

The Swedish *Bonniers bokklubb* and the Role of Anglo-Saxon Translation Literature

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As a result of the publishing crisis in the 1970s the Swedish publishing industry went through some very radical changes. By the end of the decade, the pocket boom was merely a memory, the book club phenomenon was past being a phenomenon, having become a significant distribution channel for the publishers, the Anglo-American translation literature was well on its way to total domination of the publishing scene,¹ and the share of bestsellers and popular literature of the total publication was sharply on the increase. Bestseller publishing, as publisher Per Gedin remarked already in the mid-70s, "requires very good finances, great influence in the mass media and wide contacts. All these things favour the forming of large publishing houses and the closing down of small ones."² Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, there are really only two main players on the publishing scene in Sweden, the multi-media conglomerate Bonniers being one of these.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the Bonnier publishing house, one of the most respected and influential players in the industry, was looking for new distribution channels, and, coming down in favor of the book club enterprise, launched *Bonniers bokklubb* (hereafter *BBK*). A mere ten years later, book club operations financed a very large share of the other

1. Yngve Lindung, "Den angloamerikanska litteraturens dominans" (Kulturrådet: 5, 1993), 29.

2. Per Gedin, *Literature in the Marketplace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 234.

publishing activities of a conventional literary publishing house like Bonniers – in one decade, then, this house with its impressive history of catering to “the cultivated circuit” could be said to have switched gear – for Swedish conditions, a remarkable change.³ In the following decades, the success of the sprouting book clubs (the Swedish *Book-of-the-Month Club* which saw the light of day in 1974 was only one of a number of new clubs) was such that they came to dominate the distribution of general literature, particularly when it came to the novel, and thus to control a substantial share of the book market. One significant long-term effect of this concerned the polarization of the kinds of books sold – what we might term “the bestseller syndrome”; while some titles sell in huge editions through the clubs, the wider range of texts found in traditional book stores sell fewer and fewer copies. This would have ramifications not only for the traditional distribution of books (through book sellers), but also for the structure of the market and, of course, for reading habits. That the Swedish cultural system is open rather than closed to cultural influences is shown by the considerable, not to say great, tolerance of translations – for quite some time now it has been the case that more translations than original texts are published. Generally, the last three decades of the 20th century was a period in which the American popular culture presence in Sweden manifested itself strongly, and when it comes to the publishing industry this might actually be something of an understatement. Since I am interested in *BBK* as an example of one important channel through which books, especially Anglo-American novels in translation, find their readers, in the strategies that lie behind the selection and exposure of these novels, I have been looking at the club magazine symbolically named *Bokspegeln* [The Book Mirror].

While *BBK* can be considered the first modern book club in Sweden, the concept was of course not new; at the beginning of the 1970s the existing three clubs (*Svalan*, *Bra Böcker*, and *Vår Bok*) were slugging along with a membership of about a hundred thousand.⁴ Some ten years

3. Per Gedin, *Förläggarliv* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1999), 237.

4. Historically, the book club phenomenon can be said to have originated in the United States where the scarcity of traditional booksellers made publishers look eagerly to other channels of distribution. The book club was one such, one that banked on the circumstance that Americans generally were familiar with the mail order system. The true stroke of genius, however, was the concept of the negative option, the idea that made the American *Book-of-the-Month Club* (launched in the 1920s) such a success. See Janice Radway's dis- →

and several new clubs later membership had increased to 1,3 million,⁵ a figure that has since remained more or less steady – in 1995, book club membership peaked at about 1,4 million, but recent years have seen a small but insistent decline in numbers. In 1997, some 20 percent of total book sales went through the book clubs.⁶ March 1970 was clearly the right time to start *BBK* since the new club met with immediate success – in 1971 there were 50,000 subscribers, in 1972 100,000, and in 1975 145,000 subscribers.⁷ After the 1980 merger with *Familjebokklubben* (controlled by another major publishing house, Esselte), these figures rose even more quickly and peaked in 1995 at 320,000, the highest figure ever for a Swedish book club. Since then, although figures have been decreasing gradually, the recent merger with *Litterära klubben* sets the estimated number of subscribers today at some 310,000, a figure that makes *BBK* still the largest of the Swedish clubs (the *Book-of-the-Month Club* trailing with around 170,000 subscribers).

But the book club that was part of, and contributed to, some of the major changes in publication strategies was *BBK*, launched by Sweden's largest and most prestigious publishing house, the family-owned Bonniers Förlag AB.⁸ In a brief welcoming note in the first issue of the club quarterly *Bokspegeln*, publisher Gerard Bonnier himself addressed potential subscribers, ensuring them of the club's commitment to "enable as many as possible to read as much as possible." It is a statement which could be taken to suggest the intricate relationship at the heart of serious publishing, the one between culture and commerce, as it on the one hand emphasizes the favorable economic conditions of *BBK* – the argument generally for book clubs – and on the other, draws attention to *BBK*'s par-

discussion in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina P), 194-98. The modern book club spread throughout Europe after WWII, one of numerous features of mass society, involving a form of distribution perfectly suited to this new world – meeting the needs of people whose most precious commodity is time, who, even if they have access to a book store never go there to browse, but who, nevertheless, have an urge to know what the media hype is about.

5. *Ibid.*, 108. *Svalan* was founded in 1942, and had 125,000 members in 1971; founded in 1965, *Bra Böcker* had 40,000 members in 1970.

6. SOU. *Statens Offentliga Utredningar*. Kulturutredningen boken i tiden, (1997), 141.

7. Even from the start the overwhelming majority of subscribers are women, something that is shown by the fact that when *Bokspegeln* in 1971:2 has five members briefly present themselves and their book selections from that issue, four out of the five are women.

8. The first head of the new endeavor was Erik Hyllner, previously in charge of the book club *Svalan*.

ticular profile, the wide selection of titles on offer. This is not a niche club, but one that assures its readers they will find what they are looking for among the two-hundred some titles of mainly Swedish novels, short stories, and poetry, of nonfiction texts, and children's books. The selection, comprising not only texts from the lists of the Bonnier-owned publishers but also from other publishing houses with which there were special agreements, would be presented in *Bokspegeln*, a magazine featuring also articles about and interviews with writers. Since Bonniers for many years had been publishing the majority of the most respected Swedish novelists and poets, it was natural that the fictional profile of *BBK* would be geared towards the indigenous literature, novels, and poetry. The second "leg" of the club would be made up of a hefty nonfiction selection. European works of fiction was not actually a privileged category, but each issue of *Bokspegeln* was scheduled to contain a page called "The Front" which would introduce new foreign fiction.⁹ While American fiction was not a privileged category, neither in terms of number of texts nor amount of space devoted to those actually on offer, "The Front" would occasionally come to include also texts originating in the U.S.

In view of this, it is interesting that the very first Main Selection – the book subscribers receive automatically if they simply refrain from doing anything when they get the club magazine – presented in the first issue of *Bokspegeln* (containing in all 226 titles) would not be a Swedish title but Irishman James Plunkett's hefty historical tale about Dublin, *Trolös stad* [Strumpet City], a book that would prove a huge success, selling 25,000 copies in the initial three-month period. It was introduced in quite an ambitious contextualizing essay about "the troubles" written by well-known Swedish journalist Lennart Winblad. This kind of article is typical of the early *Bokspegeln*: typical in that it was signed, in that the author was a respected member of the Swedish cultural establishment, and in that it is underwritten by the ambition to explain, to educate, to edify. In these early years there are quite a few instances of such didactic entries; one touchingly earnest effort entitled "Barn behöver böcker!" [Children Need Books!] is actually a summary of a lecture on children's literature,

9. "The Front" was actually what remained of the initial plans for the new book club that Bonniers spent a couple of years planning and discussing. One of the original ideas was to launch a rather exclusive club catering to readers with an interest in elite literature.

a delineation of what kinds or aspects of books children find frightening, and of how a parent might allay such fears. Since there is no obvious connection to any one book offered, this piece was clearly motivated by a desire other than the commercial. Another case in point is the 1971 "How to Make a Book" mini-series which aims at providing the readership with some insider perspectives. This four-part series in consecutive issues of *Bokspegeln* offers interviews with various professionals responsible for the finished product, the book – editors (four out of six of whom are women), translators, artists responsible for book covers, and publishers.¹⁰ Underlying all of this, I believe, is the editor's determination to have *Bokspegeln* be something more than merely a sales channel, a desire to involve and educate the readers.

The (visible) American presence in these early *BBK* years is a minor one. In view of the political climate in Sweden, the early half-page entry on three nonfiction texts about race relations in the U.S. can actually be considered representative. The caption "Från ett sjukt Amerika" [From a Sick America] that appeared in the very first issue of the new endeavor *Bokspegeln* introduces *Förtroendekrisen* [Crisis of Confidence] by Arthur M. Schlesinger; *Gossebarn i förlovat land* [Manchild in a Promised Land] about life in Harlem by black lawyer and writer Claude Brown; and Coretta Scott King's biography of her husband Martin Luther King promising important insights into this "sick America." As writers and texts are briefly highlighted, the rationale behind the selection is explained – "the need to provide nuances" to the prevailing picture of the United States as a haven for the oppressed and persecuted. Such nonfiction texts dealing with diverse political, social, and economic issues appear frequently all through the 1970s – though gradually less as the decade draws to an end – and is of course a reflection of the political consciousness of the time. The 1971:4 issue of *Bokspegeln* provides yet another half-page entry on two nonfiction texts about racism; first, the Swedish journalist Lars Ulvenstam's *Harlem Harlem* which deals with his year-long stay in the black urban ghetto, and, secondly, Black Panther Bobby Seale's *Tiden är inne* [Seize the Time] where he, writes the editor,

10. While Gerard Bonnier stresses the marketing potential of the book clubs, Per Gedin (Wahlström & Widstrand) focuses on Solzhenitsyn (whose publisher he was), and the third publisher, Kjell Peterson (Forum), discusses Swedish books and writers.

“tells about his own background and what motivates black people in their struggle for a humane existence in the U.S. of today” (21, my translation). Also *BBK*, hardly a bastion of radical ideology, can thus be found to view the U.S. rather warily, to present a skeptical attitude to a number of American social and political features.

This deep-seated suspicion might be a partial explanation for the scant presence of American fiction in the club's first years. Several of the Bonnier publishers actually had good connections overseas although traditionally, their eyes had been focused on the U.K. instead. The American selection consisted mainly of elite writers like Bellow (*Mosby's Memoirs*), Philip Roth, and Updike, but occasionally there appeared something less mainstream like Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*. The somewhat dry and brief write-up of John Updike's *Par om par* [Couples] defines the New England setting of the novel as being “part of America's heart: the cradle of both American Puritanism and democracy.” Updike, it is claimed in the neutrally informative language of these early issues, “zooms in on a piece of representative middle-class America and mirrors its novel attempts to fill a materially well-replenished existence with different dreams of happiness” (my translations). This emphasis on established elite writers – on writers who already have an interested (if limited) Swedish audience – continues all through the 1970s: there are several editions of authors like Nobel Prize winner Pearl Buck, and Steinbeck whose *Tortilla Flat* comes recommended as “one of the world's great humorous novels.” But that none of these books is considered a main attraction is evidenced by the brevity of the write-ups. The first American novel to appear as Main Selection is *Islands in the Stream* (1971:4), played up by a two-page interview with the author in his Cuban home by Swedish writer and translator Mårten Edlund (done in 1958), accompanied by a large photo of a pensive Hemingway, and an excerpt from the nomination formulation of the Nobel Prize Committee. Since Hemingway for decades had enjoyed a very solid position in Sweden, one of few American writers of whom that could be said, a new book by him was an almost certain success.

But as the 1970s progress, *BBK* gradually changes appearance – or is it, perhaps, actually coming into its own, finding its true format? When the first editor Ingmar Björkstén leaves after two years, it becomes clear how much the tone and emphasis of *Bokspegeln* had been a reflection of

his preferences. Towards the end of the decade the no longer quarterly but now bimonthly Main Selection is frequently a popular fiction novel, generally of the category Anglo-American bestseller – like *Kylen* [The Cooler], labeled “thriller,” by first-time novelist George Markstein (1974:3). Selling 100,000 copies in its first year, it remains one of the all-time best-selling novels in *BBK* history. It had, to be sure, been a selection of both the *British Literary Guild* and the *British Book-of-the-Month Club*, and having done very well in both of these, it came, so to speak, “highly recommended.” But while Markstein made a one and only appearance in *BBK* there were other writers of popular fiction that continued to attract large audiences and kept on producing bestsellers, writers like Herman Wouk with his *Winds of War* miniseries of four individual titles, novels that went through several editions during the 1970s and 80s.

The growing importance of popular culture in society generally of course affects not only the selection of books but is reflected also in the layout and style of *Bokspegeln*. The crossover between genres that is such a prominent aspect of sales promotion today is, to be sure, an occasional feature also at the beginning of the 70s. In an early attempt to capitalize on Hollywood and the movie industry, the write-up of the reprint of Charles Portis’s 1968 western *Mod i barm* [True Grit] comes accompanied by a picture of John Wayne as grumpy old charmer Rooster Cogburn from the 1969 film version, in Swedish *De sammanbitna*. In the same vein, the first issue of *Bokspegeln* contained a page-long write-up of four books dealing with WW II, two nonfiction historical texts and two novels, one of which is Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*. Since the introduction contains several references not only to the movie-version of *Catch 22* but also to M.A.S.H., both then showing in Sweden, it seems probable that the topicality (and popularity) of these films is the reason behind the reprint of Heller’s novel.

Erich Segal’s *Love Story* gets a full page in *Bokspegeln* (1971:3), partly consisting of a picture from the soon-to-be released movie of the same name. This bestseller, published throughout the world with identical covers in one of the carefully orchestrated publicity campaigns that will soon become commonplace, “the love story of the century, on top of the bestseller-list everywhere,” is “finally here.” It comes as no surprise to learn that the internationally acclaimed film – with Ryan O’Neill and

Ali McGraw – is scheduled to open in Sweden about a month after the release of the novel.

At the end of the 1970s, “the topicality factor” can clearly be seen to have struck as increasingly often the books given maximum coverage in *Bokspegeln* turn out to be popular fictions, generally also international bestsellers. Books by certain writers appear regularly not merely as Main Selections but also in reprint, in less expensive editions – books by Ira Levin, Irwin Shaw, and Harold Robbins, Arthur Hailey, Sidney Sheldon. Catherine Cookson and Virginia Andrews, Jackie Collins and Judith Krantz, to mention only a few Anglo-American names.¹¹ And as the 1980s progress, not only the nature of the texts but also the way in which they are exposed make it signify that *BBK* has drawn the consequences of the fact that its main target group consists of women. Between the very first years of *Bokspegeln* and the mid-80s there is a fascinating shift in the tone of address – the neutrally explanatory tone with the underlying educational agenda is gradually transformed into a direct address foregrounding the emotional qualities of the texts, the psychological complications encountered by the characters, the exciting, often luxurious settings. There are no longer any contextualizing articles – being relation-centered tales and tempestuous love affairs, in the 80s often also stories centered around female friendships, around the difficulty for contemporary women of juggling professional and private lives, these novels have no need of introductions.¹² This is the stuff of a particular kind of popular romance – whose practitioners almost all seem to be Anglo-American – a genre that becomes increasingly popular in the 80s and early 90s (and of course of corresponding economic significance for the publishers), to a considerable extent, I would argue, because of extensive book club exposure.

Asked how she would characterize *BBK* today, editor Ingrid Carroll who is responsible for the book selection, uses almost the same words as do the first issues of *Bokspegeln*, emphasizing on the one hand the wide selection of both fictional and nonfictional texts the club provides, and on

11. Sheldon, e.g., had a book as Main Selection in the years 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1992, and Krantz had one in 1983, 1986, 1988, and 1993 respectively.

12. These sketchy “sales arguments” intriguingly often lack specifics pertaining to setting, the when and where of the story, foregrounding instead the intense emotional life of the main characters, their extravagant life-styles, or the unbelievable difficulties they have to overcome to reach their goal.

the other the “attractive main selections.” *BBK* is not a club that prides itself on being either innovative or trend setting, or to cater to particular interests. “Our target group, women 30+,” Carroll explains, “is not really sensitive to trends. The majority lives in small towns or in the countryside.” Some 80 percent of the subscribers are women. Having been with the club for more than a decade, she prides herself on knowing what her readership is looking for; partly through careful monitoring of subscriber responses and reactions – phone calls, letters, emails as well as surveys – partly through careful monitoring of sales statistics. Carroll by now feels herself to be “privy to the secrets of Swedish women.” And judging her subscribers to be fairly conservative, Carroll and her (all female) staff are wary of doing anything that might, so to speak, rock the boat – which is the main reason why they do not, e.g., attempt to rejuvenate *Bokspegeln* (now appearing with 10 issues per year) although they consider its layout outdated and cluttered, having something of a catalog feel. But since subscriber reactions to the magazine are consistently positive, indicating that the present format does its job, one should not, Carroll suggests, perhaps somewhat resignedly, tamper with something that works so well.¹³

The changes that have been observed in *Bokspegeln* in the first three decades of its existence can be said to be manifestations of more or less the same trend. That interesting initial sense of mission, of the responsibility to educate, is a feature that did not survive for long. It should actually be seen, I think, as a resonance of the lingering desire for that other, literary, club that was for a while a seriously contemplated option before the decision came down on what would become *BBK*. It was also clearly related to one particular editor. The most striking aspect of the changes concerns the role of translation literature, the strong influx of Anglo-American bestsellers – of romantic novels, detective stories, and what has been the dominant trend in the last few years, psychological thrillers – popular fictions all. This trend is heavily reflected in both layout and tone of the present glossily commercial *Bokspegeln* whose sales pitch and argument not infrequently resemble that of a well-known cosmetics brand: “Because you’re worth it!”

Like most book clubs, *BBK* prints only books that have already been published and has generally little influence on what scripts and books

13. In an interview with the author, October 30, 2002.

publishers buy (though *BBK* editors occasionally read and comment on novels still in script and not yet published in the original). But since book club exposure is of such economic importance to publishers, this is one very significant ingredient in the decision to publish. On the whole, the book selection provided by *BBK* can be said to reflect the trends in the publishing industry generally in this period. One of the two major trends of the major Swedish publishers of fiction in recent years is the privileging of popular fiction originating in the United States or Great Britain, a translation literature heavily dominated by novels.¹⁴ It is my argument, however, that the club has done more than underwrite this trend, that it actually had a role to play in bringing it about, *shaping* it. While these are complex issues in that they are hard to pin down, they are interesting to consider because of their implications; one effect of such a massive presence as that of Anglo-American fiction in Sweden is a demand for more books, for even more visible presence, then. This, in turn, has the effect of familiarizing the foreign: that readers (or viewers or listeners) no longer perceive the “foreign” in the foreign but feel so at home with certain settings, ways of thinking, of structuring stories (all ways which actually originate in a cultural system other than theirs) that they incorporate these in their own system of norms – so that, to most Swedes today, life on Manhattan actually seems more familiar than life in Torneträsk.

14. And as Lindung (footnote 1) has shown, 22, one of the main distribution channels for the Anglo-American translation literature has been the book clubs.