It is commonly stated that reading books is among the best ways to increase one’s knowledge about oneself and about other people, places and cultures. At the same time the “common” Swedish reader tends to read books that are mainly from the same cultural sphere as his or her own: books written in Swedish by a “Swedish” author, or books written in English by an English or American author. A recent study made by Ingela Engman shows that only five per cent of the fiction that was translated into Swedish during 1999 was written by authors with a background in Africa, Asia or Latin America (Engman 2001).

This situation raises a lot of questions. In this paper I will discuss a few of them using the 29 books written by authors with a background in Africa, Asia or Latin America that were translated into Swedish and published in Sweden in 1999 (the five per cent I was talking about).

The first thing I would like to talk about concerns the reception of the books. Since the books I am talking about are books that have been translated You could say that they are books with passports. They have been able to leave their homecountry an enter into Sweden. They have passed the first gate-keepers. But are they also able to get a position in the Swedish literary field?

The second thing has to do with the route these books have travelled, and that is a question that is related to the original language of the book and to the place where the author lives. Are these books translated into Swedish because they are books written by an author living in a Western society writing in a Western language?

From margin to margin

If You live in Sweden and want to be updated on fiction from Africa, Asia or Latin America You have to read Karavan (Caravan), a periodical specializing in literature from the so called Third World and former known under the name Halva världens litteratur (Half of the world’s literature). It started in 1992 and has since then published four issues a year, containing articles about and interviews with authors from countries outside the western hemisphere, but also original material such as short stories, poems etc., and of course reviews of books from Africa, Asia and Latin America translated into Swedish (www.karavan.nu). During 1999 Karavan had a review and/or an article about almost all of the 29 books in my study.

That a specialized periodical is the best way to get information about a specific field of knowledge is nothing to be surprised about. It is the way it is. But what really surprised me when I studied the reviews of the 29 books translated into Swedish during 1999 was that neither the largest newspaper in Sweden – Dagens Nyheter – nor the ordinary Swedish literary periodicals such as BLM or Ord & Bild covered this area very well. Dagens Nyheter only reviewed less than half of the books, a number that was exceeded by some of the local newspapers in smaller cities in Sweden, for example Sundsvalls Tidning and Helsingborgs Dagblad, and also by Svenska Dagbladet, the second largest newspaper in Sweden.

The ordinary literary periodicals were even worse than Dagens Nyheter. Together they only reviewed a handful of books or had an article about one of the authors. (I have used Bibliotekstjänst artikelsök to find reviews of books and articles about authors. It is a database that contains reviews and articles from the largest newspapers and periodicals in Sweden from 1978 and up to now. www.btj.se)
What conclusions can you draw from this then? Since I have only had time to study one year, and being in the beginning of this new project of mine, of course I have to be cautious when it comes to conclusions. But I still think that this case-study raises some interesting questions and underlines some important issues. It is clear that books from Africa, Asia and Latin America – as a whole – not only have a hard time getting into Sweden, but also run into difficulties when it comes to establishing a position in the Swedish literary field. Even though almost all of the books that are translated into Swedish have been bestsellers in their homecountries and/or are written by authors that have a strong position in the literary field of their home countries you could say that they go from margin to margin. They belong to a group that is marginalized in the Swedish bookmarket, and they end up belonging to a group that is marginalized in the Swedish literary field.

It is a situation that can be compared to the one that women writers have experienced and are experiencing. That is since you do not belong to the first sex, so to speak, you automatically end up in the margins of the literary field. Or if they do have a chance to take a position in the field, they never is able to be in the center, to reach the top-position. Just to take one example that is extremely clarifying. As Toril Moi has shown in her study of Simone de Beauvoir; de Beauvoir could not reach the top because of her sex. That is also something that Pierre Bourdieu underlines in his foreword to the study. As a woman de Beauvoir could not be the self-made man that every intellectual not only wants to be but also has to be. In this case it is all about sex.

To explain the marginal position that women as a group hold in the literary field some use the term shadow-field. But even though that is a term that in a way is clarifying I do not like it. First of all because it gives you the impression that the ”Real” literary field is the source of light – with allusions to the Enlightenment movement, knowledge, progress etc. – whether the shadow-field is a field that lacks these qualities and therefore finds itself in the shadow. Secondly because it describes a situation that is static since the source of light comes from another place. And thirdly because it tends to avoid the most important question. That is that if you are going to use the term literary field their can only be one, and either You are in this field or You are not.

And what is clear in this case is that authors from Africa, Asia and Latin-America do not – as a group, there are always exceptions from the rule – hold a very strong position in the Swedish literary field. (Another important question that I am not going to discuss here, is the question whether You can take a position in a literary field in a country where You do not live.) That is the only way You can interpret the little attention these books get from Dagens Nyheter and ordinary Swedish literary periodicals. The people who have the power to consecrate choose other authors than these.

**A win-win situation for the publishing-houses**

In this case it also seems that there is a relation between the authors marginalized position in the literary field and the books status on the bookmarket. Ingela Engman has shown that even though it was possible to find almost all of the 29 books in bookstores and at the public library in Stockholm few people bought or borrowed the books. One explanation to this, according to Engman, is that people do not know enough about these books to get interested in them. There is a lack of knowledge that can be explained partly by the way the publishing-houses act when it comes to these books and their authors. There is not enough money and effort spent on marketing. The books are left on their own. And apparently this also effects their possibilities to take a position in the literary field. This raises another question. If the publishing-houses do not promote the books enough why do they publish them? What function do these books have for the publishing-houses? Is it only a question of increasing the house’s symbolic capital? If the books do not sell and increase the publishing-house’s economic capital, then You ought to think that they are being published to increase the publishing-house’s symbolic capital. And if so, what does it mean that these authors, as a group, are marginalized in the literary field? Are they still able to effect the publishing-house’s symbolic capital?

Of course You have to take into account that there is a difference between the small publishing-houses and the big ones. And many of these books are in fact being published by small houses that do not have the same kind of resources when it comes to marketing that he big houses have, which is one reason why the public knowledge of these books is relatively poor. But at the same time I believe that we witness a paradoxical situation here. That is we are talking about books that are
being published despite the fact that they do not hold a very strong position in the literary field or sell very well. Why then are they being published?

One answer to this interesting question could be that for the publishing-houses they represent a win-win situation so to speak. As Ingela Engman has shown, 77 per cent of the 29 books that were being published during 1999 applied for and also got economic support from Statens Kulturråd (the Swedish Council for XX). This fact indicates that this is a kind of literature that do not render a high economic risk for the publishing-houses, at least not for the big ones. In other words it means that as long as we are talking about a small number of books, printed in small editions, it is possible to publish them without loosing to much money. At the same time, if the publishing-house is lucky, they can strike gold if the bestseller they are looking for turns up in this group. And they can also count on getting at least some symbolic capital from publishing these authors. If not from having authors with a strong position in the Swedish literary field, then at least from being publishers of literature from the so called Third World.

Of course there are other reasons for publishing these books, and a lot of the publishers and translaters and so on that are working with this kind of literature are not in it for the money or for the status, but do it because they love literature or they want Swedish readers to discover the literary world outside the West. But still if they do not make any money on it, they are not able to go on.

I do believe that this means that the economic support provided by Statens Kulturråd is crucial for books from these areas. But considering the situation from the win-win point of view You also have to ask Yourself if the economic support provided by the Swedish government is the best way to support literature from these areas, or at least if it does not have to be supplemented by other kinds of support. Maybe I am being a bit cynical, but could it not be that this economic support is one reason why the publishing-houses do not care to promote these books? Because they do not have to.

The question of language
I have used the phrase from margin to margin to describe the way these books are handled on the Swedish bookmarket and in the Swedish literary field. But if You consider the route these books have travelled to get to Sweden You have to use a different kind of metaphor. Allthough it is correct to say that the 29 books in my study is written by authors from Africa, Asia and Latin America – areas that are marginalized when You talk about the Swedish bookmarket and literary field and also when You talk about the International bookmarket and literary field – it is also, in a way, incorrect. It all depends on what significance You give to the fact that many of these books are not written in languages that are marginalized, but instead are written in languages that hold a strong position in the international literary field, and that many of these authors also live in the West and not in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

Allthough there are books written in what is called dominated languages (for example languages that are based on an oral tradition and with a weak and relatively young written tradition, languages from ”small” countries or languages that have a strong and old literary tradition but a weak place in the international literary field) that are translated into Swedish, many of the 29 books have a dominating language, such as English or French, as their original language (for a discussion of language, see Casanova 2002). Of course this is an effect of colonialism – and the meaning of this is of course an issue of utmost importance that has been and are debated heavily, but it is not something that I am going to talk about today. What is important here is the conclusions You can draw from these facts.

If You consider the question of language, it is clear that many of the books written by authors from Africa, Asian and Latin America that are translated into Swedish do not come from a marginal or peripheral place in the international bookmarket or in the international literary field, instead they come from the center. They are not only written in a dominating language, but have also succeeded in taking a position in the international literary field and on the international bookmarket. They are bestsellers, they have got great reviews and been rewarded with literary prices etc. This does not only mean that the Swedish publishing-houses choose to publish authors that are both wellknown and successful in an international perspective, but also that the question of language when it comes to publishing books from Africa, Asian and Latin America is extremely important. Not only because writing in a dominating language is the best way to take a position in the international literary field
and on the international bookmarket, but also because it makes it easier to get translated into peripheral dominated languages such as Swedish.

Of course this is a problem for the dominated languages, and for the authors that write in these languages. As Ingela Engman has shown, lack of translators is one of the reasons why books from Africa, Asian and Latin-America do not get published in Sweden. But at the same time the question of language shows that the small percentage of literature from Africa, Asia and Latin-America in Sweden can not be explained by a lack of translators only. Since so much of the literature from these areas are in fact written in dominating languages there have to be other reasons.

This is only speculation, since I am in the beginning of this project, but I do believe that the main reason is that the Swedish literary field do not want to recognize this literature. It is the only way Yoy can interpret the small percentage of translations of books from these areas and the lack of interest in these books from Swedish newspapers and literary periodicals. The Western canon still rules in more than one way. It is where the economic and the symbolic capital are to be found, and a few bestsellers or nobelpries for Indian or African writers have not been able to change this situation. There are still books without passports. And