

Star Over Scandinavia



In Karl Ove Knausgaard's spellbinding new novel, [*The Morning Star*](#) (*Morningstjernen*), we follow the fortunes of several protagonists—all living in various places in western Norway—over the course of a few warm days in August 2023 that will prove earth-shakingly momentous, not just for them but for all of humanity. Arne, a literature professor preparing to teach *The Divine Comedy*, is vacationing at a summer home with his three kids and his wife, Tove, a bipolar artist who's entered a manic phase. Egil, Arne's eremitic childhood friend, who has directed one documentary about a Christian fundamentalist sect and another (never completed) about a Satanic death-metal band, lives year-round on the road from Arne's summer home and spends his time reading Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger.

In the city of Bergen, there's Emil, a young day-care worker; Iselin, a recent college dropout and convenience-store cashier; Solveig, a hospital nurse; Jostein, a cynical, hard-drinking newspaper reporter who's been put on the arts beat but longs to return to crime reporting, at which he's a virtuoso; Turid, his wife, to whom he's casually unfaithful,

and who works at a depressing night-shift job at a residential home for the mentally impaired; Vibeke, an ambitious young art curator whose husband, Helge, a prominent architect, is turning 60; and Kathrine, a pastor in the Church of Norway, who's tired of life with her husband, Gaute, and who, when we're first introduced to her, is flying back home from Oslo, where she's been serving on a committee producing a new Bible translation.

As in Knausgaard's bravura six-volume autobiographical novel [*My Struggle*](#) (*Min Kamp*), published in Norway to staggering success between 2009 and 2011, the leading characters here spend a not-inconsiderable part of their lives pondering—well, life. Over beers, Arne and Egil debate faith, mortality, the meaning of existence, the relation of man and nature. Kathrine reflects on youth: “We squandered our time and thoughts, and only when it was over did I understand that it had all been unique and would never return. That is what life is like, is it not?” Solveig, driving home after her shift, muses that young people living near the hospital never think about what goes on there: “Of course not, why should they? Death was always somewhere else.”

But whereas in *My Struggle* the characters' ontological reflections take place within a thoroughly realistic context—indeed, the book, translated into three-dozen odd languages, gave Knausgaard a worldwide reputation as a master of the mundane and quotidian—in *The Morning Star* we soon enter the realm of the creepy, the weird, the awful. A man at Burger King tells Iselin that he's the Son of God. Jostein gets a grisly tip: members of a Satanist rock band (the same one Egil filmed for his unfinished documentary) have been found murdered, their skins removed. Then things transpire that are downright extraordinary. At the Oslo airport, Kathrine has a brief encounter with a man who, the next day, at a funeral at which she's officiating, turns out to be none other than the deceased—though the service was arranged over a week earlier.

A patient of Solveig's, a famous politician, is declared dead—no heartbeat or brain activity—only to prove to be alive, after all.

Freakish things happen involving animals. Tove, descending into madness, decapitates the family cat. Arne runs across hundreds of sea crabs on an inland road. While Kathrine is sitting at an outdoor cafe in the heart of Bergen, a massive bird swoops down and snatches a tiny sparrow pecking at crumbs on a table. Turid, chasing an escaped patient into the woods, ends up face-to-face with something that she first takes for human, only to look into its yellow eyes and realize: "It wasn't a man."

Most remarkable of all, a dazzlingly bright light suddenly appears in the night sky. Is it a comet? A supernova? A new star? Arne finds it beautiful: "As beautiful as death was beautiful." Kathrine's reaction: "Something terrible was going to happen." Egil decides that it's the Morning Star from the Bible, which in Latin, he reflects, "was called Lucifer," though in some passages of the New Testament the term "Morning Star" is applied to Jesus. "Not that I believed the star to be Lucifer or Christ," Egil maintains. "The star was a star. But I had no doubt that it was a *sign* of something."

The next morning, the astral body's still there—and the odd events continue. Thousands of ladybugs appear on Vibeke's terrace. Egil's son, Victor, swears that some creature has peered into his window; Egil comforts him, but when he hears inhuman sounds coming from the woods, he thinks: "Had the gates of hell opened?" Solveig's hospital takes in victims of a horrific bus crash, one of them a girl who's "nothing but blood and bone," but—perplexingly—they're still alive. Jostein and Turid's depressed son, Ole, shoots himself, and looks as if he surely must be dead—but he, too, clings to life. When Turid locates her lost patient, who previously couldn't utter a coherent sound, he tells her: "You . . . are . . . doomed." And when Atle checks the now certifiably psychotic Tove into a

psych ward, she says: “Everyone’s dead . . . We’re all dead.”

My *Struggle* was, in my estimation, a masterpiece—and was all the more impressive a feat because it was cobbled together purely out of Knausgaard’s own memories. *The Morning Star* is a gem, too, but Knausgaard’s accomplishment this time is imaginative: he’s created no fewer than nine fully rounded characters and given them storylines that work together to deliver, ultimately, one hell of a wallop. One neat trick here is that during the opening chapters we’re lured into thinking that this is going to be an entirely different kind of book than it turns out to be.

At the outset, it has the bleak feel of a standard-issue contemporary Scandinavian literary novel, complete with the usual cast of ennui- or angst-ridden literary and artistic types, who, more often than not, have bad marriages, maladjusted kids, and drinking problems. Soon enough, though, *The Morning Star* begins to resemble a [Jo Nesbø](#) crime story; one can almost anticipate the way in which Knausgaard will explain how that man from the airport got into the coffin at Kathrine’s church and link it to the slaughter of the death metal band. Then the book starts to look like a work of fantasy by Stephen King, complete with such tropes of the genre as animals acting strangely and not-quite-human creatures making scary noises in the woods. Finally, we end up in science-fiction territory, with the sense of wonder and terror that builds up toward the novel’s end recalling two powerful and justifiably famous sci-fi stories about cataclysmic cosmic events—Arthur C. Clarke’s “The Star” and Isaac Asimov’s “Nightfall”—even as the book’s mounting dread and unease, culminating in the transformation of a recognizably ordinary world into something out of a nightmare, brings to mind some of the more haunting episodes of *The Twilight Zone*.

In the final analysis, however, *The Morning Star* doesn’t fall neatly into any genre or strongly resemble any other literary

novel I know of. It's *sui generis*. Yet after some head-scratching, I came up with three works—all movies, as it happens—that it reminded me of in certain ways. First, there's *Magnolia*, which offers several protagonists, each with his own storyline, plus a mysterious windup in which frogs rain down from the sky; second, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which (discounting the ape-man prologue) the story begins in realistic, if futuristic, fashion only to be consummated in a riot of inexplicable but captivating visual poetry; and third, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, in which otherwise-unrelated individuals find themselves compelled—seemingly irrationally—to seek out Devil's Tower in Wyoming, where, it turns out, aliens are about to land their spaceship.

As noted, *The Morning Star* is set entirely in Norway. But thanks to the translator, Martin Aitken, the reader often feels as if he has been transported to jolly old England. I'll accept uncomplainingly *car park* and *at the weekend*, along with *uni* for university, *cigs* for cigarettes, *maths* for *math*, and even (at least a dozen times) "Do you fancy" for "Would you like." But repeatedly, where there's a perfectly good translation available that sounds neither obtrusively British nor American, Aitken seems deliberately to toss it aside and reach instead for whatever option sounds most jarringly British.

Skillelig sint han var, writes Knausgaard, meaning: "He was really angry." Aitken makes it: "A proper rage he was in." *Tror jeg stikker* means "I guess I'll be going"; Aitken goes with "I reckon I'll be off." When Kathrine orders a Coke on the plane, one flight attendant gestures toward another and says: *Du betaler henne*—literally, "You pay her"; but Aitken turns it into "Payment's with my colleague." And then there's *For en utrolig kul fest!*—which means, again literally, "What an incredibly cool party!" But in Aitken's hands, it becomes "Absolutely brilliant party!"

Aggressive Briticisms aren't Aitken's only problem. He

writes *theologist* for *theologian*, *astronomist* for *astronomer*. The word *fjell*—mountain—crops up a lot, and Aitken consistently renders it as *fell*—a usage that the 1933 *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies as obsolete. (At least twice, moreover, Aitken avoids *mountainside* and writes *fellside*, which doesn't even appear in the OED.) Similarly, *dal*—valley—becomes *dell*, last heard from in the Mother Goose rhyme "The Farmer in the Dell." Also, Aitken refers to Kathrine throughout as a priest. In Norwegian, yes, the word is *prest*; but in English, a Church of Norway pastor (or, if you prefer, minister) is never called a priest. In one scene, a stranger touches Jostein, who, in Aitken's translation, wonders: "Was he a homo, or what?" In Norwegian, it's *Var han homo, eller?*—but "homo" in Norwegian isn't offensive, and the right word here is, quite simply, *gay*.

Still, even translation problems can't ruin *The Morning Star*. If its opening pages make us feel as if we're in the midst of something resembling life as we know it, by the end we're looking at the whole enchilada *sub specie aeternitatis*—from the perspective of the eternal—having along the way been vouchsafed an acute sense of the fragility of human existence, the futility of our efforts to fathom it and do something meaningful with it, and the fallaciousness of any illusion that we've accomplished something remotely important in the big scheme of things. Arne assiduously plans his classes in Dante; Egil wrestles day and night with the great philosophers; Kathrine grapples with word choices in her Bible translation (even as she pretends, in her funeral homily, to a confidence about Christian teachings that she doesn't really feel). Yet however much we may exert ourselves to make a mark in this world, how little we truly appreciate its everyday miracles—among them love, animal companionship, the beauty of nature, the joy of music and art; however much we may strive to make sense of life, how astonishing our capacity to persistently push away thoughts of mortality. *The Morning Star* is one of those rare books that stir and move and

unsettle you in a way that isn't easily described, and that you keep rolling over in your mind for a long while afterward.

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