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BEFORE YOU WAKE

INTERVIEW
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[Text box]
LINN ULLMANN

• b. 1966. Her debut novel, *Before You Sleep*, appeared in 1998, followed by *Stella Descending* (2001), *Grace* (2002) *A Blessed Child* (2005) and this year's novel, *Det Dyrebare*.

• Awarded the Norwegian Book Club Prize for *Grace*. The same novel was named one of the year's ten best novels by the Danish paper *Weekendavisen*. *A Blessed Child* was named best translated novel in *The Independent*. In 2007, Ullmann received the Amalie Skram Prize for her writing. She has been translated into 31 languages.

• Member of the jury for the main competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2011 along with Robert De Niro, Jude Law and Uma Thurman, among others.

"I write about what I'm afraid of. I'm terrified of being lied to – and not see through it. People can sound dishonest even when they are completely sincere. I'm afraid of being lied to in art as well, but in that case it would perhaps be better to talk about artifice," says Linn Ullmann.

She has come out with her fifth novel, *Det Dyrebare*. Here, people lie to themselves and to each other, they suppress and distort, and some lie to survive.

"But at a time when autobiographical issues are discussed so intensely, we must remember that every novel is a lie, whether the author uses a real name or not. That is what a novel is."

How did it begin?

Work on *Det Dyrebare* began with three mental images.

"I wanted to include a girl who disappeared, to see what that did to those around her. I knew early on that it would have to be something terrible, a crime. The second image was that of an old parent, bedridden and dying, no longer able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The third was the black-haired, angry and at times almost violent Alma. In other words, I began with two images and a character," says Ullmann.

Two images and a character turned into a story about a dramatic event and its effect on people: the nineteen year old Mille disappears and is found dead two years later. This affects the lives of Jon Dreyer, an adulterous author with writer's block, his wife Siri, who has her

own struggles rooted in childhood, and their erratic and strange daughter Alma who takes after her difficult grandmother Jenny.

But was it really the incident with Mille that started all the lies, all the different situations and injured relationships? Did the event simply reveal what was really going on with people? Or is it unclear whether these things had anything to do with each other?

“Jon asks himself: where does a story begin and end? I have always been interested in that tiny motion that triggers something: at what point does it occur? Another thing I want to explore as an author, is that the *name* one gives to this motion depends on the lighting; it changes depending on who is talking about it.”

An agreeable death

Atonement and reconciliation are central themes in your novel. For example, in the course of the years it has not become easier for Siri to come to terms with her mother, Jenny. After having abstained from drinking for 20 years, Jenny suddenly decides to abandon herself to a bottle of booze during a birthday celebration she has not asked for. Later in the book she wastes away, leaves behind her illusory days of greatness, and dies.

“We often have ideas about how things should be when someone dies, how it will happen. We hope that death will be agreeable and end in reconciliation. But is that possible? Not for mother and daughter in this novel, at least. Too many open wounds and questions remain. We want to be able to put things behind us, start with a clean slate and close a door. But I don’t know if it is possible to close the door completely – perhaps it will always have to be left slightly ajar. And I don’t know at what point you can say that the slate is clean,” says Ullmann.

Waking up in the morning

What Ullmann calls a “fantastically scary song” from the 16th-century opera *King Arthur* by Henry Purcell and John Dryden, “Det Dyrebare,” provides an underlying point of reference for the novel. *King Arthur* remains part of the opera repertory to this day, and “Det Dyrebare” has been the subject of countless interpretations by opera singers.

“It is about someone who is wakened from the dead, and it is a terrible awakening. With this novel, I think I have tried to prolong that moment of awakening, from being asleep until you wake up and see it all, the whole terrifying process.”

“*An awakening that lasts nearly 400 pages?*”

“Yes, waking up to everything that surrounds the characters. I think it’s something many people will recognize, that one, brief moment in the morning when you don’t remember anything bad, that you’ve been deceived or that you are grieving.”

“*What is ‘precious,’ as the Norwegian title suggests?*”

“That must be up to the reader. But there is a lot of hard currency in the book: What are things worth? What is Mille’s life worth? If you read Jane Austen, you might easily think that she was quite a romantic. But she wasn’t, she was tough when it came to values and questioned things that broke with them. *Romeo and Juliet* has something similar – you think of it as the

world's most romantic play, but it is just as much about values: what is precious and what is not.

What we value

Having written five novels, Ullmann has naturally found a different tone and language for each project. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the contrast between her debut novel, *Before You Sleep*, and this year's novel. While the first book was burlesque and playful, *Det Dyrebare* is shrouded in gravity and darkness, despite some humorous phrases such as, "Jon smiled his very most charming smile and asked the old lady, who recently had been operated on her hip, one or two hip-related questions before excusing himself to leave."

"I'm probably somewhere else now as a writer. Today it would be unthinkable for me to write that a man turned into a fish, something that seemed a natural thing to do in my debut novel. This book is more serious, the consequences are greater. But then again, a truly horrible incident lies at the heart of it."

Something that does recur throughout all five novels, however, is a treasure buried by children. What is it with Ullmann and treasures?

"Hm. Sure. Let me just tell it like it is: when I was seven, my father took me to bury a treasure. This made an indelible impression on me. He said that there had to be a price to pay, and that we had to put something really nice into the box. From his office – it was at home, but we called it the office – he brought along a shark tooth. At least he said it was a shark tooth. He also put a picture of his mother into the box. When I arrived with my two things, he brushed me aside and said that I had to find something better. I ended up putting a hundred kroner into it, a fortune at the time, and a bracelet. We buried it on the beach.

"*You let one of the children in* Det Dyrebare *say that it isn't a treasure if we dig it up again?*"

"Yes, I, too, have dug up treasures again, and that's when they stop being treasures. It's not a treasure if it isn't valuable, and it's not a treasure if you dig it up again. People usually bury things that are precious. We bury each other when we die. Some bury a time capsule that's supposed to be opened in the future. Burying is about getting rid of something, but also about preserving. Figuratively, it can be about how much we want things to remain buried, what can stand the light of day, what can be talked about."

"*Does that apply to the arts as well – what many artists say they aspire to, but never will be able to reach? That something has to be inaccessible in order to be effective?*"

"Yes, Hans Herbjørnsrud talks about this, about the moment that shapes us. The things one never writes about explicitly, but that nevertheless lie at the heart of it all. Knausgård has described his own project as literary suicide – he has, in a way, dug up the treasure. No, wait, I can't begin to talk about Knausgård as well. Don't let me talk about Knausgård. Gertrude Stein said, "The stories you tell, you never write." It is, for example, difficult to talk about a book while writing it. When you put words to the project, you reduce it – the more you talk about the book, the more it disappears."

"*But since this book is about disappearing, maybe it would have been fitting?*"

"Yes."

Ullmann laughs.

“Maybe I could have talked the book completely away during its launch.”

The conspicuous narrator

The novel begins by quoting Gunnar Ekelöf: “But your very disappearance remains.” There is, in other words, a presence in that which disappears – “you are never closer than when you are gone,” to quote Tor Jonsson. But something also slips away when there is closeness (“something is gone when you are close”).

“Telling a story means bringing something to life, but it is also a way of erasing someone. The same applies to a photograph: Mille is afraid of being photographed, just like I am. Because it is a way of making something real as well as making it disappear.”

“*How can you disappear from an image that captures you?*”

“Kjell Askildsen has written a short story called “I’m not like that, I’m not like that.” That’s the answer. Mille’s mother is an art photographer who has taken lots of pictures of Mille as a child and released them in book form under her own name. Mille felt that she disappeared in the book. She couldn’t recognize herself.”

“*Not until Jon Dreyer took a picture of her?*”

“Exactly – because he sees her. She feels seen by him. It’s partly about being seen or not being seen.”

“*You often use the family as a starting point for your writing. I imagine it something like this: no need to look any further than the family in order to come across something nasty?*”

“I often use the family, but I don’t think of myself as someone who writes classic family novels. *Grace* is an exception, by the way, more of a chamber piece. Families cover the entire spectrum – adults, children, old people. Families have their memories, their own language, their own rules, even their own songs and secrets. The family is a miniature society, and an author can get a lot in return for delving into it.”

Linn Ullmann is a writer who does not hide her narrative voice. She can write, “Let me present to you …” or “Here is what I was going to tell you….” Does she do this in order to point out that a novel is nothing but lies and deceit?

“It’s probably a little of both. You can be deceived by that voice, too, right? So it creates another layer. But what I want to tell the reader is: come, be with me. I often get stressed when I read a book review saying that the author “does not fulfill expectations.” My whole project is about not fulfilling others’ expectations. I think I’ll simply just say: come, be with me.