

# Mslexia

## Review: Novels

**A Blessed Child** by Linn Ullmann, trans. Sarah Death (Picador, £14.99)

**The Good Plain Cook** by Bethan Roberts (Serpent's Tail, £10.99)

**Evening is the Whole Day** by Preeta Samarasan (4th Estate, £16.99)

Skillfully utilising the rich layers of multiple viewpoints, these three new novels are each remarkable in their own way.

Set in Norway, *A Blessed Child* is about three sisters who share the same father, Isak – leonine, towering and often emotionally unavailable to his daughters – but different mothers. They spend their childhood summers at their father's island vacation house, and the plot structure juxtaposes the sisters' memories of these summers with their present-day lives; throughout the novel, they are each undertaking a journey to visit their old father on the island.

During her island holidays, one of the daughters, Erika, was close to Ragnar, a boy who was bullied and abused by other children. There is a mystery about him: Is Isak the boy's father? When Erika turned 14, she betrayed Ragnar and he is killed by children who stone him to death. With this background story in hand, Ullmann clearly, though unobtrusively, links the emotional problems that the sisters face as adults to their complicated childhood. Particularly well-portrayed are the awkwardnesses, the sexual tensions, the feelings of exclusion, and the cruelty of adolescents, as well as the bonding of the young sisters against the stunning background of the Scandinavian island. With its sudden storms, its pebbly beaches, and ancient outcrops of rock, the setting – and the story – are perfectly mirrored by the narrative voice: forthright, engaging and occasionally terse.

*The Good Plain Cook* is a semi-historical novel that focuses on the life of 1930s bohemians in rural Suffolk. It is well-crafted and researched, highlighting the class tensions between supposedly progressive artists and intellectuals, and the servants who worked hard to maintain their unconventional way of life. The style is simple, but follows the emotional lives of the characters with great intelligence.

American Mrs Steinberg has taken a cottage in the countryside with her lover, Mr Crane – whom she is supporting financially while he writes his novel – and her daughter Geenie. Enter the young Kitty, who answers Mrs Steinberg's advertisement for 'a good plain cook... Broad outlook essential' – though, it transpires, she doesn't know how to cook.

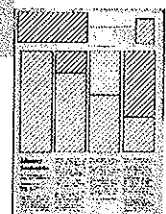
Roberts excels at characterisation: Mrs Steinberg, the wealthy bohemian who doesn't send her daughter to school, has noisy sex with her lover every night and wishes she were more domestically inclined. Geenie is eccentric and withdrawn, but also creative. Kitty is quiet, observant, sensitive, hard-working, and strongly attracted to the handsome Mr Crane.

Those tensions firmly in place, the narrative adeptly turns stereotypical class and gender dynamics on their head: the gardener, who is of Kitty's 'station' and thus 'suitable,' is rejected by her. She, in turn, is seduced by Crane. As relationships continue to unfold, Roberts maintains an extremely skilful and believable presentation of the complexities between

mother and daughter, mistress and servant, lover and lover.

*Evening is the Whole Day* is fantastically good. Portraying the tragedy of a wealthy, dysfunctional Tamil family living in Malaysia, and set against the backdrop of nationalist politics and the country's conflictual multicultural society, it really deserves the rather hackneyed title of a 'stunning debut.' It is strongly reminiscent of novels by Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy: the family saga interwoven with the history of a community, the narrative focalisation through the eyes of children, the postcolonial theme, the linguistic innovativeness, even the hints of magical realism. But Samarasan has a powerful and compelling narrative style all her own that captures, with incredible and harrowing emotional precision, the cruelties that once-loving family members can pile on one another. There are some unambiguous victims: the youngest child, Aasha, first neglected by her socialite, aloof mother, and then by her beloved older sister Uma. The other victim is the maidservant Chellam. Brought into the house to look after the father's aging mother, Chellam slowly becomes the scapegoat for the sins, misdemeanours, and bitterness of each family member in turn, until she is accused of accidentally killing the old grandmother.

The narrative is constructed as one continuous flashback – almost a psychoanalytic exploration of the family's slow unravelling – showing how each character is



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alternately victim and perpetrator. The Malaysian setting is conveyed with cinematic vividness through food and streetscapes, and sheds a fascinating light on the complex relationship between Malaysia's diasporic Indian community and its ongoing struggle to define its national identity.

NEELAM SRIVASTAVA teaches postcolonial literature at Newcastle University. Her research focuses on the postcolonial Indian novel in English and on the history of Italian colonialism.

