I became a Nordic Riveter a couple of decades ago – before Nordic Noir became the big brand it is today – after reading my first Wallander story by the late, great Swedish novelist Henning Mankell. I was riveted. Various Scandinavian crime series followed on TV and I watched them all. Then came the hygge books, the wood-carving and knitting books, and a whole forest of thrillers. I then received my first hand-knitted Norwegian sweater – and there was no going back. I love my red-and-white sweater so much that we’ve put it on the front cover. I made my first actual trip ‘north’ to Sweden for the BBC. I took trains through dark forests and saw Stockholm sparkling at night – and was riveted afresh. Finland is the one Nordic country I have not visited, but I feel I know it thanks to reading its great literature and interviewing some of its pioneering writers, such as Sofi Oksanen and Katya Kettu.

These days I’m a regular Nordic Riveter. Every year I host the Norwegian arts and literature festival, SILK, in the heritage town of Skudeneshavn. This is where I first met our Guest Editor Gunnar Staalesen, Norway’s Grand Master of crime. Norwegians even knit during the events. This September I was a guest moderator at the Reykjavík International Literature Festival and fell in love with the geysers, waterfalls and the novels of Nobel Prize-winning author Halldor Laxness. I am also the proud owner of an Icelandic knitted hat.

Nordic writers have given me some of my greatest reading pleasures over the past two decades, and also, as an interviewer at events and festivals, some of my greatest interviewing pleasures. Not only do they write with great depth and psychological insight, they talk like that too, and often in excellent English. Karl Ove Knausgaard was an early interviewee – at the Hay Festival in Wales, just after the first volume of My Struggle was published in English: there were only a handful of people in the audience. I called him a genius then. I believe he still is. Today Knausgaard draws audiences of hundreds or thousands when he speaks. Icelandic writers such as Sjón, Jón Kalman Stefánsson and Yrsa Sigurðardóttir have profoundly influenced my inner life over the years. And thanks to the pioneering work of the annual European Literature Night at the British Library, and a growing number of Nordic Literary events, I’ve been exposed to the creative brilliance of Dorthe Nors, Pia Juul and Naja Marie Aidt from Denmark and Anne Sward, Jonas Hassan Khemiri and Steve Sem-Sandberg from Sweden – amongst many others.

Several of these writers, and their translators, feature in our Nordic Riveter, made possible thanks to the generosity of
Having focused on the literature of individual countries in previous editions, in this, our third outing for The Riveter magazine from the European Literature Network, we have broadened our reach to take in a whole region. Five countries are represented in this edition: five different languages and five different cultures; but all are labelled loosely “Nordic”.

So how do we address the ways the writing from these countries differ and the ways they are the same? Our Guest Editor, Gunnar Staalesen, does a fine job of teasing apart this conundrum in his editorial. And then goes on to treat us with a short story – an example of why Nordic Noir currently wears the “crime” or “mystery” blue riband. Gunnar’s English-language publisher (and my colleague), Orenda Books’ Karen Sullivan, gives her views on the Nordic Noir phenomenon, and his translator, Don Bartlett, submits to my questions about how Gunnar compares to another great writer he translates, Karl Ove Knausgaard (also one of Rosie’s favourites). Karl Ove, and his meisterwerk, My Struggle, are the subject of an article by US author Jonathan Levi, and Knausgaard’s latest book, Autumn is reviewed by Roland Gulliver, Programme Director at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Travelling across the northern Atlantic, we find ourselves in the company of some of Iceland’s most important contemporary writers. It is our great honour to present to the English-speaking world the first, exclusive glimpse of CoDex 1962, a major novel from the formidable pen of Iceland’s Sjón. But the honours don’t end there: we have another exclusive English-language extract, this time from The Story of Ásta by Jón Kalman Stefánsson. Sjón and Stefánsson are accompanied by poetry from fellow Icelander Sigurdur Pálsson, who, sadly, recently passed away. A fitting tribute, we think, to a great poet. Our feast of Nordic literature and translation continues with extracts of the work of Danish writer Eva Tind, Finn Asko Sahlberg, Swede
Ebba Witt-Brattström, and more.

Of course, The Riveter wouldn’t be riveting without our Riveting Reviews, and we have a wealth of them. We cover Pushkin Press’s latest Nordic anthology; Gunnar Staalesen reviews his Norwegian peer, Jon Michelet; Rosie, our Riveter-in-Chief, writes about Dorthe Nors, and we get views on Pajtim Statovci’s My Cat Yugoslavia and on the latest titles from Vigdis Hjorth, Hakan Nesser and many, many more.

To guide you through this bounty, we have enlisted five specialists to discuss the literature of each of the five Nordic countries we cover in the magazine. And to leave you with a smile on your face, we conclude with an exclusive, as yet-unpublished, and absolutely hilarious, Digested Read from the inimitable John Crace of the Guardian.

Our thanks go out to all you who have contributed your time, words, and efforts to making this magazine the biggest, and we think, our most riveting yet. We hope you have a Riveting Read!

West Camel is Editor of The Riveter.
When people in the UK look towards the Nordic countries, what do they really see? On the map they will surely notice the Scandinavian peninsula, which contains two countries: Norway and Sweden. South and west of this they will see Denmark, which looks like an upper extension of Germany. In the east they will find Finland, which has a border with Russia (Norway has a small one too, far to the north). And to the west, in the sea, they will discover Iceland, in some ways – mainly due to its language – the most Nordic country of them all.

Some of our countries are closer to one another than others; we share some of our history. For 400 years Norway was a part of Denmark, with the king and power situated in Copenhagen. From 1814 to 1905 we Norwegians were in union with Sweden, with the king living in Stockholm but with our own parliament in Oslo. It was not until 1905 that Norway was again a “free” country, after 500 years subordinate to, or in union with, other countries.

We are close in terms of language too. Swedes, Danes and people from Norway can, if they do not speak too fast or in a local dialect, understand each other. We can chat together without needing interpreters. We can, without any major problems, read each other’s books in the original language. In fact, we share a common Nordic language, Old Norse, which today is spoken – in a modernised version – only in Iceland. Icelandic is almost impossible to understand for people from the so-called Scandinavian countries (Denmark among them). The same is true of Finnish, but it is more closely related to Hungarian than to the Nordic languages.

From this complex part of the world comes what is often called by a single name: “Nordic literature”, part of which has, in recent years, been specified as “Nordic Noir”.

So, are there definable differences between these countries and their literatures, or are the similarities easier to see? In my opinion there is one word that defines much of the literature from the Nordic countries: “nature”.

Compared to most other European countries we Nordics all live in fairly small
cities, and even our capitals are not very big. From the centre of Oslo you can take a
local train or your car and, after twenty
to thirty minutes, you can put on your
skis and start skiing in winter, or walk for
hours in the forest in the summertime. In
most Nordic novels, plays or films nature
is always present, either as the backdrop
to the story or as a dominant part of it. You
will find this in classic literature, such as
Ibsen and Hamsun, all the way back to
the Icelandic Sagas; and you will find it in
modern-day fiction, crime included.

What of the various Nordic peoples?
When trying to characterise people from
neighbouring countries, it is difficult not
to use clichés. People from Denmark are
continental, with liberal views about
alcohol, smoking and sex. Swedes are
looked upon as more formal, standing at
some distance to their neighbour nations
– the “big brother” of the company. The
Finns are dark, brooding and drink too
much. The Norwegians are puritanical,
with strict laws against drinking and
smoking, and with a lust for independence
(from the EU, for instance). The Icelanders
are the wild ones, having originated from
Norwegian outlaws in the ninth
century. As I said, all these are clichés, but
the question remains: can you see them in
Nordic literature?

As a Norwegian I am not so sure.
The Molière of Nordic literature, Ludvig
Holberg, is called by the Danes a
“Danish writer, born in Bergen”, and
Bergen (where I live), as you know, is in
Norway. The Swedish playwright August
Strindberg was much more radical, in
some ways, than the Norwegian Henrik
Ibsen, and the work of both is performed
today, more than 150 years after they
were born. A foreigner would not be sure
if Jo Nesbø was from Norway, Denmark
or Sweden, if they did not read it on a
cover, and there have been Danish writers
who have created modern sagas almost in
the Icelandic style. I think, perhaps, that
the Icelanders are the ones most similar
to their image, being isolated out there in
the ocean for so many years, and
remaining the marvellous storytellers
they have always been.

Ultimately, we have to accept that our
origins are the same: we all descend from
people who settled up here in the north
when the ice left, 11–12,000 years ago.
And we have the same stories to tell as all
human kind; stories about where we came
from and where we are going, of love and
hate, and of the lust for wealth – stories
told by everyone who comes from the
north, the west or from any other
direction, Nordic or non-Nordic.

Gunnar Staalesen

Gunnar Staalesen was born in Bergen, Norway in 1947.
He is the author of more than twenty titles, which have
been published in twenty-four countries and have sold
over four million copies. Twelve film adaptations of his
Varg Veum crime novels have appeared since 2007.
Staalesen has won three Golden Pistols (including the
Prize of Honour) and most recently the Petrona Award
for the international bestseller Where Roses Never
Die.
“There’s no such thing as the perfect crime,” I insisted.

“Oh really?” he replied, his expression bordering on exasperation.

We had met in the kind of place to which men flock to have a pint or three, usually alone, though never in pursuit of the fairer sex. If that’s their objective, they pick a different spot. Ninety-nine per cent of the clientele around us were men, and those women present were either lost tourists who had stumbled in, unaware of the nature of their surroundings, or the odd escort, watched as keenly as a hawk eyes up a homeless hen. This was a place men came to in order to talk to other men about the kind of things that men talk about together.

“People always make at least one error,” I continued.

“Not necessarily,” he replied.

“No?”

“You know, even the police reckon that most criminal offences shouldn’t really be defined as ‘criminal’ ...”

“Like accidents, you mean?”

“That’s one example, yes.” He hesitated before continuing. “I’ve got a tale of my own.”

“A perfect crime?”

“Yep.”

“In that case we need another round. Bartender!”

Our drinks were served, and after taking a swig he embarked upon his story ...

* 

They met at the edge of the forest that overlooked the sea.

They could see Lars down by the dockside, readying the lobster traps. Huddled over in his boat, he was barely visible against the backdrop of the water on that bright, warm evening in August.

She appeared uneasy. “I can’t hang around for too long! I told him I was just going to get changed.”

“Can you see this through, Anne-Mette?”

She nodded. “You’re sure that he doesn’t know anything about, you know, the
undercurrents?”

“Of course not! Nobody was able to explain what had happened when Liv died all those years ago. The only reason I ever found out was because it’s part of my job to study that kind of thing. Meteorologists stumble upon all manner of strange natural phenomena, you know.”

“And what about ... after?”

“It’s up to you what happens after that, Anne-Mette. There’ll be some kind of investigation, but nobody will blame you for the fact that the natural world claims its victims. If you keep things quiet and hold your own, we’ll both reap the rewards for years to come!”

“Oh Steinar!” She embraced him for a moment. “I can’t believe it’s come to this ...”

“No one can escape their fate, Anne-Mette,” he said, tenderly stroking her hair. “But hurry up, or he might lose patience and leave without you.”

“I’m going! But ... when will I see you next?”

“At the funeral.”

She cast him a final glance, the sorrow on her face giving way to a dejected expression as her arms dropped to her side. She raised a hand to bid him farewell before disappearing along the pathway towards the water.

He remained beneath the canopy of trees until he saw her reappear down by the boat, where Lars helped her on board. He lifted his gaze and looked outwards, towards the two Mackerel Isles and the narrow inlet that divided them.

The Mackerel Isles ...

* ...

He and Lars had been childhood friends, and Lars on more than a few occasions had enjoyed long summer holidays in Steinar’s family’s summer cabin on the Sørland coast. Particularly in the years immediately following Liv’s death, Steinar’s parents had been consoled by the clamour of youthful houseguests: music blaring from the record player on the beach, one-on-one football matches in the back garden and warm evenings huddled around the barbeque having returned to dry land laden with freshly-caught cod, pollock or whiting.

The fact that, after marrying Anne-Mette, Lars had decided to buy a cabin directly across the bay came as no great surprise. It was here, after all, that he had spent his happiest summers. Why not attempt to harness that joy and bring it into his adulthood by relocating to the place from which it originated? But was it possible to extend into his maturity the secret magic that had brought him such pleasure in the springtime of his life?

It was also no great surprise when Steinar, Lars’ oldest friend, became a frequent guest at both the couple’s summer cabin and their home in Oslo; he had, after all, never quite managed to settle down with a spouse of his own, and Anne-Mette – even as a friend – was sufficiently generous to make room in her life for both men.

However, neither Steinar nor Anne-Mette were prepared when, a year and a half before, they found themselves growing gradually closer, with matters unexpectedly culminating in a weekend escape together to Sweden. Following a passionate few days spent in a guesthouse overlooked by the mountains, they had both racked their brains to find a reasonable explanation for the unexpected turn of events, though Anne-Mette
more so than Steinar. She blamed her absence on a long, drawn-out trip with girlfriends – that’s right, just like in that film we saw, she explained to Lars, after making her way home on the express train from Gothenburg the following Monday morning. Steinar kept his distance from them that week, later relaying how he had made his way into the mountains – I just needed some time to myself, Lars, you know how it is; you find yourself nearing forty and you start to wonder, what have I done with my life?

And what had they done, exactly?

As it happened, Anne-Mette and Lars had two splendid children, both grown-up enough to be out and about that weekend towards the end of summer, attending scout camps and horseback treks. What about them? The thought had plagued Anne-Mette when she and Steinar had begun making their plan. He had placed a comforting hand on hers and re-assured her: “I’ll be like a father to them. I promise you …”

* 

It was Anne-Mette who had first put her thoughts into words. “What if Lars weren’t … Imagine if he were … if it were just you and me, Steinar …”

“You mean, if he were … dead?”

“Yes! Oh, as if it’s even possible to imagine something so awful! But you’ve come to mean so much to me, and I want nothing more than to share everything with you. Everything! Do you understand?”

One evening, in his apartment in Majorstua, where she had become a more frequent visitor than any woman before her, he dropped a hint – a fleeting suggestion, at most – about how it could be arranged …

“You’ve heard about what happened to Liv, I suppose?”

“Yes your sister who drowned?”

“Yes …”

The whole family had been out at the Mackerel Isles, and he and Liv had been bathing in the narrow inlet between the two small islands when Liv had suddenly vanished, as if grabbed by an invisible hand and pulled beneath the surface of the water. It was as if the Midgard Serpent had claimed her from the watery depths, because Liv never reappeared. She remained submerged. Their father had dived in desperation without seeing a thing, and when they had finally rowed back to land and called the rescue team, they knew it was too late – even if they had managed to find her, it would be too late. But they never did find her, at least not until they were in the throes of autumn, when she washed up on dry land several kilometres northwards along the coast. That is to say, what was left of her washed up; it was only with the help of her clothing and dental fillings that they were eventually able to identify her.

“Oh, how awful it all must have been for your parents, Steinar!”

“It was awful for all of us. Neither of my parents ever really got over it, and even today I can’t look out towards the Mackerel Isles without thinking about it. But the point,” he continued, “is that, twenty years later, when a group of students and I mapped the tidal patterns along that section of the coastline, I discovered that, twice a day, between the ebb and flow of the tide, an undercurrent forms in the inlet of water between the Mackerel Isles. It must have been this that was responsible for pulling Liv under that day.”
“But surely you presented your findings?”
“No, that particular discovery held no relevance for our project. Besides, it was all too personal. Either way, I decided to keep it to myself.”
“You mean to say you didn’t even tell your closest friend?”
“No, Anne-Mette. Not even him.”
“So why tell me all this now?”
“The point is this: if I were to provide you with a list of times, and you could somehow lure Lars out with you to do some crab fishing or take a swim in the moonlight – anything along those lines – then …”
“It leaves too much to chance.”
“Maybe. But on the other hand ... it would be the perfect crime. The sea gives and the sea takes away. Do you see what I’m saying, Anne-Mette?”
“I do …”

They rowed out in silence.

Lars was old-fashioned enough to prefer a boat without an outboard motor. “It’s not often we row out much further than the Mackerel Isles, anyway,” he used to say, “and the kids have their little inflatable speedboats to play with. I prefer the contact with the elements, the resistance of the water, the application of strength it requires; it’s only in the rowboat that I can really savour these things …”

She watched him from where she sat on the thwart furthest back in the boat: his broad, slightly mature body, his greying hair that was beginning to thin on top. He looked considerably older than Steinar, even though they were the same age.

As if he had read her mind, he said, “I see that Steinar’s out and about, too.” He gestured towards the opposite side of the bay, where light glowed from his childhood friend’s cabin. “Strange that he hasn’t popped over to see us.”

“He probably appreciates some time to himself now and then.”

“Now you mention it, I have noticed that.”

“Noticed what?”

“That he’s pulled away from us over the past couple of years, what with his hikes in the mountains or that time he absconded to Paris out of the blue in the middle of autumn – around the same time you and Trude were in London ...”

“Oh?”

“Anyway, I’m sure he won’t abandon us altogether. We’ll see him tomorrow, no doubt.”

After a long silence, which was interrupted only by the creaking of the oars against the thole pins, he added, “I mean, we’re all he has.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

They approached the Mackerel Isles. It was a glorious late-summer evening, the August clouds forming dark, inky blots against the bright cope of heaven, yet with the warmth of any night in July, the air seasoned lightly with the scent of roses and honeysuckle. The sea undulated gently beneath them like an enormous bed of silk bordered with the luminescent glow of mareel, a draw calling from deep within the body of water.

In the bay they heard a motor boat starting up, the grating sound of the engine’s roar in the still evening causing Lars’ eyes to roll to the heavens in resigned frustration.
“Here we go again! The barbarians are on the loose!”

Immediately afterwards they saw a boat on its way out towards the fairway on the north side of the Mackerel Isles, a strip of foamy spray in its wake. Before they had arrived it was gone, yet they could still hear it, the roaring fading to a faint rumble across the landscape.

Lars released the anchor in the shallow waters just south of the larger of the two isles. He picked up one of the two lobster traps and lowered it into the water, the rope it was attached to slipping through his fingers as he released it. After the lobster traps had settled, he lifted the orange float over the side before giving Anne-Mette a satisfied nod and returning to his position at the oars.

She glanced discreetly at her wristwatch. Another ten minutes to go …

She dipped her other hand into the water. “Almost lukewarm,” she said, looking up at him suggestively.

He flashed her half a smile. “Do you fancy a dip?”

“Perhaps,” she replied, stretching her legs out before her like a cat soaking up the sunlight on a warm summer’s day.

By the rocky land mass, history was repeating itself: lobster trap, rope, float. It was almost time.

The hum of the other boat’s motor was still audible, though now from the opposite side of the isle.

Lars nodded towards the ridge on the mainland. “It won’t be long before the moon makes an appearance.”

She began unbuttoning her blouse. “Think you can beat me in?” she asked him coyly.

She knew him so well, she could perfectly predict his reaction. He could never resist a challenge.

He stripped off his t-shirt, pulling it up and over his head and standing up with such haste that the boat almost capsized. He unbuckled his belt, pulled down his jeans and sat down again to coax his legs free before casting them from him; they landed over the thwart further along in the boat. Dressed in nothing but his boxer shorts he suddenly looked at her. “Given up already?”

“Given up?” She felt herself pale.

He gestured towards her bosom, where her fingers had ventured no further than the top buttons of her blouse.

She felt a jolt shoot through her as she realised what he was referring to. Demonstratively she worked her way through the remaining buttons, holding his gaze as she did so. She removed her blouse before unfastening her trousers and nimbly lifting her hips from the thwart, sliding them down over her long, tanned legs.

Like a teenager he gazed at her, as if he’d never before seen her undress.

For a moment they sat, each perched on their own thwart, both in their underwear.

He stood up while she remained seated.

He waited, the same unspoken challenge in his gaze.

She stood up to face him, wearing a faint, strained smile. Legs wide in the tiny vessel, they gently swayed towards one another.

“You’re surely not thinking about jumping in wearing that lovely brassiere?”

“No …” Her lips parted and slowly she ran her tongue over them as she reached her arms around behind her back and unhooked the delicate garment. She felt her bare nipples stiffen. With a sense of uncontrollable sexual arousal coursing through
through her body – stronger than he had awakened in her for many years – she dangled the brassiere in front of him.

He took it from her, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

He took one step forward, grabbed her wrist, and in one swift movement sat down firmly on the middle thwart, bracing his legs against the rigging and throwing her above his head. Her body formed an arc as she soared over the gunwale and entered the dark water, head first. With a short, sharp cry of shock, she disappeared into the deep water.

He quickly glanced at his watch. Just a few minutes past! Things were going perfectly.

From the opposite side of the isle he heard the other boat. It was obviously much closer now.

He peered over the side and down into the black depths.

Nothing to see. Nothing at all ...

The small, high-speed boat made its way around the headland.

Lars waited, but no mermaids emerged from the waves beneath him. Nobody at all, for that matter. Anne-Mette was gone – forever.

The high-speed boat slowed, making an elegant turn before deftly lining up beside the much heavier rowboat.

Steinar looked at him quizzically. "So? Did everything go to plan?"

Lars nodded, his expression grave. "It had to be done – for the children's sake," he added.

Steinar nodded. "You've explained everything."

"All those debts ... the life insurance will pull us through the worst of it." He leaned in towards his childhood friend. "I'll never forget this, Steinar. If you hadn't told me about the undercurrents, then ..."

"Enough now," Steinar replied. "One good turn deserves another," he mumbled. "But look ... I need to be getting back to the city. If anyone were to see us out here together they might put two and two together."

"When will I see you next?" Lars asked, his expression disclosing a sudden sense of loss.

"At the funeral, I'd imagine. Let me know about the arrangements."

He looked at me, a triumphant expression on his face as he gestured to the barman to serve us another round. "That was that. She was buried, and no more was said about it."

"And nobody suspected anything?"

"Lars was summoned for a few routine interviews, obviously, but no. The water had been unusually warm that day, she was found wearing nothing but her underwear, and he explained that they were in the middle of taking a dip when she was suddenly pulled under. It didn't do his case any harm when you consider that a similar accident had happened there thirty years before, almost to the day."

"And the life insurance?"

"Paid out in full."

"Hmm."

Fresh pints appeared at our table. We each took a sip.

"So what's your role in this tale, then? Are you Steinar?"

A faint smile crossed his lips. "You could say that. But that was years ago now. Four and a
half, to be precise.” He threw out his hands. “In other words: yes, the perfect crime does exist.”
“Well, not entirely perfect,” I said.
“Meaning what, exactly?”
“It strikes me that you made one fatal error.”
“Which was ...?”
“Revealing the story to a retired policeman four and a half years later.”
“Retired poli—”
“I may not work for the force anymore, but as I’m sure you are aware, we retire at the sprightly age of sixty and many of us work elsewhere until we qualify for a state pension. For instance, I’m employed as an investigator by a life insurance firm. The same firm Anne-Mette and Lars – if we insist on continuing to use those names – chose for their policy all those years ago.”
He had fallen silent.
“We’ve had you all under surveillance since the incident all those years ago, but it was only today that we achieved our objective. I’ve got the whole thing on tape just here,” I said, lightly tapping my jacket pocket.
He looked at me bleakly without uttering a word.
Before we left, I had one final question for him. “What about now then, eh? Surely you agree with what I said earlier about the perfect crime ...?”

Gunnar Staalesen
Translated by Rosie Hedger

Rosie Hedger completed her MA in Scandinavian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Rosie’s translation of Agnes Ravatn’s *The Bird Tribunal* won an English PEN Translates Award in 2016 and was selected for BBC Radio 4’s Book at Bedtime. The novel was subsequently shortlisted for the 2017 Petrona Award for Best Scandinavian Crime Novel of the Year.
Don Bartlett has translated some of Norway’s most prominent and popular contemporary writers, including Jo Nesbø, Roy Jacobsen, Lars Saabye Christensen and Kjell Ola Dahl.

2016 saw the publication of his translations of works by two of Norway’s biggest literary figures: *Some Rain Must Fall*, the fifth in Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series of intimately autobiographical, supremely literary novels; and Gunnar Staalesen’s *Where Roses Never Die*, the hugely successful series of crime novels featuring the idiosyncratic but likeable PI, Varg Veum.

As a reader of both Knausgaard and Staalesen, and additionally as the English editor of Staalesen’s novels for Orenda Books, I was interested to find out about Don Bartlett’s experience of translating them both – two authors who many would see as sitting at opposite ends of the literary spectrum. This is our conversation.

*West Camel*: The key difference I, as a reader, see between the work of these two writers is the presence of the author in the text. Staalesen, I think, is concealed behind his character, Varg Veum. Knausgaard, to state the obvious, is present everywhere in his work. How does this alter the approach you take to the translation of these novels?

*Don Bartlett*: Staalesen and Knausgaard write in different genres – wherever you place Knausgaard’s genre. Their novels have very little in common except for the fact that they are first-person narratives. Gunnar’s writing is linear and conforms to certain expectations of crime fiction (plot, chapters, ending etc). You know what to expect: taut dialogue, tight structures, tension, excitement and a resolution.

Karl Ove’s writing goes through a great many stylistic changes, can develop in any direction and is much denser and more emotionally intense. There are no chapters, as such; and it is difficult to speak of a plot, although the beginnings and endings are always well anchored. The character of Karl Ove is at the centre and he goes through a great deal of pain. You identify with him and you are affected.

Despite all these differences, the approach to the translation is the same: you do your best to get inside the characters.

*West Camel*: The work of both writers is characterised by a very strong voice. As a translator, how do you ventriloquise a fictional Norwegian, in the case of Staalesen; and a fictionalised
Norwegian, in the case of Knausgaard?

DB: With Staalesen, I have read him widely (something like seventeen novels, now) to get a sense of who Varg Veum is. I know he is an honourable man with a background in child welfare, who fights for social justice. His life hasn’t been easy, but he is loyal to his own and he has humour. You might have a sense of Gunnar in the writing, but it would be wrong to assume Gunnar is Varg Veum.

With Knausgaard, I have also tried to catch the tone and voice of Karl Ove from the novels I have read. At the beginning I translated fifty pages or so and sent them to him to make sure I was on the right lines. A substantial part of the novels is dialogue and this has to feel genuine.

WC: In an interview with The Paris Review, Scott Esposito suggests Knausgaard sounds “a tiny bit British” in your translations. How much of your own, British, voice can you detect in the Knausgaard? Is this inevitable? Is it, even, preferable in order to aid readability?

DB: Scott Esposito probably read the Archipelago version of My Struggle. The editor, Jill Schoolman, quite rightly took out elements that sounded too British (pavement, football, Mum, various idioms), but otherwise she has a very soft touch. If Scott had read the Harvill Secker edition he, as an American, might well have said it sounded very British. However, Karl Ove has said publicly that, when he reads the translation, it sounds and feels like him.

It makes sense for the US version to seem somewhat culturally “alien” – Norway is after all in Europe, closer to us. I would think there is still a strong sense of cultural alien-ness in the British version too. I can’t tell you how much there is of my own voice in My Struggle, but I would imagine it is hard to eradicate totally.

WC: Is it easier to neutralise this sense of a “national” or “regional” translator’s voice in works such as those of Staalesen, where the character is a more distinct type – ie, the hard-bitten PI?

DB: I think finding a voice for a character is the same in any genre. You are guided by the character. I wouldn’t want to neutralise the language to any great degree, for fear of losing colour.

Staalesen’s books are full of linguistic variety and include dialects. I would say that, generally, it is a mistake to imitate the dialects. There are ways of indicating that a strong dialect is spoken. However, some loss is inevitable.

WC: Staalesen’s books, as supreme examples of the crime genre, are plot driven. Does this help the translator in the same way as it does the reader – giving a strong forward impetus that carries you along?

DB: It certainly does. Some translators prefer not to read the original before they start translating so that they are driven by the plot and the excitement. Personally, I prefer to read the original first so that I can be sure of the characters and I’m prepared for any potential translation problems.

WC: Some readers might think that Knausgaard’s novels – being so concerned with the act of memory, with the details of everyday life and with the shaping of character – are far more difficult to read than, for example, a Staalesen crime book. However, as the huge success of the My Struggle series has proved, Knausgaard is extremely readable. What in your opinion makes these authors equally readable, while being so different?

DB: Well, it is certainly true to say that Staalesen doesn’t divide readers in the same way as Knausgaard does, and there is no doubt that he is easier to read.

Staalesen has a proven track record: attractive protagonist, tight plots, good
endings, topical themes, psychology, wordplay and humour. It’s Nordic Noir, but it is not dour. Furthermore, Gunnar opens our eyes to Norway. Bergen and its environs are very much part of the novels – I doubt there are many people who know the history and geography of this area better. I have always considered Gunnar Staalesen a great dramatist, and his newer books have shown he is on an upward trajectory.

The big question is how has Knausgaard touched a nerve, because he certainly has. Some critics at the beginning said he left in the novels all the parts good writing left out. However, for me, it is his ability to describe in such meticulous detail – especially the intimate areas of his life – that makes the novels such compelling reading. By concentrating so minutely on his own life he has reminded many readers – of all ages and cultures, it seems – of elements of their own lives, and they can identify with him. The books have a universality, an intellectual and a personal appeal, and are not afraid to deal with taboo subjects.

**WC:** With both authors you’re in the process of translating series of their books. Do you feel yourself entering a “Staalesen mode” or a “Knausgaard mode” when you begin a translation; or is it, in fact, purely a “translator mode” for all your work?

**DB:** I don’t think there is such a thing as a translator mode. You adapt to whoever you translate, much as in acting. The great benefit of a series is that you know beforehand who you are dealing with and there is less to be uncertain about. You become more sure-footed with each book. Changing to a new author is harder, but is rewarding in terms of variety.

**WC:** Both writers have excellent English. How does this affect what kinds of conversations you have with them about your translations?

**DB:** Yes, that’s true. However, this has no real influence. Both authors prefer to stay in the background, but have responded immediately on the occasions I have a query. Both are a pleasure to work with. We communicate in English or Danish/Norwegian.

**WC:** It could be said that Norway, with a population of only 5.2 million, has produced a disproportionate number of internationally acclaimed writers. As translator of several of them, what do you see as the possible reasons for this?

**DB:** There is a tradition of excellent writers in Norway. Norwegians read widely, Norway supports its writers well and the Norwegian Arts Council and the Norwegian Embassy are very adept at promoting their authors. Also, in Norwegian literature there is strength in depth. I can think of writers who enjoy great success in Norway, but are yet to be recognised in the same way outside Norway. Norwegians would probably see the present period as a golden age.
As the grandson of two rabbis, I knew some of my family would worry when I told them I was flying to Beirut to interview the author of Mein Kampf. But if chasing the exotic isn’t a little bit dangerous, then what’s the point of being a writer? And my invitation to the Hay Festival in Beirut was back in 2013, before the arrival of vast numbers of Syrian refugees from the war next door, and during a quiet interval, when it was perfectly safe – well, relatively safe – to stroll past the yacht clubs along the Corniche and go rooftop dancing impromptu with Saudis and Palestinians desperate for the promised R&R of the lotus land of the Levant.

Five years ago, when Festival Director Cristina Fuentes invited me to interview the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard at the Hay Festival in Beirut, I had never heard his name. Knausgaard’s six-volume autobiographical novel Min Kamp, translated into English as My Struggle, had sold 500,000 copies in Norway, a country with a population of five million, but hadn’t yet been published in the United States.

“You’re going to love it,” Cristina wrote and attached a pdf of the first volume, A Death in the Family.

“For the heart, life is simple: it beats as long as it can.”

That first line hooked me. Far from a romantic come-on, it had that mix of existential pretension and noir dread that sucked me into the Everyman Cinema in Hampstead to watch Ingmar Bergman’s Persona and Through a Glass Darkly when I was a student in the early 1970s.

Even the Bergman of The Seventh Seal knew that there had to be more to his heaven and earth than philosophy, and the bulk of Knausgaard’s first volume quickly moves from meditation on anatomy to “cigarette smoke, coffee drinking, listening to the radio, eating breakfast and car engines warming up outside in the dark”. The central death in the family is the death of Knausgaard’s father. But the central character is the young Karl Ove, easily drawn to tears, wanting nothing more than to please people – his drunken, tyrannical father in particular.

Of course I knew that Bergman was Swedish and Knausgaard Norwegian. But my direct knowledge of Norway was limited to a family drive through the fjords when I was ten, ending up at the seaside town of Fevik, where we swam in what my own father,
bravely quoting James Joyce, called “the scrotum-tightening sea”.

Knausgaard spent his early years not far from Fevik. Reading his life, like reading anyone’s life, is travelling to a foreign country. We read because we crave the exotic. In a Europe H&M-ed and Accessorized into an homogeneous pulp, the exotic is increasingly difficult to find.

Yet we navigate best with signposts in a language we understand. Throughout the five volumes of My Struggle that I have read (the final volume is due out in English this year) Knausgaard’s 1990s childhood is set to a soundtrack of Elvis Costello and Echo and the Bunnymen, and yet throws enough foreign names at us – Scandinavian authors such as Aksel Sandemose and Kjartan Fløgstad – that we know we’re not in Kansas anymore.

When I met Karl Ove in Beirut, I felt either that I knew him, or that he reckoned I knew him because I’d read what he had written about himself and he owed it to both of us to stick to the script. He was tall and shaggy. He was painfully shy. There were cigarettes. Lots of cigarettes. But in our interview – in front of only twenty people – he was charming and forthcoming and generous. This from a man who now appears around the world to crowds of thousands. Yet when I tried to persuade him to join me and the Welsh poet Owen Sheers on a day trip up to the Phoenician port of Byblos, he begged off: he had to meet a deadline for an essay on the occasion of Soren Kierkegaard’s bicentennial. Right.

While I was still in Beirut, The New Yorker published an excerpt from the second volume of My Struggle. By this point in the saga, Karl Ove is living in Sweden with his second wife and has two young daughters. The excerpt was a set piece – a birthday party for a school friend of Vanja’s, the older of the girls – a painful episode. Three-year-old Vanja doesn’t want to go; thirty-year-old Karl Ove doesn’t want to go. And yet the feeling that one must go, in the most Beckettian sense, leads to a scene of banal, childish cruelty, and banal, adult mediocrity. I remembered a phone conversation with a writer friend in Edinburgh who thought that Knausgaard was more overrated than Elena Ferrante – and this was back in 2013.

“And yet we read it,” I argued back to him. “We read it all. Right up till the end.”

“Maybe you do,” he said. “I struggle no more.”

I lay in my Beirut hotel room, reading about this disastrous birthday party with a mixture of embarrassment and boredom, when suddenly Karl Ove and Vanja escape from the party – his wife and younger daughter have long since gone – and walk out into the Malmö night:

“It was cold and clear outside, but all the light in the town, from street lamps, shop windows and car lights, seeped upwards and lay like a shimmering dome above the rooftops, through which no starry lustre could penetrate. Of all the heavenly bodies only the moon, hanging almost full above the Hilton Hotel, was visible.”

I’ve never been to Malmö, and there’s nothing particularly exotic about a Hilton Hotel anywhere, in my experience. And yet, drinking through my mini-bar just a mile or two away from Sabra and Shatila, I felt that Knausgaard had written something exquisite.

In recent years, waiting for the next installment of My Struggle, I’ve read several
of Knausgaard’s essays in the New York Times and most recently his book of short thoughts, Autumn. Sadly, they don’t grab me in the same way as My Struggle. Maybe they’re less rooted in the pain and joy of remembered experience. Maybe the philosophy, the analysis, is more banal. Maybe the base observations are just plain ordinary. Maybe the writing just isn’t as good.

But this passage at the end of the birthday party made me think of Joyce, of Gabriel Conroy at the end of The Dead watching the snow fall over Ireland and his own arrogance. And it made me think, well hell, when you get down to it The Dead is just a story about a party. Maybe I was just trying to be as much of a people-pleaser as Karl Ove. But maybe it was true. That, at least in the five volumes I’ve read of My Struggle, Knausgaard knows how to turn on the lyrical tap at just the right moment and make his music, his writing, his cigarettes, his booze, his childish craps and cries, his family and friends, his scrotum-tightening struggle, into our struggle. At least for a little while.

I walked out of the hotel and took a taxi to another Beirut rooftop party. I hoped Karl Ove would be there and I could please him with my Joycean epiphany. But of course he wasn’t.

Jonathan Levi

Ever since I began learning Norwegian back in 2006, I’ve been impressed by the active literary scene that thrives in Norway. I was initially struck by the fact that publishers there seemed more willing than those here in the UK to take chances on experimental work and debut authors – partly thanks, I later learned, to a state scheme designed to support the cultural and creative industries. There is no denying that this leads to an interesting variety of interpretations of literary trends. One particularly strong trend in recent years has been the complex interplay between fact and fiction, which has been explored in the work of debut authors, as well as by some of Norway’s best-known contemporary writers. Following in the footsteps of Karl Ove Knausgaard, a number of writers continue to experiment with the possibilities that this genre presents, whether by creating fictional narratives around real-life events or by placing themselves at the heart of their work.

Brit Bildøen took the 2011 terror attack in Norway as a starting point for her novel *Seven Days in August* (published in Becky L. Crook’s English translation by Seagull Books). While touching upon this painful event in Norway’s recent history was a risk, Bildøen handles her difficult subject matter with elegance and sensitivity.

Another author to draw upon real-life events is Helga Flatland, who debuted in 2010 with the first in a trilogy telling the story of three young men from the same village who enlist to join the Norwegian armed forces, only to be killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. Flatland skilfully links international political events with a tale of rural Norwegian life, providing readers with a fresh perspective on current affairs.

Taking the interplay of fact and fiction one step further, Tor Even Svanes draws heavily upon official documents and a well-publicised court case in his most recent novel, *To the West Ice*. This stark, intense book follows a young female veterinarian on her first tour of inspection...
with an all-male crew of seal hunters. Svanes’s descriptions of the unspoiled beauty of the Greenland ice and the chilling violence of the seal hunt are powerful, creating a tale of control and transgression. Nonetheless, the fine line between actual events and the book’s fictional elements riled some critics, some of whom questioned the degree to which this could be considered a work of the imagination.

While some authors take inspiration from real-life events, others place their own experiences at the heart of their writing in a more explicit manner. Edy Poppy documents a polyamorous relationship with striking candour in her novel *Anatomy. Monotony* (forthcoming in English from Dalkey Archive Press, translated by May-Brit Akerholt). Gine Cornelia Pedersen’s prize-winning debut novel *Zero* (my own English translation of which is coming soon from Nordisk Books) is another that embraces this trend, with the author admitting to drawing upon some degree of personal knowledge. Pedersen’s novel charts one young woman’s experience of psychosis with startling vulnerability, and is written in an experimental style that pushes the boundaries of the literary form.

Unlike these authors, who seem very willing to comment upon the autobiographical elements in their work, the novelist Vigdis Hjorth remained controversially tight-lipped when she found herself at the centre of a furore concerning her highly accomplished novel *Wills and Testaments*. The book tells the story of Bergljot, who levels accusations of sexual abuse against her late father in the midst of an inheritance feud. Critics were quick to reveal similarities between the author’s life and certain events depicted in the novel, leading to debates in the press about the degree of truth in the more troubling aspects of the work. As well as simply exposing oneself to criticism, fiction that plays upon real events naturally implicates others, and rarely more controversially than in the case of Hjorth’s novel.

It could be argued that this kind of tantalisingly fact-infused fiction represents little more than egotistical navel-gazing by authors who have drifted away from a truer form of fiction; yet Norwegian authors appear to be embracing this literary trend as a means of self-exploration, and judging by their success with readers, the intimate portrayals they offer seem to embody something much more universal. The manner in which authors interpret this particular trend highlights just a little of the interesting variety to be found among Norway’s literary offerings. Perhaps, if we are lucky, we might find ourselves exposed to a little more of this diversity in English translation before too long.

Rosie Hedger
While we await the sixth and final instalment of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s ground-breaking, genre-redefining *My Struggle* series, his publisher Harvill Secker has launched the English translation of *Autumn*. Translated by Ingvild Burkey and beautifully illustrated by Vanessa Baird, it is the first in a seasonal cycle, with the other three volumes being published over the next twelve months.

Written in 2013 for his then unborn daughter, Knausgaard captures the world around him through sixty short essays that cover diverse topics from the physical to the emotional, and include blood, plastic bags, lice, war and buttons in order to create a personal encyclopaedia of life.

The Karl Ove we discover here is vastly different to the one we left at the end of *Some Rain Must Fall*. He strikes us as calmer and happier, appearing reconciled with his place in the world as a writer, father and human being. The charting of internal turmoil has been replaced by an external exploration of existence, his perspective on our human being transferred to a much larger canvas, one on which we are just one small aspect among many, where the familiar becomes foreign and the ugly beautiful: “we are at once familiar with and foreign to ourselves and the world we are part of”.

Stylistically *Autumn* is very different to his previous sprawling novels, but the themes and obsessions continue. Knausgaard digs down into the mundane and the minute before opening out to the metaphysical and the spiritual. He watches his wife and children go about their daily routine; small tasks bring him pride as he maintains the family home; in wonder he observes the natural world outside his window, as summer turns to autumn, oblivious to his being and his insatiable desire to find meaning in life and authenticity in his writing – a longing in which “one’s notions about reality and reality itself are one and the same thing. Or in other words, a life, an existence, unfamed”.

“What makes life worth living?” he asks in his opening letter to his daughter. It’s a question that has defined Knausgaard’s work and fired much of his creative angst. Now, “showing you the world, little one, makes life worth living”, so perhaps this project is where he has
finally reconciled the conflict between life and art.

The concept of writing for his daughter allows Knausgaard to approach each essay with a childlike innocence, so that subjects like tin, toilets and teeth can be looked on with new eyes, and the strangeness of what we take for granted can be explored. The book’s form also returns us to his preoccupation with the nature of family, the role of the father (his own father still haunts this collection) and the generational shift in his understanding.

When he says in his introduction that “the world expresses its being, but we are not listening”, Knausgaard is asking us to start listening again. Simple stories are suddenly flipped by an image, an anecdote or an historical cultural reference, which bring loss, nostalgia and joy in unexpected places. Although he is searching outside himself, this collection of essays grounds the reader, slows time and allows us to lift our heads from the page and look afresh upon the world: “Art was the exception. The exception opened up the moment, broke through time and created presence, in the vortex of which everything became meaningful.”

Roland Gulliver

Roland Gulliver is Associate Director at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. He has been at the Book Festival since 2007. Previously, he was at the Six Cities Design Festival and from 2000-2006 at the British Council Brussels working as their Arts Manager.

THE FROZEN WOMAN by JON MICHELET
TRANSLATED BY DON BARTLETT (NO EXIT PRESS, 2017)
REVIEWED BY GUNNAR STAALESEN

In Norway we have more than one writer who is called the “Grandfather of Nordic Noir”. I am afraid, though, that none of us deserves it. The “Grandparents of Nordic Noir” are without doubt Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. With their ten-book series about Martin Beck and his colleagues at the police department in Stockholm, they set an example that many of us, at that time younger writers, tried to follow. There is no question about them being the inspiration for Jon Michelet, and for me, when we published our first crime novels – both in 1975.

Perhaps, though, Jon and I may share the title of being the “Grandfather of Norwegian Noir”? We both wrote police procedurals back then. I had a couple of police officers at the Bergen police; he had a couple of the same in Oslo. One of his investigators was called Wilhelm Thygesen, who later on left the police to work as a lawyer, more or less as a private detective. The first real Thygesen novel in that style was Jernkorset (“The Iron Cross”) from 1976, the year before my first Varg Veum novel. Through the 1970s and 1980s our two heroes were often compared, and each operated in our respective parts of the Norwegian kingdom – Bergen and Oslo – with huge success.

Jon Michelet is a prolific writer, and in recent years he has published what is certainly going to be his principal work – a series about a young Norwegian sailor set during World War II, in which he uncovers the truth about the shameful treatment of
these sailors in the decades after the war, when they were never shown the respect they deserved; not until it was far too late. The Frozen Woman, which is being published in UK this year, is the ninth Thygesen book and was published in Norway in 2001, after a pause in the series of twelve years when Michelet wrote other kinds of books. The Frozen Woman earned him the Norwegian Riverton Prize (for the second time) for the best crime novel, the first writer ever to experience that. And it is without doubt a very good crime novel.

In this book Thygesen is sixty-three years old. He has had success as both a lawyer and a TV personality, but now he is confronted with a very difficult situation: a frozen woman found in his own garden. Very soon a biker, from a gang Thygesen has previously represented as a lawyer, is found dead, presumably murdered – and the plot thickens. It was good to read the Norwegian version when it was new, good to have Thygesen back again in good shape, and I am sure that UK readers will enjoy meeting one of the central Norwegian crime writers of the last forty years in one of his best books. And, being translated by my own English translator, Don Bartlett, I know that Michelet and Thygesen are in the very best hands.

Gunnar Staalesen

Jon Michelet has been one of Norway’s leading authors through five decades. He made his debut in 1975 with the crime novel He Who Is Born to Be Hanged Shall Never Be Drowned. He has since published numerous novels, plays and non-fiction books, and co-authored five bestselling reportage books. He has been awarded the Riverton Prize for Best Norwegian Crime Novel twice. He has also had phenomenal success with his epic series, A Hero of the Sea, which so far sold well over half a million copies, making Michelet a household name in Norway.

LITTLE LORD BY JOHAN BORGEN
TRANSLATED BY JANET GARTON (NORVIK PRESS, 2016)
REVIEWED BY ANNA MARIA ESPSÅTER

Little Lord is the first part of Norwegian author Johan Borgen’s trilogy focusing on upper-class boy Wilfred – the Little Lord of the book’s title – who is growing up in privileged circumstances in Kristiania, today’s Oslo.

Borgen chooses to contrast a boy on the brink of change with a Europe on the brink of war. In the book, we become acquainted with Oslo and the high (and low) society of its bygone days. Grünerløkka, which today is one of the city’s hippest areas – having gone from downtrodden and shabby to chic and trendy in the space of a century –
is, in the early 1900s, when the book is set, a dangerous neighbourhood. It’s one of the places into which Little Lord ventures in order to express “his dark side”, his desire for excitement and to escape his loving but stifling home, where he’s expected to remain a small, immature child.

Clever, talented, well mannered and well loved, on the surface he’s the boy who has everything – everything, that is, except a father. Throughout the book Little Lord’s father, who died when the boy was very young, is alluded to and hinted at, ever-present, but never quite tangible. His death casts a long shadow over Little Lord’s life and most of the mystery around his father’s personality and death remains hidden throughout the novel.

Little Lord’s mother is kindly, if childish, and this is where the book rings less true for me. Although I realise it is sometimes necessary to suspend one’s disbelief when reading Little Lord’s discourse – the book is written from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy, but he often seems much older – I find it harder to do when it comes to his mother, Susanna, and the other female characters. And this, in my opinion, is where Borgen falls short: the women are rather one-dimensional compared to both Little Lord and some of the other male characters.

In addition, I found many of the book’s key figures, Little Lord included, anything but sympathetic and the language has a flowery verbosity that can come across as exaggerated. This must have been a challenge for a translator, but this new English translation, for the most part, flows beautifully.

As a study of a young mind battling mental-health issues, Little Lord has contemporary merit, but, for me, most other aspects of the book work as nostalgia for a previous era.

Anna Maria Espsäter

Anna Maria Espsäter is a freelance, multilingual writer, originally from Sweden, but based in the UK for many years. She’s authored, co-authored or contributed to, more than twenty books on topics as varied as travel in Scandinavia and Latin America, South American gastronomy and everything you’ve always wanted to know about cats. www.annamariaespater.co.uk

Johan Borgen (1902 – 1979), is best known for his novels and short stories. However, he was also a popular journalist and playwright. His trilogy based on the life of Wilfred Sagen, the protagonist of Little Lord, published in the 1950s, focuses on the problems of identity and personality as a fictional construct. Borgen was a central figure in Norwegian cultural life during and after World War II.
In Torkil Damhaug’s novel *Fireraiser*, one character tells another that her psychiatrist has abandoned his medical practice in favour of writing crime novels. Cue “a mixture of laughter and contemptuous sneer”, provoked by the psychiatrist’s assumed preference for money over “making himself useful”. Damhaug, the author of four fine psychological thrillers bearing the heading the *Oslo Crime Files*, is himself a trained psychiatrist, but one should not approach his work with the cynicism exhibited by his characters. The novels, ably translated into English by Robert Ferguson, are both riveting reads and nuanced commentaries on the darkness that lurks at the heart of the Norwegian welfare state.

For the reader accustomed to the serial format of much crime writing, the *Oslo Crime Files* come as a refreshing surprise. The four novels are loosely grouped together by recurring characters, many of whom work within the justice system, but the central character varies from novel to novel. The central police figure in *Medusa* is Detective Chief Inspector Hans Magnus Viken, who is assisted by his police colleague Roar Horvath and the pathologist Jennifer Plåterud. All three appear in *Death by Water*, while Horvath emerges as a significant character in *Fireraiser*, and Plåterud takes centre stage in *Certain Signs That You Are Dead*. The doctor protagonist of *Medusa* treats a psychotic female patient, who later turns out to be the sister-in-law of Horvath’s best friend, Dan-Levi, a central character in *Fireraiser* – and so on, until a fine network of human relationships emerges. The law officials of the series move in and out of the police force, exhausted by the demands of the job and buffeted by equally demanding human relationships. Damhaug’s investigators are fallible and vulnerable human beings who are as much defined by their social interactions within the novels’ fictional world as are the criminals and victims whose actions they seek to uncover.

The picture Damhaug paints of Norwegian society is dark in the extreme. The series teems with marginal, neglected characters: immigrants from Eastern Europe and beyond; children growing up in dysfunctional or broken families; victims of child abuse; drug addicts and alcoholics. Family relationships are distorted by sibling...
rivalry, wilful deception, parental tyranny or sexual exploitation. Spaces that should be safe – children’s bedrooms, schools, hospitals, summerhouses – turn out to be the very places where we are at our most vulnerable. Those in positions of power are too damaged or weak themselves to resist temptation, leading to an endless cycle of exploitation that carries on down the generations. Grown men harass their girlfriends’ underage sisters; supply teachers invite school-girls to their homes; doctors fall into relationships with their trainees, psychologists with their patients. Yet, disturbingly but brilliantly, Damhaug suggests that we judge these characters at our peril, for we share their essential humanity and weakness.

Minna Vuohelainen

Dr Minna Vuohelainen is Lecturer in English at City, University of London. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century popular culture, including Gothic and crime fiction.

Torkil Damhaug studied literature and anthropology in Bergen, and then medicine in Oslo, specialising in psychiatry. After working as a psychiatrist for many years, he now writes full time. Torkil lives with his wife and children near Oslo.

Cursed by Thomas Enger
translated by Kari Dickson (Orenda Books, 2017)
reviewed by Max Easterman

In Thomas Enger and his translator, Kari Dickson, Orenda Books have once again come up with a winning combination. Enger is a true original on the Norwegian scene: his protagonist in his five noir novels is not the flawed, troubled police officer that we may have come to expect from the genre, but, like himself, a journalist, Henning Juul. Mind you, Juul does have his problems: an alcoholic mother, psychological trauma stemming from his son’s death in a fire and the nagging suspicion that this disaster was a warning from the man he was investigating at the time.

“Sometimes the nights went on forever: he couldn’t close his eyes without reliving it all – the smoke billowing towards him ... Jonas’s screams from the room engulfed in flames...[he was] unable to understand how you could hold your son in your arms and still not be able to save him.”

On the face of it, a journalist who takes risks, goes several rounds – figuratively and literally – with the worst thugs in Oslo, and persists in investigating the man who may have killed his son, invites comparisons with Stieg Larsson’s Mikael Blomkvist; and though Juul, like Blomkvist, digs into corruption and the grimy underworld of his capital city, the similarity ends there. The focus in Cursed is not on violence towards women, but much more on the deep, dark secrets surrounding corruption and murder, and
on Norway’s less-than-pure recent history.

So, while Juul pursues the corruption, his ex-wife, Nora – also a journalist – is following up the disappearance of one Hedda Hellberg, whose ordinary, if gilded, existence now looks quite otherwise. She was supposed to be on a retreat in Italy – but never booked it, never left Oslo, vanished at the airport and is apparently connected with the shooting of an old man in a forest in Sweden. The two investigations collide, and Henning and Nora find themselves working together again, as it becomes clear that the old man’s death is connected to some very nasty people among the country’s glitterati. And all is made more difficult by the fact that Nora is pregnant by her new boyfriend, who just happens to be one of Henning’s work colleagues – another psychological blow for him to cope with.

“They sat in silence for a few moments, each with their own thoughts ... ‘What about Nora?’ Henning heard himself ask. Iver wet his lips. ‘She’d perhaps hoped for, well, a bit more enthusiasm on my part.’ ‘It’s like having a gun to your head,’ Henning said ... ‘Being a Dad.’ Iver nodded, but Henning could see he didn’t understand what he meant.”

Cursed is so much more than a thriller, than just another Nordic noir. Certainly, the mystery builds and deepens and draws you inexorably in, but the personal stories, the domestic tensions, have their own dimension of suspense that counterbalances the criminal element and some very unpleasant events from decades ago.

“Henning thought to himself that Fritz Hellberg’s actions after the war were immoral. But the company could survive that in this day and age; the family could claim not to have known anything about it ... But Unni hadn’t thought of it that way ... she was blinded by hate. So she had killed two birds with one stone ...”

Thomas Enger writes with verve, colour and a pace that builds to a thrilling climax, cleverly and deftly weaving a complex of fictional elements into some uncomfortable details of his country’s history. Highly recommended!

Max Easterman is a journalist – he spent 25 years as a senior broadcaster with the BBC – university lecturer, translator, media trainer with Sounds Right, jazz musician and writer.

**Thomas Enger** is a former journalist. He made his debut in 2009 with the crime novel Burned, which became an international sensation before publication and is the first in a series of five books about the journalist Henning Juul. In 2013 Enger published his first book for young adults, a dark fantasy thriller called The Evil Legacy, for which he won the U-prize. Enger also composes music, and he lives in Oslo.
A woman lives alone in rural Norway, enjoying bosky nature’s idyllic manifestations: dark nights (when she walks and skis); watery days (swimming in fjords and lakes); locally grown or wild foods (excepting the red wine that accompanies her loneliness). Yet she also enjoys this loneliness, for it allows her to keep strange hours, devote herself to tapestry-making and to closely observing her nearest neighbours.

These neighbours are a Polish couple with a young daughter, Izabel, to whom the woman rents an apartment adjoining her villa. Few others come within her orbit. Even when her grown-up children visit with friends on holiday, the woman absents herself; and her boyfriend is only an occasional presence.

Alan and Mira’s marriage is, in contrast, intense and intermittently violent. The woman becomes increasingly drawn in, alternately as an observer – absorbing every coming and going - and as a manipulator, pulling strings with housing and social services departments to sort their rent and their relationship and, finally, to have them evicted.

But her primary involvement is through her art, which alters according to what it finds. Having made trade-union banners and celebratory wall hangings, she becomes obsessed with creating a tapestry to mark the centenary of women’s suffrage and the egalitarian intentions of the Norwegian Constitution. Integral to her research is the tragic tale of Johanna, who is married off young to a hellfire vicar, by whom she bears, not the son he demanded, but a daughter. Misery and repression causes Johanna gradually to lose her mind, her daughter and her life. As she reads this tale from a century before, the woman shouts aloud, “how can you tell who is mad in a mad world?”

The woman recognises that she identifies with Johanna and with her beloved sewing machine more than with modern-day Mira, who only paints her nails and is truculent even with Izabel. Yet Johanna and Mira may not be so different, and neither perhaps is the woman. If a constitution means anything, it is to defend each person’s right to self-determination and the fulfilment of their potential. But somehow it is easier to sew this onto a tapestry than put it into practice.

In its examination of the place of art and the individual in society, this novel, too, aims high. The woman’s name is Alma,
Alma is forced to realise that a life well lived needs to make an impact: “She tried to be an advocate for the ordinary and see the big picture in the little things, but it was hard going.” Ultimately, perhaps what Alma needs is less grandeur and more humility. Just as the last twist in the novel is there to remind her.

Amanda Hopkinson

Amanda Hopkinson is a literary translator, and professor of literary translation at City, University of London. She translates from Spanish, Portuguese and French, mainly specialising in fiction, poetry and human rights/testimonial writing from Latin America. At City, she has introduced MA courses in Professional Orientation (in literary translation), and co-founded the annual Translate at City Summer School.

Vigdis Hjorth

is a Norwegian novelist. She grew up in Oslo, and has studied philosophy, literature and political science. In 1983, she published her first novel, the children’s book Pelle-Ragnar i den gule gården for which she received Norsk kulturråd’s debut award. Her first book for an adult audience was Drama med Hilde (1987). Om bare, a roman à clef from 2001, is considered her most important novel.

THE UNSEEN by ROY JACOBSEN
TRANSLATED by DON BARTLETT and DON SHAW (MACLEHOSE PRESS, 2016)
REVIEWED by MISHA HOEKSTRA

The first instalment of Roy Jacobsen’s Helgeland trilogy, The Unseen follows a family scraping a rough living on a Norwegian island just south of the Arctic Circle. The family has lived on the island and shared its name – Barrøy – “since time began”.

When we first meet Ingrid she is three years old and can already gut a fish. By the time she becomes mistress of Barrøy a dozen years later, we’ve seen her learn to tie a clove hitch and card eiderdown, to cut peat and haggle. Like everyone else here, she has a knack for work and for solving problems. And there are plenty of problems: the weather and the seasons play outsized roles in the book’s brief, episodic chapters, as the islanders struggle to improve their lot and, often, simply to survive.

Though war and depression eventually impinge on the islanders’ lives in dramatic fashion, it happens indirectly. The absence of twentieth-century technology reinforces the timeless quality of the prose. The story actually begins in 1913, though that doesn’t become clear until the
next volume, still to appear in English.

Jacobsen’s lyrical voice has been gorgeously translated into English by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw. Frequent comma splices accentuate the Scandinavian flavour of the prose, while conveying a certain urgency and intensity. The translators have done a particularly noteworthy job with the dialogue; they’ve cast it in an invented dialect that draws on Norse and Lancastrian elements, so that it feels both ancient and familiar. “Tha laughs at ev’rythin’ nu,” Ingrid’s father tells her at one point.

Indeed, there is much humour and affection here, though the prevailing feeling is loneliness, which Jacobsen has called “the most Norwegian feeling of all”. He is particularly interested in how the island defines character and outlook. “Nobody can leave an island”, he writes, and the book is a demonstration of this thesis. Similarly, Ingrid’s mother is “the philosopher on the island, the one with the oblique way of looking at things, since she comes from a different island”.

In the end, The Unseen feels like one of those bottled messages that occasionally washes up on the shore of Barrøy, described as “mythical vehicles of yearning, hope and unfulfilled lives”. What do you do with such a find, once the letter is read? You could do worse than what the Barroys do, with their fierce practicality and wonder:

“... they put the letters in a chest reserved for objects which can neither be possessed nor discarded, and boil the bottles and fill them with redcurrant juice, or else simply place them on the windowsill in the barn as a kind of proof of their own emptiness, leaving the sunbeams to shine through them and turn green before refracting downwards and settling in the dry straw littering the floor.”

Misha Hoekstra

Misha Hoekstra has translated a variety of Danish fiction, including Dorthe Nors’s Mirror, Shoulder, Signal, which along with The Unseen was shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker International Prize. Misha has just been awarded The Danish Translation Award, the annual award given by The Danish Arts Foundation’s Committee for Literature.

Roy Jacobsen is one of Norway’s best-loved authors, with more than twenty novels to his credit. Several of his books have been translated into English by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw, including Child Wonder, Borders and The Burnt-Out Town of Miracles.
THE SIXTEEN TREES OF THE SOMME by LARS MYTTING
TRANSLATED BY PAUL RUSSELL GARRETT (MACLEHOSE PRESS, 2017)
REVIEWED BY MIKA PROVATA-CARLONE

In his previous book, Norwegian Wood (MacLehose Press, 2015), Lars Mytting composed an elegy to trees – not only as an elemental form of life, as symbols, and as the other, vital half of the animate cosmos, but also in their immutable relation to man. Artefact, building material, creative body, inspirational source, energy provider or civilising medium, or even as the wherewithal of devouring destruction, wood becomes in Mytting’s narrative evocative of stark simplicity and mesmeric complexity, the very stuff our lives are made of.

In The Sixteen Trees of the Somme Mytting returns to trees and wood, this time as the critical pivot of an eggshell-thin narrative of life that alone can keep the characters from hurtling themselves into a gaping abyss. A story of isolation and of the quest for community, a tale of fear and of the yearning for release, it is a narrative of reflection, memory failing, memory lost and memory regained.

A boy grows up in a fecund solitude that contains the sinister and the miraculous in almost equal measure, in a twentieth-century Heidi-like household in Norway that includes a darkly enigmatic, recluse grandfather and a farm, where life and death have always alternated in the midst of a natural landscape as dramatically beautiful as it is pregnant with tragedy. Screaming silence and healing Nordic stillness form the background, the frame of vision and analysis of single and multiple pasts, dreams and nightmares, singular and unexceptional lives. A camera, an M6 Leica with a full set of macro, telescopic, panoramic and fish-eye lenses, becomes the catalyst for tensions suffused with chilling mystery, tangential coherence, unsettling gaps in the continuum of life and understanding, which threaten the very possibility of existence.

Mytting contrasts the epic terror of World War I with the heinous Nazi atrocities of World War II, lethal green poison-gas mines and the Black Watch pitted against the Green Mina death trucks of Ravensbrück and the black SS uniforms. He writes with the unembellished exactness of coarse-grain film and the poetry of lost possibilities, combining the rhetoric of an earlier feel for language and literature with the need for images and words that will sustain...
continuity with a more contemporary reality. He is the artist, the writer-photographer who captures and interprets the past, the present moment and infinity: the intimation that “we are many who talk about heaven. But few who understand eternity” becomes the underlying drive behind the characters’ choices, in an attribution of meaning that oscillates audaciously between the absolute and the merely human.

The Sixteen Trees of the Somme conceals genuineness and purity of diction behind a story that intertwines the historical experience with the mysterious, the thrilling, the if-only fairy-tale romance, the whole spun together with a mythographer’s skill for creating symbols out of allegories, lore out of facts, experience out of events, wisdom out of fault and failure. Felling a tree or nurturing a wood, taking or leaving the Leica behind, opting between wellies and bespoke footwear, choosing the flawless fit of habit or the friction of a more potent union become the vocabulary of a “this side of language” that will finally weave together the severed strands of many lives, many episodes of history, into an anonymous vita beata.

Mika Provata-Carlone

Mika Provata-Carlone is an independent scholar, translator, editor and illustrator, and a contributing editor to Bookanista. She has a doctorate from Princeton University and lives and works in London.

Lars Mytting is a novelist and journalist born in Fåvang in Norway’s Oppland county in 1968. The Sixteen Trees of the Somme was awarded the Norwegian National Booksellers’ Award and has been bought for film. Norwegian Wood has become an international bestseller, and was the Bookseller Industry Awards Non-Fiction Book of the Year 2016.

THE HISTORY OF BEES by MAJA LUNDE
translated by DIANE OATLEY (SCRIBNER UK, 2017)
reviewed by WEST CAMEL

There is a key moment in the professional, personal and spiritual life of William Savage – one of The History of Bees’ three protagonists – when he realises that, by redesigning the standard beehive, bees can be “tamed by us, become our subjects”. By thinking of the new hive not as a house but as a laboratory and a factory – somewhere beekeepers can study and control the insects – William Savage, along with his colleagues specialising in the field of apiary, make the breakthrough that forms the centre of this expansive and powerful novel.

Savage’s story takes place in mid-nineteenth-century England. In early twenty-first-century America, his ancestor, George, is an industrial bee-keeper, witnessing first-hand the early worrying occurrences of CCD – Colony Collapse Disorder, the real-life phenomenon in which bees abandon
hives overnight, bankrupting their owners and putting the human food chain at risk. The novel’s third protagonist, Tao, lives in late twenty-first century China, in what I’m sure every reader will hope is not their children’s future – a global dystopia that is the result of CCD, the disorder that can be traced back to the scientific breakthroughs made by Savage and his ilk 250 years before.

Maja Lunde’s debut adult novel, is therefore, a cautionary tale. Her point – that human interference in the natural order has far-reaching consequences we’d be wise to address now – is made adroitly and packs all the more punch because it is delivered via three very personal, very human stories. While William, George and Tao are all connected in some way by bees and beekeeping, their primary concerns are their relationships with their children. But it is no great effort to connect Lunde’s two main themes.

What makes this novel even more interesting, however, is the control Lunde maintains over her material. In many ways, she looks down on her characters and her plot in the same way that, as William says, “the sky … looked down upon me, and perhaps also God the Father … because this is how we shall look down on the bees”. Lunde, then, is a kind of literary apiarist, pulling out from the hive of her novel its various structures – its frames – and displaying to her reader the activities of its characters. This is not to say that there aren’t dramatic moments in the book – there are. But overall it is a quiet, and at times rather slow reading experience. Yet as the evidence from each, almost scientifically recorded, incident accumulates, the effect of the novel builds. As a reader you begin to trace the connections between the three plot strands and simultaneously develop a pit-of-the-stomach sickness as you sense where we are heading.

Only a rare reader won’t close this book and go searching for more information about bee populations and solutions to CCD. This, no doubt, is Lunde’s intention: she exerts control even after her reader has finished this persuasive debut.

West Camel

Maja Lunde is a Norwegian author and screenwriter. Lunde has written ten books for children and young adults. She has also written scripts for Norwegian television. The History of Bees is her first novel for adults.
A Modern Family explores the impact of one couple’s decision to divorce after forty years of marriage, documenting the reactions of their three adult children as they process the unexpected news. In common with Flatland’s work so far, A Modern Family deals with the concept of loss in its many variations. She writes with great insight into the pursuit of self-realisation. A Modern Family has sold over 20,000 copies since its publication this summer (2017). Since her fiction debut in 2010, Flatland has been awarded a host of literary prizes. Her work is now gaining recognition outside of Norway, although it is still to be translated into English. Her elegant and perceptive portrayals of everyday relationships leave their mark on the reader, and much like her previous novels A Modern Family offers psychological insight and shrewd analysis of the experience of the individual in contemporary society, making Helga Flatland a noteworthy voice of her generation.

We’re far too big for Italy. Big and white and blond, we barely fit around the table at the restaurant that evening. The furniture and interiors have been designed with trim little Italians in mind, not Dad and Håkon, both almost six feet four inches tall; not for such long arms and legs; not for us. We squeeze ourselves into our chairs, all elbows and knees, too many joints jostling for room. Ellen and Håkon squabble over the available space, suddenly teenagers all over again; I recall the way we marked the seams between the seat cushions in the back of the car, treating them as border lines – even the slightest coat flap sneaking over your own seam was forbidden. The air around us was subject to the same restrictions. Håkon was only three at the time, but he grew up with sisters, and with clearly defined lines in the car and the tent and at the dining table – and in life in general, really – lines that laid down the ground rules.
Sitting beside us is an Italian family, there are more of them than there are of us, and they’re all seated around a smaller table, as Håkon points out, all making their way through one dish after the next, just like Olaf and I did on our first trip to Rome. We’d told the waiter that we wanted to order the same dishes as the family at the table next to us. I’d spent the following week gazing at these big Italian families sitting down to eat together every evening for several hours at a time, children and grandparents, loud and prone to gesticulation, just like in the films, and I missed my own family, though I knew even then that it wouldn’t be the same if they were there. Here. But now they are here, now we’re here, all of us seated around the same table: Mum, Dad, Ellen, Ellen’s boyfriend, Simen, Agnar and Hedda, Olaf and me – and Håkon.

I glance over at Dad at the head of the table and it strikes me that we’re sitting exactly where we sit when we’re at our parents’ house. Dad is always seated at the head of the table, with Mum to his right and me beside her, and Håkon sits across from Mum, with Ellen by his side. Other, later additions to the family – partners: Olaf, Agnar, Hedda – they’ve had to organise themselves around us. I don’t think we even gave it a single thought. The only person ever to initiate any kind of silent protest is Simen; on the few occasions he’s joined us for family gatherings, he’s practically launched himself at the seat beside Ellen – Håkon’s place – draping an arm across the back of her chair and demonstratively clinging to his spot until everyone else has sat down.

Dad has thick grey hair, and even though I still see him with the dark hair he had in pictures taken when I was little, I can only just recall it; in my memories, he always has the same grey hair he has now. He locks eyes with me and smiles, and I wonder what he’s thinking about, if he’s happy, if things are how he imagined they would be. Perhaps he hasn’t imagined them at all; he tends not to predict what things will be like one way or the other, but he’s always commented on my own tendency to do so: You have to try to accept things as they are, Liv, he told me when I was young and shedding anguished tears over holidays, handball matches or school assignments that hadn’t gone as I’d predicted they would. It was impossible to explain to Dad just how critical it was that they should unfold exactly as I’d anticipated; any action or accomplishment, great or small, each one had to follow a predictable course to prevent things from becoming chaotic and intangible. But life couldn’t be planned in that kind of detail, Dad had said, you needed to accept that you couldn’t always control everything.

Helga Flatland

Translated by Rosie Hedger

Helga Flatland is one of Norway’s most awarded and widely read authors. She has written four novels and a children’s book. Her fifth novel A Modern Family was published in Norway in August 2017.
For three days on end, the local farming folk combed the bushes and thickets, wedging their way into a bear’s abandoned winter den, wading through the brook on the mountain dairy farm and dragging iron hooks fastened to long lines through pools and tarns; but it was as if the earth had opened up and swallowed the missing man. Their dredging tugged up nothing but water-lily roots, slick as eels. They hallooed and listened. The echo mocked their cries. When they stopped to rest, all they could hear was the deafening stillness of the dairy pastures.

When they came back to the dairy farm at twilight, the white cowbell chimes glittered in the air around them like whitefish darting in a river’s current. And then the evening poured across the uplands and muddied the day. The sky above the dairy shed filled with twinkling shards of glass. Out in the meadows, the darkness gasped for breath beneath the juniper and the crooked birch. Only after they had stepped into the cramped summer farmhouse did they gradually become calm. The paraffin lamps shone. The men ate and drank. The plump timber of the beams closed its fingers about them, so that they sat shoulder to shoulder as if hidden within the hollow of two clasped palms. The flame shuddered on its wick. They spoke little. And then sleep blew them all out.
At the end of the third day, all the search party had found was a grimacing skull, a backbone, a silver belt-buckle, a fine brooch and several bone fragments besides, all belonging to the daughter of a well-to-do farmer who, as the whole village knew, had been lured away from home one Saturday night long, long ago and enticed into the mountain realm by the troll in Gråberg Peak. It looked to the search party as if the troll had swallowed the girl up, skin and hair and all, then hawked up the bones and spat them out again, it was said. What they took at first to be an indigestible skein of her waist-long brown hair proved, on closer inspection, to be owl pellets.

On the sixth day after the brothers had gone up along the boundary, the carcass of the murder victim floated up to the surface of the water out in the middle of a tarn. It lay there and swelled up to a vast size in the baking sun beneath a blue-black thundercloud of raucous, cawing ravens. The dairymaid who discovered the dead body thought at first it was an ox-calf puffed up with bloat.

Four men carried the waterlogged carcass back to the village on a litter in the late-August evening. And it was said that the corpse glowed and cast a greenish sheen around it like the will-o’-the-wisp that hovers over a hoard of silver buried in the marshes, or the phosphorus gleam that flickers around spoiled fish in the darkness of the cellar. He lit himself home in the black night, it was said.

Hans Herbjørnsrud

Translated by Lucy Moffatt

Hans Herbjørnsrud was born in Telemark in 1938. In 1976, he abandoned a teaching career to take over the family farm in Heddal, and made his writing debut three years later with Witnesses, which won him the Tarjei Vesaas prize for first-time authors. His subsequent work – with its rich, inventive language, forays into metafiction and explorations of human villainy – has earned him a central place as one of Norway’s most critically acclaimed writers of short fiction. Herbjørnsrud was nominated for the European Arsteion Prize in 1999, won the Aschehoug Prize and Dobloug Prize in 2005, and has twice been nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize.

Lucy Moffatt is a literary and commercial translator working from Norwegian and Spanish. Recent work includes Tatiana Huezo Sánchez’s award-winning documentary, Tempest, 1909 Norwegian crime classic The Iron Chariot by Stein Riverton, and Nowherelands: An Atlas of Vanished Countries by Bjørn Berge. In 2014 she won a John Dryden prize for her translation of a longer excerpt of this Herbjørnsrud text.
Amalie Skram was a female naturalist writer living from 1846 to 1905; she is one of the most important inspirations for my own writing. She wrote with a huge sympathy for her characters, and her point of view was radical for a female author at the time in which she wrote.

Three of her novels are translated into English (Constance Ring, Lucie and Betrayed), but not her main work, the tetralogy, Hellemyrsfolket. In my opinion this is one of the most important and best prose works ever written in Norwegian. Had it been written in English, French or German, Amalie Skram would be an important name in the history of nineteenth-century world fiction.

If you are going to read only one Nordic Noir novel in your life, you should read this. It has both an English title and an American one, but whatever it is called, the book is the masterpiece of modern Norwegian crime fiction, judged as the best-ever Norwegian crime novel by the newspaper Dagbladet in 2009. In the novel we meet Gunder Jomann, who has married Poona, a woman from India, who he is going to fetch at the airport. But a traffic accident stops him, and Poona is later found murdered. The case is in the hands of Karin Fossum’s detective, the sympathetic police inspector Konrad Sejer. It is a touching love story and one of the most shattering crime novels in Norwegian literature, with an ending that you will never stop thinking about.
Swedish Writing: A Riveting Guide

Sweden – A Journey in Literature
By Nichola Smalley

Sweden may be famous as the birthplace of the contemporary Scandi-crime wave, Pippi Longstocking and the Nobel Prize in Literature, but look a little closer and you will see a wealth of less famous but equally brilliant gems among the writers creating contemporary literary fiction and poetry.

Contemporary Swedish literature is characterised by a diversity of voices, settings and literary intentions. From intricately plotted memoirs to bold experiments in perspective via idiosyncratic depictions of rural life, this particular trip around Sweden gives you a glimpse into the country’s literary riches.

The comparative isolation of northern Sweden has produced some of the country’s most fascinating literature in recent years, often characterised by strange events and the creative use of local dialect. Two examples of this are writers native to Västerbotten, Torgny Lindgren and Stina Stoor. Lindgren sadly died earlier this year, but many of his books (Hash, The Way of a Serpent) have been translated into English by Tom Geddes. They capture a world of tight-knit communities and inexplicable but comic encounters. Following in Lindgren’s linguistically experimental footsteps, Stina Stoor’s sole short-story collection Bli som folk (“Beasts and Other Stories”) is yet to be published in English, but it’s a rich and complex portrait of an area that has been hard hit by depopulation and economic decline. My hope is that one day English readers will have the opportunity to enjoy its frank and pleasingly vulgar explorations of human nature.

The southern region of Skåne has also produced some bold writers recently. This year’s winner of the August Prize, Sweden’s equivalent of the Booker, is Lina Wolff, with her novel The Polyglot Lovers, a work of comic genius and serious feminist intent that revolves around an ill-fated manuscript written by a fantastically egotistical male writer. If you can’t wait for that, her acclaimed debut novel Bret Easton Ellis and the Other Dogs was published in English in 2016, in Frank Perry’s Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize-winning translation.

Also from Skåne is Andrzej Tichý, a young writer who brings his innovatively constructed narratives to life with direct language tinged with multilingual slang. His first novel in English translation is expected in 2019.
Travelling up the western coast, we come to Gothenburg, and two writers who have made their names as being unafraid to challenge racism and religious intolerance – Athena Farrokhzad and Johannes Anyuru. Farrokhzad’s poetry collection *White Blight* was published in Jennifer Hayashida’s translation in 2016. Her confessional, accusatory portrayals of life in the diaspora make for transfixing reading. Anyuru is also a poet, but my favourite book of his (and the only one to have been translated into English – by Rachel Willson-Broyles in 2015) is the novel *A Storm Blew in from Paradise*. At its centre is Anyuru’s father, a Ugandan pilot trained by the Greek military just before Idi Amin’s coup. It’s a visceral study of power, ambition and desperation.

Heading east to Stockholm, we find Jonas Hassen Khemiri, whose playful yet insightful novels, stories and plays have brought his reputation as a uniquely talented wordsmith to a wider audience outside Sweden. His most recent novel in English (published in 2015) is *Everything We Don’t Remember*, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles. This portrait of a young man, told from multiple perspectives, speaks eloquently of the fragility of human relationships.

Finally, I’d like to come to Per Olov Enqvist, one of Sweden’s most established writers, and one who has been translated into English many times. His most recent book in English is *The Parable Book* (2016), in Deborah Bragan-Turner’s translation. A tale of a young boy’s life-altering love for a much older woman, *The Parable Book* twists and overlaps, pouring forth in a series of riddles. The writing is rhythmic and reverberates with memory and realisation.

This personal journey through Sweden’s contemporary literary landscape is no more than a snapshot, yet I hope it gives you an idea of the boldness and innovative spirit of writers working in a national context that has an international significance far beyond what might be expected of such a small country. Swedish writers are often outward-looking and well-versed in international literature (perhaps they have the Nobel Prize to thank for that), yet are intensely conscious of local identities and their place in the world. The writers I have highlighted here are excellent examples of that combination of far-sightedness and dedication to the detail of local life – I hope you enjoy exploring their work.

Nichola Smalley

Nichola Smalley is Publicity, Marketing and Sales Manager at independent publisher And Other Stories. She’s also a translator and lover of Swedish and Norwegian literature, and an escaped academic. Her translations include *Jogo Bonito* by Henrik Brandão Jönsson, a Swedish book about Brazilian football, and *How to Fall in Love with a Man Who Lives in a Bush* by Emmy Abrahamson.
Who was Samuel, and why did he die? These are the central questions in a gripping, jigsaw puzzle of truth, lies and misinterpretations, related in the most original and bracing way by the gifted Swedish novelist Jonas Hassen Khemiri. Samuel is the protagonist – in spite of the fact that he has just died in a car crash. His last days on earth are reconstructed by an unnamed and unreliable narrator. Who is this narrator, beyond just being “the author”? He’s not a friend, he’s not family, but he inveigles himself into the lives of those close to Samuel to interview them and investigate Samuel’s death; to find out if it was murder, an accident or suicide. The narrative perspective shifts to and fro, as the story is passed on, like a relay baton, from one character to the next. We hear primarily from Samuel’s ex-girlfriend Laide, his mate Vandad and his grandma. Each has a different version of Samuel: he is loving and generous, but also closed and mysterious, someone who “conformed so much that he erased himself”. Samuel is an enigma; his life is the jigsaw puzzle.

The story is told in fragments, strung together as a necklace of lively observations, clues and character portrayals. The language is musical and lyrical, without a false note, and with the rhythm and direct expression of song lyrics. Songs about pain, love, grief but also about the wealth gaps and population pressures of modern city life – Stockholm in this case.

Samuel and his friends experience the challenges of poverty, crime and immigration in a rapidly changing place. He and his girlfriend work with refugees and migrants, and the two of them share a wealth of languages and cultures – Arabic, French, English and Swedish. They also represent challenges to Sweden’s famous tolerance and equality, and to its fast-disappearing welfare state. Multilingual and multifaceted, Samuel and Laide are just like their creator.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri was born and brought up in Stockholm with a Swedish mother and Tunisian father. He hit the literary headlines in 2003 with his first novel, One Eye Red, a Swedish bestseller. His next novel, Montecore, The Silence of The Tiger (also published in English) won top prizes, and his play Invasion is
performed round the world. He is today a highly regarded playwright and novelist, and a well-known and outspoken public commentator in Sweden on issues of immigration policy, identity and race – descriptions of himself that I know he dislikes and dismisses. I’ve had the good fortune to interview Jonas Hassen Khemiri at literary festivals. He is an eloquent and charismatic speaker, and rejects his role as public spokesperson, saying that, “the word ‘immigration’ brings me out in a rash – it is too loaded and complex’. But his background has shaped his life, and his linguistic and intellectual agility have forced him to the front of the stage: people listen to him.

“I think [language] is why I started writing. Never believing that one’s language is an x-ray of a character’s soul, but rather showing [its] manipulative power.”

Language is obviously a major obsession for Khemiri. He is suspicious of it but it is his drug. This novel is an impressive read, not just for its provocative writing but for the original way it tackles our current European anxieties.

Rosie Goldsmith

Jonas Hassen Khemiri is one of the most important writers of his generation in Sweden. His debut novel, One Eye Red was awarded the Borås Tidning Award for Best Literary Debut Novel and became a bestseller. Khemiri’s equally original second novel, Montecore: The Silence of the Tiger, was awarded the prestigious P.O. Enquist Literary Prize and Swedish Radio’s Award for Best Novel In November 2015, Khemiri was awarded the prestigious August Prize. His novels have been translated into over twenty languages. He is also a celebrated playwright.


Okay, maybe this is not so innocuous coming as it does from the pen of John Ajvide Lindqvist, the Swedish horror writer, best known for his debut novel Let the Right One In. But it’s a small chuckle for Isabelle.

That opening exchange is between six-year-old Molly and her mother, Isabelle. They’re on a caravan holiday, but the entire campsite has disappeared, save for four cars, their caravans and occupants; there is just an empty space left, an expanse of grass all around and no sun in the sky. Ajvide Lindqvist examines his characters mercilessly in this nothingness: glamorous Peter and Isabelle with their daughter Molly; another family, Stefan, Carina and their son Emil; an older couple, Majvor and Donald; and Lennart and Olov, two old friends who have lived together since their wives left them.

As the novel progresses, we learn about each character’s past. It turns out that even a couple like footballer Peter and model Isabelle, who might appear perfect to outsiders, have their dark secrets. The strange nothing-world brings these secrets out, to the reader’s eyes at least: the characters themselves only catch a glimpse of their personal bogeymen, spooky figures from their childhood that may (or may not) be supernatural. It could be that the space in which the characters find themselves is built from the dark side of their imaginations. Then again, Donald thinks the whole thing is his own elaborate dream, so who knows?

I Am behind You takes its time to unfold – sometimes a little too much time, as the book can drag in places – but stick with it and what unfolds is a tale in which the horror ultimately comes from within, and all the supernatural paraphernalia simply exist to help coax it free.

David Hebblethwaite

David Hebblethwaite is a book blogger and reviewer. He has written about translated fiction for Shiny New Books, Strange Horizons, Words Without Borders, and We Love This Book. He blogs at http://www.davidsbookworld.com/.

John Ajvide Lindqvist was a conjurer and then a stand-up comedian, before writing Let the Right One In. That novel became a phenomenal international bestseller and was made into a film and a West End play, both called Let Me In. His books are published in twenty-nine countries worldwide.
One evening in August 1947, twenty-four-year-old David Rosenberg from Łódź alights in Södertälje, a small Swedish town with a big lorry factory. The sender’s address on his letters to fiancée Hala is R 639 B, as stark as a block number in a concentration camp. Passing trains screech and whine “like an overburdened chain gang on a punishment march”. Yet Södertälje – largely history-free – holds the promise of a new life for the young couple who once parted on the selection ramp at Auschwitz.

Göran Rosenberg’s multi-layered masterpiece is a memorial to the father he loved, and lost. It is also an exploration of David’s experiences as a death-camp inmate, slave labourer, refugee and emigré; an examination of how society treats traumatised refugees; and a poignant memoir of Rosenberg’s childhood.

The narrative shifts back and forth in time, capturing the simultaneity of past and present. The opening scenes in post-war Sweden are followed by a flashback to the Łódź ghetto, where all pretence of normality ceases when the SS order families to yield up their young children. Meanwhile, Södertälje’s local newspaper juxtaposes a piece on the celebrations of the Catholic Saint Lucia with a report on the killing of Poland’s Jews. Like the Warsaw carousel that Czesław Miłosz immortalised, still turning while the ghetto empties, the everyday coexists with genocide.

The central chapter traces David’s odyssey from Łódź, via Auschwitz in Poland, to Germany and the slave-labour camp near Braunschweig, where he fitted lorry axles for Firma Büssing, on to Ravensbrück and the Wöbbelin death camp. Though the horror is beyond imagining, Rosenberg chronicles the atrocities meticulously, performing a duty of memory. The quiet, understated narrative style occasionally gives way to bitter irony, as when Firma Büssing’s proprietor rejects a post-war demand for compensation on the spurious grounds of having treated “his” slaves better than most. Sarah Death’s translation sensitively conveys these shifts in tone.

Beyond the horror, however, the book’s most remarkable achievement is its heart-piercing depiction of a young man’s struggle to make the transition from survival to life, moving from a Swedish “aliens’ camp” to the “Place” he attempts to “make his own”. “The Place”,
“the Project”, “the Child”, “the Name” and “the Language” acquire universal significance. Göran is given the most common Swedish boy’s name to make sure he will fit in. But David, who hones his Swedish by reading Strindberg after shifts at the lorry factory, and designs a car luggage rack – the “Piccolo”, which has echoes of the Auschwitz “Pikolo” in Primo Levi’s masterpiece – nonetheless remains trapped in an assembly-line job that crushes his spirit. He will ultimately be enveloped by the shadows of the past. Rosenberg berates his younger self, “the Child”, for failing to grasp that “he cannot make the Place his own if he doesn’t know where he comes from”. That is the very thing the book explores and it does this in such an intensely moving way that it adds to our understanding of the duty and art of being human.

Fiona Graham

Fiona Graham is reviews editor at the Swedish Book Review. She has translated Karin Bojs’ August Prize-winning My European Family: the First 54,000 Years (Bloomsbury Sigma) and Elisabeth Åsbrink’s acclaimed 1947: When Now Begins (Scribe UK), both published in 2017.

Göran Rosenberg is one of Sweden’s foremost journalists. His books include Plikten, profiten och konsten att vara människa (“Duty, Profit and the Art of Being Human”); Friare kan ingen vara: den amerikanska idén från revolutionen till Reagan och lite till (“Free Man’s Burden: The American Idea from Revolution to Reagan – and a bit more”), described as “the best book on American political history written by a European in recent years”; and Det förlorade landet: en personlig historia (“The Lost Land: A Personal History”) on Israel.

A FORTUNE FORETOLD by AGNETA PLEIJEL
TRANSLATED BY MARJAINÉ DELARGY (OTHER PRESS, 2017)
REVIEWED BY ANEESA ABBAS HIGGINS

The coming-of-age novel is almost a rite of passage for the emerging novelist, a vehicle through which a voice is found and the burden of lived experience lightened. A Fortune Foretold, from the acclaimed Swedish novelist Agneta Pleijel, shares many of these characteristics, but Pleijel has waited until late in her long and distinguished career to produce this penetrating analysis of the childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of a woman whose young life was scarred by the dawning realisation that her parents’ marriage had been lived “without the slightest vestige of honesty”.

Pleijel’s mature voice, translated here by Marlaine Delargy, is both distinctive and uncompromising, as the narrator Neta delves into the treacherous swamp of her own memory and tries to discover how the child of those memories became the woman she is now.

The child and the mature woman are clearly differentiated in the novel, with the narration alternating between the “I” of the narrator’s voice looking back and the “she” of the girl speaking in the remembered past. It took me a few pages to become used to this unusual approach but I was soon drawn into the world of the bookish child growing up in post-war Sweden with her father, a professor of mathematics, and her mother, a gifted pianist whose own career had been derailed by marriage, motherhood and the
Neta navigates her way through school, always seeking refuge in books in order to make sense of the world around her. With the adults shrouding themselves in silence, anything unpleasant or shameful shunned in conversation, the young Neta realises very early on that the subject of sex is the biggest taboo of all. However, Pleijel’s treatment of the young girl’s sexual awakening is forthright and unstinting. From the child’s obsessive desire to know what adults get up to, through the fumblings of adolescence and the restless promiscuity of her early adulthood, Neta strives to find a way of uniting body and soul. When the veil covering her parents’ relationship is torn away, and the deception and betrayal that had eroded it are revealed, she is forced to confront a harsh truth: “So this is love stripped bare. This is the god Eros. And Eros turns out to be evil. Destructive.”

As her mother crumbles and sinks into depression, the adolescent Neta feels she is forced to live inside her mother’s despair. Torn between a father she loves and a mother to whom she feels bound by an intimate, visceral bond, the young Neta turns throughout the novel to her beloved aunt, Ricki. It is to Ricki that the fortune of the title is told, and it is the trajectory of Ricki’s life that provides Neta with the final epiphany of the narrative.

*A Fortune Foretold* is an engrossing and memorable novel. Pleijel’s direct, uncompromising voice leaves us in no doubt that the burden placed on the child by a failed marriage is very heavy indeed. But Pleijel’s treatment of this bleak subject is far from despairing. Neta’s memories and revelations may be suffused with the melancholy that invariably accompanies age and maturity, but her tale is peppered with zest and humour and enlightened by a restless intelligence and desire to understand.

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**Aneesa Abbas Higgins**

*Aneesa Abbas Higgins* is a literary translator and former teacher. Born in London, she has lived in Britain, France and the USA and holds degrees from Sussex University and the University of London. She translates from French and has studied several other languages.

**Agneta Pleijel** has worked as a critic and cultural editor for various Swedish newspapers and magazines. She served as President of Swedish PEN between 1987 and 1990, and has been a member of the academy Samfundet de Nio (The Nine Society) since 1988. From 1992 to 1996, Pleijel was a professor at the Institute of Drama in Stockholm. Apart from being one of Sweden’s foremost novelists, she is also a playwright and a poet. Her books have been translated into more than 20 languages.
In The Darkest Day Håkan Nesser introduces the reader to Rosemarie and Karl Erik Hermansson, a middle-aged couple who are set to retire and move to Spain – the dream of many middle-class Swedes. What should otherwise be a joyous moment in a couple’s life is, for the Hermanssons, one that is fraught with existential angst. At least it is for Rosemarie, who resents her husband’s intransigence, and whose run-of-the-mill life has recently been rocked by their son’s scandalous performance on a TV reality show.

As we discover more about the dysfunctional Hermansson family, so the tension mounts, heightened all the more by the prospect of an imminent family reunion – a joint father and daughter birthday celebration, which is reminiscent of similar scenes depicted in Scandinavian film and TV dramas, such as Thomas Vinterberg’s Festen and Maya Ilsøe’s Arvingerne. Keen observations of sibling rivalry and charged family dynamics are set against some wonderful sketches of everyday Swedish life and explorations of how people cope (or not) with the changes and challenges this life brings. As the pressure-cooker tension mounts, Nesser layers up the various generations’ approaches to the whirligig of time, and at first it appears it is simply this that makes the novel such a satisfying read. However, the initial lack of a December snowfall in this Nordic setting should, perhaps, alert us to the fact that a rupture is inevitable. When it does come, it is with the disappearances of not one, but two family members, with devastating consequences.

Readers familiar with Nesser’s earlier and highly successful Van Veeteren series will be aware of how well he draws a grumpy, cynical investigator. With Inspector Gunnar Barbarotti, an officer of Swedish/Italian origins, the author presents us with another experienced detective; this one, though, has entered into a deal with God. Having suffered the trauma of divorce, the idiosyncratic Barbarotti is obsessed with proving that God exists, something he does by showing how God answers his prayers and provides him with the guidance he seeks.

Rather than fulfilling the stereotype of the lone sleuth, here we have a detective who works well with his colleague and friend, Ewa Backman. Indeed, at the heart of this novel lie the knotty questions of human interaction and family ties. In the case of Ewa, we see an officer who refuses to let her husband and children’s obsession with ice hockey ruin the relationship she has with them.
In common with all fine contemporary Nordic Noir narratives, *The Darkest Day* (the first instalment in a new five-part series) places society under the microscope, revealing the dilemmas and difficulties that trouble the psyche of a nation. Cultural shifts, generational differences, societal constraints and the expectations individuals put on themselves and others, are just a few of the questions Nesser explores, while at the same time providing a top-notch investigation into some grisly goings-on, courtesy of his latest crime-fighting duo Barbarotti and Backman.

*Jacky Collins*

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**Håkan Nesser** is one of Sweden’s most popular crime writers, receiving numerous awards for his novels featuring Inspector Van Veeteren, including the European Crime Fiction Star Award, the Swedish Crime Writers’ Academy Prize and Scandinavia’s Glass Key Award. The Van Veeteren series is published in over twenty-five countries and has sold over ten million copies worldwide.

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**RIVETING SWEDISH RECOMMENDATIONS**

**From Minna Vuohelainen**

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**Let the Right One In**
by John Ajvide Lindqvist

Meet the vampire next door: s/he is not even the most terrifying monster in this Stockholm suburb seemingly abandoned by the welfare state. Nordic Gothic at its best.
He said:
Philanthropy is simply vanity.
Charity is the way
ambitious ladies
keep score.

You with your little
gender equality department.
Who cares.

He said:
When do you ever think
about anything other than
how injured you are
and how appalling it is
that people don’t think
you’re a great authority.

Why should I play a role in your farce
when you won’t play one in mine?
Or do you think yours is less farcical?
How blind can you be?

She said:
I am playing a role in your farce
though it’s more of a sordid tragedy.

It’s sad that
all you can do is
sneer at me
but that’s fine
I’m used to it.
I’ve done the weekend shop.
Don’t destroy it
please.
YOU CAN GET A LOT DONE BETWEEN THE TEARS

She said:
In The Night of the Tribades
Siri cries
I’m so alone.
Enquist gets it spot on there.
But then the play is from 1975.

Women were on the move.
And new men too.

He said:
I hate the seventies.
No-one noticed me.

He said:
It’s emancipation.
It put ideas in women’s heads.

Feminism is
a fixed set of opinions.
I despise that kind of thing.

He said:
Man is superior to woman.
It’s how it’s always been
and how it’s going to stay.

Haven’t you got any nails
to bite
or chairs
to hit?

She said:
The mechanism in place.
Half the brain switched off.
Your Google translate
takes the things I say.
Prints out
evasive
derisive
discourteous
coltroucheous
words.
Nonsense.

Are you a human being or a plati-
tude generator?

He said:
Watch your step.
I can be a really nasty person.

She said:
Think that’s news?
Today my sister
saw the bruises
in the bath.

Born in Stockholm to a German father and Estonian mother who had sought refuge in Sweden during the war, Ebba Witt-Brattström has won numerous awards for journalism and criticism. She was Swedish newspaper, Expressen’s, runner up in their ‘Women of the Year 2017’ survey.

Kate Lambert has been a freelance translator for over 20 years, following stints as, amongst other things, an English language teacher at a hydropower station in Arctic Finland. As well as having translated a number of titles from Swedish and Finnish, Kate has made contributions to the Dorothy L Sayers Society and has reviewed various works for the Swedish Book Review. She lives in Somerset.
FROM *DEVIL’S HORN* (“PUKEHORNET”)
BY KERSTIN EKMAN (ALBERT BONNIERS FÖRLAG, 1967)
INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED BY SARAH DEATH

Two decades before Paul Auster published his meta-detective fiction in the stories of *The New York Trilogy*, leading Swedish author Kerstin Ekman dipped her toe in the same waters. Her *Devil’s Horn*, a clever and intriguing short novel, long overdue for translation into English, is set in a run-down workers’ district in Uppsala and in the surrounding countryside. It is sometimes described as a crossover work, marking the author’s transition from crime fiction to “serious” literature. But then all of Ekman’s fiction is multi-dimensional and resistant to straightforward genre categorisation.

In this opening chapter of *Devil’s Horn* we see old Agda Wallin’s insecure carer-handyman Pär (Peardrop) become trapped by his own fear and inertia after a disastrous trip to the country. He soon finds himself caught in a web of lies. But is Peardrop the only teller of stories in the novel? Another narrative voice emerges: that of the female writer who rents one of the upstairs flats. The entire premise of the plot is gradually called into question: is the whole first section of the novel in fact a product of that writer’s imagination?

**EXTRACT**

Pär went with her to Kolarby as usual to see she got on the bus alright and didn’t lose her footing on the way. She had made her usual trip in June. Now it was November, and if there had been snow on the ground, she would not have been able to make it from the bus to her sister’s cottage. It was too far by the lane, the way the milk lorries went, but there was a short cut along a good, level path through the forest up to the main road.

On the way back, he walked behind her to make sure she didn’t fall as she heaved herself along. Looking after old women had its drawbacks. Her sister had shed a few tears, sitting there among her packed boxes of possessions, and they had stayed longer than planned. Now they were making their way slowly through the forest, and as they did, he was telling someone about their trip.

“And wouldn’t you know it, the batty old bird wanted to take the forest path even though we had a full half-hour until the bus went. Agda, I said, you listen to me.” That’s what he could have said to her. He was practising the story of their trip to Rotbol near Kolarby. There was no guarantee he would ever have listeners to tell it to, but everything was better when he told it as a story. That was something he had often noticed: everything was better if he told it as a story while it was happening.

She stopped, not abruptly because she wasn’t capable of that, and at first he thought she had paused to look at something. But there was nothing to see. The ground was
a patchwork of pine needles, ice and worn tree roots. The fir trees looked dead: grey beard lichen and pointed branches with no needles. Their tall tops were still green and were stirred by the chill and distant wind. He never felt comfortable in the forest. He shifted his feet restlessly, for the soles of his best shoes were thin. Then he saw she was staring.

“You’ve gone all pale,” he said.

She turned her eyes towards him and her body hunched over. “Feel poorly.”

He took out a cigarillo and stuck it in his mouth. Once he had lit it, he felt as if the forest were absorbing all its smell and taste.

“We’ll have to stop here. I don’t feel well.”

He wanted her to shut up. He was so cross that he felt like lashing out; here he was, strolling along telling the story of what had just happened, and then she had to go and say something, or something happened, that didn’t fit at all. It was like stirring something fragile with a heavy implement.

Now, though, she was quiet for a long time, and while they were neither walking nor talking, he could hear the forest breathing sharply with its great lung.

“Just you take it easy,” he said. “We won’t miss the bus. But this is the last time, make no mistake, because you can’t bloody well carry on like this every year at your age. Even for me it’s –” he was forty-one “– a bit of an effort.”

“Be quiet.”

He hadn’t wanted to say anything at all. If only she’d start moving again. But she was still doubled up. There were beads of sweat between the bristles on her top lip. Her eyes were not moving. Slowly and distinctly she said: “You must fetch help. Right away.”

He shifted his feet a little because he was so cold. She seemed to be afraid of moving her body. It was only her eyes that were following him, and he involuntarily retreated. Then she closed her eyes and stretched out a hand towards him. It was softer and limper than ever, and as she rested all her weight on his arm he almost lost his balance. She licked her lips and moved slowly back against a big, fallen tree. When she finally got herself down into a sitting position with the roots of the tree behind her for support, she gave a groan. He saw with disgust that something was dribbling from the corner of her mouth. She tried to spit out what she had brought up, and he took a couple of steps backwards. He was obliged to shut his eyes.

Now she’s down, she’s stuck, he thought. The thought must have struck her the same instant, because he saw once more the disconnected yet deeply focused look she had when she couldn’t get up by herself.

“Do you hear me?”

He had forgotten to take the cigarillo out of his mouth, or he would long since have asked her what was the matter.

“You must fetch help. Now.”

It wasn’t his fault he couldn’t stand that look of hers. That was the only reason he backed off. It did not occur to him that she could interpret it as a refusal, so used was he to obeying her.
“Pär,” she said, and her tongue went in and out between her lips; he couldn’t take his eyes off that trickle running from her mouth, “you’ve got to get help now, you hear me?”

Now she’s down, she’s stuck. Even if there’s nothing wrong with her. If I went off and left her now, she’d never get up. She’d be stuck down there until – well yes. She would. She can’t cope without me. She can’t do anything without me.

Her right arm still wasn’t working properly after that mini-stroke she had in August, which had also started with her feeling poorly.

Her eyes were steady, showing the patience of a dumb animal. If it hadn’t been for the rapid movements of her tongue and mouth, he would not have appreciated her terror or been infected by it.

Kerstin Ekman

Translated by Sarah Death

Kerstin Ekman is Sweden’s storyteller extraordinaire, with numerous successful novels and many literary prizes to her name. Witty and erudite, she is an acute observer of society and its ills, especially of women’s place within its structures. She is best known in the UK for her so-much-more-than-crime-fiction title Blackwater (Chatto & Windus, 1995).

Sarah Death has translated almost forty books, mainly from Swedish. Her awards include the George Bernard Shaw Prize for Kerstin Ekman’s The Angel House. She is a managing director of Norvik Press and spent twelve years as editor-in-chief of Swedish Book Review.
Hans Christian Andersen’s characters belong to the world; Karen Blixen first told stories from her African farm in English; and without Søren Kierkegaard, although he didn’t venture far beyond Copenhagen, modern literature would have read very differently. Although geographically small, Denmark has fostered storytellers who have longed for, and engaged with, the wider world by telling gripping tales that combine exotic locations with global concerns, as Peter Hoeg did with his Danish-Greenlandic heroine in *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*. Danish literature is an example of a small language that has made its mark on the world, as the recent book *Danish Literature as World Literature* (Bloomsbury) demonstrates.

If Danish literature is anything it is restless. Today it seems to be “all over the place” – geographically, thematically and formally: from Morten Søndergaard’s concrete poetry in *Wordpharmacy* (2012), where word classes are drugs to be taken in measured doses, to Jussi Adler-Olsen’s addictive *Department Q* crime series; and from Madame Nielsen’s record of travels in the footsteps of refugees in *Invasionen* (“The Invasion – A Stranger in a Flood of Refugees”, 2016) to Charlotte Weitze’s *Den afskyelige* (“Big Foot” 2016) – an uncanny tale about love in an age of climate change. Danish literature impatiently jumps from small-scale laboratory experiments with poetic language to large-scale transformations of the human experience in an unsettling global world.

Navigating between the Danish periphery and the wider world is Carsten Jensen’s epic seafaring novel *We, the Drowned* (trans. Charlotte Barslund and Emma Ryder, Harvill Secker, 2010). Narrated in the communal voice of the small, south-Danish port town of Marstal, the novel chronicles generations of war-weary sailors from the outbreak of Denmark’s First Schleswig War against Prussia in 1848 to the end of World War II. It is a larger-than-life novel, full of fantastic local anecdotes, unsettling portraits of precarious lives at the edge of the sea, and a gripping fable of Denmark in the world. Epic scale, restlessness, violent deaths and sea journeys are also found in Kim Leine’s *The Prophets of Eternal Fjord* (trans. Martin Aitken, Norton, 2015). At the centre of this rare Danish colonial
novel, set in eighteenth-century Greenland, is the Danish-Norwegian, Rousseau-quoting missionary Morten Falck, whose confrontation with the hardy Inuit “prophets” leads to his (and the ruling colonial Danes’) inner turmoil, self-doubt and sin. Jensen and Leine are excellent examples of the epic storytelling tradition in Danish. Their mammoth-sized novels have been popular with readers and critics (Leine won the coveted Nordic Council Literature Prize) and they are widely translated.

While Danish authors traverse oceans and time, and render our historical past uncanny, an equally dominant strain in the Danish literary DNA are writers obsessing with the details of small-scale everyday life – an everyday, however, that threatens to burst into major conflict at any moment. The master of existential minimalism is Helle Helle, whose This Should Be Written in the Present Tense (trans. Martin Aitken, Harvill Secker, 2011/2014) is a good introduction to her understated prose, her preoccupation with women at the edge of Danish society and stories in which one is constantly aware of the conflicts, desires and dreams that are hidden away below the surface, and in the “past tense”, and that threaten to explode her quiet prose. The everyday uncanny is also part of the literary sensation Dorthe Nors’ stylistic DNA. Like Blixen, she had to be “discovered” in the US (by The New Yorker) before she had her Danish breakthrough. The skewed lives of, for instance, an ordinary husband who has a passion for female killers and a civil servant who converts to Buddhism populate the painful yet funny absurdist stories collected in Karate Chop (trans. Martin Aitken, Pushkin, 2015). In the novel Mirror, Shoulder, Signal (trans. Misha Hoekstra, Pushkin, 2017), we meet Sonja, who translates Swedish crime fiction and struggles to change gears – in her driving lessons as well as in life.

The everyday or psychological realism of Helle and Nors is perhaps the hallmark of Danish prose, but young poets such as Asta Olivia Nordenhof (Det nemme og det ensomme; (“The Practical and the Lonely”), 2013) and Yahya Hassan (whose record-breaking debut poetry collection sold more than 100,000 copies) also commit everyday life to their pages, albeit in a raw, ruthless poetry that operates on the “underbelly” of the Danish society and on memories of difficult, violent childhoods.

As I focus on the dirty realism and social critique of contemporary Danish poetry, I cannot help but end with Danish Noir and mention a couple of exciting new crime writers who take this modern epic genre in new directions and find their stories in self-chosen exiles: Thomas Rydahl’s The Hermit (trans. K.E. Semmel, OneWorld, 2016) and Lone Theils’ Fatal Crossing (trans. Charlotte Barslund, Arcadia, 2017).

From epic historical novels, minimalist absurdist prose and poetry to bestselling noir, Danish literature in the twenty-first century is at its most restless – reflecting, perhaps, the unsettling and creative opportunities of an increasingly homeless and helpless world.

Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

Dr Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen is Senior Lecturer in Scandinavian Literature in the School of European Languages, Culture and Society at UCL. He is the author of Scandinavian Crime Fiction (Bloomsbury 2017) and a co-investigator on the AHRC-funded research project, Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations.
Sonja Hansen is forty-something, unhappy, single, a Danish translator of Swedish crime novels, living in bustling, modern Copenhagen, and originally from remote, rural West Jutland. She decides to learn to drive, in order to shift the gears of her life, but it’s a challenge because Sonja suffers from positional vertigo. This means she often faints, can’t look down, to the side or back. She is in a rut – a real, emotional, practical and existential rut. Thank goodness Dorthe Nors came along to help Sonja out.

If, like me, you’ve read Dorthe Nors’ short stories before (Minna Needs Rehearsal Space and Karate Chop) you know what to expect and know the rules of reading Dorthe Nors: you sit on the rollercoaster and let her drive. You give in to the pure pleasure of reading, the exuberance of the language, the myriads of colourful characters and, in this novel (her first in English), the deliberate metaphors. In Mirror, Shoulder, Signal driving is central to the narrative. Sonja’s “at a turning point”, driving is a “game with death”, she has “no sense of direction, can’t look in the mirror”, so will she ever move on in life? Dorthe Nors is obviously having fun with all this – she is a mistress of comedy and satire – but she is also a very kind and astute writer: Sonja’s story is heartbreaking. Here’s a troubled, lonely woman in the city dreaming of the rye fields and endless skies of her childhood (the descriptions of nature are outstanding), while trying to behave like an adult, “a child who doesn’t want to learn her lesson, who won’t adapt”.

For the whole of Mirror, Shoulder, Signal, Dorthe Nors places herself (and all of us) inside Sonja’s brain, her busy, buzzing, snow-globe brain. We experience the same dislocation, fear and vertigo. We wonder if she is going mad. We celebrate her mini triumphs (changing from third to fourth gear!). Sometimes Sonja is making sharp, witty observations – of her driving instructor Jytte (“a bingo night wreck”) or of her new-age masseuse Ellen (“with warm hands and a certain predilection for surrogate worlds”), and at times she is shrewdly analysing her own oddness: “that’s the problem: the things Sonja says and the way she says them”.

The doctor had described Sonja’s medical condition of “positional vertigo” (a family trait shared by her mother and grandmother) as “just some tiny stones inside of you that are breaking free”. Sonja explains that: “When she gets her
Dorthe Nors is one of the most original voices in contemporary Danish literature. Her short stories have appeared in numerous international periodicals including the Boston Review and Harpers, and she is the first Danish writer ever to have a story published in The New Yorker. Nors has published four novels, and a novella, Minna Needs Rehearsal Space. Her collection of stories Karate Chop won the prestigious P.O. Enquist Literary Prize in 2014.
The premise of Jens Christian Grøndahl’s *Often I Am Happy* is an intriguing one: Ellinor is recently widowed and stands in front of her dearest friend Anna’s grave telling her about the death of her husband Georg. Georg had been Anna’s husband before Anna died in a skiing accident together with her lover, Henning – who was then Ellinor’s partner. Intriguing and complex indeed, but what follows is a quietly elegant unfolding of Ellinor’s story.

Georg died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-eight. He and Ellinor have been married for decades but she’s never quite shrugged off the feeling that she’s leading Anna’s life. Now that Georg has gone, she’s bought herself a small apartment in the down-at-heel neighbourhood of Copenhagen where she was brought up, believing that her father died in the war.

Before Anna and Henning were killed in the skiing accident Georg had discovered their affair. Ellinor was stunned by her grief over the death of her friend and went to Anna’s and Georg’s home, to help the widowed husband and father bring up his twins and keep house. She stays and they become a couple. Ellinor has always cast herself as an outsider, falling in love with Henning and then into a marriage with Georg that didn’t feel entirely right. She’s a stepmother who has never felt the children were hers; accepted by the family but standing at the edge of it. Now that Georg has died, there is no one with whom she wishes to talk except Anna.

This is a softly powerful and beautifully crafted novella. Grøndahl’s pose is spare but studded with vivid images: “the snow on the summits resembled torn lace where the grey-blue mountainside showed through”; “Life went on without you; the years passed like an express train, its windows full of new faces”.

Ellinor’s grief is private and painful, not a rending of garments or tearing of hair but a constant ache of absence – as much for Anna as it is for Georg. Anna’s twins, who accepted Ellinor’s love when they were children, have grown into distant middle-aged men, while her love for them has become “the recollection of a feeling, not the feeling itself”. She tells Anna “it is true that one is no longer oneself” in the face of grief, but, as Ellinor unfolds her story, revealing secrets long hidden, it seems as if she has never quite inhabited herself.

At the heart of Grøndahl’s novella is a loving, forgiving friendship for a vibrant
woman, of whom Ellinor says “[I have] warmed myself in front of you”. It may be a meditation on love and loss yet the title is a reminder that life goes on.

Susan Osborne has spent most of her working life in the book world, first as a bookseller, then as book reviews editor for Waterstones Books Quarterly and We Love This Book. She blogs at www.alifeinbooks.co.uk.

Jens Christian Grøndahl is one of Europe’s most celebrated and widely read contemporary authors. He has written plays, essays, and eleven novels. An Altered Light was shortlisted for the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and in 1998 he won the Danish booksellers award De Gyldne Laurbær for his novel Lucca. He lives in Copenhagen.

**IDEALE BEGIVENHEDER (“IDEAL EVENTS”)**

**BY SIGNE GJESSING (GYLDENDAL, 2017)**

**REVIEWED BY MAX MARTINUSSEN**

Verse. That’s the genre; it says so on the cover of Ideal Events. The pages lie before me like bedsheets, white, dotted with just a few lines, lonely and isolated. There is an alarming amount of space between these fragmented sentences, like an image of the star-filled void Gjessing is trying to describe. The book wrestles itself out of its own category; it does not want to be called a collection of poems. The space in between each poem stands out, working as poetry itself. But this is the spirit of Gjessing’s work.

Her text takes no responsibility for communication. So I’m left with a strange feeling. There is something here. But what? This is the kind of poetry that takes effort. I have to flip the book over and read it again, slowing down and tasting every little morsel. After another reading, I still haven’t found a narrative, but my sense of understanding the text on its own terms is slightly closer.

Gjessing is captivated by places, rooms and space, and she manages to give them a voice of their own. She removes the boundaries between the interior, the exterior and even the cosmos. At the same time she seems to be saying that everything can be sorted and arranged, even blank space has a place and a meaning. This work is a constant, cyclical transformation of pronouns and their relation to various types of space.

For me, poetry is a force that affects us, but which is inexplicable. Gjessing does this, not with rhyme and rhythm and well-chosen language, but with the white between the lines. It is as if this white is
a wide, paper abyss between each line of poetry. Beauty is located there: and it is this that moves me. Take this line, for example: “Everything is divided: a child’s open throat on a bicycle ridden over cobblestones: å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å-å”. Here the Danish å (which sounds like the English /o/) is transformed into a tale of carefree childhood. That is what poetry can do: create an entire world out of something as simple as a single letter.

Gjessing’s poetry is about becoming free, accepting changeability, tasting language and enjoying the time we are given in this cosmos. This text is a universe of tiny suns that can be skimmed through one by one or studied as a whole. There is no end to the meanings and patterns we might see, and the chance that any of us will read the stars the same way is nil. We realise that “there is a universe in every well-sorted mind”. That is the landscape outlined by Signe Gjessing. Her book can prompt the same inexplicable awe as we feel under a starry sky, trying to understand the endless emptiness. Hers is a glowing language that echoes in an infinitely deep universe, verse, verse ...

Max Martinussen

Max Martinussen studies Danish literature at the University of Copenhagen. His poetry has been published in Hvedekorn.

Signe Gjessing is one of the more distinctive Danish poets of her generation. Her poetry is inspired by Arthur Rimbaud and Nelly Sachs and she has three collections to her name: Ud i det u-løse (Gyldendal, 2014; praised for its innovative use of language and originality); Bløffende rum nævende alt (Gyldendal, 2015) and Ideale Begivenheder.
II. 1881. During a spell of poverty and illness, I enter the world in a small, almost empty attic apartment on Fredericiagade, just as I write in The Tenth Muse. Or rather: I’m born on Gammel Kongevej in a shared loft that serves as home for us and several others.

III. The way it’s told to me: I was born without eyes. A large dark mane of hair curtains my face, and my mother gasps with fright. The midwife brushes the tresses to one side and my large eyes swim into view. When I lie in my baby carriage and people poke their heads down into it, they jerk back with a screech because of the huge eyes they encounter upon the pillows.

IV. Johanne, my sister, is four-and-a-half years older than I. She suffers from recurring rheumatic fever; a diffuse inflammation of the joints, heart, blood vessels, skin, central nervous system. Johanne survives childhood, but her heart valves are ruined. Johanne with the long fair plaits, her eyes blue, her face narrow, her hands strikingly beautiful. There are just the two of us, Asta and Johanne, but there was one who preceded us and died, the firstborn, whom we cover with lilacs each year on the anniversary of death, white, purple, fragrant. The lilac, my mother’s favourite flower; the grave, a black square in the ground.
LX. 1964. It happened unexpectedly, as if someone cut through time with a pair of scissors: my son-in-law, Paul, died. It was chance that took him, a traffic accident. Now Jesta sinks into a heavy depression. I cannot pull her up. She eats almost nothing. Three months after Paul was torn away, she takes her own life. She leaves me a short note: “Dear Mommy, sorry, but I can’t go on.”

LXI. My flat is a lonesome hole. I can no longer tolerate light. The dark rooms are full of carpets, tall porcelain vases and figures, gilt-framed paintings, dark, heavy furniture, the lipstick at the base of the mirror still red, all of it looks like itself but everything’s altered, I cannot sleep, I lie there at night and imagine movie scenes with no sound. It’s always the same scene: a white chicken lies motionless on a tree stump, held down by a man who looks like one of Lotten’s many uncles. The large, coarse hands, the downy white body, the axe striking lightning in the chicken’s neck, the head falling, the red earth. The wings flapping, trying to escape, but they have the body in tow. Even though the chicken is dead, it flies nevertheless, headless, in among the trees.

Eva Tind

Translated by Misha Hoekstra

Eva Tind was born in Korea and grew up in Jutland. Residing at the junctures between film, fine art, architecture and literature, her work explores the nature of belonging and the forging of identity. Asta’s Shadow forms the basis for Tind’s film essay A Red Carpet for Asta Nielsen.
what can you do, the evening falls over your shoulders with a secret sound, like a moth-eaten rug, you know exactly what I mean, you blue sparrow you red robin, you old raven, to be precise, that the skies are flat and spread out on every side, a dark-gray morning stares at the whole, thinking heavily to itself: are you still here a little?

(night and day)

a blue bird stares at me like an expert at a dubious painting, not convinced of either authenticity or goodness, but elegantly and discreetly tolerant, the way certain birds can be; a tall, heavy thing, slow and slow-witted, it thinks: but maybe we have to be here together for a time, so one must pretend as though this fool is good enough and just as authentic as that worm despite its patent lack of stature

(this and that, romance)
what can you do, the evening falls over your shoulders
with a secret sound, like a moth-eaten rug, you know
exactly what I mean, you blue sparrow you red robin, you
old raven, to be precise, that the skies are flat and spread
out on every side, a dark-gray morning stares at the whole,
thinking heavily to itself: are you still here a little?
(night and day)

postcard from the country way
out in the country, where birds
circle and the woods are fading,
while churchbells toll and the corn
moans and groans like a person
who’s either joyful or desperate,
but in the middle of a field there’s
a billboard that reads, hell exists,
and another, thou shalt not fornicate;
just what I was thinking of doing
(cincinnati: hell is real)

Per Aage Brandt
Translated by Thom Satterlee

In addition to his poetry, Per Aage Brandt has published a large number of books on the subjects of
semiotics, linguistics, culture, and music. He has also translated Molière and the Marquis de Sade,
among others, and has had some of his translations set to music in Frederik Magle's Cantabile.

Thom Satterlee received his MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas, and has
published two previous collections of Danish poetry in translation. He has received fellowships from
the National Endowment for the Arts and PEN America, and won the Translation Prize from the
American-Scandinavian Foundation.
FROM *THE EASINESS AND THE LONELINESS*
BY ASTA OLIVIA NORDENHOF
(OPEN LETTER, FORTHCOMING 2018)
TRANSLATED BY SUSANNA NIED

i saw my brother sitting close to me across from
his throat and part of his shoulder. seriously
now, gray sky back then: don’t know
oh yeah it was stormy, i had running shoes on
the sky: don’t know
behind my little brother sat the man in the green sweater who didn’t know i idolized him
thought about sitting in his bed
from there seeing him in his kitchen his back to me
cutting a tomato in two
or a bigger fruit or a cucumber
i: sitting in his bed on the edge of the bed
outside the apartment a person goes by, mute in the storm
silently silently over the skin
he divides the fruit in two
before the meal in a valley between hills this town
its not his breath im hearing
from the kitchen the ultimate sigh, the skin triumphs
outside the apartment a person goes by, ignorant of the scene
the inviolability of this tomato, whether or not its whole: without meaning and silent
on the cutting board still for thought
before we then will want to sit on the edge of the bed blue legs or his closer to yellow

Asta Olivia Nordenhof
Translated by Susanna Nied

Asta Olivia Nordenhof (b. 1988) debuted in 2011 with her novel *Et ansigt til Emily*. She is a graduate of the School of Authors in Copenhagen, and was awarded the 2013 Montanas Literature Prize for her poetry collection *Det nemme og det ensomme* (“The Easiness and the Loneliness”).

Susanna Nied is an American writer and translator. She has been honored with the Landon Translation Award of the Academy of American Poets (2007) and has twice been named a finalist for the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation (2005, 2012). Her translations of Danish poet Inger Christensen are published by New Directions.
It is perhaps fair to say that the recent phenomenon of Nordic Noir – sparked by popular TV shows such as *Wallander*, *The Bridge*, *Borgen* and *The Killing* – has propelled Nordic fiction to new heights of popularity around the world. This development is to be welcomed wholeheartedly, as only a decade ago the idea of watching subtitled drama or reading translated fiction would have turned off most English speakers. This precipitous rise in popularity has brought with it many fringe benefits too: firstly, it has increased interest in literature and culture outside Scandinavia and, secondly, it has lowered the threshold for translations of works outside the crime-fiction bubble.

Finnish literature in translation has long lagged behind its Scandinavian counterparts, in no small part because there are simply fewer translators who work from Finnish (a Finno-Ugric language and a daunting task for any prospective student) directly into their native tongue. Thanks to the unflagging work of organisations such as FILI (the Finnish Literature Exchange) and a shift in readers’ general view of translation, this is now changing. With regard to translations from Finnish, the watershed moment came at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2014, which showcased Finnish literature. Since then the number of translations has increased dramatically. Noir and crime fiction receive plenty of attention as it is, so for balance I will take a closer look at other genres. “Fantasy” literature has always played an important role in the Finnish literary scene. I use inverted commas because, of course, all fiction can be considered “fantasy” to the extent that it deals with fictitious events. The prominent writer Johanna Sinisalo, many of whose works exist in English translation, points out that we often “forget that even realistic literature is made up; that it is every bit as fictitious as the most unbridled fantasy literature”. Edited by Sinisalo herself, *The Dedalus Book of Finnish Fantasy* provides a fascinating cross-section of the history of fantasy writing in Finland. In recent years, the term “Finnish weird” has been coined and represents a sub-genre in its own right.

Elements of fantasy and magic realism have found their way into many books recently translated into English, notably Salla Simukka’s *Snow White*.
Trilogy, described as “Lisbeth Salander for a young-adult audience” and the “feminist fantasy” novel The Red Abbey Chronicles by Maria Turtschaninoff. Described by Téa Obreht in the New York Times as “a marvel, a remarkable achievement, and a world apart from anything you are likely to read this year”, Pajtim Statovci’s striking debut novel My Cat Yugoslavia incorporates elements of magic realism into a historical narrative about displacement and the realities of life as an immigrant in a foreign culture.

Like many countries, Finland was left deeply traumatised, first by its own Civil War (1918) then by World War II. From Väinö Linna’s 1954 classic The Unknown Soldier onwards, the war and its repercussions represent a constant strand in much Finnish literature. Recently, however, the perspective of war narratives has begun to shift away from the more traditional depictions of men at the front and widened to encompass the stories of the families and women left behind. Also, historical fiction in general now increasingly explores associated historical themes, lesser known outside Finland. Aki Ollikainen’s White Hunger provides a compelling – if grim – account of the Great Famine of 1866-68. Leena Lander’s (as yet untranslated) novel The Command (“Käsky”) examines the tensions between “Whites” and “Reds” during the Finnish Civil War, and Asko Jaakonaho’s (again untranslated) The Path of Happiness (“Onnemme tiellä”), a fictionalised account of the real-life, unsolved murder of a local politician, picks up those tensions during the interwar years. Katja Kettu’s expansive novel The Midwife explores the intense relationship between a local midwife and a German soldier during the Lapland War of 1944.

Naturally, it is hard – and useless – to divide authors into tidy categories. Many of the authors mentioned above straddle multiple genres that all impinge upon and enrich one another. As with all national literatures, a literary “canon” exists in Finland, though it is often specifically works that exist outside that canon that can be the most fascinating and rewarding for readers elsewhere. That said, canonical works themselves can assume new relevance once they are relieved of their historical baggage and read within a different cultural and linguistic context. And as with all literatures, many excellent authors are yet to be translated, though I am confident that, as the thirst for Nordic literature of all genres continues to grow, this will soon be remedied. For readers and translators of all languages, this is an exciting time, a win–win situation. There is still so much to discover.

David Hackston

David Hackston is a British translator of Finnish and Swedish literature and drama. He graduated from University College London in 1999 with a degree in Scandinavian Studies and now lives in Helsinki, where he works as a freelance translator. In 2007 he was awarded the Finnish State Prize for Translation.
The setting of *Cruel is the Night*, the first of the Finnish author and editor Karo Hämäläinen’s novels to be translated into English, is not for the faint-hearted. Four Finnish friends meet for dinner and drinks – particularly for drinks – in a luxury pad high up in the Shard, the tallest building in London. Only one of them, the prologue tells us, will survive the evening.

This very dark and often very funny novel acknowledges its debt both to Agatha Christie and to nineteenth-century “sensation fiction” by offering us first-person split narratives by the four central characters: Robert, a wealthy banker; Elise, his mentally unsteady trophy wife; the morally upright but infuriatingly petty journalist Mikko; and Mikko’s no-nonsense wife Veera. As events unfold, it becomes apparent that all four are hiding dark secrets from one another, including strong feelings of hatred and desire. The narrative technique, which allows the characters to speak for themselves, delays, but does not eventually prevent, the reader’s realisation that all four are in fact deeply unpleasant individuals. In a deft twist, Hämäläinen thus makes the reader complicit in the plot by having them want these people dead.

Hämäläinen also, however, teases the reader, by showing the sole survivor leaving the crime scene. Yet the novel is not really a whodunit, rather, as the ill-judged evening descends into alcohol-fuelled mayhem, it becomes an absurdist comedy. The pitch-black humour of the book is particularly Finnish: there is rye bread spiced with strychnine; a champagne sabre of the type owned by Marshall Mannerheim, used to cut open more than just bottles; and there are cocktails spiked with cyanide. A Finn, after all, could never turn down a free drink, but there is no such thing as a “free drink” in the moral universe of this novel.
In Finland Hämäläinen is known for his financial thrillers, and similar themes feature in this novel. Robert has made a fortune from unethical but legal LIBOR manipulations, an activity that Mikko cannot countenance. But this is also a book in which everything and everyone is for sale, and in which all human relationships are defined by the logic of the market. Each of the characters appraises the rising and falling stock of the others in this game of murder. The stock will ultimately only rise for one of the four protagonists - but for which one?

Minna Vuohelainen

Karo Hämäläinen spent fifteen years as an economics reporter and currently works as the managing editor of Parnasso, Finland’s leading literary publication. His novel The Buyout received the 2012 Tampere Literary Prize. His second novel, Alone, won the 2016 Savonia Prize.

MY CAT YUGOSLAVIA by PAJTIM STATOVCI
TRANSLATED by DAVID HACKSTON (PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, 2017)
REVIEWED by RACHEL RANKIN

Based on a brief description of the plot, you could be forgiven for mistaking Pajtim Statovci’s debut novel, My Cat Yugoslavia, for a whimsical, feel-good fairy tale full of talking cats, fateful encounters and adventures in new and exciting places. The novel moves between the story of Bekim, a Kosovo-born immigrant to Finland, who meets a talking cat in a bar one night, and that of his mother, Emine, who, as a young Muslim girl in 1980s Kosovo, takes part in an arranged marriage to Bajram, a man she believes will provide her with wealth, happiness and stability.

Unfortunately for Bekim, the cat is racist, homophobic and obnoxious, dismissive of his ambitions and interests, as well as insulting, demanding and greedy. Emine, for her part, discovers Bajram to be physically and emotionally abusive. Furthermore, the stability she craves is destroyed by the outbreak of civil war in Kosovo, resulting in the family’s escape to Finland. Any illusion of a fairy tale is thus quickly destroyed and the novel soon shows itself to be a sharp criticism of the refugee experience in modern-day Finland. “When are immigrants going to get off their asses and do something?” Bekim hears Finnish people asking. “When are they going to stop shafting the welfare system, lazing about and harassing women? Sure, they’re not all the same. Like you, I mean, you’re an exception, you’re just the kind of immigrant we welcome here. But most of them.”

Although the genre-bending nature of the novel can be grating at times, this is only to the credit of Statovci’s writing: just as the novel doesn’t fit any particular genre, so Bekim and his family move from place to place without truly fitting in anywhere. The animals in the novel – namely cats and snakes – also paint a picture of loneliness, misunderstanding and isolation. As a child, Bekim is terrified of snakes, to the point of needing therapeutic intervention without knowing...
why. As an adult, he buys a boa constrictor, which proves to be pretty harmless, yet he notices how people are frightened of it based on their preconceptions of such animals. The talking cat exudes a stereotypical feline standoffishness, yet the friendly, gentle cat Bekim discovers in Albania is shunned, cats there being viewed as symbols of evil. The fact that the stereotypical, hate-filled talking cat is the most fantastical element of this otherwise realistic novel makes a point that is not to be ignored.

*My Cat Yugoslavia* is a smart, fresh and ultimately important novel, particularly in today’s fraught political climate. The poor treatment of Bekim and his family and their sense of alienation are not confined to Kosovo-born immigrants to Finland in the 1990s. As a result, Statovci has managed to capture the prevalent societal attitudes towards modern-day immigrants despite writing about a war that happened two decades ago. In a world in the midst of an immigrant crisis and where empathy seems to be slowly disintegrating, this novel makes for essential reading.

Rachel Rankin

Rachel Rankin is a postgraduate tutor in Scandinavian Literature within the Scandinavian Studies department of the University of Edinburgh. She reviews literary fiction for *Gutter* magazine and has been mentored by the Scottish Review of Books.

Pajtim Statovci was born in Kosovo and moved to Finland when he was two years old. He currently lives in Helsinki, where he is studying comparative literature at the University of Helsinki and screenwriting for film and television at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture. *My Cat Yugoslavia* is his first novel.

**THE WEDNESDAY CLUB** by KJELL WESTÖ

translated by NEIL SMITH (MACLEHOSE PRESS, 2016)

reviewed by ANDY TURNER

It is 1938, some twenty-one years into Finnish independence, and the scarred layers of Helsinki society are continuing to reconcile the ghosts of civil war with a new, contemporary identity.

The Wednesday Club, a dining and debating society made up of six upper-middle-class men, has been meeting once a month for the last eleven years, but now, with the European continent sliding dangerously into chaos and war, tensions and divisions between them are surfacing and threatening to destabilise the club – and with it any hopes they may have of maintaining their places in the Swedish-speaking establishment.

Kjell Westö sets his psychological thriller against this background, shaping the narrative alongside the simmering and unpredictable national-political interests and pressures Finland experiences as a
result of her geographical “buffer-zone” position between the Soviets and the Nazis, both of whose propaganda machines are focusing on the new country in the run-up to World War II.

This is not, however, a novel about middle-aged male officialdom and bureaucracy. Far from it. It is very much a human-interest story. Claes Thune, the liberal-leaning former diplomat in the Finnish legations in Moscow and Stockholm, now a lawyer, is the male protagonist. Already heartbroken that his wife, Gabi, who finds it easier to make friends than he does, has left him, Thune remains deeply unsettled by the Nazi and anti-Semitic leanings of some of his colleagues and relations.

An assorted political field is represented by the other members of the Wednesday Club. Leopold (Polle) Gröneroos, possibly the wealthiest member, is a pro-German investor whose main concern is that his fortune keeps growing. Guido Röman, a lazy print journalist with a famously large penis, is happy to go with the flow. There are two successful physicians: Robert (Robi) Lindmark is a progressive psychiatrist, while Lorenz (Zorro) Arelius is a private doctor, whose scepticism towards liberalism and democracy comes from profound right-wing personal convictions. Joachim (Yogi) Jary is a Jewish poet and actor, prone to bouts of debilitating mental illness during which he has moments of insightful clarity. It is a “mixed company. But united by strong bonds.” Enter Matilda Wiik, and the club’s already fragile unity starts to wobble.

Mrs Wiik is from a working-class background and comes to Thune’s employ as his new secretary. Like Thune, she lives alone; her husband Hannes has simply walked out without a word. Polished, manicured and efficient, and always reading up about Hollywood stars in the latest issue of the Finnish-language Elokuva-Aitta movie magazine, Mrs Wiik has her eyes set on the wider world. But when she unexpectedly hears a familiar voice in Thune’s innermost room, her psychological childhood scars are re-opened as the trauma of the silent rapes perpetrated by “the Captain” in a prison camp during the Finnish Civil War of 1918 returns.

Westö’s tale is instantly enticing, taking us with it as events unfold. It is masterfully translated into English by Neil Smith who perfectly balances the “panoptic claustrophobia of Swedish [-speaking] Helsinki” with the “plain-spoken Finland” of the 1930s. And, sadly, we can also recognise the warnings in Westö’s novel about fascism in Europe today.

Andy Turner

Andy Turner is an emerging literary translator from Swedish and German into English. He has just completed an MA in Literary Translation at UEA.

Kjell Westö made his literary debut in 1986, and since then has published poetry, collections of short stories, and novels. His novel Där vi en gång gått (“Where Once We Walked”) was translated into most major European languages and was awarded the Finlandia Prize, Finland’s most prestigious literary award.
One of the most original novels I’ve read in a long time, *The Core of the Sun* is set in an alternative present – in the “Euisistocratic Republic of Finland”. This dystopian version of Johanna Sinisalo’s native country has been practising genetic selection, hormonal manipulation and indoctrination of its people for decades, with the aim of breeding submissive women, called “elois”, as mates for healthy men, “mascos”. Reproduction is precluded to “minus men” – those with chronic illnesses or disabilities – and to intelligent, independent women – labelled “morlocks” – whom the state sterilises.

Vanna/Vera, a bright woman who passes off as an eloi, is searching for her vanished docile sister, Manna/Mira. Jare, the young man who loves Vanna/Vera, is seeking to flee abroad. But their quests are more profound than these conscious aims. Ultimately, each seeks to express an authentic, multi-faceted identity: Vera, the main character’s name before the state changed it to Vanna, means “true”. Love in its various forms – that of a grandmother, of a sister, of a man – is a poignant connecting thread in the main characters’ development.

While the measures taken by this totalitarian state to secure compliance with prescribed gender roles are extreme and fictional, the questions the novel raises are steeped in reality. A key one is this: if attitudes that belittle women or restrict them to a narrow range of behaviours are widely accepted, who can set a limit to the extent and consequences of that belittling and constraint? “For some mascos,” observes Vanna/Vera, “it’s not enough to see elois as lower creatures than themselves. Elois have to be much lower creatures. They have to be creatures debased. [...] When nothing is enough, nothing ever will be enough.”

The themes may bring to mind Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but it would be a disservice to both authors to insist on comparisons. Sinisalo’s speculative fiction grows out of a strong Finnish tradition of fantasy writing. She is one of an internationally acclaimed cohort of authors writing in a diverse genre often referred to as “Finnish Weird”, but her work crosses and transcends categories. *The Core of the Sun* is a refreshing mixture of first-person narrations by Vanna/Vera and Jare, of letters never posted, of entries from the republic’s official dictionaries, books of fairy tales, history textbooks, home-
work assignments, and personality questionnaires. The extract from a 1935 article advocating eugenics is from an actual Finnish magazine, as befits a novel that invites reflection on the boundaries between fiction and real life. The translator, Lola Rogers, conveys superbly all these contrasting voices, and the main character’s complexity shines through the gradations of her tone: forthright, puzzled, sad, angry and humorous.

Central to the plot – prima facie absurdly, but rendered by Sinisalo with Kafkian verisimilitude – are chili peppers, prohibited by the state; “The Core of the Sun” is the name of a fictional potent variety of peppers. This is an engaging, clever, tight, moving and suspenseful read – a true discovery.

Valeria Vescina

Valeria Vescina (valeriavescina.com) is a graduate of the Goldsmiths Creative Writing MA. Her debut novel, That Summer in Puglia, is due for release with Eyewear Publishing. Her second novel, also set in Puglia, will focus on the sixteenth century. Valeria also teaches creative writing and reviews opera and Lieder for Seen and Heard International.

Johanna Sinisalo is the author of the novels Troll: A Love Story, Birdbrain, and The Blood of Angels. Praised by readers and critics alike, she has won several literary prizes, among them the Finlandia Prize and the James Triptree Jr. Award. Her works have been translated into nineteen languages.
EXTRACT

The rustle of a garment. An omen of Axel’s demise? The air-raid warning and the thunder of bombers cutting through its blare: merely background noise for the dress, slipping to the floor. Everything, yes everything, was focused on the woman undressing next to the bed. Axel almost wished she would put on and then peel off her shabby attire again. After the hellish din of the past few years, he felt the need to get caught up in the fabric’s whisper – coy, covetous – as he lay on his back, motionless, eyes closed.

On the other side of the wall, a door slammed and someone rushed into the stairwell: a man, going by the heavy thump of his steps. You could hear the difference: a woman wouldn’t go dashing down the stairs at such a pace. If Axel had ever got round to making the acquaintance of his neighbours, he would have known who was out there, exchanging one risk for another: that of perishing in an air raid for that of breaking one’s neck on the steep staircase. Not that Axel was interested. Not in the least. He would feel most at home in a world without neighbours.

The siren stopped wailing. The space left by the shrill noise made small clicks seem loud – bra hooks. Having undone them, the woman seemed to stiffen. Axel heard her breathing; it was shallow and tight, constrained. The bra fell softly to the floor. Shortly after, bending over, the woman said in a low voice: “I’m not ashamed.”

“Why should you be?” Axel replied.

The woman hesitated. “Well, you’ve got your eyes closed.”

This is the opening of Helsinki Nocturne (“Yhdyntä”), a novella set in 1944, in a wintry, war-time city under attack from Soviet forces. The action takes place over the course of a single night. Passages written from the point of view of the two main characters, Axel and Valma, are interwoven skilfully with the narrator’s commentary. The result is an atmospheric, complex and richly textured work.

Sahlberg explores a number of major themes, such as the effect of war on morality, with admirable economy: Axel becomes a black-market racketeer and Valma a traitor. The relationship between men and women also emerges as a key concern; with his trademark black humour and inventiveness, Sahlberg suggests both the hopelessness and hopefulness of human relations.
“Maybe I’m ashamed.”
“Am I that ugly?”
“Yes. Because you’re an angel of death.”
The woman gave this some thought. “Maybe we should, after all…”
“Go to the air-raid shelter? Go, by all means, go. It isn’t too late yet. But I’m staying here.”
“Then I’m staying, too.”
A gleam of light through Axel’s eyelids: the stiff light of an unshaded lamp. He had switched it on in order to see the woman, and now here he was, lying with his eyes tightly shut. Sometimes it was better to imagine. But he was disturbed by the thought of the window, covered by its black-out curtain. Windows always made him feel restless. He tried to avoid them, even, sticking to the middle of a room when looking outside. He had this strange sense of being sucked towards windows, to drift into a vortex beyond those squares of light then fall for a long time. Where did it come from? Had he once nearly fallen? No, not he. He was in the habit of standing with his feet planted firmly apart; he was not that easily shaken. And yet…
“Maybe you don’t want to.”
“Listen, Alma…”
“Valma,” the woman corrected him.
“Valma. Let’s not talk about wanting. This isn’t that kind of a situation.”
He barely noticed when Valma sat down on the edge of the bed where he lay.
“What kind of a situation is this, then?”
“It’s a matter of life and death.”
“I dare say. But isn’t it always?”
Axel did not open his eyes; he slowly dragged his eyelids upwards. Narrow strips of light, which widened. He blinked, and was taken by surprise. Valma was closer than he had thought, and his now-open eyes focused directly on a pale breast; a nipple thrust aggressively from its centre. It captivated him momentarily. The room was cold, the nipple chilly. That unevenness, rubberiness; and the circle around it, melting shadow-like into the skin. A thin, twisting vein, barely visible, formed a secret passage, a channel for flowing blood. The nipple seemed to be staring at him, struggling towards him. A faint recollection of latching on to one. Did a man ever cease to be a child? The thought of warm, sweet-yellow milk stirred up nausea within him. He could ask if Valma had children. But that had nothing to do with anything, and it was better not to know.
“They’re pretty close now,” Valma stated calmly.
Strangely, Axel had forgotten how one could be oblivious to the ever-increasing noise. The war had been going on too long. Without noticing, he had begun to shun its racket, to push it aside. The rumble of the bombers approached in waves, in shudders; it did not yet thunder in the ravines and labyrinths of the city. Why hadn’t the air-raid defence sprung into action?
Anxious feet pounded the streets; people hurried to air-raid shelters and cellars, slipping on icy patches as they went. Parents carried screaming children; old people got dragged along; many had with them their most precious possessions, stuffed into suitcases. Some prayed, others drowned their fear in spirits. There was always someone standing stoically calm at some street corner, hands in pockets, posture declaring contempt for other people’s distress. The picture was not complete until some loony climbed onto a roof to point an old rifle at the sky, or until the
blasphemously merry sound of an accordion rang out of some manhole.

“I’m coming under the covers,” Valma said. “I’m freezing.”

“Feel free.”

The breast formed a pear shape when Valma lay down. Axel watched her face. Its expression was veiled and calm; it was the face of someone who buried her thoughts. There was something waxy about it, something reminiscent of winter’s paleness, of light swaying exhaustedly between dark walls. The face was completely smooth, even the forehead. The eyes glinted, dark and immobile as glass. Valma had to be either incredibly brave or – and this was more likely, since such enormous bravery hardly existed – as hardened as Axel.

“What if I were to switch the light off?”

“Go ahead.”

Valma sat up again. The air-raid defence awoke.

Asko Sahlberg

Translated by Emily Jeremiah and Fleur Jeremiah

Askosahlberg is the author of fourteen books. He has won many awards, and been shortlisted three times for the prestigious Finlandia prize. His works range from the Biblical setting of Herod (“Herodes”) to the snowy, nineteenth-century farm of The Brothers (Peirene Press, 2012) – but all feature Sahlberg’s utterly distinctive voice, sardonic humour, piercing philosophical insight, and stark, arresting imagery.

Emily Jeremiah and Fleur Jeremiah have co-translated three novels from Finnish: The Brothers by Asko Sahlberg (Peirene Press, 2012), Mr Darwin’s Gardener by Kristina Carlson (Peirene Press, 2013), and White Hunger by Aki Ollikainen (Peirene Press, 2015). They have also worked on translations of modern Finnish poetry.

From THE GUESTS (“VIERAAT”) by HELMI KEKKONEN

Translated by EMILY JEREMIAH and FLEUR JEREMIAH

Recommended by EMILY JEREMIAH

It is a beautiful day in late summer; the sky is blue and filled with brightly-coloured hot-air balloons. A man has gone out to buy roses, a woman puts on a white dress. All is well and everything is in place for the guests’ arrival.

In The Guests, (“Vieraat”) Helmi Kekkonen introduces the reader to a group of people who in different ways have arrived at crossroads in their lives and whose decisions
have unforeseen and irrevocable consequences. These people, who all wander under the same hot Helsinki sky, are suddenly strangers, both to themselves and others. Running through the book is the engaging and far-reaching theme of parenthood and childhood. And we see how, once fulfilled, no wish, no piece of luck, no fear, is altogether as a person originally imagined it to be.

EXTRACT

Lauri hasn’t come home. He went out to buy flowers and never came back.

   Shouldn’t you buy the flowers yourself?
   What?
   Mrs Dalloway, remember? She said she was going to buy the flowers herself.
   Senja remembered all right. Virginia. Clarissa. Bond Street.

   Long ago, her mother had read that novel to her at bedtime. Among other things. Like Oates, Munro, Atwood. Angry, intelligent stories about sad women and unhappy families. Only years later did Senja understand that there was something strange about this: that other children’s bedtime stories were quite different; that other children’s mothers were quite different.

   And now, here, standing in the spacious bedroom, the phone in her clammy hand, her heart restless, Senja remembers the small, angular bedroom of her childhood, the rough seams of her night dress, the moths flapping against the window; she remembers Mum sitting at the edge of her bed, hears the words being read aloud – she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day – and she understands how apt Mum’s admonishment was. What did she actually do herself? What she did?

   She sat and waited. From one day to another, one week to another. Arranged a dinner party, that was all, making a big thing of it, as if it were a massive deal. She waited, and read, and felt far too much, that’s what. Everything was so bloody complicated and important, apparently, existence, thoughts, emotions. But really, she could just buy the flowers herself.

   Come on, don’t worry. It’ll all work out.
   Mum’s voice is gentler now; it calms her a little.
   As long as you come. You’ve got to come.
   I did say I’ll come. You don’t always have to make such a …

   Senja breaks off the call before the warm feeling disappears, before Mum spoils it again by saying how Senja always makes a meal out of everything, how she’s always this or that – that’s precisely what she doesn’t want to hear now. There are so many things Mum doesn’t understand, in spite of everything. Particularly Mum. No one else, either, though.

   She puts the telephone down on the window sill, rests her head against the cool glass.
For a moment, she would like to forget this stupid attempt to be all perky and sociable, cancel the whole evening. Undress, wash her face, draw the curtains, go back to bed, to sleep and dream and be alone with Lauri, merely sleeping – but she doesn’t cancel, of course she doesn’t.

Everything will be fine. Everything is fine.
That’s what she’s thinking, though she feels fear spreading beneath her chest and into her stomach, and she remembers that that too was one of the sentences Mum would always repeat:

Don’t worry, little one. Everything will be fine, everything’s fine.

Mum said it so often that Senja began to believe it. Nothing bad would ever happen to them, or at least nothing they couldn’t cope with.

As long as they were united, the whole world could collapse around their ears.

If they only kept the secrets, remembered to lock the doors and turn off the taps.

It annoyed Dad. Your mother’s a dreamer, always has been. Your mother never makes any plans. It’s impossible to live with your mother. Your mother says “we” but she means “memememememememe”. Your mother this, your mother that. Senja knew Dad was telling the truth, she had always known that, but she loved Mum, loved her more than anything else. She loved Dad, too, but that was different.

Once she spent a month on the Greek islands with Dad and Mari, all bright colours and glittering sea, and it had been a good time. They went on long walks, taught themselves to dive and hired a sailing boat. At the end of the first week, Dad bought Senja her own camera, a cheap, disposable one, but her very own, and Senja taught herself to look at the world around her, faces and buildings, light and shade, everything that was visible and yet slightly hidden from view. Soon she realised she felt happy against her will, realised she even liked Dad’s new wife, but at the back of her mind the feeling lingered that she had somehow betrayed Mum. Done something wrong.

She loved Mum’s voice, touch and gaze, the special way Mum plaited her hair and blew the pain off a bruise on her knee. She loved the pancakes Mum never managed to make rise and their sweet bread-and-jam breakfasts. She loved Mum’s dressing gown, with its smell of menthol cigarettes, and her scarf collection, she loved Mum’s parties and strange, loud friends, as well as their shared somnolent Sunday afternoons.

She also learnt to love missing her, longing to be with her. Because nothing, nothing felt as good as Mum coming back home.

So, without being asked, she began to paint Mum’s goings and doings in a good light, to conceal and lie. To build walls and doors. She did her homework on time but didn’t invite friends home, didn’t mention birthdays, because she knew Mum wouldn’t have time to get a present or take her to parties and then bring her home. She didn’t draw too much attention to herself, or too little.

She protected Mum, she protected their life together. She had no one else.

Helmi Kekkonen
Translated by Emily Jeremiah and Fleur Jeremiah
RIVETING FINNISH RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM MINNA VUOHELAINEN

_Tuntematon sotilas_ by Väinö Linna

A Finnish World War II classic and an indelible part of the national psyche, available as _Unknown Soldiers_ in a new translation by Liesl Yamaguchi.

_Purge_ by Sofi Oksanen

A haunting and subtle exploration of memory, oppression, betrayal and corruption, set against the Soviet occupation of Estonia.

FROM GUNNAR STAALESEN

_The Mine_ by Antti Tuomainen

I had read the Finnish writer Antti Tuomainen’s two previous novels, _The Healer_ and _Dark as My Heart_, in Norwegian and was fascinated by them. _The Mine_ I have read in David Hackston’s English translation, and I am still very impressed by how this writer varies his way of telling interesting stories – somewhere between traditional crime fiction, thrillers and very good mainstream literature. _The Mine_ is both an ecological thriller, a classic mystery and a portrait of a man pulled between his wife and child, his mother and his father. And what a father! I will say no more. Just read it, and prepare to be surprised.
If we were to enter by night the main square of a small town, let’s call it Kükenstadt, in Lower Saxony (judging by the architecture and the signs above the shops lining the square), we would find the atmosphere typical of such towns after midnight. Everything so wondrously quiet that it puts one in mind of the dormitory at a summer camp for obedient children; every house in its place with the night tucked up under its eaves; the whispering about the cares and events of the day fallen silent. A small boy with an umbrella has incorporated the town into his realm.

The boy may have continued his marauding westwards, but he has not left the little town of Kükenstadt entirely at the mercy of its dreams: in the middle of the square a statue keeps watch over the citizens.

It is the sculpture of a chick, caught mid-sprint, its neck thrust out and head raised to the sky, beak gaping wide and wing stubs cocked from its sides. The blue moon is mirrored in the black marble like a night-light left burning for a child who is afraid of the dark.

It is from this chick that the town draws its name, and despite its diminutive size – only about seven times larger than a living chick, and that’s not saying much – it ensures the inhabitants of Kükenstadt more peaceful rest than most big-city saints can grant their flocks, for in the hearts of the sleepers the memory lives on of how the chick saved their forebears from being slain by a ferocious berserker who once rampaged across the continent, annihilating everything in his path.

But were it not for the fact that my life-story begins in this very town which owes its existence to an inquisitive chick; yes, if it did not begin here, in a three-storey building on the square, we would tiptoe out of the dormitory town of Kükenstadt, closing the door softly behind us.”
“There’s a sound of moaning coming from the building, as those who have an ear for houses will notice, but these are not the sighs of the suffering or the sick, oh no, these are the agonised moans of ecstasy, the crescendo of sexual climax; the groan that results from being bitten on the neck and gripped tight around the buttocks.”

“So it’s a whorehouse, then?”

“A creeper sprawls across the front of the house, parting round the windows and the sign over the entrance: GASTHOF VRIESLANDER. The plant is in such a tangle under the eaves that it looks as if it’s about to lift off the roof.”

“Lift it off! I want to see inside, see who’s moaning …”

“This is no longer a house of pleasure but an ordinary guesthouse, run by an honest couple who upped sticks and abandoned their farm to make way for an autobahn. They didn’t get much for it, but God and good luck were on their side and they bought this den of iniquity for a song when the Party outlawed immorality from the land.”

“Lift it off!”

“Close your eyes, then. Can you picture the square? The chick and the shops? Gasthof Vrieslander, the tangled creeper and the roof? Good. No, don’t open your eyes. I’m going to put my hand inside your forehead – yes, go ahead and wrinkle it – and now you can watch it entering over the square, pale-grey like a monster’s claw in the ghostly glow from the street lights and the moon over the church…”

“God, how weird your hand looks – so huge. You’ve got long nails, I hadn’t noticed that before …”

“Shh, concentrate! I press my thumb against the eaves of the roof at the front, grip the join with my fingers and gently prise the whole thing off, taking care not to break the chimney.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to wake anyone.”

“Then swing it over the square with a smooth flick of my wrist and set it down, and now the chick has acquired a roof over its head. More importantly, it can’t see what we’re up to. Listen to it cheeping with curiosity: ‘Can I see? Can I see?’”

“Oh, it’s so adorable …”

“Don’t feel sorry for it. It’ll soon give up protesting and stick its beak under its wing …”

“Good night, little chick.”

“It’ll fall asleep while we carry on exploring the house. Can you see me poking my long finger nails into the joint between the facade and the gables?”

“Yes …”

“And pulling the facade forward?”

“The joints are cracking like sugar glue.”

“Now I’m laying it down on the square.”

“It’s just like a doll’s house …”
“Indeed. Here on the ground floor is the reception with an office leading off it; directly opposite the desk you can see the door to the dining room, and through that door there, the one with the oval window, is the kitchen. As you see, there’s nothing indecent going on here: the guests are respectably asleep in their rooms on the three floors, while the staff lie work-worn in their beds under the rafters.”

“So what are those noises coming from the office, then? From what I can hear it sounds like panting and gasping…”

“You’re quite right, let’s take a peep inside and see who’s panting…”

“In a deep leather chair at the desk a red-haired youth sits hunched over the yellowing photographs of buxom girls, his hand working away in his lap…”

“Who’s the pervert?”

“The guesthouse servant boy, an orphan the couple brought with them from the countryside, who they use to do the chores no one else wants to…”

“What’s his connection to your story?”

“He’s only really a minor character, poor thing, but all will be revealed later: I’m not telling the story here and now, merely setting the scene. Well, do you notice anything else unusual when you see the house opened up like this?”

“Like what?”

“Well, take a look. How many rooms are there on each floor, for example? I’m not saying any more…”

“Hang on…”

“If I lift off the upper storeys so that you can look down on the first floor from above like a maze, what happens?”

“That’s what you mean, ah, now I see…”

**Sjón**

*Translated by Victoria Cribb*

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**Sjón** has written numerous novels and novellas, as well as nine poetry collections and four opera librettos. He was nominated for an Oscar for his lyrics for Bjork’s song in the film *Dancer in the Dark*. His other novels include *The Whispering Muse* and *The Blue Fox*, which won the Nordic Council’s Literature Prize. *Moonstone: The Boy Who Never Was* won the Icelandic Literary Prize as well as the Icelandic Booksellers’ Prize for Novel of the Year.

**Victoria Cribb** has translated more than twenty-five books by Icelandic authors, including Sjón, Arnaldur Indriðason, and Andri Snær Magnússon. Her translation of *Moonstone* ("Mánasteinn") by Sjón was long-listed for the Best Translated Book Award and the PEN America Translation Prize in 2016. In 2017 she received the Orðstír honorary translation award for services to Icelandic literature.
Twenty or thirty years ago, most people in the English-speaking world knew little to nothing about Iceland, save for our odd appearance in a 1990 episode of Twin Peaks (Google it!). A lot of people simply assumed that we lived in igloos – a baseless cultural stereotype that I’m sure Greenlanders were happy to lend us.

Then came The Sugarcubes, Björk, Sigur Rós, Múm and Of Monsters and Men, and finally the gut-wrenching embarrassment of the “Inspired by Iceland” ad campaign. With it, the nation began its ongoing and somewhat traumatic first encounter with mass tourism. As the króna fell, Iceland was added to bucket-list holidays the world over. More recently we’ve had the Eyjafjallajökull volcano disrupting air travel across the globe, the Icelandic financial crash causing pensions to vanish around Europe, and the Panama Papers, with our Prime Minister storming out of an interview and then out of office – all to the nation’s glee.

Yet despite all this, when people abroad ask me about Iceland, they are most keen to hear about elves and “the hidden people”, the Icelandic “way of life”, the Northern Lights and how we jailed the bankers. It is considered a social faux pas to suggest that most of our hidden people are refugees and asylum seekers or that last year one of those jailed bankers managed to crash his helicopter – he was still serving a sentence in an open prison at the time.

It is against this background that Icelandic fiction has entered the tumultuous realm of “world literature”, that infinitely flexible publishing term-slash-marketing ploy. Over the past few decades, we have seen a wealth of Icelandic authors step onto the international stage. Authors such as Sjón, Hallgrímur Helgason, Andri Snær, Auður Ava Ólafsdóttir, Guðrún Eva Minervudóttir, Oddný Eir, Arnaldur Indriðason, Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and Jón Kalman Stefánsson – great writers who have honed their craft by writing for the extremely particular and demanding Icelandic reader, within the limits of our ambitious yet small publishing industry, inevitably “niche” as only three to four hundred thousand people read Icelandic.

While historically it has taken a backseat to Icelandic music as a cultural export, I have high hopes for our
I believe that Icelandic writing represents us to the rest of the world as no other medium can. Icelandic writers show us at our best, describing the steadfastness and integrity of our island mentality, our ambitions as a small nation on the world stage, our love for our nature and our language, and how fiercely we protect both. The best of our writers, however, also show us the worst of ourselves: our callus close-mindedness, our pettiness and greed, our xenophobia and our selfish, stubborn hubris.

Writers compromise their art if they speak anything less than the truth. Our writers describe – for us as well as for the rest of the world – the clashes in our national psyche; those faults and frailties that we need to attend to if we are to survive as a culture and a nation. They show us the things we might not want to admit are there; the cracks in the perfect lopapeysa-clad image that we like to hold up to the world. If we are to survive culturally, we must grow to accept these imperfections, rather than hide them. Our writers can help us to do this by forcing us to stand naked before the outside world.

My personal hope is that this happens as Icelanders and Icelandic fiction step into a new era of multiculturalism, as new writing by immigrants and other minorities arrives on our shores, capable of portraying us in uncomfortable and unfamiliar ways. If we mean to stay relevant and venture beyond merely honouring our rich literary history, we must also break the mould of Icelandic fiction and nurture elements that push against the norm. This is doubly important for a nation as small as ours, where economic support for the arts is limited. Hopefully, an increase in the export of Icelandic fiction will provide new resources for our writers. If this is to happen, however, we must also stop ourselves from buying into our own hype before the world becomes weary of us.

Björn Halldórsson

Björn Halldórsson’s writing has been published in Britain by Valve Journal and From Glasgow to Saturn, in Italy by Effe: Periodico di Altra Narratività and in Iceland by Tímarit Máls og menningar, Stína, Skíðblaðnir and Partus Press. His first book, a short story collection titled Smáglæpir (“Misdemeanors”), received the Icelandic Literature Center’s Grassroots Grant in 2016 and was published by Sæmundur Publishing House in 2017.
Finishing this short collection of contemporary Nordic writing, I have an overwhelming sense of a region suffering trauma. Or at least a group of authors from that region expressing the effects of various kinds of stress: destruction of the environment; parents who are either damagingly negligent, or overbearing to the point of harm; relationships on the point of ending; the aftermath of a breakup.

Nowhere in this collection is this sense stronger than in Rosa Liskom’s “A World Apart” – a selection of her brief fictions, all focusing on people in straitened circumstances: alcoholics; prescription drug addicts; a prostitute; a woman only just surviving on benefits. Finnish author Liskom tells their stories in a punchy, first-person present voice. The effect is powerful: both admirable and depressing, as, in some ways, is this whole book.

Wondering whether this was the editors’ intention when they brought together this collection – to focus on the “dark” and the “blue” aspects of the North - I flick back to the introduction, a conversation between Sjón and Ted Hodgkinson. I find Sjón discussing “the author’s power to be a voice of change by revealing society’s ills with literary means” [my italics]. Later he describes what he sees as literature’s role: “the few moments of warmth that come from sharing a story, a chance for people to compare their fate”.

I note that the warmth here is in the act of sharing those tales, not in the stories themselves. Because, while there are moments of warmth and humour in this collection, it is the difficulties, the stresses, that dominate.

Perhaps these stresses and these traumas are responsible for another major theme that seems to run through the collection: that of transformation, of metamorphosis. In the title story, from Finland, by Johan Bargum, the narrator visits his estranged father, only to find he has turned into a dog (or believes he has). Hassan Blasim’s Iraqi bus driver in “Don’t kill me, I beg you. This is my tree”, calls himself “The Tiger”; but his “claws” have really “dripped with blood” back in the water wars in his home country. Blasim is Iraqi-born but lives in Finland. More conventionally, the Norwegian writer Kjell Askildsen in his story draws a comparison between a couple struggling either to stay together or to part and “the dogs in
Thessaloniki that got stuck together after they’d mated".

But it is in perhaps the most conventional, and perhaps the best, story in the collection that the intersection of personal trauma and transformation is most evident. Frode Grytten’s “1974” is a master class in short-story writing. It sees the narrator – a teenage boy; his country – Norway; and even the world, at the point of transformation. In 1974 the boy witnesses the violent complexities of his parents’ relationship and experiences his own sexual awakening, and thus enters the adult world. At the same time, we are told, “1974 was the year with the greatest number of working-class people in the world ... social democracy reached its peak ... all visions were within reach ... After that ... the world changed direction with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan”.

Four decades on, “Our present world of conflict and climate change”, as Sjón describes it, needs a chance “to discover [a] common humanity”.

Sad, dark and blue as it is, this collection certainly provides that.

West Camel

Ted Hodgkinson is Senior Programmer for Literature and Spoken Word at Southbank Centre. Former online editor of Granta, he has written for the Independent, the TLS, the Literary Review and the Spectator and is London correspondent for the Literary Hub. As a broadcaster and chair he hosted the Granta podcast, appears on radio programmes including BBC Radio 4’s Open Book and interviews writers at international festivals.

MOONSTONE: THE BOY WHO NEVER WAS by SJÓN
TRANSLATED BY VICTORIA CRIBB (SCEPTRE, 2016)
REVIEWED BY BRIAN ROSSITER

Moonstone: The Boy Who Never Was, the latest novel in English by Icelandic poet, writer, and lyricist, Sjón, and excellently translated by Victoria Cribb, continues the author’s fondness for placing his literature in historical settings, in this case Iceland in 1918, about to win full sovereignty from Denmark. Heady with positivity as it is swept into the modern era, at the same time the country is experiencing the devastating grief and setbacks caused by the Spanish flu epidemic, which effectively brings the island to an economic and social stand-still.

All this is seen through the eyes of a boy, Mání Steinn Karlsson, the “Moonstone” of the title. Mání is bursting with all the energy and imagination of youth, but he is also struggling to gain full sovereignty over his body and sexuality as he approaches adulthood. Mání is queer, and while the society around him grapples with the threat of the influenza pandemic, he remains in his own microcosm – his own story – grappling with societally imposed limitations.

The tone is bleak, although Moonstone is also a story about the preservation of life, whether that life be Mání’s smouldering sexual desires, or the
The eponymous protagonist’s perspective manifests itself as a film screen with a lead role and a slew of other characters, many of whom are liaisons in a sexual life that cautiously flourishes like a small shrub scarcely sheltered from the stormy Icelandic winds. As the film flickers, travelling between its two spools, the scenes of a nation grappling with an epidemic turn from eerie to morbid as the death toll rises. Spliced into these harrowing scenes are indulgent depictions of sexuality. Thus the corporeal limitations of human bodies are pitted against the vivid affirmations of life found in Máni’s sexual ecstasy.

The Iceland we see through Máni’s eyes differs greatly from any perspective an outsider might have, either today or back in the time the novel is set. As Máni sneaks through society – a manifestation of the ‘other’ – he observes the parochial and closed atmosphere around him, feeling not so much a victim but rather a bystander or an observer. And it is with this last point that the author demonstrates a very clever tendency. By relating the events of the novel through the frame of the boy’s personality, instead of just being a bleak tale of oppression and unstrained desire, the novel depicts a world of (understated and Icelandic) imagination and possibility. Moonstone is an interesting take on a little-known period of Icelandic history, as well as a respectable contribution to LGBTQ literature.

Brian Rossiter

Brian Rossiter is an MA student of Translation in UCL, London, in addition to teaching Icelandic at City Literary Institute. He graduated with a BA degree in Icelandic with Swedish in 2016.

YO-YO by STEINUNN SIGURDARDÓTTIR
TRANSLATED BY RORY MCTURK (WORLD EDITIONS, 2015)
REVIEWED BY HELGA LÚTHERSDÓTTIR AND BRIAN ROSSITTER

Yo-Yo, Steinunn Sigurðardóttir’s award-winning novel, brought to English readers in the translation by Rory McTurk, is the chronicle of a successful oncologist whose life, despite outward appearances, is marked by the double childhood trauma of an assault and later the accidental death of his closest friend.

Well respected by both patients and staff at his Berlin hospital, the hard-working “Sigfreud, slayer of tumours”, Martin Montag, is a straight-laced, intensely focused man who has one mission – destroying cancer. This miracle worker, with an adoring and adored wife, refined middle-class home life and a noble mission, develops an unlikely but close friendship with a homeless patient, a Frenchman also named Martin. Under Steinunn’s pen their friendship flows through the pages with an organic naturalness, and McTurk’s nuanced translation similarly draws the reader into the two Martins’ charming, witty and...
often razor-sharp repartee.

This unlikely friendship is what carries our protagonist through the profound shock and agonizing aftermath of identifying his latest patient as his childhood assailant. Deeply traumatised, Martin is faced with a dark dilemma. Should he simply care for this patient as any other, or should he extend his oath to “help others” to the general population and withhold care? Should revenge be allowed to play a part in our actions when that revenge and our sense of humanity are means to the same end?

Much more than a just story of an unlikely friendship or an account of assault and its subsequent trauma, Yo-Yo takes a poignant and sensitive look at high-functioning adults coping with mental-health issues, and its subtle depictions of the exterior and interior selves may surprise some, and even lead them to consider their fellow humans with more understanding.

In Yo-Yo, Steinunn addresses some of the dark issues that contemporary society is accused of attempting to keep quiet. She delicately and with great insight gives voice to a survivor, while mercifully providing her reader with frequent moments of humour and dry wit, even as she effectively portrays the deep comfort and invaluable support found in true friendship, love, and trust.

Helga Hlaðgerður Lúthersdóttir is Senior Teaching Fellow and convenor of the Icelandic BA Programme in the UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies (SELCS). Her main specialist areas are Nordic representations in popular culture, Nordic Noir, and translation theory. She has published on several topics from cultural and political reflection in Hollywood film to queering as empowerment.

Steinunn Sigurðardóttir is one of Iceland’s most acclaimed novelists and poets and she has contributed greatly to the international recognition of contemporary Icelandic literature. Steinunn’s output to date includes twelve novels and seven volumes of poetry, including The Thief of Time and Place of the Heart, which won The Icelandic Literary Prize. She is also a translator of poetry and prose, and has worked extensively for the media, especially for radio and television.
The Story of Ásta is told by a dying man, Sigvaldi. He and Helga, Ásta’s parents, chose her name — “love” in Icelandic — while she was still in the womb after they read Independent People by Halldór Laxness. Sigvaldi, a writer, has now fallen down a ladder and is lying on the pavement.

Sigvaldi’s life flows through his mind. His wife Helga, wild and poetic, ran away from a mundane life in Reykjavik, leaving their two daughters to the foster-care system. Ásta is their youngest.

This is a story about love, sensuality and sex. About the Icelandic countryside, poetry and the desire to know the world. About children, those kept by their parents and those raised by strangers. About life and death. And Ásta.

EXTRACT

“Our father had a very good singing voice, and was a master at imitating people, certain species of birds, and sheep. Those three are my specialty, he used to say, and he could be quite humorous and fun when he managed, in his own peculiar way, to combine respectable characters from town life with whining seagulls or bleating sheep.”

But he wasn’t so fun when he was sucked into the black hole of drink. His binges usually lasted two or three weeks, and it seemed that no power, neither on earth nor in heaven, could stop him.

“We were fortunate, lucky, that he used to disappear from home on the third or fourth day. Maybe everyday life became too oppressive for him. The look in my mother’s eyes too disturbing. The presence of us kids too constrictive. And so, it was best just to disappear. Which is often the simplest escape route. He began – my mother used to say – to drink away his judgment. That was easiest. Then his reason, and then everything else he had: money, rings, tie, respect, coat, hat.”
And finally, the grocer’s itself.
Which had done well. Mainly, perhaps, because it was run almost entirely by their mother, who worked there along with her elder daughter. Although their father’s infectious cheerfulness and magnetism probably played its own part in attracting customers.

* 
It took us two years, said their mother, to pay off enough on the store for it to stop being a burden and start providing more than just toil, worry, sleepless nights, but it only took you a fragment of a night to gamble it away, along with various other things of ours, of course. Or, things that were ours. You’re good at ventures; poor at gain.

I’m not worthy of being your husband or the father of our children, he said, miserable, broken down, tattered, after a binge of just over three weeks. “One of his worst binges – maybe the worst. He woke up three days ago down in Keflavík, between two sisters. They were all naked.”

* 
Woke early in the morning. Couldn’t remember how he got there. Vaguely recalled a long journey from Reykjavík, remembered a night in Hafnarfjörður where he slept, together with his drinking pal, in a fragrant heap of netting beneath singing stars, a shifting moon – when they continued on their journey, they smelled like fish. His pal was mad-keen on getting out to Vatnsleysuströnd, where they spent the next night at a little farm. He remembered the sea there. How it seemed to fill existence. He’d never seen anything so big. But somewhere along the way they separated, the two pals, his trustiest drinking companion, a bookkeeper for one of the better merchants in Reykjavík. Yes, that’s right, he’d stayed behind in the little farm on the coast, said that he was so afraid of the sea that he didn’t dare go out the door. Knew the people there; spoke the entire way about the eldest daughter, who’d worked for the merchant the year before, but had quit and returned home when she became pregnant, and no one seemed to know who the father was. But how he got from that farm to a bed in Keflavík is lost in the fog of his memory. He didn’t remember having met the sisters, let alone having clambered naked into bed with them.

Except that when he woke, he felt like the Devil had used him as a broom to sweep the floor of Hell.

* 
He opened his eyes, looked around, shut them again, said, and meant it, I want to die. Not right away, said one of the sisters. Maybe tomorrow, but not today, not now. She slipped out of bed and grabbed the bottle of schnapps standing on a simple table next to an old sink. They were in a large garret. Morning light poured in through a skylight and over the woman, who stood unmoving at the table, as if lost in thought. He guessed that she couldn’t be much older than twenty-five, and there was something about her, her body, her long, dark hair, how it fell over her slim shoulders, the curve of her back, which made him think of music. And life returned to him with his first sip. I’m completely revitalised, he said. Can I see? said the woman who had grabbed the bottle, and then she disappeared beneath the blanket. The other woman took a sip from the bottle, watched his face change, and asked, as if she didn’t know a thing about life, is it good, what my
sister is doing? Yes, he whispered, very ... but you ... you seem ... sad ... why ...?
Maybe because it’s too far for happiness to get here to Keflavík.
I got here.
That might be what I meant, she said, before giving him an open-mouthed kiss.

“I’m not worthy of being your husband,” said our father, a good twenty-four hours later, having come home to the apartment that they’d lost. “I know,” said Mom, “I know.”
“But there’s terribly little we can do about that, except stand upright. Those who crawl can’t see the horizon.”

Jón Kalman Stefánsson
Translated by Philip Roughton

Jón Kalman Stefánsson has created a unique and enchanting fictional world in a series of related novels and short stories. Two of these works, Summer Behind the Slope and Of Tall Trees and Time, were nominated for the Nordic Council Literary Prize. In 2005 Jón Kalman received the Icelandic Literature Prize for his work Summer Light, Enter Night, an unusual collection of connected stories and fragments. His Trilogy about the Boy, which includes the titles Heaven and Hell, The Sorrow of Angels and The Heart of Man, won him international recognition, numerous prizes and a feature-film deal.

Philip Roughton is an award-winning translator of Icelandic literature. His translations include works by many of Iceland’s best-known writers, including the Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, Jón Kalman Stefánsson, Bergsveinn Birgisson, Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, and others. He was awarded the 2015 American-Scandinavian Foundation Translation Competition Prize, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize for 2016, and an NEA Literature Translation Fellowship for 2017.

POEMS FROM INSIDE VOICES, OUTSIDE LIGHT
BY SIGURDUR PÁLSSON
TRANSLATED BY MARTIN REGAL (ARC PUBLICATIONS, 2014)
INTRODUCED BY THE PUBLISHER

This book presents poems from Pálsson’s ten collections written between 1980 and 2008. Swirling with imagery, they reveal a poet committed to unearthing the joy of living connected to the natural world. For Pálsson, poetry contains such energy and force as can upset chronology. Ideas run amok, views close and open, space is compressed so the various fabrics of the world are folded into each other, creating a causal layering of the natural and man-made. This is a thrilling sweep across this poet’s work.
Star in the grass

A child lying
on the grass
Looks
up into the light blue
endlessness
Suddenly imagines
dotted lines on the ground
all around its
body lying there
A star shaped form
drawn with dots
in the darkness
Light blue
Dotted lines

Nocturne for a brimful moon

The jazz players blow the nightjars hammer
pours oil tones onto the flames
Hot-blooded whirlwind around the floor
The cloudless brimful moon plays the banjo
Silent precipitating facts in the conditional mood
winding straight into frenetic horns in the present tense
The jazz players blow the nightjars hammer
pour oil tones onto the flames
Whining strings glittering metal
And still jazz the nightjar beats
Stark naked rhythms
Crimson high tide of passionate longing

The Icelandic poet, novelist, playwright and translator Sigurdur Pálsson was a professor and cinema producer. His poetry has been translated into ten languages. He was also the author of three acclaimed novels and a book of memoirs. Pálsson received the Icelandic Literature Award in 2007 and was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1990 and in 2007 he was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre National du Mérite. He died last month, in September 2017.

Martin Regal has been teaching at the University of Iceland for over thirty years. He specialises in drama and is currently completing the volume on tragedy for the Routledge New Critical Idiom series. His translations of Gisli’s Saga and the Saga of the Sworn Brothers have appeared in Penguin editions.
Definers and certainly parents of the genre, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, led the Scandi crime fiction wave with their Martin Beck series several decades ago; however, it wasn’t until Stieg Larsson’s *Millennium* Trilogy and Peter Hoeg’s *Miss Smilia’s Feeling for Snow* that English readers developed their craving for dark crime reads set in the chilling north. And, perhaps for the first time, the fact that they were translated became a selling point, rather than a hurdle, as you’ve been reading in this magazine. It’s even fair to say that Nordic Noir has demystified translated literature to a significant degree and opened readers’ minds to the fact that translations aren’t necessarily “high brow” but brilliantly written books that just happen to come from another country. Consider the success of Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard, whose works bear far more similarity to Proust or even Joyce, and most definitely have no resemblance to crime fiction. The fact that readers so eagerly embraced his intimate, angst-filled autobiographical works is undoubtedly an indication that the translation taboo is lifting, and that is, in no small part, due to the success of his fellow Norwegian crime writers.

At Orenda Books we publish eight authors who fall neatly into this genre and they are by far our bestselling authors. From the godfathers of Nordic Noir, the Norwegians Gunnar Staalesen and Kjell Ola Dahl (both translated by Don Bartlett, who also translates the works of Jo Nesbø and Karl Ove Knausgaard, widely discussed in *The Riveter*), come the Varg Veum and Oslo Detective series; and from the brilliant Norwegian ex-journalist Thomas Enger (translated by Kari Dickson), we have the explosive and moving Henning Juul series. Last year (2016) we published literary star Agnes Ravatn’s *The Bird Tribunal* (translated by Rosie Hedger), and it quickly became one of our top-selling titles ... a Norwegian *Rebecca*, if you like. Agnes was slightly bemused that we marketed the book as a psychological thriller, but it ticked every one of that genre’s boxes. Its obvious position within the Nordic Noir category definitely helped to seal its success, with an English PEN Translation Award, a WHSmith Fresh Talent pick and a slot on BBC Radio Four’s Book at Bedtime.

It’s not just Norway that has been a success for us. Icelandic crime writer Ragnar Jónasson (translated by Quentin Bates) had written the whole of the Agatha Christie-esque Dark Iceland series without an English publisher taking notice, but
within two years of the first, *Snowblind*, being published here, he’s gone on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide, a phenomenon that shows no signs of abating. His books are set in the northernmost town in Iceland, Siglufjördur, bound on one side by the sea and on the other by mountains, providing the ultimate in locked-room mysteries. Ragnar is joined this month by Lilja Sigurðardóttir, when we publish her thriller *Snare*, which begins her new Reykjavík Noir series. From Finland we have Antti Tuomainen, whose standalone thrillers veer from the unsettling and chilling (*The Mine*) to a Coen Brothers-style, dark comedy thriller (*The Man Who Died*); and also the beautifully written, socially conscious crime fiction of Kati Hiekkapelto (*The Defenceless* and *The Exiled*).

What all of these authors have in common, and what, perhaps, acts as the greatest draw for English and other non-Scandinavian readers, is their ability to create an unforgettable sense of place – to transport the reader to the dazzling brightness or devastating darkness of the northern countries. But they also prod and unveil societal wrongs; they can expose while entertaining, and they propel the reader on nail-biting journeys into other lands. And perhaps it is that “otherness” that is one of the genre’s selling points: the disturbing, unnerving crimes that could never be committed anywhere else. Could they?

*Karen Sullivan*

Karen Sullivan is Publisher of Orenda Books, a new independent publishing company specialising in literary fiction, with a heavy emphasis on crime/thrillers, and about half in translation. She was a Bookseller Rising Star for 2016, and Orenda Books has been shortlisted for the IPG Nick Robinson Newcomer Award twice. Bestselling authors include Ragnar Jonasson, Agnes Ravatn, Amanda Jennings, Michael J. Malone, Steph Broadribb, Thomas Enger, Gunnar Staalesen and Kati Hiekkapelto.
It was the body of a seventy-year-old man. His head battered by an ashtray. Erlendur knew the victim’s name was Holberg but nothing more.

“It’s just another typical senseless Icelandic murder,” said Sigurdir Oli.

“Apart from the message left by the body,” Erlendur replied.

“Are we going to mention to the readers what the message was?”

“Not yet,” said Erlendur. “You really haven’t got the hang of how these thrillers work, have you?”

“There’s been a sighting of a suspicious-looking man loitering outside Holberg’s apartment around the time of death,” Sigurdir Oli continued. “Shall we bring him in for questioning?”

“No. If it’s that simple the book’s over in thirty pages.”

Erlendur went back to the bare apartment he had been living in since the acrimonious separation from his wife. He was pleased to note there was no food in the fridge. He lit a cigarette and felt a sharp pain in his chest as he drew in the smoke. Lung cancer or heart disease probably. Good. He was the perfect Icelandic Noir maverick.

The door burst open. It was his daughter Eva Lind.

“Are you back on the heroin?” he asked.

“Yes. And I’m pregnant.”

Erlendur smiled. All was well with the world.

It was raining hard when Erlendur went back to search Holberg’s apartment two days later. He should probably have gone a little sooner but if he had he wouldn’t have got soaked. In a drawer he found a photograph of a four-year-old girl named Audur who had died in 1968.

His phone rang. It was his old boss, Marion Briem, whom he had known for thirty years yet still wasn’t sure if it was a man or a woman. Reyjkavik could do that to a person.

“This Holberg was a nasty piece of work,” said Marion. “He was accused of raping a woman called Kolbrunn back in 1963, but the police dropped the case as they didn’t believe the woman’s story.”

Erlendur sighed, all too aware of the casual sexism that had been prevalent in the Icelandic police force at that time. He lit two cigarettes in quick succession and gasped for breath. Now he was ready to go check the old files. An hour later, he had the
information he needed. Kolbrunn had given birth to a child nine months after the rape, the child had died of brain cancer four years later and she had committed suicide a few years after that. He drove out to Keflavík – with the windows rolled down to allow the sleeting rain to drench him – to see Kolbrunn’s sister, Elin.

“Of course the baby was Holberg’s,” Elin yelled. “Now leave me alone.”

“Are you sure we oughtn’t to be looking for the suspicious bloke who was seen outside Holberg’s flat?” asked Sigurdur Oli.

“No,” said Erlendur. “When are you going to realise that thrillers don’t have that obvious a solution?”

Marion phoned again. “You should know that Holberg was with two other men on the night of the party at which he raped Kolbrunn. One’s called Ellidi, the other’s Gretar. Ellidi’s in a maximum-security prison. Gretar disappeared more than thirty years ago.”

Erlendur grunted. It might have been helpful if Marion had told him this during the first phone call. Or indeed if he had asked Marion if there was any further information. But it had added to the suspense and, besides, he was too busy smoking fags, getting wet and being generally miserable.

“Are you still on the heroin?” Erlendur asked Eva Lind as he rescued her from a junky squat.

“Sure am,” she replied.

“Just as I hoped,” said Erlendur happily.

Erlendur drove out to the maximum-security prison to see Ellidi. “I’m telling you nothing,” yelled Ellidi, before mentioning that Holberg had raped other women before Kolbrunn.

“We need to investigate the possibility that other women may have been raped by Holberg,” Erlendur told Sigurdir Oli. Nothing got past Erlendur.

“Do you think it’s now OK to tell the readers what message the killer left beside Holberg’s body,” Sigurdir Oli replied.

“If we must. It’s ‘I am Him,”’ Erlendur said.

“Do you think it’s significant?” Sigurdir Oli asked.

“Sometimes you’re even stupider than you look,” Erlendur said testily. “Of course it is, otherwise we would have mentioned it earlier.”

Erlendur went back to his flat. The rain was still beating down hard. He smoked an entire packet of cigarettes, willing the cancer to ravage his body. Finding himself mysteriously still alive and with the weather having taken yet another turn for the worse, Erlendur decided to exhume Audur’s body. He needed to find out what she had died of.

“I’m afraid Audur’s brain is missing,” said the coroner. “It must have been sent to Jar City.”

Hundreds of thousands of body parts lay floating in formaldehyde in the Genetic Research Centre. This was Jar City. A physical repository of Iceland’s tainted past.

Erlendur smiled. The metaphor was working for him.

“Audur’s brain appears to be still missing,” the curator said. “It must have been stolen.”

As the rain turned to snow, Erlendur remembered that there had been reports of an unpleasant smell coming from Holberg’s apartment in the early eighties. He immediately ordered a forensics team to dig up the floor. There they found the body of Gretar.
“Hmm,” said Erlendur. “He must have had photographs of Holberg committing the rapes and tried to blackmail him.”

“So Holberg killed him?” Sigurdir Oli interrupted.

“Nothing gets past you,” Erlendur observed, clutching his chest as a violent spasm of cancer wracked his body.

Two days later, Sigurdir Oli was finally able to track down Katrin, one of Holberg’s previous victims.

Erlendur got straight to the point. “You were raped, got pregnant, had the baby and never told a living soul, not even your husband,” he said tenderly.

“You’re right,” sobbed Katrin. “And guess what? My son, Einar, works in the Genetic Research Centre. And his daughter has just died of brain cancer.”

Erlendur felt the case coming to a satisfactory conclusion. It was obvious what had happened. Holberg had passed on a rare form of brain cancer that only affected his female descendants. Now all he had to do was track down Einar.

The snow had turned to sleet when Erlendur found Einar lying in a windswept graveyard. “Holberg destroyed my life, so I destroyed his.”

“So that’s the significance of ‘I am Him,’” said Sigurdir Oli.

Einar pulled out a shot gun and blew his brains out. It was either him or that halfwit Sigurdir Oli.

“It’s not cancer,” said the doctor. “You’ve just pulled a muscle in your chest.”

“Damn,” Erlendur muttered. “But I dare say there’s always the hope of a fatal illness in the next book.”

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Icelandic author and writer of crime-fiction, Arnaldur Indridason is particularly well known for his series featuring protagonist Detective Erlendur. He continues to write this ongoing set of novels for an ever-increasing audience. With a cinematic treatment of his book Jar City, this popularity looks set to increase both nationally and internationally.

John Crace is the Guardian’s parliamentary sketch writer and author of several books about football, Shakespeare, politics and literature. He writes his Digested Reads, pastiches of popular writers for the Guardian. His political satire I, Maybot is due out this month.
The Nordic Riveter is published on 18 October 2017 to coincide with the special Northern Noir symposium at Europe House, London.

In from the Cold: Northern Noir
A symposium on Northern crime writing, crime fiction translation and criticism

18 October, 2017 (9am – 8.30pm)
Europe House, 32 Smith Square, London SW1P 3EU

Authors:
Håkan Nesser (Sweden)
Kjell Ola Dahl (Norway)
Torkil Damhaug (Norway)
Indrek Hargla (Estonia)
Karo Hämäläinen (Finland)
Henry Sutton (UK)

Translators:
Don Bartlett
Kari Dickson

Academics, Chairs & Organisers:
Dr Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (University College London)
Prof. Amanda Hopkinson (City, University of London)
Dr Karen Seago (City, University of London)
Dr Minna Vuohelainen (City, University of London)
Rosie Goldsmith (European Literature Network)

This special symposium brings together some of Europe’s best crime writers, translators and critics to discuss the characteristics of northern crime fiction. How does crime fiction in Britain differ from Northern Europe? What are the cultural similarities and differences? What challenges do translators working in this area face? Is it possible to define a recognisable ‘northern’ tradition of crime writing that crosses national borders?