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PAUL BINDING

Linn Ullmann

A BLESSED CHILD

Translated by Sarah Death

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“Day after day, month after month, year after year I will love you and lie beside you in the grass on Hammarsö and listen to the music on the waters.” The speaker of these words is Ragnar, a boy of almost fourteen. He is precocious in his emotional and sexual longings, childish in his obstinacy and secretiveness, appealing in appearance to some, but offputting to others, with his horn-like birthmark between the eyes. He is addressing Erika, who shares his birthday, eldest of the three daughters of Isak Lövenstad, an eminent gynaecologist. And Hammarsö is an island in the Swedish Baltic with a colony of regular summer visitors to which both of them have, since early years, belonged.

Like Ragnar, Hammarsö has a double identity. The summer visitors think of it in terms of peace, pleasure and visual beauty. The highlight of their year is a pageant scripted by a poetaster whose outdated politics sentimentalize the indigenous culture. But locals know their true history was one of harshness and neglect, with wrecking a source of much-needed income. The sea may suggest limitless freedom, yet in the 1970s, when Ragnar and Erika are friends, its eastern stretches end in the sealed-off Communist Bloc from which menacing objects drift onto beaches. Hammarsö half-believes that God has forgotten He made this island, hence the prayer beginning: “Dear God, who reigns over Sweden, Norway, Denmark and large parts of Hammarsö . . .”.

It is the parts over which God does not reign which creatively interest Linn Ullmann. In this richest of her four distinguished novels, she is preoccupied not only with the marginalized individual, so movingly represented by Ragnar, but with marginalized areas of the personality. We see a group of young girls sunning themselves, dabbling in petty sophistication, making self-ignorant

lubricious experiments, then we watch them surrender to a lust for destruction and a crude power that they don't understand and will never acknowledge. The adults are scarcely less fragmented. Isak, world-renowned expert on women's health, pioneer of ultrasound, professor at Stockholm and Lund, is helpless before the stark realities of pregnancy and fatherhood, and later an enigma to his children. After the agonizing death of his second wife, he vows to kill himself. But he does not, and probably never intended to.

His daughters when adult also exhibit the doubleness of Hammarsö. Two, Erika and Molly, are the children of Norwegian mothers. All three have ended up living in Oslo rather than their father's Stockholm, while remaining profoundly affected by their summers on a Swedish island they have not set foot on for twenty-five years. Here their widowed father lives permanently, having arrived, in his own words, at his life's “epilogue”. In summer he has his hair close-cropped, in winter he wears it long.

The novel is structured round Erika's decision to make a winter journey from Oslo to Hammarsö. Erika is a gynaecologist like her father. An affectionate mother, she failed to achieve emotional stability with either her cheese-paring first partner or her spendthrift second. Though an atrocious driver, she is perhaps temperamentally more suited to the open road, with its offers of unexpected encounters, than to domesticity. Her nearest sister, Laura, a teacher, with a securer (Swedish) girlhood behind her, is by contrast enmeshed in the familial; her home is The Colony (its name echoing the summer island), an enlightened housing organization on a prime Oslo site. Hammarsö survives in Laura's instinctual reactions; she refuses, for instance, to share her fellow-Colonists' censorious attitude to an eccentric resident with possible paedophilic tendencies. Laura persuades the youngest of the sisters, theatre-director Molly, the most distant from her father, to join her in following Erika through Sweden and snow-fall to visit Isak.

Their respective journeys are as much through time – that hot Baltic summer of 1979 – as through place, and are rendered with formidable contrapuntal narrative skill.



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Destination is only literally reached. The ghastly tragedy of Ragnar cannot be explained or even comprehended, only feelingly re-experienced. Appropriately, Ullmann refuses us the fictive closure of a unifying meeting between the sisters and their father. Uncertainty prevails.

Abounding in the inner correspondences usually associated with lyric poetry – resonant changes are rung on 400 million-year-old rocks, birds, ticks, a boy running, Prospero and Caliban – *A Blessed Child* shows Ullmann asserting the indestructibility of the imagination, whether a social outcast's or a trapped insider's. As Ragnar himself observes: "It's the big trees that fall over in the storm, not the little ones". Sarah Death's translation does justice to both Linn Ullmann's breadth and her depth.