

15. april 2006

## Art doesn't make us better people

By Søren Kassebeer, Berlingske Tidende

**Literature shall -- as all other art forms -- give room for the sharp, the abominable and the politically repulsive, ascertains Linn Ullmann when she continues her exploration of humanity for better or for worse in her new great novel *A Blessed Child*, which will be released here in Denmark on Tuesday.**

Both as an author and a debater, the 39 year old Norwegian is implacable. Even her country's Minister of Culture has become aware of this. Linn Ullmann is artistically unyielding.

"Art shows the greatest solidarity when it makes no attempt at being pedagogical, well intentioned or uniting," establishes the 39 year old Norwegian writer, who will have her fourth novel, *A Blessed Child* released in Danish next Tuesday.

"Art is at its most unifying with the humane when it is sharp and provokes and gives room for the abominable, the difficult, the physical, the disgusting, the shameful, the politically repulsive. Only then will it show solidarity, only when it has created a place where the whole spectrum of humanity exists."

Linn Ullmann is also a distinguished columnist in Norway, debuting in great fashion, when she, in 1998, published her novel *Before you Sleep*. The book received enormous attention, not only because the author's world-famous parents are the Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann and the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergmann. Linn Ullmann received, right from the start, a reputation as an extraordinarily strong and self assured author in her own right. With her next two novels, *Stella Descending* and *Grace* she strengthened her position, and *A Blessed Child* hasn't lessened the respect of her literary name. In this, her longest novel so far, she unravels a succession of large themes in an ambitious composition, in which she periodically moves between past and present. Violence -- in particular physiological and physical violence between children -- is an important theme. Typically for Linn Ullmann, author as well as commentator, nothing is left to the imagination:

"I write about the violence that adults turn their back on, that adults do not see, because it is disguised as games. Humanity has the capacity for great love, I believe that. But they also have a great capacity for violence.

### The great silence

The novel's decisive and fatal act of violence takes place on the (fictitious) Swedish island, Hammarsö, during the summer of 1979. This is where the famous doctor, Isak and his wife Rosa reside every summer. Isak's three daughters come here to visit. Here they live in a house full of rules, because Rosa is an old-fashioned matriarch, who has lots of notions about what is dangerous and forbidden, and Isak -- the famous doctor -- needs peace to think.

Outside of the law-abiding house everything is the exact opposite.

"The island on the outside of the house is like an enchanted fantasy world," says Linn Ullmann.

“Outside the house the children are left to their own resources. That’s why the place becomes lawless. After the catastrophe, the great silence occurs; this is also a form of violence. Do not talk. Do not reminisce. Just forget.”

Linn Ullmann, whom we meet one day in Oslo at one of the city’s grand old hotel cafés, is surrounded by children daily. She is married to the author Niels Fredrik Dahl, he is the father of two children from a previous marriage. She, herself, has a child from a previous marriage and together she and her husband have a two year old daughter. The welfare of children is, for obvious reasons, forever present for her.

“The thing that makes me furious, and also gives me a feeling of impotence, is when children commit an act of violence against each other,” she says.

“We know, of course, from our own children how easy it is to let these boundaries be broken and displaced. The first question I asked myself when I started on this novel was: What can we reprimand a child for? Does the child recognise its own limits? This is a classic subject about guilt and atonement and guilt and punishment. What do children know of the consequences of their actions, when they do it? How do they continue living with it?”

The victim in *A Blessed Child* is a boy. His name is Ragnar. He’s an outsider. “That is a decisive reason,” says Linn Ullmann. “The decisive reason is not how he is an outsider. He could belong to an ethnic minority. He could be a kid that stutters. Or he could be something completely different.” Amongst children, any reason can make a child an outsider. Ragnar is both beautiful and ugly, he is a strong insurgent, he is a rebel, he dresses in black and he is on the outside of the strong alliances the other children have formed. But you can’t name any specific social reason for it going wrong.”

That the novel also offers a very direct and un-glossed portrayal of both the beautiful and the dangerous sides of the very young woman’s sexuality, only underlines the authors unyielding need to -- in solidarity -- say something about how human life really is.

“When sexuality is unleashed in older children, when it is completely new, it is enormously strong,” says Linn Ullmann.

“It is partly innocent, but in its innocence it can also turn violent. I describe the young girls’ fierce sexuality, and of course there are those that have reacted to these very direct descriptions.”

### **Artistic inheritance**

Autobiographical characteristics are also present in the novel. During the “present” period of the story, after the death of his wife, the brilliantly talented Isak has retired to his Swedish island and it is unavoidable for the reader to think of Linn Ullmann’s father who permanently lives on the island Fårö, north of Gotland. That the three sisters of the novel do not all have the same father and mother is also a reminder of Linn Ullmann’s life:

“Even so, you should not read *A Blessed Child* as if it was an autobiography in disguise.

Firstly, it is not autobiographic. Secondly, reading any novel as an autobiographic book will always curtail the experience,” says Linn Ullmann. She also mentions that although there are scenes in the novel that could remind one, in short glimpses, of scenes from her father’s films, it is meant as more than a kind greeting to a close relation:

“My father’s films are a part of our artistic inheritance and this mutual artistic inheritance is something I’m always aware of when I write. I have conversations about books I have read, films I have seen, music, dance.” *A Blessed Child* contains clear references to Shakespeare’s final play “The Tempest” -- old Isak is my Prospero, while Ragnar is my Caliban, the elder, the wild. Also the three sisters are typically Shakespearian. And there are passages inspired by Virginia Woolf’s fantastic novel *To The Lighthouse*. All these elements and many more are included in the novel, but are not necessarily something the reader will notice.”

## **Chronicles and shrimp sandwiches**

Finally, it is all about Linn Ullmann creating art that is honest and pure, where nothing is brushed under the carpet, and with this in mind, it's not strange that she recently had a fairly fierce feud of principles with Norway's very social democratic Minister of Culture, Trond Giske. It was two completely different artistic and cultural opinions that were up against each other.

"The Minister of Culture wrote a chronicle in the daily newspaper Aftenposten. It was titled 'The position of culture in the new Norway' and it sounded very promising, but I thought it contained a stamp of nursery school mentality. Trond Giske obviously believes that art is there for the sake of good. He wrote that if we observe people with different cultural backgrounds, we would discover that things are not so frightening, but rather 'interesting and exciting'. This statement provoked me. It was, in my opinion, an expression of a mentality which presumes that the absence of conflict and the absence of differences is the condition for being able to live together, and -- this is quite mean -- expresses that art in one way or another has a utilitic value. It does not. Art does not make better humans, maybe art can -- as the great Norwegian poet Georg Johannesen said -- train our skill for sensitivity, and that in itself is no such small feat."

Using this artistic and cultural view as a starting point, Linn Ullman sat at her keyboard and wrote a very sharp opposing chronicle. The next day, Trond Giske accused Linn Ullmann of being an elitist and privileged person, who -- figuratively speaking -- eats nothing but shrimp sandwiches.

"That was a very strange metaphor. I don't even like shrimp sandwiches," laughs Linn Ullmann and says that the cultural feud reminded her of one of the minor characters in *A Blessed Child*, namely the play writer, Palle Quist, who, every summer -- in the novels "past period" -- writes huge dramas for the amateur dramatics in Hammarsö. Palle Quist is an artist who, not unlike another classic social-democrat, builds up a whole small world on his stage, and he dreams of a society without discord, where everyone understands each other. Trond Giske reminds Linn Ullmann of the well intentioned artists and cultural politicians, who believe that well intentioned art and well intentioned politics can contribute to a conflict-free environment where even things like the Mohammed crisis, which also involved Norway, would just nicely and quietly disappear.

"That is not reality," says Linn Ullmann.

"The debate about integration is a question of identity, language, religion, sexuality, moral and gender. The debate is not 'interesting and exciting', as the Minister of Culture says. It is almost constantly both conflicting and frightening, and we all -- including the Left -- must find a better and more honest language where we can talk of these things without being accused of belonging to the one or the other extreme wing. We should not try to ignore conflicts and we must respect freedom of speech 100 percent. I would never think of standing up in church and spitting on the Bible and swearing -- that would be an insulting and idiotic thing to do. Although I do insist that it is in my full right to do that without the risk of criminal persecution or threats of violence. We can, of course, discuss whether swearing in church, insulting words, gestures or just pictures alone, are a sort of act of violence. I'm actually not completely sure.

## **Facts**

Linn Ullmann was born in 1966, the daughter of actress Liv Ullmann and film director Ingmar Bergman. From 1984-1990 she studied English literature at New York University. Her debut as an author came in 1999 with the novel *Before you Sleep*. This was followed by *Stella Descending*, *Grace* and *A Blessed Child*. Linn Ullmann's books have been released in large parts of Europe and in the USA, besides her being a famous debater and writer of

chronicles in Norway. At first she was connected to the daily newspaper Dagbladet, now she has a column in the daily newspaper Aftenposten. Linn Ullmann is married to fellow author Niels Fredrik Dahl. The couple lives in Oslo together with their four children.