

The Brave New World of Recent Swedish Dystopias

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UNLIKE BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES, Sweden does not have a long tradition of utopian and dystopian writing. However, this is rapidly changing. Recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of dystopian novels published in Sweden. I have chosen to discuss three of them: Mats Strandberg's *Slutet* (The End) (2018), Balsam Karam's *Händelsehorisonten* (The Event Horizon) (2018), and Johannes Anyuru's *De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar* (English title: *They Will Drown in Their Mother's Tears*) (2017). All three are original and innovative works that confront controversial issues in Swedish society and our globalized world. They build on the classic Swedish dystopias, Karin Boye's *Kallocain* (1940) and Harry Martinson's *Aniara* (1956), and experiment with that genre. Because of both their literary quality and their social criticism, these works deserve to be included in the fast-growing international genre of contemporary dystopian fiction.

Slutet (The End) (2018)

Mats Strandberg (b. 1976) is the author of the well-received young adult fantasy trilogy: *Engelsforstrilogin* (The Engelfors Trilogy) consisting of *Cirkeln* (The Circle 2001), *Eld* (Fire) (2012), and *Nyckeln* (The Key) (2013). He has also written two horror stories: *Färjan* (The Ferry 2015), which takes place onboard a Baltic cruise ferry and involves vampires, and *Hemmet* (The Home 2017), which takes place in a residential care home haunted by ghosts. He has even written a humorous and insightful children's trilogy based on the Frankenstein mythos: *Monstret Frank* (Frank the Monster), published in one volume in 2019.

Strandberg has called *Slutet* a “pre-post-apocalyptic novel” since it focuses on events leading up to the apocalypse rather than the apocalyptic event itself and what happens after. It is about young people in a relatively small town in Sweden facing the impending end of the world due to a comet colliding with the earth. The time left - four weeks and five days - is measured out in individual chapters counting down to the end. Rather than describe external events, like the breakdown of society, which is more common in this type of fiction, Strandberg focuses on the

thoughts and emotions of the people affected. In doing so he provides a moving account of how these people prepare to face the end.

Unlike Hollywood movies in this genre, there is no last minute reprieve or rescue. However there is one movie that is similar to the novel: Danish filmmaker, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011). In that movie a rogue planet is on a collision course with the earth, and as in *Slutet*, the end is inevitable. Whereas Strandberg's YA novel focuses on young people and the future that is denied them, von Trier focuses on adults and the various ways – including suicide – they use to avoid what is happening. The exception is Justine, the character played by Kerstin Dunst, who, suffering from depression throughout the movie personifies the melancholy of the title. The final scene depicts a calm Justine sitting together and holding hands with her anguished sister Claire and Claire's son as the rogue planet slowly approaches the earth. Both *Slutet* and *Melancholia* express a feeling of irrevocable loss that can be said to be a distinguishing feature of Scandinavian dystopias¹.

Händelsehorisonten (The Event Horizon)

Balsam Karam (b. 1983) is a Kurdish-Swedish writer and librarian who was born in Teheran, Iran. *Händelsehorisonten* is her first novel. The event horizon of the title is the boundary of a black hole from which nothing – not even light – can escape. Black holes were a staple of 20th century science fiction before their actual discovery. Those works of fiction, written by male writers, describe intrepid male explorers who boldly go where no man has gone before. Karam, as a woman, does something quite different. Instead of an exciting adventure story with a lead male character, she describes an imaginary, gender-segregated world against which a young woman revolts. Her depiction of a gender-segregated society places her alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and Doris Lessing's *The Cleft* (2007). Her novel also shares strong similarities with Ursula Le Guin's intriguing novel *Always Coming Home* (1985). In that novel Le Guin describes two societies: the peaceful, life-affirming society of women and children, who live in tune with nature; and the life-denying, warlike male society that delights in destruction and death. In Karam's novel, the distinction is made between the City, where the men live and the Outskirts, where Women and Children live. The latter depend on the City to eke out a subsistence existence but are rejected and marginalized by it. The story reads as a fable, hence the use of capitals in the description above.

Unlike Strandberg's relatively straight-forward account, Karam's novel uses a kaleidoscope narrative². This has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that it provides a suitable vehicle for the fable nature of the story. The disadvantage is that the narrative can be dif-

¹ A point I argue in an unprinted research paper I gave on "Three Swedish Eco-Dystopias: Karin Boye's *Kallockain*, Harry Martinson's *Aniara* and P. C. Jersild's *Efter floden*" at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, on October 19, 2011.

² See Nuha Ahmad Baaqeel, *The Kaleidoscope of Gendered Memory in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's Novels*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne/ Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, p. 13. for a discussion on how "the fractured patterning" of this type of narrative "allows one to situate the questions of trauma, gender, memory, art, and nation in a way that does not simplify the complexity of the antagonisms and contradictions involved".

difficult to follow, which has been pointed out by reviewers. My own view is that this is less of a problem than at first appears and that a chain of events can be pieced together as discussed below.

I feel there are two main stories, or one story being told in two different ways. In the first, the young woman, Milde, together with her friends, Trinidad and Diamond, firebomb a public building in the City. Milde is later captured, imprisoned and executed. In the second, Milde is not executed but agrees to be sent to a black hole in outer space as part of a sadistic “scientific” experiment run by men on earth to see how long they can remain in contact with her³.

The Greengrocer, who moves between the City and the Outskirts, is the link between these two stories. Early in the novel, she witnesses the execution of Milde but does not know who it is. Only after Milde’s few effects have been returned to her mother, Essa, does the Greengrocer realize who was actually executed. And it is then that the Greengrocer starts to tell stories about how, instead of being executed, Milde is sent into space as part of the above-mentioned experiment.

In the stories told about her after her death, Milde becomes a larger than life figure. She becomes a symbol of revolt and an example to follow. Whether the stories the Greengrocer tells are true or not is beside the point. What is important is to inspire further acts of rebellion. This seems to have had the desired effect. There are hints of a later, better organized and more comprehensive attack carried out by the Mothers and Children. The novel ends on a note of revolutionary optimism by retelling the part of the story about the firebomb attack where Milde and her compatriots, Trinidad and Diamond, avoid capture and escape to the mountains.

Karam emphasizes the need for rebellion even if it is unsuccessful. One can draw many historical and contemporary parallels: among them, slave rebellions in the United States, both before and after independence, the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the Palestinian Intefadas. The book is introduced with a long quote from the by now almost mythical Subcommandante Marcos saying how he can be found in everyone who fights against oppression and everywhere this takes place. The same can be said about Milde, who, after her journey to the black hole, is said to shine down like a star from the heavens upon the Women and Children.

De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar (They Will Drown in Their Mother’s Tears)

Johannes Anyuru (b. 1979) is a poet and author. He won the prestigious Swedish August Prize for the Best Work of Fiction in 2017 for *De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar*. Like Marge Piercy’s *Woman on*

³Since Milde will be stretched out beyond recognition as she crosses the event horizon, this episode can be seen as a metaphoric retelling of the torture Milde has already undergone, and which is described in detail. One reason why black holes were called that was because of the infamous British prison in India called the Black Hole of Calcutta, so named because no one ever emerged from it.

the Edge of Time (1976) this novel takes place in both an imagined future and the real present. In both novels it is a young woman in a mental institution that moves between these two worlds. However in Piercy's novel, the future is utopian, or at least is said to be utopian, whereas in Anyuru's novel the imagined future is clearly dystopian⁴. The story that takes place in the imagined future is told by a young girl named Annika Isagel⁵. She claims to be writing fifteen years in the future after a successful terrorist attack has been carried out against a comic book store named Hondo⁶. This attack has ushered in a repressive, extreme rightwing government in Sweden. In reality, Annika took part in the attack but prevented its success by shooting her friend Amin, who was about to kill the cartoonist who was the guest of honor at the bookstore. Since then she has been in a psychiatric hospital named Tundra on the outskirts of Gothenburg. There she writes her account of the future and shares it with a writer not unlike Anyuru⁷.

As the novel progresses we find out, through the efforts of the writer who reads what Annika has written, that she is a Belgian citizen, was arrested there on very flimsy, or even non-existent, grounds as a Muslim extremist, and was imprisoned and tortured in an American black site. After being released she somehow ended up in Gothenburg, Sweden. There she met Amin and Hamid and was drawn into the plot to attack the comic book store⁸.

There are several links between Annika and the writer. Annika says she comes from a Gothenburg housing project called the Rabbit Yard. The writer to whom she gives her story says he grew up there. The writer is intent on moving his family to Canada to escape racism in Sweden, but his wife, who is from Algeria, is hesitant. Annika says her mother was from Algeria. She and her family tried to escape to Algeria but a nuclear explosion prevented this. Annika's mother dies under suspicious circumstances shortly after. Annika's father was, like the writer who reads Annika's story, is a well-respected poet who finds it increasingly difficult to live under the repressive rightwing regime. Anyone who does not support the regime – Muslim, Jew, leftwing critic, or other - is in danger of becoming a “non-Swede” and subjected to increasing degrees of isolation and punishment that lead to Nazi-like “scientific” experiments that end in death.

Both Annika and the writer need each other to become whole. Annika needs to tell the writer her story. He needs to hear it to better understand his own situation. Both are looking for a home and to experience a sense of belonging in a society that treats them as second-class citizens. Their stories come together at the end of the novel when Annika visits the writer's home. She has slowly become integrated into the real world and now wants to meet the writer's wife. The writer's family has recently decided to stay in Sweden rather than immigrate to an imagined better

⁴ I call into question the utopian nature of the future world described in Piercy's novel in a conference paper, “But would you really want to live there? A Critical Look at the Ecotopias of Callenbach (1975), Piercy (1979) and Le Guin (1985)”, at the conference: *The Ecology of Utopia: Ecological Concerns and Utopianism in American Culture*, held at Universidade de Coruna, on September 23-5, 2010.

⁵ One of several allusions by Anyuru to Martinson's *Aniara*, a work he clearly admires. Isagel is a pilot on the *Aniara* and can be said to be a melancholic. See my forthcoming article, “Harry Martinson's *Aniara* (1956) as a Menippean Satire for the Anthropocene”, to be published by John Benjamins.

⁶ Yet another allusion to *Aniara*. Hondo is the historic name of the island on which Hiroshima is located. In Martinson's poem it is used to denote humankind being knocked off course by dropping A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See my forthcoming article mentioned above.

⁷ Most reviewers feel that the attack described here was based on the one against the Charlie Hebo offices in Paris on January 7, 2015, and indeed there are strong similarities. However, Anyuru came up with the idea for his novel long before the Charlie Hebo attack and spent ten years working on it before it was published in 2017.

⁸ Both the description of what will happen to Milde as she approaches the event horizon, and Annika Isagel's construction of an alternative identity in the future can be seen as coping strategies to deal with the torture they have endured.

future in Canada. The novel ends by establishing one final, emotional link between Annika and the writer. In her imaginary world, Annika's best friend was Liad, a young Jewish girl who was just as ostracized by the future intolerant Swedish society as was the Muslim Annika. The two spent considerable time as teenagers hanging out in a playground on a set of swings. As the story ends here, the writer's daughter comes in and introduces her new friend – a girl called Liad. The two girls then go outside to swing in the playground. The novel ends with this picture of innocence and the possibility of a better future.

I do not know if this was intentional, but Anjuru's ending the novel this way reverses the nightmare vision at the beginning of *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) where Sarah Connor (played here by Linda Hamilton's twin sister rather than Linda Hamilton herself) gazes out from behind a metal mesh fence at an idyllic scene of children playing in a playground. Suddenly a nuclear explosion takes place. We follow the shock wave of the explosion as it annihilates everything in its path including the children in the playground and Sarah Connor. According to film critic Jonathan Barkan this is one of cinema's most nightmarish and enduring scenes. It still haunts him more than twenty years later⁹. Considering the impact this scene had on viewers, it is not unlikely that Anjuru had it in mind when he decided how to end his novel.

Conclusion

All three of these novels focus on important issues in Swedish society and the globalized world of which it is a part. They are written by a new generation of writers from diverse backgrounds and offer new perspectives on the domestic and global problems we face. In doing so, they carry on the tradition established by Harry Martinson and Karin Boye, both of whom issued Cassandra warnings in their own times: totalitarianism in the case of Boye's *Kallockain* and nuclear holocaust in the case of Martinson's *Aniara*. These warnings unfortunately are not out-of-date. Though describing dark circumstances, the three novels under discussion here are not devoid of hope. Firstly, like other dystopian novels, they believe in the ability of narratives to change society. Secondly, and something that may not be all that common in other dystopias, they emphasize the redeeming power of love: in *Slutet* this leads to people recognizing their common humanity despite being flawed individuals, in *Händelsehorisoneten* we have the love Milde feels for the Women and Children and the love they feel for her, and in *De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar*, we have the love the girl and the writer feel for their respective families. Lastly, we have the love of the mothers in the title of Anyuru's novel who mourn sons who have joined Isis. Anyuru reminds us throughout his novel of the Sufi saying that "The Creation is

⁹ Jonathan Barkan, "The Nuclear Explosion Scene in Terminator 2 Still Haunts Me After More Than 20 Years", *dreadcentral.com*, January 15, 2018. <https://www.dreadcentral.com/news/264595/nuclear-explosion-scene-terminator-2-still-haunts-after-more-years/>

a love letter from God to the Prophet”, and adds, “We are a love letter”. Maybe this is the lesson we are supposed to take with us as we navigate our way through troubled times.

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