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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Judit Martin. *Augusta's Daughter: Life in Nineteenth-Century Sweden*. Iowa City: Penfield Books, 2012. 238 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-932043-81-5.

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Judit Martin's historical novel *Augusta's Daughter* is a welcome new addition to English-language historical fiction set in nineteenth-century Sweden during the era of mass immigration, from 1850 to 1920. More than sixty years have passed since the publication of Vilhelm Moberg's *The Emigrants* (and more than forty years since its film adaptation). His historical fiction helped several generations of Swedish Americans understand the circumstances that caused their ancestors to leave homeland and family networks, endure an arduous ocean voyage, and attempt a new life in the United States. Martin's novel holds some of that same potential for helping Swedish Americans understand their heritage.

Unlike Moberg's, Martin's novel unfolds entirely through the voices of women, primarily that of the fictional Augusta's illegitimate daughter, Elsa-Carolina, who at the novel's end immigrates to the United States after surviving years of hardship, prejudice, and exploitation as a child and young woman. The book opens with Elsa-Carolina returning for the first time to her homeland at age ninety-four in the 1940s. As she and her great-granddaughter journey via ship to Sweden, Elsa-Carolina relates the story of her life prior to emigration, a story she had until that time kept secret.

Through the stories of Elsa-Carolina and her mother Augusta, Martin reveals the underside of women's lives in nineteenth-century Sweden. Augusta falls in love with her employer's son, Erling, and becomes pregnant with his child, but the strict social class hierarchies prevent the couple from marrying. Augusta is instead forced to marry a farmhand, Olov, who works for the same employer. Erling is sent away by his father ostensibly to learn about the family business. When he returns home

and discovers that his father has married off Augusta in his absence, he joins the military. After several years he is killed during military training. At Erling's funeral Olov discovers that the child, Elsa-Carolina, is not his offspring. He beats Augusta and the local church authorities publicly shame her for her sins. Trapped and suffering in a loveless marriage, Augusta joins a pietistic religious group and continues to bear children for her husband. When one of her pregnancies ends with the newborn's death, Augusta is accused of infanticide and removed from the home. Olov wants nothing to do with Elsa-Carolina, so she is left at age ten to the mercies of nineteenth-century Swedish welfare practices (which bear little resemblance to the much-lauded twentieth-century Swedish welfare state).

While the reader may have thus far cringed at Augusta's fate, Elsa-Carolina experiences even more horror and abuse than her mother. As a parish ward she is subject to the Swedish system of *utackordering*, auctioned off to the family willing to accept the least compensation from the local authorities to provide her room and board (that lowest bidder then benefited from her labor). Abused and exploited in her first year in this system, her second auction placement lands her in a loving family. But her happiness is short-lived. When the head of that household dies Elsa-Carolina is placed in the parish poorhouse. These Swedish institutions were often the dumping places not only for orphans but also for the elderly, mentally ill, and disabled who had no family to support them. Elsa-Carolina suffers this existence until age fourteen, when it is time for her confirmation. In order to receive her religious instruction she is sent to serve at a parish priest's home. Here she is repeatedly raped by the priest and becomes pregnant. She is ejected from the

household when the pregnancy is discovered. Returning to her home parish, the local authorities force her to wear a whore's cap to signify her misdeed, but she receives support from her old godmother, Stina. Shunned by her community, Elsa-Carolina also faces hunger. Sweden in the late 1860s experienced serious famine, and Martin's characters barely survive, resorting to bark bread (*barkbröd*) and begging. Elsa-Carolina fortunately gives birth to a healthy daughter (Kajsa), but, overwhelmed by the death of her godmother and public shaming by the church and community, she becomes mentally and physically ill and unable to care for the child. A wealthy family who had just lost a child agrees to take in Kajsa (though Elsa-Carolina doesn't realize that, against her wishes, this will become a permanent adoption). When Elsa-Carolina recovers her health, she leaves her home province in central Sweden to travel to Stockholm and make a new start. Here she falls in love and marries. She and her husband decide to emigrate to America with her husband's family. An epilogue takes the story full circle as Elsa-Carolina returns to Sweden after seventy years, reconnects with her past, and after solving some of the mysteries surrounding her mother Augusta's death, passes away.

An engaging read, the novel, if used in a Scandinavian history course, would certainly provide students insight into nineteenth-century Swedish society and the ways in which gender and social class shaped women's

experiences. Church and parish authorities and the upper classes are depicted quite unflatteringly, but Martin's fiction is grounded in historical research in primary and secondary sources. The novel includes a bibliography of sources she consulted for her work. The novel is enriched with detail about the routines of daily life as well as folklore and folk medicine (see, for example, pp. 20-21, 28-29). And even though Martin wrote the novel in English, she used sentence construction common in nineteenth-century Sweden for her characters' dialogue (they address each other in the third person, for example).

For the general reader, Martin's novels can help balance family historical accounts that may not provide a complete or very accurate picture of the challenges of life in nineteenth-century Sweden prior to emigration. Readers should be aware, however, that while all of the unfortunate circumstances that befell Augusta and Elsa-Carolina were in fact experienced by various Swedish women in the past, and not infrequently, for so many different misfortunes to have been experienced by only two women is unlikely. In that sense Martin's characters ought not be considered as typical Swedish immigrant women of that era. It is also important to remember that while immigration often resulted in an improvement in women's quality of life and social status, life as a Swedish immigrant woman in the United States held its own set of challenges and potential calamities.

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