

The Man on the Hook

On the impossibility of happiness: With his novel *The Lady in the Valley*, the Norwegian [author] Ketil Bjørnstad concludes his impressive trilogy about Aksel Vinding, a young pianist from Oslo.

When he first hears of the country doctor Sigrun, who lives in remote Finnmark, her name only brings forth a vague impression; no more than a fleeting flicker. Because when the famous psychiatrist Ida Marie Liljerot tells him of her youngest daughter Sigrun, Aksel Vinding, the nineteen year old protagonist of Ketil Bjørnstad's extensive trilogy, only has eyes and ears for Sigrun's sister Marianne Skoog, who's in medical care after a suicide attempt that was foiled only at the last minute. She is seventeen years older than him and the love of his life.

Later, after death has visited the Skoogs' house in Elvefaret, Oslo, one final time and, with the passing away of Marianne, everything has settled down, Aksel will also have a history with Sigrun; a short, erotic fling. But the road to Finnmark and her and from Finnmark and back is long. Within the framework of his grand-scale trilogy about Aksel Vinding, a young pianist from Oslo, Ketil Bjørnstad, himself a pianist and writer born in Oslo in 1952, tells the story of an artist's odyssey. A painful inner journey marked by the limits of love, death and the presumed impossible force needed to make a fresh start. The story is told over more than eleven hundred pages in sentences and images of great poetry and, sometimes, of icy beauty. They show that not even love has the power to save the individual from himself and his demons.

As a roller coaster ride through the emotions of his [Bjørnstads] juvenile alter ego, *The Lady of the Valley* follows up on the dramatic revelations of the previous volumes, *To Music* and *The River*: Aksel futilely attempts to resist the gravity of the relationships. Initially, in his youthful enthusiasm, he believed that to free his girlfriend, Anja Skoog, who at the end fell victim to anorexia, from her inner captivity and thereby saving her, he only has to love her enough. Less than four hundred pages later, at what appears to be the peak of his happiness, Marianne Skoog, Anja's mother, whom he has impregnated, takes her own life in the basement of her house. Once more he must painfully realise that one cannot escape one's fate. And so Aksel falls into a deep depression, numb with pain from Marianne's death. Until he eventually sees no other way out than to follow her. He jumps into the river – the river where his mother died in a swimming accident – in the hope of "colliding with the rock that had been lying there for so many years, waiting for me ... My only thought was to make it, I had to succeed, like Marianne had succeeded, like Anja had succeeded, even though Marianne never admitted that Anja had committed suicide." But fate has other plans for him: Aksel gets caught on an angler's hook – and with this narrative wink of the eye, Bjørnstads world-weary protagonist is brought painfully back to life. "I felt an unexpected, stabbing pain. Something sharp had pierced my mouth. It hurt terribly ... Suddenly I felt the line. Only then I realised that someone had caught me, that some idiot was there to drag me out of the water."

The Lady of the Valley effortlessly picks up where *The River* (2009) ended: the summer of 1971, when the sounds from Joni Mitchell's album *Clouds* filled the air and

Aksel and Marianne slowly got to know each other in the kitchen of the house in Elvefaret. When Aksel may finally leave the clinic he was brought to after his suicide attempt, he does not go on a grand tour through Europe as planned, the tour on which he should have excelled as the youngest interpreter of Brahms Concert in B Major. Instead he retreats to the far north, to the Russian border. He wants to rehearse Rachmaninoff's second piano concert on the Arctic Coast. The concert will have a groundbreaking impact on him. When Rachmaninoff in 1900 began work on the composition, he too had recently been dealing with a creative crisis: In October 1897 his first symphony in D minor had been a flop with the public as well as the critics. With the failure of his symphony, the twenty-four year old [composer], accustomed to success, saw [his talent] called into question for the first time. He started doubting himself, before ultimately falling into a depression. A fate in which Aksel now clearly sees his own reflected. Like Rachmaninoff's piano concert, Bjørnstads novel alternates between delicate and song-like, and enthusiastic, hymn-like moments; particularly when Sigrun, Marianne's younger sister, enters the picture. She lives at the Russian border with her husband, far from Oslo's occurrences. She is the lady of the valley who annoyingly reminds Aksel of her deceased sister Marianne. Though is she really his salvation, sent to him by fate?

Aksel becomes more and more lost in his conflicting emotions for Sigrun, until he one day starts believing that by conquering her, he may feel close to Marianne for one last time. And in fact, Sigrun embarks on a short, erotic dalliance with the visitor from Oslo – attracted by his sensitivity and the unconditional nature of his feelings. But when he goes skiing with Sigrun's husband Eirik and dramatic incident occurs, Aksel flees back to Oslo, compelled by the painful realisation that no road will lead him back to the time before Marianne's suicide.

With *The Lady of the Valley*, Bjørnstad's extensive self-portrait is completed as a great narrative of a utopia that remains unfulfilled. The author shows us a small, private world without redemption, described with icy control. It is the story of a feverish search for one's real identity. It portrays man as a creature condemned to freedom, in the sense of Camus. But also his desire to be spared this burden for a couple of seconds.

"But is not the main object of art to tell a horrible story without forgetting its beauty?" Aksel ponders after he has left the lady of the valley by the Arctic Coast. He has now returned to the house of the Skoog's in Elvefaret, where once upon a time everything started with his love for Anja. Here he can find back to his true and probably only reliable purpose in life: music.

With this trilogy, Ketil Bjørnstad, whose works include more than fifty CDs and more than twenty novels, succeeds with a grand undertaking: portraying the futility of trying to hold on to happiness. He lets us take part in the painful process of growing up that the protagonist must endure, a process characterised by death and loss. And he lets us take part in the difficulties and fears, the disappointments and vulnerabilities of the artist who sees his irresolvable loneliness exposed. That Aksel has survived does not imply that he has escaped. Perhaps even the opposite. Life goes on for the young pianist from Oslo, whose development one would much have liked to follow.

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Ketil Bjørnstad: "Die Frau im Tal". Roman.

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