

"A charming debut . . . You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll feel new sympathy for the curmudgeons in your life."

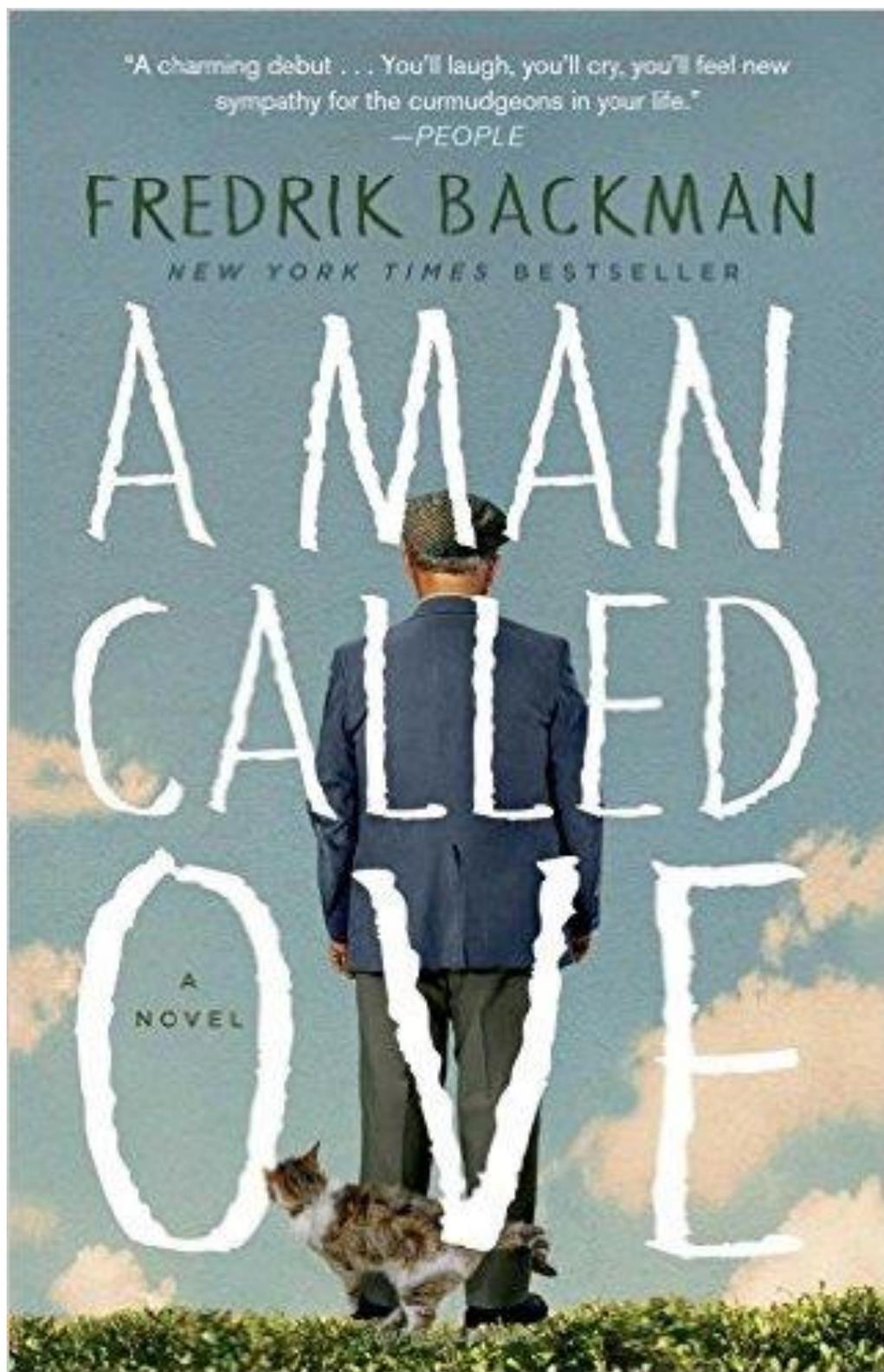
—PEOPLE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A MAN  
CALLED  
OVE

A  
NOVEL



## Books

# The Man Behind ‘A Man Called Ove,’ Sweden’s Latest Hit Novel

By [ALEXANDRA ALTER](#) OCT. 28, 2016



The writer Fredrik Backman in Stockholm. His book “A Man Called Ove” is among Sweden’s most popular literary exports since “The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.” Credit Casper Hedberg for The New York Times

Fredrik Backman got tepid responses when he sent out the manuscript for his debut novel, “A Man Called Ove.” Most publishers ignored him, and several turned it down.

After a few months and a few more rejections, he began to think perhaps there wasn’t a market for a story about a cranky 59-year-old Swedish widower who tries and fails to kill himself.

“It was rejected by one publisher with the line, ‘We like your novel, we think your writing has potential, but we see no commercial potential,’” said [Mr. Backman](#), 35, who lives outside Stockholm with his wife and two children. “That note I kept.”

In hindsight, that critique seems wildly, comically off base. Four years later, “A Man Called Ove” has sold more than 2.8 million copies worldwide, making the book one of Sweden’s most popular literary exports since Stieg Larsson’s thriller “The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo.”

“Ove” became a blockbuster in Sweden, selling more than 840,000 copies. It was adapted into a successful stage production and an award-winning Swedish feature film, which recently [opened in the United States](#). Translation rights have sold in 38 languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Latvian, Thai and Japanese. Mr. Backman has gained a passionate fan base in South Korea, where the novel became a huge best-seller.

“No one really knows why,” Mr. Backman said in a recent telephone interview. “Not even the Korean publisher understands what the hell is going on.”

In the United States, “Ove” got off to a slow start. For months, it sold steadily but in modest numbers. Then sales surged. It landed on the best-seller list 18 months after it was first published and has remained there for 42 weeks. Demand has been so unrelenting that Atria Books has reprinted the novel 40 times and now has more than a million copies in print.

Peter Borland, who acquired United States rights to “Ove” for Atria, said he was struck by the book’s pathos and humor.

“It had a great voice, and it was different from everything else I was reading,” he said. “It wasn’t Scandinavian noir; it was Scandinavian” — he paused, searching for the right description — “something else.”

Mr. Backman didn’t fit into any obvious genre mold, and there was no guarantee that his whimsical, oddball sense of humor would appeal to Americans. Atria was cautious at first and printed 6,600 hardcover copies, a decent run for a debut novel in translation.

The novel got a boost from independent booksellers, who placed big orders and pressed it on customers. The Book Bin in Northbrook, Ill., has sold around 1,000 copies, largely based on word-of-mouth recommendations.

“I passed it around to the rest of the staff and said, I think this is absolutely wonderful, am I crazy?” said Nancy Usiak, a bookseller at the shop. “There are 10 of us, and this was one of the rare occasions where we all agreed.”

The novel’s protagonist, Ove, is a lonely curmudgeon who screams at his neighbors for parking in the wrong place and punches a hospital clown whose magic tricks annoy him. Six months after his wife’s death, he’s planning to commit suicide and has turned off his radiators, canceled his newspaper subscription and anchored a hook into the ceiling to hang himself. But he keeps getting interrupted by his clueless, prying neighbors. He strikes up a friendship with an Iranian immigrant and her two young daughters, who find Ove’s grumpiness endearing.

Once it became clear that there was an appetite for Mr. Backman’s quirky misanthrope, Atria asked Mr. Backman if he was working on any other novels. As it turned out, he’d already written several more.

“I write pretty fast, because I’m high strung,” Mr. Backman said.

Atria bought them all. Last year, it published his novel “My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry,” about a girl named Elsa whose grandmother dies, leaving her with a batch of letters to deliver to people her grandmother had wronged in life. The book now has nearly 500,000 copies in print and has spent 26 weeks on the paperback best-seller list. In May, Atria released a translation of his novel, “Britt-Marie Was Here,” about a passive-aggressive woman who leaves her cheating husband and ends up coaching a children’s soccer team in a backwater town.

Last month, Atria bought four more books from him, including the novella “And Every Morning the Way Home Gets Longer and Longer,” a surreal story about an elderly man with dementia who adores his grandson, which is to come out on Tuesday.

Mr. Backman got the idea for “Ove” five years ago, when he was freelancing for the Swedish magazine Cafe. A college dropout, he once worked as a forklift driver at a food warehouse, taking night and weekend shifts so that he could write during the day.

A colleague at Cafe wrote a blog post for their website about seeing a man named Ove explode with rage while buying tickets at an art museum, until his wife intervened.

“My wife read the blog post and said, ‘This is what life is like with you,’” Mr. Backman said. “I’m not very socially competent. I’m not great at talking to people. My wife tends to say, your volume is always at 1 or 11, never in between.”

Mr. Backman started writing blog posts for Cafe about his own pet peeves and outbursts, under the heading, “I Am a Man Called Ove.”

Mr. Backman realized that he had the blueprint for a compelling fictional character, and the novel began to take shape. “There’s a lot of me in him,” he said of Ove. “When we get angry, it’s about a principle, and we get angry because people don’t understand why we’re angry.”

After getting a few rejections from publishers, Mr. Backman tossed the manuscript aside and started working on a comic memoir about the challenges of parenthood. He had already finished the second book when a Swedish publisher, Forum, finally made an offer on his novel. Mr. Backman insisted that the publisher buy both books, and the novel and memoir were released on the same day.

Mr. Backman still hasn’t adjusted to the life of a famous author.

“Everyone keeps telling you how great you are and what a great writer you are, and they want selfies, and that’s not healthy, because you start liking that,” he said. “You still have to write like you’re writing for 20 people, or you’re going to freak out.”

*(taken from nytimes.com)*

# Man Called Ove (Backman) - Author Bio

## Author Bio

- Birth—June 2, 1981
- Raised—Helsingborg, Sweden
- Education—no degree
- Currently—Stockholm

Fredrik Backman, Swedish author, journalist, and blogger, was voted Sweden's most successful author in 2013.

Backman grew up in Helsingborg, studied comparative religion but dropped out and became a truck driver instead. When the free newspaper *Xtra* was launched in 2006, the owner reached out to Backman, then still a truck driver, to write for the paper. After a test article, he continued to write columns for *Xtra*

In spring 2007, he began writing for *Moore Magazine* in Stockholm, a year-and-a-half later he began freelancing, and in 2012 he became a writer for the *Metro*. About his move to writing, Backman said...

*I write things. Before I did that I had a real job, but then I happened to come across some information saying there were people out there willing to pay people just to write things about other people, and I thought "surely this must be better than working." And it was, it really was. Not to mention the fact that I can sit down for a living now, which has been great for my major interest in cheese-eating. (From his literary [agent's website](#).)*

Backman married in 2009 and became a father the following year. He blogged about preparations for his wedding in "The Wedding Blog" and about becoming a father on "Someone's Dad" blog. During the 2010 Winter Olympics, he wrote the Olympic blog for the Magazine Cafe website and has continued as a permanent blogger for the site.

In 2012, Backman debuted as an author, publishing two books on the same day: a novel, *A Man Called Ove* (U.S. release in 2014), and a work of nonfiction, *Things My Son Needs to Know About the World*. His second novel, *My Grandmother Sent Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, came out in 2013 (U.S. release in 2015). (*Adapted from Wikipedia and the publisher. Retrieved 7/23/2014.*)

*(taken from [litlovers.com](#))*

# Man Called Ove (Backman) - Discussion Questions

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does the opening scene, in which Ove attempts to purchase a computer, succinctly express the main points of Ove's ongoing battle with the stupidities of the modern world?
2. Ove loves things that have a purpose, that are useful. How does this worldview fail him when he believes himself to be useless? How is he convinced that he can still be useful?
3. As readers, we get to know Ove slowly, with his past only being revealed piece by piece. What surprised you about Ove's past? Why do you think the author revealed Ove's past the way that he did?
4. We all know our own grumpy old men. How do Ove's core values lead him to appear as such a cranky old coot, when he is in fact nothing of the sort? Which of these values do you agree or disagree with?
5. Although Ove has some major "disagreements" with the way the world turned out, there are some undeniable advantages to the modernization he finds so hollow. How do these advantages improve Ove's life, even if he can't admit it?
6. Parveneh's perspective on life, as radically different from Ove's as it is, eventually succeeds in breaking Ove out of his shell, even if she can't change his feelings about Saabs. How does her brash, extroverted attitude manage to somehow be both rude and helpful?
7. Ove strives to be "as little unlike his father as possible." Although this emulation provides much of the strength that helps Ove persevere through a difficult life, it also has some disadvantages. What are some of the ways that Ove grows into a new way of thinking over the course of the book?
8. Ove is a believer in the value of routine—how can following a routine be both comforting and stultifying? How can we balance routine and spontaneity? Should we? Or is there sense in eating sausage and potatoes your whole life?
9. The truism "it takes a village to raise a child" has some resonance with *A Man Called Ove*. How does the eclectic cast of posers, suits, deadbeats, and teens each help Ove in their own way?
10. Although we all identify with Ove to some extent, especially by the end of the story, we certainly also have our differences with him. Which of the supporting cast (Parveneh, Jimmy, the

Lanky One, Anita) did you find yourself identifying with most?

11. What did you make of Ove's ongoing battle with the bureaucracies that persist in getting in his way? Is Ove's true fight with the various ruling bodies, or are they stand-ins, scapegoats, for something else?

12. On page 113, after a younger Ove punches Tom, the author reflects: "A time like that comes for all men, when they choose what sort of men they want to be." Do you agree with this sentiment, especially in this context? How does the book deal with varying ideas of masculinity?

13. On page 246, the author muses that when people don't share sorrow, it can drive them apart. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

14. What do you think of Ove's relationship with the mangy cat he adopts? What does the cat allow him to express that he couldn't otherwise say?

15. On Ove and Sonja's trip to Spain, Ove spends his time helping the locals and fixing things. How does Ove the "hero" compare and contrast to his behavior in the rest of the book? Is that Ove's true personality?

16. Ove and Sonja's love story is one of the most affecting, tender parts of the book. What is the key to their romance? Why do they fit so well together?

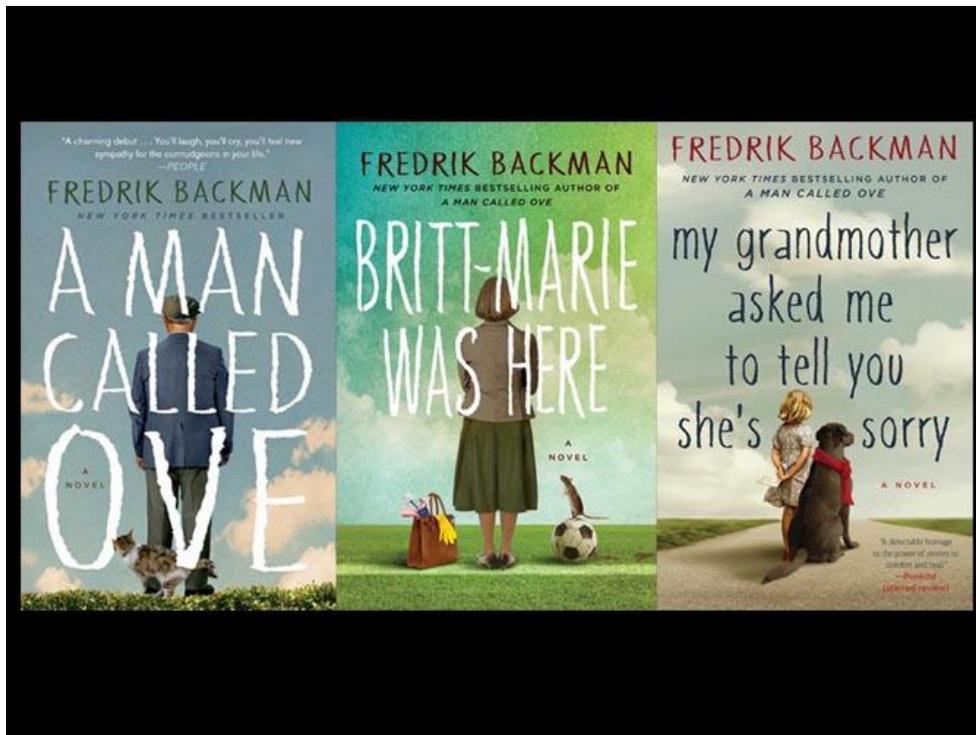
17. Saab? Volvo? BMW? Scania?  
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

*(taken from litlovers.com)*

# The Magic of Fredrik Backman

Writer Ilana Masad delves into the works of Swedish author, columnist, and blogger Fredrik Backman.

BY ILANA MASAD • 1 YEAR AGO



A couple months ago, I was given the latest of Fredrik Backman's books, [Britt-Marie Was Here](#), along with the other two that have been translated into English: [A Man Called Ove](#), the first book Backman published, and [My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry](#), which was the third (the second wasn't translated into English). Unwisely, perhaps, I started backwards; though fitting maybe with Backman's name (and its meaning in English, though I'm sure he's gotten enough jokes about that at Book Expo America in Chicago where, according to his blog, he spent a lot of nervous time recently).

The reason I know that Backman was at BEA and that he was nervous is because I used Google Translate on his blog, which led to many funny-sounding sentences because, of course, the translation is far from perfect. For example, at a baseball game with his agent, Backman was apparently very excited and explaining the game's ins and outs (though not its innings, as he wasn't given the chance) to his agent:

so asked my agent if I "thought go on like this the whole match." And when I nodded (basically quite normal enthusiastically!) He asked how long a match usually is. And when I replied that they could be anything between three and seven hours mumbled something about my agent that "this is not part of our contract."

If I hadn't read the books yet, I would already be a little in love, especially as, even with the garbled translation, the writing style is actually strangely recognizable from his books, which have been, as far as I can tell, very excellently translated, by Henning Koch, whose name only appears in the copyright information, unfortunately—I wish he would get more credit for his wonderful work. A shout out to translators here: you're wonderful, and it is because of you that we get to read literature that wouldn't otherwise reach us here.

So despite the bad translation that my computer spat out at me, I managed to get a general sense of the man through his personal writing, and what he said seemed to tie in so beautifully to the books he writes that I felt compelled to add one more thing he wrote recently before I discussed the books themselves. Specifically, this is about how hard it is for him to sleep without his wife and children:

I lack the expertise to sleep without my family nearby. They manage [of] course the reverse just fine, they've already messaged everyone was happy this morning... but I cannot even fall asleep without my wife's wine cold feet, they are like two damn squirrels that have been dipped in liquid nitrogen running over my calves every time she turns in her sleep. You get used to it. And I'm not very good at being without the kids either, and hotel bed is too soft so tonight I get down to the front desk and ask if they had any Lego I could hide randomly in different places under the sheets.

I'm inclined to think that "wine-cold feet" and "squirrels that have been dipped in liquid nitrogen" are pretty apt translations since these are the kind of beautiful and beautifully strange yet absolutely sensical similes that Backman uses in his novels. And just wait until I get to one of the only interviews I could find about Backman... But we're not there yet. Let's get started on his actual books before we come back to Backman himself.

Okay, I'll stop.

As I was saying, I started with Backman's newest book, *Britt-Marie Was Here*. As seems to be the case with all his novels (which I discovered as I continued to read them), it started out with what seems like a fairly stereotypical stock character. In this case, Britt-Marie, an almost-70-year-old woman with severe hair, severe manners, little patience for the youth's ridiculousness, and a rigidity reminiscent of the elderly Carl Fredricksen from Pixar's *Up*. She starts out, like Carl, as a caricature of herself.

But unlike many such characters in literature, Britt-Marie's past is slowly and tentatively revealed to the readers, and we learn to sympathize with her, just as she begins to learn to sympathize with the world around her. Her story begins with a ring-finger that is empty suddenly and her need, for the first time in many, many years, to get a job. She bothers a young woman at the unemployment office every morning for several days until she finally gets sent to be the temporary custodian of a community center in Borg, a town that everyone has given up on. What happens to her there I'll leave you to read for yourself, but suffice to say that the cover does give you some clues:



Yes, those are cleaning supplies, a rat, and a soccer ball. It all comes together very nicely, believe me.

What is fascinating in *Britt-Marie Was Here*—other than the interpersonal relationships which really carry the book along and the excellent dialogue, as well as the perfectly measured and paced flashbacks and memories which, when put together, make up not only a beautiful but also a very readable book—in addition to all that,

Backman folds in some criticism and exploration of Swedish society and the state of the country's economy. Borg, the town Britt-Marie gets a job in, is suggested to be a town like many others in a country still suffering from the financial crash of 2008 (despite the fact that Britt-Marie's entrepreneur husband says time and time again that the financial crisis is over). In Borg, the people are what keeps the community together. The pizzeria is also a grocery store and a post office because the grocery store and the post office have closed down. The proprietor of the pizzeria, whom Britt-Marie refers to as "Somebody" throughout the book, having never bothered to learn her name, has taken up the mantle of these extra responsibilities in order to keep Borg alive, in order to maintain a sense of community during a time fraught with uncertainty.

In his writing, Backman demonstrates a sense of positivity in the world, even while describing desperate circumstances. He covers up horror with humor but allows sadness and pain to have their time on the page as well, once his characters have developed enough of a closeness with each other to be able to experience it together. There is a kind of central thesis to his books in this: pain is something to be shared, something that is far harder to deal with alone and that is often pushed down or ignored or dealt with matter-of-factly when one doesn't have a support network.

His belief in the goodness of even the grumpiest of people seems to stem from a deep empathy he has with his characters. In his newest book, that empathy begins to overtake the last quarter of the book when violence, loyalty, and a desire for and belief in fulfilling one's dreams, as far-fetched as they are, all blend together into a messily yet realistic ending. An ending that had me end up looking like this (as I documented on Instagram at around 2am when I'd stayed awake reading the last 100 pages or so):

After I finished the beautiful new book, I went back to read the first one, *A Man Called Ove*. Which brings me back to Pixar. In *Up*, we know all about Carl's sad state of affairs before the story really begins: we see the montage in which Carl grows up with the girl—and later woman—he loves, the way they make a life together, and the way their life together ends when she dies before him. I kept thinking of Carl when I began reading Backman's first book, to the point where I wonder if he saw the movie and whether it stuck with him.

Ove, in *A Man Called Ove*, is also a stereotypically grumpy man, almost 60, who, we come to learn, has recently lost his wife. The first chapter includes references to things Ove's wife says, in the present tense, and soon we find out that when Ove is talking to his wife, making coffee for her, or dreading what she might think of him, it is because he still feels her all around him in his house and because he visits her at the cemetery, where he tells her that he misses her.

***(taken from readitforward.com)***