
Love in a Cold Climate? Teaching Popular Romance at a Swedish University

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Abstract: This article describes and discusses experiences of teaching popular romance in Sweden, a country where the genre has been more or less invisible until recent years. Starting with an overview of the status and visibility of popular romance in Sweden, our experiences of designing and revising a course on romance is presented. Our projects providing textbooks for students are presented and we share both pitfalls and rewards we have experienced giving this course.

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Introduction

What is it like to teach classes on popular romance fiction in a country where the genre has been more or less invisible for many years? What is it like to discuss a genre in a culture where, broadly speaking, romance books have not been reviewed, romance authors have not been visible in the media and the romance genre hasn't been discussed in either the

media or academia? What should an undergraduate course on popular romance literature include in order to give the students the tools that they need to analyze fictional texts, and an understanding of the genre and its place in a larger literary context?

For the last seven years we have taught a summer course at Linneaus University, *Romance – Romantic Fiction from Three Decades*, that focuses on popular romance. The ten-week course is taught online and awards 7.5 ECTS [European Credit Transfer System] credits. The course objectives are the following:

After completing the course, the student should be able to:

- In general terms account for the development of the romance genre during the last decades,
- discuss romance as a part of popular literature,
- critically review romantic fiction (“Romance – Romantic Fiction from Three Decades”).

The theoretical literature includes Pamela Regis’ *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), several texts in Swedish (among them Elin Abrahamsson’s doctoral thesis on Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* and E.L. James *Fifty Shades of Grey*) and Catherine Roach’s article “‘Getting a Good Man to Love’ Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy” (2010). The students read eight novels: Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, Simona Ahrnstedt’s *All In*, Kathleen Woodiwiss’ *The Flame and the Flower*, one title by the Swedish author Sigge Stark, and one by Nora Roberts that the students can choose themselves. They also need to choose one novel on their own and, with the help of Regis’ eight elements, argue that it falls into the genre.

In this article, we will begin with addressing popular romance from a Swedish context. We will then share our experiences teaching popular romance in Sweden, discuss challenges we have faced, and also discuss rewards and pitfalls we have experienced.

Sweden and the Invisible Romance

The fact that popular romance has been a challenged genre with a problematic reputation is well known. Romance has been seen, and to some extent still is seen, as a static genre which consists of poorly written books that are strikingly similar. Regis has an entire chapter “In Defense of the Romance Novel” focusing on how the “formula” of romance can be seen not as a limitation but as a challenging prerequisite (Regis 9 – 16). Maya Rodale tries in *Dangerous Books for Girls* to explain the genre’s “bad reputation” (52-65), discussing both how the genre has been accused of being an endless repetition of basically the same plot to the fact that romance is a genre where both authors and readers are very often women. Popular romance has also been seen as old-fashioned, as a kind of literature that strengthens patriarchal norms and ideals rather than challenging them (Abrahamsson). Working with popular romance as a scholar can create its own problems. Charlotte Brundson argues in *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* that it has been problematic to focus your scholarly attention to a genre as ridiculed as the soap opera. Not only are your choices questioned, as researching low status genres is not always seen as important or even valid, but your position as an academic researcher can also be challenged. To admit an interest or

even a preference for a genre that is not recognized as “important” enough for scholarly attention can easily force you as a scholar to take up a defensive position and might have impact on your tenure (Brundson). Even if this is changing and there is a growing field of academic romance studies, and even if popular literature and popular culture is becoming more of an integrated field in Swedish academic research (at Linneaus University a center for research in popular culture has just been launched), focusing on a genre like romance is still something that can be problematic, an experience we share with several of our colleagues.

Ten years ago, popular romance was rarely discussed in Sweden and the genre was largely invisible in both an academic and a more general context. In Sweden, the term “popular romance” took a long time to be established. One of the reasons this has changed is because of Simona Ahrnstedt, an author who has been very vocal about labelling her novels romance. She started her career writing historical romance, but got her big breakthrough with the novel *En enda natt (All In)*. In 2015, she became the first Swedish romance writer ever to be picked up by an American publisher (Hoch). In 2018, she created a “Romance Academy” whose goals are to promote the genre in Sweden. This “academy” is not connected to a Swedish University, but is an independent organization whose members consist of scholars, publishers and authors. In order to promote the genre, the academy organizes open lectures, writes discussion posts and teaches how to write romance in creative writing-courses (*RomanceAkademin*). However, this does not mean that Sweden has been devoid of romantic fiction, and it would be a simplification to claim that Sweden discovered the genre with Ahrnstedt. In order to understand the genre’s position in Sweden, we need to talk about (at least) three things: the strong tradition of realistic novels in Sweden; the position of Harlequin (now Harper Collins) in the Swedish book market; and how, until recently, few romance titles were translated into Swedish by the larger publishing companies.

However, we still have a very traditional range of fiction read in Swedish schools. If you study literature at a Swedish university, you will, for the most part, read the same selection of classics that you would have read thirty years ago (Persson). Several universities offer “special” courses on several different kinds of popular fiction (at LNU we also have courses on popular fiction in general and on crime fiction, as well as courses on horror and vampire fiction and on Harry Potter), but genres like popular romance are not a part of the “main” literature courses that you take if you want to, for example, get a bachelor degree. To write, to study and to teach a genre like romance remains controversial.

Romance = Harlequin

If romance has been discussed in Sweden, the genre has very often been seen as equivalent to Harlequin. Many students come to the course with no knowledge of the genre and they often think that romance starts and ends with the novels published by Harlequin.[1] Even if we have had a lot of opposition to popular fiction (Gustafsson & Arnberg), the publishing company Harlequin has been successful in Sweden. Harlequin opened an office in Stockholm 1979. In Pamela Schultz Nybacka’s study from 2011, in which she interviews readers of different kinds of fiction, she notes that “216,000 people in Sweden regularly read Harlequin books” (295). When discussing these numbers with Eva Högberg

from the Harlequin Stockholm Office, Nybacka found that the firm was a bit worried that they were losing young people to “other media” and that sales would diminish (296). It is interesting to note what when trying to find subscribers to interview for her study, Nybacka reached out to hundreds of readers but only three people wanted to be included in her study.

In Sweden, Harlequin is not seen as a publisher and Harlequin books are labeled “magazines”, which means they are not included in statistics on book sales. There is ample evidence of the low status of Harlequin. For over four hundred years, the Royal Library in Stockholm has collected every book published in Sweden in the Swedish language, but as the novels published by Harlequin are not considered “books”, they are not part of this collection. Harlequin has not been permitted to join the main organization in Sweden for publishers as they are not seen as a publishing house (Hemmungs Wirtén).

Just as Kelly Faircloth describes in her online article “How Harlequin Became the Most Famous Name in Romance”, for many Swedes, popular romance equals Harlequin, making romance something that is not seen as “literature”, not something connected to bookstores or libraries, but something that you buy with your groceries at the supermarket or subscribe to.

For the average person, romance novels bring to mind one word: Harlequin. Of course, it’s not a very illustrious name. It’s treated as a punchline, a smutty innuendo, God forbid it pass your lips in literary circles... . (Faircloth)

There are many different reasons for Harlequin’s reputation, from the idea that the books are more or less identical, which studies have shown not to be true (Vivanco; Dixon), to the fact that they are often printed on cheap paper and have a kind of cover art that is often ridiculed (the clinch). In Sweden it is also important to note that most Harlequin novels are seen to be not just badly written but also badly translated. Having read a lot of Swedish translations it is noticeable that they do contain a lot of grammatical errors and other mistakes. One reason for this could be that the translators have to work really fast. According to Hemmungs Wirtén and Anna Svedbom,[2] you do not make a lot of money translating Harlequin books and many translators will translate several books each year. It is interesting to compare translations of Nora Roberts’ novels, which are published both by Harlequin and by Albert Bonniers, one of the most prestigious publishing companies in Sweden, as you can see a clear difference in the quality of translations between the two publishers.

In her dissertation from 1998, Eva Hemmungs Wirtén discusses the strategies for selecting romance novels to translate that the Swedish branch of Harlequin has used and how they edited these novels in order to make them more “Swedish”. This could be anything from changing the names of the characters, to letting the characters eat different kind of food, to rewriting episodes deemed to “old-fashioned” or “patriarchal” to satisfy a Swedish reader, a practice described by Nybacka as “transediting” (298). The idea has been and still is that as Sweden have had an early and a strict legislation against gender discrimination which has led to a lot of work promoting gender equality, Swedish readers of romance will not accept novels that portray old-fashioned gender patterns that they (might) have left behind. This raises the question of how universal a genre can be. There is (still) a strong notion that romance novels adhere to a strict formula (which one might both agree and disagree with), but is that true in an international context? Are there interesting differences between, say, romance from the US and romance from Sweden?[3]

Is there a Nordic Romance Novel?

In order to discuss this, we want to turn briefly to chick lit, a genre related to the romance genre but not necessarily identical to it. One could argue that chick lit can be seen as a “subgenre” of the broader genre of popular romance (Nilson, *Kärlek*), but chick lit can also be connected to the 1970s “women’s fiction” of authors like Erica Jong and Marilyn French (Whehelan) and to the rise of postfeminism (Harzewski). It can also be identified from its style of writing, which includes distinctive presentations of thought and speech, in addition to distinctive settings and tones (Montoro).

Chick lit came to Sweden with Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Nilson & Ehriander, “När Bridget Jones”). After this novel’s success, books by Marian Keyes, Sophie Kinsella, and Catherine Alliott were translated into Swedish, and very soon Swedish writers like Denise Rudberg, Kajsa Ingemarsson, and Emma Hamberg started writing a Swedish version of chick lit. Jenny Björklund argues that the Swedish welfare state has had a big impact on Swedish chick lit. Not only are the heroes often examples of so-called “modern men” who have no problem with washing up the dishes or changing nappies, but the “family drama” that we might see in novels by, for example, Keyes, are virtually nonexistent in Sweden. The chick lit heroines in novels by Swedish authors are more focused on their love interests, their female friends and their careers than on their families (Björklund). Wenche Ommundsen discusses in an article on chick lit from 2011 that “non-western” chick lit has changed the genre:

Marrying classical chick lit themes with vastly different social conditions, gender roles, and cultural contexts; these novels add new dimensions to the conflicting desires that characterize the genre. (108)

Discussing novels like *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea, which Ommundsen argues are modelled after Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City*, she shows that these non-western novels do not simply mimic American bestsellers, but also change and develop the genre. In perhaps a less dramatic way, the same is true of chick lit in Sweden.

In 2016 Harper Collins Nordic, which includes Harlequin among its publication lines, launched a campaign to try and get more Swedish writers to write romance, arguing that Swedish readers needs books that mirror our own society and that Swedish writers might add something new and interesting to the genre. So far six books have been published in this campaign: a lesbian historical romance by Samanta Olofsdotter (a pseudonym); two contemporary romances by Lina Forss set in the world of high finance; and four novels by Sofia Fritzon that are a bit more chick lit than contemporary romance. The latter won a competition run by Harper Collins Nordic in 2015 to identify new writers; her second book was published in 2017.[4]

Major Swedish publishers, such as Albert Bonniers and Norstedts, rarely release Swedish translations of romance (Werner).[5] Novels by Nora Roberts and Tamara McKinley are exceptions. Since the success of E.L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*, we have noted an increase in Swedish translations of erotic romance; these include novels by Sylvia Day and Meredith Wild. In 2018 Forum (Simona Ahrnstedt’s Swedish publisher) launched a new imprint titled Lovereads, featuring international titles “handpicked” by both Swedish authors and editors to suit the local market (“Lovereads/Forum”).[6] These books are

marketed with the help of Simona Ahrnstedt, who in her role as “Sweden’s romance-expert” not only helps promote these books but also “guarantees” their quality.

From Chick Lit to Popular Romance

Linneaus University, where our course is offered, is located in Växjö in the middle of the countryside in the south of Sweden. The most well-known universities in Sweden are located in or close to big cities, which of course attracts students. In order to compete, Linneaus University today offers a large number of online courses, a development that our department had a significant part in. Linneaus University is a new university (born 2010 when Växjö University and Kalmar University Collage was merged), which has been a distinct advantage for developing new and non-traditional courses. As we are not located in one of Sweden’s larger cities, developing distant learning courses has been extremely important. The department of comparative literature, where we work, is challenged with less students applying for the regular courses and a “colder” climate for research in the humanities with fewer grants to apply for, a development that affects every Swedish university. In 2006, Helene Ehriander created the first summer course at our department; a course delivered online during the summer break that attracted hundreds of students. Students enrolled in this first course studied the famous Swedish author Astrid Lindgren’s works from an intermedial perspective, where her novels, picture books and television/film adaptations were analyzed.[7] The summer course quickly became very popular, and the department saw a welcome addition of new students. The following year a course on the Harry Potter phenomena was born and Maria Nilson joined the venture. Nilson had just finished a book on chick lit, *Chick lit – från glamour till vardagsrealism (Chick Lit – From Glamour to Everyday Realism)*, and together we created a summer course on this subject. There was at the time a visible discussion of chick lit in Sweden, making it easy to attract students to the course. In the course we read not only the “classics” of this genre, such as Helen Fielding, Marian Keyes and Sophie Kinsella, but also a number of Swedish texts. The course attracted around 300 students, and we delivered it for five consecutive summers. In 2014, we introduced the course on popular romance. In this case, the course came first and Nilson’s book later. After having given the course for two years, she published an introduction to popular romance, *Kärlek, passion och begär – om romance (Love, Passion and Desire – On Romance, 2015)*.

There are several reasons why we put the course on chick lit on hold and created a new course. The “buzz” on chick lit diminished in Sweden, so we attracted fewer students in 2012 and 2013, but we also realized that even if the course gave the students a good idea of what defined chick lit as a genre and knowledge on a few prominent writers, they did not always understand how chick lit developed. In creating the new course on popular romance, we have tried to add more background material so that students will be able to put, for example, authors like Nora Roberts in context. This is not always easy. As Pamela Regis writes: “Where a clear outline of the romance novel should appear, we find instead the legend: ‘Here be dragons’” (Regis 54).[8] Students very often treat romance novels as a purely modern phenomenon, and some have difficulties connecting the genre to the literary history they study in high school as the curriculum very seldom includes any popular genres.

To understand how popular romance develops, how the genre connects to other genres and how changes in both society and in fiction are mirrored in romance is an important part of the course.

In the students applying for the course, we see a lot of interest in the genre and a genuine ambition to understand its popularity and its diversity.[9] Over three hundred students apply for the romance course each year. When asked why they have chosen to apply for it, we usually get variations on two different answers. The first is that they have always read romance and now, finally, they get the chance to learn more about the genre (this is the most common answer). The second is that they know absolutely nothing about the genre, but are interested and want to learn more. Overall, these students are as committed as those *distinctly* committed students attending our Harry Potter course. Even those who start the course without theoretical knowledge of literary analysis have usually already read a great deal of the fiction texts that we have listed as required reading and are eager to discuss these. In the evaluation of this course, it is common that the students are very positive of the fact that we teachers openly express our love for the genre. Some of them are romance readers and have had experiences of being ridiculed by previous teachers. It is of course a privilege to teach a class closely connected to one's own research, but there is more going on here. John Hattie argues in *Visible Learning for Teachers* from 2012 that being successful as a teacher

requires a love of the content, an ethical caring stance deriving from the desire to instill in others a liking or even love of the discipline being taught, and a demonstration that the teacher is not only teaching, but also learning. (20)

It is rewarding, but also humbling, to teach students that are sometimes themselves experts on the subject of the course, but it can also be a herculean task to teach these students to distance themselves from the texts that they love and read them critically. This is especially difficult when the genre we are studying has such a problematic reputation. Because of the often harsh critique that these books still receive, you often find a defense of popular romance as a genre in many scholarly texts. We find it in most every article in the collection *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz from 1992, but we also find a defense for the genre in Pamela Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* from 2003. Having to defend the object that you are studying is never easy and a recurrent comment from our students is that family and friends do not understand how reading romance novels all summer can be a "proper" university course. These students sometimes struggle with having to critically dissect the texts that they love and it takes them a few weeks until they have arrived at such a point.

One problem that we always have to address is the "trap" of "either/or": the temptation to see the romance genre as either old-fashioned and patriarchal or subversive. Linda Lee argues in an article from 2008 on romance and fairy tales that:

Most scholarship on romance novels falls into one of two polarized camps that view these novels as conservative forms that uphold existing patriarchal structures, or as subversive resisting forms that challenge existing structures. (54)

Students often find it a challenge to understand that most texts, fiction or theoretical, are “messy”, contradictory and ambivalent. When the course starts, they often express a desire to be told the “correct” interpretation of a text, but after a few weeks, they learn that this is, of course, impossible.

We also put a lot of focus on what angle we approach a text from as both teachers and students. In a review of the collection *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Jennifer Maher writes: “We feminist pop culture critics are skilled at unearthing progressive potential in what might at first appear to be potently sexist or otherwise conservative depictions of women” (194). When working with a genre that has been critiqued and sometimes ridiculed as the romance genre has been in Sweden, it is dangerously easy to find oneself eager to defend the genre. There is of course a risk to fall into the famed “Cinderella fallacy” which we constantly warn students about, a fallacy that Hoy defines as: “This fallacy grow out of the dogmatic belief that if we think a thing must be there, then it is in fact there, even if it can never be seen” (18). Students may start with the notion that there is a feminist subtext in romance novels, then choose a novel or two to discuss and then, find feminist subtexts, but are they really there? An important part of the course is discussing what it means to analyse a text and how we can be open to the contradictions of a text and not fall into the trap of findings things in a text that aren't there.

From Definitions to Discussions

The course material on the popular romance course consists of a number of recorded lectures, a few written ones and a great deal of discussions, mostly by chat, but some orally (or vocally) in a virtual classroom. We also have interviews with authors Simona Ahrnstedt and Natalie Normann, for example, and editors/publishers like Charlotte Werner. The students need to read about 2000 pages of fiction as well as about 1500 pages of theoretical texts by, for example, Pamela Regis and Catherine Roach. On this course, the number of pages that students are expected to read have not been a problem as students very often want to read more than the required books.

The first assignment on the course is to try and define what romance is, with the help of Pamela Regis' eight essential elements, with which she defines a romance novel. The students need to compare Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with a Nora Roberts novel. They need to give examples of all elements from these novels and discuss the examples. This has proven to be a very useful first exercise as it raises questions about definitions and labels as well as questions about the heterogeneity of the genre. The deadline for this assignment is about three weeks into the course and the students get a lot of feedback on everything from their analysis of the novels and their knowledge of Regis' elements to how they handle references and academic writing.

The next assignment is writing and commenting on a discussion post. The students can choose between writing about Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower*, Meyer's *Twilight* and Ahrnstedt's *All In*, and they discuss and compare their own reading with, for example, Elin Abrahamsson's. Before the students write a post about the novel they have chosen with the help of several articles that they are required to read, they engage in at

least three chat discussions. After they have published their post, they comment on at least one post written by a fellow student. Most students find Woodiwiss' novel difficult and unpleasant to read. They not only object to the hero raping the heroine in the first part of the book, but also to how the relationship between Brandon and Heather is portrayed. "He is so awful, why doesn't she just shoot him?" is one student's comment. As "the bodice-ripper" is an important part of the genre's history, we think it is important to include this novel. The first two years we also read E.L. James *Fifty Shades of Grey* and a lot of students complained and thought this novel was very problematic. After a discussion with both the students and with colleagues, we decided that this novel could be part of the optional reading list as students are introduced to erotic romance with Ahrnstedt's novel.[10]

The students then complete a written home exam with both shorter questions and one more extensive essay question. If they are training to become a teacher, they may use the essay question to create a lesson plan for working with a romance book, but they can also concentrate on a theme which we provide, like "Strong Heroines and Alpha Males: Discuss two romance novels from a feminist perspective" or "Challenging Heteronormativity: Queer romance". This was included after students requested more on queer romance. In Sweden, we have an independent publisher who publishes novellas under the heading Queerlequin. Several students were familiar with these novellas and we have included lectures and discussions on heteronormativity and queer theory, and have a reading list with authors like Radclyffe and Jay Northcote. The themes are broad and the students are given a lot of freedom to explore them in their own way. In the previous assignments the students have been directed to specific texts, but here they need to choose themselves from the course syllabus and present arguments for their choices.

Reading Romance

One of the challenges we face when teaching the course on popular romance is what one might call a broadening of the way we read. Rita Felski argues in *Uses of Literature* that academia has forgotten, or at least tried to forget, that we read in many different ways and it has too easily dismissed reading for pleasure. Discussing and problematizing the way that we read has become an increasingly larger part of our romance course. How can we combine reading for pleasure and reading critically?

In the article "I'm a Feminist, But... Popular Romance in the Women's Literature Classroom", Julie M. Dugger discusses both the feminist critique of popular romance novels and also how they can be read as subversive and challenging. But she also discusses how reading popular romance in the classroom requires you to shift between reading for pleasure and the critical reading mode promoted by academia. This is something we have worked a great deal with for the last two summers. We start by discussing the common trope of the reading woman who cannot differentiate between real life and fiction, illustrated by Emma Bovary from Gustave Flaubert's famous novel. In Sweden we had a rather inflamed debate connected to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*-books. Several critics argued that not only were Meyer's books "poor literature" but the way that especially young girls would read them could be dangerous. The image of the bored housewife that read romance novels to escape

her trivial reality (as seen for example in the finale of season 2 of *Stranger Things*) is still very much alive and need to be addressed. Susan Ostrov Weisser aptly argues that:

I would therefore like to question the oppositions that are drawn in feminist critical agendas between the pathetically passive consumer of mass market romance and the smart, subversive reader who carries her agency around like the briefcase she takes to her office; between the female right to pleasure and the female necessity to analyse and critique (and yes, mock) the sources of that pleasure, including romantic fiction; and between literature as a medium that uncritically meets ideology and literature as a medium to resist and change it. Our social and personal worlds are too complex to admit simple oppositions like this, and the problem of romance has too many implications for women in the real world to be resolved by recourse to either simple denigration or easy enthusiasm. (144)

In 2019, we included parts of Elin Abrahamsson's dissertation on romance novels, which discusses how they can be read from a queer theorist perspective to include new research on the genre from a Swedish perspective. In this study, Abrahamsson not only discusses E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, but also why and how we read romance, using, among others, Rita Felski's theories on reading. The fact that as a reader one can be aroused by romance is analyzed, and Abrahamsson also focuses on women's desire and sexuality with the help of queer theory. The inclusion of this text on the course has led to a more intense discussion on how and why we read romance.

Publishing Your Own Course Literature

The summer courses at our university have not only amounted to a great many students but also to us having published three collections of articles connected to the courses, written by both academic researchers and students. There are several reasons why we have done this. If you are to attend a university in Sweden, you are required to be able to read English, and a lot of our course material from undergraduate courses and onwards is written in English. The advantage is, of course, that our students get more fluent in English, but there are several disadvantages. On undergraduate courses, many students struggle with academic texts and if all the books that they are required to read are in a foreign language this easily becomes a problem. But we need more than textbooks in Swedish, we also need material that discusses the examples we have of Swedish fiction.

When we started the summer courses we gave the students a great deal of freedom. They had access to recorded and written lectures, we held discussions online and they, with the help of some tutoring, wrote a paper at the end of the course. From these papers, we would select a few that, after a great deal of tutoring, were strong enough to be published. It is very difficult to get an article published if you are an undergraduate student, and we wanted to give students who had written ambitious analysis an opportunity to be read by a wider audience. We also saw a strength in combining articles from tenured colleagues with

“new” writing from younger authors. Even if we did need to assist these students as they wrote their “first” articles, we as “seasoned veterans” learned a lot from the experience.

We published our first collection in 2011, an anthology on Astrid Lindgren’s work. The year after we published two collections, one on fantasy literature and one on chick lit.[11] The articles in these collections are not just by former students, but also by scholars from our own and other Swedish universities. These collections have not only broadened knowledge on popular fiction in Sweden, they have also, in a small way, built bridges between what we scholars do and what teachers and librarians do. All of them combine articles focused on presenting new readings with articles discussing different ways to explore these texts in the classroom. We have had a great deal of debate in Sweden about what kind of texts we should read in schools, from kindergarten to high schools and beyond. We still read mostly classics. August Strindberg is of course a must, as the focus very often is on male white authors with a firm position on a literary field, and few teachers feel comfortable with or feel that they have time for working with popular fiction in the classroom. The need for more didactic material explaining what you can do with a novel by Nora Roberts or E. L. James from, say, an intertextual or intermedial perspective, has been great, and we have tried to do our share.

Future Projects

In 2017 we celebrated a ten year anniversary for our summer courses. Part of the celebration became a collection of articles, again with contributions by both teachers and students.[12] During this time, we have continued to create new courses. We are currently working with what in Sweden has become quite the publishing phenomenon, namely “feelgood”, which is more of a label (put on books that should make you as a reader feel good)[13] than a sub-genre. From 2018 and onward, more and more romance titles are being translated under this label. Authors like Jenny Colgan and Julia Quinn are now called “feelgood” in Sweden and these books are marketed more as “feelgood” than as romance.

“Feelgood” is both an interesting and a problematic label as it is very wide. It also includes, for example, translations of Alexander McCall Smith’s work and books by Swedish author Catharina Ingelman-Sundin who, among other things, writes a series about characters in their late 70s who decide to do something about the problems they see around them and become modern day Robin Hoods. Ingelman-Sundin’s novels are funny and uplifting and definitely not romance. It is important to note that not all romance that is published in Sweden is labelled “feelgood”. Erotic romance, for example, does not have this label. The popularity of so called “feelgood” books in Sweden has, however, resulted in more romance, both from international authors and from Swedish ones, being published. The course we are now trying to develop will need to discuss popular literature from a broad perspective and include a discussion of why we read as well as a discussion of popular romance. This time our goal is to publish a collection of articles about the Swedish “feelgood” phenomenon and then create a course around this collection. As this label is so diverse, we need to start with discussing it and there is at this date very little research done on this phenomenon.

[1] In summer 2018, we had three authors of Harlequin romances attending the course as they felt they needed to know more about the genre.

[2] On the 22th of April in 2015, we interviewed Simona Ahrnstedt and Anna Svedbom, who was then head of Swedish branch of Harlequin in Stockholm. A recording of the interview is available on request.

[3] For international studies of Harlequin, see Schell; Daud.

[4] Samantha Olofsdotter, *Kärlek på öppet hav* (*Love on the Open Sea*, 2016), Lina Forss, *Arvtagerskan* (*The Heiress*, 2016), *Storstadskärlek* (*Love in the Big City*, 2017), Sophia Fritzson's *När drömmen slår in* (*When Dreams Come True*, 2016) and *När äventyret väntar* (*Adventure Awaits*, 2017). So are these texts different than other romance texts? Yes and no. We can easily label them as "modern" with strong heroines, heroes that firmly believe in gender equality and, in Olofsdotter's novel, a break from heteronormativity.

[5] Interview with Charlotte Werner on the 14th of February 2014, when Werner was still Nora Roberts' editor in Sweden. A recording of the interview is available on request.

[6] Among the first titles translated into Swedish were Sarah Title's *The Undateable*, Julie James' *The Thing about Love* and Colleen Hoover's *Ugly Love*. These novels are published as hardbacks, making them relatively expensive, but have been a success.

[7] Astrid Lindgren is the creator of Pippi Longstocking and one of the most translated authors of children's books in the world.

[8] Today this has of course changed with studies like Jayashree Kamblé's *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction. An Epistemology* from 2014. Maybe the need for this kind of study has lessened. An Goris argues in "Mind, Body, Love: Nora Roberts and the Evolution of Romance Studies" that there is now a shift where broader studies are "being replaced by a more specified perspective in which the scholar seeks to address not the similarities of the whole, but the specifics of the parts of the whole". In Sweden, however, there is just a handful of articles and few studies on romance literature so we need a bit of both – more broad studies that try to understand the genre as a whole, and more specific studies digging deeper into specific authors, subgenres and tropes.

[9] In Sweden, studying at university is free of charge and all students can apply for courses at any of the Swedish universities. As some courses, like our course on romance, attracts a great number of students, they need to have high grades in order to secure a position on the course.

[10] Ahrnstedt combines contemporary romance with erotic romance in this novel, which focuses on the relationship between David, a self-made millionaire, and Natalie, an upper-class woman with a royal title. The review on the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books website says: "I felt like this was full of Shakespearean drama, and scheming families, and hot sex, and gorgeous clothes, but also some important things to say about how the world is functioning".

[11] The three collections: *Starkast i världen. Att arbeta med Astrid Lindgrens författarskap i klassrummet* (*Strongest in the World: Working with Astrid Lindgren's Texts in the Classroom*); *Ett trollspö på katedern. Att arbeta med fantasy i skolan* (*A Wand on the Lectern: Working with Fantasy Literature in the Classroom*) and *Chick lit – brokiga läsningar och didaktiska utmaningar* (*Chick Lit – Heterogeneous Readings and Didactic Challenges*).

[12] The collection, entitled *Tio år med sommarkurser* (*Ten Years with Summer Courses*), is available online.

[13] Books that have HEA-endings, very little violence, uplifting stories and basically a belief in the good of humanity!

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