

ANNE-MARIE MAI:

Galleri 66. En historie om nyere dansk litteratur.

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Anne-Marie Mai is a prolific historiographer of Danish and Nordic literature. In the early 2000s she edited the three-volume *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede*. As the recent Editor in Chief of the expansive, multilingual and now digital *The History of Nordic Women's Literature*, Mai has promoted a more inclusive literary history and helped canonize the work of women writers; and in the monumental three-volume *Hvor litteraturen finder sted* (2010-12) Mai explored the long history of Danish literature centring on the actual places where literature has been written, read and preserved from Medieval cathedrals to YouTube.

With *Galleri 66*, Mai's aim is similarly to find a new way to engage in literary historiography, which, she admits, is a discipline that has had difficulty attracting new readers; partly, she suggests, because we have become suspicious of narrow national and chronological histories, and partly because the traditional historiographic division of literary history into decades, movements and -isms, as it has been drilled into generations of students, results in simplistic and distorted views of literature. Instead, Mai proposes to capture the recent 50 years of Danish literature as refracted through the year 1966 – a major year for literary debuts (e.g. Henrik Nordbrandt, Dan Turèll, Klaus Høeck, Vagn Lundbye and Peer Hultberg), but also a year where literary and social upheavals materialized.

In the introductory chapter, Mai explains that her 'literary historiographic experiment' to transcend traditional chronological methods draws on Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's hypertextual history

writing, his 'essayistic time machine' *In 1926. Living at the Edge of Time* (1997). Mai does not subsume the 1960s and the decade's literary aftermath under the banner of postmodernism. Although she does not subscribe to Gumbrecht's radical encyclopaedic and anecdotal approach, her use of the year 1966 as a 'portal' to tell literary histories through various contexts, authorships and their constellations is, first and foremost, an attempt to avoid monolithic constructions, such as postmodernism, and to capture a period which begins with the death of H.C. Branner, and with him the end to a particular cultural-radical high-modernist author figure, the expansion of the welfare state into the cultural life of the nation, through a period of rapid globalization ending with the arrival of cyberspace.

The dramatic changes that the portal of 1966 led to are explored in the next chapter, which refers to Bob Dylan's song 'the times they are a changin'' from 1964 in its title. Dylan is a significant figure in Mai's stories about the 66-generation and its significance in late-modern Danish literature. Mai has been an advocate for Dylan as a worthy recipient of the Nobel Prize at least since 2009, and with his award of the prize in 2016, *Gallery 66*, which was published the same year, appears almost prophetic, even if Mai must note that 'Bob Dylan still has to be awarded the prize' (p. 60). Mai traces Dylan's influence in how Danish authors opened up to musical influences in the 60s, to popular culture, a new media society, a new political consciousness and a postcolonial, global world full of new opportunities and audiences but also vulnerable to Americanization and appalled by atrocities such as the Vietnam War.

A significant contribution of Mai's historiography is its narrative about how Danish literature grew up with and into a wider world of literature. Here Mai is informed by critical world literature perspectives, which she introduces briefly. The concerns and aesthetic innovations of writers around the world contextualize Mai's national history through discussions of a range of significant post-War writers including V.S. Naipaul, Solzhenitsyn, Nadine Gordimer, Thomas Pynchon and Mario Vargas Llosa.

However, it remains an open question in Mai's conclusion as to why the Danish authors of the '66-generation', although they have absorbed

global trends, have not been more successful in translation: 'We haven't had a breakthrough of a significant Danish author in one of the world languages, and Denmark has not been able to give authors a chance to break through the walls of large-nation media. It would have taken a sustained economic investment from public and private funders if Danish literature were to have made a real impact aside from sporadic drops in a vast sea of literature' (p. 101, my translation). There is no doubt that several of the authors writing in the 60s and 70s deserved more international attention (e.g. Turèll, Thorup, Brøgger, Svend Aage Madsen), but the cursory attention Mai pays to Danish literature in translation – and its social-institutional contexts – does not do the topic full justice. In fact, Mai does not venture much further than Georg Brandes did with his assessment that writers in 'small-languages' lack 'the weapon', the language, of anglophone or francophone writers to reach the wider world. On the other hand, Mai suggests a more productive line of inquiry, which could have led to interesting insights, namely that success in translation necessitates sustained public and private investments, i.e. the backing of the Danish welfare state. It would, therefore, have made sense to unfold the institutional and political history of state support for translations in the wider context of cultural export and nation branding in diplomacy (soft power) and trade in the same period.

A particularly strong chapter in *Galleri 66* is where Mai explores the intimate relationship between the post-60s 'dethroned' author figure and the welfare state's institutionalization of financial support for artists and authors, and how the state investments in literature have been negotiated variously by authors as either a welcome invitation to work from within the conditions of the welfare consumer society (as argued by the neo-realist Anders Bodelsen) or a suffocating embrace of state power, as the Maoist author Ebbe Kløvedahl Reich would have it; however, Reich himself, like a vast number of the 66-authors, became a recipient of state support.

Mai adds significant knowledge to our understanding of the political, institutional and, not least, the aesthetic and existential dialogue (and battle) between the welfare state and Danish literature since the 1960s. In that sense, a significant trend in Danish literature over the past

half century, whether realist fiction or avant-garde concrete poetry, is that literature has been put to 'use' as a social seismograph, as social critique, and as a form through which to explore identities and life in and outside the ever-present welfare society. Such perspectives open up the history of Danish literature to 'new' voices, and allow Mai to pay particular attention to authors such as Kirsten Thorup, Jette Drewsen and Vibeke Grønfeldt, whose works are analysed convincingly as central if not to world literature then at least to Danish welfare literature.

Galleri 66 is not only a sweeping and purposefully digressive story about what happened to Danish literature when viewed through the wide portal of 1966. It is also an intriguing view into Mai's sustained and passionate preoccupation with her own generation's literature, and her understanding of how literature responds to and takes part in a changing society.