

‘Translators are both the engines and cogs that make up the machine. Without them, there are no translations’

An interview with Susanne Bergström Larsson

by Ian Giles



Susanne Bergström Larsson is a self-confessed literary scholar at heart, but an encounter with Publishing Studies during her university days made her realise that the publishing industry was where she was destined to be. After graduating, she worked for Alfabeta Bokförlag, where she was responsible for foreign rights sales, before moving on to join the team that established Bonnier Group Agency. In 2012, she joined the Swedish Arts Council where she is Head of Swedish Literature Exchange.

Photographer: Hans Alm

Q: Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed! Could you tell us about the Swedish Arts Council and what it does to promote literature abroad?

Susanne: There are 100 employees at the Swedish Arts Council, of which 15 work in the Department of Literature and Libraries. Swedish Literature Exchange falls within this and is responsible for promoting Swedish literature abroad. Five members of staff are involved in Swedish Literature Exchange, and it has the undivided attention of two of them, while the others also dedicate time to other tasks.

In terms of investment, we spend the biggest share of our budget on grants (approx. SEK 8 million), and a smaller share on other activities (approx. SEK 2 million). We offer a number of grants, as well as contributing to the book fairs in London, Bologna, Frankfurt and sometimes elsewhere. In terms of activities, our magazine *New Swedish Books* comes out twice a year, we organise translator events, send out our newsletter four times a year, and try to keep an eye on the world of Swedish literature.

Q: What did those grants get used for?

Susanne: Over half of our grants were to support the translation of Swedish literature. In 2018, we received 491 applications and awarded SEK 4.8 million to 271 translations into 41 different languages. The top languages were Danish, Spanish, Russian, English and Italian. On average, we granted SEK 15,900 per application, and on average our grants amounted to 57% of the sum applied for.

We also awarded grants worth a total of SEK 1.8 million to 57 projects in 27 different countries. More than half of this related to author visits to festivals and signing tours. Funding was additionally awarded to *Swedish Book Review*, as well as a range of translators' seminars and workshops in France, Italy, Poland and Russia.

In terms of translator travel and sample translations, we supported 88 translators to the tune of almost SEK 500,000. Most of these grants related to participation in workshops and seminars (54), 20 related to sample translations, and the remainder related to visits to Sweden, book fairs and festivals. In 2018, 34 publishers participated in the Gothenburg Book Fair Fellowship scheme and we welcomed translators from 20 countries.

| Most Granted | |
|---|--------|
| Type | Number |
| Novels originally published after 1965 | 78 |
| Children's books | 53 |
| Picture books | 36 |
| Non-fiction | 31 |
| Total number of unique titles supported | 206 |



| Most Granted Titles | | | |
|--------------------------|---|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Author | Swedish Title | English Title | Number of Grants |
| Golnaz Hashemzadeh Bonde | <i>Det var vi</i> | <i>What We Owe</i> | 9 |
| Niklas Natt och Dag | <i>1793</i> | <i>The Wolf and the Watchman</i> | 6 |
| Johannes Anyuru | <i>De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar</i> | <i>The Rabbit Yard</i> | 6 |
| Liv Strömquist | <i>Kunskapens frukt</i> | <i>The Fruit of Knowledge</i> | 5 |
| Carolina Setterwall | <i>Låt oss hoppas på det bästa</i> | <i>Let's Hope For The Best</i> | 5 |
| Anne Sjärd | <i>Vera</i> | <i>Vera</i> | 5 |

Q: How have these grants changed in the last 10 years? Are more awarded? Has crime fiction or other genres had an impact?



Susanne: Well, the budget for translation support has grown steadily in response to increased demand. We're receiving more and more applications every year. I don't know whether the wave of crime fiction has had any impact on the number of applications. We only award grants to crime fiction in exceptional cases where they contribute to a renewal of the genre or otherwise distinguish themselves in a particular way. The task at hand for our expert advisory panel is to read all works that are subject to applications for support and assess whether they are of good literary quality. Then they have to prioritise amongst those they consider to be of high quality since there isn't enough money to support everything. As a matter of principle, we always award a decent amount when we offer grants so that they can really make a difference. On average, we award 57% of the translation cost, which naturally means that we award fewer grants than we might if we opted for a lower percentage of costs. So, the panel have to make tough decisions every application round.

Swedish literature has enjoyed a prominent position internationally for a long time. Has the crime fiction wave has enhanced interest in Swedish literature? Well, I think in some cases it may have resulted in some publishers daring to try publishing a more literary author – it has opened up the market a little more. But it all comes and goes.



Q: What is the role of English for Swedish literature at the moment – especially in terms of exports? Which other languages are important for Swedish or have been applying for more grants lately?

Susanne: Given that English is a language read by far more people than Swedish, it is obviously enormously important. It can generate positive attention for a book if it gets a good review in a British or American

newspaper, and publishers in other countries can read the whole book and decide whether it is suitable for their list. In terms of other languages, the number of applications for translation to Chinese was on the rise, but they have fallen again. Italian recently appeared in the top 5.

Q: Tell us about the new sample translation fund – how does it work? What do you hope to achieve through it?

Susanne: We re-launched the sample translation fund in 2018 to support individual translators in their work promoting a diverse range of Swedish authors in translation. We think that translators may need support in order to pitch an author they strongly believe in, and who may not yet have been picked up by an agent. Translators can apply for the grant in order to introduce a contemporary author to a new language, or perhaps to re-introduce them if it's an older author. The maximum sum applicants can request is SEK 12,000. Translators decide how much is needed to prepare a great package to present to different publishers – it might just be an excerpt, or even biographical and bibliographic details, a CV and so on. In the application, the translator needs to outline why they have chosen this particular author, as well as detailing which publishers they intend to submit their material to. We then follow-up with the translators to find out how it went – initially one year after the award. We are going to evaluate this next year to determine whether to continue the scheme or not. During 2018, we awarded SEK 200,000 to fund 20 sample translation projects.

Q: Translators: how important are they to the Swedish Arts Council's work, and what do you do to keep in touch with them?

Susanne: Translators are our most important resource. They're both the engines and cogs that make up the machine. Without them, there are no translations. It's tremendously important for us that they have what they need to be able to work and continue their development. Not to mention ensuring a supply of new translators. Since the introduction of GDPR, we have contacted all translators in our old records to ask them to confirm that they want to remain on our books, and we have also asked them to submit updated CVs and their consent that we can pass these on to interested publishers upon request. We support and encourage all initiatives for workshops and seminars, as well as organising our own conference every other year. This year, we are looking into the possibility of organising a seminar for translators at the beginning of their careers. We also organise meetings for translators when we visit book fairs: this year we will be in London, Bologna and Frankfurt. Naturally, we hope that all translators subscribe to our newsletter *Swedish Literature Exchange*.

Q: How closely do you collaborate with the equivalents to the Swedish Arts Council in other Nordic countries, e.g. FILI, NORLA, etc? Do you keep an eye on what they're doing to export literature?

Susanne: We have a very valuable shared network, NordLit, for knowledge exchange and joint activities. The thing that binds us together is the translation

SUSANNE
BERGSTRÖM LARSSON



| Top Languages | | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| | 2018 Number of applications | | 2017 Number of applications | | 2016 Number of applications |
| Danish | 28 | Danish | 25 | Chinese | 34 |
| Spanish | 24 | English | 24 | German | 29 |
| Czech | 23 | German | 22 | French | 28 |
| English | 21 | Chinese | 21 | Spanish | 23 |
| Italian | 21 | Spanish | 21 | English | 22 |
| German | 19 | French | 19 | Danish | 21 |
| Russian | 17 | Polish | 18 | Arabic | 21 |
| French | 16 | Italian | 17 | Czech | 19 |
| Polish | 16 | Estonian | 16 | Russian | 15 |
| Chinese | 13 | Russian | 15 | Ukrainian | 14 |

support that we jointly receive from the Nordic Council of Ministers in order to support the translation of literature between the Nordic countries. We hold an annual conference where we plan our joint activities and discuss various matters. Of course, we often collaborate at fairs – for instance, in London we jointly organise the Nordic stand, as well as the Nordic translators’ seminar for children’s book translators. When we travel outside of Europe, we often do so together – for example to New York last year. We share information with each other, hold workshops on processes relating to grants and keep each other informed of what we’re doing.

Q: Describe a typical working day for you.

Susanne: Well, yesterday was a Monday. We had a visit from the Director of the Swedish Institute in Paris, Ewa Kumlin, who told us about their plans for this year and about all the festivals taking place in France. Then we had our weekly meeting for the SLE team, where we talked about the ongoing rounds of grant applications, planned meetings for the week, travel bookings for Bologna and London, and whether we will have *New Swedish Books* ready in time. Then I had lunch – leftovers from home. Then I spent a couple of hours replying to emails. Right now, we’re working on things like going through notes from our latest dialogue meeting with the Swedish literary agencies, making final corrections to the spring edition of *New Swedish Books*, reviewing applications for translation support, discussing what our stand in Bologna should look like with the designer and booking hotel rooms for participants on this year’s Gothenburg Book Fair Fellowship. At 5pm I went home. I’d say that’s a pretty typical day.