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# EDITORIAL: FROM THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN - NORDIC HISTORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN COMICS

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## PREFACE: SJOCA REDUX

At long last, the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* returns from its extended hiatus. Because of the vagaries and vicissitudes of life and the world of academia, almost the entire editorial staff has changed. Fredrik Strömberg remains the journal's anchor, while former editors Erin La Cour, Ralf Kauranen, and Rikke Platz Cortsen have all moved on to other projects. Rikke and Erin, for example, recently co-edited a comics studies anthology titled *Comics and Power* that highlights the current state of comics studies in the Nordic countries, and which we strongly encourage our readers to seek out.<sup>1</sup> Following the original team's departure, a new group has stepped in to fill the hole they left: Katja Kontturi, Martin Lund, and Leena Romu. We all hope that we are equal to the task of taking over from our predecessors. The editorial team would like to particularly extend our deep thanks and appreciation to Frederik Byrn Køhlert, who was an integral part of the team during a crucial time in the journal's redevelopment, but who had to leave us to concentrate on other things.

Some things have changed since the last issue. Some of what is new will be evident already in this issue, such as changes in how we handle notes and references and our switch from British to American English conventions, while other changes will emerge only over time. When *SJoCA* was established, the idea was to concentrate primarily on Nordic comics or comics studies by Nordic scholars. As can be seen in this issue and as will become evident as we publish the issues that we are currently putting together, this editorial guideline is no longer as strong. We still stress the Nordic perspective, but we strongly encourage an international focus in contributions and we welcome non-Nordic contributors with open arms.

Still, most of journal operations remain the same. Foremost among the continuities – aside most obviously from the retention of the triple text-type format of articles, book reviews, and forum texts (although none of the latter are included in this issue) – is that the new editorial team is as dedicated as our predecessors to presenting quality research into the comics medium in its many different forms, studied by scholars engaged in the widest possible range of disciplines. Together with our contributors and anonymous reviewers, we have worked hard to ensure that this issue will not disappoint, and we will continue to dedicate ourselves to quality in the months and years to come. We encourage you, our readers, wherever you may be reading this, and whatever discipline you might be working in, to send your articles, reviews, and debate pieces and musings to us, so that together we can help move the interdisciplinary field of comics studies into the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Magnussen, La Cour, and Cortsen, *Comics and Power*.



With all of that said, the editorial team would like to welcome our readers new and old to the new *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* and this, the first issue of the second volume. We hope you enjoy it!

## COMICS, MEMORY, AND THE NORDIC PAST AND PRESENT

This issue contains three articles that deal in their own ways with Nordic cultural memories and history. The past is all around us, not least in our entertainments. It is also a highly malleable thing that can be molded and shaped to tell us who we are, who we should be, and where we came from. The myriad ways in which conceptions about the past can be informed by contemporary concerns and the ways the past can be used to legitimize present practices and ideas have been ably charted by scholars in the rapidly growing field of memory studies.<sup>2</sup> Although highly interdisciplinary, comics studies has yet to truly enter this field, despite the fact that its subject matter provides ample opportunity for studies of representations of history and memory.

Nordic comics history and comics that represent the past and present of the Nordic countries provide one of many possible inroads into these fruitful lines of inquiry. For example, Nordic comics, from early comics strips through locally produced contemporary comic books, like the Swedish funny animal series *Bamse*, Norwegian humor series *Nemi*, the Finnish *Moomin* stories, Danish strip *Poeten og Lillemor*, and many more, all provide a vast and still largely unstudied archive of historical perspectives and attitudes. In addition, varying degrees of adulation or criticism inform biographical and historical comics and graphic novels about personages like Swedish writer August Strindberg; compiler of Finland's national epic *Kalevala*, Elias Lönnrot; or Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Nordic comics creators, like "Team Fantomen," who have produced the majority of Phantom stories for regional publication since the 1960s, make frequent use of the Nordic past as a setting or story element. This is the subject of this issue's first article, historian David Gudmundsson's "The Ghost who Walks Goes North: Early Modern Sweden in *The Phantom*, 1987–2008." In his article, Gudmundsson discusses Team Fantomen's representations of early modern Swedish history in several stories, grounding his analysis in theories of the uses of history

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<sup>2</sup> For some important inroads to the field, see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*; Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*. See also Olick and Robbins, "SOCIAL MEMORY STUDIES," on some of the problems with memory studies.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the exhibition "Livet är inget för amatörer – svenska serieskapare tolkar Strindberg" [roughly: "Life is not for amateurs - Swedish cartoonists interpret Strindberg"]; Ranta, *Kajana*; Kverneland, *MUNCH*.



and discussing how the comics both engage with contemporaneous historical scholarship and long-standing stereotypes and received wisdom.

It should be noted that the Viking Age and conceptions about its culture and beliefs have been a particularly inspiring topic for comics creators, spawning among other titles Marvel's character Thor, who reshapes Norse myths for an American audience and like his superheroic compatriots does so with a potboiler feeling for the state of American culture; Brian Wood's 2008–2012 anthology series *Northlanders*, which strikes a balance between historical representation and modern sentiment; Peter Madsen's long-running and often ideologically anachronistic *Valhalla*; several adaptations of Swedish writer Frans G. Bengtsson's *Röde Orm* (*The Long Ships* or *Red Orm* in English) that retell the same story to different ends; and, in 2013, the Swedish-created but superhero-inspired character, *The Norseman*. The Viking Age has been particularly important in comics' making Nordic history and memory international imaginative currency. In these comics - which in addition to the titles mentioned above also include for instance Japanese Manga like *Viking Saga* and *King of Viking*, and Franco-Belgian album series like *Asterix*, *Thorgal*, and *Johan and Peewit* - the creators use a past not their own to speak to and about their own time and place and, often alongside other forms of popular culture, serve to establish and recycle certain common images of Vikings and Norse culture. This is addressed in the issue's second article, literary critic Asuka Yamazaki's "The Body, Despair, and Hero Worship: A Comparative Study of the Influence of Norse Mythology in *Attack on Titan*." In her article, Yamazaki studies the use of Old Norse tropes and topoi in a contemporary manga, highlighting how the modern text uses old figures to consider and critique contemporary Japanese society.

Finally, in recent years, Nordic-produced comics themselves have increasingly appeared in translation, perhaps most notably in such anthologies as *Kolor Klimax*, *From Wonderland with Love*, and the United States' 2010 "Swedish Invasion." In various ways, these comics contend with preconceived notions about the Nordic countries and Nordicness or Scandinavianness. The issue's last article, Rikke Platz Cortsen's "Stockholm/Copenhagen/Oslo: Translation and Sense of Place in Martin Kellerman's Comic Strip *Rocky*" touches upon these issues. Discussing the original Swedish version of cartoonist Martin Kellerman's strip *Rocky* and juxtaposing it with its Danish and Norwegian translations, Cortsen shows how Kellerman constructs place in his strip, how the strip's translators work to adhere to this construction of a sense of place, and how these processes highlight a common Scandinavianness, but also how comics help construct a progressive sense of place.



In addition to these articles, we are pleased to publish three insightful book reviews by media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest, English-scholar Eric Berlatsky, and art historian Fred Andersson. So, without further ado, we give you “From the Land of the Midnight Sun: Nordic History and Cultural Memory in Comics.”

## REFERENCES

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