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# The Reception of Danish Science Fiction in the United States

by

Kristine J. Anderson

Science fiction is a distinctly American genre. Although scholars have traced its origins back as far as the Latin writer Lucian of Samosata,<sup>1</sup> it was Hugo Gernsback, a publisher of pulp magazines in the United States, who first gave the genre its name in the June 1929 issue of *Wonder Stories*. Gernsback had been serializing the scientific romances of such writers as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, emphasizing their treatment of technology and putting them forth as models for other budding writers to imitate. The magazines that Gernsback initiated became very popular, spawning more from other publishers. Groups of aficionados sprang up around them, provided with a forum by Gernsback's letters columns, where they happily exchanged opinions and found addresses with which to contact one another outside the magazine. In this way Gernsback also gave birth to science fiction fandom, which then went on to produce successful authors from its own ranks to write for all the science fiction magazines then pouring off the presses.<sup>2</sup> Soon American science fiction was translated into other languages and published abroad, becoming a worldwide phenomenon and a significant subgenre in numerous other nations.

The American science fiction tradition has become so hegemonic that it is easy to forget about the myriad writers toiling in their own languages to produce works of great originality but accessible to only a few. Authors living in Denmark and composing in their native Danish are prime examples of this. Danish scholar Niels Dalgaard wrote about them in the third edition of Neil Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder*, and, more recently, in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Hans Henrik Løyche also has written a brief survey article found in the online journal *Phantazm*. Dalgaard's own Danish reference work, *Guide til fantastisk litteratur*, published in 2001, identifies approximately 100 Danish authors who have produced at least one Science Fiction novel, and Løyche claims this number approaches 250.

Reception of a national literature in another linguistic culture requires go-betweens who understand both languages and can represent the foreign literature in the target culture, be that in the form of summaries, critical articles, reviews, or translations. In the United States, this role is largely assumed by bilingual scholars writing articles for reference books, reviews, literary criticism, or translations of foreign works. Dalgaard, when he wrote his article on Danish sf<sup>3</sup> for the foreign language section of *The Anatomy of Wonder*,<sup>4</sup> played this role. In this paper I will focus on works of sf written in Danish and translated into English, with reference to how they were presented by reviewers and literary critics.

To identify these, I went through Dalgaard's *Guide*, picked out the sf books written in Danish, and checked their titles in *WorldCat* for English translations. To identify translated short stories, I checked the list of Dalgaard's authors in the fan-published *Locus Index to Science Fiction*. Adding other titles from other sources, I came up with a grand total of 12 novels and an excerpt from another, 3 short stories, and two plays. I do not claim, however, to have the definitive list.

It is not surprising that the translations of Danish sf are few. The lack of a market for any kind of translation has long been lamented by educators and translators. The main audiences for writings identified as Danish are professors and scholars of Scandinavian literature and lay people of Scandinavian descent. In the United States, the major scholarly organ is *Scandinavian Studies*, which regularly publishes articles on Danish writers. *World Literature Today* regularly publishes

reviews of contemporary untranslated Danish literature and occasional articles about Danish writers, but because it is trying to cover the whole world, its dedication to things Danish is necessarily slight. None of these publish fiction, although they do review it. A few literary reviews occasionally have a special issue devoted to the literature of a particular country, which may include both articles on writers and their writings. *The Literary Review* and the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* both have had special issues devoted to Danish literature. For lay people of Scandinavian heritage there is the *Scandinavian Review*, which, among other topics, publishes both articles on writers and their writings. Any sf or, more likely, fantasy that may slip into any of the aforementioned venues generally is not labeled as such, however.

As for the sf part of the equation, there have been sporadic attempts to educate anglophone sf fans and readers about sf in other countries over the years. Several editors from the sf community have diligently collected stories from around the world and published them in anthologies. Some of these have included Danish stories. The scholarly journal *Science Fiction Studies*, usually very good at reviewing international sf and its criticism, including small countries like Czechoslovakia and Romania, has surprisingly little on Danish sf: a scan through the table of contents for the whole run yielded only a review of *Vølv: Scandinavian Views on Science Fiction: Selected Papers From the Scandinavian Science-Fiction Festival of 1997* edited by Cay Dollerup.

These are the major venues in the U.S. for Danish short fiction, poetry, and reviews of novels in English. The sf novels themselves have been marketed to a general audience and only occasionally labeled as such, more often in reviews than in the books' own packaging. In the following sections, I shall discuss the Danish sf works that have been translated into English in chronological order, decade by decade.

The identification of pre-twentieth century sf is a kind of back-formation. First Gernsback coined the term "science fiction," replacing earlier terms such as "scientific romance," "scientific fiction," or Gernsback's own "scientifiction" for the same phenomenon. After a substantial body of this literature had come into existence, scholars began to study it and formulate definitions. Brian Stableford, John Clute, and Peter Nicholls devote 3 pages in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* to a survey of such definitions, concluding "There is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of sf will ever be established" (314). Nevertheless, such definitions are then used to survey earlier literature for works that may fit. Kingsley Amis, in *New Maps of Hell*, offered this one in 1960: "Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin" (18). Also frequently cited is Darko Suvin's more complex later definition of science fiction as "the literature of cognitive estrangement." A crucial element, according to Suvin, is the "novum" or new thing—something that renders the fictional world strange to the real world. Although fantasy also includes the novum, in sf it must conform to natural law. As Nicholls and Clute point out, academic definitions such as Suvin's tend to err on the prescriptive side, neglecting the description of what sf habitually does, and "what kinds of things tend to accumulate under the label" (313), like stories about space exploration, time travel, utopian/ dystopian societies, etc.

The term "science fiction" did not actually begin to penetrate Denmark until the 1950s with *Planetmagasinet*, a short-lived version of the American magazine *Astounding*. Nevertheless, works of sf were available long before this in Denmark. Jules Verne was widely translated and read throughout Scandinavia, inspiring the deeply conservative, pro-nazi, and highly prolific Danish

Niels Meyn, who wrote science fictional adventures for children in the 1920s and 1930s under numerous pseudonyms.

Going even further back, Dalgaard also has identified several satirical and fantastical sf-like works from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including, most notably, Ludvig Holberg's *Nicolai Klimii iter subteranneum*, published in 1741. This book is widely recognized as the first work of Danish sf, although it is not in Danish, but in Latin, and Holberg can be legitimately claimed by both Norway and Denmark. It was first published in English in 1742, under the title *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground*, translator unknown. In the United States it is largely known in the translation by James Ignatius McNelis who claims, however, to have made only minimal changes to the 1742 English translation. Holberg's satire about the University of Copenhagen graduate who falls down a hole into a subterranean solar system and proceeds to go from place to place, encountering both utopias and dystopias along the way, was an international bestseller in its time and has attracted the interest of scholars ever since, most recently Peter Fitting, who is fascinated by the notion of subterranean worlds and has not only written an essay on this aspect of *Niels Klim* for *Utopian Studies*, but included an excerpt from it in a collection he has edited of such works.

The only writer of Danish sf to have been translated into English from the nineteenth century is Hans Christian Andersen, several of whose stories have been identified as sf. In her article, "Science Fiction in the Age of Romanticism: Hans Christian Andersen's Futuristic Tales," Marianne Stecher-Hansen uses a definition of science fiction similar to Amis's: "a genre of fantasy with a basis either in scientific fact or in a plausible kind of pseudo-science" (74). According to her, Andersen was inspired by the work of his friend Hans Christian Ørsted, a natural scientist, to envision the scientific advances of the future. She identifies the following as science fiction: *Den store søslange* [*The Great Sea-Serpent*], *Bispen paa Børglum og hans Frænde* [*The Bishop of Boerglum and his Kinsman*], *Om Aartusinder* [*In a Thousand Year's Time*], and *Dryaden* [*The Wood-Nymph*]. In addition, remarks in some of Andersen's travel essays, like "Poesiens Californien" ["Poetry's California"], reveal his progressive views. English translations of all these can be found in various collections if one looks hard enough.<sup>5</sup>

Sven Rossel and Patricia Conroy's 1980 translation of *Tales and Stories by Hans Christian Andersen* also identifies two of Andersen's stories as sf. In addition to "In a Thousand Year's Time," which features tourism in an airship, they include "The Drop of Water," a sort of parable comparing the violent world that can be seen in a drop of water under a magnifying glass with human cities like Copenhagen. Andersen's visionary tales are not at all what we would call sf today, although some of them contain technological innovations. The Danish critics Dalgaard and Løysche both consider these only "sf-like," rather than true sf, finding only "Om Aartusinder" of any interest.

Translations of Holberg and Andersen are the sum of pre-twentieth century Danish sf in English. The practice of applying definitions of sf to twentieth century works is complicated by a prestige factor characterized by the contrast expressed in Danish between *trivalliteratur* and *skönlitteratur*. The equivalent distinction exists in English as well, between "popular" literature and "serious" literature, or *belles lettres*. In both Denmark and America, sf has been relegated to the non-serious or "trivial" side of literature, largely due to its origins in the American pulp magazines and its early emphasis on whiz-bang technology. In *Det gode gamle fremtid*, Dalgaard points out another factor: because American sf was read by fans who also wrote it and freely borrowed each

other's gadgets and concepts, the consequent intertextuality gave rise to a special language he terms "genre-internal." In other words, a lot of shorthand is used in these novels to refer to things like "ansibles" and "FTL" that would need to be explained to the uninitiated. The other kind of sf, represented by authors such as Thomas Huxley and George Orwell, is "genre-external," does not take the reader's specialized knowledge for granted, and expends more time and effort in explaining the strangeness of the futuristic or alien universe. Thus the "ghettoization" of sf within sf fandom, which functioned as a hot house where ideas could germinate and be nurtured, also promoted a kind of exclusive society in which a special language was used, thereby contributing to its marginalization as literature. A consequence of this is that sf often is seen as aimed at a very specialized audience and many writers emphatically reject the label in order to maximize sales of their works and be taken seriously by the literati. Arguments frequently arise between sf authors, who insist they are not writing sf, and sf reviewers, who tend to use more encompassing definitions.

Despite the intention of many Danish sf authors to contribute to what Dalgaard calls the genre-internal type of sf—an international sf that could or does take place in some sector of outer space light years away without any reference whatsoever to Denmark or the Danes—it is not, in fact, this kind of sf that usually gets translated.<sup>6</sup> Glancing over the few twentieth century translations of Danish sf works that exist, we find them dominated by works with literary pretensions. The next author on our chronological list is a prime example of this: the Nobel Prize Winner Johannes V. Jensen, who has possibly never been identified as a sf writer outside of *The Anatomy of Wonder*.<sup>7</sup> This reference work classifies *The Long Journey: Fire and Ice and The Cimbrians*, as "a classic prehistoric fantasy" and compares it with the best works of J. Rosny ainé and William Golding's *The Inheritors*. Jensen's use of Darwin's evolutionary theory to imagine the long development of the human race certainly seems to qualify it for inclusion in the genre.

The next Danish sf book to be translated into English is *The Olympic Hope* by Knud Lundberg, published in 1958 in London by Stanley Paul. Lundberg was a sports journalist; this was his only work of sf. Like many Danish dystopias, it is written about the near future, making it strange to read today because the future it predicted is already past. The first-person narrator is writing from 2004, telling about the 1996 Olympics, the only one in which a Dane has won the 800 meter race. Lundberg describes the various experiments performed by each country to give its own athletes the competitive edge. In America, genetics and hormones are employed under the auspices of various foundations established by rich men. In Germany, drugs are used, although the ideal of German superiority and the pressure on the athlete to commit suicide if he does not come in first also play a role. Russia has only recently ceased the bizarre experiment of amputating the athletes' arms just above the elbow. Only Erling, the Danish contender, is truly the amateur. This very interesting short book has proved somewhat prescient in regard to the drug scandals currently plaguing the Olympics, although these practices have not advanced as far as Lundberg predicted they might in the area of social approbation. I did not find any reviews listed for this book, however, and it seems only to have been published in England.

The utopian/dystopian theme continues into the 1960s with Hans Jørgen Lembourn's updating of Voltaire's *Candide*, titled *Grev Frederik* in Danish but *The Best of All Worlds; or, What Voltaire Never Knew* in Evelyn Ramsden's translation. Lembourn's novel has a Candide figure in Count Frederik and a Pangloss figure in his Marxist tutor, Engelson. It follows Voltaire's plot closely, using it to satirize the socialistic leanings of Lembourn's own Danish society. This is Lembourn's only work of sf. He was better known in America for his *Diary of a Lover of Marilyn*

*Monroe*, in which he recounts a brief 40-day affair he claimed to have had with the actress, a book that was reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* and the *Washington Post*. *The Best of All Worlds*, however, got no reviews at all.

In 1969, Sven Holm's *Termush* appeared in English translation from Faber and Faber in London. Written as a diary by a nameless narrator who has paid in advance for a room in a luxury hotel supplied with a fallout shelter in the event of nuclear war, it addresses an anxiety familiar to the time. It focuses on the social and psychological states of those who paradoxically feel both guilt and a sense of entitlement for having the means and the foresight to make arrangements in advance. This novel, which appeared early in his career, is the only one of Holm's translated into English, although there are a handful of his short stories in literary magazines, some fantastic like "The Poet," and *The Wonderful Instrument*." *Termush* received three reviews in British publications and had good company in its *TLS* review, where it was discussed along with John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and Robert Silverberg's *Anvil of Time*, all three also sf novels, two by Americans.

In 1971, Johannes Allen's *Data for Death*, and Anders Bodelsen's *Freezing Down* were both published, Allen's book only in England, however. In *Data for Death*, actuarial science has advanced so far with the aid of computers that it can actually predict the exact day and hour of a person's death. Werner Carlson, the protagonist, becomes the unwilling participant in an experiment to determine what effect such knowledge will have on an individual's behavior. Learning the exact time of his acquaintances' deaths is enough to push Werner over the edge. Again this novel is somewhat prescient, for the basis of actuarial science's new accuracy is the collection of all kinds of data on human beings whether they will it or not, an issue of great concern today as well. This novel was never reviewed in the major U.S. reviewing media, however.

On the other hand, Bodelsen's *Freezing Down* (or *Freezing Point* in its British edition) was quite well known to audiences of both mainstream and sf. In Denmark, Bodelsen was one of those modernist authors of *skønlitteratur* who, according to Dalgaard and Løyché, was severely rebuked for his experiments with the genres of *triviallitteratur* by the Danish literary establishment. *Freezing Down* was his only sf work in English, although several of his detective novels also were translated. The science fictional novum in *Freezing Down* is cryogenics, and at the time of the book's publication, the possibility of one day being able to quick-freeze an ill person until the time a cure was discovered for the disease that would otherwise have killed him was much discussed in the news. Walt Disney was even rumored to have willed this done to his own remains. Bodelsen presents a protagonist named Bruno, stricken with a rare form of cancer, who agrees to this procedure. The novel relates what happens to him and how he feels each time he is resurrected to a society even more obsessed with immortality than it was previously. *Freezing Down* received a number of reviews, both in major media reviewing organs as well as in fan magazines. In general it was well received, most often compared with Orwell's *1984*. *Freezing Down* also has been discussed in a *Scandinavian Studies* article by Frank Hugus titled "Three Danish Authors Examine the Welfare State: Finn Soeborg, Leif Panduro, and Anders Bodelsen."

Two anthologies of European sf translated into English also appeared during the 1970s. *View from Another Shore: European Science Fiction* edited by Franz Rottensteiner in 1973 included "The Ring" by Svend Aage Madsen, a sort of alternate worlds fable in which a man is given the choice of which world he will live in. The other European anthology, *The Best From the Rest of the World*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim for DAW books contained "Planet for Sale" by

Neil E. Neilsen. Neilsen's story, which features an international crew on a spaceship, is not overtly "Danish." Instead, it is an exemplar of what Dalgaard calls genre-internal sf. Yet its tale of the capture of a tiny, yet living and technologically sophisticated planet the crew instantly nicknames "Lilliput" is reminiscent of Andersen at his most pessimistic.

Two more dystopias were translated in the 1980s. Henrik Stangerup's *The Man Who Wanted to Be Guilty* published by Marion Boyars in both the United Kingdom and the United States deals with a man who kills his wife in a drunken rage and then is confronted by nothing but kindness and understanding everywhere he turns when what he really wants is to be punished and expiate his crime. Like Bodelsen, Stangerup was compared to Orwell in the American reviews. In contrast, Kate Cruise O'Brien writing for the British publication *The Listener* represents a more European point of view: "If guilt has been abolished in this authoritarian, socialist state, so has poverty, hunger, fear and greed. In Ireland we are not exactly stifled by the social services, and my response to Torben's dilemma is rather like that of a rather poor person contemplating the social problems of a very rich one, a mixture of envy and disbelief."

Klaus Rifbjerg's *De hellige aber*, translated by Steve Murray as *Witness to the Future* in 1987, uses the device of time travel to make its point. Two boys from 1940, living in the country away from World War II raging somewhere else, go exploring in a cave and end up in a dystopian and unfriendly 1981 on the verge of a nuclear war. This is Rifbjerg's only work of sf and one of only three works out of this author's prolific Danish output that has been translated into English. The review in *Publisher's Weekly* called the book an "allegory of the chaos and emptiness of modern times that conveys admiration for a simpler past," a judgment with which Charlotte Schiander Gray concurs in her review for *Scandinavian Studies*, in which she compares this work with the movie "Back to the Future." In another article, "Klaus Rifbjerg, Patron of the Literary Arts," Gray speculates that Rifbjerg "fits into the nostalgia for the fifties" (69) and calls *The Holy Apes*<sup>8</sup>/*Witness to the Future* a "kind of science fiction story" (68).

Ulla Ryum's radio drama "And the Birds are Singing Again," translated by Per Brask appeared in 1989 in an issue of *DramaContemporary* dedicated to Scandinavia. This play is "set in a future which is probably not too distant" (102) and relates the investigation by a group of young soldiers of the former site of Bakken, the amusement park north of Copenhagen which in the play was "cleaned out ten years ago" (105). The soldiers' dialogue alternates with a tape recording made on the site just before it was destroyed, thus creatively contrasting a moment from the miserable but free present with a moment from a totalitarian but peaceful future.

The major development in the publication of Danish sf in the 1990s was the appearance of *Virtue and Vice in the Middle Time*, James M. Ogier's translation of Svend Åge Madsen's 1976 novel *Tugt og Utugt i Mellemtiden* by Garland in 1992. Madsen belongs to that group of modernist authors whose work Dalgaard has called sf-like and not really sf, since he uses sf tropes for his own complex purposes rather than trying to follow genre conventions. Yet Madsen himself does not disdain the label "science fiction," and his novel written by a writer from a far future in which novels no longer exist about a man unjustly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit can be seen as taking sf in new and exciting directions. Despite the book's importance from a literary standpoint, however, this translation seems to have fallen on deaf ears, receiving not a single review—negative or positive—anywhere, although the Danish language original did receive one review in *World Literature Today* when it was first published. It should also be pointed out here that another of Madsen's works also saw publication during the nineties: his short story

“Mnemosyne’s Children” in James Gunn’s mammoth anthology, *The Road to Science Fiction*. The subtitle of Volume 6 is “Around the World,” and in it a short section is dedicated to Scandinavia and Finland, containing, however, only Madsen’s story and one from Sweden. The editor, James Gunn, an American scientist and popular sf writer in his own right, singles out three major Danish sf writers for mention: Anders Bodelsen, Svend Åge Madsen, and Inge Eriksen, the third of whom has never been translated into English. Gunn does not indicate any awareness of Ogier’s translation of *Tugt og Utugt I Mellemtiden*.

*The Review of Contemporary Fiction* published an anthology of New Danish Fiction in its Spring 1995 issue, where a number of the authors Dalgaard lists as having published sf are represented. The excerpt from Ulla Ryum’s novel *Jeg er den I tror*, translated as *I am the one you think*, is the only sf work, however. It is set in the year 2038 and, like her earlier play, counterpoints voices from the character’s past with her future.

The position of celebrated Danish author of the nineties was endowed on Peter Høeg. I mention him here only because two of his books, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* and *The Woman and the Ape*, have been listed in *Locus*, which characterizes *The Woman and the Ape* “as a literary sf love story.” Høeg is not one of the authors Dalgaard singles out as a sf writer, or even sf-like, although several of his books clearly belong to the fantasy genre. *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, his international best seller, falls neatly into another American subgenre, the hardboiled feminist detective novel. Smilla is a scientist of sorts who uses her scholarly knowledge of ice and snow to draw certain conclusions contrary to those that people in authority want her to have. The science fictional novum is not introduced until the very end, where it becomes the solution to the mystery Smilla has been trying to solve throughout the 400-odd pages that preceded this discovery. Høeg often uses science in some original ways, but whether this can truly be called sf is debatable. In *The Woman and the Ape*, the sf novum is an exotic ape who turns the tables on humans, proving himself to be a step up the evolutionary ladder from them. All of Høeg's books have garnered their share of rave reviews in the U.S. media.<sup>9</sup>

As we come to a close of the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the slow but steady trickle of Danish sf into English seems to be drying up. Another sf play by Ulla Ryum, *Face of the Hunter*, was published in Per Brask’s translation by a Canadian publisher, Adler and Ringe, in 2000 along with one of her non-sf plays in a volume titled simply *Two*. Other than that, nothing. Part of the problem is the introversion of Americans, who seem only interested in reading works written in the United States and do not support the translation industry. Part of the problem is with the sf genre, whose best-sellers now are to be found in the endless series of Star Wars and Star Trek spin-offs. Fans with more discriminating tastes who try to defend a higher standard have noticed the melding of genres for at least a decade, as recorded in fanzines such as *Locus*. And now even National Public Radio has noticed the penetration of sf themes and motifs into the mainstream in a piece they did recently titled “Sci Fi Themes Invade the Literary World,” in which they once again document literary authors’ reluctance to be identified as sf writers. Still, as we have seen, Danish sf has always fitted itself into the publishing mainstream and only identified as sf incidentally.

Nevertheless, a visit to the Science Fiction Cirklen website reveals quite bit of sf still being produced in Danish, and Dalgaard’s *Guide* lists a wealth of sf writers who have never been translated. The solution for the true Danish sf aficionado, obviously, is to read them in the original Danish.

- <sup>1</sup> Syrian Greek writer, c120-180. *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, 739.
- <sup>2</sup> For a brief account of Gernsback and his contribution to science fiction, see Moskowitz, 225-242.
- <sup>3</sup> sf is the accepted abbreviation for science fiction among scholars and fans.
- <sup>4</sup> The third edition of *The Anatomy of Wonder* is the last to have a foreign language section.
- <sup>5</sup> See examples in the Bibliography below.
- <sup>6</sup> An exception to this rule is Neil E. Neilsen's short story "Planet for Sale."
- <sup>7</sup> Jensen does not appear in Dalgaard's *Guide til fantastisk litteratur*, however.
- <sup>8</sup> Schiander here uses "The Holy Apes," a literal translation of Rifbjerg's "De hellige aber" instead of the title used by Steve Murray for his translation.
- <sup>9</sup> I have only cited a small sample of these in the Bibliography section.

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