Saski Vogel: I would say that one of my favorite pieces of editorial advice was: it needs to sound good. And I think that is a really good rule of thumb. I think I translate thinking about the pleasure of reading, and so I don't bring a lot of opinions in that way to the translation of the text. Like, I want the reader to feel the book as I have felt it, or as I feel the writer wants you to feel in Swedish. I want to convey what the writer is conveying, and sometimes that means you do have to stray from the original a bit. Swedish has a great capacity to hold a lot of silence in a very powerful and meaningful way, which can just be super flat in English. You know, like, dialogue can be too perfunctory if you just keep it as sparse as it can be in Swedish. There's often a lot of body acting and looking, which I think is definitely not part of an Anglophone convention. I don't think we read that as subtext. I think we read that as, "Why is everybody looking at each other in this scene? Why did Kim look at Saskia and then Saskia looked out the window?" Yeah, and so that's a real pick-and-choose moment. I tend to keep it, and then sometimes, every once in a while, it's like, "This doesn't work as it is. I'm going to rewrite this ever so slightly." And I think there is also the question of transcreation, or like, am I improving the text when I translate? And I don't think so. I think part of the job of translating is to, yes, translate the language, but also translate the feeling, but also the culture. And sometimes that means intervening in the text a bit more. I'm very lucky and I really translate excellent literature, so there may be other questions that come up with other translators who maybe might be working with more popular texts, and more extensive rewrites might be needed for different reasons. I haven't encountered those problems.

[Intro music starts]

Colin Gioia Connors: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[*Intro music ends*]

Saskia Vogel has been translating ever since she can remember. She grew up in Los Angeles in a bilingual household, English and German, and after moving to Sweden in her early teens, learned Swedish as well. Saskia has worked as a global publicist for Granta, a British literary magazine, and currently volunteers for the Finnish film festival, Viva Erotica. In 2013, she transitioned to translating contemporary Swedish literature into English and writing novels of her own. I sat down with Saskia in our studio to discuss her recent work.
Saskia: So, I'm Saskia Vogel and I am a writer. My debut novel is called *Permission*. I'm in Seattle because I'm on book tour with the novel. And then my day job, I work as a literary translator from Swedish into English. And I feel really lucky that I've gotten into a kind of niche of strong contemporary female voices: Karolina Romqvist, Lina Wolff, whose book, *The Polyglott Lovers*, is coming out later this month, and Lena Andersson, whose *Acts of Infidelity* is coming out in May in the US. Those books, they deal a lot with questions of gender and power and the patriarchy, and overlap really nicely with my own interests and questions that I explore in my own writing.

Colin: So did you start as a translator or as a writer?

Saskia: I started as a writer. I mean, I— I don't know. My mom just sent me a box of stuff from her basement. She moved recently and was unloading some stuff, and I found some books that we made together before I could write. So apparently I have been dictating books to my mother since before I could write, but I hadn't remembered that I did that until I saw these lovely artifacts. They're properly bound books with, you know, title pages and everything—bound with cardboard and wallpaper and that kind of thing. I think for a long time I was primarily interested in storytelling. I was just really, really interested in lots of different kinds of storytelling forms. I was really interested in film for a while and visual storytelling. But, I think the simplicity of myself and the page, and being able to create anything you like with just a pen and paper, I think, that made me choose writing over a much more complex career like film, I suppose. Complex as in you need a lot more people to make a movie, yeah.

Colin: Could you tell me a little bit about your debut novel, then? What is it called?

Saskia: Sure, my novel is called *Permission*. I set out to write the least sensational book possible about a topic that is often sensationalized, which is BDSM sexuality, sort of, fetish subculture. But really, it is a coming of age story about a girl called Echo, who loses her father really unexpectedly. Then she moves back home with her mother and they don't have a very good relationship. There's not much to do at home, and she kind of starts spying on her neighbors, and her new neighbors across the street, it turns out it's a dominatrix who is setting up shop in one of the suburban homes together with her renter, but also long-term client called Piggy. And they enter into a sort of healing relationship that is friendly but also intimate and erotic at times. And I suppose it is a book that looks at, you know, what do we do with our pain? Like, we are all going to go through—we'll all experience loss and pain, but how do we process it? But also, the healing potential of certain BDSM practices, which I think I look at in the way that some people might look at massage as body work—that kind of thing. And I put the erotic very much in the center of this novel and I wanted to tell the story through a very sensualist perspective. Yeah.

Colin: So BDSM is not a very public culture. How did you prepare for writing this novel?

Saskia: Well, when I moved back to LA after I finished university in London, my best friend was living in a house share in Los Angeles with a group of people who were really involved in the sort of fetish nightlife scene in Los Angeles in the early 2000s. There was a real moment where there were a lot of clubs that were sort of more and more visible, and parties and nights, and so there was kind of a great sort of public moment, I suppose, or real nightlife moment. And I was really impressed. I was maybe 23 and had never seen, I guess, non-heteronormative relationship structures, and people really challenging and questioning the roles that they otherwise may have been expected to play by former lovers, or their family, or society. I did an MFA and wrote a very not-accomplished book, at all, kind of just telling sort of their stories. I think I was trying to be like Gay Talese or something with *Thy Neighbor's Wife* but I did not know how to handle a book of reportage at that age. Eventually those stories kind of—some drifted away, some I just didn't think about as much any more, but there were a few stories that stuck, and those turned into Echo and Piggy.

Colin: You mentioned that some of the novels you have translated from Swedish have had similar themes dealing with gender and sexuality. Did that influence how you approached your novel?

Saskia: Yes, it did. I really feel运 lucky that I've gotten into this kind of niche of strong contemporary female voices: Karolina Romqvist, Lina Wolff, whose book, *The Polyglott Lovers*, is coming out later this month, and Lena Andersson, whose *Acts of Infidelity* is coming out in May in the US. Those books, they deal a lot with questions of gender and power and the patriarchy, and overlap really nicely with my own interests and questions that I explore in my own writing.
Saskia: Absolutely. I mean, I think thinking about the word “permission.” I think reading Lina Wolff and Karolina Romqvist, whose books I was translating while I was working on my novel kind of gave me permission to experiment formally in certain ways, but also Karolina Romqvist’s book, *The White City*, is about a woman who is kind of lost all of her resources, a sort of gangster girlfriend who no longer has access to the sort of power structures that kept her in a very protected, luxurious space. She's powerless, and, you know, it’s a book about being powerless, in a way, and reversals of power. There were certain scenes in that book that really helped me think through the questions I had, I guess, about power dynamics in Los Angeles culture in a sort of post-Weinstein #metoo world. It was those sort of questions that had been in my mind, but we didn't have #metoo yet when I started writing the book. So it's been really interesting to have a new language to use when talking about the book. Yeah.

Colin: Do you think that in the wake of #metoo that the culture is changing, or is it the conversation that's changing?

Saskia: That's a really, really good question. Off the cuff I would say the conversation is changing. I think it will take a bit longer for the culture to change, but as the conversation changes I think inevitably the culture will change, hopefully. But what is really lovely is, there is this one scene. There is a dinner scene in Karolina Romqvist's *The White City* and there is a dinner scene in my book, and they are both dinner scenes where the powerless female character is having dinner with somebody who has power over them. And she is on this is-it-a-date-is-it-a-business-meeting with this guy, and when I wrote it pre-#metoo, I was wondering how it might be received by readers, how it would be read, if it might be, kind of, dismissed as “Oh that's just Echo and Van. That's not, you know, a general cultural phenomenon,” which it felt like a general cultural phenomenon, at least in Los Angeles, this sort of uncomfortableness that we now have an entire context for in a very clear example of the power structures at play that have been used to take advantage of people who have less power by people who have more power.

I was in Sweden at the time that #metoo was breaking, and the response in Sweden was very immediate and also resonated very strongly in the cultural community. I mean, #metoo was sort of—broad strokes, because I know I'm not doing the complexity of how it unfolded in Sweden justice, but I think, broad strokes, you could say that #metoo is the reason that there was no Nobel Prize in literature awarded this year. It was sort of this notorious open secret that he was a Weinsteinian figure in the literary community with strong connections to the Swedish Academy.

Colin: Saskia is referring to a scandal that broke in Sweden the fall of 2017, when at least 18 women accused the literary organizer Jean-Claude Arnault of sexual assault and rape. Arnault was charged and convicted of rape, and he is now serving a two and a half year prison sentence.

After the allegations went public, The Swedish Academy cut off all ties with Arnault and his wife Katarina Frostenson, a member of the Academy herself. Allegations arose of financial misconduct and six members resigned in protest. Eventually, Katarina resigned without admitting any wrongdoing. When the dust settled, there were only ten of the original eighteen members left. It was decided to cancel the award for 2018.

Saskia: One of the things that I thought that was lovely, really lovely—So, #metoo broke in the fall and I was in Sweden in the early spring and I went to visit someone in Malmö who was saying that as a result of #metoo, she and some other local artists had been going around speaking to museum curators, etc., to talk about how they could address these imbalances and these issues on, kind of, a local level in the local arts community. So it was fascinating to, kind of, watch #metoo unfold and move through Sweden because it seemed like there was such a strong, immediate response, and things did happen as a result. Stuff changed.

Colin: One such change was the creation of the so-called New Academy, made up of about 100 Swedish writers, poets, musicians, and librarians, who banded together to create a replacement prize for literature in lieu of the Nobel. The group selected 46 nominees and invited
the public to vote as well, something never done for the Nobel prize.

Saskia: We'll see what that'll be like in the long term, but, ah! It was really fascinating to watch from abroad.

Colin: Maybe I can ask you some questions about your translation work, then.

Saskia: Of course.

Colin: When I think about translation, there are words and sentences that you can only translate one way, but then there are others which you can translate 3, 4, 5, 10 ways. How do you make choices?

Saskia: By feeling, I think. I think this is the thing that I say the most about translation. I realized coming to the university today, I felt a little intimidated because I don't come from a—I didn't study translation. I don't have a, sort of, rigorous theoretical framework that I can use to speak about translation. I think I came to translation quite intuitively. I read something I loved and I felt like I could take this story into English. And so, that kind of—feeling how the book makes me feel, how the rhythm of the language moves, that's how I make choices. And then sometimes it's very practical, like, this sentence structure works in Swedish but it doesn't work in English. So I'm just going to have to bash that around—or working with idioms. You know, I think sometimes I really want to preserve Swedish idioms. I've never seen this in a text, but like, the phrase god dag, yxskaft, which is, I guess you would sort of translate it as, like, [Valley Girl accent] “random!” [*laughs*] But in Swedish it's like, “Hello, axe shaft (shaft of an axe),” and sometimes I think it's so nice to be able to retain the Swedish idiom, but you want the reader to be able to understand what's what, and so, you know, sometimes you kind of might lose out on some of the inherent playfulness and poetry that exists in Swedish through set phrases. So in Swedish, solkatter—it's the sort of, you know, spots of light, of sunlight that filter, or maybe scatter on a wall. You know, like light filtered through the trees that end up with the glowing, beautiful spots of light on the floor, on the wall, on your skin, and solkatt, “sun-cat,” is such a lovely notion. You know, often those spots of light will be moving and sort of dancing around the room, and I think there is something inherently playful about the notion of a “sun-cat,” which every Swede understands, and then maybe by putting it into a literary text maybe highlights the “cat-ness” of the phrase, but in English— In a translator's forum there was a recent discussion and people were sharing how they translate “sun-cats” and some, you know, some stick with “spots of light” and another person—I really like this solution—they were, again, back to feeling, translating the notion of “sun-cats.” So you know, like, “spots of light pouncing around the room,” to sort of bring the feeling of, like, a feline quality to the description. I think that's really nice.

Colin: Do you have sort of a goal of how you hope people will—like, what kind of an experience that you hope they'll have reading a book that you've translated?

Saskia: I don't know. So the thing with translation, and translating and writing, is through translation I've had a lot of practice letting go of things. Also when I was a publicist. So, I mean, that is maybe something important to bring in. So I used to be the publicist at Granta magazine and, you know, I would read reviews of the issues that we had done, or of certain stories in the issue, and sometimes people just get things really—like, you can just see that they're reading, they're not reading the same text that I was reading, maybe. And I have that also reading reviews of translation that I've done, and you know, you just see that people, as soon as the text leaves your hands it becomes somebody else's. As soon as you give it to the editor, it becomes somebody else's. And, yeah, I feel like I've had a lot of practice in terms of letting things go, and trying not to have those expectations. Yeah, just to let the text belong to other people. I'm really happy, I guess, in a post-Fifty Shades of Grey-world that the conversation around BDSM, and, like, fetish and sexuality, is in a different place. So I think people are able to read Permission, kind of—kind of with enough background information so that they can kind of—I'm really happy that readings are kind of very much about power structures and patriarchy and power dynamics and the value of the erotic and the uses of the erotic, just to refund Audre Lorde, whose essay “The Uses of the Erotic” was a really big influence. And so that makes me really happy and I think I would have been having a much harder time right now if the book was
maybe being read in wildly different ways, you know. But, you know, some people prefer Piggy to Echo. I love them all. [*laughs*] You know, yeah. And I'm really proud of the translations that I do, so there I feel like I'm facilitating a conversation. I'm adding something to the Anglosphere, and that's what makes me happy. Yeah.

[*Outro music starts*]

**Colin**: If you've exhausted your collection of Nordic crime fiction and would like to read Saskia's novel, or one of her Swedish translations, you can find them all on her website, saskiavogel.com, that's S-A-S-K-I-A-V-O-G-E-L.com. Links to her website can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website, scandinavian.washington.edu.

Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a class or declaring a major. Language classes are a great way to build a lifelong skill and to get to know a culture in a small-classroom environment. You can find complete course listings as well as languages offered by the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

[*Outro music ends*]

**SHOW NOTES**

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Learn more about Saskia Vogel's writing and Swedish translations at saskiavogel.com/

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