

The Right Time for a Dane to Cross the North Sea

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The novel, written by a little-known Danish writer who has refused to be interviewed, has an inhospitable, wintry heroine, a strange title and a sombre blue-black jacket. And although HarperCollins has marketed it as a ‘thriller’, it is a bleak discourse on the terrors of modern life with long, often scientific descriptions of ice and snow. So why has Peter Høeg’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* been near the top of the bestseller lists for three months?¹

One might imagine that Bjarne Thorup Thomsen was regarded as a role model by the Danish novelist Peter Høeg (1957–), who arguably spent much of his youth following in the footsteps of his compatriot. A couple of years junior to Thomsen, Høeg was also a student of literature at the University of Copenhagen in the early 1980s. Not long after Thomsen had made the move across the North Sea, first to Newcastle and then on to Edinburgh, the young novelist Høeg began to eye a similar trajectory, doubtless

1. Gerrard 1995a.

impressed by the opportunities afforded to Danes arriving on British shores.²

The cover of the current Vintage Books ebook edition of Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* proclaims the book to be 'the original Scandinavian thriller'. Although this claim is somewhat dubious, it was nevertheless groundbreaking in a number of respects. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen and Claire Thomson identify it as the sole example of a Danish crime fiction international bestseller,³ and it is arguably the most significant Danish book transmitted to Britain in the last century in terms of impact upon reception.⁴ Additionally, the success of *Smilla* in Britain in the early 1990s represents the decline of genre boundaries in British literary circles, as described by Clive Bloom.⁵ Much as Thomsen helped to craft a new hub of Scandinavian research and teaching in Edinburgh over the course of a fruitful career, so Høeg leveraged genre hybridity to secure his place in the British literary canon of the late twentieth century. This chapter explores in further detail how the latter went about transforming his financial and literary fortunes.

2. The British and Irish isles have long been lands of fortune for Danish visitors, and it should come as no surprise that both Thomsen and Høeg opted to emulate their forbears a millennium earlier in crossing the North Sea. Indeed, the departure of Thomsen's renowned footballing prowess from Danish soil was such a paradigm-changing moment that another young Dane who (may have) looked up to Thomsen, one Peter Schmeichel, opted to accept a transfer from Brøndby to Manchester United in 1991 so that he too might benefit from all that the UK had to offer to a young Dane.

3. Thomson and Stougaard-Nielsen 2017: 240.

4. See Giles 2018 for a detailed account of this.

5. Bloom 2008: 10.

Høeg and *Smilla*

About Peter Høeg

Peter Høeg has been a presence on the Danish literary scene since the late 1980s, writing a range of novels in different styles. In particular, he is known for being reluctant to be in the public eye, and has been portrayed over the decades in equal measures as a literary great and as an overrated eccentric.⁶ The story of how Høeg came to be published by the small press Rosinante, run by the late Merete Ries – former publisher at Gyldendal – is one that has been repeated regularly in both the press and scholarship over subsequent years.⁷

Høeg's debut novel *Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede* ('*The History of Danish Dreams*') was published in August 1988, and its saga-like style drew immediate attention. It was a front-page sensation in the Danish press, with parallels being drawn to H.C. Andersen, Blixen, and Kierkegaard.⁸ It won one of Denmark's leading literary prizes, Weekendavisens litteraturpris, in its year of publication.⁹ This set it on a path to relative success for a work by a literary newcomer, being reprinted eight times before enjoying a print run of 30,000 in 1991 when it was added to a book-club list.¹⁰ A subsequent collection of short stories, *Fortællinger om natten* ('*Tales of the Night*'), was also

6. For a thorough introduction to Høeg's biography and literature, see Høeg 2011.

7. In something of a publishing fairy tale, Høeg, an intense young man, arrived at the home of Ries by bicycle to request that she read his manuscript. Perhaps the best account is provided by Ries herself in Ries 1998.

8. Ries 1998.

9. 'Weekendavisens litteraturpris' 2014. Høeg's award-winning credentials continued. He received the Golden Laurel in 1993 for *De måske egnede* ('*Borderliners*').

10. Ringgaard 2006.

received positively. This led to limited success for Høeg with translations into other Scandinavian languages and German. By the early 1990s, Høeg enjoyed a position within the Danish literary establishment as an entrenched newcomer who was unlikely to be dropped by his publishers or the reading public, setting the scene for continued literary experimentation.

The publication and reception of Smilla in Denmark

Rosinante published Høeg's third book in April 1992 with the Danish title *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne*.¹¹ The novel received rapturous press reviews upon release. Jens Kistrup said that 'the novel's Danish virtuoso had done it again' while Søren Vinterberg congratulated Høeg on successfully taking on the thriller genre and succeeding.¹²

The impact on Rosinante was tremendous, transforming the commercial prospects of the publisher from a house with literary prestige but serious liquidity issues into a publishing commodity that eventually attracted the attention of Gyldendal.¹³ This impact was not instantaneous, however. In 1992, the Danish edition of *Smilla* sold just 10,000 copies, one tenth of other bestsellers in the Danish market at the time.¹⁴ Carsten Andersen noted that it was the success of *Smilla* in

11. *Smilla* draws on the genres of crime fiction, thriller and science fiction, and the theme of postcolonialism to tell the story of its half-Greenlandic protagonist, Smilla. As a result of investigating the death of a child in her Copenhagen block of flats, she ends up entangled in a complex web of intrigue that takes her to sea and to the fictional island of Gela Alta off Greenland.

12. Kistrup 1992; Vinterberg 1992. Other equally positive Danish press reviews include Bredal 1992; Bukdahl 1992; Schou 1992; Wiemer 1992. Beyond newspaper reviews, the book was clearly appreciated for its crime-fiction credentials, being nominated as Denmark's entry for the 1993 Glass Key award, and winning this prize.

13. Høeg precipitated a boom and bust effect on Rosinante. See Andersen 1996; Andersen 2002.

14. Andersen 2006.

the anglophone world that kickstarted mass sales in Høeg's native Denmark. The widespread critical positivity was noted in a brief article in *The Guardian* in 1992.¹⁵

English-language publication details

Høeg's foreign rights were marketed by Rosinante directly. While some foreign-rights sales had been achieved, there had been little success in attracting the attention of the anglophone market for Høeg's previous works: 'the suggestion that they should consider buying from one a novel by an unknown Dane about Danish dreams resulted in blank faces'.¹⁶ This reflects a variety of issues, not least the difficulty of selling as a small publisher in a global market, alongside the slow pace of literary exports from Denmark in the 1980s.¹⁷

World English rights to *Smilla* were bought by American publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux (FSG) before publication in Denmark, with UK rights sublicensed to Harvill Press.¹⁸ Ries attributes this to FSG's Danish editor Elisabeth Dyssegaard, although it should be noted that there is more to the backstory of the English-language rights than Ries' account would suggest.¹⁹

15. 'Hit List: Denmark' 1992. The article outlines *Smilla's* position on the Danish bestseller lists, and reflects on other contemporary Danish trends. Interestingly no suggestion is made that the book may be translated into English.

16. Ries 1998: 36–37.

17. This slow pace is clear to see in hindsight. For instance, Ellen Kythor opts to use 1990 as the start date for the corpus data used in Kythor 2018.

18. Ries 1998: 37.

19. MacLehose initially believed he had secured UK rights to *Smilla* on behalf of Harvill, only to find that FSG had acquired World English rights, due to a mix-up at Rosinante. Subsequently, MacLehose reached a gentleman's agreement with FSG's Roger Straus to acquire UK rights. For full details of the acquisition of *Smilla*, see Kythor 2019: 158–159. Furthermore, the context of the British acquisition is further muddled by a suggestion that an EU pilot project for funding the translation of European literature had provided support for the translation of Høeg to English, which undoubtedly would have

Harvill published its edition on 6 September 1993.²⁰

Marketing

Unusually for a translated novel at the time, a thorough marketing strategy was adopted for *Smilla*. Reflecting on Høeg's international success in 1998, Ries concentrated on the American transmission, noting that FSG's editor Elisabeth Dyssegaard had been championing the novel in isolation until a draft translation was available, at which point the publisher's marketing team realised they might have a bestseller on their hands.²¹ In Britain, there was a sophisticated approach to selling copies of *Smilla* that began long before publication, and sought to engage not just readers but also booksellers.

According to Steven Williams, publicist for *Smilla*, the ground had been prepared with literary editors and booksellers markedly far in advance for a translated book of this kind.²² In particular, there was a focus on securing prominent positions for the book in major bookshops such as Waterstones, while also ensuring consistent word-of-mouth recommendations from booksellers to customers.²³ Booksellers were engaged through the use of promotional gimmicks such as a *Smilla*-themed

sweetened the deal for Harvill. See Tucker 1995.

20. It is worth noting that *Smilla* represented a genuine instance of a British literary discovery of a Scandinavian author ahead of other key markets. The English translation was one of the first translations of *Smilla* to appear, with the vast majority of foreign translations appearing in the period 1994–96. Even German, in which Høeg's *The History of Danish Dreams* was published in 1992, was outflanked by English.

21. Ries 1998: 37.

22. Kythor 2019: 207. MacLehose reportedly decided that *Smilla* was to be promoted at the top of Harvill's list for autumn 1993, more intensely than any other book they were releasing. See Pihl 1996: 111.

23. Specially designed stands for copies of *Smilla* were provided to booksellers, and the novel was Waterstones' book of the month in December 1993. See Pihl 1996: 107–110.

jigsaw puzzle sent en masse to bookshops in Britain, which was carried through to the marketing directed at consumers.²⁴

Notably, Høeg was extensively involved in the British launch of *Smilla*. Tina Pihl observes that Høeg gave four different radio interviews, while also being interviewed by two British newspapers ahead of the book's release.²⁵ He also made personal appearances for the book launch in London. The newspaper articles focused heavily on Høeg as an eccentric, covering extensively his past as an actor, dancer, and fencer, while glossing over his literary success.²⁶

Role of the translator

FSG commissioned Tiina Nunnally to translate *Smilla* on the basis of a strong translation of another book, Mette Newth's *The Abduction*, translated together with her husband Steven Murray in 1989.²⁷ Nunnally's translation, which was published by FSG, went on to win the Lewis Galantière Award from the American Translators Association.²⁸ Høeg, however, was unhappy with the translation. Nunnally suggests that it was Høeg's unfamiliarity with English and nervousness due to the stakes involved in publishing in English that were the cause of his disappointment.²⁹ Høeg, in turn, stated that he had misgivings in relation to Nunnally's translation, feeling that it was not only error-strewn but also normalised *Smilla* when

24. Pihl 1996: 111.

25. Ibid.: 108–112.

26. For example, see Binding 1993.

27. Gwinn 2001.

28. An award bestowed biennially on a book-length literary translation into English from any language except for German, and published in the US; it is awarded directly to the translator for their translation effort. For further details see Feuerle 2014.

29. 'He went from a market of 5 million people to the rest of the world'. See Gwinn 2001.

he preferred what could be described as a quirkier approach.³⁰ Høeg reportedly sent a forty-page letter to FSG with corrections and suggestions, but found that many of these were ignored. When Harvill sent the translation to the author anew, MacLehose reports that Høeg effectively rewrote the novel in the margins.³¹

Despite Harvill sharing the heavily revised translation with FSG, the American publisher opted to stick with its own version, and Nunnally refused to approve the British version. According to MacLehose, the British edition is a 'much more lively, visually exact text' as desired by the author.³² Nunnally describes it as 'rife with grammatical errors and strangely contorted sentences'.³³ Høeg was unaware that he was in a position to veto the American translation but stated in 1996 that he wished he had done so.³⁴ The range of narratives about this situation tend to overlook the role played personally by MacLehose at Harvill, but given the length of the British editorial process, MacLehose's involvement must have been extensive.³⁵

The outcome was two different English-language translations, one British, one American, derived from Nunnally's work, which were published simultaneously on each side of the Atlantic. Nunnally requested her name be removed from the Harvill edition in the UK on the understanding that it appear without a translator credit, but it was instead published under the pseudonym of 'F. David'.³⁶ Høeg reportedly chose

30. Follin 1997: 35.

31. Gardner 2010; Kythor 2019: 319.

32. Gardner 2010.

33. Follin 1997: Letter inserted after page 34.

34. *Ibid.*: 36.

35. This is borne out by observations on the Britishisation of Mankell novels by MacLehose in Venuti 2008: 157.

36. Follin 1997: Letter inserted after page 34.

to withdraw from participating in work on subsequent translations as a result of the latent hostility of the situation with Nunnally.³⁷ Furthermore, a number of comparative academic studies compare the two translations,³⁸ while the subject is often discussed by *Smilla's* British publisher, MacLehose.³⁹

The reception of *Smilla*

Critical reception

Writing some years after publication, Bloom described *Smilla* as a surprise bestseller, noting that the ‘complexity of the plotting, nature of the thematic concerns and seriousness of purpose may make *Smilla* one of many bestsellers bought but never fully read’.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the book was widely reviewed upon release, albeit mostly in the broadsheets, and largely received by critics in positive terms.⁴¹

Many reviewers chose to focus on the literary quality of *Smilla*. An anonymous review in the *Financial Times* noted that ‘[i]t’s a novel, of course, not a “thriller” – but that has to be said of all good thrillers, because the word, so inappropriate to the boring bulk of them, devalues the exceptions’.⁴² Geraldine Brennan, writing in *The Observer*, took a similar line in her

37. *Ibid.*: 34–35. Indeed, speaking in 2017, Høeg’s description of his involvement with his current English-language translator, Martin Aitken, is the complete opposite of his involvement with the translation of *Smilla* in the 1990s. See Giles 2017.

38. Satterlee 1996; Follin 1997; Thomson 1997.

39. MacLehose 2004; Gardner 2010; Kythor 2019.

40. Bloom 2008: 305.

41. Pihl notes this was far in excess of what Danish or other translated books tended to receive in the British press during this period. See Pihl 1996: 109.

42. ‘Books – Thrills at Turn of Leaf’ 1993.

review, describing *Smilla* as ‘a riveting psychological novel’.⁴³ Even a brief but positive review published in *The Mail on Sunday* sought to establish Høeg’s literary credentials: ‘Hoeg [sic] is a masterful writer, using a thriller-like plot as a means of investigating other, more profound matters, like the experience of foreignness or the longing that is nostalgia.’⁴⁴

Beyond straightforward literary quality, more than one reviewer was attuned to the hybridity of *Smilla*. Writing in *TLS*, Jim McCue clearly found pleasure in Høeg’s ‘[obliviousness] to the dangers to his narrative [...] he writes like an escapologist’ as well as in many of the jokes that are added to the prose at the most unexpected of moments.⁴⁵ Clive Sinclair, writing in *The Independent on Sunday*, found the novel’s ending strongly reminiscent of Shelley and Herge.⁴⁶ Marcel Berlins, writing for *The Sunday Times*, was particularly impressed by Høeg’s achievement in taking ice beyond the work of writers such as Martin Cruz Smith and Alistair MacLean and making it, along with snow, an essential character in the book, representing the moods and actions of Smilla.⁴⁷ Berlins’ argument was that while the book is ‘a good straight thriller: a tight, unusual plot with politico-ecological overtones, lots of tough action, multiple twists and a shocking, unforeseeable climax’, its strength lay in the work that Høeg had done beyond those key elements of any thriller. Writing in *New Statesman and Society*, John Williams argued that *Smilla* demonstrated the elasticity of the contemporary crime novel.⁴⁸ He joked that the plot came straight from a Michael Crichton science-fiction thriller.

43. Brennan 1993.

44. Trelawney 1993.

45. McCue 1993.

46. Sinclair 1993.

47. Berlins 1993.

48. Williams 1993.

There was also a tendency for predominantly male reviewers to be enchanted by the protagonist, Smilla. This was found in the *Financial Times*' review, while literary translator Shaun Whiteside's review for *The Guardian* lauded the first half of the novel: 'the beguiling build-up is slow, strange, and often very funny, with plenty of quirky detail', and emphasised that the strength of the novel at this stage lies in the humanity of Smilla's journey of discovery as she finds out more about the child Isiah, in tandem with reflecting upon her own relationship with her mother.⁴⁹ Ultimately, Whiteside reflected that he would have happily met Smilla under other circumstances. Sinclair commented: 'I look forward to seeing Sigourney Weaver as Smilla Jaspersen.'⁵⁰

In terms of the presence of Greenland throughout the novel, and the postcolonial dimension to the novel, the British critical response was muted. When that aspect was raised, it was with a degree of scepticism. Sinclair highlighted the linguistic determinism of the novel in introducing the reader to the extensive Greenlandic vocabulary for snow, while remaining unconvinced about Høeg's empathy for the Greenlanders. Sinclair suggested that 'when all is said and done [...] he is more influenced by American movies than by Inuit culture [...] indeed, the book really comes to life in the numerous passages which describe the shedding of blood, not the falling of snow'. *The Guardian*'s Whiteside merely felt the novel offered unusual insight into Greenland. John Williams appeared not to read the novel as a postcolonial text as such but reflected that Høeg had successfully transformed what is typically an empty wilderness in literature, Greenland, into a place where people live. Critics like Berlins had remarkably little to say about the Greenlandic

49. Whiteside 1993.

50. Sinclair 1993.

or postcolonial elements of the novel altogether. The picture is one of blithe disinterest in the topic in book-reviewing circles.

Not all reviews were wholly positive. *The Herald's* Alan Chadwick appeared to damn *Smilla* with faint, or perhaps non-specific, praise, finding it 'chilling', and noting that Høeg is 'probably the best thriller writer in Denmark'.⁵¹ Other reviewers, in particular the *Financial Times* and Whiteside, had been underwhelmed by the quality of the second half of the novel.

Paul Binding's review in *The Independent* provides excellent insight into the cumulative critical response to *Smilla*.

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow is, on one level, both a whodunit and a thriller – ingeniously, elaborately and satisfyingly plotted and with a breathless narrative pace. It is extremely hard to put this long novel down and the excitement it engenders spills over into your time away from it. But this is only one of its attributes; it is also a novel of a riven society, of the relations between Europe and an under-considered part of the world, of science versus the atavistic, of humankind versus the terrifying vastness and power of Nature.⁵²

The majority of critics were positive, highlighting the inherent readability of the book due to its thriller and crime-fiction tropes, alongside the more highbrow literary qualities of the novel. While there were some nods to Høeg's postcolonial approach, the majority of reflections upon Greenland were largely related to setting and snow, revelling in the depictions of the exotic north.

51. Chadwick 1993.

52. Binding 1993.

Popular reception

When Roger Straus and I first published Peter Høeg, we thought we were doing something of a favour for Danish literature, and then *Miss Smilla* abruptly sold a million copies in both England and America.⁵³ (Christopher MacLehose)

Tracking the undeniable sales success of *Smilla* in the years immediately after release is something of a challenge given the limitations of Nielsen BookScan, which only tracks British sales from 1998 onwards. Bloom laments the absence of a coherent bestseller list during the 1990s and notes that they were often incomplete. As an example, he remarks that while *Smilla* did not feature on the bestseller list for 1995, the book had sold 400,000 copies in the space of two years.⁵⁴ Consequently, we are left with the word of *Smilla*'s publisher, which is not necessarily always wholly accurate.⁵⁵

We can dig deeper into these earlier years through consulting the bestseller charts, even if they are deficient, alongside other fragmentary information available to the researcher. Most pertinently, Pihl notes that the first print run of *Smilla*, totalling 10,000 copies, sold out quickly, and that three months after release, a total of 21,000 copies had been sold.⁵⁶ However,

53. Hitchens 2011: 19. In the early 2000s, Høeg was the all-time bestselling author in translation in the US. See Wirtén 2004: 42.

54. Bloom 2008: 99.

55. The figure of one million has been used rhetorically by MacLehose, and others, for many years, including in conversation with this author. Given that at the time there was an interest in driving hype through high sales figures, and subsequently in building the story of a bestseller, the publisher evidently has a vested interest in sharing this figure. More pertinently, publisher sales figures reflect how many copies it sells to retailers, not how many copies are bought by consumers.

56. Pihl 1996: 113. This three-month period cited by Pihl would have covered the majority of the run into Christmas 1993, one of the most

the spread of these sales over what may have been multiple editions adds to the confusion: while most newspaper reviews in September 1993 reference a hardback edition selling for £15.99, a paperback issue, also published by Harvill, entered the *Observer*/Waterstones bestseller charts in December 1993.⁵⁷ It rose as high as number five,⁵⁸ before falling to number ten by mid-January 1994.⁵⁹

A Flamingo paperback edition published in October 1994 at a reduced price of £5.99 appeared to have some impact, with the book placed at number one in the bestseller list following a fortnight on sale.⁶⁰ It continued to remain in the top ten, moving up and down, before returning to number one in the run-up to Christmas 1994.⁶¹ It is, however, of note that in a compilation of the top-rated books by a spread of publications at the end of 1994, *Smilla* had not made the cut as a regularly selected top book to buy for Christmas – despite being a regular fixture in the bestseller list during the run-up to Christmas.⁶²

A major publishing event in 1995 was the collapse of the NBA.⁶³ Those who had argued in favour of keeping it believed that its loss would lead to a narrowing of the market, a cut in titles published accompanied by price rises on less popular titles, and shorter print runs. The converse argument was that much of the ‘rubbish’ published with the support of the NBA

important times of year in trade bookselling.

57. ‘*Observer*/Waterstones Best-Seller List’ 1993.

58. *Ibid.*

59. ‘*Observer*/Waterstones Best-Seller List’ 1994a.

60. ‘*Observer*/Waterstones Best-Seller List’ 1994b.

61. ‘*Observer*/Waterstones Best-Seller List’ 1994a.

62. ‘Top of the Tops’ 1994.

63. The NBA was an agreement between British publishers and booksellers that set the price paid by British customers for books. It collapsed following the withdrawal of publisher Hodder Headline from the agreement and the ensuing domino effect as all other major publishers followed.

would no longer reach the market and that expenditure on books would increase.⁶⁴ The end of the NBA had a significant impact on the literary market, permitting true mass production of books for the very first time. This was true in the case of *Smilla*, with the Flamingo edition ending 1995 at the top of the year's bestselling paperbacks list.⁶⁵ *The Guardian* even noted that the continued success of *Smilla* throughout 1995 was highly unusual in publishing terms.⁶⁶ It examined a number of changes in the publishing industry that had had an impact on sales trends. Apart from the collapse of the NBA, airport sales were said to make up a large proportion of receipts.

By early 1996, *Smilla* had spent a full year in the paperback bestseller chart.⁶⁷ The novel benefitted from another repackage in 1996 with the establishment of the Panther paperback list, intended to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Harvill Press, but from this point onwards, sales began to slow down. The main paperback edition of *Smilla*, which continues to be published under the same ISBN, even if jacket designs have varied somewhat, was published on 1 April 1996. Sales figures for this in the first two years of publication are unavailable, but since 1998, 37,494 copies have been sold in the UK.⁶⁸ We have Bloom's assertion that *Smilla* sold 400,000 copies in 1994–95. He also notes that it sold 140,000 copies in 1995 – two years after its initial release.⁶⁹ The origins of the oft-repeated statement that the novel sold one million copies in the UK are hard to

64. Macdonald 1994. A good overview of the decline of the NBA is provided by Jordison 2010.

65. 'Best Sellers of 1995' 1995.

66. 'Titans and Terrors in a Troubled Industry' 1996.

67. 'Chart Watch' 1996.

68. As of 15 July 2017. This two-year gap is significant, however, as the film adaptation was released in 1997 and would presumably have had an impact on sales in that year.

69. Bloom 2008: 305.

trace, but by the turn of the millennium, it was being stated as fact.⁷⁰

Comparing the limited sales figures to hand for *Smilla* is challenging. Ongoing sales of *Smilla* since 1998, covered by Nielsen, are comparable to those experienced by titles like *Roseanna* by Sjöwall and Wahlöö, while the estimated figures for the first few years of sales are obviously significant but pale when compared to a modern megaseller such as Stieg Larsson. Nevertheless, if the figure of one million is taken at face value, it means that it means that *Smilla* sold more copies than books by present-day bestselling authors such as J.K. Rowling's crime-writing pseudonym Robert Galbraith.⁷¹

In 1996, MacLehose led a management buyout of Harvill from HarperCollins, making Harvill independent. Høeg proactively ensured that he remained with MacLehose and Harvill, rather than parent company HarperCollins, suggesting a strong relationship with his British publisher.⁷² However, the commercial sensitivity of this decision can be seen in the repercussions that followed. HarperCollins reportedly dispatched a private investigator to Copenhagen to track down Høeg and offer him a lump sum of £50,000 to stay with them – to little effect.⁷³ In 1997, matters became more fraught, with HarperCollins issuing a high court writ against Harvill with a view to retrieving the profitable author Høeg and *Smilla*.⁷⁴ While the matter appears to have been settled, this degree of animosity indicates the commercial value of Høeg to his British publisher.

70. Jaggi 2000.

71. Galbraith having sold 900,883 books across three titles as of 15 July 2017. All Nielsen BookScan data cited by the author accessed during 2017.

72. France 1996.

73. Andersen 1996.

74. 'Snow Joke for Smilla' 1997.

Sales of *Smilla* over the first three or four years after publication were evidently remarkable, all the more so given the relative lack of interest in Scandinavian literature at the time; beyond the book itself capturing the imaginations of reviewers and readers, the marketing initiatives adopted by Harvill must also have been effective. This was evidently combined with canny use of affordable paperback editions, healthy airport sales, and conceivably the additional commercial edge provided by the collapse of the NBA.

Heirs to Høeg

Høeg on British shores

Most notably, beyond the positive critical reception and sales success, *Smilla* was an award winner, receiving the Fiction Silver Dagger from the CWA in 1994.⁷⁵ However, *Smilla*, and to some degree Høeg himself, were adopted into the British literary canon at a time which saw the number of Scandinavian authors being imported to Britain increase. *Smilla* was broadcast as Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime* in 1996, situating it firmly in the heart of the British literary establishment, while a big-budget film adaptation starring a predominantly British and Irish cast further solidified this sense, even if the film itself disappointed.⁷⁶ In terms of popular culture, it appears that Høeg's work generated widespread recognition of the multiple Inuit words for snow, with a multitude of articles published in the

75. See 'The CWA Gold Dagger'. The novel was also an award winner in the US, where it was a finalist for the Edgar Award for Best Mystery Novel, while translator Nunnally won the 1994 Lewis Galantière Translation Award for her involvement.

76. 'A Bond Movie on Ice' 1997. Reviewers appeared to find multiple plot changes in the film problematic.

press in the subsequent decade mentioning different types of snow in the same breath as Høeg. In many respects, the novel also became a reference point for the early to mid-nineties, being cited over a decade later in print journalism on multiple occasions each year.

The success of *Smilla* led to the rapid acquisition and translation of Høeg's other works, with four books appearing over a period of three years from 1995.⁷⁷ *Borderliners*, published in 1995, was generally found to be wanting by critics. John Bradley found the book frustrating on a number of levels, most notably complaining that Høeg was questioning the intelligence of the reader through his prose.⁷⁸ *The History of Danish Dreams* (1996) briefly managed to reach the bestseller top ten,⁷⁹ though *The Observer* described it as 'a young man's ramble', overly reliant on a debased form of magic realism,⁸⁰ while 1997's *Tales of the Night* did little better with the critics.⁸¹ The worst criticism was reserved for *The Woman and the Ape*, published at the end of 1996, which was met with incredulity over the fact that its author could also have written *Smilla*. Emma Tennant suggested that it was likely to win the Bad Sex Prize, while noting that 'the characterisation and the plot are difficult to follow; the book is frequently incomprehensible'.⁸²

Following the 1997 publication of *Tales of the Night*, Høeg entered a decade-long hiatus before returning in 2007. All three

77. Høeg 1995; Høeg 1996a; Høeg 1996b; Høeg 1997. These novels were all translated by Barbara Haveland, who reportedly enjoyed a far more positive relationship with the author than her predecessor. See Cunningham 1997.

78. Bradley 1995.

79. 'Best Sellers' 1996.

80. 'Remains of the Dane' 1995. Laura Cumming found the protagonist to be inept and distinctly less likeable than Smilla. See Cumming 1996.

81. For a typical disappointed reviewer, see Knight 1997.

82. Tennant 1996.

of Høeg's novels written this century have been published in English translation.⁸³ *The Quiet Girl*, published in 2007, was received well in critical terms, with the suggestion that it was a welcome return by Høeg to the literary scene,⁸⁴ though *The Elephant Keepers' Children* (2012) was met with a somewhat more lukewarm response.⁸⁵ *The Susan Effect*, published in 2017, met with more positivity, although reviews tended towards drawing strong connections between the new novel and *Smilla*. Forshaw harked back to the original and saw *Susan* as a near cousin, while *The Economist* stated that Høeg 'reverts to the Smilla model'.⁸⁶ Høeg's two bursts of literary activity in Britain, one over the past decade, and the preceding spell in the 1990s, have all fallen into the shadow of the critical and commercial success enjoyed by *Smilla*.

The hunt for other Scandinavian Høegs

The fulsome acclaim granted to Peter Høeg's *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* [...] was a clarion call to British readers that there was (in the words of Shakespeare's Coriolanus) 'a world elsewhere'.⁸⁷

The race was on to find other equivalent Scandinavian authors to import to the UK. The focus of every British publisher at the 1995 Frankfurt Book Fair was to find the next Scandinavian hit,⁸⁸ while Ries noted that every publisher wanted to buy the

83. Høeg 2007; Høeg 2012; Høeg 2017.

84. Lawson 2007. 12,865 copies have been sold in the UK as of 15 July 2017.

85. Moss 2012. Only 2,234 copies have been sold in the UK as of 15 July 2017.

86. Forshaw 2017; 'Peter Hoeg's New Novel Is a High-Concept Thriller' 2017.

87. Forshaw 2012: 5.

88. 'Happiness Is A' 1995.

translation rights of a book by any foreign author, so long as they were Høeg.⁸⁹ Ries cites the impact of Høeg, in direct parallel with the success of writers such as Jostein Gaarder and Kerstin Ekman, as the reason why Danish and other Nordic writers suddenly became interesting to rights-acquisition departments around the world.⁹⁰

The outcome in this pursuit of other Høegs saw some Scandinavian writers fare better than others in the British literary market. Reviewing Herbjørg Wassmo's *Dina's Book* in 1996, Sam Taylor complained that *Smilla* had 'ploughed a path for lesser compatriots' before going on to say that 'Wassmo writes like Gabriel Garcia Marquez [sic] with a learning impediment'.⁹¹ Pernille Rygg's 1997 debut, *The Butterfly Effect*, found itself subject to similar comparisons with *Smilla*. For instance, Amanda Craig of *The Times* found Rygg's efforts in a post-*Smilla* era to be predictable and 'no great challenge to anything but your patience'.⁹²

While Wassmo and Rygg failed to engage British critics as they experimented with what was perceived to be *Smilla*-esque hybridity, writers such as Ekman, toying with the crime genre in a fashion similar to Høeg, enjoyed greater traction in the UK. Her first English translation, published in 1995, was *Blackwater*, which sold 16,000 copies during its launch year despite little-to-no press attention.⁹³ Reviewers were generally impressed, as with Høeg, by the literary quality of Ekman's work alongside the hints of genre fiction.⁹⁴ Binding went so far as to describe it as the

89. Ries 1998.

90. Ibid.

91. Taylor 1996.

92. Craig 1997.

93. Feay 1996.

94. O'Sullivan 1995.

most important Swedish novel in Britain of the 1990s.⁹⁵ Despite all these factors, Ekman's British publisher in the mid-1990s, Chatto & Windus, appears to have missed an opportunity to capitalise on her as the next Høeg-esque bestseller.

The other major Scandinavian bestseller of the 1990s in Britain was found in the form of a novel almost wholly unlike *Smilla* – Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. The critical response upon publication in 1995 was typically impressed by the philosophical dimension of the book but tended to question whether it was a true novel.⁹⁶ By 1998, *Sophie's World* had sold over half a million copies and spent eighty-three weeks on the bestseller list.⁹⁷ Gaarder, however, was not another Høeg. Yet, it is evident that the success enjoyed by Harvill Press with a Scandinavian author meant that other publishers were also inclined to consider their options for importing Scandinavian literature in a way they had not done before. In many ways, the success of Høeg and Gaarder with UK readers foreshadowed the diversity of Scandinavian literature that was to arrive on British shores in the two subsequent decades.

Transatlantic weather books

A further trend that can be identified in the years after *Smilla* is a wave of other novels being published, largely produced in English, that critics began to classify as belonging in the same category as Høeg's novel. These works can be described

95. Binding 1998.

96. See, for example, May 1995.

97. Thackray 1998. The book had reportedly sold 50,000 copies in the UK in its first three months on sale, and ended 1995 at number two in the hardback bestseller list. See 'Best Sellers of 1995' 1995; Lyall 1995. The paperback edition, also published in 1995, managed to sell in excess of 160,000 copies before the turn of the year. See Ritchie 1996.

as ‘transatlantic weather books’. Prominent examples of these books include David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, and even Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong*. Writing in 1996, just over two years after *Smilla* was published, Catherine Bennett described a new genre of ‘weather-books’ which had been established by Høeg, stating that the genre label had become so established in publishing that a publisher had ‘boasted recently of buying “next year’s snow book”’.⁹⁸ Jason Hazeley chose to focus on snow in particular, describing it as the ‘Fargo Factor’, a reference to the 1996 film *Fargo*.⁹⁹

The categorisation of these novels typically manifested itself through reviews in the press. For example, in the case of Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*, reviewers were quick to draw connections between Høeg and Guterson, as well as Proulx.¹⁰⁰ Guterson enjoyed success far beyond that expected of a debut writer in much the same fashion as Høeg, with his book selling around 11,000 copies in hardback.¹⁰¹ As well as the similarity in title, and the parallels drawn between Guterson’s plot and Høeg’s, it is of note that the marketing of the book actively sought to place the novel into the category of ‘Nordic thriller’, despite its American origin.¹⁰² Guterson told Suzi Feay that he had not read Høeg’s work but said ‘we’re all just telling the same stories for a new generation. Nobody has any new ideas.’

This author takes the view that Bennett’s ‘weather-book’ best reflects the variety of the books in this sub-genre, but that it could be better described as transatlantic to demonstrate that

98. Bennett 1996.

99. Hazeley 1997.

100. Gerrard 1995b. Indeed, it was later suggested by Gerrard that a natural response to finishing *Smilla* was to read Guterson’s novel. See Gerrard 1995c.

101. Feay 1996.

102. *Ibid.* In fact, Guterson’s novel takes place in a Japanese community in the Pacific Northwest of the US.

it is not solely a European or North American trend. Other than the focus on grey, weather-driven settings, and in many cases snow, the other trait of these novels is the use of hybridity in the shape of quality literary credentials to present books as elite literature, while making use of genre fiction tendencies to make the books appealing to a wider cross-section of readers.

Trends and hybridity: *Smilla* in Britain

In *Smilla*, we have a single novel lauded by critics as both literary and readable, exotic and yet somehow familiar. The positivity of reviewers is matched by book buyers, who happily turned the book into the bestselling Scandinavian novel of the decade, and regardless of glib comments that few manage to complete the book, many of the central themes have been adopted into British popular culture. The impact of this one book was also remarkable, with a notable Høeg-inspired flurry of Scandinavian translations commissioned in the years that followed *Smilla's* arrival in Britain, as well as the emergence of other, less Høeg-esque Scandinavian writers and the establishment of a transatlantic weather-book sub-genre. What follows is an analysis of why this happened, along with an appraisal of the position of *Smilla* and Høeg in the British literary sphere.

Response to contemporary trends

In literary terms, Britain in the 1990s was characterised by diversity:

examples of novels can be identified that address issues of provincialism and globalisation, multiculturalism and specific national and regional identities, experimentation and a reengagement with a realist tradition, as well as renewed and

reinvigorated interest in a range of differing and overlapping identities: nation, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and even the post-human.¹⁰³

It was a decade of healthy literary production as writers and readers sought to engage with their identities on a number of levels.

Smilla's reception, in particular, with both reviewers and readers is a reflection of the prevailing literary trends in the early 1990s in Britain. Literature of the decade, a *fin de siècle*, was characterised by reflection on the past century, as well as ambivalence about the future.¹⁰⁴ Uncertainty surrounding a rapidly changing, technologising society concerned about the looming millennial shift was accentuated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which had for so long provided a straightforward paradigm to many of us versus them. In this wavering light lay fertile ground for *Smilla* to make an impact on British readers, as a novel that reflected the grey areas of society and the places where fact and fiction were easily confused.

Bloom noted that waves of immigration from the 1940s to the 1970s were being reflected upon through second- and third-generation immigrant literature in the 1990s.¹⁰⁵ Høeg's examination of the postcolonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland, most astutely identified by reviewers such as Binding, and also hinted at by Sinclair and Whiteside, was obviously one that spoke strongly to British readers of the early 1990s. In addition to exploring the experience of non-white immigrants in Britain, Bloom also identifies a trend towards 'ethnically inflected novels' that specifically aim to give white readers a greater understanding of other

103. Bentley 2005b: 1.

104. Ibid.: 2.

105. Bloom 2008: 129.

cultures. While Bloom cites authors such as Alexander McCall Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Khaled Hosseini in this regard,¹⁰⁶ the designation is obviously applicable to *Smilla* – a novel about a non-European outsider in Copenhagen, with the remote and unfamiliar setting of Greenland.

Sara Danius argued that the greatest strength of *Smilla* was its contemporary quality, which is imbued with postmodern uncertainty and postcolonial ambivalence.¹⁰⁷ This contemporary quality in the British setting, and the novel's adhesion to British literary currents of the early 1990s, obviously allowed *Smilla* to take up a more central position in the literary poly-system than is typically afforded to translated books.

Bestseller by hybridity

Smilla's successful arrival in Britain was not solely the result of conformance with contemporary literary trends. It went further, by being at the forefront of literary developments in the early 1990s. Figures such as Bill Buford, editor of *Granta*, had pronounced the death of the English novel by the 1980s, suggesting novels had become an essentially middle-class and whining monologue, no more than a 'longish piece of writing with something wrong with it'.¹⁰⁸ Yet Pamela Bickley notes that the 1990s marked the arrival of a diverse range of new literary forms, revitalising the novel in the process.¹⁰⁹ *Smilla* certainly fits into this category.

Høeg's representation of postcolonial issues and pre-millennial uncertainty was presented innovatively, making use of genre hybridity. His use of less prestigious genre forms such as the thriller, and to some extent also science fiction, meant that

106. Ibid.: 15–16.

107. Danius 1994.

108. Quoted in Bickley 2008: 10.

109. Ibid.: 11.

Smilla was not only more appealing to a wider audience but also at the heart of the revitalisation of the novel in Britain at the time. Ola Larsmo argued that in *Smilla*, Høeg had taken on a genre and twisted it, managing to exploit the clichés of that genre but to his own end.¹¹⁰ The use of genre no longer automatically set a novel apart as being lowbrow as it might once have done, and indeed became a point of strength for the fickle commentariat when they considered it had been done well. Bo Tao Michaëlis argued that the way in which Høeg not only took into consideration issues understood in the anglophone sphere but also presented them through the use of the thriller genre made *Smilla* ripe for export from Denmark, comparing Høeg to authors such as John Le Carré and Alistair MacLean.¹¹¹ This kind of hybridity has worked well over past decades, and *Smilla* took advantage of the growing British predisposition towards books of this ilk.

Mark Morris went a step further in his classification of *Smilla*.¹¹² He argued that it, along with other titles in the ‘trans-atlantic weather book’ sub-genre, was a big bourgeois hit. This was on the grounds of hybridity actualised through these works being sufficiently literary to appear clever to readers, while actually remaining accessible to those readers who did not read widely. *Smilla* was a fresh addition to the literary scene, and one that appealed to a broad cross-section of readers of both popular and elite literature.

Tell the people what they want

While the conformance of *Smilla* to prevailing literary trends paired with its innovative use of hybridity appealed to British readers and reviewers of the early 1990s, this did not occur

110. Larsmo 1995: 17.

111. Michaëlis 2005: 148.

112. Morris 2002.

in isolation. The extensive marketing campaign run by Harvill was clearly a significant contributory factor to the reception, popular and critical, of the novel.

Joanna Pitman strongly suggests that the popular success of novels such as *Smilla* was contingent on word-of-mouth recommendations and an apparent faith in 'solid' plots that are easy to follow.¹¹³ There is certainly truth in this observation, but it assumes that the initial recommendations stemmed from straightforward enthusiastic readers passing on tips. In practice, as has been established, Harvill had run a comprehensive campaign to target reviewers and booksellers prior to release, in addition to an advertising campaign run after publication. As can be seen from the range of newspaper articles discussing its success during subsequent years, Harvill were also highly effective at continuing to drive mentions of *Smilla* and accompanying hype. Word-of-mouth recommendations clearly had an impact, but it was only possible for them to do so through a concerted effort to tell people to make those recommendations.

British readers were also provided with an author with whom they could engage beyond the book. As noted, Høeg was involved in the launch of *Smilla*, and press coverage of him served to highlight his consumable eccentricity. Høeg also conveyed a certain degree of mystique: it has been widely reported that he dislikes publicity work.¹¹⁴ Despite this, Høeg has been interviewed semi-regularly for all of his books' publications in Britain, and has made public appearances at bookshops and literary festivals over the course of the past two decades.

The widespread popular impact of *Smilla* in the early years is down to an intelligent and driven marketing strategy that ensured that patrons of literature, whether reviewers or

113. Pitman 1997.

114. O'Neill 1995. Høeg reportedly 'feels at odds with twentieth-century society, unable to move at the pace of modern life'.

gatekeepers, as well as consumers, were fully enthused by the book on offer. In terms of Scandinavian books in translation, this arguably represents the first successful attempt to create a bestseller, by engaging with readers and reviewers on their terms and providing the literary polysystem with a product that fulfilled many contemporary requirements.

Transatlantic weather books and the exotic north

Robin Hunt observed that many books in the early nineties, especially thrillers, used settings that were 'remote, high and cold'.¹¹⁵ While literature has arguably always acted as a conduit for escapism, the desire of writers to take their readers to places they have never been or imagined seems to have been particularly common during the 1990s, reflecting the increasing uncertainty in a post-Cold War, pre-millennial world. This might be thought of as the 'Fargo Factor', as mentioned earlier, or indeed part of a longer running trend for snow and ice to feature in certain genres.¹¹⁶ However, the identification of a transatlantic weather book sub-genre common in the 1990s helps to trace the way in which *Smilla* successfully integrated itself into the British literary polysystem. In particular, this sub-genre clearly interfaced well with existing British notions of an exoticised north, especially amongst the literary elite responsible for publishing, reviewing, and recommending books such as *Smilla* to the reading public.

An excellent example of this type of interaction is found in Jane Jakeman, who was quick to draw connections between authors such as Høeg and Ekman and the Norse sagas, while also alluding to the enduring and strong appeal of snow-laden Nordic writing to specifically British readers.¹¹⁷ Harry Bingham,

115. Hunt 1996.

116. Hazeley 1997.

117. Jakeman 1997.

meanwhile, noted that the Danish-Greenlandic element of the novel meant it was easy to portray it as an exciting novelty.¹¹⁸

The connection between transatlantic weather books is hinted at by Nicci Gerrard, who noted that *Smilla* was not the only work of the early 1990s in a northern setting to catch the British imagination, citing Proulx and Gaarder too.¹¹⁹ Her thesis was that the protagonists' desperation in *Smilla* and *The Shipping News* to escape harsh urban landscapes reflected British pre-millennial fears. Drawing a direct connection between Britain and Scandinavia, Gerrard concluded 'the British are a puritanical race – we associate pleasure with fecklessness and sin; a life that is easy must be wrong. Life is not easy in the northern countries'. Thorpe went further, describing the sub-genre as 'northern-oriented fiction' reliant on 'ice-storms, stalling conversations, brooding depression and low temperatures'.¹²⁰ In both playing upon the tropes of the transatlantic weather book sub-genre and tugging on the 'borealist' heartstrings of British critics, *Smilla* effectively added a further layer of hybridity that gave it appeal to UK readers and facilitated a smooth passage to the centre of the literary polysystem.

Finally, the presumption of exceptionalism in the case of the British-Scandinavian literary relationship is also worth noting in this regard. Kristine Anderson has observed that there has been a tendency for Danish writers translated to English to be categorised amongst English-speaking writers, rather than as translated authors. She cites Brandes and Andersen, and speculates that the natural progression is for Høeg's work to become part of the canon of a British 'female detective genre' rather than being categorised as foreign fiction.¹²¹ This is ultimately

118. Bingham 2006.

119. Gerrard 1995a.

120. Thorpe 2002.

121. Anderson 2000: 335.

a borealist perspective, drawing on the sense that Britain and Scandinavia's shared heritage means that a Danish novel can be considered as part of Britain's domestic literary canon.

The position of *Smilla* and Høeg in Britain

Overall, the public response to *Smilla* was remarkable, particularly given that it was a translated novel from a small source market. However, the novel clearly responded to a number of prevailing literary themes and was almost universally appreciated by critics on various levels as a diverse, pacey thriller and a complex postcolonial novel. The changes to the British book market that occurred in parallel with the publication of the various early editions of *Smilla* are likely to have aided its continued success – a popular, critically acclaimed book was available in mass-produced form in a wider number of retail outlets than ever before, and competitively priced. Given these elements, it is hardly surprising that the response from the buying and reading public was positive.

Smilla acted as a tonic to the British literary scene, reinvigorating the thriller, crime fiction, and science fiction genres, while also highlighting the role to be played by hybrid literature in drawing in new, larger audiences. Discussing the role of thrillers in contemporary literature in 1995, Gerrard remarked that *Smilla* had 'made whodunits chic and sexy and unfamiliar again',¹²² while highlighting the increasing prevalence of 'serious' writers, such as Høeg, turning to genre fiction to make a living. Ultimately, the contemporariness of *Smilla* resonated with British readers and allowed the book and its author be integrated into the native literary canon of the 1990s.

122. Gerrard 1995c.

While Høeg's star has waned in the years that have followed, *Smilla* remains a presence on the British literary scene. To some extent, it seemed as if Høeg had pitched the perfect British novel at the British market at the right moment in time. His conformity with the British literary zeitgeist and his sophisticated use of genre hybridity allowed him to appeal to popular and elite audiences alike. Just as Bjarne Thorup Thomsen had himself found, it was the right time for a Dane to cross the North Sea.

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