

## ***The Age, Australia***

By Cameron Woodhead

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### ***Stella Descending: By Linn Ullmann, Picador, \$30***

Like *The Seducer*, Linn Ullmann's *Stella Descending* unfolds from a single traumatic moment. On a summer night, Stella, a nurse at an Oslo hospital, is drawn into one of the risky games that characterise her marriage. Stella and husband Martin are seven storeys up when she falls to her death. Did she jump? Did he try to save her? Or did he, in fact, push her? Three witnesses to the fall cannot say.

The incident provokes a series of desolating confessions. Martin, a furniture salesman, admits meeting Stella through a self-imposed game - he seduces every woman who buys a particular avocado sofa from him. He cannot stand his younger daughter, about whom he frequently has nightmares. A videotape made for insurance purposes reveals in minute detail the malicious and immature nature of his intimacy with his wife.

Stella's elder daughter, Amanda, has perverted secrets of her own. And Axel, a geriatric patient with whom Stella had an unlikely friendship, unveils his pathetic past. To cap it off, the ghost of the recently departed Stella emerges to tell what she really thought of them all.

Ullmann may be the daughter of Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman, but her talent is as unique as it is prodigious. Her first novel, *Before You Sleep*, was received to international acclaim. Her second, so often an author's stumbling block, confirms Ullmann as a writer of empathy and poise.

In spare, beautifully crafted prose, *Stella Descending* whittles away the deceptions that pervade our intimate relationships to expose a gnawing isolation from which only a temporary respite seems possible. It is a painful, deeply distressing novel and yet its cumulative impact produces the opposite - the kind of elation you can get only in the presence of great art.