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The goodness of reading and writing – reflections on Swedish Literature Policy

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Introduction

A month ago I went to Namibia in South West Africa travelling with a multicultural group consisting of people from Japan, Australia, Canada, Israel, Malta, Germany and Sweden. We had one language in common, English. For some of us a native language - for some a foreign language. But, in the Himba village of Opuwo all of us went mute. Nobody had the advantage of knowing English – except possibly for the Japanese guy who after a few minutes was joined by two nice okra-coloured girls who wanted to marry him and immediately leave for Japan!

In Opuwo I happened upon an aged and dusty report about the Himba people titled: Notes on the Kaokoveld. First published 1951 in South Africa by the Department of Bantu Administration. It appeared as if the book had been lounging in the curiosity-shop for decades without anybody ever taking notice of it. On leaving the shop I went and showed it to our local host and guide, Queen Elisabeth, who looked at the pictures and recognised a great-grandfather from her village. The book aroused great interest among the people around her and especially the old men. Everybody tried to find their ancestors and intense discussions followed about the old times and who was related to whom.

Another example: Some years ago I visited the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia, where the Wana, the rainforest-nomads, live. I travelled together with people from the north of Sweden who had brought along with them a picture book about life in Älvsbyn, their hometown. Some of the pictures showed Älvsbyn at wintertime covered in snow, with people driving snow-scooters and skiing. But, how do you explain the

feeling of sub zero temperatures and soft snow to rainforest people who have never even experienced the cold, nevermind snow? We repeatedly tried to express the sensation of cold snow – but I was left with the feeling that we had made complete fools of ourselves.

Travelling extends one's personal horizons presenting new perspective on matters. In our westernised culture we take the written word for granted, as we do the means of communication for a common language. We believe in the goodness derived from the acts of reading and writing. Writers, publishing houses, libraries and bookshops are part of an old and tested infrastructure of our society.

Another conclusion reached is that the written word assumes greater importance to me if there is something that I can relate to in a text (or a caption to a picture). That dusty report had no meaning to the people in the village, as they didn't know that their ancestors were mentioned in it. Neither does the word "snow" mean anything to you if you have lived in a rainforest all your life.

Returning to the western world I realised that this paper had to be written and its given topic was to be "Swedish literature policy". I shall now keep to the subject.

Looking to the number of inhabitants, Sweden is a small country. To maintain variety in book publishing in a minority language area consisting of 8 million inhabitants is difficult at the best of times. The rapid development of international media towards increased conglomerations of publishing houses and increased commercialisation pose a threat to minority language areas in particular.

The goal of the state's literature policy in Sweden is to make quality literature available to everyone, even if you live far from Stockholm or other major cities. There must be bookshops, libraries or other means of book-distribution over large and often sparsely populated areas. There are about 400 bookshops, several book-clubs, about 1 500 public library units, a number of school-libraries and a little more than 100 book-mobiles in Sweden's 289 municipalities. The aim to make available general and high-quality standard publications, satisfying various reading interests and needs is not an easy task. There are state grants that aim to promote diversity and quality. Children and young people are particularly important target groups.

The Swedish book market

Ever since computers started gaining ground, the death of the book has often been proclaimed. The rumours always seem exaggerated as more books than ever before are published. The long-term effect has made the book cheaper and more available.

Considering the limited range of the Swedish language there nevertheless is a relatively large number of publications in a wide variety of subject matters presenting the Swede with a vast selection of quality literature. But the book is in fierce competition with other media, especially that of recreational reading. Reading books is a time consuming matter and time has become a commodity in very short supply. We spend less time reading than we do watching television or listening to the radio.

Numerous works of fiction are published and sold in small editions. The average sale per title in Sweden has in the past ten years decreased on average by 1000 copies. This has enabled a few best sellers to monopolise a greater part of overall sales. Books by thriller author John Grisham have for many years accounted for 15 percent of total sales of general literature in the United States. The gap between best-sellers and small edition quality literature is widening.

Specialist books enjoy a more favoured position. The higher level of education and increased interest for the literary specialist book has widened its readership.

The attention surrounding a book of today is often created by other media and in other forms than previously. The days when a good review in a newspaper's cultural section would literally guarantee encouraging sales seem to belong to a bygone era. Today's media attention is often geared towards the author's own person than the book itself. Best-sellers are often created in a sphere of symbiosis with film, television and advertising agencies. Perhaps ten of these titles make a significant impact on the trade each year.

The past twenty-five years have seen radical changes take place in the bookmarket. The structure of publishing is today characterised by large conglomerates counterbalanced by smaller, often specialised, publishing houses. What was once the middle range of publishers have either merged with the larger companies or else disappeared.

The retailing side of the business has also changed. The majority of bookstores are part of various bookstore chains. There has been a modernisation and rationalisation of the traditional booktrade.

Book retailing on the Internet is a phenomenon enabling the customer to purchase books regardless of time or space. You can publish, order, sell, buy and read literature via the Internet. The new technology may be a threat to the local bookseller, but it can also open up new opportunities and create competitive advantages.

Computer technology also offers new methods of publishing. The e-book co-exists as a media for storing previously published books as well as for publishing new, not printed, books. The conventional book is distributed in a set edition, in identical copies and is geographically restricted, whilst the electronic document assumes different appearances irrespective of time and space.

VAT

Together with Denmark, Sweden, until recently, held the dubious merit of leading Europe's highest VAT rate for books, 25 percent. The issue of reducing VAT on books has long been a subject for intense discussion. Finally this year and following a successful campaign led by the book-publishers association the government decided to reduce the VAT down to 6 percent as a complement to other means of supporting and promoting measures to increase reading.

But if the reduction of Value Added Tax is to be culturally and politically effective it requires publishers, book retailers, book-clubs, major stores and other participants to make sure that the fiscal effects remain. With these points of departure, a governmental bookprice commission set the wheels in motion.

The commission will pay close attention by extensive investigations in to price trends for books, periodicals and other items covered by the tax reduction the next three years. It also aims to secure the customer the full benefit of this reduction. Another task for the commission is to serve the interests of increasing readership in all categories and to account for the effects attained by the reduction of the VAT.

So far, it appears as if it has attained the desired effect, which is that of granting the customer to reap the full benefit of the VAT reduction. This full effect does not however seem to have benefited customers of periodicals. The reduction seems to be used to strengthen the periodicals own finances.

The VAT reduction and the focus on books has led to an increase in book purchases. But, it is still too early to say whether it will influence reading patterns in the long run.

Guaranteeing the readers a wide choice of quality books

State funding, as a means of promoting and maintaining quality standards and variety in book publishing was introduced as long ago as 1975. Besides Norway Sweden is the only European country that has a general state funding for book publishing. The intention was to guarantee the readers a wide choice of quality titles. The background was that costs of publishing and book prices were increasing, the number of literary debuts was on the downslide and there was increasing difficulties in publishing titles for such a diminutive market.

Structuring a funding system and applying it to a free market turned out to be a rather sensitive business. The function of the subsidy is that of a general stimulus. It is not an industrial subsidy as such, but a selective subsidy to a sector of the market, which is of importance in terms of literature and cultural policy.

The system, that is administrated by the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs, was designed to subsidy individual titles in general literature. The intention of the subsidy, without undue control, was to improve the financial conditions for publishers enabling them take risks by publishing titles that might not be expected to yield an immediate profitable turnover.

Some 700–750 titles are each year provided financial support. They are selected by a number of independent professional groups. The criterion for selection is literary quality, and nothing else. This means that even Nobel prize winners' books can be refused. Defining quality is sometimes a delicate task, but the system has worked surprisingly well. Very few decisions have been questioned. There seems to be a consensus about what kind of literature should be supported.

Most of the grants can be applied *after* publication. The aim of this is to reduce the risk of the State indirectly setting precedents for publishing. It is linked to a provision for keeping prices at a minimum: publishers must not exceed certain specified maximum prices for the titles for which they are seeking grants. The annual budget is barely 50 million SEK (530 8644 EUR) a year, which is enough for about 700 titles or the half amount of the applied titles.

Working teams, one for each programme, makes decisions regarding applications. The groups include authors, translators, critics, teachers, librarians and experts with the competence to evaluate applications in their chosen subject areas. They meet between four and six times a year. Each book is assessed by at least two readers. Support for publishing is administered by the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs. Literary quality and quality of content is the criteria for financial support. The translation is taken into account regarding books of foreign origin. In the case of the classics, we also ascertain whether the work is available on the Swedish book market or not.

The system established in 1975 is still operating with the original concept and has become part of the publishing sector. Its abolition would cause confusion and even damage. For the large scale publisher the subsidies are of marginal importance. For the small and medium-sized publisher, however, they are of vital importance.

It is impossible to give any statistical evidence for the impact of the system. Since the publishing subsidy functions in a free market, where it only corresponds to about 1 % of the total turnover, and since it is decided and paid out after publication, it is impossible to give any vital statistics as to its effect. Any attempt at evaluation must therefore be based on the structure of the subsidy and its way of functioning. However, one conclusion that might be drawn is that the funding system has helped to maintain a number of small and medium-sized publishing companies and indirectly worked against consolidation of the publishing sector.

Even if the subsidies to the publishing sector has worked reasonably well, the goal of making literature broadly available has nevertheless failed. A new system of distribution to public libraries and about one hundred booksellers was initiated in 1999.

In addition, En bok för alla AB (A Book for Everybody Ltd.), a publishing house, receives a grant of 10 million crowns for publishing works of quality in inexpensive editions. Since 1986 there has been a grant for a limited period of 2-3 million crowns a year for the publication of series of classics for schools.

The total cost of the state literature policy is about 90 million SEK or about 9 355 000 Euro per year. In relation to the turnover of the publishing sector it is of marginal importance. None the less, this selective support is an important part of a national literature policy.

Start with the children

The right to a language is basically about democracy and the freedom of speech. Language is attained via literature and reading and is therefore of central importance to the state's cultural policies. The Government has during the last few years made this a priority and state support for literature and reading has doubled. A substantial part of these measures concern children and young people.

Taking stock of these measures is difficult for the short term. Changing reading habits takes a long time, but despite threats from other media, it appears as though children's reading habits remain fairly stable.

To support reading – mainly for children and young people – is one of the cornerstones of the state's literature policy. For the fifth consecutive year Swedish libraries have been granted 25 million crowns to purchase books for children and young people. Much of the subsidies cover books for school libraries. Some of the municipals see these subsidies as a way of repairing the damages caused by the financially stressful times of the early nineties. A condition for receiving these subsidies is that the municipal authorities account how it is being used to increase reading habits among children and the young. Those municipal authorities that have taken measures to increase co-operative efforts between public and school libraries, as well as stimulating reading efforts are given priority. The subsidy is often used as a means of lobbying local politicians into maintaining the level of subsidies already attained.

The state also lends its support to various reading activities for children and young people. It is on the whole a long term approach where pre-school, disabled children and children who have another native language than Swedish are afforded support in their linguistic development. There are numerous projects supporting this, stretching across vast regions: the Nordic countries, the Barents area, the counties of Norrland and several individual counties. Alarming reports concerning student's inability to take in texts of a complex nature has given cause for reflection.

Since 1999 the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs issue annually a catalogue listing books for children and young people. The catalogue will this year be published in an edition of 500 000 copies. Its main purpose is to show the general public the scope of publishing in this area. As a complement another catalogue presenting children's literature in other languages than Swedish is recently published. It contains 240 titles in 18 languages issued by publishers in Sweden.

Besides the institutions and publishers an increasing number of NGOs are involved in book and reading promotion for children and young people. Their work is extremely important to stimulate reading.

Sweden – a multicultural society

Sweden has changed from the culturally peripheral homogeneity to a country of many cultures. Of the slightly more than eight million people inhabiting Sweden there are close to a million born in other countries. Sample this by taking the Stockholm underground to Tensta and all of a sudden you will be in Iran or Somalia. The Tensta Library, in a suburb of Stockholm, has 40 000 books in 50 languages. Newspapers and periodicals from around the world are among the most popular media. The work with children is based on the conviction that a good knowledge of their native tongue is the best basis for learning a new language. All children are given a present, The child's first book, with stories for small children. Two women, one who speaks Arabic and one who speaks Somali work as "language pilots" to stimulate the children's language training by storytelling sessions. The language pilots also work as bridge-builders between the library and Arabic-speaking girls in the area.

Children, as well as adults are in great need of help with their homework. Most of the adults do not have contact with Swedes and Swedish is seldom spoken at home. Understanding the words in a textbook is a major problem. The Tensta Library has successfully offered help with homework since 10 years. About 20 people are providing this help on a voluntary basis.

Growing up in different cultures and different linguistic environments often implies that immigrant children seldom feel at home in either. Their linguistic capabilities suffer, at the worst it can result in semilingualism—that is, children growing up not knowing any language well enough to be able to communicate feelings or thoughts or to understand what others say or write.

With books, stories and fairy tales the librarians meet the children and their parents every week. Their basic methods are reading together, looking at and talking about the pictures, telling stories and discussing with the children and their parents. There are also visits to libraries to borrow books and to find out what else is on offer. As the children find their linguistic feet, they can start to tell stories themselves, draw, and perhaps write their own stories or together with others. The children's own activities are fundamental to the success of this initiative. Strengthening children's identities is a primary principle in a project called 'Alfons opens the door', a literature project for and with immigrant children in Halmstad and Falkenberg, two places on the Swedish west coast.

The International Library in Stockholm is with its 200 000 books in over 100 languages the public library with the largest collection of books in foreign languages. Those who read Arabic have a fairly wide choice—over 17 000 volumes. Spanish- and Persian-speakers can look for something worth reading among the 14 000 covers. And for those who read Turkish there are about 12 000 volumes to browse through.

The public libraries are important places for the immigrants – they are free of charge, you can meet friends, find your home newspaper or books in your own language. But the possibility to write and express yourself in your native tongue is also important. Since 1977 the state subsidy to literature has also included the publishing of books in immigrant and minority languages in Sweden. Every year about 50-80 books are given such support. The publishers are quite small and usually sell their books one by one in few copies. But some of them – especially the Kurdish ones – are actors on an international market, attracting good writers and buyers all over the world.

Children and young peoples books are given priority. Many of these are translations of Swedish children's books. The underlying principle is that, despite language, children can share the same literature. As of this moment there are 240 titles among children's books on the book market. These are presented in a new catalogue issued by the Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs.

The potential market for books written in Somali, Romany or Kurdish is relatively small compared to that of English language books, or Swedish ones for that matter, as are the conditions under which they exist. But, there are occasions when a state subsidy can initiate unforeseen possibilities. A year ago, Pippi Longstocking by Astrid Lindgren was published in Romany. Behind the scenes of this publication lie years of persevering and pioneering work. It involved a great number of people; not least older generations of Romanies who were asked about old words and expressions. There were words, which had to be created, such as “fire-hose”, as it did not exist in Romany. The book is also available as print-on-demand.

Public libraries – a way to reach the readers

Without libraries, many books would not reach their readers. For an author who only sells a small print-run via bookshops, it becomes very important to exist in a library. Although it is possible to get hold of books on the Net or through book clubs, libraries have an important role as intermediaries for books.

Public libraries are a responsibility for the 289 local authorities around in Sweden. They are open more than 33 000 hours per week. Their staff is usually trained to select and lend books. But library grants for purchasing books has been reduced – at the same time as the number of titles published have increased. Media acquisitions as a share of libraries’ total budgets are about 12 percent.

When book grants are reduced there is a risk that novels, poetry, translations from lesser-known languages and books by less-well known authors will cease to be bought. There are two ways of selecting when grants are cut—by trying to maintain a wide range of holdings by buying many titles but fewer copies of each, or to buy fewer titles but maintain the number of copies for each. Many Swedish libraries have chosen to maintain a wide range in their holdings. This means that the books most in demand are often not to be found on the shelves.

There are great differences between local authorities. There are some libraries that allow 100 SEK (10,6 EUR) or more per inhabitant per year for buying books and other media, but others that buy books worth 13 SEK (1,4 EUR) per inhabitant per year. This is one reason why the official commission of enquiry into books made a whole range of proposals for support to the dissemination of books and the promotion of reading through libraries and the book trade. Among other things, state support to literature as described above was supplemented with a system of supporting distribution.

The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs (Kulturrådet) pays the publisher 50 percent of the book’s net price in compensation for it being distributed to libraries and bookshops.

Which books do libraries buy?

What effect will the distribution system have on a library’s purchasing policies? Will libraries buy fewer copies of the books that receive support? If they do, how will they use the funds they save? As a second measure, loans of the books that receive state support is being investigated, and a third measure will include issues of handling and supporting distribution.

According to an almost completed study there are some clear tendencies. In all libraries, of the titles that received support, the proportion bought by libraries was highest in the category of children’s and young people’s literature—the mean was 83 percent. Then came fiction literature in Swedish, literature in translation and facts literature. The largest local authorities bought as expected more titles than the smaller ones.

The study also shows that 25–30 percent of the fiction literature distributed to libraries is seldom or never borrowed, much of this being collections of poetry.

The attempt to disseminate quality literature to readers raised many questions as to the role of libraries. What is their responsibility towards quality literature? Do libraries tend to have the same selection as bookshops and book clubs, or is there also scope for unusual interests? What happens to the local profile of small libraries when they are swamped with books that receive state support? Can you lend just anything through marketing and efforts to promote reading? Do all the books get read? The experiment with the distribution of quality literature will show whether easier availability of literature in itself creates demand or whether more is needed if books are to reach their readers.

Reading habits

It is often said that the Swedes are a nation of readers. We read fiction, technical- and specialist books, newspapers and periodicals. We even read texts on the back of milk cartons. Each day an estimated 40 percent of the population read from a book. We are surrounded by the written word during our waking hours. In other words – when it comes to reading the Swedes present an opposite to the people of the Himba and Wana, which I mentioned in my opening statement.

So, is this diligent reading habit we possess a consequence of the state's literature policy? Or effective marketing by publishers and booksellers? Or is it merely an effect of our cold climate and long dark winters? To offer an unambiguous answer to this question is not an easy task. A recently published Eurobarometer made obvious the distinct differences between the north of Europe and that of the south of Europe. The north and north west present a population who read a greater number of books, who have books at home and are frequent visitors to libraries.

The Eurobarometer was initiated by the EU commission's statistics authority, EUROSTAT, in the autumn of 2001 to survey the situation of cultural and media habits in the EU community. The research was carried out in all membership countries using personal interviews of more than 16 000 people over the age of 15 who were given identical sets of questions. Some of these questions touched on reading habits, to what extent books were read, if there were books in their homes, if they used the Internet to purchase books, how often periodicals figured in their reading habits and how often they visited the library.

Questioned if they had read a book in the past 12 months, a majority replied that they had. On the other hand, slightly more than 40 percent that is four out of ten had *not* read a book during that time, whether it was for professional, educational or any other reason.

The preference among those who do read books are that they read for enjoyment and not for reasons such as work or education. A third of those who had read for enjoyment had read between one and three books, every four had read four to seven books and a fifth had read more than one book a month. The variations were on the whole large between the various countries.

The interviewees were also asked how often they had visited different cultural institutions or attended cultural occasions during the past 12 months. The most common being visits to the cinema, libraries and historical places. The libraries offer a wide spectrum of services and they are increasingly being used for educational purposes and for seeking out information. The extent in which libraries are used is a reflection of a society's reading patterns. The Finnish were the most diligent of library visitors, followed by the Danes and the Swedes.

Library visits, reading and ownership of books follow the same geographical patterns and appear to be more prominent in the northern and the north western parts of Europe.

It is a well known fact that educational levels and different socioeconomical factors affect reading habits. Add to these relevant factors such as standards and availability of book stores and libraries. It is assumed that price levels for books also play into this and this is influenced by the level of the VAT and if book prices are controlled or not. Direct acts of literary policy and ventures bolstering various reading programmes is also of importance.

The statistics supplied by the Eurobarometer are too coarse and shallow to give satisfying answers to the importance of various factors related to the EU community's reading habits. It does nevertheless point in certain directions. There seems to be a direct correlation between the standard and accessibility of public libraries to people's reading habits. Those countries that have large numbers of people, who merely read for enjoyment, generally have well developed public library systems. This applies to the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Conclusions

I began this paper with some reflections on the subject of travel and followed it with a presentation of the Swedish bookmarket and the goals of state policies – in a nutshell, to make a wide variety of quality literature available to everyone – emphasising literature and reading promotion to children and young people. I have also tried to give you an impression of a multicultural Sweden. It might seem narrow-minded, but it is not a question of protecting us from external forces, nor to preserve a homogenous uniform culture, but to create a diversified and interactive culture, which in turn can interact with other different cultures.

As to the needs of state or other support to books and reading I would introduce a distinction between profit and non-profit areas of book production and distribution. Clearly non-profit and desirable in all well developed countries is the production of talking-books, easy-to-read books and other media for reading-disabled persons and small publications in small languages. In a way the public libraries belong to the non-profit and desirable sector. To the profit sector belongs the ordinary publishing of books. But there are some reasons for state funding: to promote and maintain quality standards in a small country. The state does just fund the book production on the margin – the responsibility to publish the book is the publisher's.

What about the public libraries and their role in the book world? The libraries' job is not an easy one. On the one hand they have to be in the front line of the information society; on the other hand they have to preserve and look after our literary heritage. Half of the users in the larger libraries are students. The service to students and school children takes much time and must do that, but if there is no spare time to help the old lady wanting a new criminal? Or to try to lend out the newest poetry?

Public libraries are now in a quite confused situation. They must decide how to use their limited resources. They must define the role of the librarian – as a pedagogue or as a serviceperson. But there is a strong support among people in general as well as among politicians for the idea of the public libraries as the most important way to reach the readers.

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Facts

The Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs

The National Council is responsible for implementing national cultural policy determined by the government and parliament. The Council is run by a board appointed by the government. The secretariat has about 65 employees.

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More information: Swedish National Council for Cultural Affairs (Fact sheet),

<u>State subsidies for literature, libraries and arts' periodicals</u>	<u>Mkr SEK</u>
Literary subsidies, publishing subsidies	50
Purchase of literature to public and school libraries	25
Promotion for reading activities	6,8
A Book for Everybody	10,2
Grants for regional library activities	36,6
Subsidies for arts' periodicals	20,6
Subsidies for the book retailers	9,8
The Swedish Library of Talking Books and Braille	62,5
The Centre for Easy-to-Read	14,2
<u>Public libraries (2001)</u>	
Number of municipal libraries	289
Number of library branches	1103
Number of visits to main libraries	47,5
Number of annual deeds	4891
Number of loans per capita	9

The Libraries Act issued 20 December 1996

In order to promote interest in reading and literature, information, enlightenment and education and also cultural activities generally, every citizen should have access to a public library.

....

The public and school libraries shall afford particular attention to people with disabilities and to immigrants and other minorities by, among other things, offering literature in other languages than Swedish and in forms particularly adapted to the needs of these groups.

....

Public and school libraries shall afford special attention to children and young persons by offering books, information technology and other media adapted to their needs in order to promote language development and stimulate reading.