

A sense of wonder

Scandinavia reveals its splendour and enchanting way of life to a young African writer with itchy feet and a keen eye for detail

By Tolu Ogunlesi

It's fascinating how cities sometimes get boiled down to a few words. Years ago a friend told me that "Kampala is a city built on understatement". Sometime in 2008 the BBC described Harare as a city that "runs on hope and ingenuity, not power and water". Lagos, according to a Nigerian vendor I met in Uppsala, Sweden, is "No Man's Land". And there's Ibadan, largest city in West Africa, famously described by the poet J.P. Clark in a poem named after the city, as a "running splash of rust and gold".

If I were to describe Oslo I'd call it a small city with a big name and an even bigger ego. The big name I'd attribute to the Nobel Peace Prize, which is handed out at the Oslo City Hall every December. (All other Nobel Prizes are presented in Stockholm; Alfred Nobel, who endowed the prizes, was Swedish.) The super-sized ego would be a product of Norway's stupendous oil wealth. Everywhere I turned – perhaps "everywhere" is an exaggeration – in my brief time in Oslo I was reminded of this fact. But it was not the city that reminded me. Rather, it was its inhabitants. To the eye, Oslo is not a very appealing city. To my mind, parts of it were plain depressing. In my journal there is a note I made, as follows: "Norwegians think Oslo is an ugly city. I think so too."

But it is city of proud inhabitants. At the same time however they manage to combine this pride with self-effacement. I struck up a conversation with a man who worked in the Tourists' Office, an elderly man who looked like he'd worked there all his life. He explained to me that Oslo was not like Russia with its nouveau riche

throwing money around desperately. "If you have money you don't shout it." But this was not before letting me know that "we don't have 'the poor' the way other countries do".

He spoke of Norwegians' preference for the "quiet life". "Life is quiet. If I want some noise, London's just an hour and a half by plane, New York's six hours. I go and return to my quiet life. I like it that way." My tour guide (this was the only city in Scandinavia in which I went on a guided bus tour) announced to us that the *Financial Times* called Norway the "Saudi Arabia of Europe". She was even less modest than the Tourists' Office man, but a lot of her boasting was good-natured. "The shops, they do well because – we're rich!" she told us. As for the hotels, she admitted that they were "expensive even for Norwegians".

But money cannot alter the fact that Oslo remains a small city. At a little over half a million inhabitants, it is smaller than most cities in Nigeria, my country. I like to imagine that Oslo would be no more than a small suburb in Lagos, and at best an apartment block in Beijing.

Oslo is a perfect example of the transforming effects of self-confidence founded on fated fortune. It is said that a letter sent from Oslo by a visitor to the city, circa 1900, bore the following caveat: "There is no point leaving the train station because there is nothing to see in Oslo." Today, the country, which for centuries used to be a Danish province and which suffered regular bullying from Sweden, is a prime destination for Swedish workers seeking greener pastures.

Uppsala, my entry point

Oslo was not my introduction to

Scandinavia (hereinafter referred to as the Heart of Coldness). Uppsala was.

Uppsala is a small city about seventy kilometres north of Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. It is a university town, as well as a place of immense historical importance. The Uppsala Cathedral, the seat of the Archbishop of Sweden, is the oldest in Scandinavia, dating back to the thirteenth century. The Uppsala University, founded in the fifteenth century, is the oldest in the region, and has produced such distinguished Swedes as world-famous eighteenth-century botanist Carl Linnaeus, former United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld and top diplomat Hans Blix.

And then there is the Uppsala Cemetery, resting place of famous men (Hammarskjöld is interred there) and Viking warriors. One of my most memorable moments in Uppsala was spent wandering with a friend through the cemetery late one evening. It was a few days after All Saints Day, and many of the graves still bore burning lanterns. It was too dark to see the fumes from those lanterns, but I could easily imagine them rising into the air, carrying the mummified hopes and prayers of the long dead. It was so calm, so peaceful, that before my eyes "Requiescat In Pace" seized for itself new meaning. (Or perhaps merely reclaimed the purity of its original meaning.)

Literary Oslo

I was in Oslo for the launch of *X Magazine*, a literary magazine in which a short story of mine had been published in a Norwegian translation. The launch took place in a small, dark, cosy pub in a run-down part of the city. It was a small



(Top) Granite figures on the Monolith Plateau of the Vigeland Sculpture Park, Oslo, Norway. (Below) One of the book stands at the Göteborg Book Fair 2008

but warm audience, who listened intently and asked questions.

When it was time to leave for my hotel, I found myself stranded. It hadn't occurred to me to change some money into Norwegian kroner, and so all I had on me were American dollars and Euro and Swedish kronor and Nigerian naira. I did not – and still do not – have a credit card. And at that time of the evening it was no longer possible to find a place to change money.

I had assumed that everyone in the

Heart of Coldness spent the same kind of money. I couldn't tell who was who by looking at faces anyway. But no, the Swedes spend the SEK, the Norwegians NOK, the Danish the DKK, while the Finnish cling tightly to the Euro. Four countries, four currencies.

Later, I was to discover that the differences ran deeper than I had previously assumed. And then it occurred to me that it was in the same manner that foreigners looked at Africa as a homogenous entity. "So where in

Africa do you come from?" or "You're from Nigeria? I've got a friend called Binyavanga, he's from Kenya. Do you know him?"

Danish novelist Peter Fogtdal writes on his blog of being asked by a guest, after a reading at the Nordic Museum in Seattle: "Why didn't the Scandinavian countries ever unite? Your countries are totally the same!"

I used to think so too, until I visited the region. During a coffee break at the Nordic Africa Days Conference, which was held at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Copenhagen, a Swede shared with me his candid opinion of our hosts.

"Denmark is known as the world's greatest consumer of unhealthy food, heavy smoking and drinking. They won't ban smoking in public. They consider the Swedes to be overly serious... they are unserious."

It was easy to see what inspired that rant: the oversized sandwiches – alarmingly burdened with vegetable and cheese and meat – that were stacked on trays nearby.

It took a white Zimbabwean, who had at some time in her life lived in Copenhagen (but now lived in Sweden) to redeem the city in my eyes. She patiently explained to me how Copenhagen was an epitome of restraint. She spoke of an "understatedness".

This was evident in the modesty of the city's symbol (a sculpted mermaid) in comparison with, say, the Statue of Liberty. She pointed out the bikers as they raced past and explained that there was an unwritten Code guiding them: how they rode, how much space they left in between moving bikes, how and where they stopped and parked.

It was she who also pointed out – from the stairway of the Centre for African Studies – the profusion of spires in Copenhagen. The rest of the "landmarks" I observed myself – the jogggers, the bikers, the man-made lakes.

Göteborg

Göteborg is home to the largest book fair in Scandinavia. I was a guest in 2008. I had never seen so many books and so

many people interested in them – writers, publishers, translators, readers, buyers. I constantly got lost in the cavernous exhibition grounds, which interestingly contained almost as many cafés as book stands. I was scheduled for two reading-cum-discussion sessions, one as part of the main fair, and the other as part of a special section called the “International Square”.

At both sessions I was interviewed by Mai Palmberg, a Finnish-Swedish literary activist and political scientist. I read poetry, answered questions, spoke about my writing, about Nigeria. I spoke about the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War) of 1967-1970.

One of the high points of my time at the fair was meeting fellow African writer, Ishmael Beah, author of the bestselling war memoir *A Long Way Gone*, which details his experiences as a former child soldier in Sierra Leone.

The first time I saw him he was being interviewed on the stage of the International Square by Swedish journalist Anki Wood. Of course, he drew a sizeable crowd; his book has been translated into Swedish. I recognised him immediately from the author photos I’d seen. I turned my camera on him and fired away. Later the next day, when I finally got to meet him, he recalled the paparazzo episode and asked if I was the one attempting to distract him with my camera. He said it was good to see another young black face at Göteborg. There was a long line of fans, mostly women, who are said to be major consumers of literature, waiting to sign copies of his book after his second session.

Hanif Kureishi (CBE) and Alaa al Aswany were two other famous writers who were at Göteborg, and with whom I made sure to take pictures. Kureishi’s seminar (discussion), hosted by journalist Kristofer Lundström, was themed “Sex, Immigration and Launderettes”. Like many writers who regularly do book tours and speak to large audiences (who hang on somewhat desperately to every word, almost pleading to be made to laugh or, at least, chuckle), he had a sardonic, self-deprecating sense



(Above) View of the Vigeland Sculpture Park in Oslo from the outside (Left) A man poses for a photo in Gamla Stan, Stockholm’s “Old Town”

of humour, couched in a somewhat detached tone, and fired off quips and quotable quotes like an elder statesman, comedian or poet-laureate on Red Bull. I very much enjoyed listening to him talk, and soon found myself feverishly copying his many excellent one-liners.

Asked if his presence on the 2008 Honours List (a CBE) surprised him, he answered: “Surprised me? I’ve been waiting for it for ages!” Asked why there was a lot of sex in one of his books: “Sex is a good way to bring the characters in a book together... especially an orgy; with an orgy you can bring five, six disparate characters together ...”

Still on the CBE (and this of course was tongue-in-cheek!), he said: “The Queen only gives medals these days to blacks and Asians!”

But perhaps the most interesting person I met at Göteborg was James

Bond. Yes, Bond, James Bond. The Swedish version. He used to be known as Schäfer Gunnar.

He told me the story of how he came to be James Bond. He was born to a German father, who fought for Germany in the Second World War. In 1945, at the end of the war, his father came to Sweden, where he met his mother who was Swedish. They were married in 1950. Schäfer was born in 1957. In 1959, his father returned to Germany, on holiday. He never returned to Sweden. He was never seen again.

Every attempt to locate him, even through the Red Cross, failed. “Because I lost my father, I decided to adopt Ian Fleming as my stepfather,” Schäfer explained to me. He pointed out that there was a significant similarity in both men’s lives – Schäfer Snr and Fleming’s. Both men worked for the British Secret

Service. Schäfer Snr was apparently a spy for the British, while operating as a German.

Having adopted Fleming as stepfather, I imagine it wasn't difficult to adopt the identity of Fleming's famous character. He showed me his driver's licence. The name on it was (surname) Schäfer (first name) Nils Gunnar Bond James. In memory of his five-decades-missing father, and of Fleming, he set up a James Bond Museum, the only one of its kind in Sweden.

Helsinki, Finland

It was with some kind of Bondesque (read "investigative" or "inquisitive") spirit with which I arrived at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport on 24 October 2008. Only I was not on the trail of a nuclear weapons conspiracy but instead eager to see how the country differentiated itself from its Scandinavian neighbours.

Helsinki presented itself to me as a "grand" city, with buildings that resembled giant blocks of neatly laid out concrete (almost as though the city was designed to convince you that a city does not need skyscrapers to be intimidating). It had the atmosphere of a place caught between a past that was both proud and painful, and a future it was only too eager to define by itself, on its own terms.

Buffered by harsh winds and unrelenting rain, it struggled to entice me with its Museum of Contemporary Art (Kiasma), its cavernous bookstore, Akateeminen Kirjakauppa (the largest in Scandinavia), its book fair and its bloodstained history.

From the stone steps overlooking the city square, Palmberg, the literary activist who interviewed me, pointed out to me the building in which Nikolai Ivanovich Bobrikov, then Russian Governor General of Finland, was shot and fatally wounded by a disgruntled Finnish Nationalist in 1904. A photography exhibition I visited in an ex-factory building displayed moving images from rural Finland of the 1960s, as well as from the Finnish Civil War, fought between the "Reds" and the "Whites".

The war images, with their death and suffering, reminded me of my collection of black-and-white photos from the

Biafran War. Speaking of this war, one of the iconic sights of Helsinki is the Temppeliaukio Church, the famous "stone church" in Helsinki. On its stone face the word B-I-A-F-R-A was graffitied (during its construction in the late 1960s) by young Finns trying to draw the world's attention to the starvation that characterised the conflict.

I also had the good fortune to be invited to the Helsinki Book Fair (like all book fairs, a "war" in its own regard; another chapter in the eternal battle between knowledge and ignorance). On Saturday, 25 October 2008 I was interviewed by Finnish editor and translator, Marianne Bargum. The interview took place in Kirjakahvila (The Book Cafe) within the Book Fair grounds. The Helsinki Book Fair is smaller than Göteborg's, but is nonetheless an impressive event. By the second day, seventeen thousand people had attended.

There were books on everything from anorexia (which I was told is a major health issue in the country) to Russia to evolutionary biology. And then I saw Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Orange Prize-winning *Half of a Yellow Sun*. It was one Nigerian book I consistently found in bookstores – in foreign translation.

The Nordic countries all have thriving publishing industries – in the local languages.

I was also constantly astounded by the aesthetic beauty of the books I found in the stores and at the book fairs. I came away with the feeling that the Scandinavians have a greater talent for book cover design than the Americans or British. By my estimates, ninety-five per cent of the thousands – if not millions – of books available at the Göteborg Book Fair were in one Scandinavian language or the other. The Uppsala-based English Bookstore's stand was the only one at which I saw English books in the majority. Everywhere I turned there were books I could not read, not because they were unreadable but because I was incapable. And it was fascinating as well to see the huge crowds that gathered around local writers, many of whose books had attained bestselling status within their countries.

For the first time in my life I witnessed English take a (deserved) back seat. I was at the Festival of Contemporary African Writing organised by the British Council in Kampala, Uganda in 2005, and recall that in one of the discussion sessions a participant pointed out the arrogance of the Anglophones in acting as though African literature started and ended with them.

Which is often true. Think of all the African Nobel laureates in literature – they have all been – with the exception of Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz – Africans writing in English, Africans from the English-speaking parts of the continent. Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee. The Swedish Academy has not yet deemed it necessary to recognise African literature written originally in French or Portuguese.

This is where I expect that one or two people will ask the (now tired) question – Can a literature written in an imported/imposed/"conquering" language truly be called an African literature?

A worthwhile experience

I thoroughly enjoyed the diversity of literary experiences I had in my three months up "North" – the book fairs; standing in front of a class of Swedish teenagers to talk about my writing and about life in Nigeria; delivering a differently styled keynote closing address at the Nordic Africa Days conference; participating in a Things Fall Apart at Fifty discussion in Uppsala; reading a poem (that interestingly enough contained a couple of four-letter words) in an underground chapel in Uppsala.

At Göteborg, Kureishi defined the writing life as "indolence, perversion, uselessness and hanging around". He forgot to include the power of literature to touch its practitioners with a lifelong sense of wonder. It was writing that took me away from Nigeria, to the "North", to the Heart of Coldness. I wrote a bit, travelled a bit and wondered a lot. I marvelled at the lives and cultures of people far removed from me. And returned home with tremendous reverence for this infinite, flat, effervescent village-of-a-world in which we live. 