

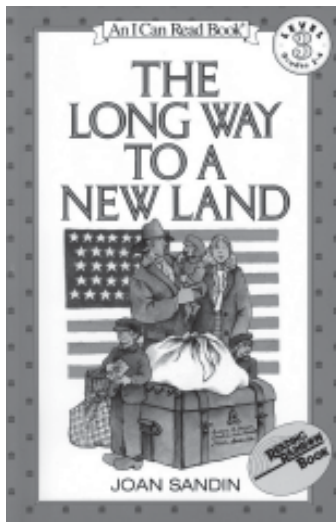
“Now We Are Arrived”: Stories of Swedish Immigration for Young Readers

BY ERICA OLSEN

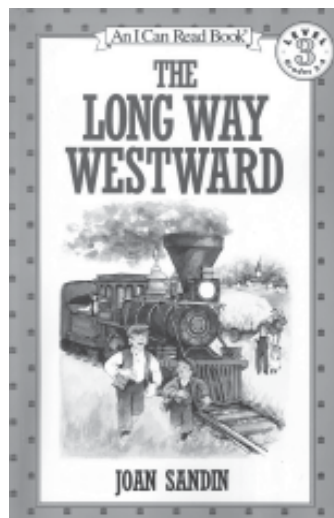
“Now we are arrived,” says Carl Erik, the immigrant boy in Joan Sandin’s *The Long Way to a New Land*, when he finally reaches America. It is an English phrase that he learned on shipboard. Children’s books by Sandin and other authors about the Swedish immigration experience can be a great way to get kids interested in their Swedish-American heritage. Here’s a look at the small but substantial shelf of picture books and novels for young adults that bring this history to life.

Picture Books

At the beginning of *The Long Way to a New Land*, drought and famine are



making life hard for young Carl Erik and his family on their farm in Sweden. When a letter arrives from the boy’s uncle in America, the family decides to emigrate. Joan Sandin’s lucid prose has the strength of poetry. The simplicity will be clear to children and eloquent to adults: “They scraped the inner bark from pine trees. Mamma mixed it with flour to bake their bread – a hard and bitter bread.” Sandin’s highly detailed illustrations, in somber blacks and grays, reflect the hardships the family is enduring.



The color scheme brightens in Sandin’s sequel, *The Long Way Westward*, which takes the family

west to Minnesota. The illustrations convey their hopes and excitement at being in America. Both books are for very young readers, with just a few lines per page. A third book in the series, *At Home in the New Land*, will be published in 2007.

Klara’s New World has a similar story line to the *Long Way* books but is told from the point of view of a seven-year-old girl. Jeanette Winter’s full-page illustrations allow the strong characters and emotions to come through. In the family’s house in Sweden, we see the wooden kitchen utensils hanging from the wall and the colorful textiles made by Mamma (who is shown weaving at her loom). In another illustration, an “America letter” is readable in Swedish. The writing is at a higher reading level than Sandin’s books, and the voice sometimes seems older than a child’s.

These books do not sugarcoat the realities of the immigrant’s journey, taking on serious subjects such as death on shipboard. Author Joan Sandin explains, “I felt I couldn’t do an accurate story about immigration without including the reality of starvation, desperation, sadness, humiliation, even death. However, these unpleasant events and emotions are balanced with the optimism and excitement also experienced by

the family.” In their text and illustrations, Sandin and Winter demonstrate solid research. All three books include historical notes.

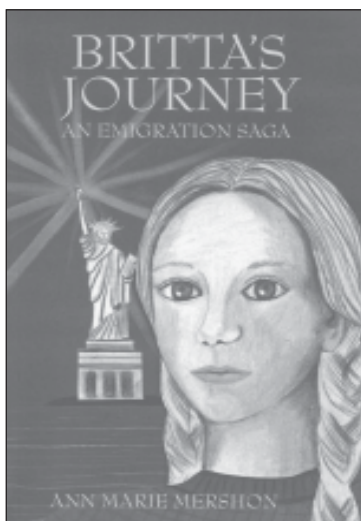
Young Adult Novels

Meet Kirsten, about a nine-year-old Swedish girl who immigrates in 1854, is the first in a series of six books published by American Girl, the company best known for its dolls. This series accompanies the “Kirsten” doll, but the books can stand on their own. Once again, there is little sugarcoating of the immigrant’s experience – Kirsten’s best friend dies during the journey. While this book cannot compare to a pioneer classic like *Little House on the Prairie*, the story is appealing, and the illustrations are charming. The



historical afterword asks: “If your family decided to move to another country, could you do that? How would you know what to bring with you? What would you leave behind? One of your relatives probably had to make decisions like these, because there is a story like Kirsten’s in nearly every American family.” A book that stimulates young readers to think about these questions is certainly doing something worthwhile.

The family in *Britta’s Journey* embodies a story that many families experienced: the father has preceded the family to America, and mother and children are making the long



journey alone. Much of this novel takes place in England, where 12-year-old Britta’s family is stranded when a misunderstanding and then an illness prevent them from continuing their journey. The story’s strength is in the details of immigrants’ travel arrangements – hotels, meals, and medical services. Britta is a likeable, independent heroine, although at times the banter between her and her know-it-all brother feels too contemporary for the 1904 setting. Also noteworthy is Britta’s background – the family comes from Swedish-speaking Finland. The epilogue reminds us: “Every family has a story ... Take the time to talk to your older relations about their memories, their childhoods, their parents and their grandparents.”

Set in 1902, *Land of Dreams* is the third book in Joan Lowery Nixon’s Ellis Island series about three teenage girls who meet on shipboard (the others are from Russia and Ireland). *Land of Dreams* focuses on 16-year-old Kristin, who expects more freedom from America than her family and her conservative “Little Sweden” community in rural Minnesota are willing to allow her. “Why can’t women do the same things as men? she thought with disappointment. Wasn’t life supposed to be different in the United States?” Kristin’s impatience with the Swedishness of her new American life is conveyed with more spirit than the

theme about women’s rights. Swedish dialogue interspersed throughout could inspire readers to learn the language.

Other Scandinavian-American Young Adult Novels

Two other books of interest are *Dancing in the Streets of Brooklyn* by April Lurie (Delacorte Press, 2002) and *The Journal of Otto Peltonen: A Finnish Immigrant* by William Durbin (Scholastic, 2000). Lurie’s novel tells of a 13-year-old girl growing up in the Norwegian-American neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1940s.

Since most children’s books about immigration focus on earlier time periods and settlement in the Midwest, Lurie’s setting stands out. In Durbin’s book, written in diary form, a teenage boy from Finland immigrates with his family to the iron mining country of Minnesota in 1905. Part of Scholastic’s “My Name Is America” series, the book includes a historical note and an excellent selection of archival photos. Although their subject matter is not Swedish, both books are worth mentioning, as many Scandinavian Americans (like myself) claim ancestry from more than one country.

While children are the intended audience for the books reviewed here, adults can certainly enjoy and learn from them. Picture books, in particular, provide a vivid introduction to the immigration experience. Through the eyes of a child, these books remind us that for a family starting over in a new land, the adults might be as vulnerable as children, and as open to new experiences.

Once upon a time, there was a family in Sweden ... These books also remind us that as we search for facts about our ancestors, what we are really doing is writing this story for ourselves.

Note:

Books in print are available by special order from your bookstore or through online booksellers. The website abebooks.com is a great resource for secondhand and out-of-print books. Last but not least, visit your public library (which, if it doesn't have a particular book, can obtain it through interlibrary loan).

Books discussed:

The Long Way to a New Land

by Joan Sandin

HarperTrophy (an I Can Read Book), 1981

Paperback, 64 pages, ISBN 0-06-444100-8, \$3.99

The Long Way Westward

by Joan Sandin

HarperTrophy (an I Can Read Book), 1989

Paperback, 64 pages, ISBN 0-06-444198-9, \$3.99

Klara's New World

by Jeanette Winter

Knopf Books, 1992

Hardcover, 41 pages, ISBN 0-679-80626-1, out of print

Meet Kirsten: An American Girl

by Janet Shaw

Pleasant Company, 1986

Paperback, 61 pages, ISBN 0-937295-01-9, \$6.95

Britta's Journey: An Emigration Saga

by Ann Marie Mershon

Singing River Publications, 2004

Paperback, 205 pages, ISBN 0-9709575-6-4, \$12.00

Land of Dreams

by Joan Lowery Nixon

Delacorte Press, 1994

Hardcover, 152 pages, ISBN 0-385-31170-2, \$14.95

Two Authors Retrace the Immigrant Journey

Joan Sandin's grandfather was born in Falun, Sweden, and immigrated to Wisconsin with his parents in 1882 when he was just two years old. Sandin herself had firsthand knowledge of immigration, but in reverse – she lived in Sweden for a time. She included details about learning English in Carl Erik's story because, she says, "My own personal experience of being an immigrant in Sweden made me particularly aware of how important language (or lack of it!) is to our sense of who we are."

To create her story and illustrations, Sandin did extensive research. "I looked at anything of interest," she says. "Letters, journals, self-published family histories, Swedish newspapers, maps, train and steamship schedules, official reports on immigrant conditions. I also did drawings of old houses, tools, household objects and clothes, at museums in Växjö, Stockholm, and Minneapolis. When I was unable to find a picture of the mail boat Carl Erik's family would have taken from Gothenburg to Hull, I used a technical description in the Maritime Museum in Stockholm and worked up the picture from that."

Ann Marie Mershon's *Britta's Journey* was inspired by the author's elderly neighbor in Minnesota, Eleanor Jacobson Stone. In the story Mershon heard, the family was stranded in London during their journey. When Mershon researched the story, she discovered that "the language barrier was so great that the family thought they were in London when they were really in Liverpool all summer." Mershon's own family history turned out to have an unexpected parallel to the story she told in fiction. Her grandfather, whom the family thought had come from Sweden, turned out to be a Swede-Finn like Britta. Mershon discovered his origins while researching her fictional character's journey. "It is pretty amazing," she says, "to realize that my grandfather had a crossing very similar to the one I researched for the Jacobsons."

More ideas for reading

Do these stories make you want to learn more? Here are three non-fiction books that present immigration history for young adults – and the whole family.

The Scandinavian Family Album

by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler

Oxford University Press, 1998

Paperback, 128 pages, ISBN 0-19-512424-3, \$16.95

A survey of Scandinavian-American life from the colonial era to the present, through first-person accounts. Extensively illustrated.

The Swedish Americans

by Allyson McGill

Chelsea House Publishers, 1997

Paperback, 110 pages, ISBN 0-7910-4552-8, \$9.95

Part of the series "The Immigrant Experience," chronicling the contributions of various ethnic groups to American culture.

Welcome to Kirsten's World, 1854: Growing Up in Pioneer America

by Susan Sinnott

Pleasant Company, 1999

Hardcover, 58 pages, ISBN 1-56247-770-6, \$16.95

A pictorial history and companion to the books in the *Kirsten* series.

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