

Author Portrait: ANNE SWÄRD

Her fictional characters challenge every boundary, both physical and psychological. There is a constant balancing act in Anne Swärd's stories, as she examines the family mechanisms with poetic clarity.

To read Anne Swärd's novels is like gaining a new friend. It starts off as a shallow acquaintance, like someone you chat to in the break room at work. But then the occasional confidences increase in number, all while the relationship deepens and grows into true friendship and eventually you learn the entire truth: the one that is rarely beautiful, but that still needs to be put into words in order for life to carry on.

One can also compare Anne Swärd's novels to a puzzle, where seemingly ill-matched pieces are nonetheless put together only to reveal an often-astonishing overall picture. Like in her debut novel *Polarisommar* (2003), where she constantly switches narrator perspectives by allowing different family members to share their part of the events, something that allows the reader to anticipate the outcome with a growing sense of horror.

A literary puzzle

It is with a firm hand that Anne Swärd guides her readers through the story and it might therefore seem surprising that the well-chiselled structure is not something that she maps out before she sits down and writes.

Anne Swärd would rather describe her writing process as very intuitive, a real literary puzzle, where every story is born out of a tangible image. She explains that her second novel, *Kvicksand* (2006), was born out of an image that came to mind during a walk around the cemetery in her hometown of Simrishamn:

- I saw two boys sitting in a kitchen. One sat in the window, the other one by the table, with their backs turned to each other. It was such a remarkably strange atmosphere in this kitchen. And then I just started to write. I wrote pretty much the entire novel before I understood what had happened. I had to rewrite everything around it in order to find out.

The mental image from the unknown kitchen brought her on a journey a few decades into the future, to an indolent but also menacing Copenhagen, where Adam, one of the two boys in the kitchen, twenty years later drives around in his black taxi, searching for a lost brother and a lost family.

Outsiders

Anne Swärd often describes herself as someone who has always been telling stories, even before she learned how to write. With three novels behind her and an August nomination for debut *Polarisommar*, Anne Swärd has gained a loyal readership. In addition, her third novel, *Till sista andetaget* (2010), has been translated into several languages.

She showed proof of her narrative authority already in her first novel, and after three novels a distinct "Swärdian" literary universe has begun to take shape. A recurrent theme in her stories is the characters' distance to the world around them, an outsider position that stems from a geographical marginalization.

We lived on the outskirts of town in an area without a name, where beauty and wilderness began.

That is how main character Lo, the girl with the strangely large, northern family, describes her childhood world in *Till sista andetaget* – a world of its own situated somewhere between the river, the railway and the motorway, “*where the world began or ended.*”

In *Polarsommar* we find ourselves in southern Sweden next to a sea with powerful undercurrents, and in dark dystopian novel *Kvicksand* we are brought to Adam’s barracks by following the railway tracks from the centre of Copenhagen.

Exploring boundaries

In Anne Swärd’s world, life at the geographical boundaries often becomes a tangible image of the characters’ lives in the margins of society – whether it involves being an immigrant, being emotionally unstable or having an unusual family constellation.

- It’s probably my own longing for freedom that haunts the stories, says Anne Swärd. You’re a little bit free right on the boundary – you might have your back turned on society, but otherwise it’s something positive. To maintain a certain degree of alienation isn’t all complicated, it also allows a liberty of action.

Much of her novels are about exploring these boundaries that we set for human actions. When the fictional characters are not balancing on the railway tracks or heading off along the motorway in an attempt to escape the lives that have been staked out for them, they instinctively explore the boundaries that our society has set for our social behaviour. Even if the relationships between these people rarely cross our usual taboo boundaries they are constantly hovering close to them. It can involve a dramatically intense brotherly/sisterly love, an infatuation that crosses the generation boundaries or the strong bond between a teenage boy and a little girl, as in *Till sista andetaget*. In this novel, Lo and Lukas’s intimate, and sometimes consuming, relationship is perceived as something incredibly provocative and ominous by those around them, who constantly project their own phantasms and preconceptions on the children. With more or less brutal means the grown-ups try to separate the two children, which in turn invest a lot of energy and ingenuity in order to escape the parental control.

This balancing act on the boundaries of the forbidden also creates tension and unrest in the text, which pulls the story forward. The constant exploration and stretching of boundaries also clarify the norms we seldom define for ourselves, just because they are viewed as something so obvious. By doing this, Anne Swärd helps the reader to realise the taboos of our modern age.

Lonely children

There are also a number of lonely children that move along the novels’ boundaries. These lonely children, a recurrent theme in Anne Swärd’s books, moves in and out of the stories just like they move in and out of the fictional families. Some are neglected and abused by the grown-ups; others are actively trying to escape the parental control, such as Lo and Lukas.

- I was quite wild as a child, very much a tomboy, was never at home. I did incredibly dangerous things, Anne Swärd says and speaks of the “enhanced sense of life” she remembers from childhood, when you set off towards dangerous or unknown destinations.

She also speaks of her fascination with the survival strategies that humans, and so many children, have access to.

- While it’s sometimes terrible to witness many children’s vulnerability it is also fantastic to see how kids manage as adults, against the odds. That makes me feel completely warm inside; it’s such a powerful force.

The family in focus

The family is the constant focus for Anne Swärd's stories. This unity that we all hail from, with its fair share of hidden secrets and emotionally charged ties. Ties that can never be broken.

- The family is really interesting from the aspect that you can never break away. You can put an end to any other relationship if it becomes too tough. But in a family there is no end to how deep, dark and fractured these ties can become. The family is also our school, our university in life. This is where you learn to become a human being but also where you are knocked about in many different ways, something that we have to work on for the rest of our lives, she argues.

Since every family carry its own unique history, this is a topic that never feels worn-out.

- On the surface things may appear completely conventional and uncomplicated, but it rarely ever is. You can take any family and still find the whole spectrum: alcoholism, suicide, infidelity.

Something that is apparent not least in *Polarsommar* where truths and liaisons are revealed one by one.

One reviewer has claimed that Anne Swärd has "absolute psychological pitch" and that she is one of a few that can capture emotional moods and human reactions. With previous studies at Konstfack and a past as an arts teacher she has not least an outstanding ability to portray abstract emotions as concrete, poetic images: "*Loss is like a piece of sandpaper – it changes into a finer graininess, until nothing hurts anymore*", is how Adam in *Kvicksand* reasons.

Her distinct imagery narrative often also manifests itself in a theatrical or cinematic way:

The currants flew like drops of blood through the air towards the black manure, which she had planted under the bushes that same morning. Grandmother in her white old lady's dress was stained by berries and blood and dirt.

That is how tangibly visual death is portrayed in *Till sista andetaget*.

Nature – always present

Something that is also palpably present in Anne Swärd's fictional universe is nature, often very distinctly and precisely described. Sometimes nature also plays its own part, a character that drives the plot forward.

Disposable ice, nightmare ice. To be the cause of someone else's death in that way, wanting to protect but instead weakening the ice so that it broke as soon as the next person stepped over it.

That's how Lo argues in *Till sista andetaget* and thereby she describes the significance of ice in the novel while also allowing it to portray a most human behaviour.

Nature is also a constant source of inspiration for Anne Swärd, at the same time as it's a path to tread upon when reality becomes too difficult to tackle. In *Polarsommar* she lets a drowned dog portray the longing for death.

- I'm very interested in natural sciences and how you can apply natural phenomena on human psychology. Like different symbiotic relationships, she says and explains that this was what she had in mind when she wrote about Lo and Lukas's nourishing, but also consuming, relationship in *Till sista andetaget*.

- You can take a leaf and look at its structure and apply it on human psychology. I have such feeling that everything is connected and that everything is replaceable.

If most of the plots in Anne Swärd's novels revolve around family and human relations, one can also detect her social commitment in the second novel *Kvicksand*. The story is set against a gloomy backdrop of violence, a deteriorated healthcare and

shredded social safety nets, in the wake of environmental pollution and financial crises. This social commitment is something that she predicts will play a more prominent part in her future novels.

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