A bedtime story is a daily routine in most Swedish families.

**CHILDREN’S LITERATURE:**

**SWEDISH CHILDREN’S BOOKS NOT AFRAID TO TACKLE DIFFICULT SUBJECTS**

Every tenth book published in Sweden is a children’s book. Covering a wide variety of themes from dancing cows to single urban fathers, Swedish children’s literature inspires, informs and entertains young readers.

Children’s books are popular in Sweden and there are plenty of them. In 2012, a total of 1,761 were published, about 54 per cent of which were written by Swedish authors. Children’s literature enjoys considerable status and often reflects the trends seen in adult literature. The books are frequently reviewed and discussed in the major media. Sweden has had a professorship in children’s literature since 1982, and the courses in literature for young readers at the country’s universities and university colleges are well-attended.

Every year, prizes are awarded for outstanding books or to organisations that encourage reading among children and young adults. These include the Nordic Children’s and Young People’s Literature Prize, the Best Children’s Novel Award and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, ALMA. The last of these is the biggest children’s book prize in the world, worth SEK 5 million (EUR 602,800, USD 784,000).

**Difficult subjects**

So what are Swedish children’s books about and what makes them so popular? There are some that entertain and some that make you think more deeply. Children’s authors in Sweden are not afraid of dealing with subjects that adults might find difficult to talk to children about. The shelves of bookstores and libraries contain children’s literature on such themes as violence, homosexuality, substance abuse, divorce, death and bullying. A popular book dealing with the end of a life is *Goodbye Mr Muffin (Adjö, herr Muffin)* by Ulf Nilsson. It tells of Mr Muffin the hamster, who one day realises it is time to look back on his life when he gets a stomach ache and will soon have to say goodbye to the family he lives with. *Vinterviken* (not translated), a book for young adults by Mats Wahl, is a love story about a poor immigrant, John-John, and a rich girl, Elisabeth, but is also a story about covert racism and cultural prejudice.

**Well-known outside Sweden**

Swedish children’s authors have achieved considerable success abroad as well. Gunilla Bergström’s books about Alfie Atkins (Alfons Åberg), a boy...
did you know?

children’s reading

Two common conclusions from various studies of children’s reading both in Sweden and abroad are that girls read more than boys and that reading tends to decline around the age of twelve. In Sweden, reading comprehension has been on the decline throughout the 2000s. Causes cited include Swedish school libraries now having fewer resources and children having fewer books around them in the home.

- who lives in the city with his father, have been translated into 30 languages, for example.  
  Juja and Tomas Wieslander’s books about the dancing cow Mamma Moo (Mamma Mu), who wants to try everything that humans do, have also been widely translated.  
  Another author in demand abroad is Ulf Stark, who has been writing books for four decades, including Can You Whistle, Johanna? (Kan du vissla Johanna?).  
  The popular Pettson and Findus (Pettson och Findus) books by Sven Nordqvist are also much liked beyond Sweden’s borders. The stories about eccentric old Pettson, who can talk with his cat, are skilfully illustrated, with humorous details in the pictures, while the texts play ingeniously with words in a way that amuses both adults and children at storytelling time.

crime for children

Today, a wave of crime and thriller books has washed over the Swedish children’s literature field and struck a chord with children of all ages. Topping the list of books sold and borrowed is the series about The Jerry-Maya Detective Agency (LasseMajas detektivbyrå) by Martin Widmark. In 2011, he was Sweden’s most popular author in terms of loans from Swedish public and school libraries, his books being borrowed 1.5 million times. He and illustrator Helena Willis have produced 22 books about the detective agency, which have been translated into more than 20 languages. Other detectives who have become popular are Kalle Skavank by Petrus Dahlin, and the Petrinis in the books by Mårten Sandén.

ebooks for children

Swedish ebooks for children have been available since 2000. Today, they are also published on tablets and smartphones. Some are interactive, with clickable extra material, audio illustrations and links.

One such Swedish ebook is the young adult novel Jag är tyvärr död och kan inte komma till skolan idag (the book has not been translated, but the title means ‘I’m Afraid I’m Dead and Can’t Come to School Today’) by Sara Ohlsson. Ebooks for children and young adults are often published one chapter at a time. One such example is Pernilla Glaser’s young adult book Under trottoaren (not translated, but the title means ‘Beneath the Pavement’), about three teenagers who don’t really fit into their society, and who together explore hidden parts of the city where they live. The story was published by stages in the form of an interactive blog where readers could vote for how the book should end.

Mystery and suspense for young adults

The suspense and mystery genre has become increasingly popular among teenagers in recent years. One example is The Circle (Cirkeln), which is about six teenage girls who find out they are witches hunted by an ancient evil. The book by Mats Strandberg and Sara Bergmark Elf gren attracted lots of attention and was nominated for Sweden’s top literary prize, the August Prize. It won two prestigious prizes in 2012, awarded by the country’s book circles and book bloggers.
POPULAR SWEDISH BOOKS
FOR CHILDREN AND
YOUNG ADULTS

MAMMAN OCH
DEN VILDA BEBIN
(The Wild Baby),
by Barbro Lindgren.
A picture book about
an adventurous baby
who keeps hiding
from his mum.

SANNING ELLER
KONSEKVENS
(Truth or Dare),
by Annika Thor.
A popular book for young adults
about bullying, loneliness and
friendship. The book won the
August Prize in the children’s and
young adult category in 1997,
and was filmed in the same year.

ELSE-MARIE OCH SMÅPAP-
PORN (Else-Marie and Her Seven Little
Daddies), by Pija Lindenbaum.
Pija Lindenbaum’s debut book
about an unusual family – to put it
mildly – challenges existing norms
and perceptions. In the US, some of
the illustrations were censored.

ELDENS HEMLIGHET
(Secrets in the Fire),
by Henning Mankell.
The first of three books about
12-year-old Sofia and her family’s
struggle to survive in war-torn Mo-
zambique.

BAJSBOKEN
(The Poop Book),
by Pernilla Stalfelt.
A relaxed and humorous book for
toddlers about something we all do
– even kings and pop stars. Writer
and illustrator Pernilla Stalfelt takes
an amusing look
at poop, toilet
visits and every-
thing that goes
with them.

THE POWER OF PICTURES

Picture books enjoy a prominent and important place in Swed-
ish children’s literature. The genre gained a foothold with Elsa
Beskow and has since progressed through illustrators and writ-
ers such as Stina Wirsén and Pija Lindenbaum.

Since the early 20th century, the picture-
book genre has grown and flourished
in Sweden. Among the pioneers were
Elsa Beskow, with Peter in Blueberry
Land (Puttes äventyr i blåbärskogen),
which has influenced contemporary chil-
dren’s book illustrators with its artistic,
imaginative approach. Beskow often took
as her theme the interaction between
nature, children and animals. This is also
reflected in the work of contemporary
authors such as Lena Anderson, in her
books Hedgehog (Kotten) and Anna
(Maja).

Humour for all ages
Picture books often have two readers, so
they need to be interesting for adults too.
This is why many include an element
of humour, in both text and the images.
Examples include Pernilla Stalfelt’s The
Little Worm Book (Lilla maskboken) and
The Big Worm Book (Stora maskboken).
They offer expressive imagery, and the
text is often interpreted literally in the
pictures, which makes their reading both
unexpected and entertaining.

Olof Landström is a children’s book il-
lustrator who has collaborated with such
leading Swedish authors as Ulf Stark
and Barbro Lindgren. Together with his
wife Lena Landström, he has created the
Boo and Baa (Fären Bu och Bää) books.
Illustrators such as Jan Lööf, Eva
Eriksson and Eva Lindström have also
collaborated with major Swedish au-
thors. But Lööf is perhaps best known for
his books about a boy called Pelle. He
has also acquired an international reputa-
tion with books such as The Story of the
Red Apple (Sagan om det röda äpplet).
Award-winning Pija Lindenbaum, who
both writes and illustrates, is another
Swede who has achieved great success
with her picture books. Her much-loved
Bridget (Gittan) books tell about a little
girl who tries to deal with emotions such
as guilt, shame and fear during her ad-
vventures.

One of Sweden’s most popular chil-
dren’s illustrators is Stina Wirsén. To-
gether with her mother Carin Wirsén,
she has produced the Rut and Knut
books (Rut och Knut), which among oth-
er things earned them the Elsa Beskow
Plaque.

Picture books are here to stay. Among
the more recent arrivals on the scene are
Sara Lundberg, Jockum Nordström and
twins Emma and Lisen Adbåge.
FROM EDUCATION TO ENTERTAINMENT

The history of the modern Swedish children’s novel begins around 1945. One of the pioneers was Astrid Lindgren, with *Pippi Longstocking* (Pippi Långstrump).

In the early 20th century, children’s books were seen as a separate literary genre. One of the most famous authors from this period was Selma Lagerlöf. Her book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige) is about a boy who travels through the country on the back of a flying goose, and is an entertaining lesson in Swedish geography. For many years, it was used as a textbook in Swedish compulsory school.

The modern Swedish children’s novel first emerged around 1945 when society began to understand that children had special needs. This resulted in an explosion of books focusing on everything from humour to social issues. The modern children’s book was born. Starting in 1945, some 400 children’s books were published every year for the rest of the decade. The foremost pioneer of the modern genre was Astrid Lindgren. Her first book, *Pippi Longstocking* (Pippi Långstrump), published in 1945, made Swedish children’s literature famous around the world. Other pioneers were Gösta Knutsson with his richly illustrated books about Peter-No-Tail (Pelle Svanlås), a much too nice, tailless cat, and Lennart Hellsing, several of whose books in verse have been put to music, including *The Banana Book* (Bananbok).

The earliest books with their moralising, didactic tone have now been replaced by stories that focus on the inherent curiosity and creativity of children. And where once the books centred on male protagonists, a growing number of the leading characters in recent years have been girls.

**ASTRID LINDGREN**

Even today, almost 70 years after she published her first book, Astrid Lindgren remains one of the most widely borrowed authors in Swedish libraries. Her books are loved by both children and adults all over the world. Some of her best-known characters are *Pippi Longstocking* (Pippi Långstrump), *The Brothers Lionheart* (Bröderna Lejonhjärta) and *Emil of Lönneberga* (Emil i Lönneberga). During her career, she was awarded numerous international prizes, and several awards have been established in her name. Lindgren’s books are distinguished by strong characters and difficult subjects. Many of the books also include accounts of contemporary life and social criticism.

**USEFUL LINKS**

- [www.barnboken.net](http://www.barnboken.net) Barnboken/Journal of Children’s Literature Research
- [www.förlagare.se](http://www.förlagare.se) Svenska förläggareföreningen (Swedish Publishers’ Association)
- [www.ibby.se](http://www.ibby.se) Swedish branch of the International Board on Books for Young People
- [www.interbib.se](http://www.interbib.se) Internationella biblioteket (International Library)
- [www.kur.se](http://www.kur.se) Kulturrådet (Swedish Arts Council)
- [www.sbi.kb.se](http://www.sbi.kb.se) Swedish Institute for Children’s Books