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Linn Ullmann on hybris, mercy and the past

“Maybe one should be a little more like Paris Hilton,” contemplates the Norwegian author. “The blond bimbo is either very courageous. Or very stupid.” Ullmann herself has a fear of being arrogant.

By Kristoffer Holm Pedersen, Politiken

[Photo text: SOLUTION. Linn Ullmann doesn’t believe that you can close the door on your past and put all the bad things behind you. “My books are about people who would like to reconcile but who are unable to,” she says.]

Infidelity, betrayal and acrophobia are just a few of the problems Linn Ullmann has put her main characters through since her debut novel *Before you Sleep* from 1998.

In *A Blessed Child*, recently released in Danish, they have to face assault, victimization and some terrible childhood memories that can never be suppressed.
But why can Linn Ullmann’s characters never take control of their lives?

Paris Hilton
”Well ...,” says the 39 year old author and smiles roguishly. “Do you know anyone who can fix everything? I believe my characters do the best they can. They have witnessed a violation which cannot be repaired.”

”The characters in my books are not especially brave, but they are not completely wretched either. They are a little lost, a little warped and a little injured. But I cannot see that they are any worse than everybody else.”

”On the plane going to Denmark, I read an interview with Paris Hilton. She said: ‘Everything just always goes very well with me. I'm always happy, and my life is wonderful. Nothing bad ever happens to me.’ I mean, I see a very hurt girl but she doesn’t see herself in that way.”

”Then I think: o hybris, hybris, you shouldn’t say these things. Had this been a novel where a young, blond, rich bimbo says ‘nothing bad ever happens to me’, and it gets into the authors hands … uh, 'very bad', at least,” says Linn Ullmann and slaps her forehead.

”I also have fear of hybris. I almost dare not feel pleasure for things. Say: o, what a wonderful day it is today, it’s spring, it’s Copenhagen, everything is fine. Because then the big black hand will appear and do some terrible things. That is my fear for catastrophes and it probably influences my writing too. Maybe one should be more like Paris Hilton: Nothing bad ever happens to me. Imagine saying that! Then you are either very young or very brave. Or very stupid.”

Victimisation and humility

A Blessed Child is Linn Ullmann’s fourth novel and it has, as have the previous ones, received raving reviews. This newspaper’s reviewer, May Schack, called it “mind shaking” in its portrayal of -- on the surface – idyllic childhood summers by the seaside, where brutality, victimisation and sexual humiliation belong to the order of the day and night.

The novel is about the three half sisters Erika, Laura and Molly, and their summer holiday experiences with their famous and temperamental gynaecologist father, Isak. He demands absolute silence so he can work. For long periods of time, the sisters are left to themselves and the changing alliances they develop with the other children on the island.

There is something particularly strange about Ragnar -- ”the boy who is always running” and he is the primary target when the children’s games turn into to victimisation. The story leaps between past and present, where each sister, separately, tries to adapt to the traumatic events that took place that last fatal summer in 1979.

Reminders of grand politics

Linn Ullmann takes it as a compliment that we see her book as unpleasant, she says. Nevertheless, she doesn’t really believe that the childhood she describes is so unusual.

”To go from childhood to adulthood is to exceed and test boundaries. Here it develops through sexual violence, physical violence and indeed a very refined psychic violence, which runs on exclusion. I believe that especially young girls recognise this very refined game that girls have between them.”

”In some ways it reminds me of grand politics. Here, there are a lot of rules, both stated and non-stated, and also a fear of being excluded and not being allowed to join in. It is the core of victimisation and is to be found amongst children and adults, in families and in politics. The mechanism is the same all over, in the large and the small picture,” says Linn Ullmann.

The community fear

The young boy Ragnar is subject to this victimisation. He is different, wears black clothes, looks weird and is therefore the natural subject of the adults’ distrust and the other children’s more and more violent undertakings. He stands outside of the community and therefore he is, per definition, easy prey. Ullmann’s meaning is that it is in the nature of community to be afraid of all that is different.

”Here in the Nordic region we are very pleased with the Scandinavian community idea, the great social democratic idea. I am a social democrat to my fingertips but connected with the idea of citizenship, the great community project is very conformist. It fears all that is different and strange. The community should not contain many different things; it should contain many equal things. We mistake community for similarity.”

So community in this sense necessarily means an exclusion of all that doesn't fit in?

“Yes, that is what often happens, and we see it everywhere: What do we do in school with little Pelle, who is hyperactive and creates problems? We give him medication or we take him out of the classroom and place him somewhere else. You can see it in the politics we run -- with boundaries that get closed everywhere. To protect the good community we have to lock out a lot, we can therefore question what kind of a community it really is.”

The great silence

A Blessed Child is about what Linn Ullmann calls “the great silence”. Nobody says anything about the child's assault while it is going on, and later in life the adult sisters cannot put their suppressed feelings into words.

The unmentioned lays heavily over the novel and it is characteristic in that it ends just as the three grownup sisters drive the last part of the road to Isak in the summer house, where none of them have been for 25 years. There is no final redemption, and the reader must decide if the sisters' attempt at reconciliation and forgiveness succeeds. That is completely deliberate, says Linn Ullmann.

”I knew from the beginning that the novel would end there, on the way to Isak. The classic dramaturgic would of course been that the novel finished with a confrontation, that was a release or an atonement. There are those who have criticized the ending of the novel because they think it finishes too suddenly.”

”Maybe there is a possibility for atonement or release in the course of the novel, but I chose not to take advantage of this. In fact, I believe these possibilities don't necessarily exist and that is maybe the most brutal. What is broken is broken. My books, at least the two last ones, deal with people who really want to reconcile, they move towards reconcilement, they try to find and stage a reconciliation moment, but it doesn't happen.”

So you don't believe in reconciliation, even if you confront the problems?

”No, I don't think you can ever reach the place where you can say: now that I've left the bad stuff behind me, it's time to move on, as a lot of these modern therapists talk about. The Americans have word for it: “closure”, that you've closed a door and finished with the suppressed. My reality is definitely not like that. I never finish with anything.”

It is what it is

For Linn Ullmann, suppression is a battle of symbols: Which memories shall we attach a symbolic meaning to and which should we not? What does a specific occurrence mean, and did it indeed happen? But why are symbols -- in novels as in life -- so dangerous?

“As an author I often hear the question: what does this and that really mean, what does the island symbolize, is it in reality a camouflaged autobiography, and is Isak in reality a

camouflaged Ingmar Bergman?," says Linn Ullmann and indicates that she gradually has become tired of answering questions about her famous family.
"One of the things I wanted to explore in the novel was whether it is possible to describe scenes in an novel for what they purely are. Furthermore, if there is such a thing as pure memories. Is it possible to insist on remembering the most meaningless, without charging it in symbolism or a story that in reality would be false? That is what I try to do in the part called "Summer and winter". Here is the description of time passing, the house rotting, the people who are gone. It is an attempt to insist on the meaningless. It is what it is."

The dangers of interpretation
But it's quite normal that we humans interpret everything?

"Yes, of course, especially writers. I can't walk in or out a single door without interpreting. I have grown up with many things in life that have instantly become a film or a story or a metaphor or a funny narrative."

"And that is probably what makes an author an author, we interpret: Why does that woman look so sad today? I see her every day on the tram and today she looks unhappy -- why? I don't go over to her and ask her, I start to imagine. But, there is also something inside of me that insists that some things are just what they are."

Why is it so important?

"Because when we interpret, we often change each other, not just to a metaphor but to kitsch. When a dictator lifts a child, it is not because he wishes to get to know the child better; it is more to say something about himself. The child becomes kitsch, a prop. So, at the same time the author's role is to interpret and tell stories, it is also to insist that some things just are and not change them to props or symbols."

"We change each other into props all the time. It happens everywhere -- in society, in the media, you can read it in interviews in the weekly magazines, where people are less important than how they look. We live in a time when props are preferred more than the person. Then finally you end up as a bit of writing on a gravestone, that someone else has written."

"Hush, hush"
At the end of the book, Erika tries desperately to conquer the silence and tell Isak about the terrible thing that has happened. All the stories pour out of her, all the secrets and the horrific details. But Isak does not listen. No, he just says: "hush, hush". That is, of course, what we say to children when they scream: "hush, hush, it's alright, it will get better again." It is a parent's instinct -- that is what lullabies are all about. They are written as a kind of creed. Relax, mother is here, everything is fine, everything is safe."

"But in all lullabies there is an underlying understanding in the text: all *is* not well, it *is* not safe, the world *is* dangerous and you will experience this one day. But not now, because right now everything will be fine and now you have to sleep. Lullabies are the most incoherent things because they are all about saying that everything is safe, even though we know it is not."

Blessing and corruption
Lullabies seem like some kind of magical incantation?

”Yes, exactly. A lullaby is a magical incantation. And that is what makes it so beautiful, that this duplicity exists. In my first book, which is completely different from this one, a mother says to her child: “I promise to protect you. I cannot protect you.” In my books there is a complete lack of protection but at the same time, there are many who try to protect each other. But it doesn’t happen.”

So the desire for protection is present in the book’s title ‘A Blessed Child’?

”The title is related to my earlier book *Grace*. Both novels ask the question what is grace, what is a blessing. How close to grace are the merciless? How close to blessed is corruption? Most children, at birth, are the subject of blessings: may you, little one, have a good life. It is a wish in evening prayers, they are everywhere. It is a blessing, but for all children it applies that blessings and corruption are very close to each other.”

”Maybe this is just my catastrophic reasoning again: Nothing bad ever happens to me.”