



Mirja Unge



Mats Wahl



Lars Gustafsson



Mikael Niemi



Bo R. Holmberg



Christine Falkenland



Ann-Marie Ljungberg



Hans Olsson



Pernilla Stafelt



Annika Thor



Moni Nilsson-Brännström



Peter Kihlgård

# New Swedish Titles 2000

## The Swedish Institute



To read literature solely as though it were a mirror of society and its interpreters would be a precarious business, as Ingrid Elam points out at the beginning of her article on new Swedish prose. On the other hand, Kajsa Lindsten Öberg demonstrates that literature, be it for adults or for children, is not entirely uninfluenced by current affairs. Mirror or not, the following two articles about recent Swedish titles identify themes connected with public debate, but also include some exposing testimonies about the most private sphere.

There is a mounting international interest in Swedish literature. Swedish books are found on bestseller and “critics’ choice” charts all over the world, and the publication of translations is no longer limited to a handful of specialist publishers. Bidding for titles occurs more and more often, even for translations of previously unpublished writers.

Ingrid Elam and Kajsa Lindsten Öberg have been requested to comment on this year’s published books for the Frankfurt Book Fair 2000. The selection of titles and the opinions are entirely their own. The comments are usually short but will hopefully encourage further reading. For more information about the authors, we refer you to each respective publisher. Information about funding of translations can be obtained from the Swedish Institute.

Helen Sigeland / The Swedish Institute

## New Swedish Fiction

If literature were a mirror-like reflection of reality, then the women writers who emerged in the final years of the 20th century must have grown up under exceptionally atrocious conditions, since practically every novel is about young girls being exposed to physical violence, incest, sadistic sexuality and bullying. The atmosphere can only be characterised as one of powerlessness, and the perspective was strictly personal, not to say private: The young female prose writer looked inwards, at her own self, or possibly at her immediate family.

This year, the first of the new millennium, several younger writers of fiction are opening their doors to the outside world, so many of them that I dare call it a trend.

MIRJA UNGE made her debut in 1998 with a prize-winning story of growing up and family life, *Det var ur munnarna orden kom* (The Words Came Out of the Mouths). Her second novel, *Järnnätter* (Frosty Nights), is also about a young girl in a harsh envi-



Mirja Unge

ronment, but the narrator is older, on her way out into the social periphery, where language is rough and impoverished, where dark-skinned girls with immigrant backgrounds are called Turkish whores, where the unemployed squander their days on booze and white-supremacy music. In Unge's world, as in the world of many young writers, unemployment, homelessness, divorce and stepfamilies are more common than in statistically measurable

reality. In other words, this literature portrays its own time in a warped mirror, where certain features are grotesquely enlarged and emphasised, at the expense of others. In this year's literary mirror, we can conclude that the family is still in a crisis, and that the welfare state is rather under the weather too. Where Unge's first book portrayed a home that was a virtual minefield, where the casual remark could trigger a catastrophe, her new book is a biting report from the small-town football stands and fast-food counters, a hotbed for racism and violence, partly because so many keep silent in the face of a bellowing handful. ASA LANTZ'S second book, *Splitta nota* (Split the Bill), is also about what happens when violence and cruelty are met with silence – and what happens to those who dare speak up. Like many contemporary authors, Åsa Lantz avails herself of the detective story form. The book is about a crime that is being investigated, but it is equally about the guilt feelings of the “detective” – a mother – and of



Åsa Lantz

her suspected son. He has already been convicted for murder, is in prison and refuses to speak. She questions her past as a socially critical and revealing artist, and therein finds the cause of her son's fate.

The moral issues (the children of the 1968 generation are consumed by their parents' rebellion?) is perhaps not described with sufficient analytical depth, but it puts the old slogan of the personal being political in a new, younger perspective.



by Ingrid Elam

On the whole, younger women writers favour setting their stories in the margins of the welfare state, just outside the big city in which one of this spring's new male writers, CLAES CARLSSON, lets his drug addicts, procurers and forlorn young people move to the beat of Smashing Pumpkins or Human League and conjure up intrigues inspired by soap operas. *Lång fin blond* (Tall Fine Blonde) is the title of his novel. PETER LUCAS ERIXON, who has published several novels and volumes of poetry, also uses the city as the background for his novel *Röster och brus*. *The New York Tapes* (Voices and Noise. The New York Tapes), which reproduces material from a tape recorder placed in the middle of New York City.

ANNE-MARIE LJUNGBERG, on the other hand, follows a few individuals in the geographical and social outskirts of the big city in her novel *Färjenäs*. Färjenäs in Gothenburg is one of those non-places that are found in all major cities, near bridge abutments, in the periphery of industrial sites, behind



Claes Carlsson

railway stations or between motorway ramps. Here, water and electricity have been cut off and windows and doorways boarded up. This is the abode of the unemployed and the homeless, those who are not sure where they are headed, and where nature can suddenly break through the concrete, and the lifestyle of former times can take over. Ljungberg's narrative voice is adjusted to the subject: slowly and meticulously she relates small events in the grey everyday existence



Cecilia Bornäs

that is whiled away with gaming, conversation and the hunt for a hot meal.

This spring, CECILIA BORNÄS published her first novel, which deals with being an outsider on a veritably allegorical level. The narrator in *Jag Jane* (Me Jane) is none other than Tarzan's Jane, who looks back on a long and lonely life among the foreign and uncomprehending creatures of the jungle.

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The greatest narrative zest in the younger generation, at least judging by this year's publications, seems to be found in the very north of Sweden. The poet MIKAEL NIEMI'S first novel, published this autumn, *Populärmusik från Vittula* (Popular Music from Vittula), is a story of growing up in a region where Swedish is the second language and Tornedal Finnish is the mother tongue. We follow "Mikael" and his very tongue-tied and religiously brought-up friend Niila from pre-school age up to their teenage years. The episodes are burlesque, at times grotesque, and encompass everything that a southerner would expect of a story set in northern Sweden: churchgoing, sauna, deluges of alcohol and abysmal silences. Niemi writes himself into a tradition with roots in Alexis Kivi's Finnish classic *Sju Bröder* (Seven Brothers), but in a way that leaves the reader in fruitful uncertainty: is he pulling our leg or is life really that chillingly hot north of the Arctic Circle? Niemi's ability to characterise tragicomic situations, not to say people, is reminiscent of Göran Tunström, an associa-



Mikael Niemi

tion that makes it a pleasure to read while reminding us of the melancholy fact that one of Sweden's most well-beloved narrators died this year.

Novels about childhood and growing up constitute a vital literary sub-category throughout Europe, but the question is whether this is not in fact the most important genre in Swedish literature, from Strindberg to our days. Young writers such as Niemi and Unge continue to favour subject matter that they are intimate with and profoundly knowledgeable about – what it is like to become an adult – and older writers sooner or later choose to look back on their own lives. This year, several of Sweden's most popular and most productive authors have written autobiographical novels or a mixture of novel and autobiography. LARS GYLLENSTEN, who in protest left his seat in the Swedish Academy, came out with *Minnen, bara minnen* (Memories, Just Memories). This is a biography that says very little about the writer Gyllensten, but all the more about the man. Above all, he settles his accounts with enemies and adversaries in the media world, and writer colleagues within and outside the Academy. In *Svart asfalt grönt gräs* (Black Tarmac Green Grass), STIG CLAESSION relates his childhood in the rural county of Västergötland and the wooden shacks of south Stockholm. Since his debut in 1956, Claesson has written more than 70 novels about the transformation of Sweden from a farming nation to a welfare state, and the price of modernisation in the form of loneliness, loss of orientation and of values. Looking back on his own life in that perspective, he now aims at something beyond the autobiographical, and many people will recognise themselves in the portrayal of the character who is a stranger in his own era, a portrait that goes beyond what is specific for Sweden. BJÖRN RANELID published an autobiography last year, *Till alla människor i himlen och på jorden* (To All People in Heaven



Lars Gyllensten

and on Earth). This year, in a novel, *Min son fäktas mot världen*, (My Son Wrestles with the World), he mingles fiction with reality. A story about two fathers and their sons in a village in southern Sweden is interlaced with the story of Ranelid and his son, as it emerges out of some correspondence. It is the father who writes to the son about good and evil, guilt and guiltlessness and other opposites that are typical of this consciously stylistic and lofty writer, who shuns the commonplace and either demonises human beings and the world, or idealises them.

In his first novel in seven years, *Samma sol som vår* (Same Sun as Ours), PER GUNNAR EVANDER also blends his own history with a fictitious story about a dead grandfather's longing.

A more provocative exploitation of the individual self is found in CARINA RYDBERG'S writings. When her previous novel, *Den högsta kasten* (The Highest Caste, 1997), was published, it generated heated debate about art and ethics. The novel portrays the rejected love of the author for an authentic man, and her encounters with other people who are named and/or identifiable to a small circle of people in Stockholm. 'Is it permissible to expose real people in that way?' several critics asked, often without reflecting that the narrator herself is examined and sacrificed more ruthlessly than any of the other characters. This autumn, Rydberg returns with a new autobiographical novel, *Djävulsformeln* (The Devil's Formula), in which she again scrutinises the less endearing sides of her own character.

In addition to the child and oneself, the family continues to provide the form and content for narratives about social developments, moral issues, togetherness and loneliness. Here are a few examples from this autumn's new titles: KERSTIN STRANDBERG'S *Tio syskon i en ömtålig historia* (Ten Siblings in a Fragile Tale) chronicles a business clan. PETER MOSSKIN'S *Där stäppen tar slut* (Where

»In several novels she has meticulously probed every nook and cranny of the bourgeois family interior. She registers every slightest nuance, nothing happens while panic surges...«

the Stepp Ends) is the third part of a story about a Jewish immigrant family. In her fourth novel, *Dom* (Them), CILLA NAUMANN writes about the loneliness and the secrets that can be contained in the small nuclear family.

The contemporary Swedish author whose preoccupation with the family perhaps goes beyond that of any other writer is CAROLA HANSSON. In several novels she has meticulously probed every nook and cranny of the bourgeois family interior. She registers every slightest nuance, nothing happens while panic surges and we do the crossword in the conservative daily paper, have a dry martini and reiterate the phrases that have been said so many times before. *Den älskvärde* (The Loveable), is her latest novel. It could just as well have been titled "The Absent", because it is about a father who has been dead for many years before his daughter dares ask herself what she actually knew about him. The answer is next



Cilla Naumann

to nothing. As she starts investigating, speaking to her mother and siblings, former colleagues of her father, business associates, friends, it emerges that no one knows much and that what one remembers does not tally with what others know or think they know. Between the lines of this rather claustrophobic and cleverly revealed family history, we sense another story about a collectively repressed memory: Sweden's actions during the Second World War, especially with regard to the treatment of Jewish citizens and their property. There has always been

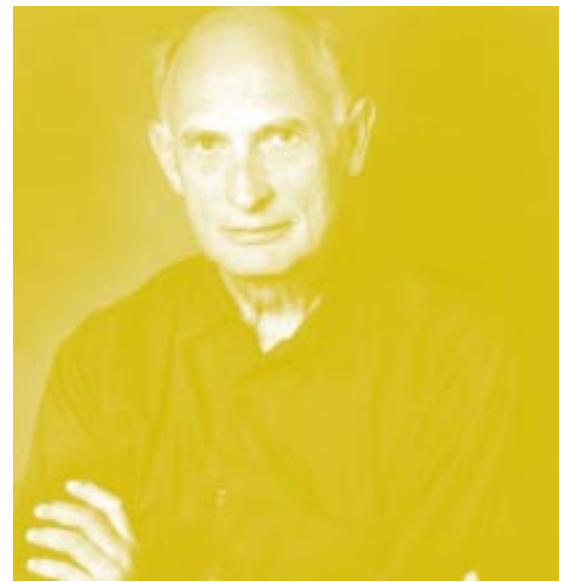
something admirably uncompromising and yet evasive about Carola Hansson's narrative stance that is especially congenial to the subject of this novel.

Where Carola Hansson's female narrator is in quest of knowledge about a who father she thinks she knew all her life, two of this autumn's male novel characters are searching for a father they have never seen. The middle-aged Bertold – after Brecht – in STAFFAN SEEBERG'S *Ariadnes spår* (The Trail of Ariadne) has been told by his mother that he was conceived when she spent a stormy winter's night with a nameless stranger. One day, he happens to read a short story in a magazine that relates exactly the story his mother has always told him. Bertold now begins to search for his father in other trivial novels by the same author, and readers who accompany him on the hunt are tossed between excerpts from fictive pulp novels and Bertold's own story of how he pieces together his own identity. Seeberg's play with the putatively trivial and "real" literature challenges the demarcation-line between truth and illusion in an era when fictive and documentary soaps attract the same audience that also reads modernist prose experiments. The main character in PC JERSILD'S new novel, *Ljusets drottning* (Queen of Light), discovers on the death of his mother that he was not at all adopted as she always claimed, but her biological child. But with whom?



Carola Hansson

And who was his mother really? We are given the answer to that question after a quest that develops into a detective search among stock exchange prices and test tube laboratories. As in so many of his previous novels, Jersild combines an engaging and entertaining narrative style with issues that are current and urgent to large audiences. He has a keen eye for the aspects of democracy that invite criticism and ridicule, but a great deal of dark pondering over the existential terms inherent both in newer ways of co-existence and in modern genetic

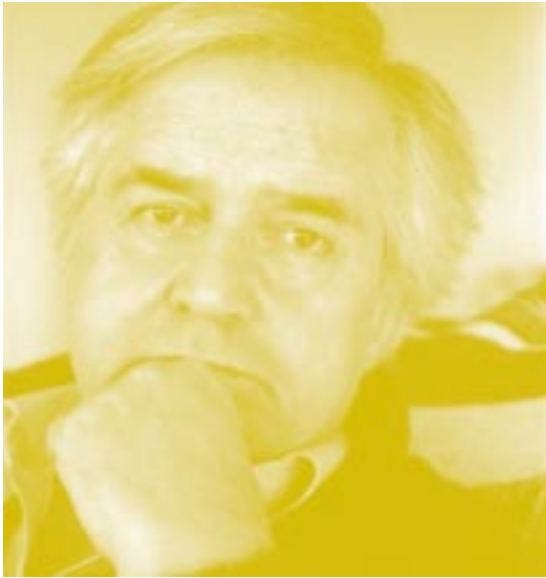


PC Jersild

engineering are lurking behind the satire.

KJELL JOHANSSON, who related an autobiographical tale of father and son in a traditional working-class environment in his previous novel *Huset vid Flon* (The House by the River), in his latest book – a satirical cock-and-bull story – also attacks contemporary Sweden with its welfare money embezzlers and tax evaders who take advantage of the democratic system. In a series of novels under the collective title "Glömskans tid" (Age of Forgetting), KJELL ESPMARK has indulged in a sharp and occasionally querulous journey through the inferno of modern-day society. In this autumn's novel, *Voltaires resa* (Voltaire's Journey) he chooses to regard Europe, and particularly Sweden, through the eyes of the philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment as he may have seen things had he risen from the dead today – equipped with more of Espmark's causticity and less of *Candide's* esprit. This autumn will also see the publishing of a book about *Voltaire* by one of Sweden's most engaging writers of monographs on great men, CARL-GÖRAN EKERWALD.

What remains of the welfare state that the older generation built up – and whose birth pains and middle-age crisis have been described in Swedish fiction over the past fifty years? This is a question MAJGULL AXELSSON returns to again and again in the three novels she has written so far. Her latest, *Slumpvandring* (Random Rambling), circles round the character types we recognise from her previous books: the superficially successful climber, who has gained an education, husband and kids and some degree of wealth, the somewhat bitter and narrow-minded character who has remained in her place of birth, and finally, the black sheep, the sister who has got out of the rat-race entirely and opted out of the labour market and welfare system, an unmarried mother burdened with alcohol problems. All three have to pay for the freedom that



Henning Mankell

women in particular attained during the latter half of the 20th century, and in Axelsson's novel, they are all incorporated in one large family, where the men appear nebulous in comparison with the many colourful women.

25 years ago, the favoured route of any Swedish writer wishing to scrutinise contemporary society would have gone via the documentary or historical novel. The present is more distinct when seen in a distant

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mirror, or in fictive or real archive dust. A significant number of this year's novels, however, are set in an entirely contemporary, "live broadcast" environment. One exception is PETER ENGLUND, who delivers the second part of his suite of novels about "Sweden's period as a great power" – the 17th century – and "a man in its midst". In the first book, *Ofredsår* (Years of Warfare), the warlord and architect Eric Dahlberg was the central character. His latest novel, *Den oöverbinnerlige* (The Invincible), chronicles Dahlberg's further adventures and also portrays one of Sweden's least famed kings, Charles X, who succeeded Queen Christina. Englund is a historian by profession, but he is also a lively narrator who knows his Walter Scott and acknowledges that history is best related with the aid of more unassuming characters to identify with – the men in the midst of the era. BJÖRN HOLM immerses himself in a later phase of history, the year of Charles XII's death, 1718, in his historical adventure novel *Tio dagar i*



Håkan Nesser

*Fredrikshald* (Ten Days in Fredrikshald).

Both the detective story and the historical novel lend themselves amenable to social criticism and analyses of contemporary attitudes and lifestyles. HENNING MANKELL already has a long series of very successful books about the police inspector Wallander under his belt now that he publishes a historical novel, *Vindens son* (Son of the Wind), about an adventurer and entomologist who travels to Africa and returns with a black boy who is placed with a family of farmers in southern Sweden, thereby triggering a course of events with a deadly outcome. JAN GUILLOU has abandoned the thriller genre in favour of the historical novel. In his third and final novel in the series about the knight Arn, *Riket vid vägens slut* (The Nation at the End of the Road), he joins the ranks of Swedish amateur historians who claim that Sweden's emergence as a national state began in the county of Västergötland in the 12th century rather than in the Stockholm region. While Guillou poses questions about popular power and national identity, Mankell moves in the same domain, albeit limiting himself more to individual identity and belonging.

However, the straightforward detective novel remains a popular genre, also among younger authors who made their debut with a more traditional psychological story or a novel of manners. BARBARA VOORS immediately gained a large audience when she departed from the psychological novel and instead wrote a detective story. This autumn's *Sömlös* (Sleepless) is a story of suspense about a past crime that begins to resurface dangerously after many years. In this year's detective story by HÅKAN NESSER, *Ewa Morenos fall* (Ewa Moreno's Case), Inspector Van Veeteren has been replaced by a female colleague. The scene of the crime is the same as before: a fictive Maardam. THEODOR KALLIFATIDES is back with a detective story too, *Ett enkelt brott* (A Simple Crime), to



Agneta Pleijel

mention yet another example among the plethora of books.

History is not always political. When AGNETA PLEIJEL moves on historical and foreign ground in her novel of ideas *Lord Nevermore*, she investigates an issue that is both more intimate and larger, universal. Two young Poles, the famous anthropologist Brinislaw Malinowsky and his close friend Stanislaw, journey into the world at the beginning of the 1900s, towards different futures. They never meet again, but are forever bound to one another. Pleijel uses their respective fates to embody the conflicts that have characterised a whole century. The novel ponders the universal issues of the (im)possibility of love and Man's inability to

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understand and come near Woman, the contradiction between reason and feeling and, not least, the stranger that is one's own self.

On the whole, the traditionally narrative and characterising novel has a surprisingly strong position in new Swedish literature. Very little is seen of the formal experiments, the broken-up chronology and montages of previous decades. The "Post-Modern" novel is conspicuously absent. When, for instance, ARIS FIORETOS, who has previously written in a style that blends fiction with essay, publishes his latest book this autumn, *Stockholm Noir*, it is an entirely traditional novel, a veritable pastiche on the 19th century epic, with a rather jauntily commenting narrator. *Stockholm Noir* is formally old-fashioned, while being a branch on a (new) modern plant: a hybrid between hyper-aesthetic prose or poetry and cool scientific

observation, such as it occurs in the works of young Swedish prose writers like Gabriella Håkansson, or German poets like Durs Grünbein. The male protagonist in Fioretos' novel is a scientific researcher of the brain and a "soul biologist". The fascination with science is also strong in KARL JOHAN NILSSON'S first novel *Kvicksilver* (Mercury), published last spring.

The gradual loss of language and memory is hardly a new theme in literature, but in KERSTIN EKMAN'S latest novel, *Urminnes tecken* (Signs from Time Immemorial), language and memory are certainly the central "characters" in a story about some creatures that are neither animals nor humans, but something in between. *Urminnes tecken* deals with the nature of sorrow and the sorrow of nature. It is an interlude, an austere beautiful story with a happy ending, where the tone, if not the scope, is at times reminiscent of Ekman's somewhat neglected masterpiece *Rövorna i Skuleskogen* (The Robbers of Skuleskogen). Consequently, this autumn's title is not the next instalment of her suite *Vargskinnet* (The Wolfskin), of which the first part was published last year.

PETER KIHLGÅRD surprised readers by producing a sequel to a novel published twelve years ago. *Du har inte rätt att inte älska mig* (You Have No Right Not to Love Me) is the title of this second volume of a



Aris Fioretos

planned quartet, of which the first part was *Fadder Teiresias vår* (Godfather Teiresias' Spring). In between these two novels, Kihlgård has written other material, including a great deal of musical and serious, playful short prose.

Short prose, or the short story, has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially among younger writers. One of the more acknowledged writers is TORBJÖRN ELENSKY who, in his short story collection *Myrstack* (Ant Hill) relates commonplace

occurrences and situations – a job interview, a banal conversation – as though they were extraordinary events. This is a device that forces readers to reflect on all that is most immediate and ordinary. The stories in JOHANNA EKSTRÖM'S *Vad jag vet om hållfasthet* (What I Know About Strength) also revolve around everyday life, but her style is more restrained and psychologically controlled, even when it encompasses the vast issues of power and powerlessness, dream and illusion. EVA MATTSSON'S stories in *Hundarna i Ask* (The Dogs in Ask) emerge from a mature authorship that dares take risks in relation to the reader. These intricately composed plots are about lives that have taken a new route, young and old people who are on the run or have simply got lost and close themselves around their secrets. They are set in Sweden and in Europe, often in the Belgium that was lamentable already in Baudelaire's time, but which is now used to represent an era when people trick and betray each other, with money, feelings and vulnerable innocence. The characters are wretched, usually from self-inflicted misery, and Mattsson treats them unsentimentally, recreates their rough tone of conversation, sees their shabbiness and is never ingratiating.

In poetry it has been possible to discern a couple of important tendencies over the past decade. Put very simply, there is the narrative, realistic but nevertheless clearly modernist poetry with the ambition to talk straight and usually in a masculine voice about everyday life, reality and politics. GÖRAN GREIDER'S poetry belongs in this category. This year, he has published a volume titled *Världen efter kommunismen* (The World After Communism). The title corresponds well with the content. Greider does not write naturalistic or lyrical poetry. He is a tribune in Sweden's public life and his poetry concerns major social changes and issues, occasionally reflected in the mudguard of a Volvo, or in the water under the Charles Bridge in Prague. Then there is the metaphor-shunning, strongly evocative and musical poetry that is above all associated with writers such as KATARINA FROSTENSON and ANN JÄDERLUND. This year, Jäderlund has produced her seventh volume of poems, *Kalender röd* (Calendar Red), while Frostenson has published two plays, possibly her best so far. *Kristallvägen /Safirgränd* (Crystal Road/Sapphire Lane) is a double exposure of the actions of language and body, and puts the severed human on the stage. Language always stands out like a foreign substance in Frostenson's poetry, and here it is given body and movement. INGMAR BERGMAN is publish-



Johanna Ekström

ing a volume, *Föreställningar* (Performances) that includes the script for the film *Trolösa* and two scripts that were never filmed. Apart from these, there is very little drama in this year's book harvest.

If Frostenson's plays verge on poetry, GUNNAR D HANSSON'S volume of poetry borders on essays and science. In *Förlusten av Norge* (The Loss of Norway) he attempts to salvage the remains of language, memories and thoughts out of footnotes, older literatu-

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re and local history, in a poetic form that constitutes a category of contemporary Swedish poetry all of its own.

Essays and biographies have represented a growing proportion of Swedish publishing over the past decade. This year's crop, however, is more meagre, but hardly a month passes without adding a few centimetres to the pile of Strindberg literature. This autumn, we can read about his talent as a gardener (!). The most debated Strindberg analysis this year ought, however, to have been JAN MYRDAL'S monograph *Johan August Strindberg*. Myrdal extracts the folksy, "Swedish" side of Strindberg and places his anti-semitism in a national class perspective, as if that would make it less objectionable. The expected debate did not occur this time however, possibly because the incendiary material was not taken quite seriously.

The historian ANDERS ISAKSSON this year completed a four-volume work on another national giant, the creator of the Swedish welfare state, Per Albin Hansson. *Per Albin, Landsfadern* (Per Albin, Father of the People)



Per Wirtén

will be a standard work not only for those who want to read about a Swedish prime minister, but also for those who want to learn about a period when Sweden underwent a revolution, albeit a gentle one. The role that early populism played in this revolution and in the Swedish popular movement is described by PER WIRTÉN in *Populisterna* (The Populists), one of this year's most widely noticed and criticised fact books.

In an elegant collection of essays with the ambiguous title *Prousts motor* (Proust's Engine) modernity theoretician SARA DANUIS argues that Marcel Proust was not only interested in things past, but also passionate about future technology and potential. This autumn, two poets have also each published a collection of literary essays: ULF ERIKSSON sketches an "aesthetic of time" in his *In i spegeln och bort* (Into the Looking-Glass and Away); and ANDERS OLSSON walks in the footsteps of "poetic nihilism" from Meister Eckhart and onwards in *Läsningar av intet* (Readings of Nothing). LARS GUSTAFSSON, who is reluctant to let a year go by without publishing something, this year produced a slim volume of philosophical meditations, *Meditationer* (Meditations). In his characteristic style, he cogitates eloquently, inventively and enthusiastically, albeit with the occasional inexplicable little factual mistake, about time, sensuality or death. Thus, he devotes one and a half-melancholy pages to lamenting that there is a grammatical term for past future, but no term for future past. If he had devoted one second to checking his facts, he would have found that *futurum exactum* is the very term he wanted. However, this sort of careless mistake is perhaps part of Gustafsson's charm.

Charm and wisdom are both encompassed by HENRIC HOLMBERG'S book about the art of acting, *Ett slags skådespelare* (A Kind of Actor). The difference between Holmberg and a predecessor in the genre like Erland Josephson, is that he has almost always wor-



Christine Falkenland

ked outside the institutional theatre, in the so-called fringe groups. It is these experiences that he conveys, among others. Three young critics, ANNE HEDÉN, MOA MATTHIS and ULRIKA MILLES, also convey their own experiences in the collection of essays *Över alla hinder* (Taking the Fences), a "history of civilisation", about girls and horses. Among the books published later this autumn, there is another collection of essays, *Telefonkatalogen* (Telephone Directory) by LARS KLEBERG, that arouses curiosity. It deals with the importance of the telephone in the modernisation process, and not least in modern-day exercising of power as portrayed, for instance, in Russian drama and film during the inter-War period.

Any critic who examines a year's publications in search of themes and tendencies, good story-tellers and regenerating eccentrics, will sooner or later be forced to resign to the fact that it is impossible to generalise, and that all the cards could be mixed and arranged according to another principle in a completely different order that would be just as valid. And yet, we go on generalising and arranging. And always, something is left over, something that does not fit into the order. This something is usually worth special attention. CHRISTINE FALKENLAND'S new novel, *Sjärens begär* (Desire of the Soul) is exactly the sort of book that does not fit into any category. A man visits his female cousin at her country manor after many years. Something unmentionable has separated them in the past, now they are irresistibly drawn to one another, but hardly out of love. Falkenland's characters move in environments seething with memories and forebodings. The cousin's manor is a romantically tinged pressure chamber reminiscent of rooms in stories by Poe or Hoffmann. There is a mystery that Falkenland is trying to reveal with her tight, pure, but still very personal prose, and this is the secret of the soul. Rarely does one encounter a young

author today who is so fearful of the soul and yet so bravely probes its very depths.

"All fiction is autobiographical, and only in that sense can it justifiably be claimed to be documentary," writes LARS JAKOBSON in the epilogue to his new novel, *I den röda damens slott* (In the Red Lady's Palace). He makes his way through the "documentarism" that the previous Swedish generation of authors – P O Enquist, P O Sundman and others – have availed themselves of with great success. However, Jakobson's "documentary" novels differ radically from those of his predecessors. Like them, he distrusts the veracity of the document, but looks for the truth beyond the facts by mixing and distorting authentic and fictitious quotations, and by relating actual events (his latest novel incorporates the Iran-Contras affair and Oliver North) to events that could have taken place, such as the colonisation of Mars. The book begins with a motto from H G Wells, who wrote about the invasion *from* Mars; Jakobson knows his science fiction, but in his books the future is already past, Martian culture is extinct. In this year's novel, an autobiographical narrator appears, a son who is clearing out a house after his dead father while intermittently attempting to write an introduction to a book about Mars and its extinct culture. He takes lorry-load

»Jakobson describes unreality with extreme stylistic deftness and great detail. He obviously does not believe that Mars has been civilised or that linguistic researchers are trying to decipher the Martian written language, but he does believe the people he visits, even in his imagination.«

after lorry-load to the rubbish dump, as the memories crowd up on him. Jakobson describes unreality with extreme stylistic deftness and great detail. He obviously does not believe that Mars has been civilised or that linguistic researchers are trying to decipher the Martian written language, but he does believe the people he visits, even in his imagination. *I den röda damens slott* is not only one of this year's most daringly plotted novels, it is also a very beautiful and captivating characterisation of a loneliness that most of us will recognise but few can break out of. And, not least, it brilliantly confirms

# Children's books as a mirror of society

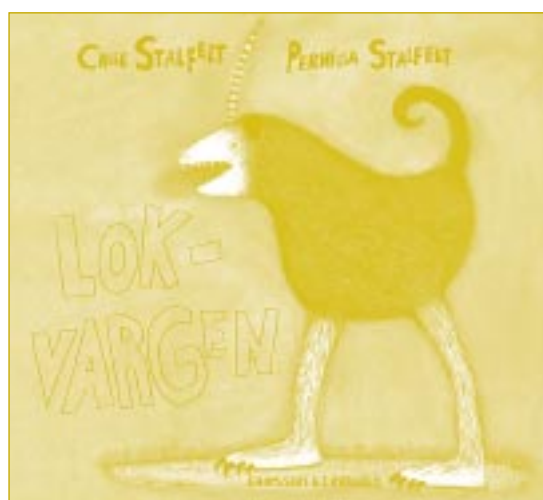
A selection of new Swedish books for children and young people



by Kajsa Lindsten Öberg

**N**

that artistic fiction can bring us closer to the truth than facts alone.



**The Engine Wolf** written by Pernilla Stafelt and her five-year-old nephew Calle Stafelt.

o matter how imaginative a children's book is, it always contains an element of realism. A contemporary ethos, and an approach to people and the world.

Today's Swedish authors of children's books write their stories against a background where television, video and computer games play an important part in children's everyday life. Even the stories are influenced by current fashions and realities: Anyone who writes stories today has to consciously or unconsciously relate to the genre called "fantasy".

Another side of reality that cannot be disregarded is that Sweden is now a multicultural nation, where most children in their everyday life encounter people from different countries, who speak different languages and have different religions, traditions and experiences. The refugees who came to Sweden during the 1990s from countries such as the former Yugoslavia have made war a reality that has crept closer also for Swedish children.

Children are the victims of adult care, upbringing and control. They are shaped by their environment and exposed to it – this is a truth that is apparent already in early picture books, where the child is taught grown-up names for the objects that the grown-ups have surrounded the child with and consider to be relevant to the child.

A short, summarised characterisation of the focus and priorities of post-War children's literature, or the new possibilities and themes that have emerged and been injected in children's literature over the decades,

could look like this:

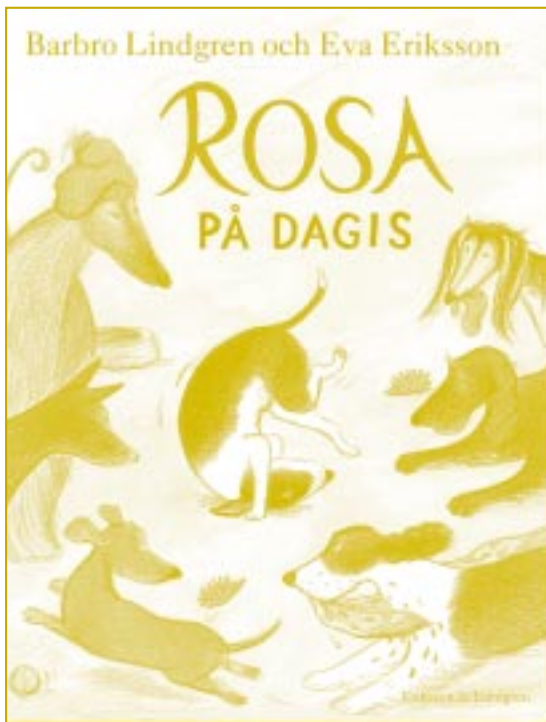
**The '50s and '60s:** Books that combine fantasy with secure, familiar reality, that speak to children in lively but correct language and identify with their situation. (Children are no longer brought up only to be well-behaved, but are also expected to be inventive and constructive, to fit in with the emerging optimistic post-War welfare society. We need Swedish engineers. Class divides are eroding and even working class children have access to higher education.)

**The '70s:** A new political awareness, radicalism and critique against society (why isn't everything as wonderful as it was supposed to be?). An interest in social issues and the world around us. Super-realism for toddlers – books such as *Emma hos tandläkaren* (Emma at the Dentist's). Not many fairytales.

**The '80s:** Imagination, poetry and nostalgia. Books about "the olden days". Psychological problems of an existential kind – with beautiful, poetic solutions. Death is a popular theme in children's books. Many fact books for children.

**The '90s:** Portrayals of society, with an emphasis on the psychology and problems of the individual. Fewer political solutions, more open endings. A distrust of dogmas and ready-made philosophies of life. Refugees and their experiences are a tangible reality in Swedish society, as are ethnic conflicts and racism. A newly awakened interest in the holocaust, refugees and racism in Sweden during the Second World War. Playful fact books.

»Today's Swedish authors of children's books write their stories against a background where television, video and computer games play an important part in children's everyday life.«



Rosa in Kindergarten by Barbro Lindgren with illustrations by Eva Eriksson.

Naturally, children's literature is profoundly influenced by earlier children's literature – new books almost always incorporate traces and references to previous books – and the different genres interweave in the works. This has been my point of departure for this review of recent Swedish literature for children and young people, and I have singled out some thirty books that I perceive to be especially interesting, good and typical of the times.

#### PICTURE BOOKS

Books about animals  
- both fictitious and real

A large number of books for small children are about animals. We could speculate about why this is so. Animals are sweet. Children like animals. Animals resemble toddlers in some ways: They can't express their feelings in words; therefore we can interpret their behaviour to mean all sorts of things.

In a picture book, illustrations and text should be of equal weight. In Sweden it is not uncommon that authors of picture books are illustrators or artists who both write and illustrate their books.

One important new writer on the Swedish picture book Parnassus in the 1990s was PERNILLA STALFELT. She has also created her own genre: the norm-breaking humorous fact book for children.

Her most recent book, *Lokvargen* (The Engine Wolf) was written together with her five-year-old nephew, CALLE STALFELT. It is a fictive fact book about a remarkable, woolly, two-legged animal, the Engine Wolf, which is "very strong". Engine wolves like to swim with crocodiles, and to fight. And they poo too. It is a hilarious book, written and illustrated in an imaginative, naïvist style.

Pernilla Stalfelt has previously written

three ferociously funny fact books – *Hår-boken* (The Hair Book, published in Swedish in 1996), *Bajs-boken* (The Poo-Poo Book, 1997) and *Döden-boken* (The Death Book, 1999) – which have been widely acclaimed and successful. To talk about a thing like poo, and to do so in a way that is both factual and jolly, is an entirely new concept in children's fact books. The same applies to death: *Döden-boken* encompasses everything from dead babies, happy skeletons and vampires, to children squabbling over the inheritance.

*Vildvinter* (Wild Winter) by ANNA-KARIN

»The main character is a flannel blanket that journeys out into the world to comfort everyone who needs to be comforted – be they children or grown-ups, emperors or tramps.«

PALM, with illustrations by ANNA BENGTTSSON, is a beautiful, poetic story about fictitious animals – about the wild and "snow-soft" snow leopards that crawl out of the trees in the parks and whirl around Stockholm in the winter, when dusk falls and the ground is covered with snow. Each spread is filled with a large picture in mild twilight colours – the soft contours of the city in the winter evening and whirling snow leopards. The text is billowingly expressive and magically evokes an atmosphere: "Strange things happen in the city in winter..."

This is Anna-Karin Palm's first children's book. She has previously written novels for adults.

*Rosa på dagis* (Rosa in Kindergarten) by BARBRO LINDGREN with illustrations by EVA

ERIKSSON, is about a real dog – a bull terrier called Rosa. She has to go to a dog-minder, because, "Dogs shouldn't sit at home growling all day, that gets too boring." We follow Rosa to the dog-minder and get to know a pack of dogs who each have their particular, strong personality. And the strongest and most particular personality belongs to Rosa. The illustrations of the dogs and their expressions as they regard each other are enough to put anyone in a good mood.

Ever since the mid-60s, Barbro Lindgren has written both realistic and more imaginative books for children of all ages. She has often broken new ground and set new norms. She is probably the first to have written a picture book (for the very youngest children) about death, *Titta, Max grav!* (Look, Max's Grave!, 1991). Barbro Lindgren has written four previous books about Rosa – two for children and two for adults.

#### TWO POETIC PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT SORROW AND COMFORT

*Gosetrasan Sven Flanell* (Sven Flannel, the Comfort Blanket) by EVA WIKANDER, is illustrated by ANN FORSLIND, with sketchy drawings against pastel backgrounds. The main character is a flannel blanket that journeys out into the world to comfort everyone who needs to be comforted – be they children or grown-ups, emperors or tramps. The text is in rhyme and sometimes highly poetic: "All is in a haze / soon the / nightingale has its last days / where are all my years? / said the old woman, wiping her tears."

Eva Wikander has been writing for children and young people since the 1970s, including a few widely acclaimed books about bullying – where the first book was about the victim and the second about the bully.

*Ängeln Gunnar dimper ner* (Gunnar the Angel Falls to Earth) by BARBRO LINDGREN, with illustrations by CHARLOTTE RAMEL, is about miracles: Gunnar the angel visits Earth one day and raises people and animals from the dead. Wherever he passes, tears of sorrow turn to tears of joy. The story is simple and concise, with not one superfluous word. Miracles take place, and it is not a dream, it's real. The pictures show animals and people rising from their graves and jumping out of the earth. "That's my old Pussycat! I met an angel who could do magic. He made Pussy alive again," the little girl Elin tells her mother. And her mother is extremely surprised.

#### CONTEMPORARY REALISM IN THREE PICTURE BOOKS

The first of these three picture books that



Tsatsiki and Love by Nilsson-Brännström.

deal with current society in a pedagogical way, while still being funny and enjoyable in their realism, is *Billy och mormor* (Billy and Grandmother) by BIRGITTA STENBERG, with illustrations by MATI LEPP. This is novelist Birgitta Stenberg's eighth book about the boy Billy. His grandmother comes to visit, and she is a very contemporary grandmother, who does yoga, keeps a pet rat and does not quite please her daughter. Billy, a quiet and thoughtful lad, manages to mediate between mummy and grandmother so everyone is happy in the end. Billy is an odd little character with a round belly and skinny legs and a surprised mien, who moves through a specific and typically Swedish contemporary environment – with punk-rockers in black with rings and metal studs in every conceivable place, and plucky grandmothers in plaid trousers who dare talk to them.

Birgitta Stenberg has previously written novels for adults, some of them dealing with her wild youth among the bohemians of Europe's capitals.

ANETTE LUNDBORG'S *Malins mamma gifter sig med Lisa* (Malin's Mum Marries Lisa) tells the story of how Malin's mother Siv gets married, or registers her partnership, with her partner and lover Lisa. Then Lisa gets pregnant, and Malin is told how she herself was made. "I got seeds from your daddy," her mummy tells her – in a jar. Daddy's boyfriend Niklas is the father of the new child, "Because he also wanted to be a father." Malin is relieved, because she was feeling a bit jealous. She wants to have a sibling, but she also wants her daddy to herself. This is a simple and idyllic book on an unusual theme. Anette Lundborg wrote the book because no one had written a book for children before about how normal and

enjoyable it can be to have homosexual parents. (According to the fact box at the end of the book, around 40,000 children in Sweden are estimated to have at least one homosexual parent.) The illustrations (by MIMMI TOLLERUP-GRKOVIC) are friendly and realistic. A funny little imagined pig is present in every picture and expresses the feelings Malin experiences in different situations (happy, excited, naughty, cross, sleepy, etc.).

The third book is about Pyret, a girl who goes with her parents to Vietnam to adopt a little brother. She herself is adopted from India. The book is called *Pyret får en lillebror* (Pyret gets a Little Brother), and was written by INGVIOR GOYERYD. It is a friendly and comforting book about sibling love and sib-

»They are set alternately in Stockholm and Greece, and give an optimistic, positive picture of what life can be like in a modern family with divorced parents,...«

ling rivalry and about being adopted from another country. (At the back of the book it says that nearly 40,000 people in Sweden have been adopted from another country.)

Two kinds of realism are discernible in Swedish children's and young people's books: *idyllic, calm and comforting everyday realism* – often incorporating humour and minor complications that are easily sorted out, at best written with psychological insights and good characterisations.

Secondly, *problem-related, psychological realism*, dealing with real problems and serious crises of a psychological, existential or social nature – death, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, bullying, unreliable grown-ups, etc. This realism sometimes also has a political or ethical message.

Both types can be freely mixed with stories, fantasy and adventure, and are often found in the same book, although one kind dominates.

#### BOOKS FOR YOUNG SCHOOL CHILDREN Easy readers with everyday realism

*Tsatsiki och kärleken* (Tsatsiki and Love) by MONI NILSSON-BRÄNNSTRÖM is a new book in the series about the boy Tsatsiki who lives with his mother in a flat in central Stockholm. His father lives in Greece. The books about Tsatsiki have been a success and have also been made into a film. They are easy to read, action-packed and hilari-

ous. They are set alternately in Stockholm and Greece, and give an optimistic, positive picture of what life can be like in a modern family with divorced parents, a stepfather, a real father who is far away, and half-siblings. Tsatsiki is sensitive and inquisitive and benefits from his contact with two cultures (Sweden and Greece). Tsatsiki's mother is strong and independent and loving. In the latest book, Tsatsiki experiences three major events: His grandfather dies, his sister is born and he dares touch an older girl's breasts.

ROSE LAGERCRANTZ has written several books about the boy Metteborg. In *Metteborg och Little Ben* (Metteborg and Little Ben), he has started fifth grade. The book has short, intense, easily read chapters on friendship, love and mischief. And, of course, on feeling left out. And on longing so much for a dog that you eventually start believing you are one. The tone of the book is happy, humorous and full of life. In the periphery of the idyll, however, there lurks a darker reality: Metteborg's classmate, Little Ben, is rather tiresome and nasty, but that's because his mother is dying. When she dies all he has is his alcoholic father, a sympathetic teacher and relatively kind friends.

CECILIA MODIG wrote her first children's book in 1999, *Mörka skogen – En sommar i Ademirs liv* (Dark Forest – One Summer in

»Grown-up behaviour is never explained. They seem to live in their own world, and the world of the book is that of the bewildered child, who is still living in an age when the world is full of magical possibilities.«

Ademir's Life). Ademir and his mother are refugees from Bosnia. They live in a suburb to Stockholm. All their relatives have died in the war. There is nothing to return to. Mother has found a Swedish fiancé – Arne – who is very kind but doesn't want to understand that life can have its darker sides. He is divorced and has three children who are spoiled, chirpy and happy. Ademir is a shy boy, who is going to start his fourth year at school and doesn't get on very well there. The book is about one summer in the Swedish countryside and about Ademir's lonely walks in the woods, where he meets a stray dog. He wants to help the dog find its home. What happens is a testimony to the fact that emotional wounds can heal, and

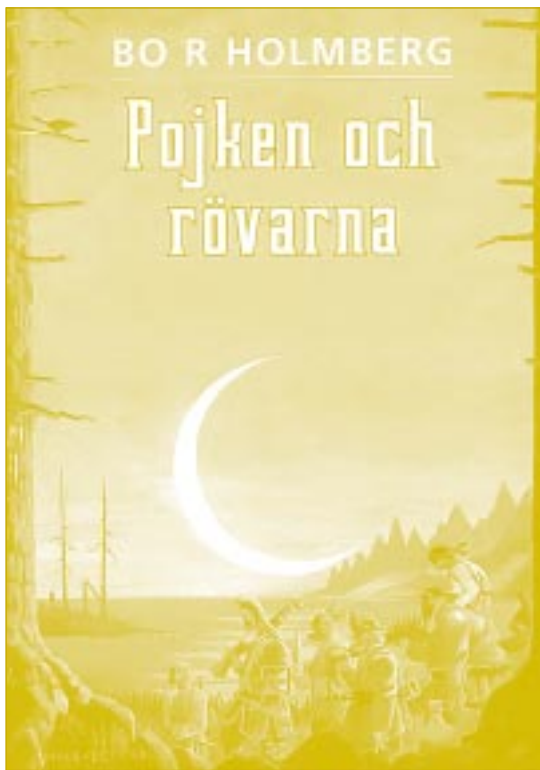
cultural divides be bridged, with care and good will.

A book that mixes idyllic everyday realism with fantasy is SANNA TÖRINGE'S first book, *Gula häxboken* (The Yellow Witch Book). It is about the girl Eline's last summer before starting school. She finds a self-reading yellow witchcraft book on the bus (she can't read herself yet). Thanks to the magic recipes in the book she manages to get her wishes fulfilled and help others during the summer. However, some spells are too difficult: "If you want to win fights, place a tooth from a dead person and a cockerel's egg in one of your boots, then no one can hit you." It is a cheerful, warm-hearted book that also has its own gentle sense of mystery. Grown-up behaviour is never explained. They seem to live in their own world, and the world of the book is that of the bewildered child, who is still living in an age when the world is full of magical possibilities. When summer is over, she has to return the witch book to the witch, and then she becomes a schoolgirl. Sanna Töringe has previously written cookery books.

A book that instead mixes problem-related realism with fantasy is HÅKAN JAENSSON'S *Bullers Bluff* (The Bluff of Hullabaloo). Hullabaloo's parents move from the countryside to Stockholm. His mother pursues a career as a consultant, while father mainly sits pondering, tugging at his beard, drinking beer and being a failure. No one has time for Hullabaloo (he's called that because he's so quiet). When Hullabaloo starts rescheduling things in his mother's diary, she does not notice. She arrives at the wrong place at the wrong time. Eventually she loses her job – and she can't understand how it happened. With a final bluff, Hullabaloo manages to get his parents talking to one another again. This happens at the local pizza parlour in the new estate, one snowy Christmas Eve in Stockholm, where two policemen sit snogging in a corner.

Two books that fit into the idyllic realism slot are *Fredda tio år* (Fredda, Ten Years Old), by HELENA DAHLBÄCK and *Agnes och kärleken* (Agnes and Love) by BO R HOLMBERG. *Fredda tio år* is the fourth book about Fredda, who is now in her third school year. It is about school, putting oneself forward, and classroom relations. It is also about Fredda's two cats and the neighbour's dog, and about how awful it feels to move.

*Agnes och kärleken* is about twelve-year-old Agnes, who is deeply preoccupied with the mystery of love. Her mother is dead. She is possessive of her dad and reacts violently when he meets a new woman. She also tries



The Boy and the Robbers by Bo R Holmberg.

to influence her brother's love affairs. The grown-ups around Agnes are both ordinary and very unusual: Her dad, a floor-layer, who takes good care of his children and the household, the chirpy old man and his girlfriend, grandmother who rides a motorbike instead of baking cakes, and her other grandmother who is respectable and cooks dinners.

When the book ends, Agnes is beginning to accept dad's need for a woman. She has simply matured slightly and grown more secure – before the terrible puberty sets in.

#### STORIES AND ADVENTURES

BO R HOLMBERG'S *Pojken och rövarna* (The Boy and the Robbers) is a story set in the past, and is based on an old legend from northern Sweden. When Per's sister returns home after having been held captive by the robbers on the high mountain, Per decides to take revenge. He does so, not only for his sister's sake but more perhaps to restore the reputation of his family, which has been ostracised by the villagers.

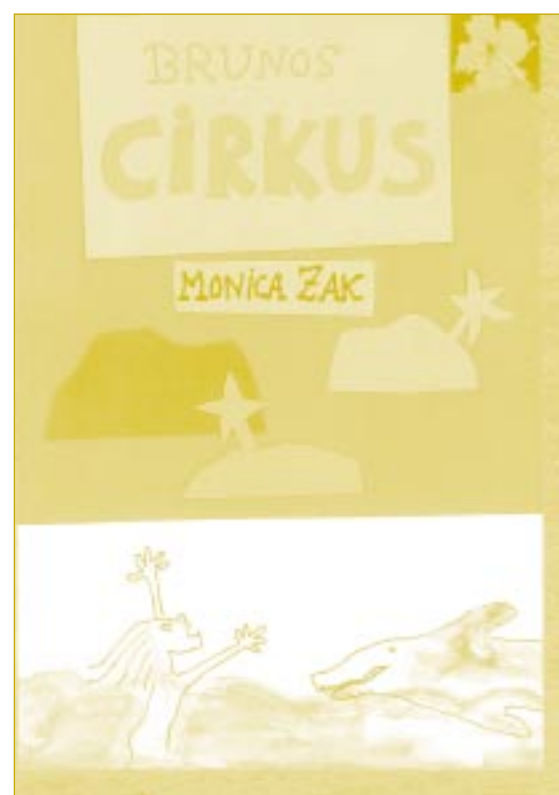
This is a terse, exciting and bloody tale about courage, betrayal and exclusion. It ends happily, but not as happily as Per had hoped. Are the robbers a special tribe, different from other humans? Or are they simply outcasts – like the gypsies among whom Per and his family are counted?

*Maghognyögat* (The Mahogany Eye) by MAUD MANGOLD is the second part of an original Fantasy series in which the supernatural characters are taken from Nordic mythology. The books are set in our time, in our world, and in the Land Inside, which is a parallel world where the trolls, witches, gnomes and elves of the old fairytales have found a sanctuary. But people from our

world start to arrive, in search of a more peaceful life closer to nature. A boy named Oliver is on his way there. He is accompanied by Fanny, who is going in search of her big sister. On their arrival they find themselves in the midst of a political coup. An evil sect leader has gained command over a large group of youths whom he takes with him and brainwashes into compliant helpers. The fairytale characters are interesting personalities, just as multifaceted as humans, and rarely one-dimensionally evil or good. This makes the book a cut above the ordinary. The trolls especially are an enjoyable acquaintance. ("If you make friends with a troll, you have a friend for life," says the author in an interview.) How the humans, gnomes and trolls together conquer evil is the theme of the book. It ends with Oliver and his family planning their move to the Land Inside. Because it is possible to live there and still have contact with our world, via e-mail and cell-phones.

Maud Mangold's books could very well become classics, in the same way as Tove Jansson's Moomin books or Lewis's stories about Narnia. She has the ability of a great raconteur to create a wide and plausible fictive world that is a pleasure to wander into and where we can dwell for hours – without thinking about references or narrative techniques.

*Brunos cirkus* (Bruno's Circus) by MONIKA ZAK is perhaps this year's most optimistic book. It is about the world's loneliest lady, Berta Viderstrand, 79 years old, whose every dream comes true at last. She gets a charming little dog, she goes to the South Sea to perform in a circus dressed in a tutu with roses. And she encounters love. This is an absolutely wonderful book, full of travel and



Bruno's Circus by Monika Zak.

animals and possibilities. Moreover, it is unusual in that the heroine is a retired lady. Monika Zak has previously travelled around the world, worked for global justice and environmental issues, and written fact-based children's books.

*Ivos resa* (Ivo's Journey) by new writer KERSTIN G LARSSON is a classical adventure story set in an unspecified past, in an unspecified country. The intelligent little boy Ivo leaves the farm where he has been the bullied youngest farmhand as long as he can recall, and goes off into the world in search of his parents. For the first time on his journey, he meets people who do not till the earth: circus artists, robbers and tradesmen. He travels through vast forests and to villages and cities that are governed by landed gentry and the clergy. He encounters evil and good. Eventually, he finds his home – the place in society that was intended for him. There he finds out who he is. It is a well-written book in a traditional style.

*Gudarnas son* (Son of the Gods) by NIKLAS KROG is an adventure set in an exact epoch and in an actual historical situation: Alexander the Great's campaign in 333-331 B.C. The Macedonian teenage boys Janus, Troy and Kaleb beg to be allowed to join the campaign. They have different reasons for wanting to go: a longing for adventure, to get away from mum's nagging, glory. But Janus, who is the main character, also has the secret reason of looking for his father, who has already gone to war, and winning his respect – simply to be seen by him. The book is full of bloody battles, strategy, heroism, death and hardships.

How the boys are hardened into men in the toughest manner and forced to accept the endless cruelties of the war and their general towards the civilian population is one of the main themes. Another is the bewildering power of love and the wild, mad craving to be seen – almost at any cost. This is a war story with psychological elements, and no sentimentality. Niklas Krog has previously written fantasy books.

#### BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

##### Refugees in Sweden

*Så många tårar* (So Many Tears) is a book in which SIV WIDERBERG interviews the refugee girl RUKIJE from Kosovo (who is also co-author of the book). It tells of the refugee family's wait for a residence permit, about the time spent in hiding from the Swedish authorities when they are threatened with deportation. The twenty-year-old Rukije is allowed to give a subjective picture of the family's fate – she writes about her feelings,



*So Many Tears*, Siv Widerberg interviews the refugee girl Rukije from Kosovo.

both happy and sad. About kind and unkind Swedes, about the joy of finally being allowed into Swedish society, and also the happiness of being with those of one's own group and maintaining one's own culture in a foreign country. A deeply sympathetic and interesting book.

Siv Widerberg started writing socially involved books for children and teenagers already in the 1960s. *Vända livet* (Turn Life Around) is her next book. It is based on interviews with young Swedes – a former racist and an ex-drug addict.

#### IN THE WAKE OF THE HOLOCAUST

Fifty years after the war ended, Swedes star-

»Judith tells her about Sweden during the war - about decent Swedish families with aggressively nazi members who were hostile to foreigners. About what it was like being a refugee dependent on the goodwill of others.«

ted taking an interest in the holocaust. This may in part be associated with the war in the former Yugoslavia and all the refugees from that area who arrived in Sweden in the '90s.

In connection with the educational project initiated by Swedish prime minister Göran Persson, and the book *Om detta må ni berätta* (Tell Ye Your Children..., a book



*Open Sea* by Annika Thor is the author's fourth book about two Jewish sisters.

about the holocaust that was distributed to all Swedish school children), a public debate arose concerning Sweden's role during and after the war: To what extent were we aware of the holocaust? Were there perpetrators and victims among us? What did we actually do during the war? And what happened to those who were never allowed in? Where did the Swedish Nazis disappear?

This debate was also reflected in Swedish books for young people in the latter half of the '90s.

*Öppet hav* (Open Sea) BY ANNIKA THOR IS THE AUTHOR'S FOURTH BOOK ABOUT TWO JEWISH SISTERS who arrive as refugees in Sweden during the war and end up as foster children in two Christian families on an island in the Gothenburg archipelago. In this book the war comes to an end. Although the girls have now acclimatised to Swedish society, they still feel unsure about where they belong. Steffi, the oldest, who dreams of studying to become a doctor, is shocked by the encounter with the sick and dying who arrive in Sweden from the concentration camps. At the end of the book, the sisters leave Sweden to be reunited with their surviving relatives in America.

IN CANNIE MÖLLER'S book *Balladen om Sandra Ess* (The Ballad of Sandra Ess) tough and sensitive nineteen-year-old Sandra meets eighty-year-old Judith Klein, a Jewish woman who fled to Sweden during the occupation of Norway. Sandra has her first job in the old people's home where Judith spends her final years.

Sandra gets increasingly drawn into a

reluctant friendship with Judith, who is as capricious and impulsive as Sandra herself. Judith tells her about Sweden during the war – about decent Swedish families with aggressively nazi members who were hostile to foreigners. About what it was like being a refugee dependent on the goodwill of others. About the survivor's sense of guilt. When Judith dies at the end of the book, both she and Sandra have somehow reconciled themselves to life.

This is a powerful book about the loneliness of young and old people, and about how love can conquer bitterness. The story about the Second World War refugees is set against the story of the illegal Polish immigrants who are renovating the house Sandra lives in.

*Elden* (The Fire) by INGER FRIMANSSON is about teenage loneliness, about feelings of guilt and insecurity, and about trying to become an adult. Josefina is fourteen. She believes that a fire in which one of her classmates was seriously injured is her fault. Her anxiety makes her ill, and she is sent to her aunt and uncle to recuperate. On their island she lives in touch with the sea, nature and animals and grown-ups who are calm

»In *Som om ingenting* (As If Nothing) Katarina von Bredow writes about norm-breaking love and eroticism. Elin, who has just left school, enters into a love affair with the father of her best friend.«

and have time for her. Eventually, she is strong enough to find out for herself what really happened, and she returns to her school and her age peers. The holocaust is present as a parallel. It is about guilt: One boy in her class is from a Jewish family that was afflicted by the holocaust. The boy is very keen on Josefina, and treats her with anxious, intrusive care. He is burdened by his family history, and Josefina has a bad conscience for wanting to reject him. This is an interesting and poetic novel, and sympathetic in that it does not supply answers to all the questions.

#### 14 MODERN BOOKS FOR GIRLS

There are certain books I would classify as girls' books. However, that does not mean only girls can read them. On the contrary – I believe boys read them with great curiosity

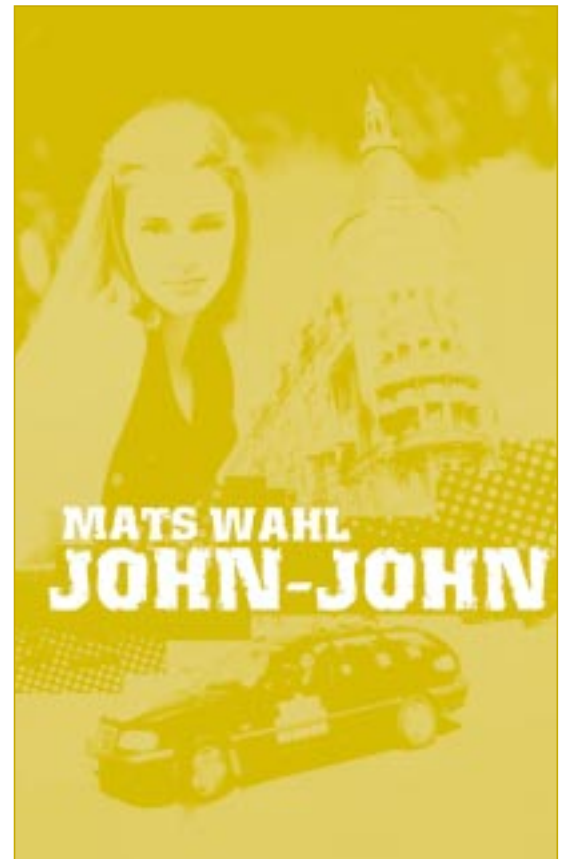
and enormous enjoyment. These books deal with young girls' thoughts on relationships, maturity, sex and the striving to find oneself and one's road in life. The men in these books are rather nebulous and serve merely as background characters. They are simply uninteresting. And the dramatic content of the books revolves mainly round the female central characters, their thoughts and feelings, and their insights and road to maturity.

In *Som om ingenting* (As If Nothing) KATARINA VON BREDOW writes about norm-breaking love and eroticism. Elin, who has just left school, enters into a love affair with the father of her best friend. Love turns to disappointment as she realises that the older man, despite their spiritual communion and her enthusiasm, is totally unprepared to put his security on the line for her sake. But the book is also about being seized for the first time by a real and adult erotic passion, or erotic madness and violent longing beyond all reason.

The author has previously written a book about sibling incest (*Syskonkärlek* 1991) and a book (*Knappt lovlig*, 1996) about a fifteen-year-old girl who falls in love and has a relationship with a man twice her age.

»Angel is an exemplary son and a loving big brother, but he is also a real Don Juan. He is chronically frightened of staying with anyone and getting too involved, until he happens to fall in love and is rejected himself.«

*Ballongfararens morgon* (The Balloonist's Morning) is written by ANITA EKLUND LYKULL, perhaps Sweden's most established writer of contemporary girls' books. She is a deft reporter on Swedish real life, especially when it comes to family life and girls on the verge of adulthood. Her language is vibrant and expressive, youthful without being mannered. *Ballongfararens morgon* is about Julia who has just left school and does not quite know what she wants to do in life. The book is so packed with contemporary dramatic detail that it sets the reader's head spinning: her parents get divorced, daddy is an alcoholic, her brother is gay, her sister bullied, her younger brother adopted and dark-skinned, and she herself adopted. Her mother's liberation after the divorce, a close friend's death, sex with the wrong man, abortion... and suddenly, Julia's unknown



John-John is written by Mats Wahl.

mother turns up, the woman who abandoned her at birth. Yet, the most important event in the book is Julia's sudden feeling of independence and her decision to leave home to start studying.

#### TWO PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOKS FOR BOYS

Let us modernise the concept of the "boys' book" – traditionally, this would represent a book about masculine interests such as cars, war and football – and instead use it to denote a book where the focus is on boys' problems and development, sexuality and feelings, maturity and insights, and where this is more important than the actual plot:

*Smitvarning* (Escape Alert) by HANS OLSSON is about the teenage boy Angel who lives with his Chilean mother and little sister in a Stockholm suburb. His father has left them years ago to return to Chile. Angel is an exemplary son and a loving big brother, but he is also a real Don Juan. He is chronically frightened of staying with anyone and getting too involved, until he happens to fall in love and is rejected himself.

The book deals with multicultural life in the suburbs, gangs, and dancing – Angel's hobby and perhaps even his future. But it is also about Angel's search to find himself and the childhood his neurotic mother

»When he violently attacks an immigrant boy and later brags about his deed, she reports him to the police. The ensuing events are nightmarish and realistic.«

deprived him of.

*John-John* is written by MATS WAHL. The hero of the book, a sensitive and talented boy who grew up with a criminal stepfather and became a juvenile delinquent himself, is now twenty years old and has left home. While waiting for his trial, he joins a theatre group that is rehearsing Chekhov's *The Seagull*. John-John reflects a great deal on the characters of *The Seagull* – a play about degradation and humiliation. To support himself, he takes on a job as a baby-sitter, or “bodyguard”, for an upper-class boy in Stockholm. He discerns the boy's problems but cannot do anything about them. Nor can he defend himself against his criminal stepfather, who one day bursts into his life again. He just flees. However, this time he is lucky. He ends up with his old classmate Elisabeth, and with her he experiences love. It is a human and reasonable love, a realistic love where he alternately gives and receives consideration, intimacy and eroticism. At the end of the book we understand that John-John will probably survive, and that he is already less vulnerable. This is a very poignant contemporary portrait, a Stockholm story and a psychological novel.

»Henry's survival instinct forces him to put on a tough act in order to be accepted as Samir's right hand, while secretly plotting to stop his rampage. The book ends on a cautiously optimistic note.«

Two previous novels – *Vinterviken* (1993) and *De övergivna* (The Abandoned, 1997) are about John-John's childhood.

#### PROBLEM-ORIENTED CONTEMPORARY REALISM

Four exciting books  
for young people on urgent topics

*Blåögd* (Blue-eyed) by MATS BERGGREN is about a girl who falls in love with a handsome racist with violent tendencies. When he violently attacks an immigrant boy and later brags about his deed, she reports him to the police. The ensuing events are nightmarish and realistic. The racist gang maliciously guards every step she takes, and the family is harassed by nightly anonymous phone calls. Someone poisons her dog. Neither her kind parents nor the police can protect her. In the end, everything goes back to normal.

The case is “forgotten”. The racist Johan ends up in a reformatory but is soon out on parole. His friends treat him like a hero. The girl, Sara, returns to her school. The teachers are totally uninterested in what has happened, and her friends remain silent.

Mats Berggren made his debut in 1987 with a book about working in a car factory. He has been hailed as a renewer of the political novel.

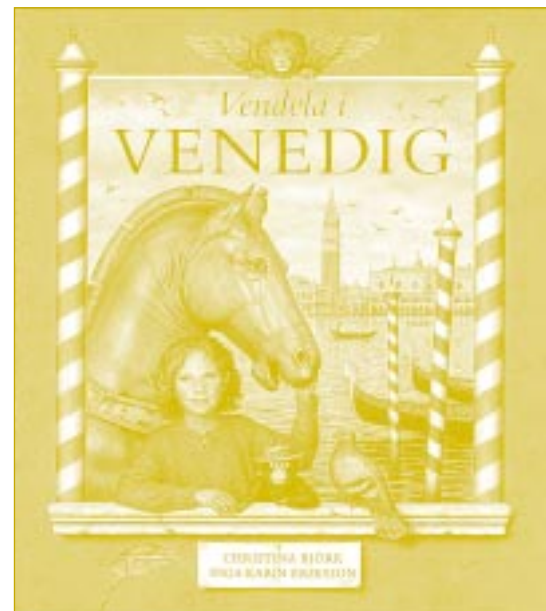
EMMA VALL'S *Egna spår* (Own Tracks) tells the story of a sister and brother whose parents have gone off in separate directions to find themselves. The kids live on their own in a Stockholm apartment – a rather aimless teenage existence with pop music, love, school, bike messenger jobs and cafes. The girl, Svala, takes up with vegans. By coincidence she gets involved in a scary business – a few dangerous and violent villains accuse the vegans of having liberated minks from a mink farm. Svala discovers that the vegan movement also incorporates individuals who are prepared to resort to pointless violence. At the same time, she cannot help admiring the vegans for their uncompromising stand that frightens the adults.

Emma Vall is a pseudonym. The author has previously written thrillers for adults.

MAX LUNDGREN'S *Dubbelspel* (Double-Dealing) is also about children who have been abandoned by their parents. Henry, who is in his eighth school year, is trying to cope with his younger siblings. His mother has died and his father has gone off somewhere. Eventually, Henry cannot manage, and the children move in with their aunt and uncle. Their new school is in a disreputable area with a mainly immigrant population. In Henry's class, the immigrant boy Samir is the tyrannical class leader, who beats up anyone when he feels like it, and has decided to make the teacher break down – the idealistic Anders. Henry's survival instinct forces him to put on a tough act in order to be accepted as Samir's right hand, while secretly plotting to stop his rampage. The book ends on a cautiously optimistic note.

Max Lundgren has written socially engaged books for young people since the '60s. He is probably best known for his books about the members of Åshöjden football club and about Benny, the boxer.

The fourth book is *Svart Gryning* (Black Dawn) by HANS ERIK ENGQVIST. It is set in a country on the African west coast racked by poverty and injustice, on the verge of a political coup. A Swedish girl, Inga-Lill, and her parents arrive there on holiday. Her parents are ingenuously jolly, but Inga-Lill gets



*Vendela in Venice* by Christina Björk with illustrations by Inga-Karin Eriksson.

involved in a group that wants to rouse public opinion against female circumcision, which is practised in that country. She meets Sheriffoba, a local boy of her own age, who supports his family by guiding and assisting tourists. Perhaps Sheriffoba is the most open of the two, the one most prepared to revise his opinions of wrong and right. The first-person narrator of the book is alternately Inga-Lill, Sheriffoba, and two of his friends, who are members of the resistance and are planning the coup. When the



*Vendela i Venedig* is rich in detail and graphic beauty.

coup takes place, the foreign tourists are taken hostage by the coup perpetrators. In the ensuing fight for political power the hostages are close to being killed. Throughout this, Sheriffoba remains by Inga-Lill's side. I won't disclose how the book ends, but will add that Inga-Lill proves to be very brave,

resourceful and determined.

Hans Erik Engqvist has written socially and politically engaged books for young people since the late 1970s.

#### FACT BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

Finally, two highly serious fact books for children, both of which have been commended and widely acclaimed:

*Vendela i Venedig* (Vendela in Venice) by CHRISTINA BJÖRK, with illustrations by INGA-KARIN ERIKSSON, is a beautiful and informative travel guide and description of Venice for children and adults. The frame story, about a father and his daughter who make the journey, is low-pitched and plausible, and the excitement derives from the facts that are related about the city of Venice, its history and the intriguing things you can see and do there. *Vendela i Venedig* is as rich in detail and graphic beauty as Christina Björk's previous success, *Linnea i målarens trädgård* (Linnea in Monet's Garden) – about a little girl who visits Paris and Monet's home outside the city.

*Se huset* (See the House) is a book on architecture. It does not have a frame story. Instead, the author conveys her own fascination with looking at houses by her direct address to the reader. Her book starts in Höganäs, the little town in southern Sweden where she comes from, which is famous for its pottery and bricks. Then she goes out into the world, to different continents, and shows us everything, from huts to museums and palaces. *Se huset* is not a systematic history of architecture, but rather, a collection of examples of interesting buildings of various kinds, and questions KERSTIN NILSSON and thoughts around architecture.