

## Slice of life

Book Reviews

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Before you Sleep

Linn Ullmann *Picador*, 272pp, £12.99

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"Here's a handy hint," said the teacher at my creative writing course. "Carry a notebook and jot down overheard snatches of conversation that strike you as worth remembering." The top decks of buses, she suggested, were good places. Linn Ullmann never had to depend on buses. She had the whole thing right there, as the family dramas went on around her (her father was Ingmar Bergman, her mother was Liv Ullmann). This could be why her parents read the book and both thought that bitter great-aunt Selma was based on them.

This is Ullmann's first novel, set in Oslo, and she has taken the daring path of making her heroine - short, dark, pudgy-nosed Karin Blomm - an unappealing character. At times, too, we are bizarrely transported into a Hans Christian Andersen-style fairy story - such as when we meet a man who never removes his boots but, when Karin does it as he sleeps, he turns into a mackerel. Well, you would, wouldn't you. Then there is the mysterious and heavily symbolic rock that every night appears in the bed between Karin's sister Julie and her husband, Aleksander.

The book begins with Karin looking after her young nephew Sander, when his parents, Julie and Aleksander, go to Italy on a second honeymoon to rejuvenate their marriage. From there, the attention turns to Julie's wedding, where we find Karin hoping "to seduce a man. It's a secret game I've played since I began seducing men at the age of 12." She spots her prey - little daughter in his arms and blonde wife by his side. A challenge. By slyly resetting the place mats, she ensures that he sits next to her at the reception, before, by force of will, she takes the hapless individual upstairs for sex. "I'm not going to *make love*. No, spare me words like that." There are a lot of italics in the book.

Why does she compulsively seduce attached men? Could it be because her father has left all the women in his life, including her mother, for new relationships? (A half-brother to Karin appears at one point.) Why are the women all attractive blondes? And why does no man have the balls to tell her to get lost? It beats me.

As the narrative swoops and glides across the decades, Karin tells us more about herself, about her grandfather's life in New York, his marriage to Karin's grandmother, about Julie's attempted suicides and her mother's botched facelift. At the end, we are back in the flat with Karin and Sander, and they are waiting expectantly for a phone call from Julie. Not so much a novel, then, as a slice of life: rambling, incoherent, without an end, full of amusing conversation, interesting thoughts and fraught relationships.