

RACHEL HORE

SHADOWS ON THE WATER

A BLESSED CHILD

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By Linn Ullmann

(Translated by Sarah Death)

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IN WINTER, TERRIBLE storms batter the Baltic island of Hammersö, the setting for Linn Ullmann's fourth novel. In summer it's an idyllic holiday retreat where families like the Lovenstads return year after year, lured by its safe, small-community feel and the strange quality of the light on the water. It's a place to store up wonderful childhood memories, one might think – but for Erika, Laura and Molly, the now grown-up daughters of Isak Lovenstad, the past throws troubling shadows.

Just for starters, Hammersö is where the half-sisters are first shocked into awareness of one another's existence. Isak, a pioneering obstetrician, is a charismatic womaniser, divorced from his first wife (Erika's mother), devoted to his second, Rosa (who was Laura's), yet unable to resist the extra-marital fling that produced Molly. For seven long summers the three girls find themselves thrown together, their practical needs attended to by the long-suffering Rosa, and doing their best not to upset Pa when he's working. Together they undergo the rites of growing up and jostle for a place in the vicious pecking order of the other holidaying children (echoes of Golding abound).

The novel opens in 2005, when thirtysomething Erika travels by car from Oslo to Hammersö to visit her father in his widowed decline. It's to be their reluctant first meeting for many years. Her erratic journey, which spans the novel, mirrors the book's wonderful ragbag structure. There's her appalling driving; the unplanned diversions; the frequent stops, when she calls her half-sisters, alternately to discuss turning back or to beg them to join her on the adventure. Ullmann's narrative is similarly unpredictable – cutting back and forth between the women's stories, past and present, weaving together snatches of children's voices from long ago, passages of lyrical interpretation or humorous observation, all with strong authorial vision and perfect control.

The dark event at the novel's heart gradually reveals itself. Erika's closest friend on the island was a boy called Ragnar, exactly her age, who was persecuted by the other children because of a deforming birthmark. When, at fourteen, she casually turned away from him, she unwittingly set in motion an act of terrible brutality that marks all the sisters for life. Yet it's not just this event that affects them.

A rich, continually shifting stew of relationships gives

this novel its depth and power. On Hammersö, the girls' friendships with the other children, dissolving and re-forming with bewildering cruelty, are brilliantly and convincingly portrayed. The worst damage, though, is dealt by their dysfunctional parenting. Isak could be a wonderfully loving father when he was there and in the right mood, but he was inconsistent. Scenes of his capacity for great tenderness – at the funeral of a wild bird, comforting a distraught Erika or reading poetry to Laura in bed – stand in painful contrast to examples of his selfishness and weakness. After the Ragnar episode there are no more summers on Hammersö, and the sisters grow apart. When eight-year-old Molly's mother is killed, Isak and Rosa decline to offer her a home, something Molly, marooned with an elderly grieving grandmother, resents all her life. We're left at the end wondering if any of these children were blessed and what on earth they'll say to Isak when they finally meet him at the ruined holiday home. The lack of a proper denouement is usually irritating in a novel, but here it is a strength.

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Ullmann: observant

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