

A New Wave of Swedish Emigrant Novels

Ulf Jonas Björk

The mass migration of Swedes to North America that began in the 19th century is newly inspiring Swedish authors and their readers in the first quarter of our century. The emigration was an exodus of nearly 1.3 million Swedes to North America from the 1840s to the 1920s, making emigration a central part of everyday life in Sweden. Most people around 1900 knew someone—friends, relatives or former neighbors—who had left for America. While the first generation of Swedish-American authors such as journalist Johan Person made the immigration experience a central theme of their Swedish-language fictional works, their



Wilhelm Moberg, 1967.

counterparts in Sweden were slow to explore the topic, and not until Vilhelm Moberg's epic four-novel *Emigrants* cycle, written between 1947 and 1957 (published by Bonniers, 1949-1959), did a major Swedish work deal with the exodus.

Moberg's novels, long required reading in Swedish schools, made a deep impression in Sweden, and Swedish emigration to America as a literary theme was given a further boost a half century later by another well-received book, Ola Larsmo's *Swede Hollow*, published in 2016 by Bonniers. In contrast to Moberg's characters, who come to America early in the history of the mass migration and end up as successful farmers, Larsmo's protagonists arrive in the

latter half of the 1800s and live in a slum in St. Paul, Minnesota, struggling to make ends meet. *Swede Hollow* thus added a new dimension to Swedish perceptions of the emigration. As Jennifer Eastman Attebery notes in her companion article, the English translation of Moberg's work extended his impact to American authors and readers, and the same may be true of Larsmo's translation to English.

Several recent Swedish books have chosen Swedish America as a topic and have picked up Larsmo's theme of Swedish immigrants as city dwellers rather than farmers. Two authors make their protagonists young single women rather than focusing on families as Moberg's and Larsmo's novels do, reflecting that those opting for a new life in America in the later stages of the great-migration era tended to arrive on their own. Camilla Dahlson's two books, *Från Tranås till Chicago* (From Tranås to Chicago; Lind & Co., 2023) and *Ebba och Mary* (Ebba and Mary; Lind & Co., 2024), tell the story of Ebba, who travels to Chicago from Sweden in the 1920s and finds work as a housemaid. Like many real-life immigrants, Dahlson's heroine is torn between her new homeland and the country of her birth, seeking out Swedish-American organizations and fellowship to deal with her longing for home.

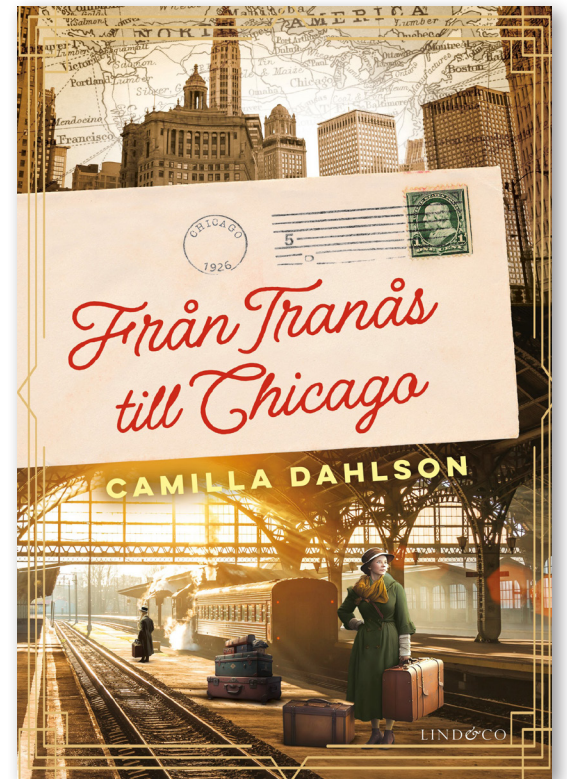
As its title implies, Maria Bouroncle's *Drömmen om Chicago* (The Dream of Chicago; Saga-Egmont, 2024) is also set in the Illinois metropolis that attracted so many Swedish-Americans. Bouroncle's protagonist, Elsa, is also a young single woman arriving from Sweden, but she settles for office work, at the US Post Office, rather than maid service. Unlike Ebba, Elsa eventually returns to Sweden, despite being engaged to a well-off American. While Dahlson's characters are altogether fictional, Bouroncle draws on real-life events and persons for her story.

Both *Från Tranås till Chicago* and *Drömmen om Chicago* stress that life in America involves hard work and economic hardship for the protagonists, although both women eventually find a measure of success. The image of the United States as the land of plenty is also challenged in Ingela E. Larsson's *Drömmarnas vind* (The Wind of Dreams; Digging Deep, 2022). This novel is really about the life of a farmer's wife in Blekinge in Sweden (a great-great-grandmother of Larsson's), but emigration enters the narrative because four of Elin Hansdotter's five sons leave for America. Using real letters from the sons to their mother to tell the sons' stories, Larsson offers an account where life across the Atlantic is marred by illness, death, and ever-present financial worries.

A fourth Swedish author to use America as a setting for novels is Martin Eaglechild, whose two novels *Där björken rotat sig* (Where the Birch Has Taken Root; Books on Demand, 2021) and *Landet bortom det stora vattnet* (The Land Beyond the Great Water; Books on Demand, 2021) tells the story of Gabriel Johanneson, a young man from northern Sweden who arrives in the United States in 1865. The story's initial chapters depict Gabriel's encounter with relatives and with a Swedish-American community in Iowa, but the search for a lost cousin soon shifts the setting to the western frontier and life among Native American tribes and warriors, making the novels read more like an old-style "Indian book" that was popular in Scandinavia in the late 1800s.

As the books of these four authors suggest, emigration from Sweden to America remains a topic that fascinates both writers and readers in Sweden.

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Från Tranås till Chicago, by Camilla Dahlson.