

15th April 2006, 3:30 a.m.

Beautiful, sombre symphony of memories by: Ide Hejlskov, kultur@berlingske.dk

Information

Writer: Linn Ullmann
Title: Et velsignet barn
Translators: Karen Fastrup and Niels Lyngsø.
Publisher: Lindhardt og Ringhof
Pages: 344
Price: 249 Danish kroner



Books: A Blessed Child

***A Blessed Child* is a brilliant Erinnerungsroman about evil and guilt and the longings of three half-sisters for their father. Linn Ullmann blends this with an international chorus of masterful voices.**

Childhood events continue to colour the lives of the three half-sisters Erika, Laura and Molly in *A Blessed Child*. They are all in their thirties and occupied with their unresolved relationship with their father, Isak. After his wife's death he went to live on the isolated island of Hammersö, where the sisters spent many of their childhood summers. The eldest of them, Erika, drives to visit her father on Hammersö. She and her sisters have not been there since a grotesque incident which took place in the summer of 1979. She approaches the callous event and her ambivalent relationship with her father with caution. The island is a two-day journey from where Erika lives in Oslo. But she takes a long detour in an attempt to escape from her urge for redemption, and perhaps a confrontation. Gradually, via the telephone, she inveigles her other two sisters, Laura and Molly, into making her unexplained journey into the past and to Isak.

Ragnar, who has some connection with the summers on Hammersö, always haunts Erika's mind. The first time she saw him, he came running like the wind with blood over his knee and stopped in front of their father's door. When Isak came out, Ragnar fell over and played dead. Erika and Laura were lying in the grass and saw him. Soon it became clear that Ragnar was almost obsessed by Isak, who did not return his attentions. Ragnar and Isak become a pain to each other in an infinite number of senses while Ragnar and Erika are deeply entangled emotionally. From Erika's side, her love is ambivalent – overshadowed by the young people on the island and their merciless game with their awakening sexuality.

A blessing in *A Blessed Child* is an ambiguous word, as indeed grace was in Ullmann's previous novel of the same name. In reality, no-one is blessed on these light Swedish summer days and nights. Perhaps some are cursed though. Isak certainly didn't stop at spreading his seed far and wide, incurring chaos as a result; he is also incapable of "seeing" his children, not to mention their moral dilemmas. Isak is, in fact, not only charismatic and full of temperament, he is also ruthlessly self-centred. He thus becomes party to the act of cruelty which takes place in the summer of 1979. So far, Isak's daughters have tried to repress the idea of their father's guilt – they were weighed down with their own – but their

lives are like mazes, the errors of their ways underscored by the guilt of their father and the act of barbarity.

There are other voices and strains mixing with Erika's on this journey towards an outcome, to wit, her father's, the sisters' and Ragnar's. The old house almost says its bit too, and the same is true of the tempestuous weather and a spirit from the sea.

With an undercurrent of pain and guilt, the whole thing builds up to a fantastic symphony which in its elegance touches Virginia Woolf's compositional heights. There are also overtones of themes from tales out of Western and Nordic culture about the complexity of the human mind: a muted version of the love story in *Wuthering Heights*, the barbarity of *Lord of the Flies*, the young people's discovery of sexuality in Riffbjerg's early novels, this time with girls playing the main roles and an aggressive power game being fought between them. And, last but not least, there is an unresolved female confrontation with the father, which has many precursors in world literature.

Linn Ullmann touches the deepest strings of your mind, to shake you and make you cheer wildly.