Butterflies in November – A Review

by **Audur Ava Olafsdottir** (Pushkin Press, 2013)

Precis –

The main character (unnamed) is a moderately successful translator who is getting divorced. At the same time her best friend falls ill in the latter stages of pregnancy and is hospitalised. She asks the narrator to look after her young son until she is released from hospital after the birth – a period of maybe three months. The narrator agrees to take on Tumi, who is four years old and profoundly deaf; she needs to learn sign language quickly and also cater for his poor speech and eyesight. Also at the start of the novel, the narrator – who is an inveterate ticket-buyer – wins two lottery prizes in a week: one is a holiday cottage, the other a small fortune. She decides that they will set off on a Winter holiday around the Icelandic coast from Reykjavik out to the east, where she has asked for the cottage to be built in the village where she grew up.

On the trip the narrator realises that she could be a mother and looks after Tumi in a quite liberal but affectionate way. She meets a number of different men, but no-one who is a suitable improvement on her jettisoned husband. At the end of the narrative, when they are about to return to the capital, they spend a last day on the beach watching the local community carving up a stranded whale on one side; and on the other, Tumi plays in the sea beside a colony of seals.

Style –

There are plenty of things to say about this text in terms of its use of narrative structure, because although it is very linear it also uses letters, inserts of folk tales, flashbacks and internal monologues. This multi-modal approach enhances the novel's sense of being a personal experience, with the interconnected perspectives all coming from the one narrative source. The text ends with another unexpected element in having an appendix of recipes and knitting patterns linked to certain episodes in the story. This metanarrative construction further secures the individualistic voice and perspective of the narrator, not least as she sounds just as authentic in fully non-fictional mode as she does in the more fictive storytelling of the main narrative.

Criticism –

Contrasting reviews have found the novel both too traditional and verging on the sexist and "stereotypical" (*The Guardian*), but then quirky and "evocative" (*The Observer*). Interestingly, these two reviews are from papers in the same publishing stable, so it is a surprise that they don't agree on a political perspective of Olafsdottir's text. It could be argued that a feminist reading would see the narrator as too easily influenced by men and their sexual behaviour and attempted ownership over women's lives; but this could also be countered by saying that the narrator stays single and never becomes fully dependant on any male characters in the text. Whilst it is not a feminist text in an overtly political way, it is also not merely feminine in its ideas or style – there is plenty here to extend the reader and also to challenge any inherent views they may possess about superiority and patriarchy.

Comparative Texts –

In terms of content the novel obviously has strong parallels with *The Curious Incident…* but this time with the adult's perspective dominating - this is partly due to Tumi's age and lack of vocal articulacy. However, the text still champions his character: he is neither too angelic nor too peripheral to conform to any reasonable stereotype of the disabled child. It is more that Olafsdottir

has set herself the challenge of writing about a road trip in which one of the participants is more bystander than central protagonist. Tumi's disabilities allow this role to function effectively and often they have a purpose in directing the narrator's decision-making. Unlike Christopher in Haddon's book, Tumi is never responsible for doing anything which needs to be seriously reprimanded or forgiven, but again his age is the overriding factor in this element. I don't get the sense of contrivance that *The Guardian's* reviewer felt in reading the text's portrayal of his life (nor that of the narrator as a stereotypical young woman released from any social responsibility into a hedonistic indulgence).

A second comparative text would be *The Ice Is Singing* by Jane Rogers (1987). In that novel a woman has left home and is driving around the South Yorkshire countryside in Winter trying to work out whether or not she should leave her husband due to his infidelities. In that narrative there is a similar multi-modal approach as the text is set in journal form, but the narrator keeps breaking up the entries with short stories she has written to symbolise her inner thoughts about her situation. Rogers' book is more consciously styled and literary (but then she has taught Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam!) in its metanarrative, and it has a very definite feminist agenda, yet Olafsdottir's text is no less interesting for not being on the same plane in terms of its literary merit. What is shared by both writers is the clear view that this part of women's life experience is not documented often enough: more should be made of the difficult choices that need to be made from a female perspective just as much as from that of a man. In this case the accusation of Olafsdottir's not being feminist enough might be more about nuances as to what she should focus on rather than her ideas and writerly skill per se.

MW
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