

‘Blogger Extraordinaire’

SBR interviews the Bookwitch, aka Ann Giles

Ann Giles, a much respected book blogger in the UK, was born in Stockholm, studied at Gothenburg University and has a degree in English and Swedish. She moved to England in 1982.

Q. It doesn't take long for readers of your blog to discover the Swedish connection. Can you tell us how you came to live in the UK?

A. I think I always felt I belonged over here, what with the Famous Five and all that lovely food, and Agatha Christie with her bodies in vicarages all over the place. And then I went on a walking holiday arranged by the CHA (Catching a Husband Association) and met the Resident IT Consultant and married him and stayed.

Q. What made you start a book blog?

A. I had taken to emailing authors I liked, and I especially liked Meg Rosoff. I went to visit her at her home in London, and after a bit she just said that I should start a blog, and she mapped it all out for me. There was going to be juicy gossip about children's authors... Well, I'd already been thinking that this new-fangled thing called a blog might be interesting to try, but hadn't the faintest idea what it should be about. So Meg helped me there, and I knew for sure that no one would ever speak to me again if I went the gossip way, so planned it more or less as Bookwitch is today. (Your secrets are safe with me!)

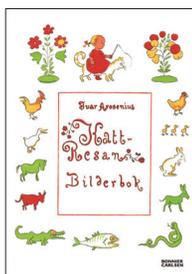
Q. Now that your own children are grown up, you still read lots of children's books. What motivates this?

A. I'm currently in my third children's books reading period. The first was as a child. The second was at university, where children's literature was part of my course. The third started with my children, and I saw no reason to stop reading the best books in the world simply because those children happened to grow older.

Q. In your blog you have mentioned your liking of books by author and illustrator Gunilla Wolde, who died earlier this year. What were your favourite books as child?



Photographer: Tom Breslin



A. You mean before Enid Blyton? *Kattresan* by Ivar Arosenius and *Sagan om den lilla lilla gumman* by Elsa Beskow. I knew them by heart and thus was able to fool older children that I could read.

Q. Which books did you most enjoy reading with your own children?

A. I especially remember two collections published by Usborne. One was about fairies, the other – I think – more classical tales. They were a good size, with nice illustrations, and the stories read well. We would return to our favourites over and over again. And you can't beat Roald Dahl's *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke* for uncontrollable giggles, tears streaming all over your face.

Q. Do you think the books you read as a child and teenager influenced your writing?

A. Yes. Were it not for the copious eating by the Famous Five and those lovely dead bodies by Agatha Christie, I'd be... well, actually, I don't know what I'd be doing. But not this. There is so much more you can do with the English language.

Q. What do you think are the biggest differences between Swedish and English children's books?

A. Swedish books seem much more daring when I look at them with my British eye. By that I mean socially, sexually, much more swearing, even in younger books. There is a lot of really great writing in the English language. But most of the time you have that cautious, sideways look at the gatekeepers who might disapprove of children reading things they are quite capable of dealing with. Books originating in Australia or New Zealand are more open, and I think that's why they are also more welcoming towards Swedish translations.

Q. And their publishers?

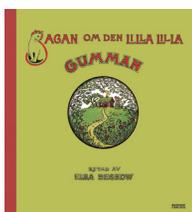
A. I can't claim to know the Swedish publishing world well, but I get the impression that they just go straight ahead and publish, and never mind what parents or teachers might say, because the books are for young people. In Britain publishers are more careful, seeing pitfalls everywhere. I don't mind so much that they consider the parents, but I do feel that pausing to ask what the buyer at Waterstones will think, is taking it one step too far. But having said that, both countries produce fantastic books.

Q. What do you think are the key ingredients of a popular children's book?

A. They should recognise themselves in the book, somehow. It should speak to them, not at them. Ideally you should find ways to deal with your problems through reading books. It might be about dragons, but that's not to say it's not addressing bullying or a death in the family, for instance. The best books are those that you will happily read whatever age you are.

Q. What do you think are the main obstacles to publication of more translated children's fiction in the UK?

A. There is a surprising amount of xenophobia in publishing, as though a



British reader couldn't possibly take an interest in a character from Växjö or Dresden or Timbuktu, unless written by a British author. We also have fewer people who are able to read foreign books to learn what they are like, and encourage publishers to buy the rights and have them translated. After all, those foreign-language novels have already been written, and 'all' you need to do is arrange for a translation. Just look at me; it was translations that got me to where I am now.

Q. As well as English Bookwitch, you also blog as Culturewitch and Swedish Bookwitch. Do you have any more blogs up your sleeve?

A. No!!! I already feel like the witch who holds a tiger by the tail and can't let go. This is fun, but also a lot of hard – unpaid – work. Bookwitch has a new post every day, while the other two get something as and when I can manage it.

