

To death – and beyond



Grace

By Linn Ullmann

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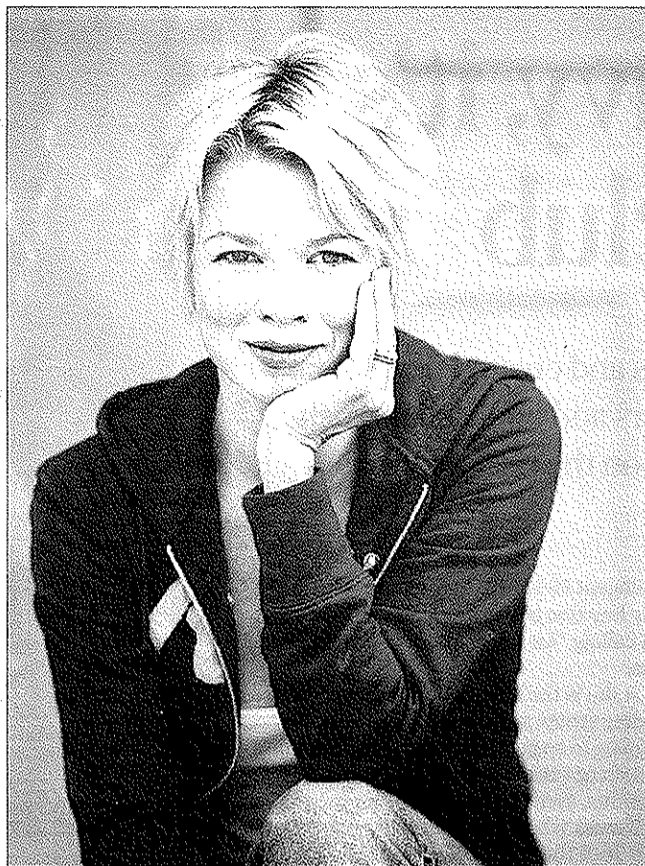
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His first marriage, to the horse-like Alice, was a disaster

Johan wasn't a popular man. He wasn't a man people looked up to. And he wasn't a controversial man. He doubted whether he was a man others would miss. But he was loved." And the person who loves him – though he can't, given his general lack of distinction, fathom why – is Maia, his second wife, with whom he has experienced 23 years of happiness, satisfying both body and spirit.

At 70, Johan Sletten is dying: "this thing was spreading ... a word he had been waiting all his adult life to hear – waiting, fearing and foreseeing." Certainly he's unable now to look back over his life and discover those occasions pointing to reserves of the kind of strength needed for facing up to this, the hardest situation of all. The retrospection that periodically overwhelms him can only provide the gravest misgivings. His first marriage, to the horse-like Alice, was a disaster; once, knowing that she couldn't swim and was afraid of the water, he pushed her into a pool, surprising himself as he did so. He quickly pulled her out, of course, but when, some time later, a fatal road-accident removed her from his life, he felt little sorrow.

His relationship to their son, Andreas, has been, by mutual agreement, unsuccessful. Andreas, spindlier even than himself, has always exasperated him with his unappealing combination of feebleness and boastful vanity, attributes that have intensified over time. As for his working life, Johan was for years an arts journalist on Norway's "third biggest-selling newspaper", but he himself knows how he was passed over for signifi-



Linn Ullmann's latest novel invites us inside fear itself

cant promotion – and besides, his career there ended ignominiously: he was caught out in a trivial but deliberate and thorough-going plagiarism. He has only a few friends, and the archaeology of memory during his worsening illness uncovers an earlier family history that can only rebuke him in his term of trial. Didn't he pray to Death to take his father before his mother, and didn't, distressingly, Death duly oblige him?

There remains the woman he married two years after Alice's demise, Maia, who once wanted to be a concert pianist but became a paediatrician instead. Just as he can't make out why she loves him, so he finds it hard to explain quite why he so deeply and

wholly loves her. She tells lies – not serious ones to disguise infidelities, but pointless and puzzling ones – and she is not beautiful, except for her hair which she brushes "a hundred times every morning and every night", affording him perpetual pleasure. Yet he adores her, and trusts her with every part of his being, an entity that illness and concomitant medication are now fracturing. She will stand by him through all his pain and dissolution, and will also surely "help" him. By this he means that, before the worst ravages incapacitate him, she will assist him to die.

But will she? In this extraordinarily fearless novel Linn Ullmann invites us inside fear itself – even though the novel is presented, as by a good friend, at a short narrative distance from Johan and Maia. There's the fear (Johan's) of being disintegrated by illness (the passive voice is the only appropriate one here), and there's the fear (Maia's) of actually ending the existence of a person intimately known, intimately loved. Yet some adjudication between these has to be made in their demanding double face. And Linn Ullmann gives us such an adjudication, the more moving and convincing for the intensity with which the predicament is presented. This is a work of the most intricate and impressive artistry, with past and present, fantasy and stark actuality, emotion and the clinically physical, not so much juxtaposed as flowing in and out of each other, like themes in a piano work by Maia's admired Schumann. There is also, paradoxically, much humour: Johan and Maia are not abstracted from life into some argument about contemporary attitudes to death, but are apprehended, and fully, in all the quotidian ordinariness of the years they've lived together. So that Maia's silly fibs about her stay in Göteborg, the absurd misunderstanding between Johan and his son over the country cottage, and his daughter-in-law's gaucherie in the hospital ward, have parts of inestimable importance to play in this exemplary account of an unremarkable but unique man's journey to the moment of death and beyond.

Paul Binding

Love that baby-eating alligator, man



Tooth and Claw

By T.C. Boyle

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T.C. Boyle is such a prolific and talented novelist that it seems almost perverse to claim that he's a better short-story writer, but his fans will know what I mean. His last two novels, *Drop City* and *The Inner Circle*, were 400-page epics that dealt with, respectively, a hippy commune in the 1970s and the life of Alfred Kinsey through the '40s and '50s. Both were enormously entertaining, but as the subject matter of both was familiar, neither had quite the bite of *Tooth and Claw*, his latest collection of stories.

Not including an anthology compiled from previous collections, this is his sixth book of stories, and one of the best. The tales are linked by the common theme of human behaviour at its most extreme and animal, with characters that include a woman bored

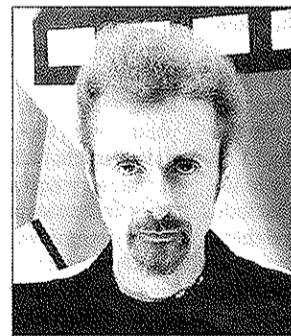
with suburbia who tries to join a pack of dogs, a radio DJ who attempts to set the world record for non-stop broadcasting only to lapse into bizarre psychosis, and a man who copes with his divorce by moving into a Florida housing community that is more like a Michael Crichton theme park.

Many of the stories are about alcohol (and occasionally, as in the brilliant final story, drugs). The opener, "When I Woke Up This Morning, Everything I Had Was Gone", concerns a

Is he closer to the nihilists or those just trying to stay out of the pubs?

hazing ritual gone wrong, but rather than being a moralistic depiction of the dangers of drink, it deals with the lurking presence of imminent tragedy in daily life. This is a theme Boyle returns to throughout. Some characters are spared, as with the couple in "Chicxulub," who believe their daughter has died in an accident, only to find it's a case of mistaken identity; on other occasions disaster is played for comedy (Boyle is one of very few writers who could make an alligator eating a baby hilarious). Hanging over the whole collection is the threat not only of death but, when the right comet hits the world, the extinction of the human species.

Boyle has one of his characters argue that while "death cancels our individuality... ontology



Warm humanity: T.C. Boyle

recapitulates phylogeny and... that, in the absence of God, is what allows us to accept the death of the individual", before questioning what would happen to society and culture if we accepted the existence of man was finite.

This is seriously disturbing stuff, but he tempers such nihilistic thinking with a modern-day "Chicken Little" story called "Blinded by the Light" in which a character from California arrives in Punt Arenas to lecture a family about the dangers of sunlight, insisting it will drive

their animals blind and give the farmhands skin cancer. He hands out dark glasses to everyone and becomes close to the narrator's daughter, who starts dressing in black and staying indoors. In taking extreme measures to get rid of this doomsayer, Boyle points out how tedious end of the species talk can become.

Boyle never reveals whether he is closer to the nihilistic characters in his stories, or those just trying to get by and stay out of the pubs until at least five in the afternoon, but his authorial voice has a warm humanity that separates him from authors such as Chuck Palahniuk or David Means. This is a truly satisfying collection of short stories, recommended as strongly to first-timers as to fans.

Matt Thorne