

The struggle of the sexes ends in death

(Filed: 26/01/2004)

Rachel Cusk reviews *Stella Descending* by Linn Ullmann

Stella Descending is a novel about the ways in which women – even equal-minded 21st-century women – are victimised by romantic love. The title refers to its heroine's fall from the roof of a nine-storey building, observed and perhaps assisted by her husband, and this event, which occurs at the story's beginning, sits centrally throughout as a monument to the theme of subjection.

How Stella came to be on the roof in Oslo with her husband, and the reasons for the ambiguity in the manner of her falling, form the substance of the Norwegian writer Linn Ullmann's second novel. She constructs her narrative from the testimonies of witnesses to Stella's life and death, most of whom share in some way Stella's vulnerability and who love her while being powerless to intervene on her behalf.

Ullmann paints this mystification of outsiders, skilfully, as the consequence of a heterosexual relationship. Stella is like a caged creature, communicating with others through the bars. In her work as a hospital nurse she overflows with kindness and with un-egocentric impulses: in the context of a relationship, these characteristics make her a victim.

The novel is loosely arranged around excerpts from a home video Stella and Martin made shortly before her death, whose purpose is to record all the objects in their house for the insurance company. Penetrating and intrusive, frequently

leering, Martin is behind the camera and provides the commentary. "This is our sofa," he says, "our avocado-green Italian sofa... If the house were to go up in flames it's the thing we would miss most. Get the picture? It all started with that sofa." This is true enough: Martin is a furniture salesman. Later in the novel, he admits that at one time he vowed to have sex with every woman, no matter who she was or what she looked like, who came into his showroom and bought the avocado-green sofa. He was succeeding spectacularly at the time he met Stella who, like her predecessors, had made the lucky purchase. The sofa was delivered to her top-floor flat by pulley up the outside of the building, with Martin sitting on it.

On the home video, Stella is heard asserting that it isn't the sofa they would miss most but the children. Such exchanges are the stuff of marital comedy, but they also signify the biological rift at its most cruel and painful. It soon becomes clear that Martin, with his erotic preoccupations, his narcissistic need for power, was bankrupted in his relationship with Stella by the birth of their child. If he pushed her off the roof, it was to neutralise the reproductive risk she continued to represent.

Ullmann by now has taken us into a realm of suggestion, where Martin is being interrogated by a corpulent female police detective who claims to be able to smell her suspects' guilt, and where the dead Stella speaks of her life as an exercise in passivity, a train of events she could not command and of which in the end she let go. She traces this failure back to her belief that she was unloved as a child, that from her mother she learned only shame, while Martin – male, dynastic, fêted – was schooled in the fact of his own entitlement.

These are deeply interesting variations on the theme of modern love and marriage, whose purpose is to demonstrate how ordinary men and women have internalised, and continue to live, the story of their sex. Ullmann is a fine writer, complex, intelligent and scrupulous. The drama of private life, and of the here and now, continues to require voices such as hers.