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A BLESSED CHILD

BY LINN ULLMANN

Picador, 256pp £14.99

Review by JANICE McCULLOUGH

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 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 great man's last baby, daughter of his wildly talented, gorgeous and ferociously intelligent muse.

In 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 for ever. It concerns the mingled fates of three sisters—Erika, Laura and Molly – who are the daughters, by three different women, of Isak Lovenstad, a renowned gynaecologist 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.

Larger than life, endlessly seductive, wilful and blind to many of his own faults, Isak seems to his daughters to be immortal. "In the winter," Ullmann writes, "he let his hair grow free, giving him an aspect of

towering greyish white, which in combination with his handsomely lined, ageing face suggested the beginnings of a rask, one of those 400-million-year-old island outcroppings in the sea, so characteristic of Hammarso."

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.

The novel pivots on his eldest daughter, Erika. As a teenager, she is torn between her love for Marion, a cruel alpha-girl beauty with long

black hair, and Ragnar, a dear, peculiar boy with a birthmark, whom everyone else despises and bullies. Handmaiden and sex toy of Marion and secret lover of Ragnar, Erika is forced to choose between them. The consequences of that choice echo throughout the rest of the novel.

While Ullmann's sentences, smoothly translated by Sarah Death, are a pleasure to read and her deft modern sensibility is winning, the deeper drama at work here is missing some crucial, potentially painful connections. In particular, she shies away from hammering home a particularly ugly suggestion of Isak's deep moral failure.

Instead, tenderness prevails. Isak doesn't die, at least not in these pages. The daughters, perpetually on their way to their father's house, never reach it. The past persists, more vivid than the present. While *A Blessed Child* might have been a more tough-minded book had Ullmann thrown a spanner into the works, it's not hard to understand her decision to keep things going. Does anyone ever really want to visit the summer island for the last time?



Ullmann's family background feeds into a tender family saga

