



God's Mercy

Kerstin Ekman

Linda Schenck, Translator

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Most readers have no clue what conditions were like in the Arctic lands of Scandinavia at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Sami, or Lapps, were herding their reindeer herds across frozen forests and lakes. One chapter opens by telling us, "There are eight seasons." These seasons are nearly all wintry. The book is filled with descriptions of endless cold, deep snow, frozen lakes and forests, and frigid people wrapped in layers of animal skins.

Like her characters, Kerstin Eckman, the author of seventeen novels, lives in rural Sweden; her translator also lives in Sweden. *Gods Mercy* is a difficult novel, especially for readers who know nothing of Swedish history and culture. These characters may be the ancestors of Lake Woebegon, but they're not funny. Some characters have three names (Swedish, Norwegian, Lapp) plus nicknames, the locations are mostly uncharted, and the style is often hard to follow. But no matter. Read on. You'll get into the style. You'll figure it out. The story will capture you.

Thomas Hobbes philosophy manifests here: the life of man is indeed solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Although the story is narrated in first person by someone named Risten, it's not revealed who she is until halfway through the book. Ristens stepmother is Hillevi, a midwife who seems to be the protagonist. After a guilty sexual encounter with a minister, Hillevi suddenly applies for a midwife position in the remote area her secret fiancé is planning to serve. She arrives before he does and is driven by a man named Trond. But people gossip, and the harsh Protestantism of the area alienates people who should be helping each other survive cold and disease. Everything is remote. Nearly everyone is "the other." To deliver a baby, Hillevi goes to an even remoter area and things happen there that haunt her for the rest of her life. Hillevi is not alone; everyone is haunted, not only by the ghosts of the forests and the black lakes, but also by hypocrisy, gossip, prejudice, and custom. Long ago and far away, people who are "not like us" turn out to be quite a bit like us.

BARBARA ARDINGER (July / August 2009)

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