

Selected Scandinavian Fiction in English Translation

BY ELIZABETH GONZALEZ JAMES



Alesund, Norway

After the runaway success of Stieg Larsson's dark 2008 thriller, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the publishing world turned its eyes to Scandinavian countries. Dozens more noir writers followed, among them Jo Nesbø, whose Harry Hole novels have sold more than 23 million copies worldwide; Joakim Zander, whose English translation of his novel *The Swimmer* in 2016 drew comparisons to the novels of John le Carré; and Anne Holt, a former Minister of Justice whose Hanne Wilhelmsen series finally made it to the United States in 2012, almost 20 years after first appearing in Norway.

If sensational murder mysteries and crime thrillers are not to your taste, contemporary Scandinavian authors have much to offer beyond noir. The dozen writers featured below hail from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. Though we preview only a small selection of these writers, those highlighted include some of the most lauded,

best-selling, and widely translated writers in their native countries.

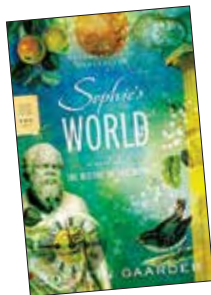
While stylistically different, many of these writers share a common interest in the natural world—its vastness, beauty, cruelty, and power over the people living in the forests, along the shores, and confined in the ice and grime of the cities. It would be tempting to assume that Scandinavian writing is gloomy and filled with dark, brooding characters that mirror their landscape, but that characterization would be false. Fredrik Backman and Jonas Jonasson's characters are as bright and humorous as could be. And, perhaps owing to the excess of darkness, many writers—among them Johanna Sinisalo, Tove Jansson, and Jostein Gaarder—have a fascination with magic and folklore.

Where available, the dates in parentheses refer to the original publication date and the date of English translation, respectively.

The Norwegians

Jostein Gaarder (1952–)

Gaarder's novel, *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy* (1991, 1995), was the best-selling book in the world at its time of publication and remains one of Norway's best-known novels. Sophie, 15, finds two notes in her mailbox: "Who are you?" and, "Where does the world come from?" Sophie's journey to answer these questions takes her on a crash course through philosophy, from Socrates to Sartre, and reveals a complicated world of shifting realities. *The Solitaire Mystery: A Novel About Family and Destiny* (1990, 1996) is an enchanting fairy tale about a young boy being driven across Europe to search for his missing mother. A miniature book about a shipwrecked sailor seems to hold clues to her disappearance. *The Orange Girl*, a book *Vogue* proclaimed, "should be read by all," again features a young protagonist—a 15-year-old boy who receives a long-lost letter from his deceased father in which he meditates on the wonder of being alive. See also *The Castle in the Pyrenees* (2008, 2010), *The Christmas Mystery* (1992, 1996), *Maya* (1999, 2011), and *Through a Glass, Darkly* (1993, 1999).



Karl Ove Knausgård (1968–)

Knausgård, regarded as one of Norway's greatest living writers, is best known for his six-volume autobiographical series, *My Struggle* (2009–2011, 2013–2016). Upon publication, the books were immediately met with controversy on two fronts: their Norwegian title, *Min Kamp*, is the Norwegian equivalent of the title of Adolf Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, and though the books in Knausgård's series are marketed as fiction, the characters include Knausgård and members of his immediate family. In Volume 1, Knausgård worries about the end: his time is running out, and one day he will die. And as if in answer to this existential worry—after Proustian catalogs of teenage forays into parties, sex, and guitars—Knausgård learns of his father's death; he devotes the second half of the book to accepting his loss. Later volumes concern a failed marriage, a solitary life in Sweden, his childhood in the early 1970s, his current marriage, and becoming a writer. Jeffrey Eugenides famously noted that Knausgård "broke the sound barrier of the autobiographical novel." The English translation of the sixth book in the series is forthcoming. See also *A Time for Everything* (2004, 2009).



Per Petterson (1952–)

Out Stealing Horses (2003, ★★★★★ Sept/Oct 2007)—a "quiet and compelling novel" (*New Yorker*)—follows Trond, an older man who recently lost his wife and sister and decides to live the rest of his life in solitude in a remote cabin. An encounter with a neighbor brings back memories of a fateful summer in 1948, when Trond and a friend "borrowed" horses, a recollection that unravels secrets about Trond's past and forces him to confront his grief. *To Siberia* (1996, 2008) features an unnamed narrator who recollects her girlhood in Denmark during World War II, as she and her firebrand brother grew closer after their grandfather's suicide. Petterson based *In the Wake* (2000, 2006) on his own family tragedy—losing both parents, a brother, and a niece in a fire aboard a ferry in 1990; the novel follows writer Arvid Janson (a recurring character for Petterson) who is still coping, six years later, with a similar loss. See also *It's Fine by Me* (1992, 2011), *I Curse the River of Time* (2008, 2010), *I Refuse* (2012, 2015), and Petterson's short story collection, *Ashes in My Mouth, Sand in My Shoes* (1987, 2013).



The Swedes

Marianne Fredriksson (1927–2007)

Although Fredriksson's early work was religious in nature, her later novels focused on friendship, which she believed was more important than love. *Simon and the Oaks*, also titled *Simon's Family* (1985, 2000), is considered by Swedes to be one of their country's finest modern novels. It features the friendship between two boys during World War II: Isek, a Jewish refugee, and Simon, a gentile who learns he is actually adopted and of Jewish heritage. Together, they transition from boyhood to adulthood in a country torn apart by war. *Hanna's Daughters* (1994, 1998), a family saga, spans a century and three generations of women. Hanna is raped and impregnated by her cousin at the age of 12 and forced into marriage to save her reputation. Hanna's only daughter, Johanna, grows resentful of her mother, whom she considers backwards. Anna, Johanna's daughter, seeks a stronger connection to her family's past, searching for "a way home." See also *According to Mary Magdalene* (1997, 2002) and *Two Women: A Novel of Friendship* (1999, 2002).



Fredrik Backman (1981–)

Backman rose to international prominence with his debut, *A Man Called Ove* (2012, 2013), a heart-warming story of Ove, a curmudgeon whose bitterness masks a deeper sadness and whose life is transformed by a young family who moves in next door. *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* (2013, 2015) features a young girl whose grandmother—her best and only friend—dies, leaving behind a stack of letters of apology to people she has wronged. “If you miss it, you’ll never forgive yourself” (*Business Insider*). *Britt-Marie Was Here* (2014, 2016) continues in this vein of charming stories about people with more interior depth than they reveal to the outside. Britt-Marie, a fussy neat freak, finally leaves her unfaithful husband and finds herself the caretaker of a decrepit recreation center and the coach of an unskilled children’s soccer team. Backman’s latest, *And Every Morning the Way Home Gets Longer and Longer* (2016), tells the story of a man suffering from Alzheimer’s. He and his grandson sit on a bench that grows smaller each day. Their surrounding area, which grows dimmer as they approach the moment they must say goodbye, is populated with people and things from the grandfather’s life.



Kerstin Ekman (1933–)

Blackwater (1993, 1996) was Ekman’s first novel translated into English after a long and successful career in Sweden. A literary crime novel, it follows a young mother and her daughter who move to a commune near a remote Swedish village and stumble upon a grisly double murder. Ecological issues play a large role in *Blackwater*, with the *New York Times* positing it as the first of the “environment-driven thrillers.” The environment also figures prominently in *The Dog* (1986, 2010), about a puppy who follows its mother and master into the wilderness, loses them, and must survive the harsh conditions of the Nordic forest. *Under the Snow* (1961, 1997) tells of a mahjong party that ends with the death of a player. Set in a remote village above the Arctic Circle, the novel explores “the peculiar psychology of people who live half their lives in darkness, cut off from the rest of the world” (*Library Journal*). See also *The Forest of Hours* (1988, 1998) and the *Women and the Town* tetralogy: *Witches’ Rings* (1974, 1997), *The Spring* (1976, 1999), *Angel House* (1979, 2002), and *A City of Light* (1983, 2003).



Jonas Jonasson (1961–)

Jonasson rocketed to fame with his debut, *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* (2009, 2012). Allan, one day shy of his 100th birthday, escapes the confines of his nursing home for one last adventure. Possessing a Forrest Gump-like knack for participating in major world events, Allan offers “a great cure for the blues, especially for anyone who might feel bad about growing older” (*Kirkus*). The comic *The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden* (2012, 2014) chronicles unlikely events on a global scale: Nombecko is an orphan from the South African slums who escapes to Sweden and finds herself enmeshed with a set of twins plotting to blow up the king. Jonasson’s most recent book, *Hitman Anders and the Meaning of It All* (2015, 2016), follows three unlikely coconspirators: a priest, a receptionist, and a murderer just released from prison. The three craft a successful business killing people for profit—until their hit man starts to ask life’s big questions.



The Danes

Peter Høeg (1956–)

A former ballet dancer, sailor, and actor, Høeg earned international acclaim with his first novel to be translated into English, *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (1992, 1993). This genre-bending literary fiction thriller features Smilla, half native Greenlander and half Dane, who befriends a young boy shortly before his mysterious death. Suspecting foul play, Smilla investigates the boy’s death and, in the process, uncovers conspiracies relating to Denmark’s postcolonial history. *Borderliners* (1993, 1994) is a dark dystopian novel about a school for “borderline” children—wards of the state, many with a troubling past. The children suspect they are unwitting participants in a social experiment and begin to plot a way out. *The Woman and the Ape* (1996) is a love story of sorts between a woman and a highly intelligent ape. After that novel’s tepid reviews, Høeg went silent for 10 years before releasing *The Quiet Girl* (2006, ★★★★★ Jan/Feb 2008), a story about a psychic clown who is tasked with helping a shady governmental outfit find a missing child who shares the clown’s gift. See also *The History of Danish Dreams* (1988, 1995), *Tales of the Night* (1990, 1998), and *The Elephant Keepers’ Children* (2010, 2012).



Jakob Ejersbo (1968–2008)

Ejersbo spent time in Tanzania as a child and trained as a journalist before turning to fiction. He died at the age of 40, cutting short a promising career as a neorealist who earned comparisons to Irvine Welsh (*Trainspotting*). His Africa Trilogy, *Exile* (2009, 2011), *Revolution* (2009, 2012), and *Liberty* (2009, 2014), published posthumously, opens with a group of wealthy expat teenagers adrift in Tanzania. The characters engage in excessive drugs and alcohol, aware that nothing—their parents, their homeland, Africa—will save them. *Revolution*, 11 short stories that bridge the first and third books in the trilogy, focuses on the lives of native Tanzanians, while *Liberty* brings the collection full circle with insights into racial and national identities in a post-colonial world. “Seldom has anyone written anything so insistent and impassioned, so glowing hot and ice-cold, so heartfelt and so cynical” (*Danish Literary Magazine*).

The Finns

Johanna Sinisalo (1958–)

Sinisalo, one of Finland’s leading science fiction writers, uses the genre’s speculative conventions to shed light on society’s darker tendencies and explore difficult questions in the neutral zone of possible worlds. In her debut, *Troll: A Love Story* (2000, 2004), also titled *Not Before Sundown*, a photographer rescues a baby troll from drunken



teenagers and takes it home, unaware of the consequences of raising a wild creature in the middle of Helsinki. Told from five different viewpoints as others interact with the troll, all of the people reveal their inhumanity in a novel that questions what separates human from beast. Our relationship to nature appears again in *Birdbrain* (2008, 2011), about a young couple hiking through the Australian outback with a copy of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as their only entertainment, and in *The Blood of Angels* (2011, 2014), in which a spreading bee-colony collapse threatens civilization with extinction. Sinisalo’s most recently translated novel, *The Core of the Sun* (2014, 2016), follows a young woman living in a brutal police state who must find her missing sister while grappling with an addiction to illegal chili peppers. It was praised by *NPR* as “funny, unsettling, [and an] emotionally charged apparition of the present.”

Tove Jansson (1914–2001)

Jansson, who trained as an artist, is best known as the creator of the Moomins, little white trolls who feature in nine immensely popular children’s books and a comic strip. In the 1970s, after the death of her mother, Jansson decided to write adult fiction, beginning with *The Summer Book* (1972, 2008). It is the story of a perfect summer on an unspoiled Finnish island, where a young girl and her grandmother enjoy the bounty of the natural world and contrast their lives: one starting and the other nearing its end. “It is slim enough to read in a day but holds a whole world between its covers” (Powell’s Books). Winner of the Best Translated Book



Helsinki, Finland



Award in 2011, *The True Deceiver* (1982, 2009) tells about two women, Katri and Anna, opposites and outliers in their snowbound village. The two are not what they seem, and soon their illusions—both inward and outward—tumble one by one. *Fair Play* (1989, 2011), which also focuses on two women, portrays the rarest of things in a novel: a loving, functional relationship. Mari and Jonna live in opposite ends of an apartment building connected by an attic. Friends for decades, they travel, create, and allow themselves to celebrate the beauty of the everyday. See also *The Woman Who Borrowed Memories* (2014), *Sculptor's Daughter: A Childhood Memoir* (1968, 2014), and *A Winter Book* (1998, 2006).

Leena Krohn (1947–)

Krohn, a Finnish fabulist who writes about strange subjects in highly lyrical prose, might be “too enigmatic for comfort” for many readers (*Publisher's Weekly*). *Tainaron: Mail from Another City* (1985, 2004) is an epistolary novel consisting of 30 letters from a woman to her lover as she describes her life in a city populated by human-sized, talking insects. The creatures are funhouse mirror versions of humans, where queen bees question their personhood and dung beetles feast on their dead compatriots in a symbiosis that repulses but then enchants the narrator. Nature and altered reality



figure again in *Datura, or A Delusion We All See* (2001, 2013). A sickly journal editor eats the toxic seeds of the *Datura* plant, long known to cause delirium and death. The unnamed narrator is soon haunted by grotesque visions and strange, shifting characters in a surreal narrative that defies clear resolution. “This is a writer whose work can rewire your brain, leaving you with an enhanced, near-hallucinatory apprehension of our fragile planet, and of all the beings that inhabit it” (*Los Angeles Times*). The small press, Cheeky Frawg, has recently published Krohn’s collected works under one volume, *Leena Krohn: Collected Fiction* (2015).

Further Reading

POPULAR MUSIC FROM VITTULA | MIKAEL NIEMI (2000, 2003)

THE HALF BROTHER | LARS SAABYE CHRISTENSEN (2001, 2003)

THE SEDUCER | JAN KJÆRSTAD (1993, 2004)

THE EXCEPTION | CHRISTIAN JUNGENSEN (2004, 2007)

PURGE | SOFI OKSANEN (2008, 2010)

DOPPLER | ERLEND LOE (2004, 2012)

THE FASTER I WALK, THE SMALLER I AM | KJERSTI ANNESDATTER SKOMSVOLD (2011, 2013)

THE LITTLE OLD LADY WHO BROKE ALL THE RULES | CATHARINA INGELMAN-SUNDBERG (2012, 2013)

KARATE CHOP: STORIES | DORTHE NORS (2014)

THE ROOM | JONAS KARLSSON (2014, 2015)

THE WEATHER CHANGED, SUMMER CAME AND SO ON | PEDRO CARMONA-ALVAREZ (2015)

THIS SHOULD BE WRITTEN IN THE PRESENT TENSE | HELLE HELLE (2011, 2016) ■

Stockholm, Sweden

