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Exploring the Collection of Swedish-American Children's Literature
Katie Hanson, assistant professor
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For five days I examined resources related to children's literature held in the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center collection. Initially, I proposed that I would examine anything having to do with children's literature. I ended up looking at lots of immigration stories as well as the holdings in the children's collection. Some of the work was in Swedish, so I looked at those items briefly, applying my paltry Norwegian skills to do my best to decipher what was going on in the stories.

The books I found most interesting were the nine volumes of *Stories for Children* by Zach Topelius. I read most of them and found a few that will work nicely in my children's literature class. For example, one story "Adalmina's Pearl" is part Finnish fable and part Cinderella story with a twist. In my children's literature class, we examine the Cinderella stories that exist in fifteen different cultures, and try to ascertain what the various similarities and differences reveal about culture. I will likely throw this story into the mix.

I also will probably need to buy a copy of a more modern children's picture book I read called *Lucia and the Light* by Phyllis Root, published in 2006. It is a very culturally rich story, and also a sort of *pourquoi* story about dark winters in Sweden. The illustrations are amazingly beautiful and evocative. It is a gorgeous book I am glad I now know about.

I enjoyed comparing the various immigrant stories, especially in the picture books. Several of the books had extremely similar stories and even similar illustrations, even though they were written and published at such different times--1968, 1981, and 1992—*Vikings of the West*, *The Long Way to a New Land*, and *Klara's New World*, respectively. For example, all three books had illustrations of what life was like in the lower level of the ships that immigrants came on to America. They also all had illustrations of the first view of America from the ship harbor, and of the immigration processing center. In *Vikings of the West*, I also learned quite a bit about the local history of Bishop Hill, and about Illinois history, in terms of the life of Carl Sandburg. I will want to share that book with my future Illinois elementary teachers as well.

I also read *At Home in a New Land*, historical fiction about the hunger years in Sweden, and *Elin's Amerika* which was a very old-fashioned view of how immigrants possibly interacted with American Indians. It was researched, but biased, so it might be a good example in my children's literature class of what to look for in terms of inaccuracies and bias in historical fiction.

I read the entire Kirsten *American Girl* series—six books of 70 pages each. The series is well-researched historical fiction and I talked about that series in my winter term children's literature class when we were reading various other historical fiction novels for middle grade students.

I read an excellent young adult book of short stories, *First Crossing: Stories about Teen Immigrants*, which had stories I hope to use in my adolescent literature class because I am adding more immigrant and refugee stories into that class and my children's literature class.

There were quite a few typical Swedish tomten and Jule stories, in English with beautiful illustrations. Most of the Christmas stories were from the early 1900s and highly moralistic and smarmy. All the children behave selflessly and unrealistically perfectly all the time. The stories are unusually dull because there are no surprises. I may use one in my writing class as an example of how not to write.

I also read some non-fiction, such as *Prairie Voices—An Oral History of Scandinavian Americans in the Upper Midwest* which had some excellent interviews with immigrants talking about what it was like to go to school without knowing English, and the costs and benefits of families choosing to speak only English at home which allowed the children to improve quickly but at the cost of losing the ability to talk with relatives who did not speak English.

I read a short history of Swedish children's books, which I can compare to the history of children's books in the United States. Not surprisingly, Swedish children's books reveal what they value about childhood and culture, just like our children's books do.

And truth be told, I got sucked into a novel one day, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky* by Otilie A. Liljencrantz, and I read all 354 pages of it. It was great fun. It reminded me of reading the entire Kristin Lavransdatter trilogy the year I lived in Norway. I was immersed for an entire day in the historical fictitious life of Leif Ericksson.

The five days turned out to be exactly the right amount of time for my initial project. I had time to research and read all of the materials I found. All told, I read fifty two books. I will perhaps go back to re-read some of the short stories. I learned a lot about Swedish immigration and about the tone and tenor of children's literature in America in the early 1900s. I went into the project just curious about what might be in the collection and now that I have completed the research, I found some interesting themes that I may want to pursue further in the future. I know that my new knowledge will positively impact my future teaching of literature and writing here at Augustana College.

I appreciate all of the help I got from the Swenson staff in terms of locating sources and how flexible they were about allowing me to research when the time fit into my schedule.