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A turn to the rights

The advent and impact of Swedish literary agents

Karl Berglund

The Anglo-American publishing business has a long tradition of literary agents. In recent decades, however, they have become increasingly important players in the entire literary economy. This power change is even more apparent when it comes to bestsellers. Agents for such titles no longer necessarily regard the book as the main objective, but as one media format among several. As Simone Murray has argued, ‘The book format is increasingly envisaged as only a temporary vessel for “liquid” content, which may be decanted and reconstituted across the full gamut of contemporary media platforms.’¹

It is no surprise then that adaptations and other types of media convergence have become commonplace. Adaptations for the screen are not to be understood as mere add-ons or bonuses; on the contrary, the possibility of adaptation is often taken into account very early on in the publishing process.² Again, this is especially true when it comes to popular fiction and potential bestsellers. Rather than books, then, intellectual property rights are what matters most in the publishing business of the twenty-first century.³ And they are to a great extent handled by literary agents.

Despite the importance of literary agents, research focusing their effect on the book business has been sparse. Most studies that discuss agents are either concerned with the advent of the trade, its older history, and prominent star agents, or have been written by people themselves active in book publishing.⁴ Broad analyses of literary agents as a part of a greater structural change in publishing in the twenty-first-century book business are few.⁵

The following aims to chart the ways in which literary agents affect

power structures in the literary economy of the 2000s by using the Swedish book market as a case study. If research on literary agents in general is scant, research on literary agents in Sweden is close to non-existent.⁶ In spite of this, the situation with agents in Sweden is particularly illuminating. Compared to the Anglo-American book trade, the history of literary agents in Sweden is much shorter and their position rather different. Traditionally, agents had had little or no importance in domestic Swedish publishing. The few agents that existed dealt with foreign rights and were normally connected to a publishing house in some way. Since around 2000, however, things have changed. More than ten literary agencies have been founded, and new ones are constantly being added. This boom in Swedish literary agencies coincides with the commercial success of Swedish crime fiction all over the world. Of course, this is no coincidence.

The rise of literary agents in the Swedish book trade is just one example of the rapid changes in contemporary publishing, but one that points to the structural transformations in Sweden as well as in the global literary economy. The speed with which this shift has happened makes it a rewarding case for analysis. Unlike the Anglo-American book markets, it is to a great extent the bestselling authors that are represented by literary agents in Sweden. This makes Swedish agents especially interesting in a bestseller context. Furthermore, the simultaneous rise of agents and of celebrity crime writers exposes some of the interconnections between book market structures and the fiction it distributes.

Next the role of literary agents in the Anglo-American book trade is sketched briefly. The focus then turns to the Swedish history of literary agents—their forebears, traditions, and innovators. The publishing landscapes in the 2000s, and more specifically crime fiction bestsellers and media convergence, are examined in greater detail. Literary agents are then discussed as both a cause and an effect of why the contemporary book trade is speeding up and why it is increasingly preoccupied with bestsellers and intellectual property rights.

Literary agents in the UK and US

Informal literary agents began to appear in London as early as the 1850s, but the opening of A. P. Watt's in the late 1870s is usually regarded marking the establishment of the world's first literary agency.⁷ Watt's intention was to 'do nothing but sell or lease copyrights', a statement that made him stand out from his contemporary, more amateurish, competitors.⁸ For nearly two decades, Watt's agency model proved successful, largely due to the fact that he was pretty much the only agent in the business.⁹ Towards the end of the century, competition increased.¹⁰ In the first decades of the twentieth century, literary agents gradually became a significant part of book trade in both the UK and the US.¹¹

Mary Ann Gillies explains the emergence of literary agents by looking at changes in the world in general as well as in the book world in particular. The main reasons she singles out are material shifts (a substantial increase in printed matter), social shifts (soaring demand), and a professionalization of authorship (a vast increase in authors living by the pen).¹²

It is important to remember that the nineteenth-century agents operated very differently to those in the twenty-first century, as they were literally double agents insofar as they worked for both authors and publishers at the same time. They saw themselves as the 'middlemen' of the book trade, which caused a great deal of irritation among publishers.¹³ In pace with the profession becoming more clearly defined, the loyalty of literary agents came eventually to reside completely with the authors. Gradually, over the course of the twentieth century, literary agencies grew in number, importance, and function in the book market.¹⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, the number of literary agents in the UK and US continued to increase as the book market expanded. Publishing became more commercialized and books were suddenly sold much like any other commodity in the retail chains' supermarkets. The agents took full advantage of this development. Another structural change that helped to strengthen the profession was the fact that ties between the book trade and Hollywood were invigorated. The literary agents' interests were no longer limited to book rights

alone. Meanwhile, an increase in the number of foreign rights available matched the expansion of Anglo-American cultural expressions all over the world.¹⁵

In the 1980s, New York-based hardline sales professionals with no former connection to the book trade pushed the literary agents into focusing on the financial and legal aspects of rights management over all else. Morton Janklow was one of the more influential of these so-called ‘super-agents’. He was the authors’ lawyer—a position more or less *opposed* to the publishers—and was only interested in bestselling authors. With such a utilitarian approach, he presented legal claims on his clients’ behalf. This eventually resulted in a shift in the book trade balance of power, which saw bestselling authors able to impose requirements on their publishers—and increasingly choosing to do so.¹⁶

These tendencies have been emphasized in the book business over the last thirty years. A few bestsellers sell in considerable numbers while the majority of the published books sell less well.¹⁷ Advances for bestseller titles have grown substantially, making the major publishers less backlist-driven and more dependent on frontlist bestsellers—a tendency often called ‘bestsellerism’. This structural change has made publishing more unpredictable. And was at least partially driven by literary agents.¹⁸

Today, literary agents in the US and the UK are the gatekeepers of the book market. Major publishers often require that authors are represented by an agency—if that is not the case, there is no question of them being published. Literary agencies in the Anglo-American book trade also do much of the editorial work.¹⁹ Simone Murray summarizes the job description of the contemporary agent as three main areas of activity: ‘to select manuscripts for placement with targeted publishers; to provide suggestions for and editorial feedback on manuscripts; and to negotiate optimal contractual terms and exploitation of book-related rights on behalf of their author-client.’²⁰ These responsibilities are significant when it comes to publishing, to say the least.

Hence, the importance of literary agents in the book business has grown; likewise, the number of tasks they perform in the publishing chain. It comes as no surprise, then, that the number of agents

active in the book trade has increased since the 1980s. There are unfortunately no reliable statistics of active agencies available, but a telling indicator is that the number of active agencies in the UK, according to Eric de Bellaigue, was 32 in 1939, 56 in 1974, and 161 in 2003. Moreover, approximately 10–12 per cent of British authors had an agent in the pre-war era. The corresponding number was around 50 per cent in the 1960s and 95 per cent by the end of the 1990s. If only mainstream trade publishing is taken into account, the figure today rises to 99.9 per cent.²¹

Even so, it is important to emphasize that agencies are small. Plenty of agencies are one-person firms; a mid-sized agency might consist of around fifteen employees in total—small fry compared to the average publishing group. Moreover, literary agencies are almost invariably independent, being seldom part of bigger media conglomerates. In operating terms this makes them unbound and free.²²

Literary agents in Sweden

Unlike the UK and the US, the Swedish book trade has no tradition of independent literary agencies separate from its publishing houses. For almost the entire twentieth century, authors and publishers normally stuck by one another—bound partly by financial advances, partly by tradition. A change of publisher was uncommon.²³ The few agents that existed were all foreign rights agents who sold translation rights. Two influential forerunners of the modern literary agents were David Grünbaum and Lena Gedin. In the 1930s they began to sell foreign rights to the Scandinavian market, mainly representing authors from Germany and the Anglo-American literary world.²⁴ After the war, Gösta Dahl and his son Gunnar became important for Anglophone literature.²⁵ But agents were still rare. Few people in Swedish publishing had heard of literary agents, even fewer knew what they did.²⁶

The first proper literary agency established in Scandinavia was the Albrecht Leonhardt Literary Agency (later on Leonhardt & Høier Literary Agency), founded in Copenhagen in 1951. Specializing in German literature, they sold rights to publishers throughout Scandinavia. The Swedish Lennart Sane Agency, established in 1969,

had a more commercial profile and soon became the market leader in Anglo-American rights. When Anneli Høier began to work as an agent in 1968, there were only six agencies in total in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, most of them one-person agencies and all of them small. ‘The world was big enough,’ as she puts it.²⁷ These agencies had fixed lists of publishers, whose book rights they tried to sell to the Scandinavian market. In other words, they largely functioned as sub-agents for foreign publishers. This was the state of play in the Swedish book trade throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The major publishing groups of course had their own foreign rights departments, but their work was for the most part rather inconsequential.²⁸ Gradually, though, things began to change. Høier points to Agneta Markås at Norstedts rights division for driving the professionalization of literary agency in Sweden and for starting to focus selling the rights to Swedish literature abroad instead of the other way around.²⁹

Another pioneer was Kerstin Kvint. She had worked with Astrid Lindgren’s books for thirty years at Rabén & Sjögren when in 1983 she decided to strike out on her own as the Kerstin Kvint Agency. Kvint handled the foreign rights to all of Astrid Lindgren’s works. By the end of her life, Lindgren would see her works translated into 91 languages.³⁰ This success story is unique in Swedish publishing, mainly because Astrid Lindgren was unique. No other Swedish author has been translated into anything like as many languages. Even in the early 2000s, Lindgren was still the author being translated the most.³¹ But the story also stands out in terms of the history of Swedish literary agents, as Kvint exported Swedish literature where agents, for the most part, imported foreign literature to Sweden.

Despite Kvint’s innovative approach, she never represented Lindgren in the domestic book market. Such independent authors’ agencies—which represent their authors in person and sell their rights in all markets and in all formats—only really began to be established in Sweden in the 1990s and it was not until the 2000s that they became a force to be reckoned with. The first one was the Nordin Agency, founded in 1990 by Bengt Nordin. It instantly became controversial and stirred up a great deal of anger and debate among publishers. Even so, Nordin Agency had its breakthrough in

the German market with Marianne Fredriksson in the mid-1990s, which proved that their business model was successful.³²

A couple of successors eventually followed. The Leonhardt & Høier Literary Agency was restructured in 1995 and now concentrated on selling Scandinavian authors' rights abroad instead of the other way around.³³ The real landmark was the establishment of the Salomonsson Agency in 2000, which focuses on bestsellers, mostly crime writers, and has pushed the literary agent's role in Sweden into a more Anglo-American and plainly commercial pattern.³⁴ In 2012, Salomonsson overtook Nordin to become Sweden's biggest independent literary agency by far.³⁵

Following Salomonsson and Nordin, a string of agencies were founded in the 2000s. Of the 18 literary agencies currently active in Sweden, twelve (67 per cent) were founded after 2000 and 7 (39 per cent) later than 2010. Some of the more noteworthy are the Grand Agency (founded in 2007), the Hedlund Literary Agency (2011), and the Ahlander Agency (2012). The Grand Agency currently represents 35–40 authors, of whom around one-third are crime fiction writers.³⁶ The Hedlund Literary Agency represents around 30 authors, with Moggliden, Stieg Larsson's literary estate, as its trump card.³⁷ The Ahlander Agency works with few authors, but with all types and levels of rights and with a particular interest in film adaptation rights.³⁸

In order to meet the challenge of the competition from the independents, Sweden's largest publishing groups turned their foreign rights divisions into agencies. The Norstedts Agency was established in 2002 and the Bonnier Group Agency in 2003. These agencies differed from foreign rights divisions in as much as they worked with a select group of the publisher's authors to promote them abroad.³⁹

In 2013, the major publishers took their agent strategies a step further. The agency Partners in Stories was launched in the early spring with Natur & Kultur, the third largest publisher in Sweden, as majority owner. A month later, the Storytellers' Agency made its first appearance at the London Book Fair. The agency is a joint venture between the Bonnier Publishing Group and the crime fiction duo Lars Kepler (a.k.a. Alexander Ahndoril and Alexandra Coelho

Ahndoril). In August the same year, the Bonnier Group Agency was transformed into Bonnier Rights.⁴⁰

The launch of the Storytellers' Agency and Partners in Stories is the most recent tectonic shift in the Swedish book trade. Big publishers, afraid of losing their market share, have tested starting alternative agencies alongside their more traditional foreign rights divisions. These agencies focus on new authors and a broad array of rights. Partners in Stories introduces itself with the following tagline: 'The agency's goal is to be "a literary hothouse", a place where great stories breed, transform, and travel around the world, in different formats.'⁴¹ The Storytellers' Agency uses a quote from Håkan Rudels, head of the Bonnier Publishing Group, which emphasizes the changes in contemporary publishing: 'When book, film, and broadcast media across the world are changing at breakneck speed, this affects the agency's role. A good story will endure, but how we administer and spread it necessarily changes.'⁴²

Even the very names of the agencies stress the importance of intellectual property rights in the contemporary book trade. The focus is not books or literature, but *stories*. And the one who holds the rights to a story can transform it into various formats, meaning the ability to sell various products, which in turn means greater income.

That said, agencies owned by or in some other way interconnected to large publishers are bound to work and act different than independent agencies. It is hard to imagine that, for example, the Storytellers' Agency would be a tough negotiating partner with Bonniers on behalf of Lars Kepler, far less that they would suggest a change of publishing house. Agents linked to publishers can never completely side with their authors in the same way that independent agents can do because they have to consider the best interests of their parent company.

Swedish crime and Swedish literary agents

Why, then, have all these agencies established themselves so quickly? How has the agent bonanza affected the Swedish book trade in more general terms? And how does the situation in Sweden differ from commercial publishing in the UK and US?

First it is necessary to note that the changes in Anglo-American and Swedish publishing are not solely due to the rise of the literary agencies. Following Simone Murray, literary agents are understood to ‘have been able to exploit opportunities created by macro-level industry developments’.⁴³ These developments include conglomeratization, globalization, and media convergence—all changes that had led to an increasing focus on rights in contemporary publishing. As Eva Hemmungs Wirtén points out:

a new economy also introduced new players to the field, not necessarily because they desired to work with books, but rather because they were equipped with the preferred know-how demanded of a new type of market. The agent knew better how to negotiate and promote the deals that some authors now could expect. The subsidiary rights race that began with paperback publishing, but would branch out into major licensing deals from movies to bedding in the wake of successful book also required new expertise.⁴⁴

Literary agents are therefore flourishing in Sweden partly because they are necessary to the literary economy of the twenty-first century. But in addition to such global, macro-level changes, there are additional reasons for the rapid growth of the number of literary agents that are true only of Sweden.

One factor was the framework agreement between authors and publishers (the so-called ‘ramavtalet’) that expired in 1996. This model ensured that bestsellers brought in money to publishers to be invested in long-term important, but commercially unprofitable, books. Piratförlaget, established in 1999, challenged this by basically publishing only bestselling authors, to whom they could offer a more advantageous business model (a 50:50 split of profits). This model proved successful, and bestselling authors in Sweden have been able to negotiate better deals from the traditional publishing houses ever since. This in turn fuelled the establishment of independent agents in Sweden. However, the opposite is equally true—independent agents have also driven this development by helping their bestselling authors to demand a greater share of profits.

Another important reason why Sweden stands out is the boom

in Swedish crime fiction. Swedish bestsellers have more or less been equated with crime fiction since the beginning of the 2000s. The upshot is that most of the authors represented by the independent agencies are crime writers.⁴⁵ For example, 24 of the 37 pages (65 per cent) of the Salomonsson Agency's autumn 2013 catalogue are given over to presentations of crime fiction writers, their works, and the rights sold. This can be compared to 5 pages of literary fiction, 2 pages of historical fiction, 2 pages of non-fiction, and 4 pages of children's fiction.⁴⁶

The global success of a significant number of Swedish and Scandinavian crime writers brought with it a seemingly bottomless demand for more stories in the same vein. When a certain genre is popular, all major publishers naturally want to publish the next bestseller in the genre.⁴⁷ This has been the case with Swedish crime fiction in the 2000s and early 2010s. Everyone in business wanted to get their hands on the next Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, or Liza Marklund. Magdalena Hedlund points out that Stieg Larsson's breakthrough changed the rules for selling Swedish literature abroad:

Although many Swedish authors had succeeded abroad before, it was never on this scale. Suddenly the world understood that 'wow, Swedish fiction can become a world hit!' ... After Stieg Larsson it was apparent that everyone was looking for the next Stieg Larsson. And as more foreign publishers became interested in Swedish literature, they acquired the tools needed: they sought contact with professional readers and translators who spoke the language.⁴⁸

Jonas Axelsson's description of how publishers tried to buy an unedited test translation of Lars Kepler's debut *Hypnotisören* (2009) at the Frankfurt Book Fair speaks of the same: 'It was hysterical. The publishers were almost pushing in front of one another so we'd see them. It was the first time I saw publishers from the UK and Germany disappointed at not getting to buy the rights to an author's books.'⁴⁹ Apparently, selling Swedish crime fiction rights abroad has not been the most difficult task in the twenty-first century.

The demand for Swedish crime fiction simultaneously created a

new market for Swedish agents; it engendered business opportunities that simply did not exist before. Hence, the rapid growth of Swedish literary agencies was partly due to the crime fiction boom. But then again, it can be looked at the other way around, as the spread of Swedish crime fiction abroad being helped by the newly established Swedish agencies. It is not easy to determine whether the rise of the literary agents was a cause or an effect. The best answer might be that it was both. What cannot be disputed, however, is the connection between the two parallel booms. This reveals the mutual relationship between fiction publishing and book trade structures: they depend on, interact with, and affect each other.

The need for speed

In the space of little more than 10–15 years, the Swedish book trade has thus adjusted to the rules of global publishing. The rise of literary agents and the new ways in which they operate are among the more obvious examples. Several commentators have noted that Swedish agents in the 2010s now operate in a similar manner to their Anglo-American counterparts.⁵⁰

As Johan Svedjedal points out, the Swedish book trade has traditionally been keen to embrace foreign literature—it has been a culture of literary imports. The export of Swedish literature mainly went to the Nordic countries and to Germany, while the UK and US book markets were typically out of reach for most Swedish authors. There are however strong indications that this has changed in 2000s, largely due to the symbiotic rise of Swedish crime fiction and Swedish literary agents.⁵¹ The Swedish book trade journal *Svensk Bokhandel* speaks of a rights trade turned upside down.⁵²

The further impact of the Swedish literary agents concerns best-sellers and publishing houses. There is a fundamental tension between smaller publishers and agents. The former fear that agents will try to negotiate better deals for their bestselling authors, typically with a major publishing house. These fears have also to a large extent been realized. Agents have taught Swedish bestselling authors to demand more money. In turn, this has encouraged authors to change publisher, with the result that bestselling authors are to an increasing

extent concentrated at a few major publishing houses. In the 2000s, the overwhelming majority (80–90 per cent) of bestselling Swedish crime fiction was published by the Bonnier Publishing Group, Norstedts Publishing Group, and Piratförlaget.⁵³

Swedish agents nowadays negotiate rights directly with publishers, both at home and abroad. When it comes to bestsellers or possible bestsellers, such negotiations often take the form of a rights auction. And even though it is the author who ultimately chooses the publisher, it is usual for the publisher who pays the most to win. Anneli Høier sums up how it works: ‘One can argue that an auction is democratic: everyone has the possibility to partake in the sacred name of competition. But it’s money that wins auctions.’⁵⁴

Moreover, the speed with which rights are sold has accelerated considerably. In the contemporary book trade it is not unusual to see rights sales start out as an *option*—in other words, they are sold at a stage before the novel in question is complete. Agents spread digital proposals to publishers and their scouts around the world, with the aim of selling as many rights as possible before the original issue has even been published.⁵⁵

There have been quite a few Swedish examples in recent years. Two that made the headlines are *Strindbergs stjärna* (2010) by Jan Wallentin and *Den andalusiske vännen* (2012) by Alexander Söderberg. The former was the main Bonnier title at the London Book Fair of 2010, even though it had not been finished at the time, let alone published. During the fair over twenty countries bought the rights to the novel in its unedited condition, which brought its author the largest advance in Swedish publishing history. The latter caused a stir at the Frankfurt Book Fair of 2012 on even less substance. The Salomonsson Agency had done a rough translation of the first 100 pages, and, armed with a two-page synopsis, proceeded to sell the novel to over twenty countries.⁵⁶

It is important to stress here that these novels both were débuts: Wallentin and Söderberg had not published anything before, and they were both completely unknown quantities. Why their rights sold so well, then, was solely a matter of hype. And, of course, the hype was mostly due to the earlier successes of Swedish crime fiction. The rights to the novels were sold on the presumption that

they might be the next Millennium trilogy. As it turned out, though, neither was.⁵⁷

Since the contemporary book trade is largely governed by front-list bestsellers, publishers try hard to promote the forthcoming titles aggressively. When everyone is hunting for the next *big book*, to use John B. Thompson's term, the result is a business culture in which publishers outbid one another in the pursuit of what everyone thinks will be the next hit.⁵⁸ This is encouraging for the agents, since their income is a share of the rights sales (typically around 15 per cent).⁵⁹ In trying to create buzz about selected titles, their aim is to convince publishers to buy the rights early on—before someone else does.

With this in mind, it is easier to understand that the rights to a debut novel might be sold to twenty countries before it is even published. It should also be noted that it is the publishers that carry the main risks: agents make their profit when the rights are sold. From the point of view of the agent, then, it does not matter if the book sells well or not—an exaggeration, of course, given that literary agents want their authors to succeed. But agents, and not publishers, are the winners in a literary economy where hype and speculation push up the price of rights.

The biggest book fairs have become increasingly important venues for dealing in rights. The most important of all is the Frankfurt Book Fair, with its agents' centre established in the 1970s.⁶⁰ Frankfurt has continuously refashioned itself as much as a rights fair as a book fair. At the most recent fairs in the 2010s, deals between agents and publishers are struck in what Simone Murray has described as a speed-dating in immaterial rights: 'a dedicated Rights Centre coordinating 30-minute back-to-back pitching sessions between publishers, agents, and film producers trading in book-derived subsidiary rights.'⁶¹

Commentators have often stressed that personal relationships and coincidence are crucial in the business of literary agents.⁶² There is no denying that historically this was clearly the case. In the twenty-first-century book trade, however, the formalized and commercial aspect of this rights economy is increasingly apparent. Networks and business connections are still essential for the literary agent. But all these networks taken together can

be understood as a part of a bigger system or structure that makes up today's book trade.⁶³

Media convergence and the literary agents of the future

Even though the Swedish book trade since 2000 has become more similar to its Anglo-American counterparts, there are still essential differences. As in the UK and US, the focus in Swedish publishing has started to shift from books to rights, in part thanks to the rise of literary agents. But this description applies only to bestselling authors with a strong position on the market. In 2010, *Svensk Bokhandel* calculated that agents represented only around 4 per cent of the professional Swedish authors. This number has probably increased in recent years, but it is still miles away from the situation in the UK and US, where an agent is more or less a requirement. It is not agents but publishers who are still the gatekeepers to the book market in Sweden. A very small proportion of Swedish authors have been directly affected by the advent of literary agents (though all authors are influenced indirectly).

This is a characteristic of the Swedish book trade that cannot be emphasized enough. Literary agents in Sweden work mostly with bestselling authors, whose works can be sold abroad and adapted for film or other media. The opposite is equally true: bestselling authors are what really matters to Swedish literary agents.

The Swedish book market is arguably too small for agents to sustain an interest in authors who are writing for a Swedish audience only. In one sense, then, there is a possibility that the Swedish book trade will become even more polarized than is the case in the UK and US: authors of bestsellers will have agents, publishers, and the opportunity to reach out internationally; all other authors will be increasingly neglected, being financially uninteresting to both Swedish agents and publishers.

It is of course risky to make prophecies; however, the tide of Scandicrime is sooner or later likely to turn.⁶⁴ What this will mean for Sweden's literary agents is hard to say. In 2013 the Stilton Agency— as the first of the agencies founded in the 2000s—announced that they were closing down their business in Sweden.⁶⁵ Stilton explained

the closure with their own reluctance to embark more commercial projects: 'Sweden is too small a country and foreign publishers are mostly interested in Scandinavian crime.'⁶⁶

Some commentators understand this as the first sign of a literary agency bubble that will eventually burst. Others foresee their continued rise since there are so many Swedish authors without agents, and since the numbers of rights involved in the book business will remain high.⁶⁷ The most common view, though, is that literary agencies in Sweden are now a mature business: the bonanza years might have passed, but the infrastructure in place will continue to generate a global interest in Swedish literature. As Elisabet Brännström at the Storytellers' Agency puts it, 'Now it's a hard fact that Swedish literature is out there in the world to stay.'⁶⁸

One probable development is that different types of Swedish literary agencies will emerge and that certain characteristics will become more apparent: bigger agencies as well as one-person firms; independent agents as well as those owned by publishing houses; commercially oriented agencies as well as editorially oriented ones; and so on. Other changes are already under way. Some Swedish literary agents have started to represent writers with manuscripts without a publisher behind them. For example, Alexander Söderberg first struck a deal with the Salomonsson Agency, after which the latter sold the Swedish book rights to Norstedts. Agents also give authors suggestions to profitable career moves. One famous one is Magdalena Hedlund's idea to get David Lagercrantz to write the 'fourth Stieg Larsson novel'.⁶⁹

A more startling move was Partners in Stories' declaration that they will publish the bestselling author Fredrik Backman's forthcoming novel, *Britt-Marie var här*, in the autumn of 2014. That an agency had decided to publish a bestseller was unsurprisingly controversial in trade circles. The literary agent in question, Jonas Axelsson, issued assurances that it should merely be seen as a 'test balloon'.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this example and others indicate that Swedish literary agents are doing rather well at the moment and that they are regrouping and re-negotiating their function in the book trade.

It is also likely that the media convergence between films and books will continue to deepen. Literary agents play an important part in this,

being the natural intermediaries between the various industries since they deal with rights and not specific media. As Alexandra Sundqvist and Isak Klasson point out, the bonds connecting film to literature have never been as strong in Sweden as today. In 2012, more than a third of the films that reached Swedish cinemas were adaptations of Swedish novels. And they were popular: nearly half of the total number of cinema visits were to watch films based on Swedish novels.⁷¹ A related trend is that many new Swedish popular fiction authors have a background in scriptwriting (for example, Sara Bergmark Elfgren, Cilla and Rolf Börj lind, and Michael Hjorth and Hans Rosenfeldt). This probably affects their prose style in that they might have an adaptation in mind early on in the creative process.⁷²

Film production companies know that a bestselling book by a well-known author guarantees the screen version a certain amount of interest. Magdalena Hedlund points out that competition and prices have increased for film rights. But the number of manuscripts of interest to the film industry is small.⁷³ Film production companies are willing to pay much more for a few select titles; at the same time, they are not ready to buy the rights to less known novels. According to Jenny Stjernström Björk of the Swedish film production company Tre Vänner, when choosing possible manuscripts for adaptation, ‘we also make a judgement based on how the publishers view the book. Is it a book that the publishers are investing in? That they really believe in themselves?’⁷⁴ For a long time, another influential Swedish film production company, Yellow Bird, had an equally telling catchphrase: ‘We turn bestsellers into blockbusters’.⁷⁵ In short, they are playing it safe, relying on the assumption that success breed success.

Synergies between publishing and film or television can of course boost sales for both industries. Paperback editions with covers alluding to the film version of the story are one of the more obvious examples of the book trade trying to make profit out of screen adaptations.⁷⁶ And big media conglomerates, with owner interests in publishing as well as the film industry and television, can have obvious advantages (in Sweden, Bonnier AB is the only conglomerate of this kind). But more generally, it is literary agents and their bestselling authors rather than publishers who are the main winners in the book trade.

In an era of media convergence, the rights to a bestselling story can be sold two times—at the least.

In 1972, the American literary agent Paul R. Reynolds explained his aversion to working with the film industry:

Dealing with motion picture people has not been a pleasant or rewarding part of my work. One of the reasons for this is that the agent never knows whether he has done a good job for his client. Selling motion picture rights means indulging in a poker game and I have never been a poker player.⁷⁷

Today his approach stands out as both honourable and obsolete. Not only are literary agents to a much greater extent involved in selling rights for film and other media formats, but book rights are increasingly sold as options, supported by test translations, unedited sections of script, or brief synopses. The rights sold by literary agents are therefore often distanced from the finished product, which in turn has made speculation and hype an essential part of the trade. The game of poker thus seems to be mandatory for literary agents in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 38.
- 2 Murray 2012, 13.
- 3 There are numerous such rights (see Murray 2012, 37).
- 4 For the key historical studies of literary agents, see, James Hepburn, *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent* (London: OUP, 1968); Michael Kreyling, *Author and Agent: Eudora Welty and Diarmuid Russell* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991); Thomas L. Bonn, 'Literary Power Brokers Come of Age', *Media Studies Journal*, 6/3 (1992), 63–72; and Mary Ann Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880–1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). For books on literary agents by literary agents see, Paul R. Reynolds, *The Middle Man: The Adventures of a Literary Agent* (New York: W. Morrow, 1972); Morton L. Janklow, 'The Lawyer as Literary Agent', *Columbia Journal of Art and the Law*, 9 (1985), 407–12; and Arthur Klebanoff, *The Agent: Personalities, Politics and Publishing* (New York: Texere, 2002). Reynolds's opening is typical for the latter in its emphasis on the anecdotal and the personal: 'This book is an account of the curious events that I have witnessed or played a part in during my forty-four years as a literary agent, events involving authors or editors. I have also tried to give the

- reader the feeling of variety, charm, and excitement of the publishing industry' (Reynolds 1972, 7).
- 5 Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, *No Trespassing: Authorship, Intellectual Property Rights, and the Boundaries of Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, 'The Global Market 1970–2000: Producers', in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 395–405; Eric de Bellaigue, "'Trust Me. I'm an Agent': The Ever-Changing Balance Between Author, Agent and Publisher', *LOGOS: Forum of the World Book Community*, 19/3 (2008), 109–119; Murray 2012; and John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).
 - 6 The only academic study concentrated on Swedish literary agents is Linda Göthberg's master's thesis, ' "Man måste fan tro på en författare..."'. En magisteruppsats om Sveriges litterära agenter och deras verksamhet', Uppsatsen inom biblioteks- och informationsvetenskap, 2001:96 (unpublished master's thesis, Uppsala University, 2001). Two studies have mapped the newfound importance of literary agents in Sweden in more general terms: Ann Steiner, *Litteraturen i mediesambället* (2nd edn, Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2012), 103; Staffan Sundin, 'Ökad integration och koncentration: Den svenska bokmarknaden i förändring', in *Läsarnas marknad, marknadens läsare—en forskningsantologi utarbetad för Litteraturutredningen*, ed. Ulla Carlsson and Jenny Johannisson (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2012), 283–328, quote at 301–302. Furthermore, the relationship between the boom in Swedish crime fiction and the rise of literary agents in Sweden has been outlined in Karl Berglund, *Deckarboomen under lupp: Statistiska perspektiv på svensk kriminallitteratur 1977–2010*, Skrifter utgivna av Avdelningen för litteratursociologi vid Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen i Uppsala, 64 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2012), 68–75.
 - 7 Hepburn 1968, 47–51. Even earlier, Hepburn notes, there were others involved in publishing who in some ways functioned as agents: vanity publishers, critics, friends, and others (*ibid.*, 22–31).
 - 8 A. P. Watt, quoted in Gillies 2007, 12.
 - 9 The authors Watt represented included Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, and Arthur Conan Doyle.
 - 10 Watt's two most significant rivals were J. B. Pinker (established 1896) and Curtis Brown (established 1899).
 - 11 Hepburn 1968, 51–66; Gillies 2007, 27–39, 87–110. For details concerning the involvement of literary agents in the US, see Hepburn 1968, 67–75.
 - 12 Gillies 2007, 12–25.
 - 13 For example, the influential publisher William Heinemann suggested that literary agents were 'parasites' (Hepburn 1968, 1; Gillies 2007, 93–4).
 - 14 Thompson 2010, 60.
 - 15 Thompson 2010, 61–2.
 - 16 Morton Janklow, quoted in Thompson 2010, 64.
 - 17 See de Bellaigue 2008, 117–18; Hemmungs Wirtén 2007; Thompson 2010, 187–222.
 - 18 De Bellaigue 2008, 117–18; Hemmungs Wirtén 2004, 80–2.
 - 19 De Bellaigue 2008, 112–113; Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, 'Can Literary Agents Be Based Outside London and Still Be Successful? An Investigation Into Agenting

- in Scotland', *LOGOS: Forum of the World Book Community*, 24/1 (2013), 7–18, quote at 8, points out that such numbers apply only to the UK and the US. Even in a book trade as close as the Scottish one (which in her understanding contrasts to the London-centred UK market), literary agents hold a very different position.
- 20 Murray 2012, 53. It is important to emphasize, though, that literary agencies can and do operate in many different ways (see de Bellaigue 2008, 114–15).
- 21 de Bellaigue 2008, 111. He singles out John Updike as the exception that proves the rule.
- 22 de Bellaigue 2008, 114–115.
- 23 See Georg Svensson, *Minnen och möten: Ett liv i bokens tjänst* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1987), 92.
- 24 Jan-Erik Pettersson, 'Agentroll i förändring', *Svensk Bokhandel*, 59/16 (2010), 10–22 (quote at 11); Svensson 1987, 92–3.
- 25 Pettersson 2010, 11; Svensson 1987, 92–3.
- 26 See Per I. Gedin, *Förläggarliv* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1999), 22.
- 27 Anneli Høier, *Den litterära agenten då och nu*, Adam Helms Lecture, 2012 (Stockholm: Svenska Förläggareföreningen & Stockholms universitetsbibliotek, 2012), 8. (My translation, originally: 'Verden var stor nok'.) Høier mentions Kurt Michaels (later Licht & Burr), Bookman and Albrecht Leonhardt in Denmark, Lena Gedin and Lennart Sane in Sweden, and Carlotra Frahm in Norway.
- 28 Høier 2012, 13; Pettersson 2010, 11.
- 29 Høier 2012, 13. Agneta Markås was also praised by the Swedish Academy in 2004 for her contributions to the dissemination of Swedish culture abroad (see Eva Bäckstedt, 'Doldis bakom svensk bokväg', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 February 2004).
- 30 Kerstin Kvint, *Bakom Astrid* (Stockholm: Kvints, 2010), 20.
- 31 Johan Svedjedal, 'Svensk skönlitteratur i världen: Litteratursociologiska problem och perspektiv', in *Svensk litteratur som världslitteratur: En antologi*, ed. Johan Svedjedal, Skrifter utgivna av Avdelningen för litteratursociologi vid Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen i Uppsala, 65 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2012), 9–81 (esp. 48–52).
- 32 Pettersson 2010, 11.
- 33 Høier 2012, 12–13; Pettersson 2010, 20.
- 34 Berglund 2012, 71–2.
- 35 Carina Jönsson, 'Med rätt att sälja', *Svensk Bokhandel*, 62/16 (2013a), 12–25, quotes at 14–15, 20.
- 36 Grand Agency, <<http://www.grandagency.se>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
- 37 Jönsson 2013a, 15; Hedlund Literary Agency, <<http://www.hedlundagency.se>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
- 38 Jönsson 2013a, 14; Ahlander Agency, <<http://www.ahlanderagency.com>> [accessed 31 January 2014]. The Ahlander Agency is partly owned by the Salomonsson Agency and the film production company Another Park Film.
- 39 Høier 2012, 13–14.
- 40 Jönsson 2013a, 23.
- 41 Partners in Stories, <<http://www.partnersinstories.se>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
- 42 Storytellers' Agency, <<http://www.storytellersagency.se>> [accessed 31 January 2014]. (My translation, originally: 'När bok-, film- och tv-mediet över hela världen förändras i rasande fart påverkas även agenturens roll. Den goda berättelsen är bestående, men hur vi ska förvalta och mångfaldiga den förändras.')
- 43 Murray 2012, 50.

- 44 Hemmungs Wirtén 2004, 81–2.
- 45 See Berglund 2012, 71–5. It should be noted that information is soon obsolete in the literary agents' world. The numbers given here thus present a snapshot of the state of the Swedish book trade in the autumn of 2012.
- 46 'Salomonsson Agency Fall 2013' [unpublished catalogue], <<http://www.salomons-sonagency.se>> [accessed 31 January 2014]. Note that the historical fiction and children's fiction lists consist solely of well-known crime writers (Jan Guillou, Jo Nesbø, and Kristina Ohlsson).
- 47 See Berglund 2012, 114–18; J. B. Thompson 2010, 223–37.
- 48 Magdalena Hedlund interviewed in Kalle Laxgård, 'Det som går upp som en sol', *Svensk Bokhandel*, 62/20 (2013), 11–28, quote at 19–20. (My translation, originally: 'Även om många svenska författare hade lyckats utomlands var det aldrig av den magnituden. Plötsligt förstod världen att shit, svensk litteratur kan bli en världssuccé! ... Efter Stieg Larsson var det klart att alla började leta efter nästa Stieg Larsson. Eftersom fler utländska förlag blev intresserade av svensk litteratur skaffade fler också rätt verktyg: man sökte kontakt med lektörer och översättare som kunde språket.')
- 49 Jonas Axelsson interviewed in Laxgård 2013, 20. (My translation, originally: 'Det blev islossning. Förläggarna ställde sig nästan i vägen för varandra för att man skulle se dem. För första gången fick jag se förläggare från England och Tyskland som blev besvikna över att inte få ett författarskap.')
- 50 Pettersson 2010, 10–14; Høier 2012, 13–14; Jönsson 2013a, 17.
- 51 Svedjedal 2012, 50–2.
- 52 Pettersson 2010, 11.
- 53 Berglund 2012, 89–92.
- 54 Høier 2012, 11. (My translation, originally: 'Man kan argumentere for, at en auktion er demokratisk: alle har mulighed for at deltage i konkurrencens hellige navn. Men det er kapitalen, der vinder i en auktion.')
- 55 Høier 2012, 10.
- 56 Laxgård 2013, 22.
- 57 *Strindbergs stjärna* sold reasonably well in Sweden, but failed abroad. *Den andalusiske vännen* did not sell as well as expected in Sweden, and many publishers are nervous that it will turn out a flop abroad (Laxgård 2013, 25–7).
- 58 See J. B. Thompson 2010, 187–237; for a term discussion on *big books*, see *ibid.*, 192–4.
- 59 See Giles Clark and Angus Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing* (4th edn, London: Routledge, 2008), 92.
- 60 Høier 2012, 15.
- 61 Murray 2012, 85–6.
- 62 See Reynolds 1972, 99–101; Høier 2012, 15; Svedjedal 2012, 62–7.
- 63 See Murray 2012, 84–6.
- 64 The Salomonsson Agency has boldly announced—flying in the face of their high crime profile—that the heyday of Swedish crime fiction is over and that in future they will concentrate on film and television rights in all genres (Niclas Salomonsson and Leyla Belle Drake quoted in Jönsson 2013a, 20).
- 65 Carina Jönsson, 'Stilton lägger ner', *Svensk Bokhandel*, 62/14 (2013b), 6.
- 66 Jönsson 2013b, 6. (My translation, originally: 'Sverige är ett för litet land och de utländska företagen eftersöker mest Scandinavian crime.')

- 67 Jönsson 2013a; Høier 2012, 16.
- 68 Brännström quoted in Laxgård 2013, 28. (My translation, originally: ‘Nu är det reella fakta att svensk litteratur är ute i världen för att stanna.’)
- 69 See Niklas Strömberg, ‘Agent bakom den nya Millennium-titeln’, *Svensk Bokhandel*, 17 December 2013, <<http://www.svb.se/nyheter/agent-bakom-ny-millennium-titel-o>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
- 70 See Lars Schmidt, ‘Fredrik Backman lämnar Bonniers för sin agent’, *Svensk Bokhandel*, 6 December 2013, <<http://www.svb.se/nyheter/fredrik-backman-l-mnar-bonniers-f-r-sin-agent>> [accessed 31 January 2014].
- 71 Alexandra Sundqvist and Isak Klasson, ‘Ett annat liv’, *Svensk Bokhandel*, 62/21 (2013), 13.
- 72 See Murray 2012, 13. This trend taken one step further is shown in the leading Swedish film production company Tre Vänner’s ambition to publish a book largely in order to turn it into a film (Sundqvist and Klasson 2013, 24).
- 73 Magdalena Hedlund, quoted in Sundqvist and Klasson 2013, 13–14.
- 74 Jenny Stjernström Björk, quoted in Sundqvist and Klasson 2013, 16. (My translation, originally: ‘Sedan gör vi också bedömningar utifrån hur förlagen ser på boken: Är det en bok som förlagen satsar på? Som de tror mycket på själva?’)
- 75 See Berglund 2012, 124; Anne Marit Waade, ‘Fra bestseller til blockbuster: Interview med producent Ole Søndberg, Yellow Bird, 7. Oktober 2008’, in *Den skandinaviske krimi: Bestseller og blockbuster*, ed. Gunhild Agger and Anne Marit Waade (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2010), 205–211, quote at 205.
- 76 For film adaptations of books, see Rebecca N. Mitchell, ‘“Now a Major Motion Picture”: The Delicate Business of Selling Literature through Contemporary Cinema’, in *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 107–116.
- 77 Reynolds 1972, 186.