

LATEST REVIEW

# *Jag faller som en sten genom tiden genom livet*

(I'm falling like a stone through time through life)

by Åke Smedberg

reviewed by Anna Paterson

A strange phrase, that title, even a little off-putting for people who like snappy labels. On the other hand, it must cause a pang of recognition in those who, like Åke Smedberg, can find themselves suddenly immersed in worlds remembered in great vividness and detail.

The exchange of letters between Smedberg and Elsie Johansson, another writer loved for her evocative writing about an often harsh, rural past, meant that they could share their experiences of sudden, intensely present memories. It is a form of remembering with an intrusive quality that irritates Smedberg: '... One is back there again. Dear Lord, how many times has it been? Always back, always crashing into the past, falling through some bloody trapdoor, stumbling back into it through one of the secret doors in the walls of the time-tunnel that seem always left open, waiting for you.' Elsie agrees that the sudden and swift compulsive movement through time can be a curse: 'Am I bewitched, I have wondered, perhaps stunted, incapable of leading the life of an aware grown-up? I have been angry, told myself off, shoved myself relentlessly back in the present.' She rages on, but admits that she can't escape her past. The girls of different ages, who were Elsie then, are still there, waiting to take her into one of their worlds once more.

**N**ot all of Smedberg's published works are overtly autobiographical, but in 'I

am falling...' he allows himself to explore freely the world beyond that trapdoor in time, and always lands, with the precision of a bee diving into a favoured flower, into beautifully precise moments in his past. Some are dimly remembered perceptions of how things felt: the happy wonder of the toddler playing by the burn, or the tense, wordless excitement of two teenage boys, doing dangerous things together – playing scary games, and exploring an untamed landscape of hills, forests and moors. Other, more articulate memories, focus on people. Those he grew up with remain the most enigmatic: a hard-working, evasive father, a clever, frustrated mother, a trusted brother. His mother's father, the lead sports journalist at a local paper, and a kind man with a short fuse, is the first to be sharply observed.

One personality in particular stands out from the haze of reminiscence: Zenia Larsson, a sculptor who became a writer, and the mentor of the young poet Åke Smedberg. Larsson was once Szajna Marcinkowska, a Polish woman. She arrived in Sweden in 1945, alone, exhausted and emaciated after six years in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Szajna's transformation into Zenia was astonishing: she learned Swedish well enough to be

accepted as a pupil at the Stockholm Art College by 1947 and had become a published writer in Swedish by the early 1970s. Smedberg was, and seems still to be fascinated by Zenia, for all the obvious reasons, as well as for her fiercely independent attempt to distance herself from her past by making it the subject of three novels. He acknowledges how important she was to his career as a poet and writer, after his previous rolling-stone existence of travelling and casual jobs. His love of poetry surfaces in his precise, flowing language, although, eventually, fiction in the form of short stories and novels came to dominate his published works. Smedberg's books add up to a national treasure, largely hidden from foreign eyes; he is described in Sweden as 'one of our most loved and valued writers'.

Some countries develop truly original literary traditions; identifying individuals with the wild nature that surrounds them seems an essential component of Swedish literature. I would suggest that 'I'm falling ...' belongs – in a good way – to a Swedish genre: stories of 'ordinary people' set in vividly remembered locations, mostly northern. A recent, much-praised example comes to mind: *Osebol: Voices from a Swedish Village* by Marit Kapla, translated into English by Peter Graves. The form is not quite the usual story-telling, but recorded interviews with locals, edited and transcribed into poetic prose; the setting is the author's own home village, an authentically northern place (forests, hills, waterways), remote, beautiful and gradually impoverished by the lack of jobs and of young people.

Smedberg does not idealise nature. His literary programme is two-fold, at least if one is to believe the ambiguous final section of 'I am falling...'. First, a long appeal (in italics) to the many small gods of nature, all uncaring and mostly unrelatable to: '*... I have never asked anything from you. Not until now. But I beg you: do something about sadness. About human grief. Sadness that rises out of the ground, follows the rain down, lives on in the water, the wind, the dark and the light.*' This passage is followed by a pastoral little story of two boys watching a middle-aged couple enjoying their summer evening together, quietly looking out over the pretty lake in front of their cabin. Ordinary, contented love of nature, shared.



Åke Smedberg. Photo: Maria Söderberg.

#### ABOUT

## *Jag faller som en sten genom tiden genom livet*

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[Åke Smedberg](#) has been awarded several literary prizes during his career. Recent awards, include being the first recipient of the newly created Elsie Johansson Prize (2022). Smedberg was nominated for the 2022 Norrland literature prize for *Jag faller som en sten*; it was won by Kerstin Ekman (adults) and Moa Backe Åstot (YA).

