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5 questions for Jan Guillou

by: Judith Hammer

At the book fair in Göteborg, Sweden.se got a quick chat with Swedish author and journalist Jan Guillou, the man behind the spy fiction novels about Carl Hamilton and the historical fiction novels about Knight Templar Arn Magnusson.



Jan Guillou. Photo: Peter Knutson

1. What made you start writing?
2. Where do you find your inspiration?
3. What image of Sweden do you think you convey to your readers?
4. Name a Swedish writer who influenced your writing.
5. What do you like most about Sweden?

1. What made you start writing?

“You start thinking about it when you’re very young. Teenager dreams, like you want to be famous rather than rich... When I was a teenager, the prestigious writers were French. Like Claude Simon and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio. So I imitated those guys. And I did quite well.

“In 1968 I was 24 years old, when the political indications for writing were obvious. The world was on fire. Portugal was involved in three colonial wars in Africa. Israel had been turned into an occupying power. Then writing became something else than art. It became an instrument that could be used to convince people of your political beliefs. That is what I’ve been doing ever since then.”

2. Where do you find your inspiration?

“I don’t need inspiration, because I’m a professional. Inspiration is for amateurs. It’s an excuse not to write: ‘I haven’t found my inspiration today. I could do the tidying up and the household instead.’ That’s rubbish. That’s amateurish. I just sit down and write.”

3. What image of Sweden do you think you convey to your readers?

“A democracy that is not flawless. My job is to find those little flaws and to describe them. And that’s a version of Sweden that our politicians would not like to be seen.”

4. Name a Swedish writer who has influenced your writing.

“The first Swedish writer who had an influence on me was Strindberg, when I was very young. He is the father of all modern literature in Sweden. Even as a 17-year-old school boy I read his novels and enjoyed them very much. He was the introduction to literature as an instrument, as a possibility, as a dream.

“Later I was influenced by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, because when I was sentenced to prison in 1973*, everyone except me read their books. In prison I had the chance to read all their stories. I realized that these guys had done something quite simple: They had transported the American hard-boiled style of writing into Swedish – just like that. And it works. While the American police novel in those days had a political tendency toward the right, or even worse, Sjöwall/Wahlöö turned their writing into communist propaganda.

“So, if they could do that with a police novel, I could probably do it with a spy novel. And that’s what I did. I could never have done that without the idea from Sjöwall/Wahlöö.”

5. What do you like most about Sweden?

“Probably the combination of democracy and nature. We’re very fortunate to have a beautiful country, no starvation, no overpopulation. We won’t be the first to drown when the sea level rises.”

**Guillou served 10 months in prison for espionage after having exposed a secret intelligence organization.*

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