



The Glitter Scene

Monika Fagerholm

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The American Girl. The Boy in the Woods. The Angel of Death. Like the refrain of a song, these phrases are repeated throughout Monika Fagerholm's dark coming-of-age novel, *The Glitter Scene*.

In 2004, Johanna and the popular Ulla Bäckström are classmates in a high school for the arts. Ulla is fascinated by the story of the American Girl who was pushed from a local cliff thirty-five years earlier by her boyfriend, who then hung himself. Ulla hints that the story, which has become a local myth, has connections to Johanna.

The novel begins to tell one story, stops and tells another. The second part begins fifteen years earlier than the first and describes the unlikely companionship between two other young women—fat Maj-Gun Maalamaa from the newsstand in the square and Susette Packlén with the big eyes—both mired in personal stories of rejection, abandonment, and grief. After a violent fight where Maj-Gun leaves Susette for dead, each makes a successful transition into adulthood—one to marriage and the other to a professional career.

Although both parts of the novel take place in the same coastal town in Finland, and both conclude in 2006, initially they don't seem related. Is it Johanna's story or Maj-Gun's? How does Susette fit in? The characters flirt with madness, sexuality, and secrets; a second young woman is pushed to her death.

The Glitter Scene follows Finnish-Swedish writer Monika Fagerholm's best-selling novel *The American Girl*, which received Sweden's premier literary award, the August Prize, as well as the Aniara Prize and the Gothenburg Post Award. That novel was published in English in 2010. Fagerholm, who lives in Ekenäs, Finland, also won Sweden's August Prize and Finland's Runeberg Prize for her debut novel, *Wonderful Women by the Sea*.

Fagerholm's elliptical storytelling style, although not for everyone, is ultimately effective in showing the consequences of an event that has reverberated for almost four decades. In the end, what happened to the American Girl is handily revealed; the Boy in the woods and the Angel of Death are blended together with family blood.

KAREN ACKLAND (July / August 2011)

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