



THE FORGOTTEN 33 %

Finland-Swedish literature from a database perspective

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Invisible actors, unknown networks. Literary Sociological Studies of Swedish Literature in Finland 1830–2023. (The Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation 2024–2026). *Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland*



STARTING POINTS FOR THIS PRESENTATION

The notion that literary history today, is partly shaped in databases and digital archives, via metadata about authors and literature.

Questions, which I will elaborate on:

- What is the impact of digital resources (archives, databases) on the visibility – or invisibility – of authors of literary works?
- To what extent is the Finland-Swedish minority literature “forgotten” seen from a database perspective?
- What are the explanations behind forgetting/remembering?



THE PRESENTATION IS BASED ON MY RESEARCH

- Focusing on the group of authors writing in the Swedish language in Finland in the period 1830–1930 (Biström 2021).
- The beginning of the period, Swedish was the dominant literary language in Finland. For instance, poetry by Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877), who became known as the national poet of Finland.
- The beginning of my period of study, 1830, is also the year of Runeberg's debut and marks a beginning for a modern literary culture in Finland.
- The latter part of the period: the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland has become more aware of its position as a minority < > a growing tradition of literature in the Finnish language > Finland-Swedish minority literature.
- The last decades of the period: a breakthrough for the modernist literature, where Finland-Swedish authors like Edith Södergran, are seen as forerunners in the Nordic countries.
- My study has its starting point in an interest for the impact of different authors during the period of study, especially in research and secondary literature about the authors (Biström 2021).



METHOD

- My study is based on data about 627 authors from Finland found in the bibliographies in *Suomen kirjailijat. Finlands författare. Writers in Finland* (1993; 1981) who have published at least some work of fictional literature (in a broad sense) in Swedish during 1830-1930.
- I have compiled data in Excel on the amounts of database references with the author's name as subject in Finna (finna.fi) >> indicates the amounts of secondary literature.
- Finna is a database/search service that collects material from a big number of Finnish organisations like (university)libraries and The National library in Finland, museums etc.
- I have considered the total amount of references, and for some of the authors the number after going over the references manually.
- As the results must be seen as an indication of the amounts of research/literature about individual authors, rather than exact amounts, I have studied the authors in groups based on search results:
>>Authors with thousands of references >> authors with no relevant references (after manual check).
- I have also noted the gender and year of birth of the authors.



DATABASE VISIBILITY

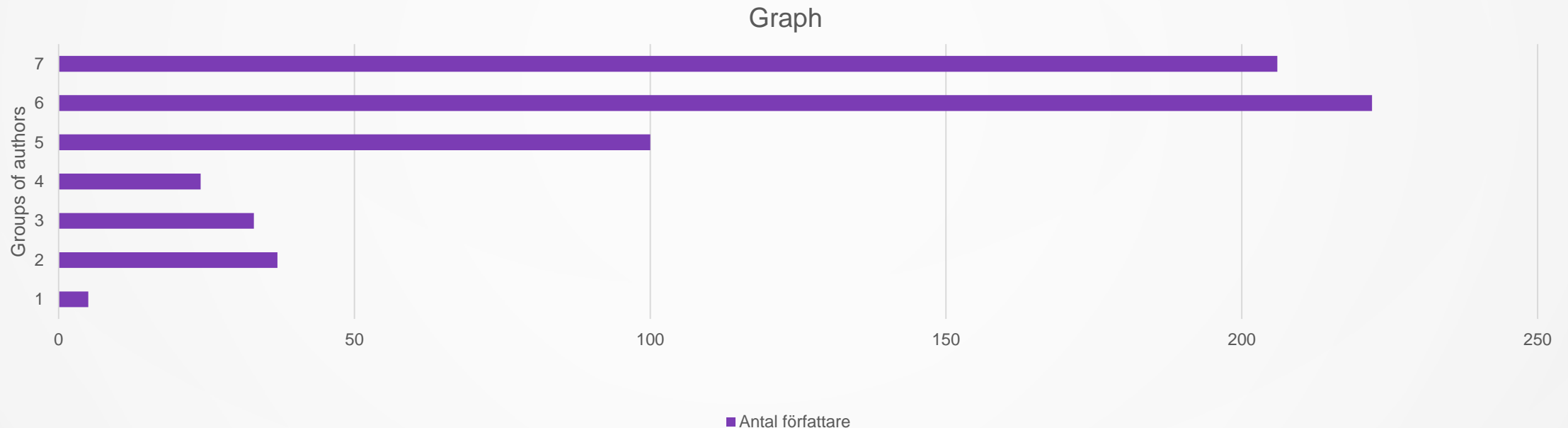
- The resources on which my quantitative study is based, is not complete, as information sources never are. See for instance Katherine Bode (2014: 7–25) in her critique of Franco Morettis’ claims to accuracy and objectivity.
 - I have approached this issue in my work with the concept of “database visibility” – which represents not only the actual amount of literature about an author, but rather the visibility and accessibility of this literature.
 - So, it is not only the actual amount of literature about an author which influences the position of this author in research, but also the accessibility of the secondary literature (Can you find it in the library/on the internet? Is it found when you search library databases?)
 - The database visibility of an author is not static: For instance, different databases give different perspectives on the visibility of authors (search results based on metadata /full text search).
 - Some of the authors whose names give no relevant search results as subjects in Finna, are highly visible in the digital collections of the National library in Finland, consisting of, for instance, an extensive collection of digitized newspapers in Finland.
- >>some authors who are forgotten today, have a high media visibility in their own time.



NUMBERS OF AUTHORS IN GROUPS BASED ON THE AMOUNTS OF FINNA REFERENCES

Group 1: authors whose names give more than a thousand references >>

Group 7: authors whose names give no relevant references





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- Roughly, the graph confirms the view that the most part of literature is forgotten, as those authors with hundreds or thousands of references is clearly a minority.
- However, if we consider group 7 (those with no relevant Finna references) as the "forgotten authors" they make only 205, that is around 33% of all the 627 authors.
- That is clearly less than the forgotten 99,5% of the literature, in Franco Morettis (2013) famous discussion.
- However, it is not clear exactly *how* forgotten an author has to be, in order to be viewed as forgotten. Those authors in my data compilation who generate one or two Finna references, are not viewed as part of a canon.
- We could, for instance, assume that only groups 1-3 in my compilation (those ca 75 authors who gain from 100 to thousands of Finna references) are part of canon. The rest of to authors would then make about 88% of the whole group (still a little less than Moretti would assume).



MINORITY LITERATURE AND REMEMBERING/FORGETTING (SEE MALMIO 2021)

- The hypothesis, that Finland-Swedish literature is less forgotten than one would assume, is also supported by a point made by Kristina Malmio (2021), concerning Finland-Swedish literary history and the year of modernist debutants 1916.
- The minority literature – is not always forgotten but may, on the contrary, be made more visible due to its importance for the identity of the minority.
- In this case, we also talk about a minority literature which is, to some extent, a privileged one.
- As I already mentioned, literature in the Swedish language has a long and strong tradition in literary history in Finland.
- Also, Finland-Swedish literature and culture have strong institutions (like publishers, newspapers...) and financial resources (funding for Finland-Swedish literature).



WHO ARE THE FORGOTTEN 33% - AND HOW DID THEY END UP IN THIS GROUP?

- My ongoing research focuses “forgotten authors” – that is the forgotten 33%, with a theoretical starting point in the concept of cultural memory (Assmann 2010) >> Tracing the processes through which authors are forgotten (or remembered)
- >Some early/preliminary observations:
- 44% women (over all more male authors during 1830-1930 >> 30 % women among all authors)
 - Database visibility
 - Channel/medium for publication: literature in newspapers is more easily forgotten
 - Genre: many of the forgotten authors (especially of the female authors, 38%) wrote literature for children.
 - Observations from newspaper material: repeated reputation/opinion >> some authors as symbols/recurring examples of “bad poetry”.
 - Some are seen as authors without pretence (less significant) from the beginning – the authors themselves could signal a lack of pretence, for instance with subtitles like “ett försök” (an attempt).



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