

Norvik Press

Celebrates 30 Years

SBR interviews Norvik Press publisher Janet Garton



Janet Garton is Professor Emeritus of Scandinavian Studies at the University of East Anglia and a founder of Norvik Press, an independent publishing house specialising in Nordic literature, based at University College London. This year Norvik Press, which has brought many shining examples of both contemporary and classical Scandinavian literature to British readers, celebrates its thirtieth anniversary.

Q. In 1986 you set up Norvik Press with Professor James McFarlane. Can you tell us what motivated you?

To a considerable extent it was frustration with the commercial publishing world; publishers were not interested in translations from Nordic literature or studies of Nordic writers, unless they were called Ibsen, Strindberg or Andersen. My colleague James McFarlane (Mac) was a pioneer of 'desk-top publishing' and had recently taken over not only the editing but also the production of the literary journal *Scandinavica*, so we decided that we would have a go at publishing the books we wanted to see in print. We set up an office at the University of East Anglia with one (very) part-time secretary. We really had no idea what we were doing to begin with; it did not occur to us to set up a company until we discovered that we would otherwise be considered a partnership, and be personally liable if we got into financial difficulties!

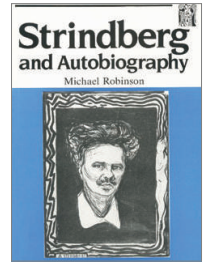
Q. What was the first title Norvik published?

From the beginning we decided to embark on two series: a translation series and an academic monograph series. Both are still going strong. Our first translation was Mac's version of the Norwegian Sigbjørn Obstfelder's *A Priest's Diary* and our first monograph was Michael Robinson's brilliant *Strindberg and Autobiography*.



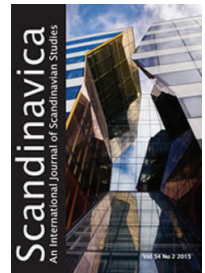
Q. Norvik Press publishes two journals, *Scandinavica* and *Swedish Book Review*. When did Norvik start publishing *Swedish Book Review* and what part does it play in the overall structure?

We started publishing *SBR* when Laurie Thompson stopped being the editor and Sarah Death took over, in 2003. Laurie had started the journal and done all the publishing, distribution etc. himself – a task which had grown exponentially over the years. Sarah did not feel she had the time or the resources to do it all herself, so she approached us to see if we were interested in a collaboration. There is now a fruitful symbiosis between *SBR* and our Swedish list in terms of mutual publicity and contacts with a network of Swedes and Swedophiles in the UK and abroad.



Q. In 2011 Norvik Press launched ‘Lagerlöf in English’, a series of new English translations of works by Selma Lagerlöf, edited by Helena Forsås-Scott. The titles published so far have been very well received. What are the special challenges of publishing classics such as these and what are the plans for this series?

We have now published eight books in the Lagerlöf series, and more are on the way, including the autobiographical *Mårbacka* trilogy. Lagerlöf has not been served well by previous translations, and we are fortunate to have some wonderful translators involved. The particular challenge is funding. As a small not-for-profit publisher we are dependent on translation and production grants, and although the Nordic countries are most generous in their support, they tend to prioritize living authors, and grants for retranslations of classics can be hard to find.



Q. One of Norvik’s priorities is that its books should be affordable and easily available. How do you achieve this?

We have recently switched to ‘print on demand’ publishing, which means that we print only a few books at a time. In this way we avoid the high costs of bulk storage but can re-order and ship books at short notice. Getting bookshops to stock our books is difficult, but they are readily available online or can be ordered from our distributors in the UK and the US.

Q. How do you choose which contemporary titles to publish and which are your bestselling books?

For contemporary titles, it is largely a matter of our own enthusiasms and assessment of books which merit an international readership; we are fortunate in that our Board consists of experts in the mainland Nordic languages, so that we can form our own judgements. Proposals from trusted translators and foreign publishers sometimes play a part as well.

We are frequently surprised by which books sell well. Our all-time bestseller is the Faroese novel *Barbara* by Jørgen-Frantz Jacobsen, translated





by George Johnston, which Tórshavn bookshop sells to tourists every year. The Norwegian poet Hans Børli's *We Own the Forests*, translated by Louis Muinzer, has been reprinted twice too. From Swedish, Hjalmar Söderberg's *Short Stories* (translated by Carl Lofmark) and P.C. Jersild's *A Living Soul* (translated by Rika Lesser) have done particularly well.

Q. The number of literary translations from Scandinavian languages to English is growing. What do you think are the most significant reasons for this?

Undoubtedly the craze for 'Nordic noir' – TV adaptations and crime fiction – has played a large part in this development, and has allowed other authors to benefit from a greater public interest in the region as a whole. A number of small publishers have been very active in promoting writers such as Jan Kjærstad and Karl Ove Knausgård, who have been well received. In general there is growing awareness of other cultures and interest in writers from 'minority' languages, as evinced recently in the 'Reading Europe' events.

Q. You recently published Norvik's first crime novel. Can we expect this to be the start of a new trend for Norvik Press?

We have actually published two crime novels recently, Dan Turèll's *Murder in the Dark* (Danish, translated by Mark Mussari) and Jógvan Isaksen's *Walpurgis Tide* (Faroese, translated by John Keithsson). But I would not really call this a new trend; we may publish other crime novels, but our main focus will continue to be on the best of contemporary and classical Nordic writing. Our plans for the near future include books by established living writers – Benny Andersen's poetry, Vigdis Hjorth's *A House in Norway*, Dorrit Willumsen's *Bang* – and classics like Amalie Skram (*Betrayed*) and Karin Boye (*Crisis*).

