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# Grace, the heir

Linn Ullmann, the daughter of the legendary director Ingmar Bergman and the actress Liv Ullmann, has a refreshingly unsentimental perspective on relationships. By *Adam Bly*

**W**HEN critics consider the books of Linn Ullmann, they sometimes suggest that the stories betray a Scandinavian sensibility, in which the business of existence is grim to the point of intolerability.

Ullmann – the daughter of the film director Ingmar Bergman and his star, Liv Ullmann – is not entirely allergic to this idea, but feels it could be more nuanced. The Norwegians, she says, have a dark sense of humour, which grows blacker the further north you go. The Swedes are almost like the French in their willingness to examine the architecture of their angst. The Finns, well, there's no helping the Finns.

But such stereotyping is unfair. Ullmann's books are serious and unsentimental, but they are refreshing rather than bleak. She has a poet's eye for the minutiae of relationships, and an easy command of symbolism. Her new novel, *Grace*, is an elegiac consideration of the low-energy love and nagging insecurities of a long-term relationship, in which the plot turns on a man's request to be euthanised.

"He wants her to promise him that she will end it," Ullmann explains. "She's a doctor, and, in theory, it all seems like the thing that he wants, but then he begins to doubt. And the doubt happens exactly when she makes him the promise. It's almost as if he can see relief in her face. But she's also the kind of person who doesn't understand doubt. That's where she's different from me, or from what I would like to be."

The story explores the imbalance in their relationship, and the apparent impossibility of ever knowing what is in another person's mind. "One of our classical writers, Sigrid

Undset, has a very lovely scene with an older married couple; one of them says 'You are not strangers, you and I. That's a really beautiful sentiment, but, for me, it's the opposite. I think there will always be black spots and voids. That's the really frightening thing about marital love or long-term relationships. Once you're past the lovey-passion, falling in love part...'

Then, she says, what remains is a nagging insecurity. 'We all have thoughts that we can't share, or shouldn't share, or don't think of sharing.'

*Grace* is Ullmann's third novel. Before *You, Sleep and Stella* Descending established her as a serious writer with an international reputation. Discussion of her parents was restricted in early interviews, but she has now relaxed, possibly because her next novel, *Blessed Child*, is about three half sisters who return after 25 years to the island where their very old father is exiled. Bergman has lived on the island of Faro since 1965.

Still, she finds it odd that people approach fiction by trying to ascertain which parts of it are true. "It's like when children see a magic show, after they're a certain age, they're not just enjoying it, they're asking where's the trick, how does it happen?"

In *Grace*, there are allusions to Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* and *Wild Strawberries*. "He's quite old now, and we speak on the phone. I see him once a year because he's living in seclusion on his island. But another way of talking to him is writing. Not writing about him, just writing in one way to him."

Ullmann's parents separated when she was three, and she was raised by her mother. One of her earliest memories dates from just after the split, when she was sent to spend the summer

with her father. "I had eight brothers and sisters and I

hadn't met any of them. I didn't even know about them. He also had a son by another woman – not his wife – and he also came. He was maybe seven, and I was four and we were sitting around the kitchen table. I had no idea who the boy was. I remember saying, angrily: 'Why do you keep calling my dad dad?' Both he and I had very bourgeois, artistic, lovely mothers who had not wanted to tell their children that my father had lots of kids, and lots of other women.

"I remember this boy snapping back at me, and my father trying to explain in a very soft way that he had been married, and then suddenly understanding everything; understanding what kind of man he was and being quite proud, and saying to this boy: 'You just don't understand, do you? My father's had a thousand wives!'"

Ullmann says she had no difficulty getting used to the idea that her parents had split, or that she had several siblings. "It was what I knew. It was harder for me getting used to it every time my mother would decide that we should be more like normal people. She had ideas sometimes, and out of the blue we were going to be eating dinner at 5.30, and maybe she would actually cook, like we were a normal family. She would get tired of that pretty quickly."

Ullmann's first three novels all include a consideration of loneliness, and while some of this may be a genetic inheritance, it could also be influenced by the fact that she attended 13 schools as a child.

"I'm 39 now, and I can still watch sitcoms like *Friends*, and think, 'Oh, I want to have that'. I still miss that feeling of having, like, your gang. I

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always wanted to have 'the guys' to call because once I'd made one friend, maybe, we had to move."

With only a hint of irony, she says that one of the advantages of her upbringing was that she was able to test a number of different educational systems. She went to American public and private schools, and to a Rudolph Steiner school.

Her mother once told her that she had attended a parents' meeting at the Steiner school, and the teacher held up a painting. "It was all abstract and reds and greens, and they said: 'This is an example of a very artistic child'."

"Then they showed my painting of a princess, which was a stick person with a little crown, and they

said: 'And here we have someone who has a little way to go'."

"I just have to say that it was because of my reading of the Norwegian folk tales. The princesses are great, they're not sweet, dainty princesses: they ride on ice bears, and it's very erotic because the ice bear says: 'Have you ever sat on a softer place or seen a more beautiful view?' And she would say 'no', so he would know that she was the one for him. They're very erotic and they're very burlesque, these folk tales, and I think I knew that at seven or eight. That's my defence for drawing princesses."

She laughs at the realisation that she has harboured this hurt for 30 years. "My mom had some idea that I needed to live in a bourgeois area, so she put me with the nanny. She lived in the city so I never saw her.

She said: 'You need flowers and trees.' So, I lived in Connecticut with the nanny, who used to be a nun, which was interesting in itself, and went to the private school. It was just awful. I begged to go to a public school, and that was a little better. At the public school they did have some foreign students, like a Filipino girl and a Chinese boy, and we sat together at the loser table at lunch. It wasn't like my gang, because nobody wanted to be in it. It was like the Groucho Marx situation, you don't want to be a member of that club."

Ullmann's own rebellion was returning to Norway after attending university in New York. "I got the notion that I was going to be bourgeois, so I married a lawyer and I had a kid, and suddenly I was a housewife. That was not so good. Of course, I now have a lovely 16-year-old son."

She is now married to the writer Niels Fredrik Dahl, and is living "a little more traditionally" than her upbringing. "Husband, wife, four kids, dog, the whole thing."

But, as Grace eloquently attests, even in the midst of a love, there is room for doubt.

"I remember very strongly that sense of feeling lonely," Ullmann says, almost fondly. "Now I can look back and it's good, having a vengeful feeling because it's the weirdoes who did a little better. Now I'm looking back and thinking I was a brave little girl."

Grace, Linn Ullmann, **Picador**, £12.99. To order, with 20% off the publisher's prices, call 08704295806. P&P £2.45.



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NORSE CODE: Lin Ullmann no longer minds discussing her celebrated parents, left. Picture: Paul Stuart

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