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A WONDERFUL NOVEL ABOUT EVIL

BY HENRIETTE BACHER LIND

In *A Blessed Child* Linn Ullmann focuses on evil and examines, through the child's consciousness, the borderland between play and cruelty.

*Linn Ullmann:
ET VELSIGNET BARN
Translated by Karen Fastrup
and Niels Lyngsø
341 pages, 249 Danish kroner.
Lindhardt og Ringhof*

I read the novel *A Blessed Child* when it came out in Norwegian and was wildly enthusiastic. I have just read it again, in the quite brilliantly translated Danish version, and my enthusiasm is not diminished by one golden daffodil. Linn Ullmann is dazzling, and her grasp of existential matters sensational.

In her three preceding novels Linn Ullmann's interest centred on love, particularly between a man and a woman. In her latest novel she focuses on evil and examines, through the child's consciousness, the borderland between play and cruelty.

When does one move into the other? Who knows how to distinguish between harmless teasing and raw violence? Where should guilt be apportioned when things go really, really wrong?

Back to the Scene of the Crime

The plot of *A Blessed Child* is told by three half-sisters - Erika, Laura and Molly - along with their childhood friend, Ragnar. One fateful summer, the summer of 1979, marks the fall from the paradise of childhood innocence. 25 years later they can no longer flee from the facts and are driven back to the scene of the crime and a meeting which might or might not be conceived as a kind of confrontation.

Linn Ullmann works intensively with the overwhelming complexity of reality and the ambiguity of language. The world is portrayed precisely as it presents itself in its diffuse mix of good and evil, without the writer resorting to any kind of heavy-handed moralism or drawing presumptuous conclusions.

Julie's line: *Man skal også møblere helvede* [Hell has to be furnished, too] in the novel *Before You Sleep* is just as applicable when dealing with the weighty themes of *A Blessed Child*.

Layers

Again and again, the writer succeeds in peeling her characters down to the core of their identities, after which tissue-thin layers are laid over the plot so that new and surprising shades and nuances begin to emerge.

Just as everything seems to be under control, there is a stray "sorry" or "forgive me", as if to emphasise how events of a particularly fatal nature refuse to let themselves be swept under the carpet.

The multi-layered structure of meaning is, as in her previous novels, also evident here in the title. *A Blessed Child* is an ironic reference to the scandalous reality that a child who could have been loved is persecuted. The title thus points to its literary kinship with the story of the blighted Cain and the parable about Jacob, who steals Esau's blessing in front of his nose because Isaac, the father, is so dewy-eyed.

Shrouded in Mystery

The latter association is rendered all the stronger through a number of details, such as the father of Erika, Laura and Molly being called Isak; he is certainly no less patriarchal in his behaviour than his Old Testament namesake. Like him, he has the same complacent blindness towards his children.

At any rate, he is not particularly interested in what his three daughters get up to during the long summer. Unless his indifference is a self-imposed protective shield to prevent his carefully built universe from collapsing. Whatever the reality is, his distanced demeanour raises the question of how far see no evil /speak no evil attitudes also partly contribute to the emergence of evil.

The answer to this question is shrouded in mysterious relationships, dilemmas and several conflicts at all levels of the novel. Everything is thrown into a complicated, obscure interwoven whole in which small and apparently unimportant events are imbedded in patterns of behaviour which cannot immediately be decoded.

The Forbidden Fruits

In contrast to the well-ordered and well-organised routine there is the riotous lawlessness which develops among the children on the island. Betrayal lurks beneath love. Under cover of unspoken truths the slips of the tongue proliferate. Several spurned mistresses, and more, hide behind the bright, shiny facade of marriage.

Right from early on in her writing career Linn Ullmann has dealt with the theme of love, this absolutely pivotal centre of human existence, from which all lines can be drawn. Ullmann's novels, each in their own way and from their own angle, answer the question of what happens when there is no love, or it is distorted, or it becomes a fight, or it is betrayed.

Were you to ask me about the essence of evil, I would answer: 'Read *A Blessed Child*.'

The writer is a great artist.

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