

To Siberia

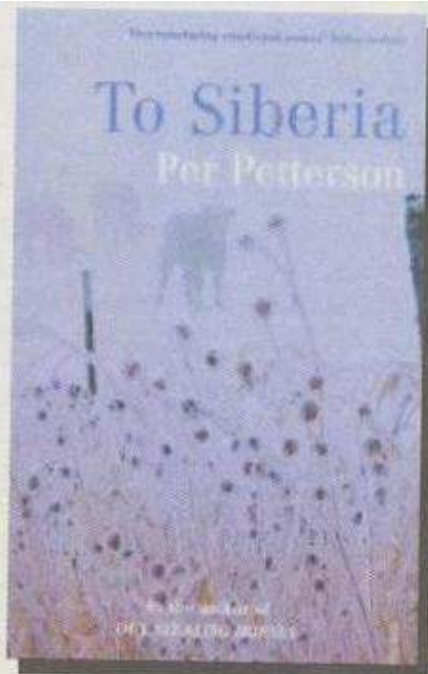
by Per Petterson

(Vintage)

In *To Siberia*, last year's Impac award winner, Per Petterson explores childhood and youth of a brother and sister growing up in the cold of Danish Jutland just before World War II. In flashbacks, the girl – and younger of the two – creates a portrait of their claustrophobic family that is just as cold as their surroundings: one of dark family secrets, an inapproachable mother, and a father who silently blends into the background – the only warmth comes from the very close relationship between brother and sister.

Both share a childhood dream. Jester, the boy, dreams of Morocco and its heat, where his involvement with unionism and his activities in the World War II resistance will finally lead him; the girl, meanwhile, pines for Siberia. Theirs is an unequal relationship with incestuous undertones at times, where the younger girl blindly follows the older brother, often not fully understanding his involvement with politics, which finally makes him flee Denmark.

The individual flashbacks that weave the tapestry of the novel have a bizarre fascination, similar to a still life or a frozen moment. However, leaving many open threads that are never finished or picked up later on, this contributes to the general feeling of detachment – maybe reflecting the isolation of the children, the lack of warmth in their environment.



A portrait of dark family secrets, an inapproachable mother, and a father who blends into the background

As the novel traces psychological development and focuses on interior more than external action, I expected it to be carried by a strongly poetic language, the Northern equivalent of Alessandro Barricco's daintily woven prose. Unfortunately, this is the weakest aspect of the novel, perhaps due to a poor translation; it is often interspersed with obvious mistakes and typos that can't be explained by the narrator's young age. In many ways it's a disappointing read, not fully exploring either the extreme setting or the psychological depths possible for a novel with so little external development.

The last few chapters, tracing the girl's life after her departure from her home village to Norway, somewhat make up for that. The character becomes less sketchy, her personality develops, her working life at her aunt's café and in the telephone exchange giving an interesting snapshot of a different time. The narrator develops into a woman who follows her own way, often stoically accepting what life throws at her.

The poignant last sentence gives the novel a strangely existentialist – but at the same time hopeful – twist which is in contrast to the woman's current situation. Maybe this is showing the inner strength the narrator gains following the hardship she already experienced as a child; her resilience when confronted with external threat, be it extreme weather conditions or human coldness. However, all in all, Petterson's novel left me disappointed and uninvolved with its main characters.

Review by Isabel Roleff



Isabel Roleff is a member of the Irish Writers' Exchange, and has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information can be found at www.irishwriters-exchange.com