

Change and Consistency in the Treatment of Lesbianism in Swedish Literature

Björklund, Jenny *Lesbianism in Swedish Literature: An Ambiguous Affair*.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 (213 pages)

AT THE VERY beginning of her monograph, Jenny Björklund summarizes what her whole book is about: "This book examines representations of lesbianism in Swedish literature across the 20th century, revealing a discourse that challenges the straightforward understanding of a progressive and tolerant Sweden." (Björklund 2014, 1) The author certainly delivers on her promise, and indeed offers a valuable, systematic overview of the theme of lesbianism in Swedish literature. Treating both well-known and lesser-known texts, this overview is firmly contextualized in terms of Swedish public policy regarding LGBTQ issues, and one sees a surprising contrast. Public policy may move forward in a progressive manner, but attitudes towards lesbianism remain oddly consistent, if depictions of lesbianism in literature are any guide.

A special focus is placed on three decades: the 1930's, the 1960's, and roughly 1995–2005. One thread of continuity that links all three decades is the, in literature persisting, medical theories regarding female homosexuality that were developed around the turn of the century 1900. These are summed up for us as the three *M*'s: "*masculinity* – lesbianism as a man's soul captured in a woman's body; *mothering* – lesbianism as caused by a troubled relationship between daughter and mother, which makes the daughter search for a mother substitute in her love relation-

ships; and *mirrors* – lesbianism seen as an expression of narcissism” (20). The bottomline is the notion that lesbianism is a disease, an abnormality. What Björklund appears to thirst for, but does not find in the literary depictions she studies, is a lesbianism, which is treated as normal, just as normal as heterosexuality. Although there certainly is a strong thread of feminism linking these novels, and even advocacy for gay rights, none of them seem to have divested themselves of the burdens placed upon them by Krafft-Ebing, Freud, and that crowd.

Perhaps the best-known novel treated in this study is Agnes von Krusenstjerna’s *Fröknarna von Pablen*-series (1930–1935), and a close reading of this work forms the basis of the chapter on the 1930’s. Björklund wisely does not lose track of the fact that she is writing in English and hopes to reach an audience that may not be familiar with or even able to read the texts she is presenting. Providing enough information about these novels, the reader can feel informed whether or not they have had the chance to read them. I was particularly taken by Björklund’s reading of the literary character Bell von Wenden in *Fröknarna von Pablen* as a sort of “Madwoman in the Attic.” The years have not dimmed my admiration for Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist classic, and Björklund continues in that tradition to show how groups who are dominated by others with power finds ingenious ways to express taboo thoughts. Even so, Krusenstjerna’s novel is still afflicted with the ambiguity that Björklund alludes to in her title; although lesbianism is depicted in a positive light, it is still a deviation from that which is normal.

Sweden of the 1960’s was perceived by many to be the most sexually progressive country in the world. Yet, for all the talk of sexual liberation there was very little talk about homosexuality, and that, which did exist, tended to focus on male homosexuality. Lesbians were virtually invisible. Björklund goes so far as to call the Swedish debates about sexuality during this decade homophobic, stating, to my surprise, that the “left-wing media and writers were the most homophobic in this debate” (71). Against this background, Annakarin Svedberg writes the novel *Vingklippta* (1962) which, just as the texts Björklund studies from the 1930’s, presents a positive portrait of lesbianism, but is still unable to get

beyond the medical discourse's explanations for female homosexuality. The three *M*'s appear quite succinctly in the following passage in the voice of a female narrator:

I couldn't possibly be in love with Carola. Everything in me resisted. Carola was so different from me in every possible way. Carina was like me, so I could love her. Inga was a mother figure, so I could love her. But Carola? A tomboy. A girl who wanted too much to be a man, to act like a man, to be seen as a man. I didn't want to. (60)

There you have all three: *mirrors*, *mothering*, and *masculinity*.

The decade surrounding the turn of the millennium shows terrific advances in Swedish gay rights; on paper, that is. Björklund makes the valid point that although Sweden is one of the most gender-equitable countries in the world, there is still a structural subordination of women in terms of "men's access to women's bodies, eating disorders, and power asymmetries in individual relationships" (113). A similar sort of structural subordination of lesbians exists in cultures with a strong heteronormative bias, Sweden among them. Björklund notes that even if lesbians are legally able to marry and adopt, there appear to be deeply entrenched cultural attitudes that see this as odd, not normal. The Swedish novels from this decade provide positive depictions of lesbian sexuality alongside portrayals of prejudice and even persecution. The three *M*'s still cast a shadow upon the discussions. After all this time, the depictions of lesbianism in Swedish literature remain ambiguous – both positive and negative at the same time.

Jenny Björklund has expanded the international discussion of lesbian issues, and I sincerely hope that the book gets the international attention it deserves. On occasion, I found my thoughts straying to another book, Ron Becker's *Gay TV and Straight America* (2006). These books address two different cultures and types of media, but have similar aspirations. 1990's American television was beset by the image of the persecuted gay character that needed a straight character to provide solidarity and support. This plot was not substantially altered until 2003 and *A Queer Eye*

for the Straight Guy, in which five gay men come to the aid of hygienically and socially challenged heterosexual men. Björklund and Becker's books could form a base for a quite interesting comparative study of American versus Swedish cultural attitudes towards homosexuality in popular culture. In both cases, we are looking for the plot that stops casting gays and lesbians as deviant, diseased, disadvantaged, dysfunctional, or any number of other dire *D*'s.

SUSAN C. BRANTLY
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN