

Current Trends In Swedish Children's Literature

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The first Swedish children's book was published in 1591¹. Early literature for children in Sweden consisted of educational and didactic texts. During the mid 18th century the focus changed in order to reflect contemporary expectations of entertainment and instruction. At the dawn of the new century, in the year 1900, Swedish children's literature enjoyed its first golden age with distinguished writers creating the base for contemporary children's literature.

At the end of the Second World War the northern light and the sombre nature of the Nordic people, explained by the harsh climate, merged in Swedish children's literature with fresh ambitions to create a brave new world with young peace-loving and democratic citizens. Something new was to be created. Astrid Lindgren's (1907 – 2002) book about Pippi Longstocking and Lennart Hellsing's (b. 1919) verse in artfully illustrated picture books cleared the path for the children's literature of modern Sweden –where no subject is taboo and no topic too difficult. Modern writers and illustrators take their young readers seriously, following a tradition of children's literature which exploits the artistic and aesthetic means of expression fully in a way similar to that of writers of books for adults. This has given Swedish children's literature high status nationally and internationally, as well as within the world of academia.

¹ It was a translation from the German called *Een sköön och härligh jungfrw speghel*.

The heritage of Astrid Lindgren's internationally renowned writing career with its groundbreaking focus is currently being recognised through substantial publishing by ambitious and quality minded publishing houses. In 2005, 478 original Swedish titles for children and young adults were published, compared to a total publication that year of 1,493 titles.

The didactic content has changed over time in order to embrace problems of deeply humanistic nature, which are not necessarily dependent on the age of the reader, as well as a gentle and curious madness where themes of humor, joy, love, drama, calm, sorrow and loss are mixed in a thrilling and universally engaging way. The writer Lennart Hellsing has coined an expression, a paradox, which has shaped the attitude to Swedish children's literature and set the tone for children's literary criticism: ' All pedagogical art is bad art. All good art is pedagogical.'

Swedish picture books, and their illustrators, have been especially well-received internationally. Lena Andersson, Eva Eriksson, Gunilla Bergström, Sven Nordqvist, Anna Höglund and Lasse Sandberg belong with internationally better known artists. However there are many more illustrators waiting to be discovered. Artists like Anna-Clara Tidholm, whose picture books for the very young are unique, Pija Lindenbaum, Anna Bengtsson, Eva Lindström, Ann Forslind, Cecilia Torudd, Lena och Olof Landström etc. are well established on the Swedish market. Amongst the younger generation there are several artists who are prepared to go even further in search of artistic boundaries. Stina Wirsén and Lisen Adbåge are two examples.

Swedish young adult fiction belongs to the part of Swedish literature which has most consciously and successfully developed new expressions of narrative structure, form and content. The eagerness to experiment that characterises these writers of young adult fiction does not only impress the critics and academics –since the mid 1980s readers have taken young adult fiction to heart. Peter Pohl, Mats Wahl and Per Nilsson belong to the older generation which has taken the genre seriously and developed it further. There are several younger writers, men and women, who tell stories about contemporary life as well as tales from other worlds and other times. The six writers, selected by their publishers to have their books presented during the Small Feet Go Far project, are excellent representatives of current Swedish children's and young adult fiction. Their contribution, I believe, makes it a delightful adventure to follow the development of Swedish literature for children and young adults.

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