



Advertise on NYTimes.com

## Norwegian Nobel Laureate, Once Shunned, Is Now Celebrated

By WALTER GIBBS  
Published: February 27, 2009

OSLO — It's all you would expect of a national jubilee: street theater, brass bands, exhibitions and commemorative coins. A statue is to be unveiled, and a \$20 million architectural gem of a museum is under construction.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images  
Knut Hamsun, shown in June 1927, supported the Nazis.

[Enlarge This Image](#)

Erlend Aas/EPA

A performer entertaining a crowd in Oslo at an event in a publicly financed commemoration of Knut Hamsun's 150th birthday.

Yet the honoree is not a war hero, nor even a patriot. It is the Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun, who welcomed the brutal German occupation of Norway during World War II and gave his [Nobel Prize](#) in Literature as a gift to the Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Hamsun later flew to meet [Hitler](#) at Hitler's mountain lair in Bavaria.

Why the festivities, then? Call it reconciliation therapy, or a national airing out.

Hamsun died in 1952 at 92, shunned by his countrymen and heavily fined for his spectacular wartime betrayal. But as the author of revered novels like "Hunger," "Pan" and "Growth of the Soil," Hamsun has remained on school reading lists and in the hearts of many Norwegians.

"We can't help loving him, though we have hated him all these years," said Ingar Sletten Kolloen, author of "Dreamer & Dissenter," a Hamsun biography. "That's our Hamsun trauma. He's a ghost that won't stay in the grave."

With the passage of time, however, Hamsun packs less of a fright. Several years ago King Harald V of Norway set off debate just by quoting a snippet of Hamsun's prose in a speech. Last week, by contrast, Queen Sonja opened a yearlong, publicly financed commemoration of Hamsun's 150th birthday called Hamsun 2009. Fanfare, musical comedy and a jovial outdoor crowd of several hundred greeted the occasion, and the queen spent a highly symbolic half-hour with Hamsun family members at the National Library. Together they viewed the author's handwritten manuscripts.

"I hope there can be forgiveness soon," Hamsun's grandson Leif Hamsun, 66, said afterward. "It feels like there's a healing taking place."

But some still see nothing to celebrate — not the man, not the books.

"Hamsun wrote great novels, but they are completely overshadowed by his behavior as a Hitler lackey," said Jo Benkow, 84, a former president of the Norwegian parliament. "At least for my generation, it's outrageous to give more honors. He won the Nobel Prize in 1920. That should be enough."

[More Articles in Books »](#)

### Great Getaways - Travel Deals by E-Mail



Sign up for travel offers from NYTimes.com's premier advertisers. See [Sample](#)  
**wgibbs@online.no** [Sign Up](#)  
[Change E-mail Address](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Ads by Google

what's this?

#### Fastpris mobilabonnement

500 minutter og 100 SMS /kr. 199,- Ring til USA for kr. 0,99 pr. min  
[www.lebara.no](#)

[Advertise on NYTimes.com](#)

### MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

1. [State of the Art: iPhone App to Sidestep AT&T](#)
2. [Vatican Declined to Defrock U.S. Priest Who Abused Boys](#)
3. [Timothy Egan: House of Anger](#)
4. [Gail Collins: Brave New Health Care World](#)
5. [Mobs Are Born as Word Grows by Text Message](#)
6. [31 Steps to a Financial Tuneup](#)
7. [Social Security to See Payout Exceed Pay-In This Year](#)
8. [A Strange Brew May Be a Good Thing](#)
9. [Economic Scene: In Health Bill, Obama Attacks Wealth Inequality](#)
10. [Op-Ed Contributor: The Fight Is Over, the Myths Remain](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)

### The fine art of selling a show

ALSO IN THEATER »

"Next Fall": Broadway on a budget  
Theater review: "All About Me"

nytimes.com

THEATER

ADVERTISEMENTS

Mr. Benkow, who is Jewish, fled across the Swedish border in 1942 to avoid deportation to the prison camps in Poland, where more than 700 Norwegian Jews were killed. But as the war generation has dwindled, so has the collective ill will. Even some formerly uncompromising voices here have softened.

In 2001 a prominent wartime resistance leader, Gunnar Sonstebj, helped defeat a proposal to name a street in Oslo after Hamsun. Norway should dissolve parliament and declare a dictatorship first, he said. But he now says that commemorating Hamsun is acceptable, as long as his literary talent and his dark side receive equal focus.

That double-barreled approach was evident in Oslo last week. One of the largest framed items at the National Library was the May 7, 1945, edition of a collaborationist newspaper whose lead article on Hitler's death was by Knut Hamsun. As most collaborators lay low, preparing alibis, Hamsun wrote, "He was a warrior, a warrior for mankind, and a prophet of the gospel of justice for all nations."

Queen Sonja, leaving the exhibition, said only, "I think we'll have to keep two thoughts in our head at the same time."

After the war a court-appointed psychiatrist found Hamsun too "diminished" from age, deafness and a stroke to undergo prosecution for treason, but a civil court confiscated much of his fortune. A period of weak book sales followed, and some Norwegians tossed Hamsun's collected works over his garden fence. Yet this former "poet chieftain" of his country soon returned to the best-seller list with "On Overgrown Paths," his postwar apologia. He has remained one of the top-selling Norwegian authors at home and abroad.

In the United States the translator Sverre Lyngstad has contributed to a modest Hamsun resurgence with new English-language editions of Hamsun's more luminous works, including his 1890 breakthrough novel, "Hunger." The self-conscious protagonist of "Hunger" signals the arrival of European modernist literature by trying, at one point, to eat his own index finger.

Instead of merely narrating events, Hamsun peels away layers from his unnamed character's flickering psyche. With typical bombast the young Hamsun declared at the time that he had outwritten [Dostoyevsky](#) and annihilated the social realism of Ibsen.

The author [Isaac Bashevis Singer](#) basically agreed. "The whole school of fiction in the 20th century stems from Hamsun," Singer wrote in 1967, citing in particular "his subjectiveness, his fragmentariness, his use of flashbacks, his lyricism."

In "Pan" and "Mysteries" Hamsun continued writing in this fathomless new way. But in 1898 came a simple, poetic love story, "Victoria," and by middle age Hamsun had actually turned anti-modern. "Growth of the Soil" (1917) is an Old Testament-style portrayal of stolid mountain dwellers. Goebbels was so fond of its blood-and-soil ethos that he had a special edition printed for German soldiers in the field.

Many readers today, however, agree that the crude, reactionary impulses displayed by Hamsun during World War II are scarcely evident in his novels, the last of which appeared in 1936, when he was 77.

As part of Norway's continuing celebration, Hamsun's publisher, Gyldendal, is rolling out a new "Collected Works" in Norwegian. Its 27 volumes contain more than 30 novels, as well as essays and travelogues, including at least one that reveals an early racist streak in Hamsun that may surprise readers of his mature works.

The Hamsun 2009 festivities are supposed to peak on the honoree's birthday, Aug. 4. On that day a new six-story Hamsun Center is scheduled to open in Hamarøy, where Hamsun grew up, north of the Arctic Circle. Resembling a large black cube, the structure was designed by the New York-based [Steven Holl Architects](#) to house both a museum and an assembly hall. Around the same time the sculptor Skule Waksvik plans to unveil Norway's first statue of Hamsun.

It will be in bronze, he says — and larger than life.

Follow us on Twitter

The new issue of T is here

Vote for the collectible car of the year

Watch today's top videos



**FIND YOUR DREAM HOME  
WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES**  
[nytimes.com/realestate](http://nytimes.com/realestate)  
Where the conversation begins ▶

[Sign in to Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on February 28, 2009, on page C1 of the New York edition.

[More Articles in Books »](#)

**Times Reader 2.0: Daily delivery of The Times - straight to your computer. Subscribe for just \$3.45 a week.**

Ads by Google

what's this?

### **Fastpris mobilabonnement**

500 minutter og 100 SMS /kr. 199,- Ring til USA for kr. 0,99 pr. min  
[www.lebara.no](http://www.lebara.no)

#### **Past Coverage**

[POSSESSED; A Structural Pro And His Empty Space \(February 5, 2006\)](#)

#### **Related Searches**

[Books and Literature](#)  
[Hamsun, Knut](#)  
[Norway](#)  
[Hitler, Adolf](#)

[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)  
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)  
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)  
[Get E-Mail Alerts](#)

#### **INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**



##### HOME & GARDEN »



[A Vanderbilt Descendant Laughs Off Dysfunction](#)

##### MUSIC »



[Take a Play, Then Adorn It With Opera](#)

##### OPINION »

### **Op-Ed: The Fight Is Over, the Myths Remain**

**Brendan Nyhan on why Americans will keep believing the worst about health care reform.**

##### U.S. »



[The Importance of Being Counted \(Pop. 842\)](#)

##### OPINION »



[Op-Ed: Too-Busy Bees](#)

##### FASHION & STYLE »



[A Strange Brew May Be a Good Thing](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)  
[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)