

BOOKS

A disquieting family tale

By Steven Whitton
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A Blessed Child by Linn Ullmann, translated from the Norwegian

By Sarah Death, Knopf, 2008, 307 pp.

Two important tropes from the films of Ingmar Bergman appear with intriguing frequency in the new novel from Linn Ullmann, Bergman's daughter. The wild strawberries of youth and the winter light of old age become literary bookends in this gripping examination of sisters and their relationship with their self-absorbed father, a man living out what's left of his life on Hammarsö, an isolated, rocky island off the east coast of Sweden.

Isak Lövenstad is a renowned pediatrician. It has been said that he knows more about babies than anyone. Yet he remains a man with no implicit understanding of the world, for he is an inveterate womanizer with three daughters by three different mothers.

But the focus of Ullmann's new novel is not on the old man. It is on his adult daughters and the effect their tentative relationship with their father has had on each of them. Erika, the eldest, is a doctor like her father; Laura is a perhaps too earnest teacher; Molly directs plays.

Erika eventually convinces her sisters to join her on a visit to their father, and memories of summers spent together on Hammarsö engulf each sister as she journeys to meet her siblings for the last leg of the trip. Those summers were the only taste of family the sisters had. Yet the summer of Erika's fourteenth birthday, an incident of indescribable childhood cruelty ended everything. The sisters spent no more summers together on Hammarsö and now struggle in their own families.

As each sister once more approaches the former house (whose foundation is now covered with mold), Ullmann reveals the winter rendezvous as a desperate attempt to recapture what they thought was present those summers together.

A Blessed Child is often disquieting, but, unlike its actual landscape, it is never cold. It is a quietly candid contemplation of life — in which wild strawberries must inevitably give way to winter light.

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