



# 10

ways into Finland-Swedish  
literature

# “It’s really never lonely here”

## – Contemporary Finland-Swedish literature



Finland-Swedish literature is a microcosm: you can find every genre represented in a body of literature which encompasses around 200 titles a year and whose primary readership numbers just 300,000 people.

Poetry has always held an important, special place in Finland-Swedish literature – like a sort of core framework. Prose works and ‘big’ novels have helped to pave the way abroad.

In her magnificent novels *Den amerikanska flickan* (2004, *The American Girl*) and *Glitterscenen* (“The Glitter Scene”, 2009) Monika Fagerholm has created a unique universe in which language and rhythm are an organic element of the narrative. Kjell Westö shapes true-to-life portraits of Helsinki in his perceptive, richly nuanced generational novels such as *Där vi en gång gått* (“Where we once walked”, 2006) and *Gå inte ensam ut i natten* (“Don’t go out alone into the night”, 2009).

Other significant authors who have managed to cross the language gap between Finnish and Swedish and are equally widely read and admired in both languages include Märta Tikkanen, whose *Män kan inte våldtas* (1975, *Man Rape*) can virtually be accorded the status of a classic. This book fitted right in with the wave of feminist literature in the 1970s, and throughout her career as a writer Tikkanen has been unafraid to tackle contemporary issues affecting everyone with a personal touch. Merete Mazzarella writes keen-eyed, warm-hearted books and possesses a unique talent for putting her finger on current themes. One author who has long been relevant in both national languages is Claes Andersson – he is a former Finnish minister

for culture, as well as a psychiatrist and jazz pianist. Tua Forsström is another major influential writer. She has won numerous awards for her poetry, which enjoys a large readership outside Finland as well.

There is a good infrastructure in place for those who wish to become authors in Swedish-speaking Finland, with two general publishing houses and a number of more specialised Swedish-language publishers in the country. The publishers compete with each other for authors, so this creates an excellent starting point for aspiring writers. Publishing activities are highly professional and market-oriented, but there is an underlying cultural responsibility which means that publishers take their budding authors seriously. Most books are translated into Finnish and published simultaneously in both languages, and a good deal of Finland-Swedish literature is also published in Sweden at the same time.

It is inevitable that Finland-Swedish literature is characterised by its status as a minority literature – in a positive sense. It does not ‘need’ to adhere to the literary trends, traditions, schisms or influences of the Finnish-language majority literature. It maintains its distance from Swedish-language literature in Sweden. Its own literary milieu is so small in scale that there are few rules or literary schools to either adhere to or depart from. This means that Finland-Swedish literature is quite free to be as wild, headstrong, experimental, or traditional a form of expression as it wants to be.

Or as Moominpappa – one of the most charming characters in Finland-Swedish literature – would say: “And I believe many of my readers will thoughtfully pause and lift their snout every once in a while to exclaim: This is life!”

**Tiia Strandén**, project manager, FILI

The text quoted in the title is taken from a poem by Tua Forsström.

# Life's fleeting nature

## *Tusenblad, en kvinna som snubblar* “Millefeuille, a woman who stumbles” by Birgitta Boucht

An elderly woman has a fall in the bath, breaking her hip. As she lies there, trying to stay alive as she waits for help, her memories and reminiscences elevate her pulse: memories of being a child and being a mother, of opting out of having children and opting out of having men – of women's fates and strategies, along with the consequences they can bring.

Millefeuille is the daughter of an extremely beautiful, strong, unhappy woman who, just like Garbo, was called Greta Gustafsson and came from Sweden, and a kindly, timid father who died early on. Who is Millefeuille herself? That is what she has always found difficult to get to grips with. If Millefeuille had been born a boy, she would have been called Flipchart because – as her mother put it – “I want to be able to draw on them. (...) Draw and then tear them up. Draw on them again. Tear them up again if need be.” Greta's friend Elsa, on the other hand, is the embodiment of a good mother, with her never-ending love, and Millefeuille grows up in the midst of a warm embrace and a severe stare. In her own life she chooses to refrain, to opt out.

Birgitta Boucht is adept at saying things directly without sacrificing complexity. She is wise without being overbearing and funny without being flippant. Even though *Tusenblad, en kvinna som snubblar* (“Millefeuille, a woman who stumbles”, 2011) is about an ageing woman, it has found a particularly receptive audience among young readers. This is a book with something reassuring to say about big issues like good, evil and forgiveness. This is an author who touches her readers.

Boucht's previous publications include numerous works of poetry, prose and contributions to anthologies. In *Tusenblad, en kvinna som snubblar* her writing has matured into a masterful simplicity. In reading Birgitta Boucht, one glimpses the majestic in seemingly small, insignificant gestures.

**Anna Friman**, editor, Schildts

### **Birgitta Boucht (b. 1940)**

Boucht holds a master's degree in politics and is an author, creative writing instructor and journalist. She is one of the leading figures in the peace and women's movements in Finland. In the course of her career she has been the editor-in-chief of *Astra Nova*, a women's magazine. Boucht has published works of poetry and prose.

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“Boucht conveys life's fleeting nature in a painful way.  
But she does it beautifully.” *Västra Nyland* newspaper



photo: Charlotta Boucht

# Poetic objectivity

## *Blad ur höstens arkiv* “Leaves from autumn’s archive” by Bo Carpelan

Bo Carpelan’s final novel, the melancholic *Blad ur höstens arkiv* (“Leaves from autumn’s archive”, 2011) consists of a series of prose sketches. They are written by the character Thomas Skarfelt, who notes down his experiences, thoughts and impressions about childhood, ageing, sex, music, nature and writing. He does this with Bo Carpelan’s sense of poetic objectivity. He uses the linguistic virtuosity that can only be achieved through a lifetime of writing and thinking.

Carpelan (1926–2011) ranks among Finland’s most significant authors as well as having the greatest number of awards and prizes to his name, including the prestigious Le Prix Européen de Littérature. His output encompasses prose, poetry, books for children and young people, literary reviews and translations.

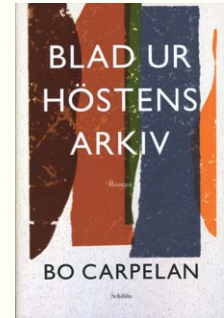
Thomas Skarfelt is an ageing civil servant who has spent his whole life working with statistics. One autumn he heads out to his summer cottage on the island of Udda to find some peace, some balance, something that he is lacking – but mainly in order to be able to pay regular visits to his mother, who is in a care home. A neighbour pops round, as does a lad called Slanten. The plot line is minimal; events do not play out at the level of outward actions, but rather seek out different, more meandering perspectives.

“I sit here on Udda and write. Is this a meaningless activity? If it were, would I still write? What am I looking for? A balance between discord and harmony, a language that is my own. Waiting, patience, longing for words that have poetic objectivity! What a presumption! And without that? Without that precise waiting, that precise text?”

This is daily life, viewed with Carpelan’s intelligent, amiable and sometimes caustic eye: the mundane imbued with meaning by someone who never ceases asking questions.

The reader finds herself at the core of great philosophical questions without having noticed being on the journey there. The big questions: right among us, no more remarkable than a bird taking flight from its branch, no weightier than a cloud scudding overhead.

**Anna Friman**



### **Bo Carpelan (1926–2011)**

Carpelan held a Ph.D. in literary studies. During his lifetime he published over thirty volumes of poetry and novels as well as children’s books. He was also a literary critic and translator. Carpelan was awarded every major literary prize available to Swedish-speaking authors: the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1977; the Swedish Academy’s Nordic Prize in 1997; and he is the only author ever to have been awarded the Finlandia Prize on two occasions, in 1993 and 1995.

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“Like reading a book of aphorisms and poetry written in prose.” *Borgåbladet* newspaper



photo: Charlotta Boucht



# Circles of life

## *Camera Obscura* by Johanna Holmström

Johanna Holmström's third collection of short stories, entitled *Camera Obscura* (2009), proves that she merits serious attention as a crafter of short-form prose. Few writers display a mastery of the art of pacy narration to equal Holmström, who is a psychologically keen-eyed observer. Her short stories have elements of fairy tales, ghost stories and horror effects.

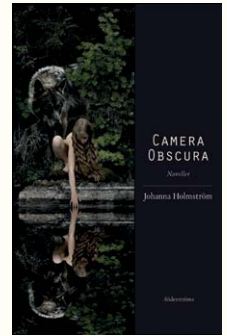
This book stretches the concept of the short story, more closely resembling a cleverly constructed novel in which the reader has to figure out the intricate relationships among the characters, events and places.

Holmström portrays young people in the opposition between tradition and modernity. She pushes her characters to the limit: she lets a young eco-terrorist commit suicide in order to avoid growing up and becoming a consumer and a drain on the environment. In the book's creepiest story, 'The doll-maker's child', a doll-maker on the Russian island of Kronstadt rounds up all the island's children, in the manner of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, in order to make exact copies of them for their parents "in a more docile form – only, easier to control, someone you wouldn't need to scold or worry about, and most important of all: someone who never grows old."

Holmström registers movements and moods with a style reminiscent of a camera's cool objectivity.

**Sara Ehnholm Hielm**, editor, *Söderströms*

"She is skilled at depicting people and settings and writes about love and sorrow, deceit and hopelessness, with a skewed view of reality and a touch of mysticism. Her prose can be stunningly beautiful, and her sense for revealing details is captivating. An engrossing, poignant book." *BTJ*, published by the Finnish Library Association



### **Johanna Holmström (b. 1981)**

Holmström trained as a journalist. Her debut work was *Inlåst* ("Locked in"), a collection of short stories published in 2003. Since then she has published two more volumes of short stories and one novel.

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photo: Irmeil Jung

# “You want to have everything”

*Leo*

by Ulla-Lena Lundberg

*Leo* (1989) is the introductory volume in a timeless, sweeping maritime trilogy by Åland author Ulla-Lena Lundberg. The other titles in the series are *Stora världen* (“The big world”, 1991) and *Allt man kan önska sig* (“Everything one could wish for”, 1995).

This trilogy, which tells the story of a shipping dynasty from the mid-19th century to contemporary times, is Finland’s very own Forsyte Saga. With giddy brilliance, the narrative shifts over the course of the three books from realism with an omniscient narrator, to polyphony and then to a postmodernist mistrust of a coherent subject, in such a way that each generation has its own narrative style. Lundberg’s writing is never predictable and always enjoyable.

When *Leo* was published it was lauded as the Great Finland-Swedish Novel that the Swedish-speaking literary world in Finland had been waiting a century for. Nowadays it is perhaps even more apparent just how universal this epic depiction of Åland’s seafaring heritage is, stretching from the peasant boatmen of the 1850s via the global fleets of sailing ships that went to Australia and America, all the way to modern-day ferry services between Finland and Sweden – a lifeline for Åland, the little island province in the middle of the Baltic Sea.

*Leo* deals with huge, sweeping changes in society: the arrival of capitalism in a village, the emergence of the modern world. Lundberg possesses excellent knowledge of how the great sailing fleets were built, right down to the smallest fittings and beams. This novel is also a family chronicle, portraying individuals with grim tenderness and unvarnished precision. Lundberg is well-versed in the seafaring history of the menfolk as well as the women’s more restricted circumstances.

*Leo* is a book that powers onward at full sail, through a vanished world that soon feels very familiar, with characters to love, mourn and treasure forever.

**Sara Ehnholm Hielm**

“Lundberg has written a novel that is the first instalment in a trilogy that is so rich and complex that it feels overwhelmingly difficult to do it justice.” *Hufvudstadsbladet* newspaper



## **Ulla-Lena Lundberg (b. 1947)**

Lundberg was born in Åland and is a qualified ethnologist. She made her debut as an author at the age of 15 with a collection of poems. She has published a huge range of works encompassing poems, documentary novels, travel writing and novels.

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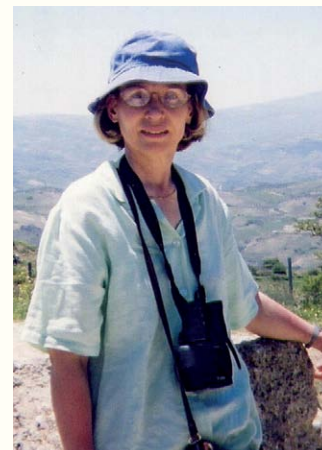


photo: Söderströms

# ”Lonely people, infinite spaces”

## *Vattnen* “Waters”

by Susanne Ringell

Author and dramatist Susanne Ringell is a talented, highly individual short-story writer. With her ninth book, *Vattnen* (“Waters”, 2010) she at last achieved success beyond Finland’s borders, garnering rave reviews in Sweden.

There are many departures in *Vattnen* – people are running away from themselves or from others. Few manage it: too much water has flowed under the bridge. Water also provides a very real link between these stories, from the waters of the womb to the Bosphorus.

The temporal setting of the narrative is often a journey that is cross-cut with the past. We encounter people in crisis, on their way towards a crisis or having just experienced one. Many of the narrators are women who possess the mercilessly acute sense of their own shortcomings that comes with middle age. The women struggle to reach the inner recesses of life, to escape their crippling self-consciousness, to be transformed.

In ‘Berlin’, one of the best stories in this volume, a middle-aged couple visit that “sensory-overloaded and fleshly” city. The only place they feel at ease is at the Bistro Calvados, a dive bar where everyone smokes. This is a piece of travel reportage and an account of a relationship that is caving in – in Berlin, interior and exterior realities amiably merge into one another.

The stories in this collection are united by Ringell’s robust, sensuous language. It is as if she has an inexhaustible toolbox of metaphors, similes and phrases, and she plays with them exuberantly. She treats words like concrete objects to squeeze and bend and carve little figures out of. But the language is never an end in itself, rather a practical tool which she applies into the tiniest crevices – and with a brusque warmth, humour and melancholy that demands some experience of life.

*Sara Ehnholm Hielm*



### **Susanne Ringell (b. 1955)**

Ringell has worked as both an actress and dramatist. She made her debut as an author with a collection of short stories in 1993. Since then she has published short stories, novels, plays and poetry collections.

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“To my mind, this is the Finland-Swedish book of the year: a collection of short stories united by the element of water. Ringell is a master of short-form prose writing and manages to evoke unforgettable atmospheres and characters using a rich, concise language.” *Svenska Dagbladet* newspaper, Stockholm



photo: Anders Larsson

# Erudite fun with none other than God himself

*Gud* “God”

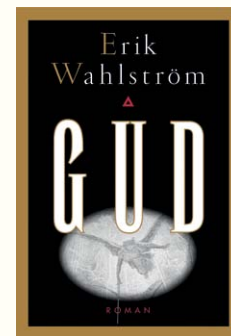
by Erik Wahlström

“God was horny.” So begins Erik Wahlström’s novel about the Lord of all the universe. Wahlström has read his Bible word for word, from beginning to end. He has livened up ecclesiastical history and brought God down to Earth in a book that could be called a Finland-Swedish answer to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*.

In this coming-of-age tale, simply and cheekily entitled *Gud* (“God”, 2006), God goes from being a virile young buck to a tired, grizzled old man. He can be likened to a human because he undergoes an ageing process, and this fact is used to explain his actions and vagaries. This novel spans the period from the Creation to the contemporary digital age, and Wahlström follows the events in the Bible in chronological order. God is constantly adapting to circumstances, tries his best, has to keep things in check – that would tire anyone out in the long term. “The world is fascinating. But I’m dull,” God admits dejectedly. The Archangels Michael, Raphael and Gabriel start out as eager enforcers of the Lord’s orders, but over time they turn into a bunch of flabby desk jockeys who think the Boss is a has-been, a drip. Wahlström also takes care to liberate the Virgin Mary from the first part of her title. And what about Satan? Yes, he’s here too, and he also grows old and grey with the years.

*Gud* is an intelligent fusion of an essayistic novel and a picaresque. It contains a great deal of philosophy and history of ideas, yet is written with a light touch. In interviews, Erik Wahlström has maintained that this book is not profound, but is instead a literary joke and a playful thought-experiment. As we know, play is by its very nature beneficial and improving. We just have to grasp Wahlström’s fearless hand, seize God’s gnarled fist and enjoy the fun, which will be mainly about people and humanity.

**Anna Friman**



## **Erik Wahlström (b. 1945)**

Wahlström holds a master’s degree and works as a writer and journalist. He previously worked as editor-in-chief of *Hufvudstadsbladet*, the largest Swedish-language daily newspaper in Finland. Wahlström has also published non-fiction books, two children’s books and three novels. He was awarded the Tieto-Finlandia prize for non-fiction in 1992 for his book *Miljöns tillstånd i Finland* (“The state of the environment in Finland”).

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Translation rights for *Gud* (God) sold to:

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“God is a book whose very concept makes you want to read it, and one that gives rise to much voluntary and involuntary laughter.” *Borgåbladet* newspaper



photo: Vertti Teräsuo



# “You are another”

## *Fallstudie “Case Study”* by Robert Åsbacka

A disastrous error has occurred in the upper echelons of the art world, and now people are desperate to preserve their honour and not lose face. Robert Åsbacka's novel *Fallstudie* (“Case Study”, 2004) follows Ralf and Øystein, two odd-job men who drive round Stockholm in a Ford Transit van on an urgent mission: they need to get hold of materials for two art installations and assemble them to the artist's specifications within a very short time. The materials they have to find, load, crush and assemble are: three hundred kilograms of magnets, several bathtubs, a couple of empty oil drums and a crate of iron wire. They've got one day before the gala opening in the prestigious gallery at Kulturhuset in central Stockholm. The catalogue has been printed and distributed, and Queen Silvia of Sweden has promised to come and unveil the exhibition. The only thing that's missing is the artwork.

The story encompasses multiple realities, milieus, cultures, class signifiers and lifelong deceptions. The novel depicts the relationship between concrete, physical labour, which is accorded low status, and abstract, artistic work, which is held in much higher esteem. Both Ralf and Øystein are products of physical labour. Ralf's family moved from Ostrobothnia in Finland to the affluent Sweden of the 1960s to look for work after the farm where they had been working was no longer viable. Øystein, on the other hand, has fled a legacy of hard graft in Norway in order to attempt to make it as an artist in Stockholm. Åsbacka moves smoothly through time and space, seamlessly connecting history to the present.

Robert Åsbacka has found a niche for himself in the uneasy tension between the work of the intellect and the body. He himself has worked in ports and warehouses as well as in academic settings. He has journeyed across class boundaries, and these experiences provide the raw material for the simple, organic narration in his novels; the intelligent, unobtrusive humour; the melancholic sadness and the eye for the unique and the ridiculous in a totally ordinary person's life.

*Fallstudie* is the first work in a loose trilogy of novels, whose other titles are *Kring torget i Skoghall* (“On Skoghall square”, 2006) and *Orgelbyggaren* (“The organ-builder”, 2008).

**Anna Friman**



### **Robert Åsbacka (b. 1961)**

Åsbacka was born in the town of Terjärv in Finland but now lives in Sweden. He holds a master's degree and is a literary scholar. Åsbacka made his literary debut in 1988 with a collection of poems, but achieved success in 2000 with his novel *Döbelns gränd* (“Döbeln's alley”) and has published three more novels since then. He has been nominated for the two most prestigious literary awards in Finland – the Finlandia Prize and the Runeberg Prize – as well as the Nordic Council Literature Prize.

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*“A distinct pleasure to read, and it keeps you thinking afterwards.”* *Vasabladet* newspaper

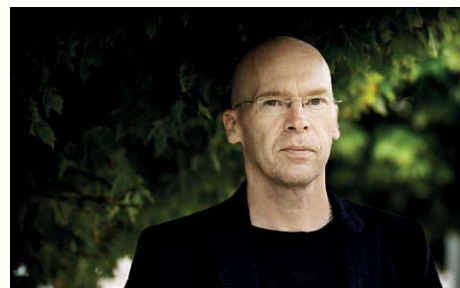


photo: Cata Portin

# Five knives and plenty more besides

## – the new generation of Finland-Swedish writers

The ranks of Finland-Swedish authors include many social chroniclers and great prose stylists with an interest in history, such as Kjell Westö, Ulla-Lena Lundberg and Lars Sund.

The younger generation of Finland-Swedish authors also have society, class, history and overtly political topics on their agenda, but they take greater liberties with structure and idiom and provide a variety of original voices, which bodes well for the future of Finland-Swedish literature.

**Ulrika Nielsen** (b. 1974), who practises a relentless delineation of the task of writing in works with titles such as *En bok av kött och ord* ("A book of flesh and words", 2008) and *Lite borta från platsen där jag står* ("A little way away from the place where I stand", 2011), could be placed at one extreme if one tries to categorise this group of authors. Her books are "poetic biographies of writing", as one critic put it: serious studies of

the process of writing and the creation of meaning. Her message is about doubt and uncertainty, rather than declaration or proof.

**Anna-Lena Laurén** (b. 1976), a journalist and former Moscow correspondent for Finnish radio who writes factually based, densely concrete prose, could be said to be the polar opposite of Ulrika Nielsen. Laurén writes books of personal reportage in which human-interest elements of everyday life are combined with expert knowledge about Russia and the Caucasus. Her books are very firmly anchored in facts and accessible subject matter; she is impressively well-read and well-travelled in the former Soviet empire. *De är inte kloka, de där ryssarna* ("They're nuts, those Russians", 2008) and *I bergen finns inga herrar - om Kaukasien och dess folk* ("There are no gentlemen in the mountains: On the Caucasus and its people", 2009) responded to a great thirst for knowledge among both Swedish- and Finnish-speaking readers. *Sedan jag kom till Moskva* ("Since I came to Moscow", 2010) sees her



Ulrika Nielsen



Anna-Lena Laurén

taking a different approach with a more personal theme: a young single woman's attempt to find a life partner, with occasional incompatibilities arising between Scandinavian and Russian social culture.

The member of this younger generation of writers who has been quickest to reach the stage that is measured in terms of external success – literary awards, enthusiasm from critics – is **Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo** (b. 1974). After making a start with extravagantly brilliant short stories in *kärlek kärlek hurra hurra* (“love love hooray hooray”, 2005) she was awarded the Runeberg Prize, one of Finland's most prestigious literary awards, for her debut novel, *Fem knivar hade Andrej Krapl* (“Five knives had Andrej Krapl”, 2007). This work combines extensive local knowledge with borrowings from folk tales and myths, along with a linguistically inventive portrayal of a young woman's liberation and conquering of the world. It prompted rapturous

reviewers to laud it as “a *Bildungsroman* for our times, with elements of cyberpunk and romance” and “a reflection on how a pure narrative can look today, beyond realism and any need for verisimilitude”.

Another way to approach this cohort of prose stylists is to savour their language: consider how it sits in the mouth, how freely the author moves along the spectrum from vernacular to formality, whether they use dialect or colloquialisms for effect, and how that works.

The most magnificent gallops along the colloquial–formal language scale are provided by **Sabine Forsblom** (b. 1961) in *Maskrosguden* (“The Dandelion God”, 2004), a portrayal of childhood with a cramped working-class view of the 1960s, enriched with older relatives' chatty stories about war and even greater poverty. Forsblom works as the principal of an adult education college, and *Maskrosguden* is her only published literary work thus far.

Sabine Forsblom



Hannele Mikaela Taivassalo



photo: Imeli Jung



photo: Ina Årsson

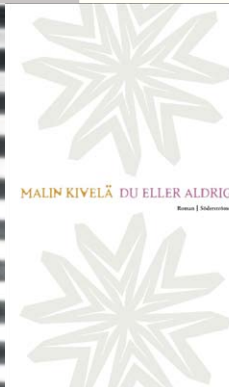
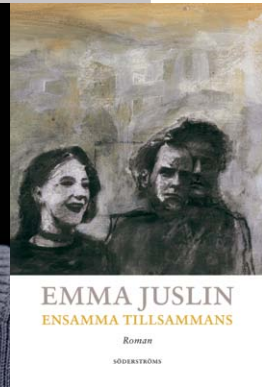


photo: Cato Portin



Malin Kivelä

Emma Juslin

Mikaela Strömberg

All three novels by **Mikaela Strömberg** (b. 1971, formerly Sundström) – *Dessa himlar kring oss städs* (“These heavens around us always”, 1999), *Till alla hästar och till vissa flickor* (“To all horses and to certain girls”, 2004) and *De vackra kusinerna* (“The beautiful cousins”, 2008) – occupy the space between urban and rural, where the small-scale farming class rubs up against the middle class. She knows what it is like to live among cows, horses, men with coarse, appealing cowboy charm, and substance-abusing single mothers – as well as the cool competence of a law office and artistic self-reflection. Her language has a luminosity and flexibility that can transport the reader deep into scenarios of tangible horror or dreamlike ineffability, with open gaps of stark naturalism in a narrative which always escapes the ponderousness of epic realism. Sundström trained as a lawyer and has also written two picture books: *Linnéa och änglarna* (“Linnéa and the angels”, 2003) and *Min bror Lev* (“My brother Lev”, 2007).

**Malin Kivelä** (b. 1974) possesses a similar ability to be both dreamlike and tangible. In her second novel, *Du eller aldrig* (“You or never”, 2006), she skilfully conjures up a virtually invisible story about an isolated and – to all outward appearances – hardly-exciting person’s daily life. Here, too, the realistic, mundane dimension is paired with a sense for the deeply affecting, the sensitive and the sweetly romantic. Studies of the infinitely varying patterns of snowflakes or Elvis Presley’s tragic fate provide space for the protagonist and images for emotions which her tiny basement apartment cannot seem to hold. Kivelä, who has a background in the theatre, made her literary debut with the novel *Australien är också en ö* (“Australia is also an island”, 2002) and has also published a picture book, *Den förträfflige Herr Glad* (“The excellent Mr. Glad”, 2004).

The young female protagonists in the three novels by **Emma Juslin** (b. 1985) try to find their way out into life and love and away from difficult families with downtrodden fathers or hordes of difficult younger siblings. Her latest book has a tone of resigned optimism in its title, *Ensamma tillsammans* (“Alone together”, 2009), and like its predecessors, its originality stems from Juslin’s cheeky, unexpectedly mature sarcasm and chatty language.





Philip Teir



Kaj Korkea-aho

The overwhelming majority of the writers who debuted with prose works during the first decade of the 21st century are women, though of course there are some men among their ranks as well.

**Philip Teir** (b. 1980) is an arts journalist. Following on from his poetry debut, *Någonting ur hennes mun faller i min mun* (“Something from her mouth falls into my mouth”, 2007), he published *Akta dig för att färdas alltför fort* (“Beware of travelling too fast”, 2011), a collection of short stories that combine irony, sadness and humour with agile inventiveness. These short stories are manifestly literary – skilfully defined and angled, with tight, ingenious plots – and also reveal a remarkable talent for observation. They provide the reader with a feeling of ‘just like this, just now, in Helsinki or any other city’, in student flats, in cafés, in families.

**Kaj Korkea-aho** (b. 1983) was already well known as a magnificent radio comedian when he made his debut with his novel *Se till mig som liten är* (“Look after little me”, 2010). This is a book about guilt, religion, bullying and becoming a man. As a perceptive reviewer pointed out, much of the anxiety potential was already there in Korkea-aho’s distorted, grotesque radio world. But in his novel, things are serious. As with Emma Juslin’s books, it is easy to imagine that younger readers will feel a particular resonance with this work – almost as compelling as a crime novel, but without the banal plot twists.

One thing that the Finland-Swedish authors who can currently be grouped together under the label of ‘promising’ have in common is perhaps a desire to develop themes based on specific individual experiences or expressions, rather than painting vast landscapes. What you lose in breadth you gain in precision – often both in thematic and formal terms.

*Pia Ingström, literary critic, Hufvudstadsbladet*

# Word-play in the 21st century

Poetry has always been one of the foundation stones of Finland-Swedish literature and an emblem of quality. Finland-Swedish poetry is varied, multifaceted and headstrong. The Modernism of the 1910s and 1920s, whose poets included Edith Södergran, Gunnar Björling, Elmer Diktonius, Rabbe Enckell and Henry Parland, made a lasting impression on Swedish-language poetry written in Finland-influences which are still visible today.

In the past decade, Finland-Swedish poetry has been characterised by playfulness, formal breadth and a keen focus on language. There are five poets who have garnered special attention among those who have broken new ground: Ralf Andtbacka, Agneta Enckell, Catharina Gripenberg, Peter Mickwitz and Cia Rinne.

**Catharina Gripenberg** (b. 1977) made her debut with *På diabiliden är huvudet proppfullt med lycka* ("On the slide, her head is packed with joy", 1999), a collection of poems whose various poetic devices and

sprinklings of foreign languages and dialects livened up the Finland-Swedish poetry scene. Following her debut, Gripenberg published two more volumes of poetry: *Ödemjuka belles lettres från en till en* ("Humble belles-lettres from one to one", 2002) and *Ta min hand, det vore underligt* ("Take my hand, it would be strange", 2007). In these books, she writes linguistically searching poetry that asks basic questions about how we exist and who we are.

In *Ödemjuka belles lettres från en till en* Gripenberg presents absurdist lyric prose: often the settings are dreamlike with a touch of the surrealist, sometimes even nonsensical. Much of the material centres around the family, and the family here is an allegory for society, its rules and order. There is also a pathos here inspired by Edith Södergran, a sort of freedom to say anything at all. Here, for example, she pokes fun at patriarchal logic and motherly care:

Catharina Gripenberg



photo: Linda Stråka



*Your father went on his plane and said:*

*Let me look from above, let me see where the sea ends,  
I don't believe in things you can't believe in. I believe in  
things you can figure out.*

*He flew up in the sky and called down to you  
that the sea exists, he's checked it out, but you  
don't need to fear, because he's discovered a  
number so big that everything can fit in it, except one, but from  
two and up it's fine.*

*You saw birds in green and blue, and came home dizzy.*

*Now we have to eat porridge and forget all we've seen!  
said your mother*

Many of the prose poems in *Ödemjuka belles lettres* are a kind of anti-narratives that insist on their own way of arranging the world. If stories traditionally create an order based on consistency that reflects the order of society, that order is thrown overboard here. The same applies with the poems in *Ta min hand, det vore underligt*. Again, Gripenberg gives a nod to Edith Södergran with the book's title and first suite of poems. She uses Södergran's familiar poems as a starting point and then rearranges things as she sees fit. Gripenberg's poetry is inventive and humorous, but it is also atmospheric and emotive.

**Agneta Enckell** (b. 1957) published her first work in 1983 and has released seven collections of poetry thus far. In her debut volume, *Förvandlingar mot morgonen* ("Transformations towards the morning") she unites aspects of the great Modernist tradition of Finland-Swedish poetry with feminist-tinged poetry which



photo: Patrik Kosk

Agneta Enckell

establishes a relationship between physicality and language. In the 21st century Enckell has published two collections of poetry:

*Innanför/utanför ((1+)3x13+(1+)13) (eller 4 olika sätt att närma sig ett landskap)* ("Inside/outside ((1+)3x13+(1+)13) [or 4 different ways to approach a landscape]", 2005) consists of four sections, each with a significantly different graphic form; the poems vary from expansive free verse to ever more deconstructed, stuttering, fragmentary verse, leading to a sort of silence:

*snow falls d  
ense and white an  
d silent -*

The poems in *anteckningar (intill ett nordligt innanhav)* ("notes [by a northern sea]", 2010) are all set around the Baltic Sea. In both this book and her previous one, Enckell examines landscapes: she emphasises connections and investigates the limits between people and their environment, between limestone, writing, body, rain, words and "the hand's movement as it writes". To Enckell, writing becomes a landscape. Writing is sometimes something that precedes the self, and in a sense something that the self attempts to become:"and so before you know the word you are out of the text, you are outside, have forgotten". Constantly shuttling between presence and absence.

**Ralf Andtbacka** (b. 1963) has published seven collections of poems. His first was *Öga för öga* ("An eye for an eye", 1994), an inventively low-key, verbally Equilibristic type of poetry marked by a particularly Anglo-Saxon brand of modernism and postmodernism. His latest poetry collection, *Wunderkammer* ("Chamber of wonders", 2008) is, as the title suggests, a wide-open cabinet of curiosities, with poems that ask questions about their own identity as poetry. There is also a reverse chronology of "The History of Sound Reproduction", a list of elements, animals in Latin, natural-history specimens and personal names.

Collecting is the major theme of this book, and the result is often a sort of humorous catalogue poem. This is a fertile sideline which one could call the material conditions of culture: from 78-rpm records via



photo: Ulja-Maria Holmros-Andtbacka



Ralf Andtbacka  
**WUNDER-  
KAMMER**

*Dikter*  
SÖDERSTRÖM

LPs to VHS tapes and digital reproduction, from sound to text, from dialect and keyboard typos to linguistic standardisation and printed text.

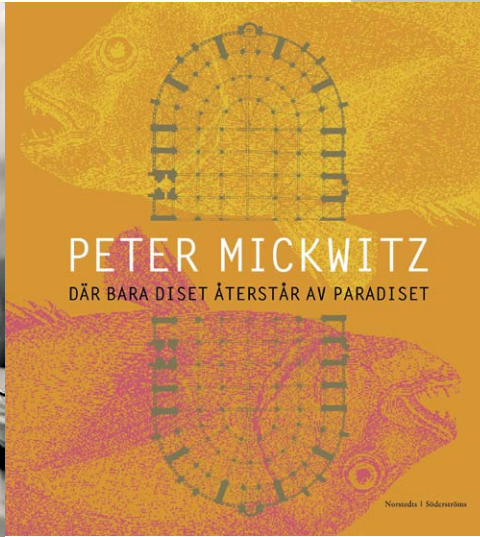
In *Österbottensk gotik* ("Ostrobothnian gothic", 2008) we encounter a collection of co-ordinated, sometimes recurring sentences that are bound together in a tightly composed long-form poem. This is both fun and thought-provoking, particularly when the sentences contrast with one another in subtle or more overt ways: "I believe in local democracy and small-scale operations. In the free movement of capital." The 'I' here is a fictional persona that holds the text together: "On a sentimental journey through the new-old Europe./ Pit stop in Katyn./ What does it mean to have dignity./ It's not enough to shed skin./". There is also a fair amount of (more or less disguised) autobiographical detail, reflections on the world, on the author's own writing, quotes from friends and acquaintances. Andtbacka is one of the most innovative Finland-Swedish poets. He feels his way along heretofore unexplored paths and creates a strong personal presence in his texts.

**Cia Rinne** (b. 1973) comes from a multilingual background and writes poetry at the juncture between different European languages: English, German, French– where one of the key points is to examine the aesthetic dimensions of language. She has published two collections of poetry. In both her debut work, *zaroum* (2001) and in *notes for soloists* (2009) she presents brief, minimalist poems – a kind of concrete poetry,





Cia Rinne



mostly composed using a typewriter. The words and means are extremely simple, but the results can be many-layered and subtle:

*peace piece:*

*peace,*

*please.*

*Or:*

*war was*

*was war*

*was war?*

*war war*

*war was?*

*war was*

*here.*

Whereas *zaroum* was more visual and also included handwritten poems and drawings, *notes for soloists* is more consistently oriented around an acoustic resonance. Rinne's poems are unlike any other Finland-Swedish poetry in their blending of humour with seriousness, the avant-garde with linguistic exercises.

**Peter Mickwitz** (b. 1964) made his debut in 1991 with *i ljuset* ("in the light"). That work took its lead from the late work of Gunnar Björling, one of the most radical figures of Finland-Swedish Modernism, but quickly blazed new paths of its own. As a poet, Mickwitz is chiefly concerned with pauses and interruptions in language and multiplicity of meaning. His poetry has an evocative musicality and often includes shifts in rhythm to heighten the reader's attentiveness. His latest collection of poems is markedly different from his earlier, darker and 'more difficult' poetry. In *Där bara diset återstår av paradiset* ("Where only the haze remains of paradise", 2007) a more playful and nonchalant side of Mickwitz emerges. There is also a recipe for the best way to cook a Moomin and a number of humorous nonsense poems. "The Moomin we're going to prepare should weigh at least 12 kg and be 90 centimetres long – eating small ones is of course completely reprehensible. Many prefer Moomins in the spring when the meat is known to have a light, pleasant flavour of spruce needles." Besides his six volumes of poetry, Mickwitz has also edited two poetry anthologies and has published a collection of essays.

**Fredrik Hertzberg**, Ph.D., literary critic

# At the juncture between east and west

## – literature from Åland

**T**he Swedish-speaking province of Åland comprises a small collection of islands in the middle of the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden. Its geographically strategic position and its proximity to the sea have had a significant influence on Åland in political and cultural terms alike. Åland's literature is also strongly tinged with the sea and seafaring.

*Katrina* (1936), the first novel by **Sally Salminen** (1906–1976), was a major event when it was first published, and today it is regarded as a classic. It was an immediate literary success and was translated into over twenty languages. Sally Salminen's own life story accounted for a great deal of this attention. She worked as a domestic maid in New York, writing *Katrina* in the evenings and late at night. She submitted the manuscript to a major Nordic novel competition – and won: a real-life Cinderella story. The book portrays the arduous life of a woman in 19th-century Åland. Sally Salminen wrote perceptively and touchingly about the contrasts between the haves and the have-nots, town and country, tradition and change, Ålanders and incomers.

**Anni Blomqvist** (1909–1990) was a fisherman's wife and a relative of Sally Salminen. She wrote the *Stormskärs-Maja* ("The storm island") series, whose five titles were published in the 1960s and '70s. These novels, as well as the TV adaptations of them, were hugely popular in the Nordic countries. In their stories about Maja, a woman from an island called Stormskär, the books give the reader a vivid portrait of life on the remote islands of the Åland archipelago in the mid-19th century.

One of Åland's most prominent authors is the clergyman **Valdemar Nyman** (1904–1998). Nyman's novel *Broder Kilian* ("Brother Kilian", 1947) has been likened to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It depicts a 15th-century Franciscan friary in the Åland archipelago and the inner and outer struggles for faith the title character undergoes. Not only the people in this novel have a voice; the sea, plants and animals can also be heard. Nyman's entire literary output deals with spiritual-existential themes.

**Joel Pettersson** (1892–1937) was a writer and artist from Åland, whose paintings as well as his dialect-infused prose and theatre pieces depict rural Åland in the early 20th century. Though very little of Pettersson's

Anni Blomqvist



photo: Söderströms



Sanna Tahvanainen



photo: Cata Portin

writing was published during his lifetime, he is now regarded as one of the most significant authors from Åland. His novel *Månadsmorgon* (“Monday morn”) was published in 2004.

Joel Pettersson’s prose focuses on themes such as exclusion and intolerance, and it contains heavy satire aimed at the public’s stupidity and greed. Pettersson has been called a modernist as well as a primitivist and a naïvist.

**Carina Karlsson** (b. 1966) is one of Åland’s most highly regarded poets. She debuted in 1996 with her poem cycle *Lisbeta, Per Skarps hustru* (“Lisbeta, wife of Per Skarp”), which tells the story of a woman who was put to death for witchcraft. The tale, told in the form of poetry, is based on an event that actually happened in Åland in the 17th century. *Åren ligger i drivor* (“The years lie in great drifts”, 2002) is a poetic chronicle, with Karlsson’s note-like prose poems prose miniatures describing the bustle and magic of childhood against the cultural backdrop of her home village.

**Åsa Lind** (b. 1958) has written both fiction and non-fiction for children. She is widely known and loved for her three life-affirming

philosophical books about the friendship between a girl called Zackarina and Sandwolf: *Sandvargen* (“Sandwolf”, 2002), *Mera Sandvargen* (“More Sandwolf”, 2003) and *Sandvargen och hela härligheten* (“Sandwolf and the whole shebang”, 2004). Sandwolf is everything the girl is not, and he patiently answers all her questions. He is never afraid, and he is fun and adventurous, too.

**Sanna Tahvanainen** (b. 1975) debuted in 1994 with a collection of poetry entitled *Fostren* (“The foetus”, 1994). Since then she has alternated between writing prose and poetry. Tahvanainen’s first novel, *Silverflickan* (“The silver girl”, 2002) about a girl’s path out of bullying and peer-group exclusion has strong autobiographical features. Her novel *Alltid skogen* (“Always the forest”, 2005) is a story about a young girl growing up. Tahvanainen has also written plays and a children’s book.

**Kent Danielsson** (b. 1953) is a clergyman and author. His first published work was a poetry collection entitled *Bilder Brista vita* (“*Images Defect white*”, 1988), a ‘non-figurative cross procession’ inspired by St. Anna’s Church on one of Åland’s smaller islands.

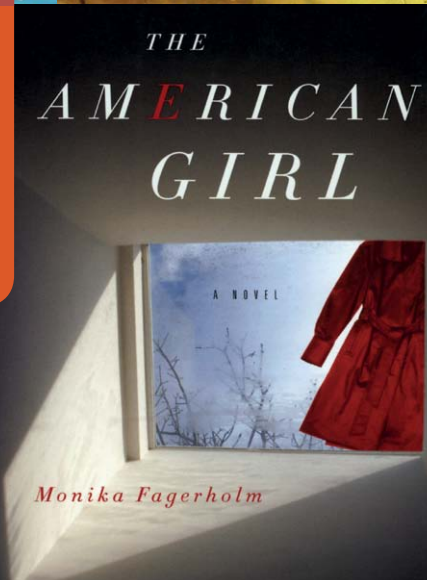
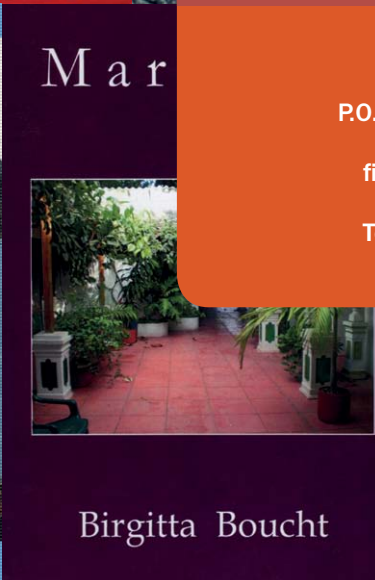
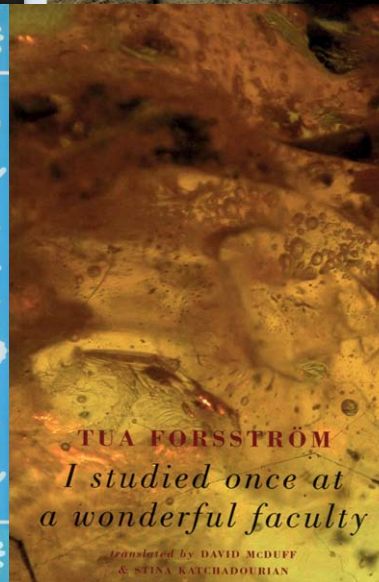
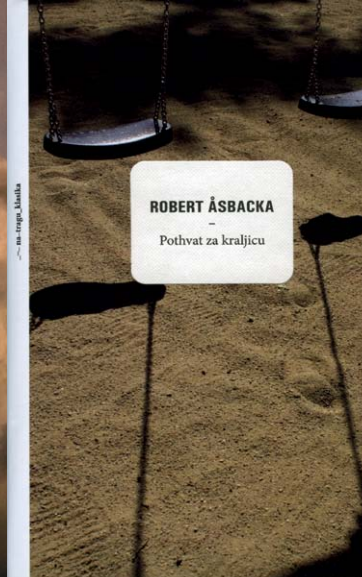
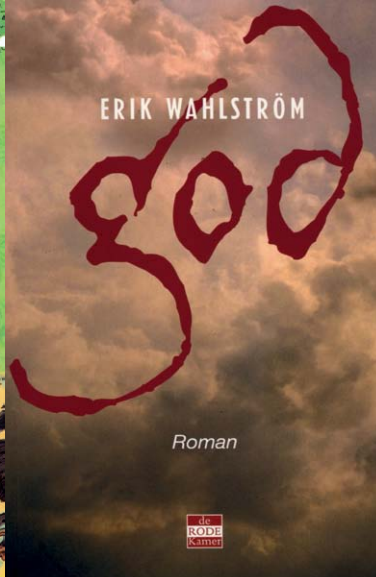
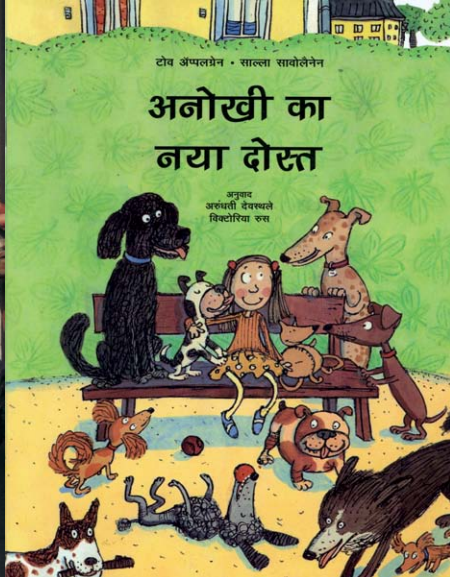
In 2007 Danielsson published his first prose work which was very favourably received: the evocative historical novel *Balladen om Bel Ols* (“The ballad of Bel Ols”) about the life of a church painter. This book depicts a medieval world that feels very far away in terms of its era and mindset, yet has strong points of connection to our own world today. In Kent Danielsson’s writing, words regain something of their archaic power – their connection to body, flesh and blood.

**Katarina Gäddnäs**, Åland based writer

Kent Danielsson







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