

Q&A with Agnes Ravatn – Translated by Rosie Hedger

What was the inspiration for The Bird Tribunal?

I think it started when I imagined the house and its surroundings, and a young woman turning up there for her first day working as a housekeeper, or something anachronistic like that. I did not know who she was, or why she was there, or who her withdrawn, curt employer was. All this stirred my curiosity and tantalized my imagination. And then I started finding out who they were and what had happened to them.

The book has been compared to Daphne DuMaurier's Rebecca. Was that an influence?

I'm ashamed to admit that I haven't actually read *Rebecca*, so no, I wasn't inspired by it. Quite a few people have also compared it to *Jane Eyre*, which I also haven't read, so, embarrassingly enough, my reading history looks like a Swiss cheese.

You mentioned that you did not set out to write a psychological thriller ... were you surprised to see it marketed that way in the various countries in which it has been published?

Well, not surprised, maybe, but a little worried that readers would start the book, impatient to read about some atrocious crime. *The Bird Tribunal* isn't a 'whodunnit', more like a 'wait, did anybody do anything? What? Who?'. I agree that it is a psychological thriller, but you don't realise that until maybe halfway through.

There is an exceptional, claustrophobic tension that builds up – partly because of the setting in an isolated Norwegian fjord, and partly because there are only two characters in the story, and their back stories and motivation are revealed very slowly and methodically. How did you sustain the drama?

By not knowing too much about what kind of story I was writing. As a writer, I am driven by curiosity, and I don't want to know what waits around the next corner. To me, that would make writing boring and pointless. I try to slowly reveal the person's true character while I write. I see this novel as a kind of laboratory: What will happen when these two people, both with unpleasant pasts, are put into a cage together? I think the drama is sustained by the fact that neither I nor the readers are ever sure where this story is going. So obviously, I am not a plotter. I love great plots, though!

How did you feel when you learned that your book would be published in English for the first time?

To be completely honest, it was one of my few moments of pure happiness as a writer! I was in a café with two friends when I got the message from my agent, and I screamed with joy and made a scene, which is not very typical of me, to put it mildly. To be made available to English readers is a real dream come true.

How was the translation process for you? Were you involved?

I was a little bit. Rosie Hedger, the translator, contacted me with questions now and then, and I tried to answer them as best as I could. But most of the time, Rosie made me feel completely and happily irrelevant. She is a wizard. I think the book seems even better in English!

Tell us about your writing day, and how difficult it is to juggle writing with a young child?

Fortunately, my son is in kindergarten every weekday, and loves it there. So my writing day starts at around 7.30, when he and my husband leave the house. I write at home, in my office on the second floor. I make sure to always leave my phone downstairs. Also, I don't turn my computer on; instead I write with my favourite fountain pen on my favourite paper, with a cup of black coffee and our cat by my side. I write until around 11.00, with a few breaks, and then have lunch.

Afterwards, I answer e-mails and do other stuff around the house, before some more writing. At around 2.00 I make dinner and then bike to kindergarten to pick up my kid. We eat, play and read tons of books, and in the evening I am so tired that I almost always skip the last writing session, and read the newspapers and a book instead, or watch TV. i.e. watch telly.