

An email interview with Fredrik Backman
March 2017

1. In *A Man Called Ove*, how did you develop the various characters and their individual personalities? How much is Ove like you, and Parvaneh and her kids like your family?

Well, that's two questions in one, and very hard to answer together. Regarding the first one: It's a long process to develop a character, and the only thing I try to do to guide that process is to go by the feeling of that, as long as it feels like a "character," I'm not really finished. I have to live with that character in my head long enough for him or her to start feeling like a real person to me. I need to have real feelings. I think that's the only way for a story to have a chance to feel like it's worth something to the reader.

Regarding the second question: I have noticed that a lot of writers always get this type of very private questions, no matter what kind of book they've written, because a certain number of readers will apparently somehow always take for granted that all literature is autobiographical. Maybe that's because of the celebrity-driven culture we live in, I don't know, but I'm going to be real honest with you here: I'm not a great fan of it. Because... well... the whole point of fiction is that it is... FICTION, you know? And we need to let it be that. I think that literature needs the chance to once in a while be just...literature. Because there really needs to be a difference between the gossip columns and this kind of discussion about a novel, otherwise all of us are in really big trouble. So here's a suggestion: let's leave my children out of this and instead expand your question a bit, and focus on the subject "are characters based on real people?" And to that I usually answer, "Yes, SOMETIMES they are, but never on ONE person." It might take bits and pieces of twenty or thirty real people to make one good character. It's like oranges: takes more than you'd expect to make one glass of juice. And you know what? Sometimes writers just make stuff up. We're very unreliable like that.

2. You give credit to a translator for the English version of the book, but given your fluency in English, how much do you get involved in the translation?

Very little, actually. It takes a lot more than language skills to be a good translator, it's really a craft that I think goes unnoticed and unappreciated by most of us, including myself, I'm afraid. The translator needs to know the little everyday things about a language that I would never pick up, the hidden meanings of a word joke or the correct phrase in a context that might have been one thing 20 years ago but is hopelessly out of date today. It's also a lot about rhythm, I might write things with a certain tempo in Swedish that wouldn't really work in a different language. So...no. I believe in finding a very good translator and then getting out of the way and letting that person do their job.

But with all that said: I hope the reason that my books have found an audience abroad is that they are not constructed out of big words and complicated language, but out of stories. Because stories are universal, they will not get lost in translation.

3. Regarding the names in the book, is there a specific reason you chose the name Ove? What were the original names for Patrick and Jimmy, and why did the moviemakers choose the English names for the movie?

Well... the reason I chose "Ove" is because it's an incredibly common name for a man of Ove's generation in Sweden. Much like "John" would be in America. I thought it was a funny title, because of it being SO common that people would think, "Why would you call a book that?" And that of course worked in Sweden, but then it got translated and sold to countries like South Korea and Italy where "Ove" is the strangest name people have ever heard... so I guess that joke got lost a little bit while it travelled. But hey, you win some, you lose some.

Regarding "Patrick" and "Jimmy," they are named "Patrick" and "Jimmy" in the book. So...there you go. They are pretty common names in a lot of countries, including Sweden. Much like "Fredrik", although I've noticed receptionists at American hotels insist on spelling it "Frederick"...

4. There were only a few clues that the story took place in Sweden — it could have happened just about anywhere. Was it your intention to make it "universal"?

No, I don't think like that. I'm pretty sure that that would backfire somehow. But I guess my writing style is to not tell you too much about what things look like. I try not to over-explain the environment and the characters in a story; there are, for example, very few physical descriptions of Ove, most of what I'm letting you know about him is about the way he acts and thinks and feels. It's very little about what he looks like. I think I trust you to have a way better casting process in your imagination than I do, so I let you choose the actors and the setting for most of what I write.

5. Did you know early on in your plans that (like the Grinch) Ove's heart was too big?

Yes. That was pretty essential to the story. And also, just like Parvaneh, I found it quite funny.

6. Is the community where Ove and Sonja lived a typical suburban Swedish neighborhood? Is a power-crazy homeowners' association president a common occurrence?

I don't know about "common," but my experience from these kinds of interviews abroad is that people like Ove exist just about everywhere in the world. A little while ago a woman from Germany wrote me to tell me that her husband has a similar role in the community where they live, and he now refers to all his neighbors as "the inhabitants." He'll come home and say, "The goddamn inhabitants, you know what one of them has done in his front yard?" I feel that's one or two steps away from using a word like "inmate." I really wish I would have known that story before I wrote the book, because I would have stolen it.

7. Were you pleased with how the movie turned out? Were you consulted in any way as they were making the movie?

The movie people were very nice, but everyone including my wife agreed early on that maybe it would be best if I just came to the meetings and focused primarily on listening and eating all the donuts instead of trying to tell competent people how to do their jobs. My wife will tell you that I know absolutely nothing about making a movie; my favorite movie genres according to her are “superheroes with depressing backstories” and “Kevin Costner plays baseball.” So the only thing she said when we got approached about the movie rights was “If you want them to do it you have to LET them do it, Fredrik. You can’t tell them to make a movie and then be all cranky when they don’t do it exactly the way you want!” I guess my wife is a lot like Bill Parcells in that way, the old NFL coach who said, “If you want me to cook the meal you have to let me shop for the ingredients.” But she was right, of course, she usually is.

To be quite honest I think sometimes authors get this idea that we can... well... do everything. But making a movie is an art, and also a team effort. So I sat down with the director Hannes Holm and the lead actor Rolf Lassgård, and they asked me a lot of questions about the story and how I saw certain things, but I didn’t interfere with their vision of it. The only thing that I told them was that it was important they understood that to me this is a love story. And I really feel like they did. So I felt secure in letting go. And it’s been quite an adventure, really, it was like watching Ove moving away from home. He lives his own life now.

8. Can you tell us about your upcoming book *Beartown* and the TV series that will be based on it? Any chance we’ll get to see it in the States?

It’s a story about a small town that is heavily invested, both economically and emotionally, in their local ice hockey team. At a crucial point in time a star player commits a horrific crime, and everyone involved has to pick a side, choose between letting him be punished for it or try to let him off the hook because he’s so important to the team’s success. It’s a story about sports, so of course it’s based on my love for... well... just about every sport in the world. I call it “having a healthy interest” and my wife calls it “having a mental problem.” But it’s also about the darker aspects of sports, the promoting of some individuals as “elite” and raising them above everyone and everything. Basically it revolves around the simple question: What are we prepared to let a super athlete get away with, if it’s our team he plays for?

I’ve been told it’s more serious than my previous novels, and maybe it is, but I hope I’ve built a strong enough relationship with my readers now that we are ready for that.

9. You have three books at the top of several bestseller lists – congratulations! How long does it take you to write a book, and how do you get your inspiration? Do you start with characters or plot?

That’s a lot of questions at once. So... how long? Depends on the book, of course. I would say the full process takes about a year, because the biggest portion of the work is not writing, it’s

thinking. And thinking can't really be rushed. I have a lot more time to write now than I did when I wrote my first novel, because back then I had a full-time job and could only write during nights and weekends. But I've found that a novel still takes about the same amount of days and months to finish now, because a thought and an idea need a natural time span to grow, I guess.

Next question: Inspiration? I get that from everywhere. That's the only way I know how to write. I steal from wherever I can get it.

And then... characters or plot? Characters for me. Always characters.

10. Several publishers turned down the opportunity to publish your book(s), but you continued to try. What kept you going?

Well...I spent a lot of time writing the book. I figured I could spend at least the same amount of time trying to get it published. It also probably helps that I'm "pretty full of myself," according to my closest friends. I wouldn't say all writers need hubris, but it certainly helps get you through some of the rejections in the beginning. Because there will be rejections, for almost all of us, and you have to battle through that. That's part of the journey.