

Petra Ostergren. *Att komma till ro med det allra varsta*. Stockholm. Natur & Kultur. 1996. 160 pages. ISBN 91-27-06377-1.

"Are human beings evil or just incapable of dealing with life?" could well be the theme of Petra Ostergren's debut book, *Att komma till ro med det allra varsta* (Coming to Terms with the Very Worst). The story of the author's attempt to come to terms with her relationship with her mother and her mother's violent death by battering at the hands of the mother's boyfriend when Ostergren was a young adult, the work cannot be pigeonholed into any genre or category. Spanning the range of human emotions from anger and despair to relief and release, it is a diary in prose and poetry, a series of vignettes from life with the author's mother and dialogues with the reader, as well as interviews and observations by the mother's friends--all interwoven with dry police accounts of the murder and autopsy reports.

Ostergren's mother was an alcoholic as well as a talented artist and teacher. The little girl's life seesawed between hell and paradise, and her only refuge was her maternal grandmother, to whom the book is dedicated. Like her alter ego in the book, Ostergren escaped her hometown at the age of seventeen in a desperate attempt to break out of the vicious cycle of alcoholism, only to find herself drawn back again and again into her mother's life to deal with emergencies, disappearances, and ultimately her mother's death. In a particularly poignant moment in the book Ostergren writes, "It's an advantage to have a dead alcoholic parent--you know the whole time where she is."

In amazingly restrained and at times almost dispassionate prose, Ostergren describes her too-precipitous leap as an eleven-year-old into adult responsibility, her feelings about her mother, her coming to terms with her mother's illness (for Ostergren passionately believes that alcoholism is an illness), and her long way back from the precipice to the realization that she has finally overcome: "I begin to see the time with her as a gift and the time without her not as a deprivation."

Att komma till ro med det allra varsta is not only a book about a child and her alcoholic mother; it is also a very moving and passionate tale about all mothers and daughters, about the struggle to understand, caught up as she is in the alcoholic maelstrom, the normal tension-filled relationship between women of two generations, the need for a separate identity, the fear of intimacy, of becoming Her ("Even if I hated to see her drunk, only then did we dare to be close to each other"), and the longing to find the self in the mother and the mother in the self: "I always search for similarities between us, hands, face, body. All to have the connection unbroken."

There are few documents in contemporary Scandinavian literature that offer such a naked portrait of the havoc wrought by alcohol and domestic violence on a child and a young adult: anorexia; sleep disorders; loss of security, childhood, and self-esteem; and looming suicide. The Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen comes to mind during the reading of the book, for there is the same commitment to truth and absolute honesty, however searing, and the same unflagging courage to walk to the edge of the abyss and to look down without flinching.

In Ditlevsen's case the ultimate ending was not a happy one; at the end of Ostergren's book there is an intimation that her experience has given her the strength and inner calm she needs to go on. One can only bid her godspeed.

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