On the morning of 2 April 2014, someone reported a suspected drunk driver to the police in Linköping. When the police checked the driver, however, they discovered that she was not in the least intoxicated. Instead, the rickety ride had another explanation: The driver had tried to avoid manhole covers marked with the letter A. The story quickly spread all over Sweden via the news agency TT. Judging from comments on social media, some people wondered what it was all about, while others recognized themselves in the narrative. It is obvious that knowledge of the danger posed by the A-covers differs from generation to generation in contemporary Sweden.

Like most people of my age, I remember the manhole covers from my own childhood in Säffle, a small city in the province of Värmland. In the 1980s it was common knowledge among my friends that manhole covers marked with an A (so called A-brunnar, in English: A-covers) meant bad luck, whereas you had good luck if you walked on K-covers. Fortunately, protective rituals existed for those who accidentally stepped on or cycled over an A-cover.

The folklore of manhole covers is one example of what is often called ‘superstition’. Alan Dundes (1961: 28; cf. Valk 2008: 14) has
defined the term as “traditional expressions of one or more conditions and one or more results with some of the conditions, signs and other causes.” In the book *Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*, Kenneth Pimple (1995: 96; cf. Kukharenko 2008: 57) emphasizes that superstition is beliefs “usually about luck and concerned with the successful completion of a specific task, often associated with ritual behaviors.” In Swedish, however, terms like superstition (*skrock* or *vidskepelse*) are heavily loaded with (negative) values. In this context, I therefore use “everyday magic” for corresponding beliefs (cf. Valk 2008).

It is mainly children and young people who take an active part in the tradition concerning manhole covers. For the vast majority, the notions and rituals are somewhere in the borderland between playfulness and seriousness. The different meanings of the letters on the manhole covers should be regarded as an expression of young people’s creativity, but to some extent the changes of the narratives can also be understood as a form of a ‘social barometer’. As the folklorist Ulf Palmenfelt (2008: 12) has stated, folklore can be understood as tools for formulating, communicating, comparing, consolidating, and questioning values. With this article, I not only want to discuss the notions of manhole covers as examples of everyday magic in Sweden but also show how the tradition and its change reflects both fears and hopes of young people in 20th- and 21st-Century Sweden. The cited texts are translated from Swedish by me.

**Narratives about manhole covers**

The day after the TT article about the unsteady car drive in Linköping, I made an appeal on the website of the Institute for Language and Folklore for narratives about manhole covers and published a web questionnaire, put together in great haste:
Have you heard what the letters on the manhole covers are supposed to represent or be abbreviations of? Tell us. Should one avoid stepping on some covers? Why? Could you protect yourself if you accidentally step on a ‘bad/dangerous’ cover? Are there any ‘good’ covers – which? Please specify the place and time you tell about (e.g. Säffle in the 1980s or Stockholm in the 1950s). Do you avoid stepping on some covers? Tell us. Do you know where the tradition comes from or how old it is? Are there similar traditions in other countries?

(http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/ga-pa-gatubrunnar)

The appeal had a major impact. After a link to the web questionnaire was published on Facebook, information about the appeal spread quickly. Several Swedish newspapers wrote about the web questionnaire, and a number of radio stations mentioned the subject. In just over a week, nearly 400 people sent their narratives about manhole covers to the Institute. The material is now a part of the collections at the Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Göteborg (DAGF 1612).

Certainly, many of the adults that responded to the web questionnaire still avoid stepping on A-covers, out of habit or just to be on the safe side, but it is obvious that it is mainly a tradition among children and young people. Most respondents tell about the notions and rituals as memories of their childhood, as something that characterized life during parts of their school time. It is primarily women who responded to the web questionnaire; only about 15% of those answering were men. The narratives themselves also reveal that the ideas about the different meanings of the covers are, and always have been, primarily spread among young women. For example, a woman born in 1974 in Salem writes: “I think this thing with the covers was most common among the girls.” And a few years younger man in Gammelstad notes: “It was nothing I
believed in, but I remember that it was popular among the girls at that time, and for a while it spread like wildfire among the schools in the town.” The transmission of the tradition seems mainly to take place horizontally: The notions exist and are spread most in interaction between young people (cf. af Klintberg 2007a: 80).

As with many other forms of folklore, it is difficult to prove exactly how and when the tradition originated. The earliest records of ‘unlucky’ manhole covers are from Göteborg in the late 1940s and early 1950s. From the mid-1950s, there are also records from Stockholm, and during the following decade, the tradition seems to have appeared in numerous Swedish cities, such as Eskilstuna, Hallsberg, Karlskrona, Karlstad, Kristianstad, Linköping, Malmö, Sala, Skellefteå, Uddevalla, and Uppsala. In the 1970s, the notions seem to have spread all over Sweden. It is easy to explain that it is a tradition that mainly exists in cities, as there are few manhole covers in rural areas.

The meaning of the letters on the manhole covers varies, both in folklore and ‘in reality’. In an interview, one of those responsible for the drainage and piping systems in Göteborg, says that the ‘real’ meaning of the letters may differ between municipalities and over time. Sometimes the letters are abbreviations for those producing the covers (A for Alvesta foundry and K for Karlstad foundry), but just as often the letters reflect the function. Thus A means Avlopp (Drains), K stands for a Kombinerad (Combined) pipe for waste water and surface water, V for Ventil (Valve), FV for Fjärrvärme (District heating), etc.

Like other forms of folklore, the notions and rituals about manhole covers are both individual and collective; the tradition has fixed frames, but the elements vary across time and place and to some extent even from person to person. However, A-covers are frequently associated with bad luck and K-covers with luck, especially with love. But other meanings can also be attached to the letters. In the
following, I will describe and discuss both how the interpretation of the letters reflects young people’s hopes and fears, and how the tradition can be understood as a method to manage and explain the unexplainable in the practitioners’ lives and environment.

From corporal punishment to AIDS

As noted, it is generally assumed that it brings bad luck to step on an A-cover. However, more than half of those responding to the web questionnaire also write about more specific meanings: how you are supposed to get bad luck or what will happen if you accidentally touch a manhole cover marked with the letter A.

Common in the 1960s, as well as in the 2010s, is that the letter A on the manhole covers is repeatedly interpreted as *Avbruten kärlek* (Interrupted love) or *Aldrig kärlek* (Never love, 75 – the numbers indicate the number of respondents that mention the interpretation). A man born in 1974 in Skurup remembers: “If you had a girlfriend/boyfriend, he or she would break it off if you stepped on an A-cover.” A similar explanation is given by a woman born in 1975 in Forsa: “If you are single, you would not get together with the person you dream about. And if you are in a relationship, it will end.” Most often A-covers were simply avoided by walking around or jumping over them, but in some cases the manhole covers could be used to end an awkward relationship. “A close friend of mine used the manhole covers when she underwent a difficult separation. She sought out the A-covers as they meant ‘interrupted love’, and that was what she wanted – that her love for her ex-boyfriend would disappear. This was in Stockholm at the end of the 1990s” (woman, b. 1967).

Although *Avbruten kärlek* (Interrupted love) is the most common explanation for the A on the covers, there are also a number of other meanings. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the letter was sometimes supposed to mean *Avund/Avundsjuka* (Envy/Jealousy,
This meant that by stepping on an A-cover you would be jealous or be affected by another person’s envy (cf. Strömbäck 1989:19–24). From the city of Malmö, a woman born in 1981 writes: “I think I was about thirteen years old when a friend told me that you should not step on A-covers because A stands for Avundsjuka (Jealousy) and if you walk on A-covers bad things could happen in your life as you ‘open up’ for other people’s dark thoughts and envy.” Avsky (Loathing, 13) and Avggrund (Abyss, 9) are other meanings that existed during the same period. Additional meanings from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s are Akta/Akta dig (Watch out, 3), Arbetslös/Avskedad (Unemployed/Fired, 3), Aga (Corporal punishment, 2), and Avsked (Farewell, 2).

Besides the meanings mentioned above, the A-covers were also interpreted in new ways during the 1980s and 1990s: Analsex (Anal sex, 12), Apa/Apskaft (Monkey/Monkeyhead, 10), Alkholist/Alkoholism (Alcoholic/Alcoholism, 7), Analklåda/Analproblem (Anal itching/Anal problems, 5), Anorexia (5), Abort (Abortion, 4), and AIDS (4) are among the interpretations that are mentioned in the answers to the web questionnaire. Other examples from the late 20th Century are Allvar/Allvarlig (Seriousness/Serious, 3), Avfall (Garbage, 2), Acne (1), Aliens come and get you (1), Amalgam (1), Anaconda (1), Anarchy (1), Andar (Spirits, 1), Apathy (1), Asocial (1), Atomic bomb (1), and Avrättning (Execution, 1). The major reason why some of the meanings above became widespread is Lukas Moodysson’s movie Fucking Åmål (English title: Show Me Love) from 1998. In Sweden, nearly a million people saw the film, and for many it nearly defines the 1990s. Briefly, the movie is about the two teenage girls, Agnes and Elin, about friendship, love, sexuality, everyday life in a small town in western Sweden, and the longing to get away from it. In one of the most talked-about scenes, Elin is warned by her older sister Jessica not to stand on an A-cover:
JESSICA: Don’t stand there!

_Elin looks blankly at Jessica._

ELIN: What?

JESSICA: A-cover.

_Elin is in fact standing with one foot on a manhole cover with the letter A on._

ELIN: Grow up!


Alcoholic. Anorexia.

ELIN: Do you still go to kindergarten?

JESSICA: Anal sex. Asthma. AIDS.

_Elina gets up on another manhole cover, one metre in front of Elin._

ELIN: But hey, are you completely stupid? You are standing on a cover yourself!

JESSICA: But this is a K-cover.

ELIN: But it is only you that believe that K means Kärlek (love).

Do you know what it really means? It means Kräkas (Vomit)!

JESSICA: Move now.

ELIN: Kondylom (Condyloma). And Cancer.

JESSICA: Oh my God, I get so irritated! Must you always do the opposite?

_Elin starts demonstratively to stomp and jump on the A-cover._

ELIN: Ok, we’re testing. I do like this: Abortion! Arbetslösh (Unemployed)! Anal sex!

_Elin stops._

ELIN: No …. I feel nothing. No anal sex.

JESSICA: You’re not normal.

_Elin walks away._ (Moodysson 1998)

Although many of the interpretations existed before Fucking Åmål, the impact the film had on the tradition cannot be underestimated.
Many who answered the web questionnaire state how much they were affected by the film and how they identified with its leading characters. A dozen respondents point out that the movie in various ways directly contributed to spreading and changing notions about the different manhole covers. For example, one woman born in 1981 in Göteborg writes: “As a teenager the meanings of the manhole covers developed as one can see in Fucking Åmål.”

The meaning of the A-covers thus varies, both over time and sometimes dependent of the practitioner’s age. Something that has hardly changed, however, is the rituals used to neutralize bad luck when accidentally stepping on an A-cover. In a few answers to the web questionnaire, it is mentioned that in such cases you should quickly locate and step on a ‘good’ cover. Most frequently mentioned, however, is that the misfortune could be neutralized if someone patted you on your back three times. A woman raised in Skattkärr in the province of Värmland in the 1980s writes: “A stands for Avbruten kärlek (Interrupted love). You should not step on such a cover, but if you should happen to step on it, someone should pat you on your back three times. This will prevent it. You can pat yourself three times on your back too, but it may not be as good.” From Gävle in the 1980s, another woman recalls: “If you were walking and pushing a pram with your younger brother or sister in, you had to clap both the children and the pram. It could be a lot of claps if you had a lot of things in the pram that you cared about. I remember that we once clapped a football for safety’s sake (it is unclear what we thought would happen to it).”

**K-covers and love**

In contrast to A-covers, which are said to be ‘bad’, K-covers are usually described as ‘good’ or ‘lucky’ covers. Another difference is that there are many fewer variations when it comes to K-covers.
Most of those who have responded to the web questionnaire write that K stands for Kärlek (Love): By stepping on a K-cover you would be able to win or keep someone’s love. “The K-covers … stand for Kärlek (Love) and luck and I/we searched for them and tried to use their power!” a woman born in 1965 in Mölndal writes. From Göteborg in the early 1970s, a woman remembers: “If we were in love with someone we had an awfully tough job to ensure that we stepped on every K-cover on our way to or from school.” Even in the 1990s, the K-covers were exclusively described as love-covers: “One should jump on them and think of one person – then he/she would fall in love with you. And how we jumped! We looked up which routes through the residential neighbourhood garnered the most covers, and sometimes ran long detours to get the opportunity to ‘pick’ those extra three covers that might make the big difference” (woman, b. 1988, Mölndal). It is often reported that it was enough to step on a K-cover, but sometimes more complicated rituals were necessary to arouse someone’s love:

A cover with a K on it means Kärlek (Love), and you SHOULD step on it. Ideally you should stand on the cover a few seconds, or walk very slowly across it, and quietly whisper the name of the person you are in love with to make it come true that the person will love you (woman, b. 1981, Kungälv).

K-cover: You should step on it, while saying ‘K-cover, luck in Kärlek (Love).’ Then you should have a better chance of winning the person you were thinking of. But it only worked for one person at a time, so for two persons it was ‘first come, first serve’, and then it took a time of uncertain length before the power of the cover was back again (woman, b. 1976, Stockholm).
In order to ‘boost the effect’ on luck in *Kärlek* (Love) at K, a friend and I kissed the K-cover while we were thinking of a boy who we found interesting at the time. It was somewhat embarrassing as he just cycled past us when we lay there … nor did it work (woman, b. 1969, Emmaboda).

Even if K-covers were generally considered to be ‘lucky’ covers, some of those responding to the web questionnaire write that they avoided them when they were younger. A man born in 1975 in Västerås remembers: “[Love] was embarrassing when one was so young.” And a girl born in 2005 in Uppsala writes: “The love cover is the one with a K on it. If you step on that you fell in love for two years, you can fall in love with anyone. It is bad.”

*Get friends, become beautiful, or end up in jail*

From the 1960s and onwards, different meanings have also been linked to other kinds of manhole covers, especially V- (*Ventil*, Valve), FV- (*Fjärrvärme*, District heating), and *Telefon*-covers (Telephone) as well as road drains.

Most often it is believed to be good or lucky to step on a V-cover. The letter V was interpreted as *Vänner*/ *Vänskap* (Friends/Friendship, 55), but from the 1980s onwards it could also mean *Vacker* (Beautiful, 11) or *Vinst*/ *Vinner* (Prize/Winner, 8). Other interpretations that are mentioned in the answers to the web questionnaire are *Våldtäkt* (Rape, 3), *Vanskap* (Malformed, 1), *Vampyr* (Vampire, 1), *Vigsel* (Wedding, 1), and *Visdom* (Wisdom, 1).

“V-covers were friendship covers. You were supposed to hold your best friend by the hand and jump on the covers, and then that friendship would last forever,” writes a woman born in 1988 in Mölndal. From Växjö in the 1990s, another woman remembers: “There was a V-cover on my way home that I always tried to step
on when I was at high school. I had no good friends and wanted so much to have friends” (woman, b. 1986, Växjö).

FV-covers were sometimes associated with Fara väntar (Danger awaits, 4), Flickvän (Girlfriend, 2), Förlovad (Engaged, 1), Farlig vänskap (Dangerous friendship, 1), or Försärligt vacker (Terribly beautiful, 1). The meanings of the road drains were always negative. In about twenty narratives, road drains (with ‘bars’) are interpreted as Fängelse (Jail), meaning that a person who stepped on them or that person’s parents would end up in jail. To walk on a cover that says Tele (Telephone) or Rikstele (National telephone) was sometimes interpreted to mean that you would soon get a phone call or a very high phone bill.

Rituals, hopes, and fears
As noted above, stepping on or avoiding manhole covers should partly be understood as a game. A woman in Göteborg born in 1989 says: “It was ... something that made the walk or a school trip a little bit more fun.” However, many of those answering the web questionnaire also describe how they took the narratives about different manhole covers very seriously when they were young, how they persistently avoided every A-cover, while looking for and trying to step on K-covers.

Like other forms of everyday magic, the rituals regarding manhole covers concern areas in the practitioners’ lives that engage them, are perceived as important, and at the same time are ‘unsafe’ and hard to control (Palmenfelt 2008: 8; cf. Tucker 2012: 396–398). “Superstition is a way of managing irrationality in our world,” as Utz Jeggle and John Bendix (2003: 82) put it. Robert Georges and Michel Jones (1995: 96) stress that ‘superstition’ mostly relates to events or conditions “over which human beings have no control and which they regard and interpret.”
Friendship and love are central themes of rituals related to manhole covers. Both emotional themes occupy large parts of our time and are a source of both joy and concern, perhaps even more so during adolescence. The website umo.se, “a youth-friendly clinic online,” expresses it in the following manner: “One friendship can feel cosy and safe, and another may feel tough and demanding. For some, it is a matter of course to have buddies, while others do not think they have any friends. Love may be beautiful and fun, but also painful with feelings like jealousy and anxiety. Being together with someone could be the thing you crave most of all, or you can most of all long to break up.” The rituals related to manhole covers can at least partly be understood as methods of coping and to some extent controlling these areas. For example, by stepping on certain manhole covers, you can increase the possibility of getting together with the one you love or acquiring more friends.

But just as often, the manhole covers are used to consolidate existing love relations and friendships. A woman born in the middle of the 1970s in Hägersten writes: “V meant Vänner (Friends). Sometimes you stepped on it together with you friends and laughed about it. As if confirming the friendship.” Some of those responding to the web questionnaire also remembered that couples could stand together on a K-cover, probably as a method both to manifest and to maintain the love for each other (cf. Kättström Höök 2012: 93). As with other forms of folklore, the rituals can be understood as methods of formulating, communicating, and not least comparing feelings (Palmenfelt 2008: 8). Several respondents, for instance, write that they used to compete with others. As part of the ritual, the one that first came to the manhole cover would say, or even better call out, the name of the person she was secretly in love with.
In the mid-70s, in Uppsala, we avoided A-covers as they meant a lot of bad luck. On the other hand, K-covers meant KÄRLEK (love) and when we were about 10 years old we competed over who first got to jump on the manhole cover and call out a name of a person we were in love with. If you were lucky enough to come to the cover first, you had to spit on it 3 times ... it meant that no one could call out the same name until the spittle had dried.

A few years later, it was enough to bike over a K-cover and think of the person you were in love with (woman, b. 1965, Uppsala).

That the letters on the manhole covers sometimes were given specific meanings can, as stated, be seen as a rash of young people’s creativity, but the associations also reflect widespread fears during the 19th and 20th Centuries (cf. af Klintberg 2007b: 114–128; Stattin 1990; Virtanen 1976: 257–258). Besides interrupted love and betrayal by friends, notions about manhole covers reflect fears of addiction (alcoholism), violence (corporal punishment, rape), bullying (being called a monkey), dentists (amalgam), and suffering accidents or diseases (AIDS, acne, anorexia, asthma, etc.). Other meanings reflect concerns about finances (unemployment, high telephone bills) or losing someone you care about (farewell). The notions about street drains are another clear example of how the manhole covers reflect young people’s fears. “If you accidentally stepped on these bars, it meant that you would end up in prison, or that you would be kidnapped and locked in,” writes a woman born in Malmö in 1976. “This made all of us kids scared,” another respondent says.

The folklore of manhole covers is to some extent time-bound. For example, the A-covers were interpreted as Arbetslöshet/Avskedad (Unemployment/Fired) during the 1970s, a topic connected to the recession that hit the Western world during that decade. And it is hardly a coincidence that interpretations such as Anorexia, AIDS, and Atomic Bomb arose during the 1980s and 1990s. The increasing
sexualisation of society in the late 1900s has also affected the tradition. This applies to the A-covers but to some extent also to the K-covers. A woman born in 1991 in Vänersborg writes: “Most of the later parts of the time in high school were characterized by love, relationships, and sex, which were reflected in virtually everything; even the manhole covers.” A man from Nyköping, born in 1983, says: “I also remember how the K-covers during school time all of a sudden got sexual interpretations, that is, if a boy and a girl together walked over a K-cover, it meant that they would, well…..”

*Love magic of today?*

As I have stated, the tradition concerning A- and K-covers seems to have originated in Sweden. The tradition appears to have been largely unknown in Denmark, Norway, and Finland, at least before the film *Fucking Åmål*. However, similar notions and rituals seem to exist in Great Britain. In his book *Penguin Guide to the Superstitions of Britain and Ireland*, Stephen Roud (2003: 353-354) mentions that it is bad luck to cross three manhole covers in a row. I called for more narratives about manhole covers in *FLS News*, the newsletter of the Folklore Society. A teacher who had been documenting folklore among children in a school in Coventry in the 1990s wrote:

Walking over single manhole covers was unlucky, double manhole covers lucky and treble manhole covers VERY unlucky. One pupil believed if you walked over a treble cover you had to walk backwards over it again (returning to the beginning as it were) and then avoid it the next time. Another pupil claimed that to get rid of the bad luck you had to spit on the last cover (of the three) and yet another said you had to cross the road and not return to your original route until you had walked over a double one (letter from Cathy Gould, 21 May 2014).
A colleague from Russia also informed me that similar notions are common among children in Siberia. At least in the Tyumen district, stepping on a manhole cover is assumed to bring bad luck in general or, more specifically, mean that your mother will die. If you accidentally step on a cover, you can neutralize the bad luck by taking three steps crouching (letter from Elena Yugay, 17 April 2014; cf. Bayduzh 2012). Notions linked to manhole covers thus also exist in other countries, but it seems as if the rituals’ connection with love is only found in Sweden.

The narratives and notions about A- and K-covers are a relatively new phenomenon. However, hopes of managing, not to mention controlling, love are nothing new. Already in Swedish collections of superstitions from the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries, several methods can be found for arousing or assuaging love. For example, in Samling av widskeppelser from the 18th Century, Johan J. Törner writes “with a sewing needle, which has been used to sew on corpses, you can make a person in love with you, if you put the needle in their clothes” (Wikman 1946: 88). In Leonhard Fredrik Rääf’s collection Svenska skrock och signerier from the 19th Century, there are about 50 different forms of love magic, for example: “put 3 drops of blood, taken from under the left wing of a bat, on a handkerchief, which you then rub gently on the mouth of a girl to arouse her love” (Wikman 1957: 266; cf. Gasslander 1982; Tillhagen 1959; Wallensteen 1899). In the Swedish folklore archives, there are thousands of records about similar rituals (cf. Schön 1996). It is possible to understand the rituals concerning A- and K-covers as a modern form of love magic, a simpler and contemporary equivalent of the peasant society’s often rather complicated rituals with the same purpose. Thus, the rituals have changed, but the notions about manhole covers show that young people are still in need of ‘magic’ rituals to explain and, more or less seriously, try to control the search for love in their lives.
As I have mentioned, the notions of manhole covers are usually somewhere in the borderland between playfulness and seriousness (cf. Kvideland 1976: 248). Probably the same applies to similar rituals of older times. It is likely that these kinds of traditions have always primarily been spread among young people. At least several of those responding to the web questionnaire have described the tradition as something that they used to believe in or practised when young. However, the answers also reveal that the driver in Linköping who was mentioned at the beginning of the article is far from the only adult who avoids A-covers. Actually, over one-fifth of the 400 respondents write that as adults, they are reluctant to step on unlucky manhole covers. For example, a woman born in 1967 in Skara says: “Strangely, this is still in me. In front of a cash-dispenser in Skara there is an A-cover! It is a bit tricky not to touch the cover when you collect the money.” Many stress that they avoid the covers for safety’s sake and often surreptitiously. For example, a woman in Norrtälje, born in 1991, writes: “If I walk alone, I walk in a zigzag pattern to avoid the A-covers.” Another narrative, significant in this context, was written by a nearly fifty-year-old woman in Ludvika: “Even to this day, I make little detours, skip and hop or take abnormally long/short steps to avoid stepping on any A-covers. Hope no-one notices ;)”

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