

The Sixteen Trees of the Somme

Lars Mytting

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Lars Mytting's *The Sixteen Trees of the Somme* is an intricate and evocative literary mystery about an orphaned Norwegian man whose family history is caught in between two world wars and the German Jewish sides of WWII.

Growing up on a remote farm in Saksum with his grandfather, Edvard's childhood is overshadowed by the mystery surrounding his parents' death on a trip to Anhuile when he was three, of which he has scant memories. He was believed to have been abducted by his grand uncle, Einar, a virtuoso cabinet maker who was estranged from his grandfather. When Edvard's grandfather dies, a coffin made by Einar arrives, launching Edvard on a mission to retrace the tragic events transpiring during those traumatic few days around the Somme.

The trail leads Edvard up to the Shetlands, to the island where Einar led a hermit's life, then to gun stores, and finally to France. Edvard searches for an inheritance at the heart of the family's brokenness. In the Shetlands, he meets inimitable Gwendolyn, the granddaughter of a timber merchant who set in motion events with such monumental consequences for Edvard's maternal family that her fate is entangled with his.

Manifold details and plot convolutions are momentary burdens, but Mytting's deft maneuvering reveals truth after explosive truth. It's an atmospheric, suspenseful telling, covering the nature of the inheritance and Einar's true relationship to Edvard. Edvard's oscillating feelings for Hanne, an old flame, and Gwendolyn, whose subterfuge makes her friend and foe both, add emotional heft to Edvard's feelings of emptiness. There's beautiful cadence to the dialogue, and to the evocative descriptions of the windy, rugged beauty of the Shetlands and the desecration wrought by war on bodies and the forests of Somme.

ELAINE CHIEW (March / April 2022)

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