



swedish culture

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Modern Literature

A whole century of Swedish literature necessarily encompasses numerous literary currents: folk romanticism, flâneur literature, expressionism, bourgeois novels, surrealist poetry, urbane portraits, social criticism, social realism, and accounts of the disintegration of the welfare state and the fragility of the individual.

Some writers belonging to this literary scene have only one role to play, but a major one. Others reappear in several guises. Different voices from different epochs speak to us, loudly or softly, from “their” particular Sweden.



TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY CURRENTS

Two giants dominated Swedish literature at the turn of the 20th century: Selma Lagerlöf (1858–1940) and August Strindberg (1849–1912), whose influence on narrative and drama has been felt ever since. Strindberg's *Röda Rummet* (*The Red Room*), 1879, and Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berlings saga* (*Gösta Berling's Saga*), 1891, are considered the first modern Swedish novels.

Nils Holgerssons *underbara resa genom Sverige* (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*), 1906–1907, by Lagerlöf, a book which several generations of schoolchildren knew by heart, is a playful introduction to Sweden's geography. Two years later came *Svenskarna och deras hövdingar* (*The Swedes and Their Chieftains*), a children's history reader by Verner von Heidenstam (1859–1940). Because Strindberg was constantly at odds with the Swedish establishment, early in this century Heidenstam was the author who enjoyed the status of Sweden's unofficial poet laureate. His oeuvre was imbued with romantic nationalism and themes from Swedish history, beginning with his debut collection of poetry, *Vallfart och vandringsår* (*Pilgrimage and Wandering-Years*), 1888. *Nya dikter* (*New Poems*), 1915, was his last major work.

During this period, symbolism was the fashionable literary movement. Strindberg, in addition to his realistic works, was also a trailblazing symbolist playwright. *Ett drömspel* (*A Dream Play*), 1902, contains one of his most famous lines: "Humanity is to be pitied."

The foremost symbolist poet was Vilhelm Ekelund (1880–1949), one of the first modernists in Sweden. He wrote free verse but later switched to essays and aphorisms.

Few authors capture the fin-de-siècle *flâneur* atmosphere of disillusioned sophistication as skillfully as Hjalmar Söderberg (1869–1941). His protagonists were passive and listless, aimlessly roaming the streets of Stockholm, but the fact that Söderberg did not condemn their often decadent lifestyles was considered somewhat shocking. *Den allvarsamma leken* (*The Serious Game*), 1912, is perhaps the most widely read of all the classic Swedish romance novels, while *Förvillelser* (*Aberrations*), 1895, and *Doktor Glas* (*Doctor Glas*), 1905, are remembered for their vivid portrayals of Stockholm.

THE 1910s

The writers associated with the period 1910–1920, inspired by Strindberg, often turned to social issues. Among the first working-class authors were Maria Sandel, Ludvig Nordström, Martin Koch and Dan Andersson. Meanwhile such authors as Sigfrid Siwertz, Elin Wägner and Hjalmar Bergman portrayed the bourgeoisie in a way that contrasted with the passive *flâneur* mentality. They wrote accessible descriptions of Sweden's transition from an agrarian to an industrial society.

Hjalmar Bergman (1883–1931), one of the truly great storytellers of Swedish literature, was both a novelist and a dramatist. One of his specialties was portraying the evils of contemporary life in a carnivalesque, entertaining way, as in his 1919 novel about small-town life, *Markurells i Wadköping* (*God's Orchid*). *Farmor och vår herre* (*Thy Rod and Thy Staff*), 1921, and *Clownen Jac* (*Jac the Clown*), 1930, are other outstanding novels.

Elin Wägner (1882–1949) depicted the lives of modern working women and the vicissitudes of the Swedish women's suffrage movement. Her most noteworthy novels are *Norr tullsligan* (*The Norrtull Gang*), 1908, *Pennskaftet* (*The Penholder*) and *Åsa-Hanna* (*Åsa-Hanna*), 1917.

THE INTERWAR YEARS

Pär Lagerkvist (1891–1974) was one of the first modernist poets in Sweden. His expressionist poem, *Ångest* (*Anguish*), 1916, introduced modernist lyricism to Sweden. Lagerkvist's prose and poetry addressed the great existential questions of the existence of God and the meaning of life. He often chose the ancient world for his settings. He was also a playwright. *Himlens hemlighet* (*The Secret of Heaven*), 1919, his best known drama, echoes Strindberg's *Ett drömspel*.

Inspired by European modernism, Birger Sjöberg's (1885–1929) poem *Kriser och kransar* (*Crises and Wreaths*) caused an outcry when it appeared in 1926, both because of its anxiety-ridden expressionistic form and because Sjöberg had earlier made his name as an idyllist with the popular *Fridas visor* (*Frida's Songs*), 1922. Lagerkvist's and Sjöberg's poetic rebellion would later be embraced by the poets of the thirties and the forties.

During the interwar period a number of writers emerged who had their roots in the working class, among them Eyvind Johnson, Vilhelm Moberg, Moa Martinson and Jan Fridegård. Many of them wrote autobiographical novels in the spirit of Maxim Gorky. During 1934–1937, Eyvind Johnson (1900–1976) produced *Romanen om Olof* (*The Novel About Olof*) in four parts, depicting a working-class boy's path from a simple background to self-insight. Johnson wrote historical novels as well and took a stand against the Nazis in his *Krilon* (*Krilon*) trilogy, 1941–1943.

The widely popular Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973) wrote about Swedish rural society and its history. Several of his novels were turned into motion pictures. Swedish film director Jan Troell's two-part adaptation of Moberg's four novels about 19th century Swedish emigration to America — *Utvandrarna* (*The Emigrants*), 1949, *Invandrarna* (*Unto a Good Land*), 1952, *Nybyggarna* (*The Settlers*), 1956, and *Sista brevet hem* (*The Last Letter Home*), 1959, — made cinematic history. Moberg was also a controversial social critic in the spirit of Strindberg.

Another social rebel was Ivar Lo-Johansson (1901–1990) who became the dominant figure among Swedish proletarian writers. He portrayed the cotters — poor farm laborers who were paid mainly in kind — in such novels as *Godnatt, jord* (*Breaking Free*), 1933, and he captured the big-city mentality in novels like *Kungsgatan* (*King's Street*), 1935. The latter was a subversive novel that in the midst of the book burnings of the thirties depicted prostitution and venereal disease.

Moa Martinson (1890–1964) wrote twenty novels, focusing on the daily drudgery of women factory workers and farm laborers. The volumes in her autobiographical trilogy — *Mor gifter sig* (*My Mother Gets Married*), 1936, *Kyrkbröllop* (*Church Wedding*) and *Kungens rosor* (*The King's Roses*), 1939, — are constantly in demand at Swedish public libraries.

Meanwhile novels about the bourgeoisie were being written by Agnes von Krusenstjerna, Olle Hedberg and Fritiof Nilsson Piraten. Agnes von Krusenstjerna (1894–1940) portrayed "the poor nobility," a class from which she drew characters afflicted by a nervous hysteria with sexual overtones in her three *Tony* (*Tony*) books, 1922–1926, and in her *von Pahlen* (*von Pahlen*) series, 1930–1935. The candor of these works stirred up bad blood and resulted in a furious debate.

In 1929, Artur Lundkvist, Harry Martinson, Gustav Sandgren, Erik Asklund and Josef Kjellgren published a poetry anthology entitled *Fem unga* (*Five Young Men*), which became a premonition of things to come in the thirties. Inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, Lundkvist and Martinson viewed the future with optimism. They later became major figures in Swedish literary history.

Artur Lundkvist (1906–1991), a surrealist poet and prose writer, was a prolific author throughout his life and played a key role in introducing international literature to Swedish readers. Harry Martinson (1904–1978), a former sailor who had grown up as an orphan, described his difficult childhood in *Nässlorna blomma* (*Flow-ering Nettle*), 1935. In the thirties he became one of Sweden's finest nature poets. But he also wrote the space epic *Aniara* (*Aniara*), 1956, in which he described the arms race and galloping technical advances in a spirit of disillusionment. This poetic epic was later turned into an opera.

Karin Boye (1900–1941), whose poetry many Swedes know by heart, was among the cultural radicals of her age and was inspired by modernism and psychoanalysis. Her futuristic novel, *Kalloeain* (*Kalloeain*), 1940, was a critique of Nazi Germany.

The thirties produced such influential poets as Johannes Edfelt, Hjalmar Gullberg and Nils Ferlin. In 1932, Sweden's arguably greatest poet, Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–1968) made his debut. *Sent på jorden* (*Late Arrival on Earth*), 1932, was called the first Swedish

collection of surrealist poetry. Ekelöf wrote simple, immediate poems as well as experimental ones, often with Oriental influences. He crushed the letters in order to find a new language which better reflected a shattered reality.

THE FORTIES

Nineteen forty-five marked a literary divide. The war was a painful memory for many writers. Pessimism ruled and themes like anxiety and guilt recurred frequently. Not until now had modernist literary trends found a firm hold; the new emerging literature became increasingly experimental and its incomprehensibility was the topic of the day.

Lars Ahlin (1915–1997), above all, came to represent the rebellion against realism. Ahlin was more interested in depicting an associative world, as in his novel *Om* (If), 1946, and later *Natt i marknadstältet* (Night in the Market Tent), 1957. In the early eighties, after many years of silence, he resumed his novel writing and continued working until his death.

One genius of the 1940s generation who died young was Stig Dagerman (1923–1954). Guilt and anxiety were the themes of his symbolist and grotesque novels, such as *Ormen* (*The Snake*), 1945, *De dömdas ö* (*Island of the Doomed*), 1946, *Bränt barn* (*A Burnt Child*), 1948, and *Bröllopsbesvär* (*Wedding Worries*) 1949. In *Den dödsdömde* (*The Condemned*), 1947, he also distinguished himself as a playwright.

Erik Lindegren and Karl Vennberg were dominant figures among the poets of the forties. *Mannen utan väg* (*The Man Without a Way*), 1942, by Erik Lindegren (1910–1968) — with its “shattered sonnets” — was little understood by most critics. The poet’s intention in using a fragmentary form inspired by the French surrealists and the tense imagery of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, was to capture the frailty of the age. *Vinteroffer* (*Winter Rites*), 1954, was his last poetry collection.

The poetry of Karl Vennberg (1910–1995), with echoes of T.S. Eliot, was critical of his age in much the same way as that

of Lindegren. Vennberg was an analytical skeptic who sought to re-evaluate poetic and political truths. He made his debut in 1937 with *Hymn och hunger* (*Hymn and Hunger*) and continued to write poetry until his death.

One of Vennberg’s disciples was the modernist poet Werner Aspenström (1918–1997), who was a successful playwright as well. Although his breakthrough came in 1946 with the collection *Skriket och tystnaden* (*The Scream and the Silence*), he is mostly associated with the fifties. One of the most widely read Swedish poets, he remained active as a writer until the end.

A number of women authors appeared during the forties, as well. The poet and prose writer Elsa Grave (b. 1918) wrote colorfully grotesque and angry poems about everything from motherhood to the threat of nuclear war. Taking her heroines from ancient mythology, Rut Hillarp (b. 1914) created an erotic surrealism and became an example for many female writers.

Stina Aronson (1892–1956) received her literary and public breakthrough with the modernist novel *Hitom himlen* (*This Side of Heaven*), 1946, in which she portrayed the taciturn women in the hardscrabble farming areas of northern Sweden.

Ulla Isaksson (1916–2000), who made her debut in 1940, also used female identity as a recurring motif in her works. Her depiction of motherhood in the novel *Paradistorg* (*Paradise Place*), 1973, caused an uproar among many feminists, who considered her views reactionary. She also wrote screenplays for film director Ingmar Bergman — *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*), among others — and in 1994 she published a highly publicized autobiographical novel, *Boken om E.* (*The Book About E.*), based on her relationship with her dying husband.

THE FIFTIES

The literature of the fifties continued some of the themes of the forties but was somewhat more playfully ironic and idyllic. Many authors were accused of ignoring world events — the arms race, the Cold War and the crisis in Korea were practically invisible

in the Swedish literature of that decade.

Lars Forssell (b. 1928) tried different genres and different identities in his writing, inspired early on by Ezra Pound. Vacillating between simple folksiness and advanced metaphors, Forssell’s poetry left its mark on the literature of the fifties. Together with Pär Rådström (1925–1963), who personified the modern spirit of the fifties with his portrayals of urban jargon and milieu, Forssell renewed Swedish political theater as well. To this day, it is still a literary event when a new Forssell book is published.

One of our internationally best known poets is Tomas Tranströmer (b. 1931), whose bold imagery has been highly influential, starting with his debut volume, *17 dikter* (*17 Poems*), 1954, and running through to his latest collection *Sorgegondolen* (*The Mourning Gondola*), 1996. However, he fell out of favor in the sixties and seventies, when a more politicized literature was expected.

The works of Willy Kyrklund (b. 1921), who made his debut in 1948 and wrote philosophical novels and short stories in which the Orient frequently served as inspiration, have seen a renaissance during the nineties. *Solange* (*Solange*), 1951, and *Mästaren Ma* (*The Master Ma*) are two of his masterpieces.

Other influential writers during the fifties were Lars Gyllensten and Tora Dahl, along with poets Majken Johansson, Göran Printz-Påhlson, Folke Isaksson, Bo Setterlind, and Sandro Key-Åberg. Still active is Birgitta Trotzig (b. 1929), a major modernist writer who made her breakthrough with the novel *De utsatta* (*The Exposed*), 1957, and whose works focus on existential questions of a religious nature.

Sara Lidman (1923–2004) became an overnight success with *Tjärdalen* (*The Tar Pit*), 1953. Written in dialect, the novel took place among small farmers in the northern Swedish province of Västerbotten. Lidman’s debut book foreshadowed the political awareness of the sixties through its commitment to helping the destitute and the oppressed of the world. After a prolific period which included her “railway epic” series, Lidman was silent for some years until 1996



From left to right: Selma Lagerlöf (photographer unknown). Karin Boye. Photo: Ateljé Jaeger/Kungl. biblioteket. Tomas Tranströmer. Photo: Ulla Montan

when her critically acclaimed novel *Lifsens rot* (The Root of Life) was published.

THE SIXTIES

A new socially critical literature emerged during the sixties, in which the emphasis was on a global perspective, Western civilization was questioned, and the anti-Vietnam War movement was born. Interest in Marxist ideology increased and literature became more accessible. Journalistic documentary books became a new literary wave which peaked in the early seventies.

Jan Myrdal (b. 1927) published *Rapport från kinesisk by* (Report from a Chinese Village), 1963, and Sven Lindqvist wrote accounts of his travels in Latin America and Asia. Sara Lidman wrote *Samtal i Hanoi* (Conversation in Hanoi), 1966, and *Gruva* (Mine), 1968, a series of interviews with miners.

Per Wästberg (b. 1933), who had made his debut in 1949 as a precocious fifteen-year-old, became involved in the struggle against racial oppression in Rhodesia and South Africa during the sixties. His interest in Africa resulted in documentary reports from that continent and several surveys of African literature. Wästberg is also well known for a trilogy of Stockholm novels — *Vattenslott* (The Water Castle), 1968, *Luftburen* (The Air Cage), 1969, and *Jordmänen* (Love's Gravity), 1972, — which portray love in the big city.

Göran Sonnevi (b. 1939), whose politically and socially conscious poems caused him to be labelled the “poet of the new left” for ten years, made his breakthrough in 1965 with *Ingrepp – Modeller* (Interventions – Models), which includes his famous poem *Om kriget i Vietnam* (On the War in Vietnam). Sonnevi's 300-page collection entitled *Mozarts tredje hjärna* (Mozart's Third Brain) in 1996, followed by *Klangernas bok* (The Book of Sounds) in 1998, showed that he is still one of our major poets

The early sixties witnessed a brief modernistic wave of avant-garde experiments with form. Bengt-Emil Johnson (b. 1936) introduced concretism to Sweden with his 1963 poetry collection *Hyllningarna* (The Homages). He was followed by Åke Hodell (b. 1919), who poked fun at the military establishment in *Igevär* (To Arms), 1963, and *General Bussig* (General Nice Guy), 1964.

Sonja Åkesson (1926–1977), who made her debut in 1957, wrote socially critical poems in the style of the so-called New Simplicity about the condition of women in culturally deprived everyday environments. Volumes like *Leva livet* (Live Life), 1961, and *Husfrid* (Domestic Peace), 1963, inspired poets such as Kristina Lugn and Bodil Malmsten, who became influential in the eighties and nineties.

Kent Andersson (b. 1933) and Bengt Bratt (b. 1937) brought a sense of social commitment to the Swedish theater stage in the sixties with their historic plays *Flotten*

(The Raft), *Sandlådan* (The Sandbox) and *Hemmet* (The Home), created — in the spirit of the times — through teamwork with the actors.

Per Olov Enquist (b. 1934) wrote both documentary prose and experimental novels. *Hess* (*Hess*), 1966, is a fragmented meta-novel, and in *Legionärerna* (*The Legionnaires*), 1968, he combined documentary and fictional elements in his account of the extradition of Baltic war refugees from Sweden to the Soviet Union. Later Enquist wrote novels with a broader scope, for example *Musikanternas uttåg* (*The March of the Musicians*), 1978, and *Kapten Nemos bibliotek* (*Captain Nemo's Library*). In the mid-seventies Enquist made his breakthrough as a playwright. *Tribadernas natt* (*The Night of the Tribades*), 1975, and *Från regnornarnas liv* (*The Dance of the Rainsnakes*), 1981, helped him become one of Sweden's internationally most acclaimed dramatists, alongside Lars Norén.

Lars Norén (b. 1944) made his debut as a poet with hallucinatory, surrealist poems. *Stupor* (*Stupor*), 1968, is a collage of violent images of world events, with themes like death and guilt.

THE SEVENTIES

A certain reaction against the politicized sixties can be detected during the seventies. In the spirit of German writer and activist Günter Wallraff, poet Göran Palm (b. 1931) took a job as a factory worker at a large corporation, LM Ericsson, and wrote *Ett år på LM* (One Year at LM) and *Bokslut från LM* (Balance Sheet from LM), 1974.

Per Christian Jersild (b. 1935), whose writing swings brilliantly between social realism and the fantastic, wrote a number of polemical novels about various Swedish institutions, for example *Babels hus* (*House of Babel*), 1978, which dealt with the health care system.

But otherwise the broad epic novel came to dominate the decade. Several major writers produced series of novels about Sweden's industrial revolution and emerging welfare state. Lars Gustafsson (b. 1936), one of Sweden's most prolific and internationally acclaimed writers, made his mark during the sixties as a philosophical poet and novelist. In the seventies *Sprickorna i muren* (*The Cracks in the Wall*) appeared, a series of novels that evoked the atmosphere of the decade.

Kerstin Ekman (b. 1933), whose importance as a writer has continued to grow, penned a series of novels about working-class women in the central Swedish town of Katrineholm, of which the first part, *Häxringarna* (*Witches' Rings*), came out in 1974. *Händelser vid vatten* (*Blackwater*), 1993, which has been translated into several languages, is one of the most critically acclaimed and popular novels of the nineties.

One of Sweden's great storytellers was Sven Delblanc (1931–1992) who made his

literary debut in 1962. He became especially popular for his *Hedeby* (Hedeby) series, which was set in the farming communities of Södermanland province southwest of Stockholm; the first part, *Åminne* (Memories of a Stream), appeared in 1970.

Another widely popular, versatile author is Per Anders Fogelström (1917–1998), who created a significant historical document with his series of novels that followed a working-class family in Stockholm from the 1860s to the present.

Sara Lidman's “railway epic”, which depicts the settling of Sweden's northern region, Norrland, created a new narrative language in Swedish literature. In the intensely imaginative writings of Göran Tunström (1937–2000), we hear echoes of Selma Lagerlöf. Tunström defined his literary universe, Sunne in Värmland province, with the novel *Prästungen* (The Vicar's Kid), 1976. His best known work, *Juloratoriet* (*The Christmas Oratorio*), which was recently turned into a movie, appeared in 1983. Tunström made a much anticipated comeback as a novelist in 1996 with *Skimmer* (Shimmering), which is set in Iceland during the age of the sagas.

Jack (Jack), a bestselling novel by Ulf Lundell (b. 1949), became synonymous with “the young seventies.” A latter-day Beat generation writer, Lundell has written several novels that both portray contemporary life and are self-reflective. He is a constant source of inspiration for would-be writers, yet Swedish publishing houses continue to search in vain for a worthy successor.

THE POST-MODERN EIGHTIES

Autisterna (The Autistics) 1979, the book that marked the debut of Stig Larsson (b. 1955), was the leading edge of the post-modern eighties. As a poet, prose writer and playwright, Larsson became the foremost representative of the young literature that emerged during that decade. Socially critical literature of epic proportions gave way to thin prose books of about a hundred pages. Gone was the dutiful social commitment of the seventies. Instead the lack of identity and fragmented shape of the characters in his novels captured a social system and a welfare state in dissolution.

As in the forties, there were debates about the incomprehensibility and amoral nature of the new literature. Young writers were dismissed as too disengaged and anemically academic. Authors such as Stig Larsson, Carina Rydberg, Alexander Ahndoril and Magnus Dahlström wrote about violence and evil without adopting a moral stance.

The form-conscious eighties were, above all, a decade of poetry. Tobias Berggren (b. 1940) had been a significant poet since the seventies; other important names were Gunnar D. Hansson, Arne Johnsson and Magnus William-Olsson. However, women poets such as Katarina Frostenson (b. 1953), Ann

Jäderlund (b. 1955) and Birgitta Lill-pers (b. 1958) were especially instrumental in revitalizing poetry during the eighties. In the nineties, the three consolidated their position at the forefront of Swedish poetry.

Lars Norén took over Ingmar Bergman's mantle as Sweden's national dramatist in the eighties and nineties. In 1980 his trilogy *Motet att döda* (The Courage to Kill) appeared, a claustrophobic middle class drama reminiscent of Chekhov. In the nineties Norén returned to the milieus inhabited by society's rejects, which he had portrayed as a poet and prose writer in the sixties. *Personkrets 3:1* (Category 3:1), the marathon first part of his *Morire di classe* trilogy, was the most celebrated Swedish play of the decade.

THE NINETIES

The decade before the turn of the millen-

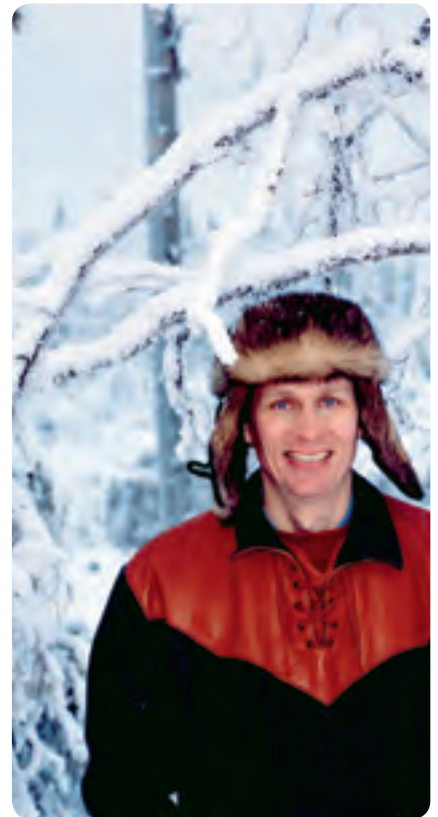
nium did not leave the same clear fingerprints as the eighties. There was, however, a vague tendency toward a more extroverted literature; here and there a sense of social commitment re-emerged. The poetry of the nineties tended to portray everyday situations and was less linguistically experimental. Göran Greider (b. 1959) set the tone with his collection *När fabrikena tystnar* (When the Factories Fall Silent).

Prosewriters, too, showed a renewed interest in social realism and documentary storytelling. In *Aprilhäxan* (April Witch), Majgull Axelsson (b. 1947) presented a Swedish welfare society in decline in an evocative mixture of social reality and the fantastic.

Autobiographies and confessional literature have experienced an upswing. For example Peter Kihlgård (b. 1954), renowned as a master of fantasy, wrote *Anvisningar till*

en far (Instructions for a Father), 1996, a prose poem depicting his adolescence. Björn Ranelid (b. 1949), too, published childhood recollections in *Till alla människor på jorden och i himlen* (To All People on Earth and in Heaven), 1997. Another who returned to his childhood world was Ernst Brunner (b. 1950), in *Vallmohadet* (Poppy Shore), from 1999.

Poet and playwright Agneta Pleijel (b. 1940) who started to write novels in the eighties, laid herself bare in *En vinter i Stockholm* (A Stockholm Winter), a book that brought her a wide readership. But self-exposure was taken to new heights with Carina Rydberg's (b. 1962) *Den Högsta Kasten* (The Highest Caste), from 1997, a book that became emblematic for this literary approach in the nineties. It contained authentic names and thereby sparked a fierce and



Upper left: From Swedish Television's production of Lars Norén's play *Category 3:1*. Photo: Bengt Wanselius. Above right: Mikael Niemi. Photo: Lars Thunbjörk. Bottom row from left to right: PC Jersild. Photo: Ulla Montan. Majgull Axelsson. Photo: Ulla Montan. Inger Edelfeldt. Photo: Moona Björklund.

prolonged literary debate concerning the freedom of the artist.

Among a number of disparate writers who had made their literary debut earlier and who enhanced their reputations in the nineties was Torgny Lindgren (b. 1938), whose mythical, grotesque novel *Hummelhönung* (*Sweetness*) recalled his earlier masterpiece, *Ormens väg på hälleberget* (*The Way of a Serpent*), from 1982. Another was Sigrid Combüchen (b. 1942), who followed up her breakthrough novel *Byron* with two further spiritually inventive, sophisticated works, *Långa och korta kapitel* (*Long and Short Chapters*) and *Parsifal*, from 1998.

In the past few years, Inger Edelfeldt (b.1956), too, has consolidated her position as an important writer. She enters the consciousness of frail individuals and shows how their inner desires collide with reality. In 1999, she produced a wide-ranging novel, *Det hemliga namnet* (*The Secret Name*), that summarised the themes of her literary output to date.

The end of the decade saw the return of the epic in Swedish literature. Authors brought out thick volumes seeking to capture the essence of the 20th century. These included Kerstin Ekman's *Guds barmhärtighet* (*The Mercy of God*), the first part of a planned trilogy entitled *Vargskinn* (*The Skin of the Wolf*). Major writers published new books. Göran Tunström returned to his childhood province of Värmland with *Berömda män som varit i Sunne* (*Famous Men Who Have Been in Sunne*) and Sara Lidman to her northern home of Västerbotten with *Oskuldens minut* (*Moment of Innocence*). And in the closing autumn of the decade, Per-Olof Enquist presented his first novel for eight years, *Livläkarens besök* (*The Visit of the Royal Physician*). The setting was the Danish Royal Court in 18th century Copenhagen. Political unrest, a time of transition – just like the age in which the book appeared.

THE NEW LITERARY CENTURY

For years, literary critics had been wondering aloud why no-one seemed interested in writing about the big-city suburbs and the 'New Swedes'. Early in the new century, this began to change. Iranian-born Fateme Behros (b. 1944) brought out her second novel, *Fångarnas kör* (*The Prisoners' Chorus*), describing the day-to-day lives of refugee women in Uppsala. One critic dubbed her "the Moa Martinson of our time" and saw her book as a new addition to the pow-

erful Swedish tradition of proletarian writing.

A number of younger writers with roots in other linguistic cultures have also appeared on the Swedish literary scene. Alejandro Leiva Wenger (b. 1976) introduced hip-hop into Swedish prose. A Chilean-born sociologist, he was unanimously acclaimed by the critics for his modernistic collection of short stories, *Till vår ära* (*In Our Honour*). The book placed him among our most form-conscious young writers in the burgeoning short-story genre.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri (b. 1978) also made his debut as a novelist recently, with *Ett öga rött* (*One Eye Red*), published in 2003. The language he uses might best be described as a consciously laboured pidgin Swedish. Sarcastic humour permeates the diary notes of 'raghead revolutionary' Halim.

Depictions of minorities and underdogs were much in vogue at the turn of the new century. *Populärmusik från Vittula* (*Popular Music*), a novel from 2000 by Mikael Niemi (b. 1959) about the lives and adventures of the Tornedal Finnish minority in northern Sweden, became an international bestseller. The success of books in this genre showed that local self-reflection can also be of general interest and find a much wider audience. The working class was given voice in books like *Underdog* by Torbjörn Flygt (b. 1962), about a working class family in Malmö in the 1970s. In 2001, Elsie Johansson (b.1931) completed her partially autobiographical trilogy *Glasfågarna* (*The Glass Birds*), *Mosippan* (*The Pasque Flower*) and *Nancy* – a sort of welfare state blues about the struggle of a strong-willed working class girl to achieve her goals.

Kerstin Ekman, too, completed her trilogy, *Vargskinn* (*The Skin of the Wolf*). A century of social development in northern Sweden portrayed through the filter of women's drudgery. *Skraplotter* (*Scratch Cards*), as the third part is called, brought her the prestigious August Prize for the best novel of the year.

The poetry of Kristina Lugn (b. 1948) could perhaps be described as welfare state blues for the lonely. In 2003, she made a widely-acclaimed comeback as a poet with *Hej då, ha det så bra!* (*Bye Bye, Enjoy Yourself!*). It was her first book of poetry since *Hundstunden* (*The Hour of the Dog*) in 1989. In the intervening years, she had worked with the theatre and developed into one of Sweden's most important drama-

tists. She specialises in a type of on-the-spot drama featuring a minimum of plot development but a fiercely energetic use of language.

Göran Tunström (see above) was famous for the exceptional luminosity of his prose. He died in 2000, and three years later an unfinished novel about the 17th century was published posthumously. The decision to put out a 'work in progress', necessarily flawed, says much about the importance of this author for Swedish literature.

Anneli Jordahl

Editor's note: If the English name of a work is italicized, it has been published in English under this title. If it is not italicized, the work has not appeared in English and the name in brackets is merely a direct translation of the original Swedish title.

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The author alone is responsible for the opinions expressed in this fact sheet.

Translation: Victor Kayfetz/Stephen Croall

Swedish Nobel Laureates in literature

Selma Lagerlöf, 1909
Verner von Heidenstam, 1916
Erik Axel Karlfeldt, 1931
Pär Lagerkvist, 1951
Eyvind Johnson/Harry Martinson, 1974

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