New Swedish Titles

2012
SWEDISH LITERATURE CONTINUES to hold its own beyond the country’s borders, thanks in large part to the long-term commitment of enthusiastic ambassadors such as translators, editors, publishers, scouts and agents. The Swedish Arts Council, too, gives top-quality Swedish writing a helping hand on its way out into the world by means of publications like this one and the financial support it provides.

As before, we have invited an independent contributor to make her choices from among all the fiction and literary non-fiction published in Sweden this year. New Swedish Titles 2012 has been written for us by author and poet Åsa Maria Kraft (b. 1965). Her first novel, 4 pahitt (4 Inventions) was followed by various collections of poetry, and her latest work of fiction, published in spring 2012, is Självpornografi, Akt 1. Pastoral prosa (Self-Pornography, Act 1. Pastoral Prose). The novel opens with a meeting on a train and carries us on into a love story with many twists and turns, a journey that we follow right to the end. Tapping into a very topical issue in Sweden at the moment, Kraft also engages in a grammatical experiment, using the emerging neutral pronoun ‘hen’ rather than the traditional ‘hon’ (she) or ‘han’ (he).

New Swedish Titles 2012 is Åsa Maria Kraft’s final selection from among all the Swedish books published between the last few months of 2011 and the autumn of 2012. It is not only a guide to the best books of the current year, but also a good way of taking the temperature of the Swedish literary climate over the past twelve months.

For information on publishers and rights, see page 44. Contact details for the relevant publishers and agents is located at the back of the brochure, where there is also information about applying for Swedish Arts Council grants, including the deadlines for 2012-13.

Susanne Bergström Larsson

Swedish Arts Council
2012 marks the centenary of the death of August Strindberg and any review of a new work by or about Strindberg this year has invariably pointed out how little attention has been paid to the centenary, or how this particular slice of attention was ill-judged. Strindberg’s most loyal fans are not easy to please. But a visit to the portal of the official website ‘Strindberg.2012.se’ reveals an impressive array of exhibitions, theatrical productions and books.

From their own niche angles, many small publishers have produced new titles and editions, ranging from political pamphlets like August Strindberg’s lilla katekes för underklassen (August Strindberg’s Short Catechism for the Working Class), published with a new commentary by Göran Greider, to Anita Persson’s Vandra med Strindberg, fem vandringar i Stockholm (On Foot with Strindberg, Five Stockholm Walks), a tourist guide to places in Stockholm and the surrounding area that have links with Strindberg.

There have also been some major publications, notably a new part of the National Edition of Strindberg’s Collected Works and a comprehensive photographic biography.

The National Edition of the Collected Works can boast a new title this year, Ockulta dagboken (The Occult Diary), published in three volumes: a large-format facsimile, a typographic version in the same size, and a commentary in standard book format. The Occult Diary spans the years 1896-1908, a productive period for Strindberg in which his output included plays like To Damascus, A Dreamplay and The Dance of Death and daring prose works such as Inferno, Black Banners and A Blue Book. This is the first time the facsimile has been printed in full colour and the accompanying typographic version is a useful aid to deciphering Strindberg’s at times illegible handwriting. The separate volume of commentary comprises an essay by Göran Stockenström and detailed linguistic and factual explanations by Karin Petherick.

To tie in with a major exhibition at the Photographic Museum in Stockholm, Bokförlaget Max Ström has published a photographic biography of Strindberg by Björn Meidal called Strindbergs världar, and an English-language version under the title The Worlds of August Strindberg. Björn Meidal is a professor of literary history at the University of Uppsala and a leading Strindberg scholar. The book is the product of close collaboration with photographer Bengt Wanselius, who won the August Prize for his Regi Bergman (The Ingmar Bergman Archives). It is a lavish volume with over five hundred photographs, including many portraits, documenting the period in which the author lived and the places he frequented. The photographs bring Strindberg’s biography vividly to life and it is the sort of book that makes you lose all track of time as you browse.

The pictures that spotlight Strindberg’s creative processes are particularly fascinating, among them the photographs he took with his ‘Wunder-kamera’, a portrait camera with a 30 cm focal length that he built himself. His intention was to capture the motion of the soul to produce less conventional, more psychological portraits.

We can detect something of the spirit of Strindberg in this year’s new titles, or at any rate perhaps use him as a kind of Rorschach test, with the ink blots of both his confrontational and his more dreamlike, scenic sides spreading beneath the surface. With or without Strindberg, what follows here is a sample of the most interesting new titles that Swedish publishers have to offer us this year.

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The literary year 2012

By Åsa-Maria Kraft

Translated by Sarah Death
the father/son relationship is a durable and constantly recurring theme in Swedish prose fiction. The sons’ paternal umbilical cord seems to have such a self-evident tradition that all the other relationships in father/son narratives seem shadowy and unreal.

In Halva solen (Half the Sun), Aris Fioretos continues the autobiographical exploration of a ‘foreign’ father figure that he began in his breakout novel Den sista greken (The Last Greek, 2003) and Vidklon av en fot (The Width of a Foot, 2008). The novel opens with the son at his father’s deathbed, deciding to write about him to bring him back to life. The chronology of the story goes backwards, from the moment of death to the son’s earliest memories, and ends with a scene in which the son himself becomes a father. The focus is on painting the father’s portrait and on what it really means to be a father, in a conscious, distanced yet tender way. Half the sun is what a father is, the other half being his son, himself a father-to-be. The figures are referred to as ‘the son’ and ‘a foreign father’ or ‘the dead man.’ The ‘Sun Boy’ image, so well known to Swedes from the boxes of a popular brand of matches, works as a kind of leitmotif for a discussion of the two sides of the sun and the brevity of life.

A son trying to come to terms with the death of his father is also the focus of Peter Handberg’s novel Skuggor (Shadows). Without ever taking a conscious decision – he has stayed on in his father’s flat to sort out the contents – the son starts living parts of his father’s life, wearing his father’s clothes, going to the same restaurants, picking up women the way his father did, etc. This random mimicry, all part of the grieving process, is like the written form of shadowing a chimera. The father is a fossilised image in Skuggor, an image the son tries to make his own and breathe life into. By imitating his father he imitates his father’s relationships and hopes this will enable him to understand and mourn. But in the end the son has to stop; he takes the urn containing his father’s ashes out into the countryside to scatter them, and the place he knows he must find is a rock formation that he reads literally in his mind’s eye, as a P. Peter Handberg is a successful writer of novels, traveller’s tales and essays. He is also a translator and has introduced the work of various German writers to Sweden.

Johannes Anyuru made his debut with Det är bara guärerna som är nya (Only the Gods are New, 2005). This was followed by a poetry collection, two books in prose and a novel. He has now turned his attention to autobiography and written a powerful novel about his father, En storm kom från paradiset (A Storm Blew in From Paradise). It is a quest for stories and a lament for history, charting his father’s life in Uganda, the brief interlude of hope after independence, military training as a pilot, chance and complications making him a pawn in the game between the various power factions after Amin’s coup in a chaotic East Africa. His father is really only trying to get away, first of all from the big brother who abused him in childhood and then from all other forms of the abuse of power. An inherited impulse to run, to plot an escape. Origins are something to run away from, yet we find ourselves perpetually tied to them, stories that cannot be origins but can only be fiction, seeking its own origins. The fact that no one actually has a homeland but that we all simply come from our ‘from here’, our own yesterday and the choices we have just made. But this book is also very much a gentle farewell to a dying father.
one of the trends the critics have picked up on in recent years is writing that wants to get even: grown-up children calling their parents to account, especially parents who were themselves writers. And some of them very well-known writers, at that. This is a trend that has something in common with autofiction, of course. There were two high-profile books in the ‘getting even’ category this year, Felicia Feldt’s Felicia försvann (Felicia Disappeared) and Johanna Ekström’s Om man håller sig i solen (If You Stay in the Sun). They are very different in style and temperament – and in status in the public’s consciousness.

Felicia Feldt is the daughter of Anna Wahlgren, known in Sweden for her parenting manual Barnaboken (For the Love of Children), written in 1983 and never out of print since. Her fame is of the most far-reaching kind: as the material of Barnaboken, she was involuntarily exposed to virtually the entire Swedish nation. Johanna Ekström is the daughter of a writing couple, Per Wästberg and Margareta Ekström. Per Wästberg, the better known of the two, was a literary child prodigy; first book published at the age of fifteen; he has travelled widely in Africa and is a member of the Swedish Academy. Johanna Ekström’s settling of accounts deals with what it is like to grow up in a family of authors.

Felicia Feldt’s Felicia försvann is written in concise and simple language, a form that helps to intensify the vulnerability of the child. But the amount that the average Swedish reader knows about the story in advance has the effect of making what should be open chapter endings seem like closed ones, although this is not the book’s fault. The ‘I’ of Felicia försvann has every justification for her unforgiving view of the adult characters in the novel. While Feldt takes issue with her mother for having made her a character in the book, a false example of happy and successful childrearing, Johanna Ekström tries to come to terms with the obligation she experienced as a child to be a successful literary and stylistic device, or at least to measure herself in those terms.

Om man håller sig i solen takes an investigative approach, drilling down to the facts and leaving us in no doubt of the author’s sincerity, nor yet of her ability to arrange her narrative to satisfy the needs of the reader. The most interesting aspect is that the underlying aspect of her story, the child born into a world where the language has to turn experience into stories or metaphors, reveals itself as the most traumatic thing of all. What happens to the parts of life that resist being turned into images and stories, what happens to the grubbier side of language, or to those stammering, prelingual stages not even worthy of the name language? What becomes of all the elements of language that cannot find a place within the metaphor, in the sunlight?
Peter Fröberg Idling’s first book was a volume of literary reportage, Pol Pot leende (The Smile of Pol Pot, 2004). It was a huge success in Sweden, sold to many other countries, and was nominated for Poland’s Kapuscinski Prize in 2011.

His second book is a novel based on documentary sources. Sång till den storm som ska komma (Song to the Storm That is to Come) is subtitled ‘A Fantasy’ and is the story of three young people in Cambodia in the 1950s, Sar, Sary and Somaly. A triangular drama of love and politics plays out between them with devastating long-term consequences for their country. Saloth Sar is the young Pol Pot. Sam Sary became the right-hand man of King Sihanouk but later fell from favour. Somaly is a young woman drawn to both Sar and Sary. The narrative is divided into three parts, one for each of them; the last two are told in the third person while the first, the tale of love and politics plays out between them, is narrated in the second person.

For Lotta Lundberg, breakthrough came with her fourth novel Skynda kram och sör (Roll up, roll up, 2006) in which the Other is represented by circus dwarves working in Stockholm in the 1930s. Ön (The Island) is a novel about a case in one of the last colonies of the British Empire, the island of Pitcairn in the Pacific Ocean, where reports of sexual assaults on teenage girls are being investigated by three British social workers who have been sent there. Swedish doctor Olivia has been a resident of the island for twenty years and has been partly assimilated into the culture there. But the investigation throws her values into question. Is she a man with no speech function, a mild-mannered young female islander who draws circles in ink on her face and body to show the social workers that the atomic tests are taking place on the island remains a futile one?

Monseir Leborgne is the first case of the famous neurologist Paul Broca, is the subject of Margareta Lindholm’s Tan. Monsieur Leborgne is called Tan after the only word he can still say when he arrives at the age of thirty at the Bicêtre Hospital outside Paris in 1840. No one knows what has made him virtually mute, but when Bocca performs a post-mortem on Tan’s brain he discovers that part of it has withered, leading him to the conclusion that this is the region in which language is located. It is still known as Broca’s Area to this day, and Broca’s Aphasia is the name given to the inability to speak, even though one can understand the speech of others. Olivier Leborgne, the first person as we follow the thoughts of a man with no speech function, a mild and sensitive soul with a hint of Prince Myshkin about him. Tan is not a man with no language, but a man who has lost the ability to speak, so the world around him can judge him as having no speech, and thus as non-human. Others’ attitudes, life in a nineteenth-century institution and Tan’s capacity for love and yearning are the lynchpins of this novel.

The Love of Liberty Brought us Here is Gunnar Ardellius’s first adult novel, coming after three books for young adults. It centres on a Swedish family that moves to Liberia in the 1960s. Hector, the father, has got a job as head of personnel at the Swedish mining company Lamco. The book is a sort of odyssey through the Swedish mentality of these years, the way that mindset views development, progress and the Other, the ever-present Other who is alternately ignored and resented as a nuisance. The hidden inner motors of the main protagonists are also revealed, almost as in one of Strindberg’s chamber plays: Hector’s father has killed himself, Margret is grieving for her lover and the child she chose not to give birth to. Mårten is seventeen, a typical teenager, but the only one who dares to open his eyes at least a little to life in Liberia and the people there. He makes friends with the Snake Boy, a servant with a severe skin complaint. The plot culminates in a strike in which Mårten takes sides with the workers, with unexpected consequences.
After fifteen years’ silence, Magnus Dahlström gave us the substantial Spådom (Prophecy) in 2011. This year’s book Sken (Appearances) is a much shorter piece of fiction, but like Spådom it is divided into three stories about three lives with points of similarity between them. Sken is about three working women, their relationships with colleagues and their gradual exploration of what is wrong with the places where they work, the subtle threats and mechanisms of subordination. By the late 1980s, Magnus Dahlström could be counted among the most interesting prose writers in Sweden and his brand of realism was emulated by many, though matched by few. This makes his comeback a particularly timely and welcome one. The almost hypnotic opening story, about an archaeologist whose visions are thwarted by her fellow workers, is written in a penetrating and crystal clear prose that defies all imitation.

Kristina Sandberg’s Sörja för de sina (Caring For Ones Own) is the second part of the trilogy that began with Att föda ett barn (Giving Birth, 2010). Here we meet the same main character Maj, now married for some years, in the early stages of the Second World War. The narrative develops slowly, holding its characters close in what might be described as a blend of psychological realism and a kind of third-person stream of consciousness that is highly compelling. The novel moves forward to the mid-nineteen fifties. Maj’s husband Tomas is trying hard to stay sober and has been undergoing hypnotherapy with Poul Bjerre. Maj struggles to make everyday life come up to the high standards she sets herself as a mother and housewife. Those rollercoaster years with small children are evoked in engrossing detail.
TANTALISING RHYTHM,
2012 has naturally brought a crop of works by established writers of crime fiction such as Åsa Larsson and Lars Kepler, new instalments in series already earmarked for publication in many other countries. Here we look instead at two first novels whose authors have attempted in their own very individual ways to renew the genre.

Pontus Ljunghill’s first book is called En osynlig (An Invisible) and tells the story of John Stierna, a detective inspector in Stockholm who is sought out by a journalist in the early 1950s and interviewed about one of his early cases, the murder of an eight-year-old girl in the autumn of 1928. The case dogged Stierna throughout his career, becoming an obsession; the solution seemed so close, yet still the murderer slipped through his hands. Stierna’s career was really taking off, but his inability to let go of this insoluble case left him with a kind of shadowy existence, in some senses a counterpart to the murderer’s own, yet still did not push him entirely out of the picture. He was, and remains, an inspector. The book is stylistically confident and skilfully evokes the Stockholm of a vanished era.

Det som inte växer är döende (If It Isn’t Growing, It’s Dying), a first novel by Jesper Weithz, is being marketed as an existential thriller, a variation on the psychological thriller, but it does not build so much on the characters themselves as on the characters as examples. Layers of fiction deriving from hard-boiled thrillers of the business world on the one hand and the horror story on the other trickle into the underlying realism as the construction of this novel of relationships develops. Henrik and Lotte are a young, established couple expecting their second child when they are told that Lotte is suffering from a strange illness: the foetus has an aggressive form of cancer which will also kill its mother. But there is hope of a new treatment in Brazil and they are setting off to go there when something happens to prevent their journey. The couple share a fundamental belief that growth is the only possible basis for putting value on anything in society; all other options seem unreal and frightening to them. In the end, shifts in the narrative turn their internal threat scenarios into external reality, and their existence cracks apart.

There is another kind of genre renewal at work in Mikael Niemi’s Fallvatten (Fallwater). This is an apocalyptic disaster novel that unfolds in the midst of the disaster, not after it. An enormous wave on the River Lule in the north of Sweden bursts all the dams and swallows up everything around it. The story follows a number of people who find themselves in its path; the decisions they take and the way they perceive the situation – and how different the wall of water actually looks to each of them as it heads towards them – influence the course of events. Crucial choices are made, sometimes leading to rescue, sometimes not. Niemi focuses on the one hand on the individuals’ choices, under the influence of their mental state and situation in life, and on the other on the vast torrent of surging water itself, taking the thriller genre into the natural world, you might say. The floodwater is almost a character in its own right and the narrative has a breakneck pace with no restful backwaters at all. Mikael Niemi shot to prominence with his novel Popularmusik från Vittula (2000, Popular Music From Vittula), claiming that year’s August Prize.
P C Jersild’s *Ypsilon* is a metanovel about the author’s own life and works, in effect a disguised autobiography, in which characters from Jersild’s past novels return to the author and tell him what has happened in their lives since. These figures also happen to coincide with schools of thought in different periods and Jersild’s digressions on philosophy, society, and the techniques of novel writing feel at times almost essayistic. Reine from *Barnens ö* (Children’s Island), for example, represents the Eighties generation, having become a doctoral student in philosophy, working on a comparative study of reductionism and deconstruction. The author, encountering his characters and seeing how their stories have developed, considers himself no more than an observer, but the characters are well aware who is wielding the pen – and they protest. This is hardly surprising, considering how many of them succumb to fatal illnesses or accidents – which in turn allows the author to reflect in depth on the subject of euthanasia. *Ypsilon* is a novel of great humour and sharp wit.

In her latest novel *Grand final i skojarbranschen* (Grand Finale in the Trickster’s Trade), Kerstin Ekman plays games with her own author biography with the help of two female characters called Lillemor Troj and Babba Andersson, who make up the two halves of one author. The author is the two-headed monster here. The book is superbly portrayed. A journey from the 1950s to our days and a battle between two polar opposites in the way we look at literature and creativity. Ekman is skilful enough to make us empathise with both these extremes, despite the fact that both largely show us their unsympathetic sides. Babba is the romantic genius who dare not step forward to face her contemporaries or the power games of social interaction, while Lillemor Troj stands for the successful middle classes, always adaptable and ready to suppress their working-class shadow, their heritage. At this point the book conveys an image of Swedish literature as made up of nothing but upward mobility and denial. Then there is ugly, angry, sensitive Babba, whose
attributes – Scholl sandals and too much spare flesh – are for Lillemor Troj the simple explanation of why Babba needs her – she must have a public face at literary gatherings. Somebody to talk for her. A voice to represent her. But it is Catch 22: as soon as the inferior opens her articulate mouth, she becomes the superior. The class traveller evolves into the perfect author – bestselling and praised by the critics – and it is this fascinating conflict that Ekman’s novel brings to life.

From Ulf Eriksson, active since the 1980s as a writer of both poetry and prose, comes Kortfattad besvärjelse av taxichaufför (Brief Invocation of Taxi Driver). A metanovel about reading, in a sense an anti-autofictional novel, or a narrative that tries to introduce fiction into reality by mixing together, or mixing up, actual writers and fictitious ones. Who is writing whom – and from where – is perhaps the overarching question, and here we see it addressed in elaborate metafiction, in writing of luminous beauty. In a dark, dystopian world with cyber elements a writer encounters messages written on white paper aeroplanes. The fictitious worlds are set out like a Möbius strip or an Ourobouros snake devouring itself, spiralling through a text with features of cyberpunk, emblem art and literary fantasy. Fictitious writers, fictitious short stories and fictitious literary theory all blend with their real counterparts, creating a singular world of imagery at the point where they intersect.

Lina Wolff made waves with her 2009 debut, a short story collection Många människor dör som du (Many People Die Like You). This year she brings us a novel that exploits the techniques of the short story: Bret Easton Ellis och de andra hundarna (Bret Easton Ellis and the Other Dogs). The novel is narrated by a young woman, Araceli, who lives with her mother in a shabby flat in Barcelona. One day a short-story writer called Alba Combó moves into the flat above, knowing that she will shortly die of cancer. Araceli’s task is to write a memorial volume about Alba Combó, and this is to be achieved via the individuals with whom Alba has relationships and by the short stories she has written, which are interspersed in the other narratives. The metafictional element is present both in concrete form in the short stories within the narrative, and in the literary and theoretical allusions moving beneath the surface. The fundamental conflict is between the sexes, to some extent between classes, but always linked to the power of sexual attraction. Early in the book we discover that Alba Combó has said in a newspaper interview that she writes in order to explore the entertainment value of violated male bodies, since the entertainment value of violated female bodies has proved so inexhaustible. This attracts a number of very different people to Alba and conflicts arise between them, caused in effect by their differing perceptions of her. They all perceive Alba differently, depending on whether they see her as superior or inferior to themselves. Alba actually stands outside such rankings and is a catalyst more than anything else.
Malin Backström's first published work was a volume of prose poems, *Berättelser som inte får vidröras* (*Do Not Touch These Stories*) in 1997. Now, fifteen years later, she has written her second book, *Bara det här med dörrarna* (*The Thing About Doors*), a lyrical and pared-down story that follows a first-person narrator in a series of short passages. The prose is transparent, light as air. Almost all the pieces consider the relationship between body and sight, the fact that our senses, sight in particular, are mediated by the body in motion. And by the tactile nature of the body. The world has to be understood through the weight, feeling and motion of bodies, only then can something happen involving the more abstract senses such as hearing and sight. These mediated senses bring with them a heightened form of attention. This movement from body to attention makes itself especially felt in the sections dealing with youth sport, where new light is shed on the social power-play within the team by the very fact that the author displays her loyalty to the physical details of the concrete situation.

With a debut collection of short stories (2001) and two novels to his name, Mats Kolmisoppi has emerged as one of the most interesting writers of the younger generation. In *Undantagen* (*The Exceptions*) he returns to the short-story form which, as the title intimates, is all about people or mental states that are the exceptions, cast aside so they are not part of society's self-image. People who are not really capable of suppressing their hatred or their terror. These figures and states are an obvious reflection of a society that is taking an ever tougher yet simultaneously schizophrenically inconsistent view of its own exercising of power. In Undantagen the protagonists talk in clear voices, conscious of their own predicaments but incapable of extricating themselves. The author's voice is spread like a thin, transparent film across their voices, occasionally puncturing them with subtle irony and a diverging tone. The writing is highly skilful and entertaining, suffused with restrained fury.

Then we have *vitvit* (*white white*), the third book in prose by Marie Norin, who is also a poet. It is narrated from the consciousness of a teenage boy who loses his mother in an accident. They are on holiday, the boy has just got a camera, the pictures he takes and his thoughts about them are a newfound language for him, which he masters just as his mother dies. The grieving process goes hand in hand with the boy's discovery of artistic language and Marie Norin captures every detail of his ambivalent progress. Initially he delights in the discovery of a tool for understanding the world, but by the end the tool has grown into a reminder of his trauma and grief. A powerful, intensely narrated and poetically rhythmic book.
Ellen Mattson’s eighth novel, Vinterträdet (The Winter Tree) shows us Greta Garbo through the eyes of a fictitious secretary, a young Swedish woman who mirrors and scrutinises Garbo and her life. Venda is both the author’s alter ego, collecting facts and speculating about Garbo from an indeterminate ‘later’, and a kind of internal twin to Garbo, her page. A fascinating, unspoken game of exchanged identities develops between them. Set in the period around 1930 when Greta Garbo’s career was at its height, the text centres on the manufactured image of Garbo, the role assigned to the star between films, that of simply being a star, the way she is marketed, the proliferation of rumours and Garbo’s own will. Ellen Mattson’s novel gets up close, but allows the enigma to remain intact. Co-creator of the image, seeing through the illusions yet still trapped in the prison of ‘the star role’: the novel maintains a delicate balance, beautiful as a tree in winter or as the sound of snow falling from a spruce when you shake it with a stick, the sound that Greta Garbo dreams of when homesickness overwhelms her.

The first part of an eighties-set trilogy by Jonas Gardell takes us to the years when AIDS first hit Sweden and the impact it had on the gay scene and on society in general. This first part, Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar. 1. Kärleken (Never Dry Tears Without Gloves. 1. Love) follows Rasmus and Benjamin, two of the young, homosexual men from small-town backgrounds who move to Stockholm in search of a like-minded community and of love. By 1989, Benjamin is watching at the bedside of the dying Rasmus. Then we rewind to see them both growing up, their stories told in parallel until they finally meet at the end of the book. We see their anguish as they try to find homosexual identities in which they can lead happy lives and watch them at last fall deeply and romantically in love. But as readers we cannot forget the tragic backdrop to their happiness, the uncertainty, the hospital bed, the hollowed-out bodies. We remember with a heavy heart the stigma attached to homosexuals throughout that period, rage at society’s bewilderment quivers beneath the surface. But Gardell treats difficult subjects with delicacy and fingertip sensitivity, creating an effect something like a chapbook for the modern age. The other two parts of the trilogy, to be subtitled 2. Sjukdomen (Sickness) and 3. Döden (Death), will be published in 2013.

Åsa Ericsdotter’s short novel Äktenskapsbrott (Adultery) is in a sense a study of secrets and confidences. The relationship under the microscope is one between two people who confide in each other, the first-person narrator relating to us the confidences of the second person. That ‘you’, a man, named towards the end as Niklas, and the ‘I’ a woman, have enjoyed a long friendship and in the past have even been lovers. Now they share confidences. Niklas reveals his adulteries; he is happy and unlike most other people who are being unfaithful he is looking for love rather than sex. He is polyamorous, albeit not openly. He relishes the prospect of two marriages, two homes, two wives and
two lots of children. The first person, for her part, has been unfaithful now and then in her life, but always for the moment, for the kick, the sexuality. Her investigation of the life lies in which those committing adultery get entangled finally prompts her to take action.

Stilla havet (The Pacific Ocean) is Malin Nord’s first book, a lyrical first-person novel with the logic of a dream, where the balance is constantly maintained between blackness and romanticism, despite many violent swings. The title Stilla havet is ambiguous in Swedish: it means ‘pacify the ocean’, which is what the main protagonist tries to do, but it is also the name of a location, an actual place and perhaps above all a literary one. The love in the book plays out between the first-person narrator and a woman called Jean, and one of the clearest sources of literary inspiration for this book must surely be all those lonely, disillusioned female characters in the work of Jean Rhys, washed up in hotels and foreign cities, trying to make themselves feel more alive with the help of various intoxicants and moments in time frozen into ‘nothing to lose’. But it is also a letter to the main character’s brother who is serving a prison sentence for a murder. The brother’s problems with drugs and violence echo in the central character, as loyalty and as a more psychological thread within the story. The darker veins in the book lend it something of the feel of Hubert Selby Jr’s Last Exit to Brooklyn. 

åsa ericsson, photo sara mac key, malin nord, photo sandra qvist
Harriet, subtitled En roman om kunsten att försvinna (A Novel on the Art of Disappearing), is Marie Peterson’s second book, a self-willed tale of a woman who as a child collected newspaper cuttings about people who had vanished. In her adult life she encounters people and places reflecting this in a variety of ways. A turning point comes when one of her closest friends, Katja, disappears. Harriet is impelled into action and her hunt for her missing friend develops into a story of what it means to be changed as a human being.

Jonas Brun’s fourth book Skuggland (Shadowland) also revolves round disappearance, in this case that of two twelve-year-old boys. As a child, Erik makes friends with another boy called Erik, and he becomes more than a friend: a copy, a back-up. Then Marcus joins the class, and Erik grows more and more lonely. Marcus and the other Eric disappear mysteriously in a car, a red sports car that has been seen in the neighbourhood, something the children have been warned about. Interleaved with the main narrative there are other stories, the tale of the Snow Queen, the computer game Shadowlands, the rise and fall of Michael Jackson. The stories are skilfully interwoven, heightening the book’s distinctive tone of fairytale and mystery.

In Harriet, disappearance assumes positive, emancipating overtones and going missing is seen as a deliberate act, a route to explore. In Skuggland it is an abduction and the image of the boys becomes frozen in time; their characteristic as individuals who have disappeared is that they do not change. The image of the missing boys depicts childhood as a land of shadows, impossible for adults to fully remember yet impossible for them wholly to forget.

Sami Said’s first book, Väldigt sällan fin (Hardly Ever Nice) is an account of an upbringing that renders you invisible, at least to yourself. Noah comes to Sweden from Eritrea with his family as a boy. The father’s value judgments, a blend of Islam and Eritrean culture, are passed on to the son. Noah finds security in not being seen, in reading and writing and thinking his own thoughts within the framework set by the prevailing conditions: his family’s values and his school, where the others keep him at a distance. The book opens as he starts at university in Linköping and tries not to be influenced by his surroundings, but he is soon drawn into complicated relationships with ‘Abdul’, a newly converted Muslim originally called Fredrik, and with an art student called Anna who falls in love with him. The book’s second half is set on a trip to Eritrea on which family conflicts escalate and Noah, as usual, tries to keep out of it all. Written in headstrong and lively language, this story with its macabre humour gives a new twist to ‘immigrant writing’. The story is told in Noah’s voice, in the first person; the reader sees things entirely through his eyes, but there is an ironically distancing overtone to that narrative voice, a new element that to me seems to create an effect for today’s reader not unlike the one generated in the 1950s by J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye.
Poor conditions in care homes for the elderly hit the headlines in Sweden in 2012, above all the so-called Carema scandal, where the weighing of incontinence pads came to symbolise greed and demands for profitability in homes owned by risk capital companies. These issues have also been aired in literary form, in a variant of autofiction where the emphasis is on the message rather than the individual, though the message is strongly influenced by personal experience. Stefan Gurt’s Så dödar vi en människa (This is the Way We Kill A Person) is an account of his father’s last weeks in a care home for dementia sufferers.

Susanna Alakoski, too, offers us an autofictional book with a message. Her first novel was Svinalängorna (Pig Row, 2006), for which she won that year’s August Prize. The book, which was also made into a film in 2010, is the story of her own childhood in a poor and dysfunctional family. Her second book, Hoppas du trivs i fängelset (Hope You Are Having a Lurly Time in Prison, 2010) continued on the same theme. Alakoski, who has also published non-fiction, now presents Oktober i fattigsverige (October in Poverty Sweden), written in diary form. The diarist attempts to get to the root of what drives her to write her books. This is a painful book to read, even though we know in advance what we will find there, but no matter how often poverty is highlighted, we always manage to put it rapidly out of our minds. In writing this book, Alakoski refers freely to material she has been amassing: six hundred pages, a biography of her family as she calls it, made up of the reports of social workers, doctors and psychiatrists on the family, her father and her mother. The book digs deep into the impossibility of such a biographical project; it is not afraid to show its vulnerability, and demands our attention.

From writer and well-known filmmaker Lukas Moodysson comes Tolv månader i skugga (Twelve Months in Shadow). This, too, is in diary form, though subtitled ‘A Novel’. In sections headed Malmö, Småland, Stockholm, Moscow, Kiev and Athens, Moodysson builds up layers of texts that are at times compromising, at times lyrical – and here, too, we find a message, even if it is not so overt. The Athens sections were part of a preparatory study for the script of a documentary film about asylum seekers, about the eastern borders of the

**THE CUTS ARE BITING**
EU, where half a million migrants with no documents are trapped in a state of limbo. Asylum seekers are often sent back to Greece if their applications are turned down in other European countries, because that was the EU country where they first arrived, and they are often sent to prison. They can be marooned there for long periods if they do not have the appropriate paperwork to leave the country. This is the message and it is one that torments Lucas Moodysson and makes him feel inadequate for the task. The Athens sections are the heart of the book, Moodysson writing his way into the dramatic case of G., a lone Iraqi refugee deported from Norway to Greece, and M., a Norwegian woman filmmaker. It is a powerful, gripping drama.

Residential care surfaces again in Sara Beischer’s first novel Jag ska egentligen inte jobba här (I’m Not Really Meant to Be Working Here), the story of nineteen-year-old Moa, who wants to be an actress but takes a temporary job caring for the elderly. It charts the development of Moa’s character with drastic humour, from an initial view of the old people coloured by her own fear of death to a point where, by lending them features from the unreal world of the theatre that is her own area of interest, she gradually starts to feel more empathy. The cuts in the provision of care are effectively scrutinised as the daily routine of the care unit is described.

Eija Hetekivi Olsson makes her début with Ingenbarnsland (No Child’s Land), offering insights into growing up in an underclass. Miira, whose parents were born in Finland, grows up on estates on the edge of Gothenburg, goes to ‘home language’ classes in Finnish and learns Swedish as a second language. Miira’s view of school and its injustices is unforgiving and she is desperate to move on, venting her frustration in protests and unruly behaviour. The succession of cuts in the Swedish education system is really biting. Class divisions in society are intensifying, the underclass sub-dividing into several layers. But Miira’s story is a classic novel of development and her future path lies mapped out before her.

A middle-aged man is the central figure in Steewe Claeson’s Den tjugo-tredje dikten, instruktion för överlevnad (The Twenty-Third Poem, Instruction For Survival). He has worked at the Post Office in a little town in Dalarna for many years. In 2010, major rationalisation leads to his being offered an international post in a new EU collaboration that is to coordinate Internet and surveillance operations. At about the same time he makes a new friend, in a cottage deep in the country near an abandoned sawmill. This friend reads poetry, pondering the meanings of poems by reading a variety of different translations. The poems in question are by Olav H. Hauge and Tao Yuan-Ming. The men’s friendship deepens. Imagining that these two ordinary, poetry-loving men might really exist cheers me immensely – who knows what subversive literary exercises might be going on in out-of-the-way spots? The novel’s focus is the choice between a new career and a life in which one can immerse oneself in life itself and hone one’s observational skills. The language harmonises completely with the narrative.
Aase Berg’s sixth collection of poems Liknöjd fauna (Listless Fauna) is an inimitable, hallucinatory language machine about nobody and everybody. Contemplations on unnatural nature alternate with reports from a henhouse containing a group of hens who in collective ecstasy believe themselves to be the Universal Mother. The salt lick stone is many miles from Berg’s, worn tool part in a cowshed. Lillpers’s listless faunae is a poetic novel, sometimes an extended, lyrical poem. This year sees the appearance of Industriomännin (Industrial Memories), one of the loveliest and most important poetry books of 2014. It explores the place where we came from, but are now forgetting with increasing speed. Agrarian Sweden, Industrial Sweden, call it what you like. The personal experiences of which the latest is the longest at over 350 pages, the exhausting form is part of the project. The universal experiences in red bort.in drill deep into writing and self-loathing, but mostly into the self-loathing of the social body. Trying to answer everything with poetry. The finer points of Eva Ribich’s minimalist poetry project have at times eluded the critics. Her whole approach depends on the reader being alert enough to read exactly right, in terms of timing and musicality, so that the charge in the significance-bearing layer of the few words we are given starts to vibrate. Vi vaknar (We Awaken) is the title of her new collection of poems, so sparing in terms of words, but in their best moments opening up a whole scene, requiring intense alertness in the moment, which is also all there is. The awakening is not metaphorical but points to attentiveness, the heightened senses of the instant, something that is also a secret, an awareness. The sparse sprinkling of words and the book’s design make the white pages important players here, too – like the morning sun.
The Second World War has made itself felt in Swedish biography this year, in the accounts of three very different lives. First a pair of total opposites. On the one hand there is Raoul Wallenberg (1912-1947), an acknowledged hero, on the other the somewhat shadowy figure of Sven Hedin (1865-1952). They are at the two extremes of how Swedish lives chose to react to Nazism. The third life is the journey made by a survivor of Auschwitz to the small Swedish town of Södertälje, narrated by his son. The sum of this is three intriguing books, sometimes contradicting each other and the widely accepted view of Sweden in 1939-45.

It is now a century since the birth of Wallenberg, one of our greatest and best-known Swedes. The centenary is marked by two biographies: Bengt Jangfeldt’s Raoul Wallenberg, en biografi (Raoul Wallenberg: A Biography) and Ingrid Carlberg’s Det står ett rum här och väntar på dig; berättelsen om Raoul Wallenberg (‘There Is A Room Here Waiting for You: The Story of Raoul Wallenberg’). They are both substantial works, packed with information. Jangfeldt’s is more of a classic biography, while Carlberg also includes her own role as a journalist and her contacts with the Wallenberg family. Carlberg paints a more positive picture of Raoul’s childhood and youth than Jangfeldt. Jangfeldt ends his book in 1947, the year Wallenberg was probably executed, but Carlberg moves on to chart the family’s hopes and speculations, which continued until 1957 when no less a figure than Khrushchev admitted Wallenberg had been imprisoned in the Soviet Union, where he died of a heart attack in 1947. Carlberg’s account of the diplomatic repercussions of this statement makes fascinating reading. Both biographers offer interesting and detailed insights into Wallenberg’s time in Hungary. For them, his ability to rescue so many people is proof not only of an acute knowledge of a social system and the individuals within it, but also of a kind of intuitive awareness of what was possible at any given moment.

In Vi som beundrade varandra så mycket (‘We Who Admired Each Other So Much’), Axel Odelberg attempts to explain Sven Hedin’s support for Hitler and Nazi Germany. Odelberg published a comprehensive biography of Sven Hedin the explorer in 2008, Äventyr på riket (‘True Life Adventures’). His new book concentrates on Hedin’s infamous
relations with Nazi Germany. Hedin lives until 1952 and never retracts his admiration for Hitler. Odelberg however reveals a more complicated picture, a Hedin who does not condone anti-Semitism — on the contrary, he tries to bring his influence to bear to save Jews on a number of occasions, even while fully supporting Hitler. Odelberg references Hedin’s own view of himself and the world as seen in letters, diaries and other material but offers little analysis of his attitudes. This makes the book a fascinating but rather uncomfortable read.

The third life story is told by Göran Rosenberg in Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz (A Short Stop on the Way from Auschwitz). ‘There are no other ways from Auschwitz but improbability. Every way from Auschwitz is an exception,’ he writes, in a book that sets unique and individual fates in a collective context. Göran Rosenberg has made his name as a journalist and writer of books of reportage. This time he is writing his own story, a memoir of incredible poignancy. Historical facts, collective knowledge, blend with a unique personal narrative. The mysterious thing that happens when people try to make contact with their own history assumes enormous proportions when that history bears the wounds of the Holocaust. But perhaps it is precisely this that lets Rosenberg go further in seeing his father as a whole human being than most father-son accounts, which can stumble in their ambition to conceal yet reveal the father figure. And anyway, a father who in a sense died before one was even born, what would be the point of rebelling against him? Here we have a son bearing witness to his father instead. We have a son writing so the world will not forget, because perhaps it could have saved his father. An autobiographical story and simultaneously an investigative journey, historically and geographically. Rosenberg charts his father’s experiences in the Polish ghetto of Lodz and in Auschwitz, Vechelde and Wöbbelin. His father survives all this and ends up in Södertälje, where he manages to arrange for his wife-to-be to join him, and after a time their first child, Göran Rosenberg, is born. Södertälje takes on the role of the place where a new life can start, and for their son, this is what it becomes, an open place. But for his father, the place is closed, it is only ‘a short stop on the way from Auschwitz’, and the true implications of this only emerge towards the end of the book. Imre Kertész wrote his Kaddish for an Unborn Child. Rosenberg has written a prayer for a belatedly murdered father.

A fourth biography rekindles long-lost interest in the self-willed, once world-famous thinker and pedagogue Ellen Key (1849-1926). Ronny Ambjörnsson gained a doctorate in 1974 for his thesis on Key, and now presents this biography Ellen Key, en europeisk intellektuell (Ellen Key, European Intellectual). He has been engrossed in Ellen Key for all that time, and can reap the harvest of half a lifetime’s research. The biography’s centre of gravity lies in the history of ideas: Ambjörnsson shows Key being influenced by leading thinkers of her age, from Montaigne and Rousseau to Spencer and Spinoza. Ellen Key was one of the most popular Swedish writers of her era; her Barnets århundrade (Century of the Child) was immediately translated into nine European languages and later even into Japanese. Key is seen in her full range of roles, as lecturer and author, educationalist and world reformer. She stood at the eye of the storm of nineteenth-century ideas and moulded them to make them her own, with pedagogy and her era’s brand of feminism as her guiding stars.
Nina Björk’s first book, Under det rosa täcket (Under the Pink Blanket, 1996) has become something of a feminist classic in Sweden. She has the knack of developing a complicated argument in a very accessible way by linking the smaller and the bigger picture. In Lyckliga i alla sina dagar, om pengars och människors värde (Happily Ever After, On the Value of Money and People) she anatomises the logic and shortcomings of consumer society, the fact that what is considered the only possible route in our society is a physical impossibility, requiring the resources of Planet Earth in triplicate if it is to work. The economic imperative is growth – how are we to find another logic of socio-economic production? What could replace growth as our goal? Nina Björk’s answer is human values and dreams that have been neglected or devalued by society, such as what surfaces in the interaction of a child and its parents as they care for a baby.

One of the consequences of growth is the impoverishment of the environment. Although we do not have three planets, we squander our resources as if we had, with inevitable consequences.

Fjärilsomrar (Butterfly Summers) by author and biologist Göran Bergengren, is a personal essay and a lament on living with a knowledge of butterflies that is as much at risk of extinction as the species themselves. Europe’s butterfly habitats have halved over the past thirty years and numbers of butterfly species, along with other insects and insect-eating birds, are diminishing. In Britain in 2011, 37% of butterfly species were on the danger list. A search on the database Artdatabanken reveals that there were 514 endangered species in Sweden in 2010. To read Fjärilsomrar with all its butterfly-centred knowledge of nature and cultural history and its lyrical language is to comprehend how fast our world is changing, and to bear witness to that change.

Mama Dolly – bilder av moderskap från jungfru Maria till Alien (Mama Dolly – Images of Motherhood from the Virgin Mary to Alien), a first book from Patricia Lorenzoni, is a study of the history of ideas about motherhood that also has a personal touch. Insemination, abortion, the Alien films, Latin-American mother goddesses, Couvade Syndrome, female country singers, they all feature here. One of the impulses driving the book is the author’s own fear of, and longing for, children. But it is the broad overviews of Western culture that are the fascinating heart of this book. Patricia Lorenzoni ties together periods and cultural phenomena that are far removed from each other. One of the book’s main threads is the sheer physicality of motherhood and our historical need to rein in that physicality and channel it in certain ways.
From poet and eminent essayist Nina Burton comes Flodernas bok (The River Book), a wonderfully consistent collection of essays in which the river is both the starting point of the aesthetic form and a concrete exploration of Europe through the prism of three of its rivers: the Rhône, Rhine and Thames. Nina Burton gathers everything into her rivers: natural science, cultural history, travelogue and fragments of autobiography. It is a book to linger over; as much care and attention has gone into the design as into the writing. Only six thousandths of the Earth’s water are found in the rivers and waters which normally sustain life and that water is cyclical, part of a cycle. Nina Burton describes the water itself as a traveller of sorts in this deep, rich text, which in telling the tale of these three rivers unfolds into a new kind of poetic history writing.

Europe is also the focus of a new series of commentaries, Vems Europa? (Whose Europe?). Björn Elmbrant’s Europa och hoten mot demokratin (The Euro and the Threat to Democracy) comprises three pieces, on the Roma in Hungary, Muslims in the Netherlands and ‘cultural Marxists’ in Norway – all of them targets of right-wing radical hatred. Rebecka Bohlin’s De osynliga (The Invisible) tackles the issue of poor, working-class groups, specifically low-waged workers in the service sector, from a European perspective. These books provide excellent introductions to some of the most intractable problems facing Europe today.
Anyuru, Johannes 44 45

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Subsidies for Swedish literature in translation

The objective of this support scheme is to make it possible for more Swedish quality literature to be published abroad. The subsidy programme applies both to fiction for children and adults and to non-fiction. A condition is that the translation must be made directly from Swedish rather than via a third language.

Who can apply?
Applications for subsidies for translations to non-Nordic languages may be filed by foreign publishers. Any publishing house applying for a subsidy must have both well-documented experience of publishing quality literature as well as professional distribution channels.

Support for translation of Swedish literature to other Nordic languages is financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers through the Nordic Culture Point. There is a special application form for this support scheme which is administered by the Arts Council. Application deadlines: February 1, May 1 and November 1.

What types of literature does the support scheme cover?
- Prose, poetry, drama, literature for children and young people
- Non-fiction in the area of general culture
- Essays
- New issues of journals and magazines including literature translated from Swedish. Irrespective of genre, the work for which a subsidy is being applied must be of high quality in terms of both language and literary quality.

What books will be given priority?
Priority will be given to contemporary literature and introduction of the work of Swedish authors into languages where there are no previous translations of that author’s work.

Particular consideration will be given to translations of literature for children and young adults. Application deadlines are 1 February, 2 May and 1 November.

Project grants
Swedish and foreign organizations may apply for project grants for literary events in support of Swedish literature to be held abroad. Application deadline are February 1, April 1, June 1, September 1 and November 1.

For more information
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The Swedish Arts Council supports, develops and initiates cooperations between the states, the regions, the municipalities and representatives for cultural life in Sweden, e.g. libraries, museums and performing arts centres. The aim is to safeguard and develop Swedish national cultural policy, and to promote cultural diversity and an even geographical spread in cultural provision.

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