

Norrland with no Borders

A Västerbotten Wonder took place in 1953, for that was the year Sara Lidman published her first novel, *Tjärdalen*. A new region—one of the poorest and most inaccessible in the country—proudly presented itself as the stage for eternal existential questions. The Wonder also introduced a new language: for the first time, dialect was used as the basis for an artful, innovative prose, merging with the biblical language of the revivalist movement (Swedish *väckelserörelsen*) and the presence of an oral tradition.

Like Värmland at the turn of the last century, Västerbotten became the centre of the Art of Storytelling. Sara Lidman and her Missenträsk/Ecksträsk were followed by Torgny Lindgren's Raggsjö and Per Olov Enquist's Hjoggböle. Three of the great Swedish writers of the twentieth century all born in an area no larger than the territory of a brown bear. In one of her late novels, Sara Lidman observes: *Det finns en närvaro, en kännedom från födelseorten så oförneklig som den egna huden* ['There is a presence, a knowledge, from one's place of birth, as undeniable as one's own skin']. The phrase can now be found in an artwork at Umeå in the form of a glass tunnel decorated with quotations from her work. The Västerbotten Wonder bears witness to the truth of her claim.

A writer can also let herself be adopted by a place, as did Stina Aronson in *Hitom himlen* ['On this side of heaven'] (1946), a novel where Tornedalen in Norrbotten finds a voice as never before. The same is true of Kerstin Ekman, in the novels she wrote from the north of Jämtland. But more commonly we find a returning writer, who goes out into the world to see and experience, and comes back to discover her birth-place anew. So it is with the two Norrbotten writers, Eyvind Johnson of Björkelund near Boden and Mikael Niemi of Pajala in Tornedalen.

Most of the places where these writers were born and grew up still survive. I would like to welcome you to visit them—the trees, the marshes, the hills, the houses. They are all exceptional dwellings in exceptional districts—sweet and loving, cruel and vulnerable. Much has changed of course, but much will call forth a smile of recognition in the reader.

But more than that I wish to welcome you to the works. For the real Wonder is not what landscape gave rise to what in literature. The Great Wonder is the transformation. That a world so distant and specific is at the same time so close and human. That a world so local is at the same time so universal.

Literature knows no borders.

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