CHILDREN’S LITERATURE:  

SWEDISH CHILDREN’S BOOKS  
NOT AFRAID TO TACKLE DIFFICULT SUBJECTS

Every tenth book published in Sweden is a children’s book. Covering a wide variety of themes from dancing cows to single urban fathers, Swedish children’s literature inspires, informs and entertains young readers.

Children’s books are popular in Sweden and there are plenty of them. In 2012, a total of 1,761 were published, about 54 per cent of which were written by Swedish authors. Children’s literature enjoys considerable status and often reflects the trends seen in adult literature. The books are frequently reviewed and discussed in the major media. Sweden has had a professorship in children’s literature since 1982, and the courses in literature for young readers at the country’s universities and university colleges are well-attended.

Every year, prizes are awarded for outstanding books or to organisations that encourage reading among children and young adults. These include the Nordic Children’s and Young People’s Literature Prize, the Best Children’s Novel Award and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, ALMA. The last of these is the biggest children’s book prize in the world, worth SEK 5 million (EUR 602,800, USD 784,000).

Difficult subjects
So what are Swedish children’s books about and what makes them so popular? There are some that entertain and some that make you think more deeply. Children’s authors in Sweden are not afraid of dealing with subjects that adults might find difficult to talk to children about. The shelves of bookstores and libraries contain children’s literature on such themes as violence, homosexuality, substance abuse, divorce, death and bullying. A popular book dealing with the end of a life is Goodbye Mr Muffin (Adjö, herr Muffin) by Ulf Nilsson. It tells of Mr Muffin the hamster, who one day realises it is time to look back on his life when he gets a stomach ache and will soon have to say goodbye to the family he lives with. Vinterviken (not translated), a book for young adults by Mats Wahl, is a love story about a poor immigrant, John-John, and a rich girl, Elisabeth, but is also a story about covert racism and cultural prejudice.

Well-known outside Sweden
Swedish children’s authors have achieved considerable success abroad as well. Gunilla Bergström’s books about Alfie Atkins (Alfons Åberg), a boy...
DID YOU KNOW?

CHILDREN’S READING

Two common conclusions from various studies of children’s reading both in Sweden and abroad are that girls read more than boys and that reading tends to decline around the age of twelve. In Sweden, reading comprehension has been on the decline throughout the 2000s. Causes cited include Swedish school libraries now having fewer resources and children having fewer books around them in the home.

Joe and Tomas Wieslander’s books about the dancing cow Mamma Moo (Mamma Mu), who wants to try everything that humans do, have also been widely translated.

Another author in demand abroad is Ulf Stark, who has been writing books for four decades, including Can You Whistle, Johanna? (Kan du vissla Johanna?).

The popular Pettson and Findus (Pettson och Findus) books by Sven Nordqvist are also much liked beyond Sweden’s borders. The stories about eccentric old Pettson, who can talk with his cat, are skillfully illustrated, with humorous details in the pictures, while the texts play ingeniously with words in a way that amuses both adults and children at storytelling time.

Crime for children

Today, a wave of crime and thriller books has washed over the Swedish children’s literature field and struck a chord with children of all ages. Topping the list of books sold and borrowed is the series about The Jerry-Maya Detective Agency (LasseMajas detektivbyrå) by Martin Widmark. In 2011, he was Sweden’s most popular author in terms of loans from Swedish public and school libraries, his books being borrowed 1.5 million times. He and illustrator Helena Willis have produced 22 books about the detective agency, which have been translated into more than 20 languages.

Other detectives who have become popular are Kalle Skavank by Petrus Dahlin, and the Petrinis in the books by Mårten Sandén.

eBooks for children

Swedish ebooks for children have been available since 2000. Today, they are also published on tablets and smartphones. Some are interactive, with clickable extra material, audio illustrations and links.

One such Swedish ebook is the young adult novel Jag är tyvärr död och kan inte komma till skolan idag (the book has not been translated, but the title means ‘I’m Afraid I’m Dead and Can’t Come to School Today’) by Sara Ohlsson. Ebooks for children and young adults are often published one chapter at a time. One such example is Pernilla Glaser’s young adult book Under trottoaren (not translated, but the title means ‘Beneath the Pavement’), about three teenagers who don’t really fit into their society, and who together explore hidden parts of the city where they live. The story was published by stages in the form of an interactive blog where readers could vote for how the book should end.

Mystery and suspense for young adults

The suspense and mystery genre has become increasingly popular among teenagers in recent years. One example is The Circle (Cirkeln), which is about six teenage girls who find out they are witches hunted by an ancient evil. The book by Mats Strandberg and Sara Bergmark Elf gren attracted lots of attention and was nominated for Sweden’s top literary prize, the August Prize. It won two prestigious prizes in 2012, awarded by the country’s book circles and book bloggers.
POPULAR SWEDISH BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

MAMMAN OCH DEN VILDA BEBIN
(The Wild Baby), by Barbro Lindgren.
A picture book about an adventurous baby who keeps hiding from his mum.

SANNING ELLER KONSEKVENS
(Truth or Dare), by Annika Thor.
A popular book for young adults about bullying, loneliness and friendship. The book won the August Prize in the children’s and young adult category in 1997, and was filmed in the same year.

ELSE-MARIE OCH SMÅPAP-PORNA
(Else-Marie and Her Seven Little Daddies), by Pija Lindenbaum.
Pija Lindenbaum’s debut book about an unusual family – to put it mildly – challenges existing norms and perceptions. In the US, some of the illustrations were censored.

ELDENS HEMLIGHET
(Secrets in the Fire), by Henning Mankell.
The first of three books about 12-year-old Sofia and her family’s struggle to survive in war-torn Mozambique.

BAJSBOKEN
(The Poop Book), by Pernilla Stalfelt.
A relaxed and humorous book for toddlers about something we all do – even kings and pop stars. Writer and illustrator Pernilla Stalfelt takes an amusing look at poop, toilet visits and everything that goes with them.

THE POWER OF PICTURES

Picture books enjoy a prominent and important place in Swedish children’s literature. The genre gained a foothold with Elsa Beskow and has since progressed through illustrators and writers such as Stina Wirsén and Pija Lindenbaum.

Since the early 20th century, the picture-book genre has grown and flourished in Sweden. Among the pioneers were Elsa Beskow, with Peter in Blueberry Land (Puttes äventyr i blåbärsskogen), which has influenced contemporary children’s book illustrators with its artistic, imaginative approach. Beskow often took as her theme the interaction between nature, children and animals. This is also reflected in the work of contemporary authors such as Lena Anderson, in her books Hedgehog (Kotten) and Anna (Maja).

Humour for all ages
Picture books often have two readers, so they need to be interesting for adults too. This is why many include an element of humour, in both text and the images. Examples include Pernilla Stalfelt’s The Little Worm Book (Lilla maskboken) and The Big Worm Book (Stora maskboken). They offer expressive imagery, and the text is often interpreted literally in the pictures, which makes their reading both unexpected and entertaining.

Olof Landström is a children’s book illustrator who has collaborated with such leading Swedish authors as Ulf Stark and Barbro Lindgren. Together with his wife Lena Landström, he has created the Boo and Baa (Fåren Bu och Bä) books. Illustrators such as Jan Lööf, Eva Eriksson and Eva Lindström have also collaborated with major Swedish authors. But Lööf is perhaps best known for his books about a boy called Pelle. He has also acquired an international reputation with books such as The Story of the Red Apple (Sagan om det röda äpplet).

Award-winning Pija Lindenbaum, who both writes and illustrates, is another Swede who has achieved great success with her picture books. Her much-loved Bridget (Gittan) books tell about a little girl who tries to deal with emotions such as guilt, shame and fear during her adventures.

One of Sweden’s most popular children’s illustrators is Stina Wirsén. Together with her mother Carin Wirsén, she has produced the Rut and Knut books (Rut och Knut), which among other things earned them the Elsa Beskow Plaque.

Picture books are here to stay. Among the more recent arrivals on the scene are Sara Lundberg, Jockum Nordström and twins Emma and Lisen Adbåge.
LEARN MORE

THE SWEDISH INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN’S BOOKS

The Swedish Institute for Children’s Books was founded as a national foundation in 1965. It aims to encourage and provide information about literature for children and young adults, and also to support and publicise research in the field. Its activities are financed by the Ministry of Education. Every year, the institute presents a report on trends, tendencies and statistics relating to the current publication of children’s and young adult books.

LIBRARY STATISTICS

Swedish children and young adults should have easy access to books. The Education Act that came into force on 1 July 2011 states that all pupils at compulsory (primary and secondary) school, special compulsory school, school for students with intellectual disabilities, Sami school, upper secondary school and all independent schools are to have access to school libraries. The reality however is often different, due to government budget cuts and a lack of resources in schools.

FROM EDUCATION TO ENTERTAINMENT

The history of the modern Swedish children’s novel begins around 1945. One of the pioneers was Astrid Lindgren, with Pippi Longstocking (Pippi Långstrump).

In the early 20th century, children’s books were seen as a separate literary genre. One of the most famous authors from this period was Selma Lagerlöf. Her book The Wonderful Adventures of Nils (Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige) is about a boy who travels through the country on the back of a flying goose, and is an entertaining lesson in Swedish geography. For many years, it was used as a textbook in Swedish compulsory school.

The modern Swedish children’s novel first emerged around 1945 when society began to understand that children had special needs. This resulted in an explosion of books focusing on everything from humour to social issues. The modern children’s book was born. Starting in 1945, some 400 children’s books were published every year for the rest of the decade. The foremost pioneer of the modern genre was Astrid Lindgren. Her first book, Pippi Longstocking (Pippi Långstrump), published in 1945, made Swedish children’s literature famous around the world. Other pioneers were Gösta Knutsson with his richly illustrated books about Peter-No-Tail (Pelle Svanslös), a much too nice, tailless cat, and Lennart Hellsing, several of whose books in verse have been put to music, including The Banana Book (Bananbok).

The earliest books with their moralising, didactic tone have now been replaced by stories that focus on the inherent curiosity and creativity of children. And where once the books centred on male protagonists, a growing number of the leading characters in recent years have been girls.

ASTRID LINDGREN

Even today, almost 70 years after she published her first book, Astrid Lindgren remains one of the most widely borrowed authors in Swedish libraries. Her books are loved by both children and adults all over the world. Some of her best-known characters are Pippi Longstocking (Pippi Långstrump), The Brothers Lionheart (Bröderna Lejonhjärta) and Emil of Lönneberga (Emil i Lönneberga). During her career, she was awarded numerous international prizes, and several awards have been established in her name. Lindgren’s books are distinguished by strong characters and diffi-

USEFUL LINKS

www.barnboken.net Barnboken/Journal of Children’s Literature Research
www.förlagare.se Svenska förläggareföreningen (Swedish Publishers’ Association)
www.ibby.se Swedish branch of the International Board on Books for Young People

www.interbib.se Internationella biblioteket (International Library)
www.kur.se Kulturrådet (Swedish Arts Council)
www.sbi.kb.se Swedish Institute for Children’s Books

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