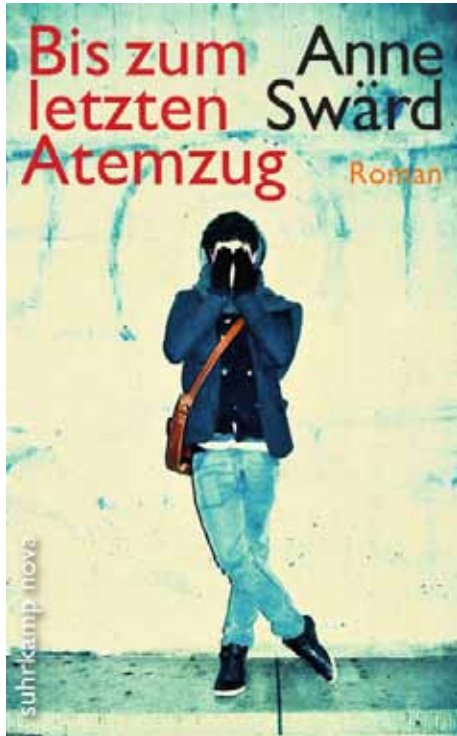


Anne Swärd / **Bis zum letzten Atemzug**

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Sirpa Pääkkönen, Helsingin Sanomat, Finland / **Interview with Anne Swärd**
(10th of February 2011)

1. Tell me about your background. Where you were born, where you live now, did you have a big family as a child?

I was born in the very south of Sweden. Both my parents were "new-settlers" there, so to speak (my father had moved from a working-class environment up north and my mother from a tiny village in the deep forests of Småland, where the family were farmers). The place my father's family originates from, is situated 1 600 kilometres north of where I was born. So ... it's a different world with a different culture, I guess you could say. I think that affected me as a child. I never really felt like I had any roots. I felt like an outsider, although I had good friends. Like Lo in the novel I always had the notion of belonging somewhere else, without really knowing where that place was. On the other hand, my sister and brother seemed to fit in just fine, so maybe this alienation was merely something within me, "the writer within me", so to speak ... Being a writer is often having that outsider position, I think, feeling a bit different, watching the world from a distance.

Opposite to Lo I didn't grow up as an only child. I was the middle child in a family that's very dynamic and kind of "loud". The house was always filled with people since my parents came from big families and had a lot of friends (especially artists and "odd" people of all kinds). I myself was a rather withdrawn child.

A bit shy or rather ... in need of a lot of time and space of my own. I was almost always wandering off on my own, or with my best friend, on adventures in the surroundings around where we lived. Or else ... locked into my room, lost in a world of writing, drawing, reading and fantasizing.

Since 18 years back I live in a small fishing-village in the very south east of Sweden, in Simrishamn in the area of Österlen, which is known for its beautiful landscape with the sea and the light and a lot of artists and creative people living there. I love it, and it's been a good place for my kids to grow up in. It's a small world, though, and therefore I travel a lot, preferably to big cities like New York, Berlin, Athens, Lisbon, Paris, Rome ... and so on.

2. When did you decide to become a writer? Did you study writing, and if so, where? Was it easy to get published in Sweden?

I've always written. I had a very vivid imagination as a child, constantly making up stories, constantly living in a parallel reality. I don't really think there's anything except writing I would have been happy doing. At the same time ... I studied hard in school and graduated with the highest grades, and my teachers all thought I'd go on to law school or maybe to study medicine, but instead I went to art school for four years, and after that I taught visual arts and did some work myself painting, illustrating and photography. Later on I studied writing for a year at a Nordic writing course, Biskops-Arnö. I guess learned a lot there, but I wasn't really at ease with writing under such circumstances ... All the time I longed to be free, writing on my own terms. I've always had this yearning for freedom - as a writer and as a person.

It's extremely difficult to get published in Sweden. The competition is really hard. For me, though, everything went smooth and quickly. The very first publishing house I sent my manuscript to responded immediately, saying "we take it!" And then everything went very fast. But I guess that was because I had worked hard on the novel before submitting it. They said they almost never saw a debut manuscript as developed, and only some month after the novel was published it was shortlisted for an August, one of the most prestigious Swedish literary award. At the time, as I recall it, it was the first debutant to be nominated for an August. So ... it was an almost chockingly quick start.

3. How did you find the idea for the novel "Till sista andetag" ("Breathless")?

Ideas don't come to me in a ready form, they rather grow from the smallest seed in the back of my head - usually a single memory or a single strong image. Due to my background in visual arts, I'm actually quite visual in my writing process, too. I think in images. My ideas often occur in a visual form. And the result - the text - has a visual quality in it, I've been told. This time the first seed was the fire in the story - the fire that brings Lo and Lukas together. A childhood memory of mine. I also felt an urge to write about a strong-minded, free-spirited young girl, growing into a ditto woman (just the kind of girl/woman that has always appealed to me). Afterwards I've thought, many times, that there probably was a lack of that kind of portraits in younger Swedish novels, since several years back.

In addition to that I guess I had had the need to write about impossible love and impossible relations. After all, that's one of the most difficult and painful dilemmas of human lives. Most people experience it at least once in their lives. And won't forget about it.

4. How important is it for you to describe childhood and teenage years in a novel?

Even when I write about grown-ups - which I for the most part do - I always want to picture them in their early years too (either just for myself, or as a part of the story). Childhood is the fundament upon which every adult is "built". So, to convincingly create a grown-up character, I must know where he or she comes from. Their origin, their childhood circumstances (preferably also the generation before them, since, of course, no man is an island, either in time or space.)

Writing about young people in a novel that is clearly intended for grown-up readers is a challenge. At the same time - we've all been young, I mean, that's one of the few things we have in common, this experience of being a child, passing through the more or less difficult adolescence, having our first experiences of love, friendship, sex, betrayal, rebellion and breaking loose ... those are human experiences we all share.

I find writing about young people as appealing as it is difficult. In early years everything in life is new and therefore strong. Young people are perhaps more vulnerable, they are in this vivid, dynamic, sensitive stage of life, which is very interesting to try to remember, and write about.

5. Are there any similarities between you and Lo?

Quite a lot, I think. She's just a bit more of everything ... The most apparent similarity between us is the urge to be free. The need and wish not to be held back by anything or anyone. One of the consequences of that is loneliness. Loneliness is the price you pay for your freedom, I guess. Security is another price, but I'm ready to pay it, and so is Lo. She has a hunger for life, for new experiences, for seeing the world, for expanding her life and herself and her territory by travelling and meeting new people. So do I. She's also a girl (later: woman) who easily deals with boys and men, and less easily with women, when I was younger I felt a bit like that too.

6. How did you find Lukas, a Hungarian young boy who lives together with his father to whom he feels very distant. Lukas is also a stranger in Sweden, he can't even write?

Lukas is very dear to me, I almost find it difficult talking about him ... maybe I feel too strongly for him, emotionally he's so close to me that I cannot really see him clearly. A lot of the readers and literary critics seem to have taken him to their hearts too. I guess that's because he's a kind of a sympathetic loser, an amiable anti-hero. I love him too - and yet, he's complex ... I mean I understand why Lo has to leave him. She just has to, or else she would have gone down with him, like a small ship trying to rescue a big ship will sink with it. In a strange way he's a mixture of myself (in the melancholia he has) and bits and pieces from boys and men I've known

closely and more briefly over the years. He's a needing person. He needs the "surplus" Lo has when it comes to joy, self-esteem, and a lust for life - everything that he lacks. In many ways he's an outcast, but I guess I've always had a special feeling for outcasts, recognizing myself in them, though I've had my share of love and security in a way that Lukas hasn't. On the other hand, I can also imagine what's attractive about him, to Lo. He broadens her world, and deepens it too, and since he's so much older than her he provides that shortcut into maturity, that's appealing when you're young.

7. You were a small child in 70s, can you remember much of that time. Your novel is placed in the 70s.

Actually my memory works in a funny way. Compared to my sister, who is only 17 months older than me, I always think I remember so little. Her memory seems to be more accurate, precise and "whole", whereas I have a memory for details and feelings, atmospheres and well ... rather strange and random things. On the other hand maybe it makes me work actively with the little I remember. I have to compensate, adding other peoples memories to my own, using my own imaginary abilities and try to link separate memory-fragments together. For me - maybe a little romantic - the 70's is a time of innocence. Or rather the end of innocence. I cannot say in what degree that feeling is linked to the fact that I myself was a child then.

8. What is the symbolism in your novel to Godard's movie? Is Godard's film important for you?

Not terribly important - more as an atmosphere of innocence and sensualism. And Jean Seberg's character in the movie, a bit cat-like, hard to catch, strong and fragile at the same time, was important to me. Also,

I was touched by her private destiny too, although that doesn't play a big part in my novel, it just flickers by in the background. When writing the novel I experienced a terrible loss in my own life, a beloved relative of mine tragically committed suicide, so Jean Seberg's destiny was like a reflection of that, in my novel.

9. Did it take a long time for you to write the novel?

Yes, in average the whole process takes a couple of years (and then the publishing takes some time too). I work a lot with the language, having a notion that quality takes time. There's no way around that, I think, no shortcuts. Most of the time and work is just for the story to develop. A lot of my colleagues in Sweden right now write semi-biographical novels based on material that's already there (the life of a famous person or someone in their family or maybe themselves). In those cases a big part of the job is already done, I guess... As for me I want to create my own universe when I write. And that takes time. But it's also the most challenging and fulfilling thing about writing novels, I think.

10. Do you do other types of work or can you concentrate on writing?

Right now, thanks to this last novel, with all the translations (as well as it being very well received by the Swedish audience) I can more or less afford the luxury of concentrating on my new novel. Before, I used to do some writing for the newspaper or teaching on the side. At the same time "going international", so to speak, and getting a lot of public attention in Sweden too, actually takes a lot of time, because I have to travel a lot and do promotion, readings, interviews and so on. It's nice to meet readers and colleagues all over, but it takes a lot of time and energy too - time that I would have used to work on my new project. But it would be terrible to complain. I'm happy people show this much interest in my work. It's really a blessing.

11. What are your plans for the future: is there a new novel in the making?

Yes. There is. I'm always very secretive about my current work, but that much I can say ... there's a new novel growing and growing. It's exciting and tiring work. I've come a long way with this fourth novel of mine, and right now I'm kind of eager to finish it, but I cannot say exactly when it will be ready. It's not really for me to decide, it's more like the novel itself will give me a secret sign when it's ready ... That may sound funny, but it's the way it is. Some level of writing will probably always be mysterious to me.