

Girls Behaving Badly

By Jennifer Vanderbes,
who is the author of "Easter Island"
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A BLESSED CHILD

By Linn Ullmann

Translated from the Norwegian by Sarah Death

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Two staples of high school reading -- John Knowles's "A Separate Peace" and William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" -- have generated decades of literary discourse on the subject of boys being bad. We all gasped when Gene pushed his best friend out of that tree, and we wrote English papers on why Piggy's shattered spectacles -- symbols of intellect, civilization and order -- meant the English prep-school boys were about to go feral.

Alongside this came the curriculum cliché of victim girls. Poor Hester Prynne. Poor Maggie, Stephen Crane's "Girl of the Streets." So entrenched is the literary trope of untamed boys and suffering girls that when the alpha-female adolescent of Linn Ullmann's "A Blessed Child" behaves very, very badly (in a masterfully creepy scene that ends as she "flings the vibrator into the sea"), I thought, "Finally!"

Psychologists coined the term "relational aggression" to describe how adolescent girls go wild, detailing the psychological warfare and silent cruelty that often pass for female friendship. Onstage, [Arthur Miller's](#) "The Crucible" and Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour" have portrayed this wicked side of girls. On-screen, "Heathers," "Heavenly Creatures" and, most recently, "Mean Girls" spotlighted the ugly side of pretty teens. But Ullmann's novel (shortlisted for Norway's prestigious Brage Prize) is a rare literary foray into this dark realm, and she strides in daringly and skillfully.

The novel, Ullmann's fourth, seamlessly translated from the Norwegian by Sarah Death, begins with Erika nervously driving through a snowstorm to the Swedish island of Hammarso to visit her 84-year-old father, Isak, a volatile and aloof genius who seems part Prospero, part King Lear and perhaps part [Ingmar Bergman](#) (Ullmann's real-life father). The old man has threatened suicide, and Erika enlists her two half sisters, Laura and Molly, to meet her there so they can check on him.

In familiar storytelling fashion, Erika's long, snowy drive begets flashbacks: In 1972, the girls (who have different mothers) begin summering with their father on beautiful Hammarso,

befriending a group of local adolescents. Raven-haired Marion is the queen bee, directing, with malevolent glances, which hive member is permitted to sunbathe beside her or who will have the distinct privilege of lending her a blouse. At the periphery of this group lurks Ragnar, a lanky male misfit who is Erika's best friend. Erika and Ragnar share a birthday, a secret language and a hiding place in the woods. But when they turn 14, during the unbearably hot summer of 1979, Erika betrays him to gain favor with Marion and to hide own her attraction to Ragnar, setting in motion an event that makes "Lord of the Flies" look almost prudish.

The novel's mosaic structure, an assemblage of various points of view at various points in time, creates powerful echoes between this horrific past event and the present. The adult Erika's painful pregnancy with her son reads like penance for her betrayal of Ragnar: "There he lay like a little suicide bomber, waiting to blow himself and Erika to pieces." (The motif of childbirth is wonderfully weaved throughout the novel: Each woman is defined by her feelings about motherhood, and Erika's father is a gynecologist famous for pioneering ultrasound.) Laura's worry about her community's response to a suspected pedophile bespeaks her regret about the violence against Ragnar 25 years earlier.

Ullmann is a terrific writer. Her novel's great strengths are the brilliantly drawn characters and the evocative setting of Hammarso. The novel's weakness is a somewhat meandering plot. The drive that sets the story in motion quickly proves a literal and narrative road to nowhere. It frames the 1970s events and allows us a satisfying glimpse of the women these girls became, but little happens in the present day.

If "A Blessed Child" is essentially about a crime committed against a child, the author seems unsure in the end who, exactly, is guilty. It's one thing for the culpable to deny responsibility, but it's odd for an omniscient narrator to point fingers at the relatively innocent. Having bravely portrayed a world where girls behave wickedly, Ullmann curiously reverts to painting them as victims, not culprits.

In the well-worn narratives of boys gone bad, the implication is that boys can regress to a dangerous "natural" state. When the Lord of the Flies speaks through an impaled pig's head, he says, "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close!" But who is to blame when girls behave badly? Ullmann has raised the question in this captivating tale but doesn't answer it.