentioned earlier, romantic and sexual love are markedly absent in feelgood narratives as well, and the absence of sexual desire does provide a fourth similarity worth exploring. However, I have omitted it from the scope of this article, merely identifying it as another intertextual link between feelgood and the Robinson narrative.

¹² In fact, the setting in *Little Beach Street Bakery* is a kind of island since it is regularly cut off from the mainland by the tide.

The setting, however, can be any type of setting as long as it has the same function as the desert island, that is, as a place where “*all conflicts and uncertainties besetting the protagonist [...] are resolved and his/her latent talents are given a chance to develop*” (Blaim, 2016, p. 100). Hence, in both *Robinson Crusoe* and the Robinsonade, the setting is identified as central due to its function as a place of self-discovery and development for the protagonist(s). In addition, in *Robinson Crusoe*, the protagonist’s development is enmeshed in a primitive crafts economy. According to Watt, Defoe “*sets back the economic clock*” in the novel “*and takes his hero to a primitive environment, where labor can be presented as varied and inspiring*” (Watt, 1967, p. 72). Watt motivates his conclusion by pointing to Defoe’s lengthy descriptions of Robinson’s bread baking and other manual labor on the island and argues that Defoe realized that the eighteenth-century reader will find these passages interesting and compensating for the “*lack of variety and stimulation*” in their own working life, the “*result of economic specialisation*” in “*modern capitalism*” (Watt, 1967, p. 71).

Feelgood fiction features a similar trajectory of self-discovery and development with economic overtones. In their remote villages and seaside communities, the protagonists first struggle with the need to secure an income after having relocated and been put under financial stress. However, they often discover that they can convert their hobbies or hitherto unexploited talents or resources into small businesses and make profit. Feelgood protagonists bake and realize that they can start unique little bakeries, or revamp derelict or unprofitable cafés (Colgan, 2014; Krapu-Kallio, 2017). Or, they inherit collections of fine tablecloths, exquisite dinner sets and old silverware from an elderly friend and through an ‘entrepreneurial hunch’ set up a rental business for customers who appreciate traditional grand dinner parties but do not wish to store linen and large dinner sets in their sleek modern homes (Klingberg, 2017; Posti, 2020). Others identify a local market and manage to make use of locality and innovation in such a way that the local success grows to become a national success. In *The House Beneath the Cliffs*, downtrodden cook Anna Campbell opens a pop-up restaurant on her windy patio by the sea and serves the local catch with unexpected flavors. Her innovative cooking soon catches the interest of the ‘bigger world’ she just left, which in turn brings her a contract on a cookbook, large enough to enable her to stay on in the village and open a restaurant with additional financial backing by the permanent residents of the seaside village (Gosling, 2021). Moreover, Anna goes through a journey of self-discovery and development by finally embracing an identity as a chef rather than cook, and by breaking loose from the image her former lover projected upon her as being a second-rate cook, even though they went to the same prestigious culinary school.

What the feelgood narrative thus shares with the Robinson narrative is the protagonist’s ability to weather through a crisis with economic overtones; they use their innate abilities and dormant talents to create a ‘market’ in which they can gain profit, and they do so in a process of self-discovery and development. Furthermore, in feelgood, as in *Robinson Crusoe*, the economic clock is set back. In a time that is becoming more and more digitalized and in which the information flow, globality, cryptocurrency and big data are forming a new reality, feelgood portrays a world where manual labor, crafts, and trade in the form of exchange predominate. As mentioned earlier, numerous feelgood narratives are set in bakeries and cafés and the protagonists begin new careers as bakers by trade. Other recurring forms of labor are cooking and gardening. For an example of the latter, we may turn to *The Winter Garden* (2020) by Heidi Swain. In this narrative, the heroine Freya Fuller gets a chance to prove herself as a professional gardener by bringing life and beauty

to a winter garden, by showing that even in the state of dormancy, a garden can provide interest and an aesthetic experience for visitors (Swain, 2020).¹³

By depicting characters engaged in manual work, the feelgood narrative creates a contrast to the literary genre of chick lit as well as to current working life imaginaries. In chick lit, the main character's career path is aimed at the bigger and fast-paced life in the city, and the protagonists strive to succeed in media, publishing, fashion, and PR (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Nilson, 2008; Nilson & Ehriander, 2013). These careers often entail contingency, internships, and short-termism, and they seldom provide stability in the early years of one's working life. Bridget in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is the most well know example of a chick lit character who tries to succeed in the field of publishing and advance from her position as a publicity assistant. In feelgood however, the protagonists often leave similar city or corporate careers to pursue work that is considered more meaningful. Their working life imagination has shifted, and the narratives project a vision of something different.

If we then consider the culture and society in which feelgood narratives circulate, and take on the perspective of a cultural studies critic, we can see that feelgood also contrasts with the current *career imagination* in (at least) the global north. “[C]areer imagination”, according to Laurie Cohen and Joanne Duberley,

concerns how an individual thinks about their working life. It defines and delimits what they see as possible, legitimate and appropriate in a particular landscape and timescape, and where a person positions themselves within this setting. An individual's career imagination thus offers a career trajectory and prescribes (sometimes competing) criteria for success. (Cohen & Duberley, 2021, p. 3)

The emergence of the feelgood narrative and its affiliation with the Robinson narrative may thus signal that there is a different career imagination at work in society today, one that just like *Robinson Crusoe*, might attract contemporary readers because it offers an alternative to their current working life. I would suggest that the feelgood narrative provides its readers with “*substitute experiences*” of the kind that Watt argues were provided by the Robinson narrative: “*basic economic processes*” are “*reintroduced [...] as therapeutic recreations*” (Watt, 1967, pp. 71, 72). (The fact that these narratives have been labelled *feelgood*, does signal a therapeutic dimension.) Readers who are caught up in demanding careers can at least, like Defoe's contemporaries, “*share vicariously*” in the characters' manual efforts of baking and gardening (Watt, 1967, p. 71).

In this way, feelgood literature replicates the recreational leisure that romance scholars have argued is a strong incentive for women reading romance. As Janice Radway argues in her often-quoted statement:

Romance reading [...] enables [women readers] to deny their physical presence in an environment associated with responsibilities that are acutely felt and occasionally experienced as too onerous to bear. Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. (Radway, 1991, p. 93)

In Radway's influential study of women reading romance, the context was the household, and the recreational impetus was relief from the demands of housework and childcare. Today, the context

¹³ It should not go unnoticed that the even the protagonist's name signals growth. At the end of the narrative, we do indeed meet a fuller, more skilled and developed Freya, who gives credit to her namesake, the goddess of fertility in Nordic mythology.

has shifted, and in my analysis, reading feelgood should instead be considered in relation to the demands on women in the labor market.

Re-writing the entrepreneurial narrative: from individualism to group relationship

The rise and popularity of the feelgood narrative might then be explained as the combined appeal of the recognizable narrative of a Robinsonade while also providing a temporary escape from contemporary pressures and anxieties of a labor market that is characterized by short-termism and digitalization. In addition, some of the appeal might also arise from the way the feelgood narrative re-writes the Robinson narrative and the entrepreneurial narrative. What Watt's analysis and the economists' entrepreneurial reading of Robinson have in common is the focus on the individual. In *Robinson Crusoe*, and in the economic individualism at the rise in Defoe's time, "*the various forms of traditional group relationship, the family, the guild, the village, the sense of nationality – all are weakened*" (Watt, 1967, p. 64). In feelgood, however, "*group relationship*" is restrengthened and constitutes a significant genre element. As I have shown in *Feelgood som genre och genrevärld*,¹⁴ friendship and community are at the core of the feelgood narrative:

it is mainly the friends (often a network of female friends already in place or built over the course of the story) that provide both emotional support and the skills and services the protagonist needs to get back on their feet and/or develop. (Posti, 2022, p. 46; my translation).

In feelgood, the main character may have relocated to a more isolated setting, but she is never alone when facing the new world. To exemplify, in Klingberg's *Huskvarna* series strong relationships between several women characters are formed and developed. Each novel of the series tells the story of one of the women who populate the *Huskvarna* universe, and each woman is supported by the others who act as important helpers in each protagonist's journey of self-discovery and development of their entrepreneurial vein. In *Manglade dukar och vikta servetter*,¹⁵ the protagonist Felicia acquires invaluable support by a woman auditor who is part of the friendship circle, and who steps in with her services when Felicia is overwhelmed by the "*bookkeeping, VAT reporting and tax payments*" (Klingberg, 2017, p. 335; *my translation*). Similarly, in *The House Beneath the Cliffs*, Anna Campbell's courage and success is clearly related to the support of her best friend and the friends that include her in their circle in the seaside village to which she relocates. They are the ones who encourage her to set up the pop-up restaurant in the first place, once they have tasted her Michelin level menu, and they support her new restaurant by investing their savings in the venture (Gosling, 2021). In feelgood, the moral of the story is not the economic success of the individual, but rather, the importance of working together for the benefit of both the individual and the community. As one of the characters in *Manglade dukar och vikta servetter* says: "*You don't have to do everything yourself*" (Klingberg, 2017, p. 329; *my translation*).

This shift to emphasize group relationship rather than individual success within a Robinson type narrative can thus be considered a re-writing of the entrepreneurial *ur-narrative*. With its focus on group relationship, the feelgood narrative explores an alternative form of entrepreneurship which approximates 'social entrepreneurship'. Social entrepreneurship has been broadly defined as a business or organizational venture with the objective of creating lasting social change. Where entrepreneurs "*improve the productive capacity of society and provide the 'creative*

¹⁴ Title in translation: Feelgood as genre and genre world.

¹⁵ Title in translation: Mangled tablecloths and folded napkins.

destruction' that propels economic change", social entrepreneurs "*do the same for social change, creating new combinations of people and resources that significantly improve society's capacity to address problems*" (Bornstein & Davis, 2010, p. 1). Even though I would not stretch the analysis to claim that feelgood narratives portray social entrepreneurship on such a level as described by Bornstein and Davis, it is important to draw attention to the fact the protagonists' entrepreneurial activities generally have some level of communal impact. The entrepreneurs in feelgood do not follow Robinson's trajectory in which the protagonist is the sole benefactor. Instead, the community to which the feelgood protagonist relocates is always positively impacted by the presence of the newcomer. The protagonist may need the help of the locals to succeed, but the support is reciprocated.

In Jenny Colgan's *The Bookshop on the Corner* (2016), the phased-out contents of a library are rescued from being sent to the incinerators, a Scottish village is enticed into reading more, and the destiny of a socially vulnerable girl is changed for the better, all due to the ambulating bookselling business which protagonist Nina sets up. Furthermore, the way Nina manages to transport a near-entire library from London to Scotland at an almost insignificant cost, can indeed be taken as an example of Bornstein's and Davis's notion of social entrepreneurship, since it constitutes an innovative "*combination of people and resources*"; Nina befriends a Latvian train engineer who transports a great part of the library books on the night train that passes near the Scottish village (Colgan, 2016). If we turn to Gosling's *The House Beneath the Cliffs*, we find a similar dynamic between the protagonist and the small community of the seaside village. Here, Anna as well as her pop-up restaurant turn out to play a significant role in healing an old rift between two local families, and in the fate of the village after a catastrophic landslide in which a large part of the community is destroyed. With the hope of eventually opening an inn to be run by Anna, the villagers invest in renovating the old and abandoned village inn. Moreover, the villagers whose homes were destroyed in the landslide take temporary residence in the old inn (Gosling, 2021). Through these communal plans and actions, a future is thus created for a village which otherwise would have been abandoned to the forces of nature. Colgan's and Gosling's novels exemplify a general pattern of communal engagement within the feelgood narrative, which indicates that feelgood both repeats and re-writes the Robinson narrative, and, as a result, rewrites the traditional entrepreneurial narrative in which entrepreneurship is conceptualized as an individualistic and predominantly male endeavor. In the feelgood narrative, entrepreneurship is rather portrayed as a social and female endeavor with both individual and communal benefits.

I began my analysis by suggesting that entrepreneurial studies would benefit from studying other and different entrepreneurial narratives. By doing so, entrepreneurial research could find alternative narratives to use as epistemic devices, narratives with the potential to reframe entrepreneurial theory and economics "*by highlighting differences in casting and metaphorical representation*" (Coşgel, 1996, p. 73). By studying other entrepreneurial narratives, researchers and students within the field of economics would expand their thinking on not only *what* constitutes an entrepreneur, but also *who*. Even though feminist scholars have addressed how the entrepreneurial narrative is male-coded, the Robinson narrative still dominates, as exemplified by Benfares's recent article in which Robinson is lauded as an "*inspiring entrepreneur*" and the novel is claimed to "*offer learners and readers a unique and stimulating perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by entrepreneurs*" (Benfares, 2023, p. 11). Benfares's article provides a thorough analysis of Robinson's many entrepreneurial characteristics, such as great leadership, risk management and uniqueness, but it lacks in awareness of how normative and excluding this narrative of entrepreneurial heroism is. For instance, one could question what kind of leadership

traits Robinson is able to display on an isolated island populated with only one other human being, and whom he treats more like an enslaved or indentured laborer than an employee.

Despite several analyses that show how imbued the Robinson narrative is in patriarchal and imperial discourse, and the ramifications this discursive relationship has on the conceptualization of the entrepreneur (Grapard, 2011; Hewitson, 2011; Samson, 2011), Robinson continues to be used as the prototypical entrepreneur. Lack of representation thus continues to be an issue of economic and entrepreneurial scholarship, and there is a need for alternative narratives and entrepreneurial role models. As Grapard argues,

The absence of female agency in the neoclassical models [such as the one's using the Robinson narrative] reflects the philosophical foundations of economics in social contract theories. By insisting on a 'natural' distinction between private and public spheres, social contract theories exclude women from the public sphere of the market place. The consequence has been that women's work and contributions to social welfare have been marginalized in economic discourse. (Grapard, 2011, p. 97)

The same can be argued about non-whites and other groups that have been marginalized in the epistemic models of most Western disciplines and discourses.

But is there room for alternative entrepreneurial narratives in economics? I believe that a change in economic perspective may be necessary. One such change might be on its way. Swedish scholars Matilda Dahl and Jenny Helin have begun to formulate an alternative “*logic*” of economy that moves away from the logic of “*conquest*” and economic “*expansion*” (Dahl et al., 2023). Based on their field study of small business owners on the island of Gotland (Sweden), Dahl and Helin introduce an “*economy of homecoming*” (hemkomstens ekonomi) which they argue provides an alternative economic model that is based on hyperlocal communality and stewardship/maintenance (Dahl et al., 2023; chapter 2). This model breaks away from the current paradigm of an ever-expansive market in which global exploitation, competition, corporate takeover, and usurping resources constitute the norm, and which has been identified as significant and underlying factors of many of our contemporary challenges, such as “*climate crisis, species extinction, monoculture, economic inequality and political populism*” (Dahl et al., 2023, p. 12; *my translation*). Moreover, they question the ideal of the “*serial entrepreneur*” (e.g. Elon Musk) which students of business administration are taught to emulate (Dahl et al., 2023, p. 10).

As an alternative, they suggest a logic of economy that builds on driving forces which they identify are central to the kind of entrepreneurship and small business models they encountered among the Gotland islanders. These driving forces are *local community, caring and dreaming* (Dahl et al., 2023). In the context of my analysis of how feelgood narratives re-write the traditional entrepreneurial narrative, these driving forces ring very familiar. As I have shown, emphasis on local community is very much present in feelgood. The local community is both the setting for and the beneficiary of the entrepreneurial ventures in feelgood. And the protagonist's pursuit of more meaningful work captures the caring and dreaming that is described by Dahl et al. As I have shown, the feelgood narrative provides a socio-economic commentary on the working life of the twenty-first-century woman, and a dreaming that envisions work beyond the career script of individual competition and conquest. Arguably, both feelgood and Dahl et al. are precursors of an imminent paradigm shift within society and in economic theory. A shift in which the metaphors and narratives of business and entrepreneurship are being revalued and revised to meet the challenges of our time, be it climate crisis and economic inequality or women's concerns about working life.

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