

# **P.C. JERSILD'S NOVEL DJURDOKTORN AND MODERN SWEDISH SOCIETY**

Irene Scobbie

P.C. Jersild is that rather rare bird, a very amusing Scandinavian novelist whose work can sometimes make you laugh out loud. He is also one of the best satirical writers in Scandinavia today and his humour usually has a bite to it.

What he satirises is our highly developed western society, and since he is a Swede the setting of his novels is usually Sweden. His barbs could just as easily be directed at other advanced societies in the world, however.

In some ways Jersild's training has given him a unique opportunity of describing a technologically developed community. (He is quite open about himself and his work, incidentally, and if one reads his *Professionella bekännelser* (Professional Confessions) one can speak with some confidence about his background and his attitude to his work, having received it from the horse's mouth, as it were).

Jersild's father was a deeply religious man, an executive member of a free church movement, who believed in the literal truth of the Bible. His mother on the other hand had a great love of literature. Jersild finally rejected his father's religion but retains a respect for people who do have a faith. He was also "indoctrinated" by his mother and is widely read, not just in such influential twentieth century authors as James Joyce, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, but also such classics as Rabelais, Swift and Voltaire.

Jersild has had an essentially *modern* education and training in that he studied medicine and then after graduating did research in Social Medicine, worked for many years in the Civil Service Welfare Department and then as a social psychiatrist. This has allowed him an insight into the functioning of large bureaucratic institutions and given

him a command of the jargon.

One notices when reading his “Confessions” that he was never a natural conformer; and that for a doctor who has worked in a large teaching hospital in Stockholm he shows an astonishing interest in patients as individuals.

What worries Jersild is the way people running a group, an institution, a country, can set in train for the very best motives a process of rationalisation which then becomes more important than the people it was designed to help. The bureaucrats have their orders, are given the necessary authority to carry them out, and then the more conscientious they are the more inhuman they make the very system devised to improve the human lot. It could be taken to terrifying lengths. All it needs is for an extremely efficient bureaucracy to “dehumanise”. Jersild defines dehumanisation for us: “the psychological process which transforms emotionally-charged factors into neutral symbols”. This point is illustrated systematically in his novel *Grisjakten* (The Pig Hunt) where a very conscientious civil servant, Lennart Siljeberg, had been ordered to exterminate all the pigs on Gotland. He doesn’t know why, and it not his duty to enquire. By studiously avoiding realistic vocabulary such as *pigs*, *slaughter* and *carcasses*, which would remind him of what he is actually doing, he can make his task fully acceptable. (It isn’t a very great step from eradicating pigs to exterminating, for instance, “non-compliable human units”).

I’d like to look more closely at one of Jersild’s novels, *Djurdoktorn* (The Animal Doctor) and the picture of society he projects there. It was published in 1973 and is set in the very near future, 1988-89. Jersild mentions in his “Confessions” that “my setting was Stockholm 1988-89... In actual fact I wasn’t primarily interested in what Sweden might perhaps look like in 1988-89, Utopias hardly ever prove true, but I needed elbow-room and the chance to use my imagination”.

The plot is woven round Dr Evy Beck, a diffident 52-year-old veterinary surgeon, unmarried, with an old irascible father and an adult illegitimate son. She has been unemployed for some time, but is

now appointed on a temporary basis to look after the animals used in experiments at the Nobel Institute, a great medical research institution. By showing us how Evy, a “normal” warm-hearted individual, wanders through the brave new world of the Nobel Institute Jersild can make many amusing, thought-provoking and sometimes nightmarish statements on the direction in which modern society is progressing.

The death-rate of the animals is too high, and in the interests of efficiency and economy – *not* animal welfare – the Institute’s board of management decides to employ a vet, but it hasn’t money to spend on such things. However, there is always someone who can work the system. They turn to KVAMS, i.e. AMS (the National Labour Board) + KVINNA (woman). KVAMS will pay the salary of a female unemployed academic who reached the age of 49 in the year of her last appointment. The KVAMS computer comes up with Evy Beck’s name, and she is asked to appear at the Nobel Institute.

Evy’s first encounter with the technologically sophisticated Institute is not unlike one of Jacques Tati’s last films, only twenty years on. She can’t see a human in sight. However, she eventually sees a microphone suspended from the ceiling and the words “Please state your name and whom you wish to see”. Evy stands beside the microphone and says:

“Evy Beck wishes to speak to Director Hörrlin”.

“Not understood”, said the microphone in a slightly nasal synthetic voice....

She was sick and tired of these entrance telephones that grated “Not understood, not understood”. The trouble was that for a woman Evy had quite a deep voice. When she said ‘Evy’ this was read as a feminine form – but it was uttered in a voice which on a phonogram could register as masculine. In that situation the computer had to respond “Not understood”. Feminine and masculine cannot exist concurrently.

She put her right index finger and thumb to her throat, squeezed slightly and said in a descant:

“Evy Beck to speak to Director Hörrlin”.

“Enter and follow the green arrow”, said the microphone so quickly that she hardly had time to finish her sentence.’ (22)

When Evy finally is seated opposite Director Hörrlin she starts to open her brief case. Since she wasn't sure whether she had actually got the post she had gone prepared with all her certificates and other papers and a couple of passport photographs, just in case.

'Evy undid the clasp of her brief case. Hörrlin looked at it, very interested.

"I brought my papers with me".

"Papers?".....

In his breast pocket Director Hörrlin had a small black plastic box, the size of a cigarette packet. He pulled it out and rested it against his chin. Along the top of the little box was a small grill like an electric razor.

"May I have your identity card, please?" he said ....

Evy handed over the stiff card bearing her personal details, and Director Hörrlin pushed it quickly into a slot; it wasn't a razor but a microphone ...

"Hello, PAI. Project professional data on the screen."

The metal trolley on to which Evy Beck had placed her rain coat started to bleep and crackle. Embarrassed, she seized her coat. The trolley's 9" TV screen was lit up. First her personal number was flashed up in white, the number projected in reverse order. Then followed a flimmering photograph... They both sat and for a couple of seconds looked at the five-year old telephoto of Evy Beck.... The photo was followed by her blood group, an abbreviated statement on her health, weight and height.... Then in quick succession schools attended, examination results, practical experience, education, professional experience".

When Evy asks if she has got the job Hörrlin simply raises the microphone again and utters: "Evy Beck; key entrance C", then shows her how to place her right thumb on to the glass screen on the trolley and assures her that from then on she can open all locks marked "C" by pressing her thumb on to the electronic eye beside the lock.

"Before putting her thumb back behind her brief case she looked at it quickly as if it had suddenly acquired a new magic significance."  
(25)

At that point in the interview Evy asks about the actual work involved.

‘For the first time he looked puzzled – as if she had tried to tell a funny story and fluffed the punch line.

“I only deal with the actual appointing interview”, he then said....“Don’t misunderstand me....You will be given instructions, inductions, information, inspection tours, milieux summaries, a policy file, personal file, map, contact with the Leisure Committee – we have a very progressive personnel policy here at the Institute....”

Three minutes later Evy is standing outside the administration block. She looks down at her heavy brief case and thinks ‘You are getting to be a confused old maid! Fancy taking a passport photograph with you when going for a job!’ (25)

Evy’s induction course lasts about a fortnight during which, despite her occasional question she still doesn’t know what she will actually be expected to do, but she is “filled in” on security, social advantages, the history of the Institute, etc. etc., and the reader realises that the Swedish system of consensus and compromise has reached a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. Every issue is dealt with by committee on which the executive, personnel and the unions are represented.

Jersild introduces features of society outside the Nobel Institute by showing Evy Beck’s home life. Her aged father had had his liver removed and is dependent on a dialysis machine. He is a socialist of the old school and a grumpy old soul. Her son Erik is, in Jersild’s words “a business economist and administrator, the new upper class”. As a single woman Evy is there to be exploited and condescended to by father, son and the state authorities. Even as a qualified vet with an exacting job to tackle she is obliged to keep her father at home on his machine, deal with his special diet, see to his needs and cope with his temper.

Rationalisation hasn’t necessarily helped pregnant women either. Evy meets a very pregnant laboratory assistant on duty on the

27th December.

‘Evy noticed that the laboratory assistant’s unnaturally white neck was swollen round the larynx.

“When is it due?” she asks cheerfully.

...“The day before Christmas Eve.”

“Why didn’t they induce it then?”

“No, I got an injection to hold things back over the Christmas. There’s nobody else to feed the animals. I’m on duty, according to the schedule.” (52)

By following Evy’s home life and her work for a year we get an insight into Jersild’s brave new world. An ‘election officer’ arrives on May 1 to interview Evy’s father. Evy mentions that he is in his eighties and an ailing man, but it is explained to her that her father has been “*slumpad*” (“randomed”). The election branch of the Statistical Public Opinion Bureau produces 10,000 names by random selection every May 1; and these people vote by interview. The results are fed into a computer that same evening, ready for the 19.30 news on television. The political party leaders then come and defend the results.

When Evy says “I think it was better in the days when we all had a vote” the officer retorts “I have heard several people say that – but the fact is that this new simplification gives a more reliable result” and proceeds to overwhelm Evy with statistics to prove her point. She then describes the method now used. First the “randomed” citizen has to blow into a breathalyser; then prove he or she is literate, state what year it is and show generally that he/she is of sound mind.

“Then we go through the three parliamentary parties’ election literature. The voter has to give reasons for and against the parties’ arguments.”

“Who provides the election folders?”

“We produce them ourselves at the Statistical Central Bureau. We look back at the previous three years and check how the parties concerned have acted. Then we blend that with the current party programmes – well, we purge it of obviously unrealistic elements first...We go through the collected arguments and try to assess the voter’s antipathy or sympathy

towards different points.”

“And if one doesn’t know?”

The election officer produces her dice. “Just as in *Riksdagen*, we decide the issue by lot”...

“So you reach a decision on which party the voter wants to elect?”

“No, you have completely misunderstood the procedure. We reach two figures for each party, a negative and a positive figure.”

“So one votes for a little bit of each party, then?”

“Exactly. The result of the interview is a composite figure. For instance: the voter gives 20 per cent to the Right; 5 per cent to the Left; 75 per cent to the Centre. We then have what we call differential voting...The old election irrelevancies are removed, the unrealistic promises are gone, as is the wear and tear on school premises...And above all: the element of *manipulation* is gone.” (129)

Old Beck is ready and waiting for the election officer by this time. He reacts to political argument like an old warhorse to the whiff of powder. He rubs his hands as the unsuspecting interviewer enters his room and says “Nu jävvlar” (loosely translated “Let me get at them”). Evy thinks she’ll take a little walk.

Industrial relations have undergone the same kind of rationalised development. There is something called the “Division principle” – as soon as more than two specialists are involved in any planning a layman must be present.

Trade Union officials have obviously been doing their duty in the matter of salaries too. For permanent employees at the Nobel Institute there is a finely tuned “compensation programme” so complicated that each section has to have a special officer to deal with it. Overtime is compensated by time in lieu, and the amount is calculated carefully: an employee working on Christmas night, for instance, would have hours worked multiplied by 5.180; someone just working through the lunch break on an ordinary weekday would multiply by 0.975.

There are other amusing touches. It is the King who delivers a

speech on May 1 – Labour Day, while one of the charwomen at the Nobel Institute is called Helène Bernadotte, the name of the Swedish royal family.

In Jersild's 1988 it hasn't been possible to "rationalise" all members of the community, and Evy Beck discovers a colony of drop-outs living outside Stockholm. The authorities have abandoned them: they exist outside the health service and, because they don't conform, are denied the benefits of all social amenities and welfare services. They are allowed to distill their own spirits illicitly provided they operate within unofficially defined limits. One of the people in this commune, Krona, is suffering from chronic toothache when Evy arrives. When she tells him he ought to go to a dentist he says that he'd never be able to open wide on thirty years of neglect, and anyway he hasn't got a toothbrush. The picture of Dr Beck, used to the latest shining sterilised gadgets, extracting the poor man's tooth arouses sympathy as well as amusement. His pathetic friends have found a pair of pliers and a kitchen chair. Krona is given some raw alcohol; he has trouble with both his nerves and his bladder and keeps disappearing behind the old bus they live in. Finally when he is inebriated enough to have the courage to sit still but not drunk enough to collapse Evy advances with the pliers.

"As soon as he feels the pliers against his lips he tries to pull away, but all Evy Beck's experience of dentistry is based on her treatment of horses. She crooks her left arm around Krona's neck, drives her knee under his chin, strikes lucky, gets a good purchase and twists. The blackened tooth glides out like a nail from rotten wood. Afterwards Evy has a large dram." (177)

However, despite the humour in this book there is always a lurking menace. This is shown symbolically when Evy leaves the drop-outs and returns to the Institute. There she visits the Ethology section and sees an experiment on rats that she hadn't known about. It is called "packning". In a large pit about 15m by 20m with glass walls are crowded thousands of white rats. Since the beginning of the 1960s ethologists have been feeding and watering them but otherwise leaving them to their own devices. The experiment is financed by Damedo, a contraction of *Katastrofmedicinska organisationskommittén*, with

Pofo (*Polisens forskningsråd*, i.e. the Police Research Council) holding a watching brief.

Evy tries to discern a pattern as she looks down into the pit. “Strong social magnetic fields have drawn up firm circles.” There are large clear patches of sand, while in other places the animals crawl on top of each other, two or three deep.

‘In several places the mass seethes when the rats turn on a comrade that has become socially fair game. Large male rats here and there lie asleep in a free zone, or else they copulate quickly and unconcerned. Almost all the rats are maimed in some way or other. Complete tails are unusual, as are two ears on the same individual rat. Despite the automatic feeding almost all the animals appear to be mangy or matted or undernourished.’ (186)

It is obvious that Jersild is making a serious statement about human society as well as a rodent colony.

Evy feels strongly enough about this cruel, unnecessary experiment to try to have it stopped – and so takes on the organisation. She is bound to fail, of course, but it is all subtly done. Such unsocial behaviour on her part is considered the result of strain, and so she is persuaded to attend the Ethics Centre. This gives Jersild the opportunity of describing a few group therapy sessions. The other patients in Evy’s group include a conscientious objector, a nurse at an abortion clinic, a young clergyman and the editor of the “agony column” of a weekly magazine. (A British reader finds added amusement in the two psychologists conducting the sessions. They are English, and Jersild’s rendering of their Swedish which is reasonably fluent but inaccurate and with awful pronunciation shows his skill in picking up nuances).

Evy is almost at the end of her pilgrimage. She learns to enjoy her sessions at the Ethics Centre and after her “cure” she sees the wisdom of her superiors and her “upper-class” son who explain that although they agree with much of what she says they think she is going about it the wrong way. Change has to be brought about smoothly within the framework of the system. When a permanent post is arranged for Evy

on the discreet understanding that she stops trying to alter things she succumbs.

It will be obvious that Jersild's 1988 is not meant to be an Orwellian 1984. The rats that appear don't threaten Evy Beck; there is no obvious systematic attempt to make her conform, and at no point in the book do the Authorities physically restrict her movements, let alone inflict physical torture.

The danger in a democratic, "reasonable" state run on a system involving consensus and a willing acceptance of rationalisation in order to preserve a high standard of living, is not that a dictatorial Big Brother will take over, but that tri-partite management committees will be set up in every section of community life and in the interests of "efficiency" forget that they are dealing with human beings.

This is what Jersild has projected so brilliantly. The exaggerations are subtle enough for us to recognise present day models. Developments at his Nobel Institute are almost uncomfortably plausible. It has established the Volvo Chair in Transport Medicine; the IKEA Chair in ergonomics; the Marabou Chair in Dietetics; and (with a gleam in Jersild's eye) the Swedish Broadcasting Company's Chair in Hypnosis Research. Jersild's Institute selects the Nobel prize winners in medicine and now decides that the prize may be awarded not just to a deserving research scholar but could also go to a body that has financed research – a beautiful piece of book-keeping.

Striving for the almost legendary Swedish efficiency has been slightly increased in 1988 and vocabulary associated with machinery is applied to human beings. The Nobel Institute incorporates a Transplantological Institute – the spare parts industry is doing well! Evy's father has to go into hospital for a general check-up once a quarter and it is called his *rundsmörjning* – an oil change, as it were. There are even off-peak vouchers for old age pensioners who are prepared to go for their service immediately after mid-summer. Passengers on a plane are called *vikt*, i.e. weights. They are weighed as well as their luggage and seated accordingly on the plane to effect maximum efficient balance.

Perhaps what Jersild sees as the greatest danger of all is the Swedes' natural tendency to conform. This too has been very slightly exaggerated. Evy's father and his generation are a dying breed. Evy herself, despite her decency and common sense can be guided into the state system by applying pressure. Some people will always refuse to conform, but they too are manageable. They are few in number and can be shunted into drop-out colonies, tiny harmless little blots outside the stream-lined society.

The book could, I suppose, be considered pessimistic despite its humour but I take the opposite view. It has been widely read in Sweden and has run to several editions and reprints. Any nation that can produce a critic of Jersild's calibre and take his criticism seriously still seems to me to be a long way from the 1988 portrayed in *Djurdoctorn*, even if we have reached 1986.

(The page references are to *Djurdoctorn*, Delfinseries 493, Bonniers, Stockholm 1976).

### **Some biographical and bibliographical data**

Per Christian Jersild born 1935

1955 matriculated as medical student at Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm.

1962 took medical degree.

1963-66 research at Institute of Social Medicine, Stockholm.

1966-74 Swedish Civil Servants' Welfare Department, Stockholm.

1974-78 social psychiatrist at Huddinge Hospital, Stockholm.

Since 1978 has been a full-time writer.

Main prose works: *Räknelära* (1960); *Till varmare länder* (1961); *Ledig lördag* (1963); *Calvinols resa genom världen* (1965); *Prins Valiant och Konsum* (1966); *Grisjakten* (1968); *Vi ses i Song My* (1970); *Drömpojken* (1970); *Uppror bland marsvinen* (1972); *Stumpen* (1973); *Djurdoctorn* (1973); *Den elektriska kaninen* (1973); *Barnens Ö* (1976); *Babels hus* (1978); *En levande själ* (1980); *Professionella bekännelser* (1981); *Efter floden* (1982); *Den femtionde frälsaren* (1984).

Translations: several in other languages, few in English

- Ledig lördag* *Freier Samstag*. Rostock: Hinstorff, 1970
- Djurdoktorn* *The Animal Doctor*. Transl by David Mel Paul and Margareta Paul. New York: Pantheon, 1975.  
*Die Tierärztin*. Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg-Taschenbuch, 1978.
- Barnens Ö* *Die Insel der Kinder*. Köln: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1978.  
*L'Île des enfants*. Paris: Stock, 1979.
- Babels hus* *Das Haus zu Babel*. Köln: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1980.