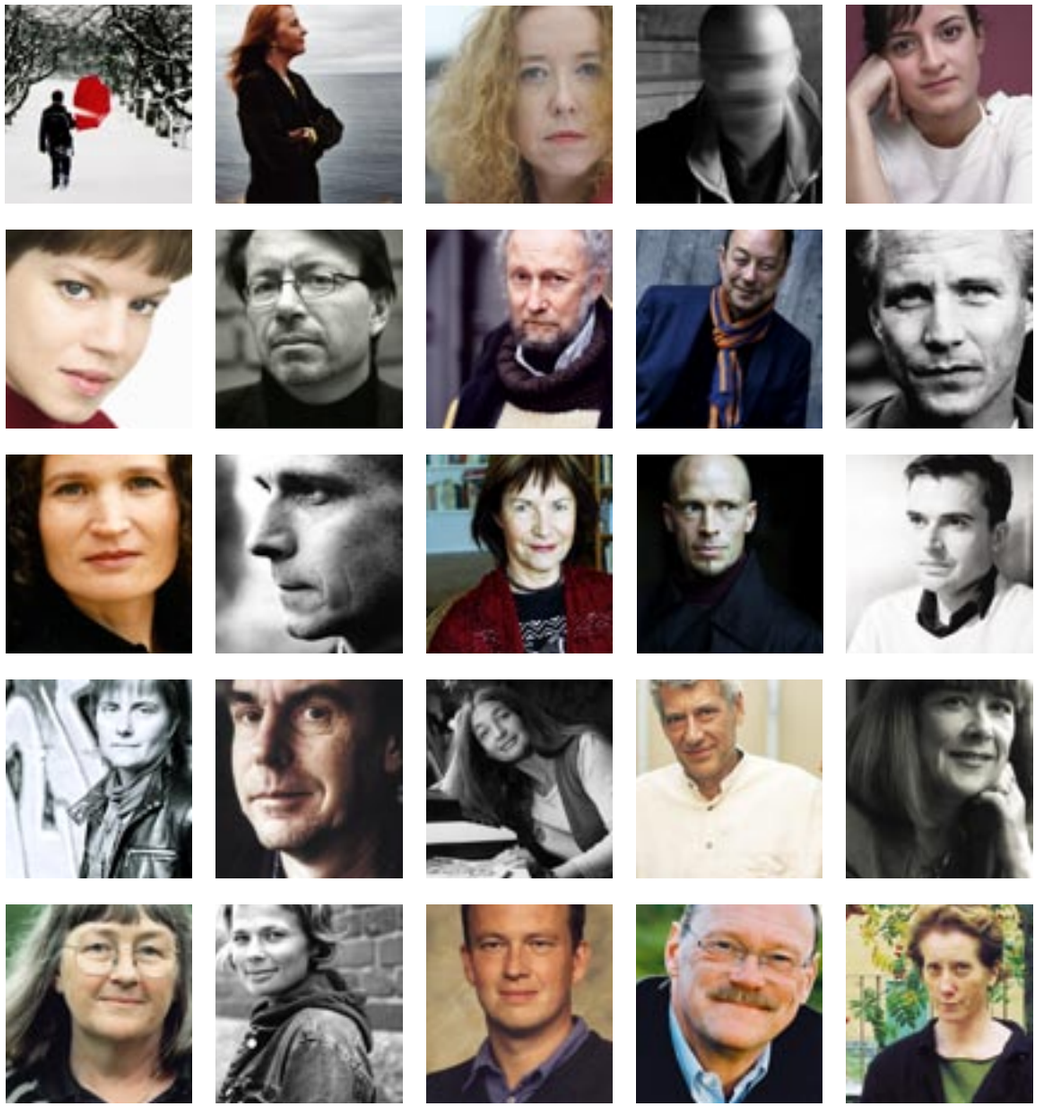
New Swedish Titles 2005

Swedish Institute Autumn 2005



Cover Photo: Auhtor "Zbignew Kuklarz", photo Sarah MacKey © Albert Bonniers Förlag

Content

Things are going well for Swedish literature abroad, very well indeed! The evidence is all there, in sales figures, critics' choices and the names of literary prizewinners – and in the number of enquiries and applications for translation support received by the Swedish Institute.

It is part of the Swedish Institute's remit to strengthen the presence of Swedish literature abroad. Offering support for the translation of Swedish fiction into non-Nordic languages is one way of achieving this; providing information about new titles is another.

So for this year's Frankfurt Book Fair we have once again invited three independent commentators to give their views on new Swedish books. The time factor makes it difficult to comment on all the new books in time for the translation and printing of New Swedish Titles. Below you will find a subjective selection of some other new fiction with the potential for topping the bestseller charts both in Sweden and abroad.

Two titles that have attracted a lot of attention are Ernst Brunner's *Carolus Rex* (Albert Bonniers förlag), a wide-ranging fictional autobiography of Sweden's King Karl XII, and Carola Hansson's *Mästarens dröm* (The Master's Dream, Norstedts), the story of two sisters who leave Sweden in the 1920s for a life as missionaries in China. Two authors who portray with great empathy and warmth the less fortunate members of society and their longing for love are Steve Claeson in his novel *De tiotusen tingen* (The Myriad Things, Norstedts) and Helena Looft in the novella *På dina murar* (Behind Your Walls, Wahlström & Widstrand).

In *Drakkvinnan* (The Dragon Woman, Albert Bonnier) Jan Henrik Swahn tells an absurd tale about his house in Greece, or rather about the violent feud started by the (slightly) mad woman next door. And Klas Östergren has published the eagerly anticipated sequel to his modern classic Gentlemen: *Gangsters* (Albert Bonnier), in which the narrator returns after twenty-five years with new perspectives on himself and on the ludicrous existence into which he has been lured. For lyrical reflections we can turn among others to Lotta Lotass's *skymning: gryning* (dusk: dawn, Albert Bonnier) and Jesper Svenbro's poetry collection *Himlen och andra upptäckter* (Heaven and Other Discoveries, Albert Bonnier).

I hope many of the titles from this autumn's crop will find new readers the world over!

Helen Sigeland
Swedish Institute

Bodil Malmsten, photo Terese Andrén © Modernista

The Literary Year 2005

By Björn Gunnarsson

Suddenly, all Swedish writers are language materialists. That's certainly true in the field of poetry, where trends like concretism, lettrism, dadaism and so-called language poetry now predominate. Partly though sheer force of numbers: the majority of recently published poetry collections are what could be termed modernist in style and form. Partly because the advocates of this trend are persuasive and articulate, and have become very influential in the public literary debate. Avant-gardism was late reaching Sweden, but now it's almost mainstream. There's a heated debate as to whether metaphors and emotions have been banished from poetry for good. Advocates of other aesthetic approaches feel sidelined.

In new Swedish poetry, language takes evasive action, sentences are reduced; abstract and concrete sit side by side, but that doesn't mean they are interchangeable. Words have relationships with each other, but not always the usual ones. The language is condensed, yet the narrative is diluted; the material nature of the words is highlighted by reversed word order or changes in conventional usage. The poets are seeking to liberate from language qualities other than those offering everyday semantic meanings. Homonyms and unexpected correspondences emerge from poems in which the linguistic sounds are themselves illustrations of what is being described. By making syntax more rhythmic and using advanced collage and quotation techniques, poets are attempting to undermine all conceptions of coherent poetic form, and all expectations that poems should have a subjective centre.

Quite literally, it's all about playing with language, often with a humorous touch, and it comes as no surprise that language poetry is related to children's games. Playing with words that sound the same, creating new ones and ignoring grammar and spelling rules are things any three year old will do. Aase Berg's new collection of poems, *Uppland,* is just like a sunny, happy children's game. The title, which can also mean "upland", refers not only to the geographical province of Sweden but also to the euphoric, light-seeking mood of the poems. Dragonflies, kites, planes and flying dogs all reach for the sky. Uppland is without doubt one of the most humorous and hope-inspiring anthologies in contemporary Swedish poetry. Virtually every line is imbued with a confidence that is childish in the best sense of the word, "in dependence's headlong certainty of uncertainty".

With its sparkling talent for twisting words, finding an exact, crystal clear focus in every new coining, Aase Berg really does find her way to "the hidden gems on the map of laughter". Uppland is also that rare thing, a homage to the delights of parenthood: to a child's first steps, to teething and dirty nappies. Creating such excellent poetry out of

such everyday material is sheer genius, and proof that language poetry can have popular appeal and humour, yet still be in the literary vanguard.

The belated aesthetic radicalisation of Swedish poetry has generally faced accusations of being abstract, intellectually academic and dull – all of which are disproved by Aase Berg – and also of being politically reactionary or indifferent. This prejudice has been shot to pieces by a number of younger poets, most skilfully and with the most commanding artistic authority by Johan Jönson. In *Monomtrl,* a collection of exceptional size, Jönson is an obstinate language materialist constructing poems that provide political commentary and reflect modern society. I have no hesitation in nominating this as one of the most significant poetry books of the decade. Using Nietzsche and Marx as his starting points, he conjures up a splintered yet wide-ranging vision of the global position and that of the poetic persona, a poetic I that is simultaneously every I: "In poetry, the I can only act as auxiliary verb, example and collective". Jönson's "solitary montages of assertions" are masterly, and have so many impelling, relentless truths to tell. He presents us with a social critique of extremes, free from all illusion, with death as the nearest option but also the most distant backdrop; interlinking the mortality of the body and that of social formation. In short, political and existential utopias are forced to their cruellest logical conclusion, to a state of hopeless opposition.

Utterly wilful yet also utterly faithful to universal truths, Jönson is highly reminiscent of internationally renowned Swedish playwright Lars Norén, who also began as a poet, producing work just like this: ruthless self-exposure coupled with penetrating political radicalism. It's no coincidence that Johan Jönson is also active in drama; there's an affinity of author temperament and field of interest here that will undoubtedly over time raise Jönson to an acclaimed position on the Swedish Parnassus. Sweden's poetry readers love their Orpheans, singing truths about themselves and their country, though these may be uncomfortable, even offensive. As for example when Johan Jönson exclaims like some ironic Rimbaud that we must "carry on continually being hyper-modern."

Heeding this last exhortation does not generally pose a problem for Swedes. Sweden is the most modern country in the world; every new development in modernity is always embraced wholeheartedly by Swedish people of all classes. Our position as a small nation on the periphery of Europe sets a deep mark on the Swedish soul: we are always anxiously monitoring every new trend, in technology, economy, lifestyle or mentality, so eager are we to avoid appearing disorientated, provincial or left out. But all these rapid changes in modernity are for us nonetheless a constant source of pain, because even as we strive to be the acme of modernity, we are always wondering where the good old days have vanished to, and what has gone wrong with our society. The contradictory nature of progress, the ambiguity in changes in society, are what Swedes want to see reflected and interpreted in literature, particularly in prose, where the dominant theme remains social change and its consequences for the individual. Socially committed, narrative prose is the rootstock of Swedish literature, against which all other tendencies are weighed, measured and compared.

Immigration to Sweden is one of the major transformations which readers have wanted to see depicted in literature. As a result, a number of first novels from writers of immigrant background in recent years have been improbably huge successes, their authors immediately hailed as essential social commentators, not afraid to tell unpalatable truths. Among this years contributors to the genre is Marjaneh Bakhtiari, who in cynical, teasing jargon in *Kalla det vad fan du vill* (Call it What the Hell You Want) tells the story of her own and her family's experience of being outsiders and attempting to integrate. Her family comes from Iran, but the story is set in southern Sweden; the issues at the heart of the book are how Swedish society deals with immigration, and the reactions and emotional patterns of the second generation. Polish-born Zbigniew Kuklarz, for his part, describes in conversational, diary-like prose what it's like to live between two cultures, the Swedish and the Polish, with a liberal sprinkling of ethnic jokes and many hilarious examples of national characteristics. The fact that the author's surname becomes a coarse obscenity if pronounced the Swedish way is, of course, one of the points of the book, accordingly entitled *Hjälp, jag heter Zbigniew* (Help, My Name is Zbigniew).

A completely different strategy for tackling the same set of problems is found in *Sex liter luft* (Six Litres of Air), the debut of Andrzej Tichý, who is also of Polish descent. The book calls itself a novel, but it is so abstract, so fixated with detailed observation, so clinically formalist in its division into triadic sections, that it's more like a collection of conceptual poetry. What's more, events are narrated using a double chronology, both forwards and backwards, with breaks for expressive outbursts from an unidentified narrative voice, which brings some poetry to the harsh subject matter. This carefully calculated literary method reveals a story of raw misery: vulnerable children and young people, from immigrant backgrounds at a guess, are drawn into drugs, violence and criminality on an unnamed estate on the city outskirts.

The really original element in Tichy's book is his allegorical invention: illustrating the total abandon-

Aase Berg, photo Elisaberh Ohlson Wall © Albert Bonniers Förlag

Johan Jönsson, photo Cecilia Grönberg © Albert Bonniers Förlag

Marjaneh Bahktiari, photo Marta El-Masri © Ordfront

ment of these social outcasts by having one of them experience a science fiction-type apocalypse. The human race has suddenly vanished, and Ivan, the novel's main character, dies a slow death completely alone. The political allegory is obvious: someone has applied a fascist final solution to the social problems of the city-edge estates. This is done with great skill, an eerie fairytale atmosphere hanging over a landscape bathed in destructive heat. The presentation bodes well for Tichý's future as an author. His modernist devices seem highly original and rare in a Swedish prose dominated by practitioners of conservative aesthetics: direct, epic narration, naturalistic in the deliniation of events and milieux and with relatively conventional psychology of characterisation.

The historical change that has made the greatest impact on Swedes in the last decade is probably the switch from welfare state and social security to a position of global insecurity. Literature functions as a forum in which these changes can be worked through; both Swedish readers and Swedish authors seem currently preoccupied with trying to understand the consequences of the transformation. One example of this sort of literary processing is Michael Lion's novel *Vanliga människor* (Ordinary People), about Stockholm's homeless. The title is naturally deeply ironic: Lion's aim is to show how ordinary people exercise dictatorship over those who deviate, particularly in an Americanised society which increasingly divides its citizens into winners and losers. The first-person narrator in Lion's book is a lethargic young man who does his best not to make any effort – but who is nonetheless obliged to, because he has nowhere to live – and who tries to avoid forming any emotional ties with other people. He shies away from becoming infected by the conventions of society, and succeeds so well that he is generally considered to be asocial and suffering from a condition that makes empathy impossible. But in fact it is a case of genuine eccentricity, impossible to accommodate within any customer profile, subculture or market segment. Lion brilliantly captures the atmosphere of a society of zero tolerance where people anxiously borrow their models for living from "reality shows" and chatshows, without thinking for themselves, and where everything is determined by consumerist lifestyles, from relationships to personality and dreams. Lion also gives his story a moral: his disorientated rough-sleeper reluctantly learns the necessity of empathy through love for another human being.

Johanna Nilsson, photo Micke Lundström © Wahlström & Widstrand

A similar perspective is adopted by Johanna Nilsson in her novel *De i utkanten älskande* (Summer Heat). The author creates a cast of characters that is rich and varied by the standards of contemporary Swedish fiction. Here we find transsexual Stefan-Sofia with a past in the homophobic Pentecostal Church; a doctor with mental problems; a musician with a stigmatising physical handicap; and the daughter of a Somali-Swedish café-owning couple, pretty as a picture with dreams of being a model, but whose boyfriend has violent tendencies. Naturally there is also a skinny, emotionally frozen young woman, the anorectic, a familiar character in Johanna Nilsson's work. But here, for once, she is no passive victim; this time she is a cunning master thief. The author's aim with this almost Balzacian or Dickensian set of characters is to portray the paradoxical freedom of the big city for anonymous deviants combined with lack of warmth towards any outsider. All the characters in the novel are addicts or abusers of some kind: sex abusers, drug addicts or reassurance junkies. They use their addictions, or their asocial patterns of behaviour, as a cover for wounds inflicted on them by losses and sorrows. They are all very lonely, and it is their loneliness which is the main focus of the omniscient narrator.

Swedes are the captives of the mechanism of social rules, and swept helplessly along on the strong current of modernisation. Yet within them there still persists a strong, though diffuse and unarticulated, longing for freedom, and a vast, melancholy sense of isolation. The best recent novel tackling the theme of Sweden's social transformation is Steve Sem-Sandberg's *Härifrån till allmänningen* (From Here To the Common). The story has autobiographical elements; the material drawn from the author's own childhood includes family relationships and fights between gangs of boys. But the book is above all an allegory encapsulating the whole history of the undermining and collapse of the welfare state within one suburban housing estate near Stockholm. Neighbourly concord and solidarity – a solidarity that includes a fair dose of conformity and authoritarian social control – breaks down under the pressure of private passions, irrational desires and the impossibility of reconciling individualist cravings for freedom with the collective social pattern. This is a masterly novel, without question one of the most outstanding Swedish books this year: thought-provoking, skilfully composed and with a finely chiselled set of characters who really come to life. The tone is humorous and cynical, bantering yet tender, with an all-pervading mood of pensive melancholy beneath. A truer picture of modern-day Sweden would be hard to find.

One consequence of these social changes, which many interpret as a worsening of living conditions and security, is a widespread sense of popular discontent. This discontent finds expression in Bodil Malmsten's *För att lämna röstmeddelande, tryck stjärna* (To Leave a Voicemail Message, Press Star Now), in which a set of marginalised, unwanted members of society attempt in a series of monologues to gain some kind of insight into their respective places in a world that confuses and scares them. The voices in this well-written book eloquently express how alienation and exclusion foster querulous, self-pitying and dogmatic opinions. "Sweden – that's just some old myth," says one of the characters in disappointment.

For many decades, the development of Sweden from an agrarian society of peasant farmers to one of Europe's most urbanised countries was a staple theme of Swedish literature. Fictional narratives on this archetypal theme are still being published: the countryside, the town, and how individual freedom relates to the geographical and social positions to which people are consigned in their lives. One good example this year is Ingrid Kampås' novel *Innerlighetens tid* (Time of Intimacy). Kampås, who

Steve Sem-Sandberg, photo Cato Lein © Albert Bonniers Förlag

has already won a broad readership and critical acclaim for her crime fiction, branches out here into an intergenerational saga of epic breadth and warm human insight. Time of Intimacy is both a dark family chronicle and a novel of ideas. The central questions running through the book are: what is left of a person after a lifetime's hard work? What are the preconditions for love? And above all, what does it take for people to perceive themselves as worth loving? These are traditional themes, but handled by Kampås with such persuasive power that they feel fresh and original. That power comes in no small measure from her style, which is as brusque and hard-boiled as in her crime stories, and yet displays a richness of metaphor that is austerely poetic, above all in the descriptive passages.

Ingrid Kampås always sets her books in the rural, agricultural milieu of her home province, Halland. Torgny Lindgren, one of Sweden's most widely read authors, is also deeply provincial. His incredibly skilfully chased, dialectal and archaic style presumably allows him to represent for large groups of readers the last vestiges of the old Agrarian Sweden, with its unwavering values and its life cycles in harmony with nature's own. This particular form of nostalgia undoubtedly explains Lindgren's popularity, but it is puzzling that a Protestant, secularised country like Sweden should so applaud an author whose stories are permeated with Catholic mysticism and theological questions. This year's Lindgren book is called *Dorés bibel* (Doré's Bible) and tells of a slightly mentally retarded man, naturally an inhabitant of Lindgren's sparsely populated, forest-covered, hyperborean home province of Västerbotten, who copies the work of the great French Bible illustrator. The narrator is dyslexic, or to be precise alexic, a polite way of saying illiterate: that is to say, he lives entirely in the world of pictures. Above all in Doré's Bible illustrations, which reveal the existence of God, he believes. Only speech and pictures tell the truth; the world can only be reproduced in pictures, not described. Literature should not be read, but listened to as it is read aloud, and then preserved in the memory. Art and religion seem to be synonymous in the narrator's world, and he quotes II Corinthians: "for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life". As ever, Lindgren's book is also a tribute to the creative imagination, but this is seen as always closely linked to religious faith and the believer's struggle to identify, and choose between, good and evil, right and wrong.

Torgny Lindgren, photo Ulla Montan © Rabén & Sjögren

The love story has never been a really prominent genre in Swedish novels. But there is still a steady stream of fiction on the eternal theme of the relationship between a man and a woman. Anders Paulrud has written a candid and personally revealing confession of a middle-aged man passionately in love with a younger woman. The book, *Kärleken till Sofia Karlsson* (Love for Sofia Karlsson) has won respect and reader interest for its sheer honesty; its multi-faceted, sensitive depiction of the crises and symptoms of ageing; and its portrayal of the mental wounds and burdens which make us more or less inclined to put our trust in those we love. As no less a figure than Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us in the novel's closing epigraph, it is hard not to be frightened when the curtains of the heart fall away and the naked truth is revealed.

The same theme, though approached in a wholly fictional manner, features in Per Planhammar's novel *Lyckliga människor* (Happy People). It is for each reader to decide for him or herself whether to read the title ironically. At any event, the book offers a highly credible interpretation of how social factors shape relationships and individuals' capacity for love. The narrative alternates between the two lovers, Thomas and Laura, in vaguely epistolary form. They both – she dying of cancer – try in their own ways to create a coherent, meaningful story out of everything that has happened between them. Neither of the protagonists is particularly likeable: she is a narcissist, and he is the kind of lover more interested in ownership and control than in being generous and forgiving. This brings one of the classic dilemmas of the novelist to a head: how to portray unpleasant characters, with whom one feels no affinity, without becoming too censorious or distant. Per Planhammar succeeds in this with the help of his superb ability to describe with elegant irony the everyday signals that reveal class and lifestyle. Perhaps the whole book is intended more as a critical insight into life and manners than a novel about the essence of love, a mild yet ingeniously venomous satire of contemporary western city dwellers. Those much-travelled types who believe themselves immortal simply because of their white teeth, plastic cards, summer cottages in the archipelago and correctly middle-class tastes. Perhaps the novel is also trying to tell us about the high price of being an artist. Laura is a successful author, but her writing merely seems yet another symptom of psycho-pathological faithlessness, rather than a noble telling of uncomfortable truths, demanding great human sacrifices.

Anders Paulrud © Albert Bonniers Förlag

The real masterpiece of the year in terms of Swedish love stories is Staffan Seeberg's *Sjöjungfruns namn* (The Name of the Mermaid). With stupendously striking impact and the complete mastery of his material one might expect from a veteran author, Seeberg devises a story of an unusually stubborn, unusually unhappy love, against a backdrop of Sweden's progress through the latter part of the twentieth century. The novel's protagonists Harry and Olma are united in the view that existential loneliness is so great that no individual can ever

Per Planhammar, photo Cato Lein © Wahlström & Widstrand

understand the inner workings of another. So huge is the distance between them that they never realise that together they could actually have found a sense of community and togetherness. The various morals of the story are black ones, and thus all the more exceptionally striking and true. Betrayal always breeds betrayal. Class is a mark of Cain, indelible. There can be no real reconciliation, just periods of temporary respite. Human beings are always lonely, but the loneliest of them all is the abandoned child. And unhappiness in love is always a damned tragedy.

The main character in Seeberg's novel is moving upwards in class terms, an unstable social situation frequently featured in our literature, since Sweden has an exceptional degree of social mobility in comparison to similar countries. The rootlessness of the upwardly mobile, in terms both of personality and of position on the social ladder, is Hans Gunnarsson's favourite theme. In the novel he has published this year, *Allt ligger samlat* (All Put Together), two married couples meet in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a chamber play, where desperate everyday attempts to create order and meaning are broken down to expose pure tragedy that is nonetheless banal. The main protagonists' lack of direction is reflected in the clumsiness and banality of their language, its tone precisely captured by Gunnarsson.

So Swedish literature ploughs on in its main furrows, showing how society shapes the individual, and how the individual responds to changes in his or her immediate or more general surroundings. It is also surprising how national in character our literature is, how rarely it allows the world beyond Sweden to be a setting in its own right, and how rarely it lets itself be inspired by international literary aesthetics. And precisely because style, motifs and themes are so often locked in the established patterns, one is all the more appreciative of those who diverge, or manage to escape them. Cecilia Davidsson for example, best known as a brilliant short story writer: in her novel *Sjunken hjärna* (Sunken Brain), she paints the portrait of an elderly man with memory loss. The empty space his memory has left behind is filled with dreams and flights of imagination which reveal the consequences of a way of living that has been aesthetic, highly refined yet rigidly aware of one's station in life. The main character, who gives private lessons to would-be actors, genuinely tries to live in and for art, and draws no distinction between artistic creativity and everyday events. Central to this is the body, its patterns of movement and rules for good performance, constituting a work of art to be refined and elevated to its ultimate extent, in contrast to the noise, dirt and baseness of the surrounding world. It is a book of great resonance, with ample room for reflection, despite the simplicity of the settings and the reduced style. The austere, pared-down language and the suggestive, enigmatic dream sequences, together with the precise, discriminating characterisation, give this book a perspective and a worth that go way beyond the narrowly national. The distinct or local assumes universal relevance, the fictional world is not exaggeratedly fixed to time or place but has a far broader application. Davidsson succeeds in reinvigorating the eternal questions, "What is a life story?" and, "What is a human being?".

The same questions are posed by the poet Marie Lundquist, who in her prose work *Monolog för en ensam kvinna* (Monologue for a Solitary Woman) goes hunting for memories of her mother. The narrator attempts to recreate both her own childhood and the personality of her mother, a hard task in view of her mother's mental illness and eventual suicide. The style is not, however, one of objectively realistic registration, but poetic and metaphoric. Moods, thoughts and conclusions are largely conveyed in the form of beautiful, intimate images and little metaphors, making the book more reminiscent of a suite of poems than a biography.

There are two kinds of literary minimalism. One in which what is written seems chosen gratuitously: something else could equally well be there on the page; it is reduced, but interchangeable. The text describes something, but it seems quite random what is selected, and it could easily be amplified in a totally different way. The other kind of minimalism is that in which very little is left to say. What is written is what is necessary; not a word more is required to complete or extend it. Magnus Florin's minimalism falls into the latter category. In his new book *Leendet* (The Smile), Florin continues to demonstrate his superb sense of style, just as in his previous works *Trädgården* (The Garden), *Syskonen* (The Siblings) and *Cirkulation* (Circulation): that apparent extreme precision of style which only notes the bare essentials, yet still manages to be suffused with an elusive, mild, vague sense of irony. Which always makes Florin's style a pure pleasure to read, enlightening and delightful. The Garden was about Linné's ordering and naming of nature, The Siblings about controlling people and Circulation about the mystery of the accumulation of capital, but The Smile is about how objects, inheritances, gifts and services carry and express social power relations: the value and significance of unspoken states of dependence and contract. The title refers to the inescapable smile of gratitude, how it is graded and evaluated. It's all about indebtedness and obligation, about the egotism of the alleged altruism: "Suspicion of a donor without a reason. – Why? Because there's always got to be a reason. An ulterior motive." The mutuality and balance of self-sacrifice are explored, and a strict set of rules emerges: "The gift must not become capital when it is accepted". The system of etiquette attached to giving is contrasted both with genuine hospitality, preferably anonymous, which asks nothing in return but an equally anonymous gratitude, and with the impersonal nature of commodities being bought and sold. When goods are bought and paid for, the personal relationship with the seller is terminated, and the buyer is not indebted. But when good friends come round to dinner, other rules apply: "Don't say thank you, issue a return invitation." The quality of gifts and gifts in return, and the way in which they are presented, opens up a whole sociology of behavioural norms. Florin's suite of short prose pieces is an investigation of the world view of the bourgeois spirit, and how it is shaped and maintained. Like his other books, The Smile tracks the course of a single person's

Cecilia Davidsson, photo Cato Lein © Albert Bonniers Förlag

Magnus Florin, photo Cato Lein © Albert Bonniers Förlag

life, hence making manifest the myriad futile sets of rules in this all-too-short life, and the merciless terms on which we live it. The story concentrates the whole dilemma in a single, ambiguous, blackly humorous phrase, as Monty Python's Eric Idle once did: "Christening, confirmation, graduation, wedding, funeral. It went so fast, can you run through it again?" Magnus Florin's oeuvre is itself a gift to Swedish literature: so precise, so artistically well developed, so rich in content.

Voids and enigmas, an everyday life that is not what it appears to be, social codes, well-known situations and people suddenly seeming incomprehensible: these are all relatively familiar motifs in the artistically advanced prose of the younger generation of Swedish writers. You could almost call it the alienation genre. Jerker Virdborg's new novel, *Försvinnarna* (The Disappearers), takes the theme to its very limits. A nervous first-person narrator, who shares the author's name, is searching aimlessly and halfheartedly for a childhood friend who has disappeared. But the book is not crime fiction; the search is not in any sense leading him closer to solving the mystery. The neurotic detective seems interested only in observing his own little gestures and reactions, and those of the people around him, not in doing any real detective work. Virdborg's text is so open and indeterminate that the reader can opt for any number of different interpretations. Placed in the middle of it all are two documentary-like sections: one about a suburban development on the outskirts of Stockholm that was never built; the other about huge shelters beneath the heart of Stockholm, from the days of the Cold War. These sections could be concrete illustrations of the banal assertion that we know nothing of the empty spaces over which we are walking, that reality is peppered with holes which can suddenly turn the familiar into something alien. In passages of almost cartographic detail, the novel is also a portrait of Lindome, a residential area with a dubious reputation, just south of Gothenburg, the childhood landscape of both the novel's narrator and the author himself. Through reminiscences, the narrator recreates this landscape as experienced by a gang of pre-pubertal boys: the setting for typical boys' adventures with secret hiding places; territories that must be observed but are naturally repeatedly challenged; bans that are imposed but still often broken. Fear of the unknown, and the challenge of overstepping the limits in spite of it, could also be seen as the theme of the book as the whole, perhaps in combination with the notion of Swedish suburban housing estates as non-places: areas with no identity or history, forcing the creation of new and brittle identities. Just as in Virdborg's last novel *Svart krabba* (Black Crab), there is no plot here, no chain of events and consequences, and absolutely no psychology. The whole book is an intense, concentrated exercise in style, with the aim of manoeuvring the reader into a specific state of suspense that is never resolved. It is highly skilful and at the same time utterly empty, just like the empty spaces the first-person narrator is always seeking out. It is here, I believe, that we find the most plausible pointer to how to read this book: what we see depicted here is the aesthetic of the writer, a perception of the ultimate emptiness of literature, not unusual among our younger writers today.

Jerker Virdborg, photo Johan Markusson © Norstedts

Eva Adolfsson, photo Ulla Montan © Albert Bonniers Förlag

Anna-Karin Palm is another gifted author with an individual style that does not fit the conventional national templates. In her latest book *Herrgården* (The Manor House), the history of the war in the Balkans in the 1990s is told in allegorical form. A group of refugees come across a beautiful manor house, which seems to have been left remarkably unscathed by the bloody civil war that has been raging in the rest of the (unnamed) country. Initially they think they have found Utopia, but the conflicts that have shattered and laid waste to the whole land also flare up among the shabby little group of refugees. The idyll is torn apart by betrayal and murder, egoism and desire for control, ideology and individual interests: political conflicts are the serpent in Paradise. Anna-Karin Palm's style is dreamlike and graceful, yet still conveys the torments of our age, genocide, terror and looting, in a way that leaves us shocked, shaken and deeply involved. The Manor House is one of the most memorable reads of the year, thanks to the writer's outstanding skill in conjuring up such a fascinating setting and apocalyptic atmosphere.

Joakim Forsberg, for his part, describes in his *Liv för Liv* (Life for Life) the last legal execution in Sweden. The year is 1910, and Forsberg begins by reproducing documentary reports of court proceedings and police investigations arising from the brutal robbery and murder for which the price is decapitation. Then, in a feverishly expressive series of concentrated monologues, the criminal and his executioner have their say. The historical novel genre has virtually expired in Sweden, but Forsberg manages to inject new life into it, principally because of the powerful subjectivity of the monologue form, which reveals historical figures as multi-dimensional people. The novel's main aim, however, undoubtedly remains that of stimulating debate about capital punishment. And not just capital punishment, but our concept of legal rights as a whole: the notoriously difficult issues of mental illness and criminal responsibility, guilt and justice, forgiveness and atonement, evil and humanity. Forsberg's intense book raises issues extending far beyond Swedish borders.

"It was that time when I was going around Sundbyberg with my big belly." This is the strong, self-confident opening of Eva Adolfsson's novel *Förvandling* (Metamorphosis). And yet it's a woman's novel on the theme of seeking insecurity. There's really no other term for it than woman's novel, because all its themes revolve round an attempt to combine femininity, the ability to take action, and creativity. You could perhaps also call it a Bildungsroman or an novel about being an artist, as it describes a young woman's quest for self-perception and a mission in life. The time is the early 1980s, at a guess; cynicism and disappointment have not yet had a chance to smother the woman's youthful idealism, radical political views and faith in the future like some cold, sodden blanket. She is pregnant – but has broken off contact with the baby's father – and is also trying to write an academic, literary essay on Knut Hamsun.

The initial sentence is of course a paraphrase of the opening of Hamsun's Hunger, and the whole book can be seen as a female variation on the themes and lines of development in Hunger. The woman in Adolfsson's novel is dreaming of a career as an author, literary critic and intellectual; she wants to leave her mark on the world and strengthen her belief in herself. At first she tries to isolate herself, believing that screening yourself off is a necessary precondition for creativity. But her need for care in pregnancy forces her back out; despite her belief in isolation as an essential requirement for creativity, she wants to be stroked, hugged, acknowledged, seen and loved. Whether by chance or conscious decision, she meets new friends and a new lover.

Ulf Eriksson, photo Ulla Montan © Albert Bonniers Förlag

She doesn't grow thin, like Hamsun in Hunger, but increases in size, both literally and metaphorically. One of the figures she meets is an elderly, working-class woman with literary ambitions of her own, and the story of this woman's life provides a sensitively portrayed historic contrast to the first-person narrator's personal situation. Care for others' welfare is set against ruthlessness, biological creation against artistic creation, body against spirit, fidelity against betrayal, weakness against strength, fear against courage, female against male; and although these are abstract themes, the story is not at all inaccessible. On the contrary, it is infectiously generous, interesting and universally applicable, despite its probably autobiographical, even confessional nature. It is intellectually thoughtful and emotionally rich at the same time. Somewhere, it's as if Eva Adolfsson is not just letting her fictional alter ego find a synthesis of male and female ideals and role models in her life. She's also finding that synthesis herself in her spontaneous, driving style, and it is extremely heartening. Metamorphosis is a wonderfully inviting and encouraging book, unguarded and thought-provoking, using playful self-irony yet also deeply earnest in its intent.

Deeply earnest equally well describes the intentions of Ulf Eriksson, who is virtually unique in modern Swedish literature, being one of the very few novelists to take contemporary literary theory as a starting point and try to put it into practice in his fiction. *Varelser av glas* (Creatures of Glass) is the title of Eriksson's new book. On the surface, it tells the story of four friends, all trying to cope with the problem of being sceptical intellectuals in a late modern, commercial, narcissistic society. In actual fact, the book is a metanovel that attempts to express the disintegration of a realistic approach in literature, while also questioning the fiction that is replacing realism. Its view of society is profoundly pessimistic: melancholy is allowed free range, and the critique of the consumerist dumbing down of modern daily life is sharp and devastating. Its outlook on human nature is stoically mournful, with an ever-present awareness of the tragic basic elements of life: "There are no strong people. Everyone is weak, and it's weakness we have to learn to live with. (...) Human society can only exist on the basis of loneliness and confusion." What Eriksson tries to convey is a quiet artistic revolt, in which melancholy is "both symptom and resource, suffering and cure, indisposition and achievement. Outward loneliness confirms inward, spiritual emptiness, but this very emptiness is also a precondition for subdued lack of illusion and clear-sightedness of contemporary diagnosis. Eriksson's style is breathtakingly associative; the text of his novel resembles a vastly rich kaleidoscope of observations, advanced poetic fantasies and philosophical reflections.

So with Ulf Eriksson's help we can tie up the loose ends of Swedish literature today and of this presentation. Eriksson unites both the language materialists and the postmodernists, keen to deconstruct the ambitions and pretensions of realism with the aid of the boundless freedom of language to depict whatever it wants, and the epic tradition's storytelling about human existence. Eriksson simultaneously also upholds that most Swedish of literary traditions, namely the urge to diagnose the state of the nation and adopt a sceptical, not to say dismissive, attitude to the onward rush of modernity. One might thus claim that Ulf Eriksson is the Swedish writer most typical of his age.

List of Titles

Eva Adolfsson: Förvandling (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Marjaneh Bakhtiari: Kalla det vad fan du vill (Ordfront)
Aase Berg: Uppland (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Cecilia Davidsson: Sjunken hjärna (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Ulf Eriksson: Varelser av glas (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Magnus Florin: Leendet (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Joakim Forsberg: Liv för liv (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Hans Gunnarsson: Allt ligger samlat (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Johan Jönson: Monomtrl (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Ingrid Kampås: Innerlighetens tid (Prisma)
Zbigniew Kuklarz: Hjälp, jag heter Zbigniew (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Torgny Lindgren: Dorés bibel (Norstedts)
Michael Lion: Vanliga människor (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Marie Lundquist: Monolog för en ensam kvinna (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Bodil Malmsten: För att lämna röstmeddelande, tryck stjärna (Finistère)
Johanna Nilsson: De i utkanten älskande (Wahlström & Widstrand)
Anna-Karin Palm: Herrgården (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Anders Paulrud: Kärleken till Sofia Karlsson (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Per Planhammar: Lyckliga människor (Wahlström & Widstrand)
Staffan Seeberg: Sjöjungfruns namn (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Steve Sem-Sandberg: Härifrån till Allmänningen (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Andrzej Tichý: Sex liter luft (Albert Bonniers förlag)
Jerker Virdborg: Försvinnarna (Norstedts)

Books for Young People

By Petter Lindgren

Katarina Kieri, photo Leif Hanssen © Raben och Sjögren

Missing mothers and others

Star Swedish tenor Jussi Björling ("a new Caruso", as the British magazine Gramophone wrote in 1937) lost his mother early. "Maybe only people who have been longing for a mother all their lives can sing like that," says Signe, an elderly lady fond of listening to Jussi Björling, whom 16 year old Elias gets to know in Katarina Kieri's August Prize-winning *Dansar Elias? Nej!* (Is Elias Dancing? No!) Like Björling, Elias lost his mother at an early age, which in Elias's case manifests itself in recurrent attacks of dizziness and nausea, sensations which Kieri – who generally writes poetry – conveys with as much empathy as she describes Björling's voice (in particular, a recording of "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's Turandot). She also sensitively portrays the wordless communication between Elias and his father, for example in the passage where his father leaves an advertisement for the local jujitsu club lying on the table, as if by chance, and Elias immediately realises it's an expression of his concern that Elias never meets up with friends or does anything. Elias does finally go to the jujitsu club, where he meets Julia with her green belt and "greeny-brown" eyes, which proves a turning point in the novel. Seasoned readers may find the plot a touch predictable, but Kieri's powers of observation and caustic turn of phrase are compelling, making Is Elias Dancing? No! one of the best books for young people this year.

Many a book has been written about absent fathers and their sons who are driven to action (think of the Odyssey, or the Bible). Bo R. Holmberg (words) and Katarina Strömgård (pictures) approach the theme from a different angle, in what you might call a picture novel or a cartoon strip novel. "After eight years. That's when he rang. Ninety-six months. Two thousand, nine hundred and twenty days. Or perhaps even a few more. I don't remember exactly when he left." The phone call comes from Eddie Bolander, one-time guitarist and songwriter with Shivers, and father of the main protagonist in Holmberg and Strömgård's *Eddie Bolander och jag* (Eddie Bolander and I). Eddie has returned after an unsuccessful sojourn in the USA, and now wants to meet his son, who at first is unwilling. Flashbacks – fishing trips, quarrels, early memories – are interwoven with scenes from the main character's everyday life in the province of Norrland. Holmberg writes a choppy, simple, slightly tabloid style of prose, often with only a few lines per page. Strömgård's sketch-like pencil drawings enhance the realistic impression, as if the reader is viewing the storyboard of a documentary film. An unsentimental but heartwarming portrait of a son reunited with a father a little the worse for wear. Odysseus is home at last!

Bullied children and the wind whispering in the pine forest

How is it that young adult fiction is so full of bullying and depressing school settings? Do we really want to read books that just keep sending us back to the same dreary place we came from? Or so I wonder after reading Per Nilsson's *Solprinsen* (The Sun Prince), the story of bullied Jonathan, who instead of turning to realistic novels about modern life creates his own science fiction or fantasy literature, a daydream in which he is the Sun Prince, the great avenger. In his dream, which has hints of Pulp Fiction and runs parallel to the main story throughout the book, the Sun Prince and tough guy Tommy Lee (namesake of the drummer in Mötley Crüe) consider what to do with Nurmi, who is persecuting Jonathan in the real time of the book. Bury him in concrete? Put him through a mincer? "Then we'll be rid of him, bloody Finn!" says Tommy Lee. The dream also features Princess, a luxury version of Tove, the girl Jonathan fancies, who in real life opts for his friend Wilmer. Wilmer is perhaps the most interesting character in the book: a weak sort of boy who doesn't really know whose side to take. A rueful and psychologically convincing account of Jonathan's development ("I've been a victim and a hero, head over heels in love like a twelve year old, as randy as a rutting gorilla and as pissed as a newt; I've been a jester and a clown and a blind idiot; I've been socked on the jaw...") from high school wimp to young adult. It's only logical, then, that towards the end the Sun King fades away and disappears, like the imaginary friend Mållgan in Gunilla Bergström's Alfons Åberg picture books.

Per Nilsson, photo Tommy Olofsson © Raben och Sjögren

Ylva Karlsson's *Resan till Kejsaren* (The Journey to the Emperor) is genuine fantasy, set in "the In-Between Times", an era not unlike the Middle Ages, when "juster laws" were introduced, "slavery was abolished and schools opened". The topography, which can be studied on the map on the inside cover, is vaguely similar to Sweden. A bay that could be the Swedish Lake Mälaren is called "Mälen", a lake that looks like Lake Hjälmaren is called "Gälen". Sixth former Mikaela gains access to this sighing pine forest via the lift in the block of flats where she lives in the Stockholm suburb of Skarpnäck. She is welcomed to the In-Between Times as a myth-shrouded, long anticipated "emperor child", in fact rather as if she were Jesus, which naturally leads to trouble. An inventive, enjoyable and thrilling tale, especially for those who appreciate metaliterary jokes like direct reader invocations ("Dear reader") and narrative chapter headings ("Chapter Eight, in which we become more closely acquainted with..." and so on).

Cannie Möller's new novel is also fantasy: *På andra sidan floden* (On the Other Side of the River), a follow-up to her first book *Kriget om källan* (The Battle for the Spring) in 1983, which has also been republished. The story is set in an unspecified agrarian future, "after the age of technology", in a world as it might look after "the last world war", as the book puts it. Between two villages on either side of a river, a conflict erupts with echoes of the one in the former Yugoslavia, or the atmosphere in Hitler's Germany. People are persecuted, houses set on fire; and one day, the bridge is blown up. Is someone from one of the villages behind the deed, or are malicious outsiders to blame? The main character Josh manages to keep a clear head, but his love for Lynn from the neighbouring village causes problems. "To hell with her! We don't want any vultures here!" shout the people of his own village. A beautifully dark, multi-layered saga suffused with a sort of Swedish sadness, as light and melodic as our folk songs.

Cannie Möller, photo Peter Kjellerås © BonnierCarlsen

Brands of polish and reciprocal observation

Johan Unenge's last book, *Vi som ser på* (Those of Us Watching) was a superb evocation of Swedish middle-class ennui. In this year's book, *Tro, hopp och burnout* (Faith, Hope and Burnout), he recreates the prevalent mood of Sweden's many dying, former industrial centres: unemployment, resignation, despair. But at least 14-year-old Kenny, the book's main character, has a future in the family firm, reconditioning cars. Cars, especially American models, are the most passionate interest of Kenny and his big brother Richard. At nights they indulge in illegal, potentially lethal races in souped-up cars on the public highway. His brother is a sort of idol in the village: good-looking, tough, a hit with the girls, and the rising star in the family firm: "My bother's a genius. That's just the way it is. All he has to do is run his hand over the dashboard to know exactly whether to use Summer Mist or Polish King. He can see that sort of thing, no bother." Kenny himself is not such a strong character, and far too self-conscious to be able to compete. A psychologically credible, melancholy depiction of the darker side of sibling rivalry, and of that youthful, USA-inspired motor culture which is widespread in northern Sweden (and Finland too), but may well appear rather exotic to readers from other countries.

"Does fate exist? Is everything predetermined? Is there an evil force at work?" These are the sorts of questions to which Martin is forced to seek answers in *Den onda kraften* (The Evil Force) by Ulf Nilsson, one of Sweden's best known writers for children and young people. Martin's Mum drinks, and he is therefore enrolled along with other children with problems on an adventure course arranged by social services, a project led by the well-meaning but rather unimaginative social worker CG, who has read far too much about theories like "reciprocal observation, confrontation and therapy". The game requires participants to answer the questions above, having first taken part in activities including a nocturnal mortuary visit, being locked up in prison, and spending a night in a spooky castle. Several of the youngsters are badly affected by all this, but Martin eventually succeeds in outwitting CG and the organisers with the help of his mobile phone and a bit of play acting. A novel that is assured, gripping and often very funny, with something of the tone of P.C. Jersild's summer camp story *Barnens ö* (Children's Island), and concluding with an invented bibliography that includes social science textbooks. Particularly memorable is the portrait of introverted Grace, sexually abused by her father: "intelligent, clever, articulate, panics when touched, always needs an escape route, won't discuss her problems" (from CG's confidential notes, which are found by one of the participants).

Ulf Nilsson, photo Cato Lein © BonnierCarlsen

Hair-raising and authentically contemporary

"I just need some space," Andreas tells his girlfriend Olivia in Inger Frimansson's thriller in an everyday setting, *Inga livstecken* (No Signs of Life); he just

Inger Frimansson, photo Dag Sundberg © BonnierCarlsen

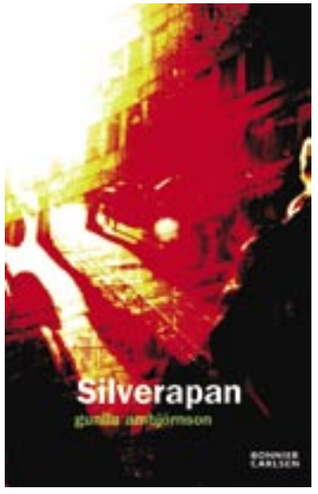
opens the door and is gone. "WHAT HAPPENED TO ANDREAS? NO TRACE OF MISSING 17-YEAR-OLD" say the billboards a few days later. In the second part of the book, we follow events through Andreas's eyes; a snowstorm and an erotically attractive physiotherapist carry the plot forward. The dramatic composition is impressive. Frimansson escalates the suspense by having a variety of characters take it in turns to speak: Andreas, his friends, Olivia.

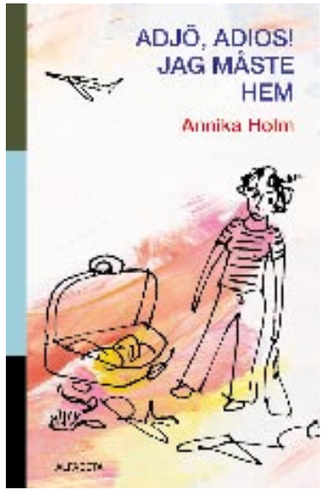
Gunila Ambjörnsson displays equally fine craftsmanship in *Silverapan* (Silver Monkey), a thriller which, like her *Tigerhjärtat* (Tigerheart) last year, has a theatrical setting. Seventeen year old Kalle, bored with school, gets a job as a trainee at Stockholm City Theatre, where mysterious things start to happen, as they always do in theatres – think of Tove Jansson's *Farlig midsommar* (Moominsummer Madness). Kalle is fascinated by M., a young actress who has a little silver monkey as a mascot. The monkey makes another appearance when one of the actors is injured. Exciting, and set in the authentic atmosphere of contemporary Stockholm, with actual actors like Ann Petrén, and the USA about to invade Iraq.

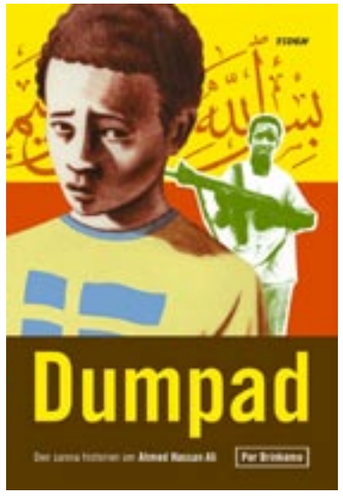
Ticketless in Nicaragua and Mogadishu

Annika Holm has completed the third part of her excellent, partially autobiographical series featuring Tomi Törnros, who at the age of eight exchanged her own family and Nicaragua for a life in Sweden with adoptive Swedish parents. Now, at fifteen, she decides to return to her country of origin, to find out where she belongs. The book, called *Adjö, Adios! Jag måste hem* (Adieu, Adios! I've Got to Go Home), is just as good as its two predecessors, though perhaps a little overburdened with surreptitious summaries of the previous novels. She likes Nicaragua but also sees real poverty. There's a mix-up over her ticket home; and that young music teacher Leonard is actually very good looking, Tomi thinks. Yes, there's plenty to interest young readers in Holm's book.

A serious and potentially lethal ticket mix-up is at the centre of *Dumpad* (Dumped) by Per Brinkemo and Ahmed Hassan Ali. Based on real events, it tells how Swedish-born Ahmed is sent "for educational reasons" at the age of thirteen to stay with distant relations in the chaotic Somalian capital Mogadishu. The problem is that Ahmed's new family is hostile to him; and when he attempts to get back to Sweden via the Swedish embassy in Addis Ababa, it emerges that his parents have gone underground, and the Swedish authorities are less than cooperative. After two years of hopeless faxes to the embassy and life spent wandering the streets, Ahmed is finally permitted to return. A sad and shocking story, all the more striking because of its documentary character, the events having actually been lived through. Evil shows a more implacable face here than in other books for children and young people; the wolf doesn't turn out to be nice once you let him help build a boat, as is so often the case in the classic Swedish cartoon series about Bamse, the little bear with superpowers.

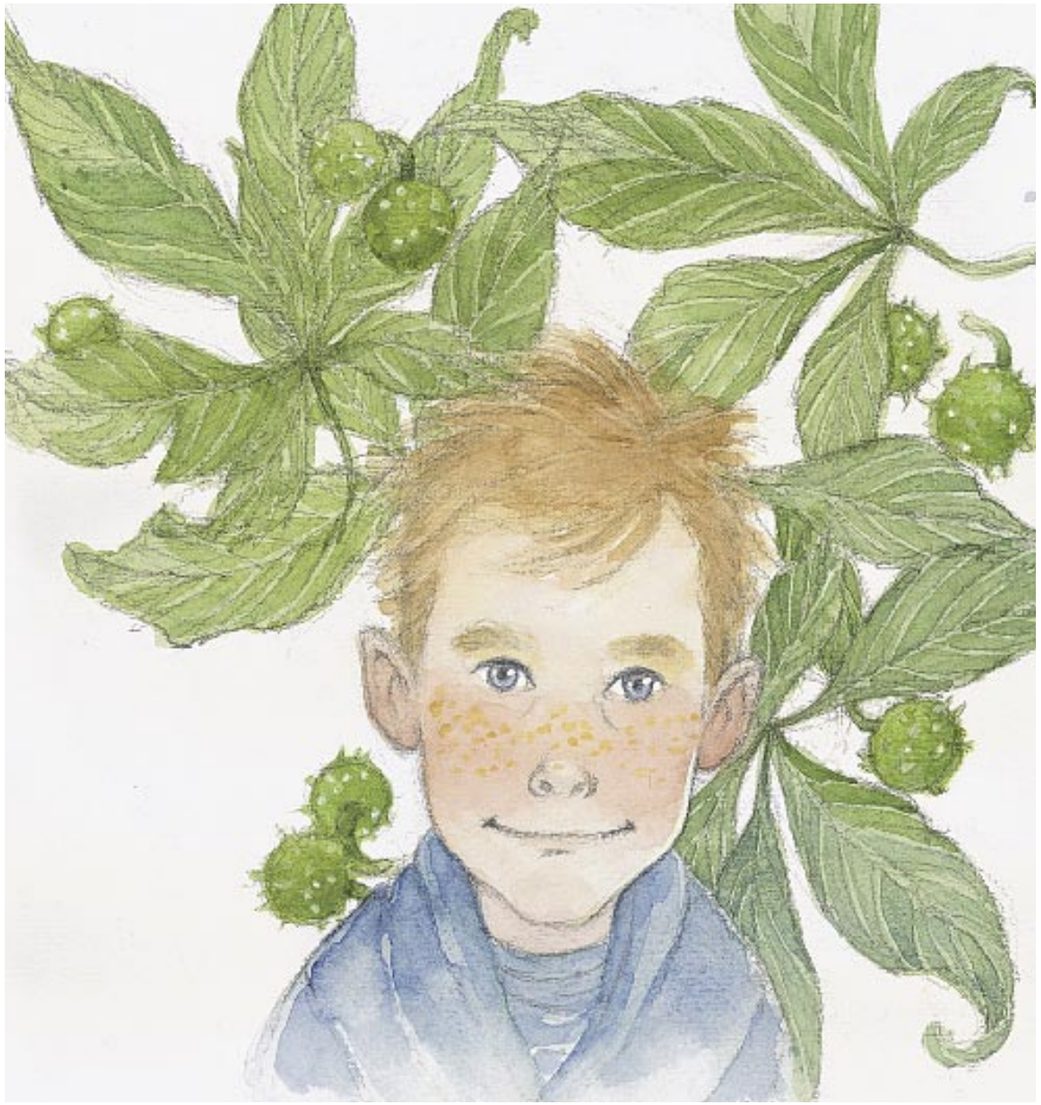






List of titles

Gunila Ambjörnsson: Silverapan (Bonnier Carlsen)
Per Brinkemo och Ahmed Hassan Ali: Dumpad (Tiden)
Inger Frimansson: Inga livstecken (Bonnier Carlsen)
Annika Holm: Adjö, adios! Jag måste hem (Alfabeta)
Bo R. Holmberg och Katarina Strömgård: Eddie Bolander och jag (Rabén & Sjögren)
Ylva Karlsson: Resan till Kejsaren (Alfabeta)
Katarina Kieri: Dansar Elias? Nej! (Rabén & Sjögren)
Cannie Möller: På andra sidan floden (Bonnier Carlsen)
Per Nilsson: Solprinsen (Rabén & Sjögren)
Ulf Nilsson: Den onda kraften (Bonnier Carlsen)
Johan Unenge: Tro, hopp och burnout (Bonnier Carlsen)



From The Chestnut King by Anna Walfridsson © Eriksson & Lindgren

Children´s books

By Magnus William-Olsson

Mimesis

The mimetic insight (pleasure?) which according to Aristotle is the whole point of art, is often the main narrative device in books for small children. "BALL" is written in big letters under a red circle on a blue background (research tells us that small children like bold colours). "BALL!" cries the child as the page is opened. "Ball" reads Mummy or Daddy in confirmation. Of course there's something pleasurable in this sudden agreement? The chain of signifiers remains unbroken.

Kenneth Andersson, one of Sweden's absolute masters in the field of books for young children, almost always lets his art blossom on the very boundary of mimetic insight. "Ball", it might say, but the ball in the picture is only nearly a ball. Well, it might be a ball, but it might also be something more. A figure in itself, a signifier without a clear signified. Ouch! Reading Kenneth Andersson's books can hurt a bit. This year he's published *Lilla Pussboken* (Little Kissing Book) and *Lilla Krypboken* (Little Crawling Book). The pictures are in the usual bold colours, with clear outlines and often with eyes – all those things that appeal to the little ones' sensibility. But what sort of pictures are they? Not wholly attractive ones. Who wants to kiss that gorilla, that lion (first kiss, then die)? Who wants to crawl into that ball of fluff (and perhaps never come out again)?

In Andersson's work, the mimetic is not just a confirmation, but a testing of how the world is ordered. Depicted in his books we find not just signs seen in the obvious way, from the front, but also their strange (and frightening) rear view. The theories of Aristotle are contradicted by Heraclitus; the river is the same and yet not the same.

In Catarina Kruusval's *Ellen och Olle åker* (Ellen and Olle Go for a Ride) and *Ellen och Olle badar* (Ellen and Olle Go for a Swim), no such ambivalence is permitted. No one need doubt whether "the dolls' pram" is a dolls' pram or "the bike" is a bike. Mimesis rules. But here we have in addition a narrative and causal confirmation. First we recognise the Slide. Then Ellen comes down it while Olle waits. The world is not just what it appears to be, it also behaves exactly as we expect it to. The signs are stable.

But mightn't we say that the mimetic is featuring here as an ideological rather than an aesthetic concept? Kruusval shows us the world (of signs) as we should perceive it, not as it is (or could be) per-

ceived. There's something authoritarian in her approach: "If I say it's the same river, then it's the same river!"

Children's poetry

There's something very offputting about the impulse to keep "children's poetry" distinct from other kinds. What does that make me, then, when I read and perhaps enjoy these poems? An improper reader? Pitifully childish? Or maybe just a proxy, a medium, an interpreter? After all, "the child" is generally a hero within adult poetry. Ever since Romanticism, the idea of poetry demanding that we approach language as children has frequently been articulated. Personally, I take a more pragmatic view. "Children's poetry" is one career path among many (other examples might be: academic poetry, performance poetry, popular poetry). Such categories are as hard to dismantle in the public arena as they are easy to set aside for a private individual.

Two of Sweden's greatest "children's poetry poets" have noteworthy new anthologies this year. Nisse Larsson has assembled all of Lennart Hellsing's numerous "moon poems" in the volume *Månpoeten* (The Moon Poet). Hellsing's poems, with their concentration on wordplay, rhythm and rhyme, are hard to translate (though it's possible that someone might be able to emulate his extremely free translation technique based predominantly on English nursery rhymes, sayings and verses). By contrast, Barbro Lindgren, whose collected poems have been published under the title *Längst inne i mitt huvud* (Deep Inside My Head) writes unusually translatable poetry. She operates chiefly through the use of intonation, narration, and economy of expression.

Barbro Lindgren, photo Anders larsson © Raben och Sjögren

If I were a publisher with an interest in Scandinavian poetry, I'd commission the translation of a selection of Barbro Lindgren's work. But I wouldn't put "poetry for children" on the back; I might put "poetry that certainly doesn't exclude children".

Art, workmanship, industry

The book trade is said to be doing well in Sweden. This also applies to the niche market for children's books. Lots of titles. Lavish editions. But just as in the book trade as a whole, there's a huge differential in the range of publications. Ever more mass-produced rubbish. Books that long for nothing more than to be sold. A respectable number of books with advanced artistic ambitions. But most of what is being done in Sweden can be categorised as more or less solid workmanship. Yet another volume in those over-long series about Ellen or Jingis or Morris or whatever they're all called. Books that only exist because there seems to be a demand, but conscientiously written, even so. I wonder if this is Sweden's version of consumer aesthetics? Give them what they want, but pretend not to realise you're doing it.

Sport

There's an epitaph from the age of antiquity that reads "Colleagues raised this stone over the boxer Aris, because he never succeeded in punching anyone on the jaw". Children's books on the sports theme are usually some sort of lite version of this sentiment. Winning or losing isn't important; it's community spirit that matters. This year there are remarkably few sports books for children. Charlotte Orwin's third book about the Whitewings basketball team, *Passa pussa* (Pass, Kiss) nonetheless conforms to the stereotype. It's a celebration of loyalty among teammates, rather than of competition for its own sake. Eleven-year-old Katis, the main character, is a genius at friendship; she never punches anyone on the jaw.

In Mats Wänblad's *Hög Press* (High Pressure), the fourth in the series about footballing Lovisa, we find the same brand of moralising, albeit in slightly tougher language. When the big match is finally played, it naturally ends four all.

Like most books in this genre, both of the above serve as advertisments for the ideological machine of the movement for sport. In Sweden, the sports movement is careful always to set a good example. It aims to foster good citizenship, at the price of producing a few big stars. They are the chosen ones who become idols. The real winners are always those who have learned to lose, and the moral jubilation is never louder than when the result is a draw.

Sofia Hedman's *Mitt i mål Matti* (Go for Goal Matti) is conceived slightly differently. Here, the urge to play football turns into a metaphor for interest in civic affairs. Matti writes to the council and asks them to do up his football pitch, and contrary to all expectations, good old society responds in wholly positive terms. The story's protagonists are all united in their enthusiasm for football, and the reader gets a lesson in the social-democratic contentment of the Swedish "People's Home".

From Pass Kiss by Charlotte Orwin © BonnierCarlsen

Sameness and death

What can we hope for from literature? In the so-called "read alone" books (novels for children), there is almost unanimous agreement that the reader should, above all, be able to recognise him or herself. By reading about children with the same longings, interests and problems as themselves, the child readers will feel they are not alone, I assume. But how do you actually write about being alike, about sameness and generality?

Perhaps the most common approach is to keep to everyday things. Every year there are shelves full of new books about the daily routines of nine, ten and eleven-year olds. They wake up in the morn-

From Go for Goal Matt by Sofia Hedman © Eriksson och Lindgren

ing. They go to school. They have break time. They meet a friend. They eat dinner. They go to bed and think over the events of the day. Or it's the summer holidays and they go to the beach instead of school. Books in that genre this year include: *Fia plus antingen eller* (Fia Plus Either Or) by Jonna Nordenskiöld; *Ronny och Julia, förstaklassare* (Ronny and Juliet in Class 1) by Måns Gahrton and Johan Unenge; *Sommar ihop* (Summer Together) by Thomas Halling; *Habib, meningen med livet* (Habib: The Meaning of Life) by Douglas Foley; and *Rosalies hemliga kompis* (Rosalie's Secret Friend) by Ingrid Carlberg. The central characters are children aged between eight and twelve, from different social groups and home backgrounds. And yet they're all so similar – not really to the children I know and have known, but to each other.

The typology of the standard child in children's literature is frighteningly limited. It may well be that the protagonists these days include both boys and girls, white, yellow and black, arriving as immigrants, adopted, bullied, or nerdy; but despite the fact that their diversity is the key to their stories, the whole point is that they're still the same. The real dividing line runs not between child and child, but always between child and adult. And yet it's adults who create these stories, seeming driven at the deepest level by the thesis that "children are always children" (the negative variant of which is: "adults are never children" or "children are never adults").

Luckily, there are some stories that don't conform. Håkon Jaensson's books (illustrated by Eva Lindström) about the boy called "Buller" (Noise) aren't like the rest. In the new book *Bullers Buller* (Buller's Noise), there's a new baby in the house and nobody's got time for him. But Buller is good at getting the action going. He's a bit of a Philip Marlowe, and Jaensson writes a bit like Chandler. Hard-boiled syntax. Warm tone. Suspense. Just like Marlowe, Noise personifies solitude as the basis of existence, and the short-lived sense of solidarity of which he dreams in these books is the happy exception. It isn't easy living in Noise's world, but it isn't impossible, either.

Anna and Thomas Lyrevik's *När vi sa farväl till Niklas* (When We Said Goodbye to Niklas), with pictures by Ida Björs, is a first-person novel which surprises the reader with its pithy language. The book is an everyday tale, concerned on the surface with friendship between a child and old people. But like their last, unforgettable book *Nora från ingenstans* (Nora From Nowhere) it deals, at a deeper level, with death. And perhaps death is a particularly fruitful theme for anyone who wants the reader to identify with what she's reading. Were all going to die, though we're all so heart-rendingly alone when we do.

Jonna Nordenskiöld, photo Cato Lein © BonnierCarlsen

Thomas Halling © AlfaBeta

Information providers

What do grown ups think children want to learn about? The non-fiction on offer is generally pretty monotonous in its choice of subject. You can always buy books galore about vehicles. You can usually find books about one or two kings and queens. And the natural world, of course. Horses and television programmes. But most common of all are books about the universe.

This year, there are two new Swedish children's books about the universe. Jonathan Lindström has produced the highly ambitious *Allt om universum. Stjärnor, galaxer och kosmiska mysterier* (Everything About the Universe. Stars, Galaxies and Cosmic Mysteries). Inventive pictures and texts that make good use of concrete terms and analogies. The galaxies grow like the twirling dough of the pizza chef. The birth of a Red Giant is like when rabbits eat their own droppings. If gravity didn't exist then we, along with the air we breathe, would shoot off into space. And so on. It's a book that seems very likely to become as popular as its predecessor *Allt från början – från urcell till människa* (Everything From the Beginning – From First Cell to Human Being). In *Mars. Din guide till den röda planeten* (Mars. Your Guide to the Red Planet), Erik Mellgren concentrates on a single planet. Everything from the god of war to Orson Welles, from Ray Bradbury to vital statistics receive the same dull, factual treatment. Anders Björkelid (words) and Jonas Anderson (pictures) try in their *Herbert och tidsmaskinen* (Herbert and the Time Machine) to bring the story of causality to life. In his time machine, Herbert goes back in time over and over again, and changes things. Thus when he gets back, things seem different. Björkelid and Anderson advance the peculiar theory that the world is more or less the same, in spite of this. It's an idea that hasn't got a lot going for it, other than happening to fit the narrative device the authors have chosen. If they'd taken their

From Herbert and the Time Machine, picture by Jonas Andersson © Eriksson & Lindgren

idea more seriously and really thought about causality, this could have been a really thrilling book. As it is, they've merely managed to make a mountainous turkey out of a molehill.

Anna Roos has written an excellent book about squirrels, *Så lever ekorren* (This is How the Squirrel Lives). There are a lot of very effective photographs, and words whose only ambition is to provide information. From Thomas Eriksson (words) and Per Gustavsson (pictures) comes *Överlevnadsboken* (The Survival Book) – practical advice for all sorts of open air situations, from making a windbreak to getting yourself out of a hole in the ice. A book that really tempts you to try the practicalities of living in the wilds. Eva Clementi has written a dramatised biography of of the legendary Swedish singer Jenny Lind: *Näktergalen. Om Jenny Lind, vår första världsstjärna* (The Nightingale. Jenny Lind, Our First Worldwide Star). It's an outstanding book telling a remarkable and fascinating life story. I'm not disturbed by a certain choppiness in the presentation. As I see it, Clementi's aim with her style somewhere between factual text and literature is to preserve the boundary between biography and novel.

Georg Johansson © Natur och Kultur

Grete Rottböll's words and Jeanette Milde's pictures in *Henrys Cirkus* (Henry's Circus) result in a miniature manual on the basic elements of the circus. Its strength lies in the fact that it is an effective handbook. With the aid of this book, you can easily get started on your own, devise a performance, practise acrobatics, jugging and balancing acts. Helping you know what to do is also the main thrust of George Johansson and Jens Albom's "Mulle Meck" (Mulle the Mechanic) books. This year's additions to the series are *Snickra* (Woodworking) and *Maskiner på väg* (Machines on the Go). As ever, practical tips are the most important element. The books seek to inform about their subject, but they also teach us something indirectly about reading act conventions. Mulle Meck highlights the poesis of the act of reading: reading not as passive assimilation but as something you do.

Children

The child is, of course, the most important concept in children's literature. Without children, no children's literature. The question is, whether "the child" is therefore also indisputably the most important subject in children's books. We must remember that children's books are produced by adults, that is, by those who are by definition different.

In other types of literature, the author can imagine he or she is writing for someone "like me". In children's literature, the author is writing for those who are "not like me" (after all, children are primarily described in terms of a dichotomy, as "not adult"). The construction of the adressee thus becomes openly problematic. Strange, then, that writers of children's books so seldom discuss this awkward relationship. They pretend they know instead. "You're not like me, but I know what you're like" - is that an attitude designed to instil confidence?

The question is, whether there's any other type of literature so burdened with prejudices as children's books. Prejudices about the very people who are its cause and subject!

Class mobility and transcendence

Christine Falkenland made her debut in the early 1990's, as a poet. More recently she has won acclaim as a novelist, and this year sees her first venture into the picture book genre. *Albert och fiolen* (Albert and the Violin) takes its special mood from the scenery of Bohuslän on the Swedish west coast. The book's most striking element is the illustrations by Ana Lysebo. It's a conventional story about growing up; the stonemason's son is gripped by a longing for the violin and ultimately becomes a violinist. The atmosphere in the book is one of undefined nostalgia. A vague feeling of the late sixties prevails. Late modern Sweden promises future opportunities as the book continues. The coveted violin promises both upward social mobility and ecstasy or transcendence. The book hums along to a song we have already heard echoing through Swedish art and culture, indeed it may even be its top line: the song of nostalgia for the "People's Home", for a time before new liberalism, globalisation and consumerism.

How the story goes

Two seasoned practitioners of the children's book, Siv Widerberg (words) and Cecilia Torudd (pictures) have come up with one of the best books for the

Albert and the Violin, pictures by Ana Lysebo © Eriksson & Lindgren

very young this year: *Hinkar, spadar, krattor* (Buckets Spades Rakes). Their trick is to let the picture tell the story. The texts, never longer than three words, name the tools and their colours, “A red bucket”, “A green spade” etc, while the pictures show a variety of children holding the bucket or spade, hurrying towards the end of the book. In the last picture, they all come together in the sandpit. This technique is as brilliantly simple as the one used by Anna-Clara Tidholm in her classic for young children *Knacka på* (Knock at the Door, 1992). This is the kind of narrative structure that shows the enormous potential of the picture book for adults, too. It seizes the opportunity for the text and pictures respectively to grab the narrative surplus and playfully pull at the loose ends and corners.

From the same team of Widerberg and Torudd there’s also a new counting story for small children: *Räkna med tvillingarna* (Count on the Twins) Here they use quite the opposite narrative device. The counting in the text drives the story forward. The result is much less stimulating. The pictures reproduce what the words say. Tautological boredom. It’s like jumping round the jogging track with both feet together.

Offering resistance

Sweden’s official cultural policy is fond of underlining the links between democracy and the value of literature. The repeated message is that only people with a potent language and a grasp of its subtleties can promote their ideas and interests. Writers tend to oppose this sort of argument. It may well be that democracy is strengthened by literature, but literature has a value of its own in any case.

In the big seventies revival currently sweeping through Swedish culture, the old stories of heroism are back in favour. With overt reference to a famous dispute between radical youths and politicians over the fate of some centrally located elms in the 1970’s, Anna Walfridsson tells the story of an old woman and a few kids who save a chestnut tree from the harsh sentence of the housing association. It’s right to offer resistance. The banal pedagogy of the story is redeemed by the wonderful pictures. Lushly detailed watercolours from unusual perspectives and expressive, almost portrait-like faces make *Kastanjekungen* (The Chestnut King) a really good book.

Picture-Text

It is often said that the world of Swedish children’s books has many wonderful illustrators but few textwriters of note. This is true. There’s no question that the development of children’s books over the last twenty-five years has been led by those creating the pictures. One of the very best is Eva Lindström. Her work this year includes the illustrations for *Raggarråttan Roger* (Roger Rat, Boy Racer) with words by Ulf Sindt. A fairly standard story of courage is transformed by Lindström into a subtle artistic masterpiece. She is superbly skilled in carrying pictures over from one page to the next, and embroidering across the boundary between the page and the world. All those directions in which to read. Her ability to create micro-stories to deepen and elaborate the narrative. Her excellent command of differ-

Illustrator Eva Lindström © AlfaBeta

ent time planes and parallel events. Quite simply, she reveals the picture book’s full narrative potential. If anybody can liberate the picture book from its narrow pigeonholing as only fit for children, she can.

One of the picture book pairings already acknowledged as classic is that of Barbro Lindgren (words) and Eva Eriksson (pictures). Their book this year is *Dollans dagis* (Dolly’s Daycare). This is an exquisite book. Barbro Lindgren writes in a vigorous, ingenious, elliptical style. Take for example the phrases “But Dolly can walk/ because her legs haven’t fallen off. / There she goes. JUMP JUMP JUMP”. Eva Eriksson’s highly atmospheric chalk drawings create vibrant scenes with a minimum of detail. She’s also a master mimic. We get very close to the characters in the book. Start to love them. Get cross with them. Share their delight. All because their faces are so expressive.

The title of this year’s offering from another classic picture book team, Tomas (words) and Anna-Clara (pictures) Tidholm, is *När vi fick Felix* (When We Had Felix). It’s an ingenious book about the intense friendship and love between two children, Emma and Evald. The ultimate expression of their feelings for one another is a child. They therefore have a child, and then lose it. As I read it, the book’s underlying subject is sexuality. You could say that the book is a modern version of the story of the stork. The subject is heavily conspicuous by its absence. How can you have children without having sex? Have Emma and Evald in fact had sex without our knowing? But children surely don’t have babies even if they have sex? The questions proliferate around what is never stated. This is a book that observes the special reading act of the picture book in an unusually bold way. It counts on the critical, dialogue-driven nature of reading aloud. You haven’t really read it until you’ve talked about it.

Granny and Grandpa

Mummy and Daddy are rarely heroes in children’s books. They are grey and ordinary, get the meals ready, read stories and give you a cuddle when you’re upset. But they are not particularly exciting. Grandparents are quite a different matter. The second book about “my brave Granny” in Africa, *Min modiga mormor och noshörningen Nofu* (My Brave Granny and Nofu the Rhino) by Inger Jakalas (words) and Helena Bergendahl (pictures) is a gripping story. It’s the pictures, with their red outlines and vivid colours, that really make the book, but they are complemented by the narrative tone and the character of Granny, as she meets Africa’s wildlife. A book surely destined to last.

In *Mitt rosa liv* (My Pink Life), on the other hand, it’s a quick-thinking Grandpa who saves the day when a girl is suddenly seized by a longing for princess pink. On one level, of course, this is a story of sexuality and gender identity. Desire descends on the girl suddenly and inexplicably, and the attributes of a princess can hardly be called gender neutral. But Grandpa doesn’t start going on about what’s girly and what’s not; he just gets on with things, in true action hero fashion. As if to obey the imperative of desire, he dyes clothes, sews puff sleeves and rosettes, fixes lace curtains, deep-pile rugs and flashing lights. At the end of the book, the girl has experienced the liberation of someone affirming her urges with no questions asked. Her life in pink can begin. Mums and Dads can rarely achieve that sort of thing.

Rhyming

Not many children’s authors these days take the trouble to write stories in rhyme. That’s a shame, I think. This indifference to verse and rhyme seems to me yet another example of a declining interest in aesthetics in children’s literature. The linguistic ideal is journalistic rather than literary. Simple word order, short sentences and the prose style of the daily papers are very much in favour. But luckily there are few exceptions to the rule. Viveca Lärn has published a story in verse this year, with pictures by Anders Hultman. *Kattkalaset* (The Cats’ Party) is about

a cat who finds a home and throws a party. It's no masterpiece, but how much more interesting books become when they take an interest in language for its own sake. Viveca Lärn's verse highlights what most other children's books lack, namely the elementary insight that language – not plot, subject or conviction – is what constitutes the art in literature.

List of Titles

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Andersson, Kenneth: Lilla krypboken. Alfabeta.
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