

In the air

# Kjell Westö: „I'm a Finn, a Swedish-speaking Finn“

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Kjell Westö (born 1961) is a Swedish-language Finnish author. He has published collections of short stories, poetry and the scenario for a musical as well as four novels: „Kites Above Helsinki“ (1996), „The Misfortune of Being Skrake“ (2000), „Lang“, (2002) and „Where Once We Walked“ (Finlandia Prize, 2006), a Finnish-language stage version of which premiered in Helsinki in April this year.

The author was in Luxembourg recently to present his latest novel and kindly agreed to answer our questions.

**kulturissimo:** What does it mean to you to be a member of the minority Swedish-speaking community? Are there any specific difficulties in being a Swedish-language author in Finland? How are relations between the two communities of writers?

**Kjell Westö:** „It means a number of things, really. One should remember that there is a wide variety of strategies and identities when it comes to living in the Swedish-speaking community in Finland. Mine is one extreme: I've been practically bilingual since my early teens, I've always maintained a close contact with the Finnish-speaking community, I even write in Finnish as well as in my mother tongue, Swedish. The other extreme would be confining oneself to the Swedish-speaking community, largely turning one's back on the culture of the Finnish-speaking majority. Most Swedish-speakers oscillate somewhere between these two extremes. One specific difficulty would, in my opinion, be the confinement and estrangement a writer might feel when he/she is restricted to the minority culture only, that is to say, fails to connect with both the Finnish-speaking compatriots and the 9 million who speak Swedish in Sweden. But this is my view, because I'm an expansive person: I speak five languages and I have a fear of isolation.“

The relations between the two communities of writers are good. At best they are excellent, involving close cooperation and joint projects. At worst they are a bit distant.“

**„k“:** What distinguishes Finland-Swedish from the Swedish of Sweden? What is your relationship to the literature of Sweden? (Do you feel closer to

your country or your language, or does the question not arise?)

**K.W.:** „The Swedes consider Finland-Swedish a bit archaic. We have retained and preserved expressions and words that the Swedes have stopped using. In big cities like Helsinki (Helsingfors) and Turku (Åbo) spoken Swedish is heavily influenced by Finnish, especially among the young. I've been walking a tightrope between things Finnish and things Swedish all my life. I feel close to both. I grew up reading first Swedish children's literature, then Swedish literature in general: my relationship to Swedish literature, movies, music, etc. is still close. I try to be a universalist, so I tend not to raise the question about whom I feel closer to very deliberately. But if I had to choose, I'd say I'm closer to my country. I'm not a Swede, I'm a Finn, a Swedish-speaking Finn.“

**„k“:** Three of your four novels have a historical background. What got you interested in Finnish history?

**K.W.:** „I think it was the silence and the chagrin surrounding the past in my own family. Both my grandfathers had died in the wars against Soviet Russia 1939-44. My grandmothers remained widows for the rest of their lives, my parents grew up without fathers. Nobody talked very much about what had been. I wanted to fathom this past, this history that seemed to have wounded people so badly. This can of course also be understood at a more general level: I simply realised that Finland had quite a gruesome and dramatic 20th century history: four wars (The Civil War, The Winter War, The Continuation War, The Lapland War), a very rapid urbanization after the Second World War, etc.“

**„k“:** How does your own writing about the Civil War relate to that of a Finnish-language author (eg Väino Linna's „Under the North Star“)?

**K.W.:** „Any comparison to Linna is too flattering, since his trilogy is probably the number one classic in Finnish literature. Finnish-language writing about any big event in our history tended, for a very long time, to take place outside Helsinki, often deep in the countryside. This is also true for Linna. All my novels are decidedly urbane, decidedly ‚Helsinkiian‘. But I'm definitely not the only one who has pulled Finnish and Finland-Swedish literature in that direction lately.“



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

Kjell Westö: „I try to be a universalist“

**„k“:** Your latest novel „Where Once We Walked“ was adapted for the stage, in Finnish. Who adapted it? Does speaking Finnish change the characters?

**K.W.:** „The book was adapted by renowned Finnish director, actor and playwright Kari Heiskanen. Yes, the fact that it was made in Finnish changed the characters and the overall feeling of the story a bit. I myself like the play and the stage production very much. But it did, to some extent, receive a mixed response. Most reviews were favourable, but some were very critical. Many Swedish-speakers seem to have difficulties in accepting the ‚Finnish‘ mood of the play. Still, the spring performances were sold out and they're still playing to near capacity houses.“

**„k“:** The hero of your novel „Lang“ is a writer and TV personality in his mid-forties who lives with a „fear of ageing and having his store of experiences declared worthless - a fear that every adult westerner carries today.“ Does Kjell Westö feel that fear?

**K.W.:** „Yes, very much so. Every time I encounter a young journalist who thinks everything that happened in the 20th century is distant history with no bearing on today's world. Every time I accidentally catch a glimpse of a TV reality-show.“

**„k“:** What are your next projects?

**K.W.:** „Right now I have two main projects. A stage play (*The Heart You Have*) that will, hopefully, have its premiere on 14 November in the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki and a novel spanning the period from the 1960s to this day, a novel that I hope will conclude my series of Helsinki novels.“

After that, I want to write minimalist stories. But I haven't got them yet.“