

Light in the darkness

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If, like myself until very recently, you have never met a catastrophist, I can only say that it is to be recommended. Do not be daunted by the title; approach the person in question with an open mind and more than likely you will find yourself in conversation with somebody who is cheerful, engaging, and witty too.

This is certainly true of Linn Ullmann. The Scandinavian author has something of a reputation for focusing on the darker areas of life. In fact, as she admits: "I have promised my editors that in my fourth novel, I am not going to kill the main character." But a confession like this is typical of Ullmann's wry take on things.

"I don't want to seem like I'm the saddest, gloomiest person in the world," she tells me. "I'm quite a happy person – but you do have to try to be honest and daring, and write about the things you may not talk about in everyday life."

The publication here of Ullmann's second novel, *Stella Descending*, gives British readers the opportunity to catch up with her four years after her internationally successful debut, *Before You Sleep*. The protagonist of this second book – there is no point in beating around the bush here – expires at the start of the story, though Stella's dying fall echoes through the rest of the volume's 250 pages. It is an ambitious piece of work, impressively focused on the things in relationships that are not usually communicated and perhaps not even usually recognised. And it is a difficult, troubling read.

Ullmann is sensibly guarded about her own life, but she does concede that personal difficulties may have contributed to *Stella Descending's* acute sense of alienation. "A Norwegian novelist said to a young writer 'Find your sadness and write about that,' and I think that's quite right," she says. "We do have a Scandinavian tradition – I mean, half of the year it's dark."

This rueful geniality is coming down the phone line from the little Swedish island where Ullmann's father, director Ingmar Bergman, has his retreat. Ullmann lives most of the year in Oslo, but returns each year to this haven, adding her own children (she has a 14-year-old son from her first marriage, and two step-children and a six month-old baby with her second husband) to Bergman's extended family.

The island routine is famously punctuated every second day (and twice on Saturdays) by performances at which one of the 20th century's greatest film-makers entertains the tribe with some of its greatest films. "Today we're seeing a Russian film based on a Chekhov short story, *The Lady and the Dog*," says Ullmann. "We've already had an early Greta Garbo and a couple of silent ones that we always see, and *Lost In Translation* – a wonderful, wonderful film."

This is Scandinavian tradition of a different and rather special sort. Ullmann has simply grown up living and breathing what used to be called high culture. Her spoken English retains the fluency of somebody who was raised in New York, where she lived with her mother (Liv Ullmann, the star of 12 films with Bergman), attended Juilliard as a prospective dancer and then went on to university. When she writes she will be listening to Schubert and Schumann, and she still works as a columnist for a newspaper in Norway after several years as a book reviewer.

"My grandmother took care of me in her bookshop when I was little and then I studied literature, and then I worked as a literary critic; my whole life has been in the company of books," she says. "Art is not mysterious or weird for me, or something I idolise or sentimentalise. I'm comfortable with the idea of the great arts being problematic and giving resistance." This very conscious sense of "resistance" – something to do with weight and difficulty, and overcoming – should not be taken as evidence of writing that is puffed. Ullmann's books, like her conversation, are alive with an awareness of idiosyncrasy, fantasy and irony, from the rocks that grow in the unhappy couple's bed in *Before You Sleep*, to the beautifully skewed ritual of the bride's reversal back up the aisle in *Stella Descending*.

The caprices of the publishing business mean we are still some way behind with Ullmann's output in this country, though her Edinburgh appearance should give some insight into the books that are yet to appear in our shops. Her third completed novel, *Grace*, is a love story about an older married couple: "a very, very sick man and his rather strange but beautiful wife".

It explores the theme of euthanasia and it is a measure of the writer's effectiveness with the unreliable narrators that she favours, that its publication in Scandinavia found her accused of promoting "mercy killing", despite the fact that she is personally against its legalisation. There are other recurring tropes among these unreliable narrators in Ullmann's work – not least of them, a series of eccentric old fellows.

It should be said here that one of the trickier challenges that Ullmann has had to face in her early career has been a media appetite for her connection with her famous parents. And while her success has made it a great deal easier for her to claim attention on her own merits, the family questions are a persistent hurdle that she negotiates with some charm, even on the phone to Edinburgh.

"My father is a fascinating figure and he's in there somehow, I'm sure," she says of her subject matter. "But I do just have a thing for these old men. I think they're wonderful – and I do them well."

There is also the unfortunate business of all that unfortunate business. It is probably fair to say that if you were planning a rebirth in fictional form, you would do well not to reappear as a character in a Linn Ullmann novel. But the writer is disarmingly frank about the root of her protagonists' misfortunes. "I'm a real coward and a catastrophist in real life," she says. "I'm always worried about the people around me, I think that something is going to happen to them, or to me. I'm a real –what do you call it?– wimp. That's why bad things happen to the people in my books: because that's what I imagine."

However, in actual fact, this is an author who is far from fearful in her plunges into the uncertain seas of fiction. An instinctive explorer, she disdains the sort of writers who bring their stories neatly to the shore. "You shouldn't have figured it out in the end," she says. "I abhor pedagogical books and that two on one side, two on the other, four in the end sort of thing." She is equally disinclined to gratify readers' expectations of her novels ("trying not to pull the same rabbit out of the hat," as she puts it). And having delivered the elderly protagonists of *Grace*, Ullmann now finds herself in the early stages of a fourth novel, turning to a feminist theme.

"I'm struggling through the thousand pages of *The Second Sex*, looking for what feminism means," she chuckles. "I've been asking myself why female experiences are sort of absent from serious literature. Things such as birth, nursing, pregnancy, are either part of 1970s political literature or else they're trivial. It's always just 'get some hot water and towels'. What do they do with all that water and towels?"

Ullmann is not short of personal experience when it comes to reductive attitudes to women. Though it is true she is a mother looking after four children and a dog ("driving the kids to football and singing lessons, and basketball or whatever"), her husband is also a writer, sharing the same domestic responsibilities. It's just that the media express no interest in that side of his life.

"There are two questions that I always get asked," says Ullmann. "How do you manage being a writer and having a family, and in what way are you a female writer? And then the publishers always want to put a young woman on the cover of the books and I say, why is that, when it's about a 69-year-old man?"

So when she has finally finished reading *The Second Sex*, and the Schubert and Schumann are switched off, the final words typed and the laggardly British publishers at last nudged into life, we can look forward to a book that will explore the things that society does to women – a book, all the evidence would suggest, that will be idiosyncratic, deeply-felt and considered. This should be a reassuring prospect for all of us, including the writer taking those preparatory breaths at the edge of the precipice.

"I want to write things I don't know how to write," says Ullmann. "That's the rush of it; every book I start, there is this idea that 'this is made for failure'. Writing is extremely difficult ..." She pauses. "And difficult is a good thing."

• *Linn Ullmann appears at the EIBF on Saturday 21 August at 4pm.*