Deckarboomen under lupp: Statistiska perspektiv på svensk kriminallitteratur 1977–2010 by Karl Berglund (review)

Rosemary Erickson Johnsen

Scandinavian Studies, Volume 85, Number 2, Summer 2013, pp. 240-242 (Article)

Published by Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study
DOI: 10.1353/scd.2013.0008

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/scd/summary/v085/85.2.johnsen.html
texts as they are. Thus it is suggested how the event of writing is turned into a poetics or a principle of production” (178).

Van Ooijen includes *The Black Glove*, which is often ignored, a special case of the casual treatment of Strindberg in English. Van Ooijen suggests it is not simply that it was written two years later; the play is too positive, too sentimental to fit the Strindberg stereotype of the terminally mad and resentful genius.

In his final settling up with Törnqvist, van Ooijen writes:

Repeatedly the plays are treated as ingenious puzzles demanding an elaborate interpretation to become intelligible, and the interpretational grids that are applied will often come to contradict the compositional principles they set out to elucidate.... The image of the weave as it is presented by Strindberg in *The Burned Lot* calls less for complex interpretations than for a simple affirmation ..., seeing the weave itself: we see the order of disorder as such, which is life rather than chaos. (200)

William A. Johnsen
*Michigan State University*

---


The boom in Scandinavian crime fiction is a commonplace of the contemporary literary marketplace, and many readers of *Scandinavian Studies* have probably felt the impact in one way or another. Such readers may want to familiarize themselves with this book since scholars in all Scandinavian studies fields (in the USA, at least), no matter how remote from contemporary popular culture, are liable to be asked by others on their campuses about contemporary crime fiction. There is widespread awareness of the boom; here is a serious, quantitatively-grounded analysis of it. Berglund’s book is a vital contribution for those working in the fields of crime fiction, contemporary literature, and book history. It is particularly welcome as the rapid growth of interest in crime fiction draws scholars from other fields, who may lack the requisite background knowledge of the genre, its literary history, and its place in popular culture studies. Berglund’s valuable study offers a current knowledge base of the scope of the field’s primary material over the past several decades in Sweden.

Reviewers of crime fiction often try to avoid “spoiler alerts” by not giving away the ending or other vital pieces of information, and this book inspires some of that feeling. How does the crime-fiction genre relate to literary fiction in Swedish publishing as proportion of titles published, as total sales,
as percentage of bestsellers? How valid is the anecdotal perception that women writers dominate the genre? How does a quantitative analysis of crime fiction’s place in the Swedish literary marketplace contribute to our understanding of blurring boundaries between literary fiction and genre fiction? To what extent is the boom a result of younger writers’ choosing the genre? How many of the best-selling authors launched their detective series after 2000? These are only a few of the questions that Berglund’s sweeping data collection and analysis allow him—and thus his readers—to approach. One of the strengths of the book is that while Berglund offers his own findings, he provides data in multiple accessible ways so that readers may extract information pertinent to their own inquiries.

After a brief description of the study’s methodology, the main text is divided into three sections: “Utgivningen av kriminallitteratur 1977–2010” [Crime Fiction Publication, 1977–2010], “De mest framgångsrika kriminalförfattarna” [The Most Successful Crime Writers], and “Bästsäljare och biblioteksutlåning” [Bestsellers and Library Circulation]. In these chapters, Berglund draws on his data to present a clearly-organized discussion of the main trends he discerns. His discussion of women writers is particularly interesting, linked as it is to the decade of the writer’s debut and illustrated by a bar graph and an area chart; his data provides perspective for current perceptions of the place of women writers in contemporary Swedish crime fiction. Readily-understood color charts are plentiful throughout the main text, and these are well-integrated into Berglund’s narrative analysis. No review would be complete without mentioning that although the book is a paperback, Uppsala University has not skimped on its production: it is well-designed, both attractive and functional. The quality paper with many color diagrams, the flexible binding, even the French flaps make the volume pleasant to read, and easy to use as a source of information.

Nearly half of the book is devoted to back matter, including appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. Appendix B provides, in tabular form, the categories that the forty-eight best-selling authors fulfill: film/tv versions, translations, lending figures, sales figures, and prizes. (Berglund has explained the reasoning supporting the use of these categories to measure success in the preceding appendix.) This deceptively simple information exemplifies how much can be extracted from Berglund’s presentation of data, and the mesmerizing lure of “fun facts” about the Swedish crime-fiction genre. Of the forty-eight authors included, only seven fulfill all categories; curiously, four writers who meet only two categories have been translated. Appendix C, running to nearly forty pages, is a goldmine of data in tabular form. It is difficult to summarize this data in a review, but some representative topics include publishing houses; data on specific houses and different kinds of
aggregate data concerning size of house and other factors; numbers of
original Swedish crime-fiction titles published and those translated into
Swedish (in addition to demonstrating interesting patterns of total numbers
of crime-fiction titles published in Sweden, this data set also offers up facts
such as that only in 2002 and 2010 did Swedish-language originals outnum-
ber translations into Swedish); publishing and sales figures in relation to
which decade the series debuted in; and records of specific authors and the
imprints under which their work was published.

Berglund has included a brief concluding chapter, in which he uses
Franco Moretti’s concept of “normal literature” (based solely on Graphs,
Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History [2005]) to argue that since
the turn of the century, crime fiction has become the “normal literature”
of Sweden. In this chapter, Berglund offers his interpretation of the phe-
nomenon his book charts quantitatively with reference to some literary
criticism. While not without interest, this section seems superfluous to
the work represented by Berglund’s research; perhaps it is an obligatory
bow to theoretical awareness, but it is for Berglund’s careful marshaling
of information that readers will take up this book.

Berglund’s documentation is precise and extensive; the notes section runs
to thirty pages, and the bibliography is helpfully subdivided into sources
of primary data (chief among these the annual bibliography of all crime-
fiction titles published in Sweden by the now-defunct quarterly Jury, but
also including URLs for lists of prizewinners, literary agencies, etc.) and a
list of secondary sources drawn from book history, marketing, and literary
criticism. The index is more than perfunctory, providing a useful tool for
those interested only in a particular author, publisher, or prize series.

The book is highly recommended for readers of Scandinavian Studies,
including scholars, general-interest readers of contemporary literature,
and students of all levels (if it were available in English, I would use
it as a course text). In April, 2013, Svenska Deckarakademin recognized
Deckarboomen under lupp as the year’s best non-fiction book in the field
for 2012, thus corroborating its importance in the field. The book is also
valuable for anyone interested in patterns of contemporary crime fiction
more broadly, particularly in its complex relations with literary fiction and
the marketplace. Berglund’s study is exemplary book history, particularly
notable for its multi-disciplinary engagement with a contemporary publish-
ing phenomenon. Karl Berglund has produced a much-needed resource
on a high-profile area of contemporary Swedish culture, and this book is
crucial for scholars engaging Swedish crime fiction.

Rosemary Erickson Johnsen
Governors State University