

SWEDE HOLLOW

A N O V E L



Ola Larsson

TRANSLATED BY TIINA NUNNALLY

A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *SWEDE HOLLOW: A Novel*

by Ola Larsmo, translated by Tiina Nunnally

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Here’s a novel that makes the epic intimate and the intimate profound and enduring. You’ll no sooner forget these characters than you will your own kinfolk, and if you’re like me, you will love them much the same.”

—**PETER GEYE**, author of *Wintering*

“A sober and realistic portrayal of the suffering and hardships that awaited Swedish immigrants after they arrived in America. *Swede Hollow* is a moving, at times harrowing, always convincing novel on a truly epic scale.”

—**STEVE SEM-SANDBERG**, author of *The Emperor of Lies*

“Ola Larsmo has animated a singular place and moment in the story of Minnesota’s settlement by Europeans. Larsmo is a faithful storyteller, rooted in historical incident, hearing the voices and breathing life into people who risked everything to forge new beginnings and raise up families by sweat, fist, and the ragged, life-giving fabric of clan.”

—**PETER C. BROWN**, author of *The Fugitive Wife*

“Ola Larsmo gives the reader a remarkable sense of the struggle and dislocation that is ever present in these people. A rich and worthwhile read addressing the basic question of immigration—how does one make a life in a new country?”

—**MARY LOGUE**, author of the Claire Watkins mysteries

“Deeply researched and full of memorable moments. Ola Larsmo writes with sympathy and grace, and his tale is a quiet epic, full of wonder and dreams and loss. Not to be missed.”

—**LARRY MILLETT**, author of *Metropolitan Dreams*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

When Gustaf and Anna Klar and their three children leave Sweden for New York in 1897, they take with them a terrible secret and a longing for a new life. But their dream of starting over is nearly crushed at the outset: a fire devastates Ellis Island just as they arrive, and then the relentlessly harsh conditions and lack of work in the city make it impossible for Gustaf to support his family. An unexpected gift allows the Klars to make one more desperate move, this time to the Midwest and a place called Swede Hollow.

Their new home is a cluster of rough-hewn shacks in a deep, wooded ravine on the edge of St. Paul, Minnesota. The Irish, Italian, and Swedish immigrants who live here are a hardscrabble lot usually absent from the familiar stories of Swedish American history. The men hire on as poorly paid day laborers for the Great Northern or Northern Pacific railroads or work at the nearby brewery, and the women clean houses, work at laundries, or sew clothing in stifling factories. Outsiders malign Swede Hollow as unsanitary and rife with disease, but the Klar family and their neighbors persevere in this neglected corner of the city—and consider it home.

Extensively researched and beautifully written, Ola Larsmo's award-winning novel vividly portrays a family and a community determined to survive. There are hardships, indignities, accidents, and harrowing encounters, but also acts of loyalty and kindness and moments of joy. This haunting story of a real place echoes the larger challenges of immigration in the twentieth century and today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

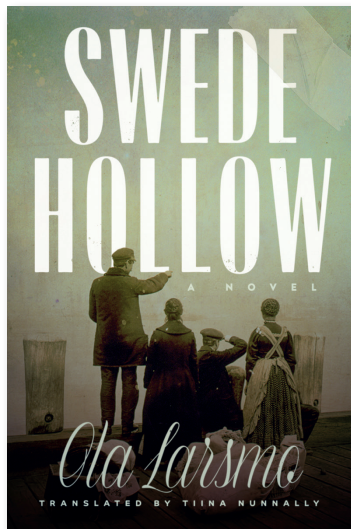
1. Why are Gustaf and Anna not seeing eye-to-eye about where they should be going once they reach the States? What might their different reasons be? Why is it so hard to discuss?
2. In New York, why is Gustaf so upset when he realizes that the Norwegian's stool is not in the alley anymore?

3. The Klar family is lucky to see a familiar face at the railway depot in St. Paul when they run into the older Gavin boy, but why do the Swedes have such a hard time communicating with their Irish neighbors in the Hollow? Is it just language issues, or are there more barriers than that?
4. What are the differences between the Swedes down in the Hollow and other Scandinavians living “up on the street?”
5. The “love story” between David and Agnes Karin is in many ways a driving force in the story. But how does it affect the other people around them? What influence does it have on the fate of the Klar family? What about Inga and Jonathan?
6. Did “Ola Värmlänning” really exist? No one in Sweden has ever heard of him, but the stories about him are still being told among descendants of Swedish immigrants in Minnesota and Illinois. Where do these stories come from? What function do they have in an immigrant society? Can you think of any similar stories you might have heard?
7. What role does religion play in the lives of the inhabitants in the Hollow?
8. What part did Carl Hammerberg really play during the lynchings and murders in Duluth? Was it appropriate or unfair that he received a prison sentence? (The background to the lynchings, and all the documents from the legal proceedings, can be found on the Minnesota Historical Society’s website.)
9. How do you perceive the “love story” between Ellen and Sol? Is it love? What different needs do they have?
10. Do the relationships between the different ethnic groups in the Hollow change over time? How? What’s it like in the Hollow today?
11. What do you think really happened to Leonard Hammerberg?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

OLA LARSMO is a critic and columnist for Sweden's largest newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, and the author of nine novels and several collections of short stories and essays. He received the Bjørnson Prize from the Norwegian Academy of Literature and Freedom of Expression and, after the publication of *Swede Hollow*, two prestigious Swedish awards: the Lagercrantz Critics' Prize from *Dagens Nyheter* and Natur & Kultur's cultural prize. He was president of PEN Sweden from 2009 to 2017 and editor of *Bonniers Literary Magazine* from 1984 to 1990.

TIINA NUNNALLY is the award-winning translator of Sigrid Undset's novels *Kristin Lavransdatter*, *Jenny*, and *Marta Oulie*. Her many translations from the Scandinavian languages include Vidar Sundstøl's Minnesota Trilogy (Minnesota, 2013–15) and *The Complete and Original Norwegian Folktales of Asbjørnsen and Moe* (Minnesota, 2019).



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