

60 Years of the Nordic Council Literature Prize

As the prestigious awards celebrated their anniversary in 2022, their recent nominees reflect the wide range of themes, interests and literary styles explored by contemporary Nordic writers.

By Rowdy Geirsson

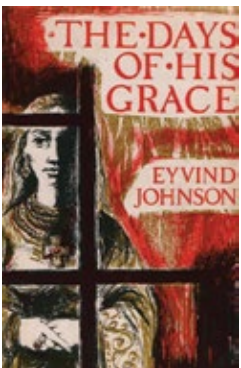


The 2022 Nordic Council Prize awards celebration at Musiikkitalo, the Helsinki Music Centre, on November 1.



Nordic House in Reykjavik has served as secretariat of the Nordic Council Literature Prize since 2014.

ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST well-known and prestigious literary awards, the Nordic Council Literature Prize celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2022 with an awards ceremony on November 1 at Musiikkitalo, the Helsinki Music Centre. Reflecting on the prize's decades of celebrating Nordic literature, Sofie Hermansen Eriksdatter, head of the Nordic Council Literature Prize located at the Nordic House in Reykjavik, notes, "Across the region and ever since the prize was established, it has received a great deal of attention when the nominees and winner are announced—to be nominated is a big thing for the authors themselves, and for the promotion of their authorship. To win this prize is a huge achievement."



The NCLP's first winner, Eyvind Johnson's *The Days of His Grace*.

Since its inauguration in 1962, the Nordic Council Literature Prize has been awarded to some of the most influential and innovative writers throughout the Nordic region, including its first recipient, the Swedish author Eyvind Johnson, for his novel *Hans nådes tid* (*The Days*

of His Grace) in 1962; Per Olov Enquist for *Legionärerna* (*The Legionnaires*, Sweden) in 1969; Antti Tuuri for *Pohjanmaa* (*A Day in Ostrobothnia*, Finland) in 1985; Kerstin Ekman for *Händelser vid vatten* (*Blackwater*, Sweden) in 1994; Sjón for *Skugga-Baldur* (*The Blue Fox*, Iceland) in 2005; and Per Petterson for *Jeg forbanner tidens elv* (*I Curse the River of Time*, Norway) in 2009. And in doing so, it has brought the nominated authors together in a form of dialogue—highlighting notable works from each of the countries, and exploring what makes them so uniquely valuable.

THIS IS VERY MUCH IN KEEPING WITH THE MISSION OF the Nordic Council itself, the governing body that oversees the administration of the Prize and that celebrated its own 70th anniversary in 2022. Established in March of 1952, the Nordic Council was born out of a general desire for greater cooperation among the Nordic nations in the years following WWII, during which a number of distinct attempts were made to strengthen Nordic regional cooperation; these included efforts to organize a pan-Scandinavian defense agreement as well as an early attempt to merge Denmark, Norway and Sweden into a unique, single economic customs union.

All nominees must fall within the category of poetry, prose or drama.

Acting as the official body for Nordic interparliamentary cooperation, the Nordic Council was initially ratified by the governments of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and later joined by Finland in 1955; the Faroe Islands and Åland Islands each joined as distinct members in 1970, with Greenland following in 1984. Today, the Nordic Council consists of 87 representatives from the parliaments of its member states, with the goal of improving the everyday lives of each state's constituents. Some of its tasks include conducting research, developing regional policy and promoting Nordic culture abroad through projects such as its Competencies of the Future initiative, the Nordic Food Policy Lab and Nordic Bridges, which raises awareness of Nordic art and culture.

WITHIN THE NORDIC Council's first decade, in addition to coordinating preexisting areas of cooperation and tackling areas of joint concern such as social problems, cultural matters, communication and travel, a goal soon arose to promote interest in the literature and languages of the neighboring countries—hence, the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1962, which was soon followed by the Music Prize in 1965, the Environment Prize in 1995, the Film Prize in 2002 and, most recently, its Children and Young People's Literature Prize, established in 2013.

Nominated works of the Literature Prize are determined by the Adjudication Committee of each nation in which they were released. All must fall within the category of poetry, prose or drama, and must have been released within two years immediately prior to the award for works written in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish, and within four for works written in Greenlandic, Faroese or Sámi, as well as those originally published in Åland.



The winners of this year's Prizes, including the literature award, were announced alongside the Session of the Nordic Council in Helsinki, November 2022.

Prior to 2014, the administration of the prize was led by the Riksdag in Stockholm, Sweden's national parliament—a full collection of every nominated work and winner is housed in the Nordic Library at Biskops Arnö Nordens Folkhögskola in Bålsta, between Stockholm and Uppsala—and has since been administered by Nordic House in Reykjavík, in a building designed by renowned Finnish architect Alvar Aalto which includes a library of all prizewinning works.

The announcement of nominees is itself an opportunity to share Nordic literature more widely among the regions, as Eriksdatter points out. "One of my tasks is to have the non-Scandinavian language works put into translation," she says, adding that while Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are fluent



Niviaq Korneliussen, winner of the 2021 Nordic Council Literature Prize for *Naasuliardarpi* (*The Valley of Flowers*).

to all the evaluators, works in languages such as Icelandic and Greenlandic are not. To do so, she works in collaboration with the national juries, as well as pulling from her own catalogue of translators. “The translations then receive a lot of attention because they then become more accessible,” she says. The announcements also gain immediate recognition for some of the less-recognized Nordic authors among the selections—as Eriksdatter stresses, the prize is awarded to specific works, and is not an authorship award. “This is why someone who is not very well-known can win, because it’s for one piece of work,” she explains.

WHILE THE NOMINEES AND PRIZEWINNING WORKS are judged by their own high quality—what makes them each unique and compelling additions to the world of literature—bringing them together often reveals the themes and literary styles explored by contemporary Nordic authors. “Over the past five or seven years, I would say sorrow, motherhood, and grief are among these, as well as ways of thinking about the new world; there’s also been an eco-critical cyberpunk wave, and a lot of capitalistic critique,” Eriksdatter says. Postcolonialism has also been a preoccupation, she adds, perhaps most significantly with its 2021 winner—Niviaq Korneliussen’s *Naasuliardarpi* (*The Valley of Flowers*), which was the first Greenlandic work to be awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize.

“Niviaq Korneliussen translated the work herself into Danish, and she was touching upon some topics which are sensitive, including both postcolonialism and the suicides among young people in Greenland that began to grow



Solvej Balle, winner of the 2022 literature award for *Om udregning af rumfang* (*On the Calculation of Volume*).

during the ’90s,” Eriksdatter says. “It’s a very beautiful book, and it explores those subjects in a very sensitive, gentle way.”

Other themes and trends that have come up recently include social sustainability, particularly in critiques of welfare systems, as well as different explorations of madness. “In the last couple of years, particularly in Denmark and Sweden, there have also been a lot of writers—especially female writers—interested in witchcraft and rituals,” Eriksdatter adds. Examples include the Swedish-born author Johanne Lykke Holm, nominated in 2021 for her novel *Strega*, and Danish author Olga Ravn, with whom Holm runs the feminist performance group and writing school Hekseskolen in Copenhagen. “There’s been a lot of interest in rituals and using text as a kind of ritual,” Eriksdatter says. And in Iceland, she says, “there’s been a new generation unfolding prose and poetry in a new and interesting way.”

THIS YEAR’S WINNER, WHICH WAS ANNOUNCED ON November 1, is Danish author Solvej Balle’s *Om udregning af rumfang* (*On the Calculation of Volume*, not translated into English), a large-scale prose work that experiments with time through a day that endlessly repeats for its protagonist Tara Selter. Eriksdatter notes that this, too, was groundbreaking for the award in certain ways. “This year 11 of the 14 books were prose—Balle’s nomination was comprised of three books, the biggest prose work of them all,” she says. “But the Danish jury argued that you could see the three books as a unity. It’s the first time that a self-publisher has won the prize, and the first time that a series of books has won.”

The final selection of the winner falls to a smaller Nordic Adjudication Committee.

Other nominations, which were announced in late February last year, spanned a wide swath of the Nordic regions constituent languages—including one work written in Northern Sámi—with both novels and poetry collections tackling themes of love, power and exclusion. The ceremony in November, at which Balle's prize was announced (with its monetary award of DKK 300,000), took place during the annual autumn Session of the Nordic Council—a multi-day summit with host countries rotating annually in which all 87 members of the Nordic Council gather, along with the prime ministers of each nation, to discuss, debate and make decisions about matters important to Nordic cooperation.

THE ADJUDICATION PROCESS TO DETERMINE THE nominees is an extensive and thorough procedure, accompanied by many lively debates. Each Adjudication Committee consists of experts within the field of literature who are appointed by the Nordic Council of Ministers (including each of the Nordic nation's prime ministers, as well as select additional ministers), on the recommendation of each nation's Minister of Culture. Two members and one deputy member are appointed each for Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, while one member and one deputy member are appointed apiece for the Finnish and Swedish languages in Finland; these select two nominees for each of their nations. The official author organizations of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Åland and the Sámi language areas maintain responsibility for nominated works within their territories, which include one submission for each. The final selection of the winner falls to a smaller Nordic Adjudication Committee, made up of 10 standard members from the national-level committees as well as adjunct members from the author organizations.

This committee, which convenes each year one month before the awards ceremony, has long and intense meetings to determine the winner. "The juries present the nominated books, and there's debate where members present their case for what they like and dislike—then they narrow it down with rotations about the differences," Eriksdatter says. The meetings are always held in-person with the exception of the 2020 discussions, which were held online due to the pandemic—which, Eriksdatter adds, "everyone absolutely hated."

Since becoming the secretariat of the Literature Prize, the Nordic House in Reykjavík has taken advantage of the increased opportunities to expand conversation on Nordic writing. In addition to arranging meetings and contacts with publishers to distribute nominated books, it collaborates with literature festivals and fairs, along with informing Ministers of



Nordic House in Reykjavík's library holds a collection of all prizewinning works.

Culture when new members of the Adjudication Committee are needed. "I do a lot of collaboration across the Nordic region such as the Free Academy/Testrup Højskole, where I do one-week seminars, and a whole week only dedicated to Nordic literature," Eriksdatter says. "We unfold all kinds of Nordic themes such as madness and desire, and this year, witchcraft and magic." With the establishment of the Nordic Council Children's Children and Young People's Literature Prize in 2013—which Nordic House also administers—they've further expanded these conversations for readers of the next generations. "I've created some seminars that are both for writers and illustrators and for publishers and academics, about themes in Nordic children's literature such as eco-criticism and social sustainability—these have been fun for groups who don't normally interact, and there's been a lot of synergy," Eriksdatter says. She adds that there is also a new project, Bokslugaren, that promotes Nordic children's literature for ages up to 12 years, particularly at libraries.

AND AS THE PRIZE NOW CONTINUES INTO ITS 61ST year, Eriksdatter notes that one of her hopes is that Nordic books appear even more in translation—including in the English language. "It depends a lot on the publishing houses, and whether they're able to negotiate foreign rights," Eriksdatter says. But with so many new Nordic voices emerging—and breaking new barriers—in the literary world, let's hope that we can soon read them in languages abroad.



The nominees of the 2022 Nordic Council Literature Prize.

LIST OF 2022 NOMINEES

Denmark	<i>Om udregning af rumfang I, II og III.</i> (<i>On the Calculation of Volume</i>) by Solvej Balle <i>Adam i Paradis (Adam in Paradise)</i> by Rakel Haslund-Gjerrild
Finland	<i>Eunukki (The Eunuch)</i> by Kristina Carlson <i>Röda rummet (The Red Room)</i> by Kaj Korkea-aho
Faroe Islands	<i>Sólgarðurin (The Sun Garden)</i> by Beinir Bergsson
Greenland	<i>Arkticós Dolorôs</i> by Jessie Kleeman
Iceland	<i>Truflunin (Disturbance)</i> by Steinar Bragi <i>Aprílsólarkuldi (Cold April Sun)</i> by Elísabet Jökulsdóttir
Norway	<i>Dette er G (This is G)</i> by Inghill Johansen <i>Jente, 1983 (Girl, 1983)</i> by Linn Ullmann
Sámi Language Area	<i>Beaivváš mánát</i> by Mary Ailonieida Sombán Mar
Sweden	<i>Löpa varg (Running with Wolves)</i> by Kerstin Ekman <i>Den dagen den sorgen (The Day of Sorrow)</i> by Jesper Larsson
Åland	<i>Hem (Home)</i> by Karin Erlandsson

PRESENT ADJUDICATION COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Denmark	Stefan Kjerkggaard, member Gro Frank Rasmussen, member Anders Juhl Rasmussen, deputy
Finland	Fredrik Hertzberg, member (Swedish) Sanna Manninen, member (Finnish) Pia Ingström, deputy (Swedish) Outi Menna, deputy (Finnish)
Iceland	Silja Björk Huldudóttir, member Kristján Jóhann Jónsson, member Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, deputy
Norway	Rune Christiansen, member Tone Selboe, member Lars Petter Sveen, deputy
Sweden	Sara Abdollahi, member Karin Nykvist, member Stig Hansén, deputy

Special thanks to Sofie Hermansen Eriksdatter, Head of the Secretariat for the Nordic Council Literature Prize, and Jesper Smed Jensen, Senior Advisor for the Nordic Council, Culture and Media.

A series of conversations with the 2022 Nordic Council Literature Prize nominees is available to stream now on Scandinavia House's YouTube channel.

Rowdy Geirsson is the author of *The Scandinavian Aggressors*, an offbeat odyssey set in the present-day Nordic nations, and a recurring contributor to *Scandinavian Review* and the Sons of Norway's *Viking Magazine*. He also writes *McSweeney's* longest-running internet humor column, *Norse History for Bostonians*.