

A Career in Swedish Literary Translation

Ian Giles interviews

Sarah Death



Photographer: John Death

Sarah Death has been a literary translator of Swedish since the early 1990s after opting to study a non-school language, Swedish, along with her German at the University of Cambridge. After a trainee year in the ‘quiet backwater’ of librarianship, with half of each week spent in UCL’s Scandinavian library, Sarah was loath to give up Swedish literature and embarked on a PhD. She has published a total of 36 books in English translation from Swedish and Norwegian. Sarah was editor of SBR from 2003 to 2014, and was awarded the Order of the Polar Star in 2014 for her services to Swedish literature and language abroad.

Q: So you got your PhD at UCL for a comparative study of works of Fredrika Bremer and Elin Wägner, and you’d enjoyed hanging around the library and dipping into a lot of literature there. How did the switch to being a translator come about – and did you move into literary translation from the very start?

Sarah: Well, I was starting to do the odd thing here and there that came my way – all literary – and I enjoyed it very much. I actually stopped doing my PhD full-time, and split my time between research, a full-time job and translation. And then I was also starting a family, and I thought, there are too many components here! Which ones can I not bear to give up? And at that point I decided I couldn’t bear to give up the translating. So I carried on with that...

Q: Was there any insight you could take with you from your academic life to your literary translation life, or was it very much a clean break?

Sarah: No, it felt seamless, really. It was all to do with plenty of reading, which you obviously have to do to be a good translator – you need to read voraciously in both your source language and your target language. That was something I knew I enjoyed and so that just carried on but I put it to a slightly different use.

This interview has been adapted and edited on the basis of a public event hosted by the University of Edinburgh’s Scandinavian Studies department in the autumn of 2015 in which Sarah Death was in conversation with Ian Giles.

Q: Tell me about an early project.

Sarah: Well, initially I was a very, very part time literary translator. I was a hundred and ten per cent a clueless mother for the first time and the translating had to fit in around the edges. I had a delightful but quite demanding baby, so I was extremely grateful to Norvik Press, who gave me an almost completely elastic deadline for my first literary novel (Frederika Bremer's *Familjen H****, translated as *The Colonel's Family*), which I did for them... because I could only make progress on this translation when I was babysitting other people's children who *slept*. So that was quite an extended project!

Q: Do you have a favourite book or author that you have translated?

Sarah: I suppose my favourite author to work on has been Kerstin Ekman; but I've known from the word go that there were many, many of us interested in translating her work, not only internationally, but even in the English-speaking world – American translators, British translators – so I knew I would never get a straight run at her work but would have to share her with all these other lovely colleagues, and they *are* lovely, we have come together several times for seminars with Kerstin Ekman translators from many other countries and that was a real treat to be part of, especially as Kerstin Ekman participated too.

There are some authors with whose style you just feel at home. Another author who I very much enjoyed working on was Ellen Mattson. I've only done one novel of hers. Actually, there's a pattern here; most of the novels I've really enjoyed working on have been short! I also very much enjoyed Lena Andersson's novel *Egenmäktigt förfarande*, which I translated last year (as *Wilful Disregard*) and these little gems that you can keep in your mind in their entirety appeal to me very much, whereas baggy novels of the 630-page variety, in which every new editing round is like climbing Everest all over again, I don't enjoy those so much.

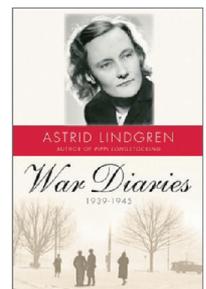
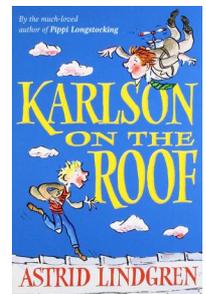
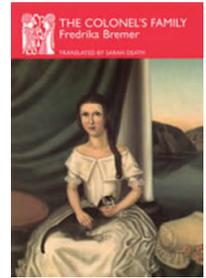
Q: Are there any writers currently not in translation who you'd like to see translated?

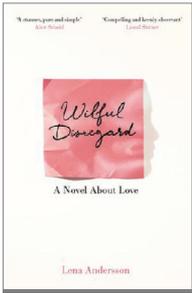
Sarah: Inger Edelfeldt – I think she is a masterly short-story writer, and I spent many, many years trying to get an English-speaking publisher to share my view and take her on, but it hasn't happened yet. I've got a whole computer file full of her stories in my translation, looking for a home!

I would also quite like to translate a novel by Jerker Virdborg. He's written many darkly compelling books but none of them have been published in English yet, to my knowledge. It would be fun to go back to the subjects of my PhD and translate them now I know more what I'm doing. Fredrika Bremer's later novel *En Dagbok* (A Diary) is one example.

Q: Do you think you are getting faster and more efficient as a translator, after all your experience?

Sarah: I find that the longer you've been doing it, the more complex the task because you realise how many elements have to be weighed up, and the more intimidated you are every time you take on a new project. You know you're





being judged against your past record, and you feel a sort of *prestationsångst* – what's that in English? Performance anxiety.

Q: What advice would you give to emerging literary translators of Swedish?

Sarah: First I would say apply to join SELTA. Then I would launch straight in and do lots of translating, whether you think you can publish it or not. Practise is invaluable, and if you are lucky you may also find an outlet for some of the work. Places like SBR (naturally!) and the SELTA blog come to mind, and online translation journals like *Asymptote* and *Words Without Borders*. Some translators set up their own websites and blogs to get their work out there. Make sure you have an up-to-date profile and CV on the SELTA members' page; I sometimes refer publishers to that when I can't take on work myself.

It's very easy at this stage, when trying to juggle a lot of new contacts with no idea which of them will bear fruit in the long term, to take on too much. Learning how long a commission will take you is very difficult, and personally I'm not sure I have mastered it even today. Unless there is a very special reason, resist agreeing to work for nothing; even though you are at an early career stage and eager to forge contacts, publishers should not exploit this.

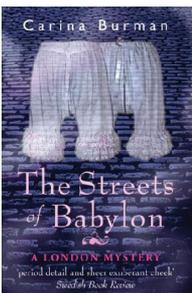
You may well be asked to write readers' reports in any of the Scandinavian languages, and by all means take them on if you feel it is worthwhile as part of your apprenticeship and to create goodwill, but I'm afraid you will earn a pittance for them, and they only very occasionally lead to a full-length translation commission.

Q: And what do you make of the recent emergence of literary agents?

Sarah: They are a relatively new phenomenon and they have *mushroomed*, for good or ill, but it does mean that they are commissioning a lot of paid samples. When I was starting out, it was very rare for a sample to be commissioned at all, and whatever you think about agents, that development is giving a lot of people a chance to do some translation work and to start getting their names put in front of British publishers.

Q: What's the state of the Swedish literary translation industry in your view?

Sarah: I feel that the state of the industry is a lot better than it was, partly thanks to the Nordic Noir effect of course. But translator incomes still do not necessarily reflect the time and effort invested, and carving out a distinct career is still very hard. The individual books that I am offered are not necessarily the ones I would choose. If you look at my CV, you might think, *ah, right, she did X, and she did Y and why did she choose to do that? Excellent, good choices*. But that's misleading, because as a freelancer you're dependent on what you are offered and when, and it may not be your preferred material; it may be that you – in order to have an income of some description – have said yes to something that you consider quite mediocre and uninteresting, and your dream job offer comes up the week after but you have to turn it down. And that continues to



be the case, whatever the overall state of the industry. So for me, as a practising translator, it's just a case of doing my best and hoping the work won't dry up.

Q: Tell me about the importance of SELTA and why, in your view, it works.

Sarah: It was perhaps more significant in the days when it was first set up, met physically twice a year and sent out a printed newsletter, because there was no email back then. For me it was terrifying but invaluable to be able to go every six months or so and mix with some of the great names on the translation stage, like Joan Tate, Patricia Crampton, Mary Sandbach, Laurie Thompson and Tom Geddes. I hadn't got a clue what to say to them, but I thought, if I carry on coming for long enough, perhaps some stardust will rub off on me!

As to the wider question of why we have this group, and some of the other languages don't – the answer is, because it was established so early, and it then carried on through its own momentum and through the tireless work of a number of individuals, particularly Tom Geddes, who ran it for many years. It became a kind of fixture on the scene, aided and abetted by the fact that it has its own journal, and I do think that without the journal to coalesce round, it might have folded; definitely a mutually sustaining relationship there. It's great to see a newer faces getting closely involved now, and the group looks set to continue flourishing.

Q: How did you come to be the editor of Swedish Book Review?

Sarah: When I had become what might be called a full-time literary translator who wasn't really full-time, and was looking for ways to cement myself in that role and expand my portfolio, I plucked up my courage one day and rang Laurie Thompson and asked, 'Do you need a deputy editor?' and to my profound amazement, he said, 'Yes.' I think I was already the reviews editor at that point and then I also became the deputy editor. He probably breathed a sigh of relief and thought, 'Thank goodness, there'll be someone to hand over to, before too long.' So I shadowed him for a few years before taking over as editor when he decided to retire.

Q: Tell me a bit about what it was like to be editor of SBR.

Sarah: Well, we have complete editorial freedom, and our enlightened funders don't even mind if some of our reviews are not all that positive. As long as there's an overall mix that's generally positive, that's fine. But we are known, actually, among British publishers, for honest reviews, and I think that's something everyone values.

As someone working from the solitude of home, I relished being the spider at the centre of a far-reaching web. Another important aspect for me was showcasing the work of new and emerging translators, giving them the chance to get into print, and have their name in circulation. That's obviously an important role the SBR editor plays and I hope it will continue to be so. It's one of the aspects of the job I felt did the most good – giving young translators an outlet.

