ForeWord Reviews

To Siberia
Per Petterson
Anne Born, translator
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At age sixty an unnamed female narrator recalls her coming of age in the isolated Danish village of Vrangbaek, remembering the imprint her brother and World War II left on her. Norwegian author Per Petterson won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for his acclaimed novel *Out Stealing Horses*, a New York Times Best Book of the Year which has been translated into over thirty languages. His latest novel does not disappoint.

With an austere hunchbacked father and a grim Christian mother, a girl (identified only as "Sistermine" by her sibling) and her brother (Jesper) grow extremely close after their grandfather's suicide. Hints of incestual feelings emerge, as the two teenagers continue to share a closet-sized bedroom, and the sister disrobes in front of her brother in a remote shack. While out drinking and dancing together, the girl notices "…at some tables the ladies are looking at Jesper, I realize they do not know who I am, for they look at me too…Jesper whirls me around to the music, I feel his firm hand on my back. Everyone knows who *he* is, and I am the secret woman." Both dream of escaping from the bland remoteness of their town to more exotic locations—the girl to Siberia and Jesper to Morocco.

The girl's strong attachment to her brother continues as German soldiers arrive in Denmark on April 9, 1940. This date will easily be identifiable to Scandinavians as the beginning of German occupation in Denmark. Jesper shows his opposition to the Nazis by hollering the propaganda slogan, "No pasaran, they shall not pass!" and becoming increasingly involved in the resistance movement. Later, the narrator states, "29th August 1943. At last!" This date, too, is historically noteworthy as the day the Danish government resigned and a nationwide rescue effort of Jews is initiated. To the girl, however, it primarily represents a time when she watches her brother flee with a Jewish family in a motorboat to Sweden.

The author's stark descriptions hide undercurrents of deep familial emotions, epitomized by the girl's parents' response when she returns to her home village after years of traveling and being without Jesper. Strewn with tongue-twisting Scandinavian names (Aftenstjernen, Vinkaeldrern, and Hvidebakker), the tale offers a different view of sibling relationships and a less familiar perspective of life during World War II.

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