

# Sven Lindqvist obituary

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**One of Sweden's most important and controversial postwar writers who aimed his fire at European imperialism.**

The Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist, who has died aged 87, argued that the racist brutality of European imperialism led to the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and survived into the 21<sup>st</sup>. "We want genocide to have begun and ended with nazism," he wrote in *Exterminate All the Brutes* (1992), "That is what is most comforting." His work neither comforted nor diminished, but clarified.

In short, numbered chapters that build on the style created in Lindqvist's first book, on working in a creosote factory, *A Proposal* (1955), *Exterminate All the Brutes* is a travelogue through African geography and European literature, punctuated with fable-like dream sequences. The title comes from a sentence that Kurtz, the emblematic colonialist in Joseph Conrad's [Heart of Darkness](#) (1899), writes about white people's role in Africa.

With [A History of Bombing](#) (2001), Lindqvist developed both the argument and the formal method. The logical progression from distant European steamboats shelling defenceless villagers to the allied incinerations of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are explained in episodic prose sections.

But rather than along what Lindqvist called the "motorway" of linear argument, they are arranged with the logic of a role-playing game. Readers have to choose their own way through the labyrinth of exploded pieces, even if this sense of agency hints at implicating them in the outrages being described, often carried out in the name of their security and prosperity.

Lindqvist came to be considered one of his country's [most important postwar writers](#), engaging controversially with a broad range of topics. From the 1960s onwards, his work was translated into English and other languages, with a focus towards the works which engage most directly with travel, war and what Professor [Paul Gilroy](#) has called "the political ethics of antiracism".

Born in Stockholm, to Oscar and Signhild, who taught in the Swedish "folk school" system, Lindqvist attended the [Södra Latins Gymnasium](#) in Stockholm alongside the future Nobel laureate [Thomas Tranströmer](#). From there, he went to Stockholm University, which later, in 1966, awarded him a PhD for a thesis on the poet Vilhelm Ekelund.

After *A Proposal*, based on his early working life, *Advertising Is Lethal* (1957) attacked the consumer culture he and his wife, Cecilia (nee Norman), a photographer and writer, experienced on setting up house together in 1956 – their children, Aron and Clara, were born in 1964 and 1970.

The newspaper for which he had written since 1951, [Dagens Nyheter](#), fired him out of concern over its own advertising contracts. The Lindqvists ended up moving to China: he took a job in 1960 as a cultural attaché to the Swedish embassy in Beijing and both studied at the city's university.

The couple's collaborative reportage about their experience there was published as *China in Crisis* (1963). In 1967, Lindqvist published *The Myth of Wu Tao-tzu*, a book based on the story of the Tang

Dynasty painter said to have entered into one of his paintings, and Lindqvist's own attempt to enter critically and imaginatively into [Hermann Hesse's](#) 1943 novel *The Glass Bead Game*. Lindqvist's analysis of relationships between countries at differing stages of industrialisation – “We have created a lifestyle that makes injustice permanent and inescapable” – anticipated the sharpening of the climate crisis.

Travelling in South America with Cecilia and Aron, Lindqvist saw the corpse of Che Guevara laid out by jubilant CIA operatives in Vallegrande. The experiences of this period were collected into *The Shadow* (1972), and later *Land and Power in South America* (1979).

With *Diary of a Lover* and *Diary of a Married Man* (1981-82), his writing entered a more acutely autobiographical phase. *Bench Press* (1988) reflected both on Lindqvist's divorce from Cecilia in 1986 (he married the economist Agneta Stark in the same year) but also the experience of befriending a weightlifter at the gym whom he considered the Virgil to his middle-aged Dante. Increasingly fixated with the connections between defining muscles and defining words, Lindqvist recovered a lifelong interest in the desert, that “most defined of landscapes”.

From here, *Desert Divers* (1990), a characteristic account of a journey to the Sahara, formed a bridge into the reflections on population and depopulation in *Exterminate All the Brutes*, and their extension in *Terra Nullius: A Journey Through No One's Land* (2005). In 2018, there was a final book of reflections, *Sanningskonst*, with the writer Stefan Jonsson.

A number of Lindqvist's 33 books remain untranslated into English. Among these is *Dig Where You Stand* (1978), a handbook encouraging workers to research and write the history of their workplaces, and counter the version of events hitherto told solely from the point of view of employers and factory-owners; at its peak in the 1980s it created an international movement of connected research groups – in [Sweden](#) there were around 10,000 groups with a total of around 100,000 members. A project based at University College London and the University of Gothenburg is working to bring it to the UK.

Lindqvist's many honours included, in 2012, the Lenin prize, awarded to a Swedish author or artist who operates in a rebellious leftist tradition. His acceptance speech noted that he was “an opponent of Lenin and most of his teachings”, and “a feminist, traditional social democrat”.

He lived with Parkinson's disease for the last 15 years of his life.

Lindqvist is survived by Agneta and his children.

- Sven Lindqvist, writer, born 28 March 1932; died 14 May 2019

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## Tom Overton

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/03/sven-lindqvist-obituary>