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ISLAND LIFE

INTERVIEW: Having one famous parent can be hard but Linn Ullmann uses her literary skills to both tease and reward those who are curious about her father, Ingmar Bergman, and her mother, Liv Ullmann, writes **Louise East**

POOR LINN ULLMANN. As a writer, she suffers the peculiar sub-Wildean misfortune of having not one famous parent but two. The only child of legendary director, Ingmar Bergman, and actor-director Liv Ullmann, Ullmann fille has four intelligent, bestselling novels to her name. Still, as each is published, it is meticulously sifted for nuggets of biographical gossip about her famous ma and pa.

"There will always be . . . " she pauses delicately, ". . . readings. I know the assumption exists that this is a hidden memoir. Readers look for that and I play with it, but then I go a little bit further."

At 42, Linn Ullmann is slight and striking. Although she has lived in Oslo for many years, her English is still near-fluent from years living in New York.

A Blessed Child, her latest novel, is both a gift and a tease to the Bergman-Ullmann beachcombers. Until his death last year, Bergman spent much of his life on an island in the Baltic Sea called Faro, reclusive aside from the summer months when the nine children of his five marriages and other relationships would visit.

In Ullmann's book, there is an island, Hammarsö, a great man, and three daughters by different relationships who visit during the summer. For particularly avid cine-sleuths, Ullmann's island resounds with further echoes. The fictional great man shares a name, Isak, with the ageing hero of one of Bergman's best-loved works, Wild Strawberries, while the mother of one of Isak's children shares hers, Elisabet, with Liv Ullmann's character in her first Bergman film, Persona.

"As a writer you use the geography you have. Now it just so happens that my childhood geography also happens to be mythologised already by my father. I thought about it for a while. I considered going to some village in Norway and setting it all there so there wouldn't be these assumptions of this being some kind of hidden memoir but I decided that was ridiculous." Ullmann knows well it's not the island the scavengers are interested in, it's the character of Isak, a gloriously selfish and remote womaniser who specialises in telling his grown-up daughters not to come and visit him.

"Isak is very far from a portrait of my father," Ullmann says firmly. "If I want to write a memoir about my father, which I might do some day, then I'll do that. I don't have to hide a memoir in a novel. Of course there's bits of my childhood here, that's what writers do. There's also bits of other peoples' childhoods and news stories and my obsession with The Tempest." Ullman's Caliban is a gangly teen called Ragnar, who is both loved and despised by Isak's

eldest daughter, Erika. In the sections set in the past, it is always summer, hot, thundery, intense; in the present day, all is snow and ice. Ullmann's style is episodic and fragmented, with a cool wry humour.

Days trickle into weeks, the past and future collide, everything centres around a point of great irreversible violence.

"[The book] had its origins in a news story I read years ago, about a boy running and being hounded to death. I started thinking about the point at which play stops being play, about the small boundaries which are crossed until play turns into bullying and bullying into brutality." It's an excellently muddled view of childhood and one refreshingly free of sentiment or sensationalism. Aside from remembering her own youth ("Childhood, once you leave it, is a strange and closed country. It took a lot of honest effort to re-enter that land"), Ullmann used consultants in the shape of her own kids: a son of 18, a daughter of four and a half and, in particular, her 15 year-old step-daughter.

"One thing she reminded me of is the laughter, how even the one being bullied is often laughing along. It's all kind of playful, and then everybody runs home to dinner but something really terrible might have happened in the process." Asked whether her own childhood was a happy one, Linn Ullmann looks a little sceptical.

"I don't know. I mean, what is a happy childhood? I was a lonely kid. I was always the new kid in class so I was always the one looking and being looked at. I tried to be as anonymous as I could . . . It was probably pretty good. You know," she says, shrugging. "I had fascinating parents."

Her first memory of her father's work is watching the intricate set of *The Magic Flute* come to life as Bergman shouted "Action". Although Linn's mother, Liv Ullmann, remained Bergman's close friend and collaborator until his death, their relationship did not last. Linn moved around with her mother's work - Sweden, Hollywood, New York - finding stability with her maternal grandmother, a bookseller in Oslo, and by unofficially adopting the family of the little girl next door.

"I longed for her family," Ullmann says with a laugh. "The dad came home at 4 o'clock every day, and the mom was there and there was dinner on the table. But then my mother was beautiful and would do things like jump in a swimming pool with her clothes on, and that to her was amazing. We longed for each other's families." The one constant in Ullmann's life was her ballet training with the Norwegian Opera: "It was very, very important to me, but then when I was 15, I didn't cut it." Instead, Ullmann became a bad girl, cutting school and having the kind of fun bad girls have, until the point when she realised she really did want to go to university.

New York University was a kind of rebirth, and Ullmann wanted nothing more than to immerse herself in academic life.

"Part of the dancing thing was that there was no way anyone could say I danced to perfection because of my parents. It was really mine and in the same way, I excelled at being a good student because that was also a way to prove myself in my own right. When I started working as a journalist, and even when I decided to write the first novel, it was kind of the same. I had to make my own platform."

Despite wanting nothing more than to "disappear into the university", Ullmann found herself back in Oslo; "I married. I was young." After working freelance as a journalist, she became a literary critic, eventually taking leave to write her first novel, *Before You Sleep*. Even before its Norwegian publication in 1998, it was sold to 14 countries worldwide and went on to become a bestseller.

"I was never the romantic who went around saying, 'I'm going to be a novelist'. I'm much more romantic about university life. Being an artist, I knew, was all about hard work and discipline. I still get much more shy if I meet a professor than I do if I meet some famous artist." Now, 10 years later, Ullmann has a new partner (writer Niels Fredrik Dahl) and three more books to her name. Despite having to put up with a certain amount of Bergman-ia, she has long since established herself as an artist in her own right. Still, she chooses to continue working for the broadsheet *Aftenposten* in Oslo as a columnist.

"I do the morning meetings. I have a desk. I like being involved in what's going on in the world, and I like that whole journalistic ideal. There's no such thing as saying to the morning meeting, 'I don't feel inspired today'.

"You write your piece, you talk to people, you try to attain some knowledge of what you're writing about. I like the journalistic approach."

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