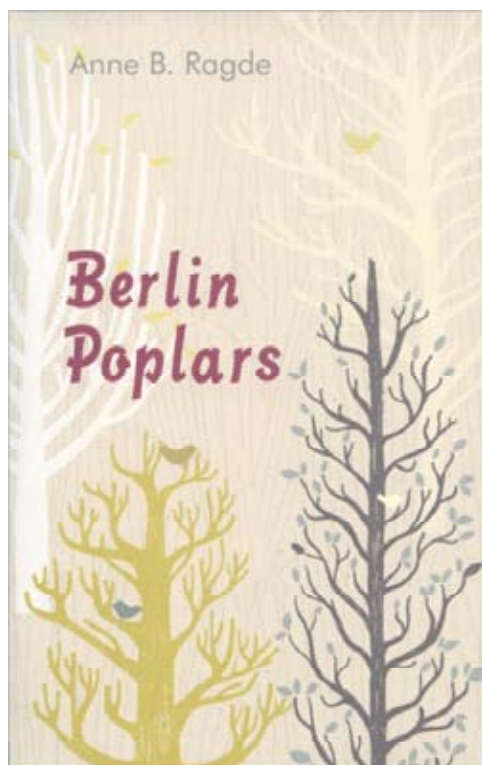


# Two pictures of Europe?



If you're the kind of person who finds family Christmases and reunions panic-inducing, then you ought to compare notes with events in this novel as it might help put things into perspective. The Neshov brothers around whom this tale revolves lead remarkably different and divided lives. The eldest, Tor has proved to be the most loyal of sons by remaining on the family farm and devoting his life to his pigs and mother. The rather dour and uptight Margido is an undertaker who, perceiving that his professional life provides him with ample excitement, avoids animated human contact. Erlend, the youngest, is the most joyous of high-camp window-dressers who fled small-town life for Copenhagen as soon as he could. It may be unnecessary to add the brothers do not have much in common, and to boot they have not spoken in years.

Things are about to change dramatically. When the dogged Neshov matriarch falls seriously ill a heady and dramatic reunion is unavoidable. To complicate matters further Tor decides to invite his illegitimate daughter, Torunn whom he barely knows. This story is a subtle and engrossing exploration of the relevance of family to the individual, and the extent to which any person can happily deny their heritage. Erlend may hysterically refuse any admission of commonality with Norwegians - to his mind they relish "enjoying their smug sobriety, feeling guilty if they laugh too loud" - but it's only after he has confessed the existence of his troubled family to his partner of twelve years, and returned to the scene of his childhood that he experiences a sense of release and calm.

Anne B Ragde does well to elicit sympathies for most of her characters, although the liberal city dwellers are a little too central and obvious in their role of shaking things up for the country folk. However this small irritation could not detract from the vivid and loving descriptions of rural life around Trondheim. The poignant portrayal of life for an isolated farmer made a particularly strong impression. Ragde has set out to record and pay homage to a traditional, almost outmoded way of life, and to comment more broadly on changes within Norwegian society. It's no coincidence that Torunn, the city vet, finds herself visiting a farm for the first time in her life, and ignoring the poverty and the smell - strong odours feature heavily here - is charmed and won over by this alternative existence.

It's rare nowadays to come across a Scandinavian novel that isn't pigeon-holed as a dark comedy by its overseas publishers, and frustratingly this is no exception. It isn't an inappropriate description - the narrative is shot through with flashes of hilarity and it contains a particularly shocking secret - but the more lasting impression is of an elegant and powerful family drama. It comes as no surprise that the author has been honoured with Norway's Riksmål Prize.

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