

Culture

BOOKS

Book Reviews: 'A Blessed Child' and 'Ancient Highway'

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A Blessed Child By Linn Ullmann Translated by Sarah Death. 307 pages. \$24.95. Alfred A. Knopf.

Being Shakespeare's sister, as Virginia Woolf imagined, would have been no bed of roses, but what do you do when you're Prospero's daughter? Linn Ullmann, it seems safe to say, is more familiar with this problem than most. Her mother is the actress Liv Ullmann and her father the writer and director Ingmar Bergman, who fathered nine children by six different women. Ullmann is the youngest of that brood: the great man's last baby, daughter of his wildly talented, gorgeous and ferociously intelligent muse. One admires Linn Ullmann for surviving such a powerful and intoxicating legacy with such a strong artistic drive.

In "A Blessed Child," her fourth novel, she tackles the trickiest, most inescapable aspect of the Prospero issue: tenderness for the lordly dream maker, whose magical island might hold you there forever. Tenderness is such a watery medium. As hypnotic as it is distorting, it can convey an illusion of connection - look how we floated, all together, in the sea of the past - that's very hard to resist, even when we know better. Desire and memory tangle and dissolve in melancholy, sepia-tinted, perfectly lost.

"A Blessed Child" concerns the mingled fates of three sisters - Erika, Laura and Molly - who are the daughters, by three different women, of Isak Lovenstad, a renowned gynecologist who in his old age lives alone on a tiny Swedish island called Hammarso, which bears at least a passing resemblance to Faro, the island where Bergman lived for much of his life and where he died in 2007. Lovenstad's claim to fame is his pioneering work in gynecological ultrasound: a technology with the uncanny ability to see deep inside women, into places they can't see themselves. Larger than life, endlessly seductive, willful and blind as Lear to many of his own faults, Isak seems to his daughters to be immortal.

The occasion for the novel is 84-year-old Isak's announcement, following the death of his second wife, that he is going to commit suicide. At this news, his grown daughters reluctantly begin

making their way to Hammarso, although none of them believe he's actually going to die. The novel implicitly agrees with them: it shows the sisters only on their halting journeys to Hammarso, with long detours into their respective pasts in that bewitched place, particularly the pivotal summer of 1979, when sex, death and betrayal became inextricably intermingled.

With a light touch and tremendous empathy, Ullmann ranges among the perspectives of the three daughters, as well as their childhood playmate Ragnar and, very sparingly, Isak himself. Mostly, Isak is a little-seen force, a generative demigod who shows his face only now and then.