

## The Family Saga as a Bestseller Strategy

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### Abstract

In the post-millennial years, Danish literature has witnessed a veritable wave of biographically based, regionally rooted family sagas. One important factor of this surge is a reaction against a polarization in the Danish literature of the 1990s between, on one hand, a minimalist, experimental short-story prose, critically acclaimed, but marginalized by the reading public, and on the other hand, widely read biographies and autobiographies of publicly known figures, mostly written by journalists.

Examining lists of especially significant literary prizes and by way of a qualitative inquiry, the article claims that one determinant in the recent development of the Danish novel has been a biographically oriented bestseller strategy, aiming at a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the readers. Based on recent bestseller theories the article defends the notion that certain genres or genre fields can be pertinent in the historical assessment of bestsellerism, and that a historically changing relation exists between popular

bestsellers and 'literary' literature. Finally, the article advocates the idea of a 'bestseller determinant' in literary history and sociology – as a *pull determinant* complementing the *push determinant* in the theories of 'deautomatization' of Russian Formalism (Sklovskij, Tynjanov), New Criticism and other theories connected to Modernism.

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### Are bestsellers totally unpredictable?

In John Sutherland's *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapter 4, "The American bestseller", ends with the following disconcerting conclusion: 'Over the long term, all that can be said with certainty is (1) there will be more bestsellers; (2) they will sell ever better; (3) they will defy prediction' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 80).

If this is taken as a statement implying that the variety over time of the bestseller will ultimately prevent us from treating it as an 'object' with discernible tendencies, the statement is, quite predictably, contradicted several times in the book. In the very same chapter, Sutherland is not afraid to generalize the assumption that the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe's socially engaged melodrama *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) introduced a long-term tendency in American bestsellerism: 'Stowe had forged what would become an enduring link between the American bestseller and the American social conscience' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 45). Referring to John D. Cawelti's classic study *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Cawelti, 1976), Sutherland affirms the generic importance of the melodrama: 'As John G. Cawelti has argued, "melodrama" is a main (arguably *the* main) strand in American popular fiction through the decades' (Sutherland, 2007, p. 51).

Furthermore, Sutherland presents some suggestive reflections on the active, ambivalent relationship between popular and 'literary' literature:

The huge market opened up by the genre/pulp fiction factories was looked at, both enviously and disdainfully, by the 'literary' sector. William Faulkner (later a Nobellist) composed *Sanctuary* (1931) by asking himself what would

sell 10,000 copies, then ‘invented the most horrific tale I could imagine and wrote it in about three weeks’. The tale of sadistic rape and violence duly sold its expected quantity. Less cynically, Ernest Hemingway (another future Nobellist) absorbed an idiom strikingly like that of the ‘hard-boiled’ crime writers into his fiction (Sutherland, 2007, p. 58).

Jim Collins’s *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* delineates some important recent tendencies in bestsellerism – and indeed in the very conditions of literature. A number of changes in the book market – promotion, sale and other forms of distribution, modes of reading, and so forth – have created a ‘new infrastructure of reading’; and the growth of visual cultures – the overwhelming amount of film and television adaptations of books – has deeply influenced the literary experience. In the last part of his book, Collins focuses on two genre developments in contemporary bestselling – and often prize winning – literature. The first genre, recent forms of *chick lit*, he characterizes as a ‘post-literary’ form of the novel as captured by his heading: ‘*Girls’ and Boys’ Guides to Romantic Consumerism: The Post-Literary as iPod in Novel Form*’ (Collins, 2010, p. 188, original emphasis). Referring to other recent studies (for example, Wood, 2005), he sees books like these as modernizations of the novel of manners in the vein of Jane Austen, appreciated not least as sources of knowledge about culture and as types of self-help books in fictional form.

According to Collins, ‘The Devoutly Literary Bestseller’ (Collins, 2010, p. 221) constitutes a complementary subgenre. This type of ‘Lit-lit’ is exemplified by the publication of no less than two celebrated fictional author-biographies of Henry James in 2004: Henry Lodge’s *Author, Author* and Colm Toibin’s *The Master*. The act of reading appears to be a much more exclusive activity: ‘In these Devoutly Literary novels, the act of reading becomes an all-sustaining pleasure that is available only between the covers of the book’ (Collins, 2010, p. 223). Through a number of critical procedures in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, Collins discloses this neo-aestheticism – a resurrection of the Golden Age of British and American aestheticism attached to a renewed interest in the Arts and Crafts movement – as some kind of ‘*Quality Consumerism*’ (Collins, 2010,

p. 229, original emphasis). While satirizing mercilessly over John Sutherland's *How to Read a Novel: A User's Guide*<sup>1</sup> as 'a vestige of a literary culture based on fear' (Collins, 2010, p. 208), Collins concludes that the self-reflexive confirmation of an elite culture in 'Lit-lit' is not so very different in kind from 'the celebration of shared sensibilities' providing a 'sense of belonging to a reading community' (Collins, 2010, pp. 262f.) which is found in chick-lit. Through a complex convergence of processes, important parts of which are designated by bestsellerism, every type of literary culture has, according to Collins, become immersed in the all-pervading consumerism of popular culture.

Without committing myself unreservedly to either Sutherland's or Collins' approaches to bestsellerism, I would like to point out that they both seem to sanction the following hypotheses, which I would like to develop for my own purpose:

- 1 Certain genres or genre fields can be pertinent in the assessment of the historical development of bestsellerism;
- 2 a historically changing relation (which is active but more or less ambivalent) exists between popular bestsellers and 'literary' literature.

### **Bestsellers and novelistic subgenres in recent Danish literature**

In the post-millennial years, Danish literature has witnessed a veritable wave of regionally rooted family sagas, partly merging with versions of the autobiographical novel. One important factor in this turn of the tide is what I consider to be a reaction against the tendency toward polarization in Danish literature of the 1990s. Somewhat simplified, it might be argued that one side embraced a minimalist, experimental short-story prose, furthered by the Danish Author's School, praised by leading critics, but marginalized by the reading public; while the other produced a large number of popular biographies and autobiographies of publicly known figures, mostly written by (or with the help of) journalists.

This reaction can be seen as a literary turn to the biographical novel, a main form of narrative whose temporality is based upon the human journey of life from birth to death, which is often epically and retrospectively oriented towards and focussed on the

family tree and its regional roots. Biographical and autobiographical forms were already important in Antiquity. Usually their perspective was public, connected to the (strong Roman) idea of the family, but more intimate, or even satirical and ironical (auto)biographical forms are also found. In the subsequent development of the novel, variants of the biographical novel and the family saga<sup>2</sup> have played an important role. In recent literary history, the 'serious' forms from the first half of the twentieth century by the Nobelists Thomas Mann (*Buddenbrooks*, 1901) and John Galsworthy (*The Forsythe Saga*, 1906-21) might serve as examples. In its more or less grotesque-satirical forms, the family saga is the main generic backbone in such important novels as Günther Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959), Gabriel García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) (both authors are also Nobelists) and Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Some Danish counterparts are Poul Vad's *Kattens anatomi* (*The Anatomy of the Cat*, 1978), Peter Høeg's *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* (*The History of Danish Dreams*, 1988) and Svend Åge Madsen's *Syv aldres galskab* (*Seven Age Madness*, 1994). A Norwegian example is Jan Kjærstad's *Wergeland Trilogy* (1993-2000).

As has been demonstrated, there were several successful predecessors, in an international as well as a national context. A number of different factors will probably have contributed to a historic turn towards certain genres such as that emerging in Danish literature around the Millennium. But before presenting other historical motivations, I would like to argue the possibility of a specific 'best-seller factor'.

As an indication of such a factor I would like to consider two literary prize lists. In recent years, an increasing number of literary prizes have been created, and the publicity accompanying their distribution is becoming increasingly important for the fate of a book, furthering bestsellerism. The literary awards all have different profiles. The first prize to be taken into account is *De Gyldne Laurbær* (*The Golden Laurels*), awarded by the Danish Booksellers' Association. Every owner of or employee in a Danish bookshop has a vote in the selection of the book and the author of the year. In the award of this prize, both literary quality and commercial saleability are among the judging criteria. Therefore the prize list will represent an

extraordinary indicative value for preferences of genre and the development of literary taste.

Appendix I contains a commented list of the books awarded with *The Golden Laurels* since 1998. As will appear, up to two thirds of the fifteen works listed can be wholly or partially classified as family sagas. No other literary genre is anywhere near a similar status. The family saga, regionally rooted, often more or less biographically based, is clearly dominant. Moreover, this domination is undoubtedly epochally significant. In earlier periods, the generic variety of award-winning works was visibly larger.

Confirmation and further clarification of the tendency can be obtained if we compare with other prize lists. In 2009 the Danish daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* arranged a competition to select *Vor tids danske roman* (*The Danish Novel of Our Time*). An expert panel of critics and representatives of public libraries, bookshops and the educational world presented a selection of one hundred Danish novels from the last 25 years. There were two independent rankings, that of the jury and that of more than 8,000 readers. Appendix II contains the commented list of the Top Ten chosen by the readers followed by the Top Ten of the jury.

The overlaps in the three lists are, of course, very interesting to note. In all three, we find Ramland's *Hundehoved*, Ejersbo's *Nordkraft* and Jungersen's *Undtagelsen*; in two of them, Smærup Sørensen's *Mærkedage*. Several authors, for example, Anne Marie Løn, Helle Helle and Svend Åge Madsen, are represented with different works in two or more of the lists.

If we compare the two Top Tens of *The Danish Novel of Our Time*, it is obvious that the jury members have a somewhat longer memory than the readers. As for the generic profile, the only (minor) difference between the lists is the presence of two crime thrillers in the readers' Top Ten. But in both lists, the family saga is once again unquestionably the dominant genre.

The epochal dominance of the family saga is even more distinct when considering the number of other prizes awarded to some of the paradigmatic works. To mention just two of them, Ramsland's *Hundehoved* was awarded *The Golden Laurels* as well as *Læsernes Bogpris* (*The Readers' Book Prize*) and *Radioens Romanpris* (*Radio Denmark's Novel Prize*) in 2006; while, in addition to the Golden Laurels, Smærup Sørensen's *Mærkedage* received *Blicherprisen*, *Statens*

*Kunsthofunds produktionspræmie (The Production Award of the Danish Arts Foundation), Weekendavisens Litteraturpris, Danske Banks Litteraturpris – and a nomination for Nordisk Råds Litteraturpris (The Nordic Council Literature Prize).*

If we compare this to tendencies in Anglo-American bestsellerism, a similar genre profile stands out. On the one hand, as already mentioned, the family saga is one of the main and increasingly important subgenres of the novel on an international scale. Moreover, it is quite prominent in long, internationally successful television series – the television version of the novel.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the quantitative and qualitative weight of the family saga seems especially poignant in recent Danish literature – and competing genres seem proportionally weaker. If we look at two of the important bestselling genres treated by Jim Collins, examples of ‘The Devoutly Literary Bestseller’ (*Lit-lit*) and of chick-lit can be found in the Danish literature of the last decades, but we will look in vain for anything resembling their success as a trend in the Anglo-American literature around the Millennium.

### **A significant trend – converging factors**

After the Millennium, the (often) biographically based and (in general) regionally rooted family saga, already a significant sub-current in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a dominant trend in Danish prose fiction. Apart from the many authors and works previously mentioned, a number of novels by Bent Vinn Nielsen and Hans Otto Jørgensen, Dennis Gade Kofod’s *Nexø Trawl* (2007), Kim Blæsbjerg’s *Rådhusklatreren (The Town Hall Climber, 2007)*, Julia Butschkow’s *Apropos Opa* (2009) might be pointed out. Katrine Marie Guldager’s novel *En plads i historien (A Place in History, 2008)* is a Copenhagen family saga, focusing on the German occupation. *Ulven (The Wolf, 2010)*, *Lille hjerte (Little Heart, 2012)* and *Den ny tid (The New Times, 2013)* are the first three novels in a still uncompleted family saga by the same author; these are set in a provincial town – and in Copenhagen – from the 1930s and onwards.

All the novels mentioned present historical retrospections. I argue that part of the historical motivation for this genre dominance might be termed the Millennium factor, which is obviously operative in several countries. The Millennium is an occasion to take a retrospective look at history (that of the previous century). The Mil-

lennium factor connects the present trend with that prevalent at the turn of the previous century, with the 'Popular Breakthrough' of regional literature around the year 1900. Then as now, the regionally rooted family sagas bloomed in a similar process when a wave of globalization swept away people from the countryside – forcing them to migrate into the towns or to the US. The authors looked back at a disappearing regional culture, recreating it, but in general without the nostalgia and sentimentality more common in some Central and Eastern European literature.<sup>4</sup>

In the present revival of the regional family saga, stories from the hidden environments of the big city also abound in numbers that may prompt the idea of a form of Copenhagen Heimat literature. Guldager's Copenhagen matches Smærup Sørensen's village in Northern Jutland. Jonas T. Bengtson's *Submarino* (2007) is an equivalent of Ejersbo's *Nordkraft* (drug abusers in Aalborg) in a Copenhagen setting.

A trend within the trend is the re-evaluation of the time of the German occupation during the Second World War and its long-term traumatic effects; just to mention some novels, this motif is important in Ramland's *Hundehoved* (2005), Romer's *Den som blinker er bange for døden* (2006), Guldager's *En plads i historien* (2008), and Butschkow's *Apropos Opa* (2009). This trend also has its international counterparts.

As is seen, a number of good historical motivations may explain the importance, indeed the dominance, of the biographically based, regionally rooted family saga in the wake of the Millennium. But, as suggested above, there are many reasons to believe that one additional historical factor is the multifaceted development of the book market, subsumed under the concept of *bestsellerism*. Like other countries, Denmark has abolished its fixed price system favouring the professional bookshops. Bestsellers are now sold in large quantities in every major supermarket. Bestseller lists are much more important in the press than previously. Book prizes and book ranking lists are prominent in the literary landscape. And in the values and practice of reviewers and critics, the sharp demarcation line between 'literary' literature, 'genre literature' and popular bestsellers now seems to be significantly less rigid. On this background, I find it plausible that a biographically oriented bestseller strategy aiming at – and perhaps often achiev-



ing – a fusion of literary quality and a broad appeal to the reading public has become a determinant factor in the recent development of the Danish novel.

### A bestseller determinant?

If a 'bestseller determinant' could be said to apply – and probably gain in importance – in our contemporary literary situation (here exemplified by the Danish literary scene) – could such a factor have been instrumental in other historical contexts, that is, could this factor be worth considering in a broader and longer perspective of literary history and sociology? The notion of a dynamic 'bestseller determinant' in literary evolution as a *pull determinant* ought to be given a position complementary to the *push determinant* in the well-known theories of 'deautomatization' as conceived by Russian Formalism (Sklovskij, Tynjanov), New Criticism and other theories connected to Modernism. The Modernist optics of negative dialectics, in other words, the assertion of originality in the rejection of tradition, is not the only possible motor of literary change. In several periods, a form of bestsellerism – for example, the aspiration to reach a larger public by renewing a well-known genre, uniting the individual and the collective, the existential and the historical – could be, I would argue, a powerful pull determinant.

### Appendix I

Since 1998 *The Golden Laurels* have been awarded as follows:

- 1998: Jens Christian Grøndahl for *Lucca* (bestselling love and identity novel, hinging on the refinding of a lost father).
- 1999: Svend Åge Madsen for *Genspejlet* (*Reflected/The Gene Mirror*, satirical, metafictional biography, a daughter writing the (fictive) biography of her father, a famous scientist).
- 2000: Anne Marie Løn for *Kærlighedens rum* (*The Rooms of Love*, atypical love story from an author mainly known for her family sagas in a provincial, rural setting).
- 2001: Hans Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen for *Riber Ret* (memoirs from the author's youth in a provincial town).
- 2002: Jakob Ejersbo for *Nordkraft* (bestselling, theatre adapted slum naturalism, the dissolution of family relations in the setting of a major provincial town, Aalborg).

- 2003: Jette A. Kaarsbøl for *Den lukkede bog* (*The Closed Book*, historical novel in the form of fictive memoirs).
- 2004: Christian Jungersen for *Undtagelsen* (*The Exception*, bestselling psychological thriller in a contemporary setting).
- 2005: Morten Ramsland for *Hundehoved* (*Doghead*, bestselling family saga – about a family in which escape is in fashion).<sup>5</sup>
- 2006: Knud Romer for *Den der blinker er bange for døden* (*He who Blinks Is Afraid of Death*, autofictional family saga).
- 2007: Jens Smærup Sørensen for *Mærkedage* (*Red-Letter Days*, bestselling autobiographically based family saga in a rural setting).<sup>6</sup>
- 2008: Hanne-Vibeke Holst for *Dronningeofret* (*The Queen Sacrifice*, contemporary political fiction).
- 2009: Ida Jessen for *Børnene* (*The Children*, family saga, last part of a trilogy in the setting of a fictive village).
- 2010: Jussi Adler Olsen for *Journal 64* (*Case Note 64*, historical crime thriller).
- 2011: Helle Helle for *Dette burde skrives i nutid* (*This Ought to Have Been Written in the Present Tense*, minimal realistic, autobiographically based memory novel in a provincial setting).
- 2012: Kim Leine for *Profeterne i Eviighedsfjorden* (*The Prophets in the Eternity Fiord*, broad historical novel, set in a settlement in Greenland at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century).

## Appendix II

The Top Ten voted by the readers was:

- 1 Carsten Jensen's *Vi, de druknede* (*We, the Drowned*, historical sailor novel, with a setting partly in a small harbour town on a Danish island, partly at exotic places such as islands in the Pacific; in 1996, Carsten Jensen had already been awarded *The Golden Laurels* for a traditional travel book; this award can only be given once to the same author).
- 2 Jungersen's *Undtagelsen*.
- 3 Ramsland's *Hundehoved*.
- 4 Kaarsbøll's *Den lukkede bog*.
- 5 Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (*Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 1992, bestselling, screen adapted contemporary / historical thriller with Copenhagen and Greenland as the scenes of action; Høeg received *The Golden Laurels* in 1993 for *De måske egnede* (*Borderliners*, autofiction)).

- 6 Ejersbo's *Nordkraft*.
- 7 Anne Marie Løn's *Prinsesserne* (*The Princesses*, 1997, historical provincial family saga).
- 8 Smærup Sørensen's *Mærkedage*.
- 9 Leif Davidsen's *Den serbiske dansker* (*The Serbian Dane*, 1996, best-selling contemporary political crime thriller; Davidsen received *The Golden Laurels* in 1991).
- 10 Sara Blædel's *Aldrig mere fri* (*Nevermore Free/the Day Off*, 2008, contemporary feminist crime thriller).

The Top Ten voted by the jury was:

- 1 Ib Michael's *Vanillepiggen* (*The Vanilla Girl*, 1991, autofiction, memoirs from a childhood in the setting of a small provincial town).
- 2 Erling Jepsen: *Kunsten at græde i kor* (*The Art of Crying in Chorus*, 2002, bestselling, screen adapted autobiographically based family novel in the setting of a small provincial town).
- 3 Ramsland's *Hundehoved*.
- 4 Svend Åge Madsen's *Syv aldres galskab* (*Seven Age Madness*, 1994, historical, metafictional family saga).<sup>7</sup>
- 5 Henrik Stangerup's *Det er svært at dø i Dieppe* (*It Is Difficult to Die in Dieppe*, 1985, historical biographical novel about a famous Danish literary critic).
- 6 Ejersbo's *Nordkraft*.
- 7 Jungersen's *Undtagelsen*.
- 8 Løn's *Prinsesserne*.
- 9 Claus Beck-Nielsen's *Claus Beck-Nielsen 1963-2001* (2003, experimental, contemporary autobiography / autofiction).
- 10 Helle Helle's *Forestillingen om et ukompliceret liv med en mand* (*The Idea of an Uncomplicated Life with a Man*, 2002, contemporary minimal realism).

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## Notes

- 1 Sutherland, 2006. John Sutherland was chairman of the Man Booker Prize selection committee in 2005.
- 2 It is linked to the 'idyllic chronotope' and its counterpart, the destruction of the idyll that often takes place. I refer to the chapters on "Ancient Biography and Autobiography" and "The Idyllic Chronotope" in Bakhtin, 1981.
- 3 Cf. Nielsen, 2012.
- 4 Cf. Gemzøe, 2009a.
- 5 Cf. Gemzøe, 2009b.
- 6 Cf. Gemzøe, 2008.
- 7 Cf. Gemzøe 1999/2001.