

Lotte Inuk: ICE AGE (in Danish: Sultekunstnerinde) Tiderne Skifter Publisher, Copenhagen 2004, 352 p.

Outline

Lotte Inuk's novel „Ice Age“ (or „The Hunger Sculptress“) deals with the often painful transition from childhood into the world of adulthood, with the heroine's forced adoption of conventional role-patterns and her attempt to escape these by shrinking her body. The setting of this conflict is modern Greenland of the 1970's. The novel tells the story of a Danish girl Charlotta, nicknamed Charlie, who at the age of 11 moves with her mother to the Greenland capital Nuuk, and is there confronted with the population of Greenland, which at that time is increasingly demanding independence from Denmark, its former colonial power. With two different narrative voices the novel tells of Charlotta's daily life and her growing up in Greenland society, but principally it is about Charlotta's gradually developing disease. Aged 13, she is the first ever patient in Greenland to be diagnosed with anorexia, which plunges her into a week-long, life-threatening coma.

The first narrative level concerns Charlotta's arrival in Greenland in 1976, and the following three years of her life. We hear, from the child's point of view, about the incredible beauty of the country, about friendship and falling in love, about the difficulties of communication in a foreign culture, but also about Charlotta's close relationship with the local children and her first sexual experiences. The main focus of the narrative is Charlotta's progress into an adulthood filled with its own special codes and challenges, as well as the sensitively told story of a close friendship, which without either Charlie or the girl involved fully realising it, increasingly turns into love. Finally, confronted with strong emotions, the close and bosom friend turns her back on Charlie, leaving her “alone in a desert of ice.” This narrative level ends with an account of the development of the disease, which finally leads to Charlie being admitted to the local hospital.

The second narrative level, which throughout the novel is interwoven with the first level, mostly deals with successive stages of the coma. This perspective is from within the disease and the psychosis, from within the child's battle with life and death, often with the help of poetic aspects of dreams which in many instances have their source in Greenland myths, Western fairy-tales and religious imaginings. The heroine becomes detached from reality and plunges into madness but partly still manages to perceive her surrounding world, yet can't articulate this, nor take an active part in it. This is described to us from inside the sick girl's mind, as are her first difficult attempts to return to and communicate with the real world, and the often counterproductive, yet popular methods of trying to cure the eating

disorder. By the end of the novel the two narrative levels merge. The story does not end happily with a complete cure of the disease; it leads us as far as Charlotta's discharge from hospital and her growing understanding of her true aims in life.

Throughout the novel the transition from childhood into adulthood is described in detail with an almost photographic memory. In this novel, as in all the author's other works, childhood is portrayed as an open range of possibilities, where it still seems possible for all dreams and longings to come true. One of the novel's clear goals is to describe how this "range of possibilities" gradually diminishes as the predictable patterns of "growing up" take over. The child's sense of limitless growth and development vanish, as the growing teenager is confronted with the demands of an adult world, which with its verbal as well as physical power, forces her into the "correct", expected manner of behaviour and self-identity. In the novel these pressures are shown to apply to gender-roles as well as to ethnic and religious identity expectations. Though Charlotta experiences her childhood mainly as a time of androgynous, ethnic and religious positive instability, she is now increasingly forced to identify herself as "a woman", "a Dane", and so on. Because she seems not to really fit well into any of these given categories, she experiences her transit into the adult world as more and more of a threat and a reduction of her original freedom and "space potential".

From this perspective, anorexia is seen as an attempted escape from these forced roles and frameworks. From the girl's point of view it does almost appear to be the logical way out, so that even readers with no experience whatsoever of this disease, can immediately identify with it. At the same time it becomes evident that the message of the novel is that the phenomenon of anorexia can't be reduced to a psychological/biological dysfunction, or to the classical, ever-to-blame troubles in the "mother-daughter relation". Lotte Inuk's purpose in the novel is much more to see this disease as a mistaken, since totally destructive, rebellion against society's ideals and the demands of normality. Thus, healing anorexia can never result in adjusting this child or "bringing it back" to the given role-patterns, which she clearly has already rejected. Every attempt to "normalize" the child will naturally result in counter-reactions, which, according to the author, may perhaps account for the tragically high rate of relapses when it comes to eating disorders. By the end of the novel Charlotta herself begins to understand her escape into emaciation and psychosis as a wrong way out and tries, together with those of her friends who had managed to stand by her during her "long time away" from them, to look for possible ways of living a life outside the usual demands of normality.

Here we have a conflict which is relevant and comprehensible for any kind of reader.

Locating the conflict in Greenland in the seventies makes it particularly interesting. For an English-language reader the setting is as alien as it is to most Danes. There is the mystery and impressiveness of that environment, together with the forbidding climate and month-long darkness, as well as the social tragedies which were often caused by the

colonial power's attempts to modernize the country. Thanks to the evacuation of people, mostly hunters, from the isolated coasts to the cities, building a modern welfare system and an infrastructure, the country certainly reached a high, European living standard, but at the same time, and due to the rush to build such a modern society, enormous social tensions erupted as the Eskimos' traditional ways of life were disturbed. Thus was the Greenland of the seventies marked by an increasingly nostalgic awareness of cultural heritage, which resulted in a widespread romantic longing for a revolution and a powerful striving for national independence from Denmark. Charlotta finds herself in the centre of this independence drive, and as a Danish child is of course immediately linked to the Danish colonial power. This is reflected in the struggles and differences within the politicized youth-culture in Greenland of that period. Like most Danish children, she identifies with the Greenlanders' longing for freedom and independence but due to the circumstances is caught in the flashpoint of a cultural conflict full of "reversed racism"

At the same time Greenland has a very symbolic role in the novel's narrative. The cold, the isolation, the steadily increasing darkness in winter, all serve as a perfect mirror of the girl's feeling of "no-way-out". The inner battle with the outside world is reflected in several central motifs. For example, for Charlotta Greenland is above all associated with complete absence of trees and forests, objects which in the novel are closely related to the dreamworld of the child. And the Greenlanders' longing for and struggling for freedom from foreign domination and power serve as the outer frame of the story. It is here that the central conflict and the positive, life-affirmative message of the story reveal themselves. Charlotta's discharge from hospital and the budding hope of true healing accords with the introduction of home rule in Greenland in May 1979.

Lotte Inuk was born in Århus, Denmark in 1965 and lived in Nuuk, Greenland (from where she took her name, Inuk, Greenlandic for "human being") between 1976 and 1979. She had a double debut in 1982 with the novels "Maria Mia" and "Mona Måneskinsdatter", and has since published many novels and some children's books. Her publications have attracted several Danish prizes. In the summer of 2000 Lotte participated in the "Literature Express" as the Danish prose representative. "Sultekunstnerinde" is the author's greatest success until now. She lives in Copenhagen, currently working on a novel based there which deals with disillusion over ideals.

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