



# Sin is a slithering thing

Sigrid Undset's 'north-facing' tetralogy of faith, family and power politics

**HAL JENSEN**

**OLAV AUDUNSSØN**

I: Vows (376pp, 2020)

II: Providence (280pp, 2021)

III: Crossroads (216pp, 2022)

IV: Winter (352pp, 2023)

**SIGRID UNDET**

Translated by Tiina Nunnally  
University of Minnesota Press.

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Sigrid Undset, 1923

her own, within which she eventually commandeered a room for her writing. In this room she produced two great series of novels in just ten years, finding a voice strong enough to win her international recognition.

Sigrid Undset, like Woolf, was born in 1882. Through her father (an archaeologist) and a favourite "uncle" (a philologist and botanist), she became fascinated with the history, language and landscape of Norway, especially in relation to all things medieval. She was brought up in Kristiania (now Oslo), but made frequent visits to her paternal grandparents in the majestic Gudbrand valley, northwest of Lillehammer, where she would end up buying her property. Her early attempts to write a medieval novel were rejected, but, while working as a secretary, Undset wrote a number of successful novels depicting modern family life. (One started: "I have been unfaithful to my husband", which serves the same purpose as "Chloe liked Olivia".) She had two young children and a third was on the way from a marriage that was failing when, in her mid-thirties, she relocated to Lillehammer. The house she bought and redesigned - Bjerkebæk - is now a museum. A great deal of information (and lots of good photos) can be found in Nan Bentzen Skille's biographical study *Inside the Gate* (2003; 2009 in English).

In this place, in the 1920s, Undset found her voice and wrote her medieval epics. The first, much the more famous, was a trilogy called *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-2), a lively clash of desire and duty with a powerful female lead. Then, having finally created her ideal workspace, she wrote the tetralogy *Olav Audunsson* (1925-7), a darker and bleaker tale in which duty restricts desire from the outset. An early reviewer, Helge Krog, called it "north-facing", which can't be bettered.

Woolf might have been as intrigued by Undset's commitment to motherhood, domesticity and Catholicism (a very un-Norwegian faith) as she would have been alarmed by her output's bulk (*Kristin Lavransdatter* is 1,100 pages, *Olav Audunsson* 1,200.) Woolf would certainly have noted that, for all Undset's home-making, there was no man in the house. Undeniably she had found her voice.

Hal Jensen is writing a book about the Oxford Professors of Poetry

So successfully did she find it that, just a few weeks after Woolf's Cambridge lectures, Undset won the Nobel prize in literature. Clearly alert to headmasters handing over silver pots, she used all the prize money to establish various foundations for children, writers and Catholics. Integrity is visible everywhere in Undset's life and is an important theme in her work.

There is structural integrity, too, in Undset's fiction, and the thing that holds the books together is the landscape. The richly detailed descriptions of Norway - especially the Gudbrandsdalen region - are full of interest, as much "felt" as depicted. For paragraph after paragraph the reader is happily and perhaps surprisingly engaged:

Clouds billowed and fog surged; the earth smelled damp. The evening was strangely steamy and hazy blue. Everything seemed to have dissolved. The forest and fields had dark bare patches between stretches of slushy snow. The fjord spoke with long gaps between each muted swell, like a sluggish pulse, but the river in Kverndalen roared, bursting with water. A sigh passed through the forest, snow fell from the boughs, water trickled and gurgled and sounded from every direction in the dusk. [*Olav Audunsson: Book IV - Winter*]

Changeable weather breaks over this living landscape, but it is never used as emotional scene-painting. Undset is equally capable of conjuring up sun-drenched hillsides awash with the fragrance of linden as thunderous midnight snowstorms, but hers is an un-Romantic, pre-gothic style of description in which the ego and its dramas are subsumed into the landscape, or transformed by it, not sentimentally expressed in it.

With the natural world as foreground, not background, Undset's novels really do appear to look out from medieval eyes, the action taking place *sub specie aeternitatis*. This perspective is reinforced by another distinctive feature: birth to death narratives whose scope places actions and events within larger patterns of moral choice.

The first two volumes of *Olav Audunsson - Vows and Providence* - begin with the boy Olav, whose dying father elicits a promise from his friend to bring up the child in his own household and eventually wed him to his daughter, Ingunn. Family difficulties and awkward power politics intervene, and the partnership between Olav and Ingunn, who are devoted to one another, appears to be imperilled. Fighting against circumstance, panicked into making rash decisions, separated for years, the two are eventually reunited in Olav's ancestral home, Hestviken, but their sins and guilt come with them and they are never at peace. They have children (one is theirs, one is not, both are troublesome), but Ingunn, conscience-ridden, wastes away.

In the third book, *Crossroads*, Ingunn having died, Olav travels abroad in the hope of finding new purpose and coming closer to God, but the struggles with his past seem irremediable and he ashamedly drops religion, like a tapestry "rolled up and hidden away in a locked chest". Book IV, *Winter*, shows Olav in old age, battle-scarred and life-worn, with a focus on his capricious, self-dramatizing son and his aloof daughter. Olav finally disappears into the landscape, a heroic and memorable figure, though it is hard to find joy anywhere in his story.

Set in the thirteenth century, Undset's tetralogy can hardly avoid the worldly realities of warfare, political allegiance, the predominance of church influence and feuds between powerful families. To this end the author treats the reader to one bone-crunching battle (the defence of a bridge against Swedish invaders), several murders and a colourful excursion to London, complete with severed heads on poles. Without doubt, however, the real conflicts in *Olav Audunsson* take place in the soul. The life-long warfare within the characters - Ingunn's terrible decline, Olav's hollowed-out durability - is not simply an element of the story: it constitutes the plot of the entire series. Undset takes us right into the minds of Olav and Ingunn, giving voice to their thoughts, matching the big themes of sin,

INVITED TO TALK to the students of Newnham and Girton in October 1928 - still twenty years before Cambridge University began to grant degrees to women - Virginia Woolf found herself struggling with the proposed subject: "women and fiction". An entertaining ramble through the shelf of English female novelists might be expected, if too easy. But then the bigger theme of women in general and the fiction they write (or appear in) seemed far too unwieldy for a lecture.

Instead - being Virginia Woolf - she walked her audience through her thoughts with an in-the-moment vitality to illustrate "a nugget of pure truth" that she felt her listeners could take away with them: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". That is, to write without compromising her voice: "to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand ... is the most abject treachery".

Woolf invented a contemporary author - Mary Carmichael - whose necessarily imperfect novel contained a gem of truth in the little phrase "Chloe liked Olivia". From such small, unimpeded steps, Woolf suggested, the female writers of the next 100 years would be able to develop incandescent voices of their own, wherever they might lead.

Not too far away, in Norway, lived an actual female writer who had indeed gained for herself an income and who proceeded to buy and renovate a house of

forgiveness, repentance and duty with the subtlety of her understanding of the psychology by which humans attempt to wriggle out of their uncomfortable moral predicaments. Sin is not a crude slogan here, it is a thing of slithering and wavering, delusion and self-deception, well-meant promises to self and self-defensive rationalizations.

Undset records these internal trials with the same clear and non-judgemental eye that she brings to natural history. Although there is a strong religious element to the setting, she never climbs to the pulpit. Nor does she reach for any waffly rhetoric of transcendence. There is, however, a cumulative and mesmeric immensity to her focus. *This is how to write about the soul.*

As the series nears its end Olav overhears his son giving a tender and thoughtful account of his dying father. It is a generous assessment, given their fractious relationship. We might even suspect wishful thinking on the author's part. But we know by now what to expect from Undset. Before we've wiped away a tear, Olav overhears his daughter respond to the assessment with a few quiet caveats and pointed questions, drily recalibrating the scene.

Undset's terrific achievement has now been fully translated by Tiina Nunnally, who also translated *Kristin Lavransdatter* for Penguin (1997-2000) and Skille's biographical study. Previous English translations of Undset's medieval epics, contemporary with the originals, were daubed with overt archaism where Undset's idiom is determinedly plain. *Kristin Lavransdatter* (originally translated by Charles Archer) suffered more than *Olav Audunsson* in this respect, but Arthur Chater's original translation of

the latter is still a bit stiff: "Not for years had Olav kept Yule with so cheerful a heart".

Undset's imagery is simple, and Nunnally respects this - "his mood had changed entirely, as if a shutter had blown away in the wind" - and the author's descriptive writing is recognizably modern(ist) in its directness:

His horse slipped, and, almost sitting on its hind-quarters, the animal slid towards the riverbank. Its shrieking whinnies sliced through all the noise and the roar of the waterfall as the horse headed for the dark, plummeting water, dragging the rider by his stirrups.

Intriguingly, Nunnally - like her predecessor, Chater - has given poetic titles to each of the four books in the series, where Undset settled for something more typically prosaic and simple: "Olav Audunsson of Hestviken" (I and II); "Olav Audunsson and his Children" (III and IV). In an article on translation - "Removing the grime from Scandinavian classics" (*World Literature Today*, Sept/Oct, 2006) - Nunnally likens her work to that of an art restorer, referencing the Sistine Chapel ceiling and Rembrandt's "Night Watch". She is aware that such cleaning is not carried out without controversy, but nevertheless feels she is getting closer to the original through this method. In recent years, the Pevear and Volokhonsky duo have been doing similar work with the Russian classics. The issue is complicated and fascinating. Perhaps it is best to acknowledge that simplicity and clarity - even a claim to invisibility - are the preferences of our age, "our" truth rather than "the" truth. Regardless, Nunnally's translations of Undset read very well.

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**This is how to write about the soul**

There were no more epics after *Olav Audunsson*. Demands on Undset's time and money ate up her 1930s and, owing to her early anti-fascist views, the large German market for her books disappeared. War forced her to flee Norway (the Gestapo took over Bjerkebak), and she ended up in New York, lecturing, writing articles, raising funds and writing the excellent memoir *Happy Times in Norway* (1942) as part of a project initiated by Eleanor Roosevelt. Between 1939 and 1940, her mother and two of her children died. A proposed eighteenth-century trilogy, *Madame Dortha*, reached its first volume in 1939, but even after she returned to her home following the war the fiction wouldn't come. She died in 1949 from a kidney infection. Undset would no doubt say she was lucky to get even ten years of blissful productivity. A four-volume collection of essays was published in Norway in 2008. A selection might prove interesting, if indeed Nunnally is not already at work on one.

When Woolf thought ahead 100 years to the fiction of the future (2028: get your essays ready!), she might have guessed that she would still figure prominently. It is no longer remarkable that Chloe likes Olivia; as it happens Olivia is now also Oliver. Identity is a key fictional theme, perhaps the defining one of our age. It is thus refreshing, today, to read a novelist for whom identity is built on duty as much as on desire, and for whom duty is less like an obstacle to self-expression and more like a fundamental truth. Thanks now to Tiina Nunnally, Sigrid Undset is as much a challenge to our own times as she was to her own. ■

# Tonight you dine with Christ!

A band of Vikings arrive on ninth-century Iona

**MAREN MEINHARDT**

**COLUMBA'S BONES**  
**DAVID GREIG**

184pp. Polygon. £10.



Iona Abbey, looking towards the Isle of Mull

**I**ONA, WEST OF THE ISLE OF MULL, is the island where Saint Columba made landfall when he set out from Ireland in the sixth century, and where he established his monastic community, from there to spread Christianity across the British Isles. Even today it is thought of as a "thin place", with an almost palpable sense of being on the cusp of the otherworldly. In David Greig's debut novel, *Columba's Bones*, this too is how it appears to Grimur and his band of fellow Vikings in the year 825, as they approach the island from the sea: "half in and half out of this world". The wind blows through the machair, lambs play in the fields, larks and ospreys soar in the sky - a good day, the Vikings reckon, for a massacre.

Meanwhile, in Iona Abbey, the red Viking sail has been spotted, the church bell clangs in alarm, and Abbot Blathmac's rallying speech does not provide the intended reassurance. "Rejoice, rejoice", he instructs his flock, "welcome the knife to your neck, for tonight you dine with Christ." Brother Martin, a young monk, would have preferred a more modest supper. Sick with fear, he thinks he might fit in a quick visit to the latrine before being massacred, and

this is how he comes to survive the raid, the fourth and most deadly of the Viking incursions on Iona. The Vikings have come to steal the reliquary of St Columba; Blathmac and his monks will not relinquish it. The Vikings kill with easy nonchalance; the monks retaliate with a prayer of love. The unequal struggle ends with Blathmac tied to four ponies and torn in different directions - a process that takes "five, or maybe eight" minutes - and all his seventy monks with their throats slit. Except, that is, for Brother Martin.

On the Viking side, Grimur, it turns out, is not quite the warrior he used to be. He is feeling his age, and already on the run to the abbey has had trouble keeping up. Instead he makes for the smithy, where he kills the blacksmith and in turn is felled by the strong mead concoction he finds bubbling over the fire. Left for dead when the Viking ship moves on, he is now one of only three remaining people on this small island: the others are Martin and Una, the blacksmith's widow. They settle into an uneasy routine.

Greig is a prolific playwright, and this intense, and bounded, set-up might easily be adapted for the

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stage. In repentance for his cowardice Martin tries to keep to the monastery offices as best he can. He processes around the big stone St John's Cross, and the day is punctuated by his lone voice singing the Liturgy of the Hours. Una is touched by Martin's devotion to his faith, but she has little use for a world beyond the present. At the mercy of the harsh seasons, foreign invaders and, most of all, a brutal, fanatical husband, she had yearned in vain for a simple, peaceful existence. Now her husband has been replaced by a Viking, and that this should bring her greater happiness than she has ever known is a miracle to one who doesn't believe in them. As for Grimur, change comes, in perhaps too neat a development, from an unexpected direction: the Book of Kells (the Book of Columba), left unfinished as a result of the raid. Transformed by the beauty of the illuminated manuscript, Grimur begins the long, slow process of self-redemption. This makes for a slower, gentler story than the fast-paced, violent *tour de force* of the opening. The unfinished parts of the Book of Kells concern the mysteries: the glimpse of transcendent meaning behind the scriptures.

Miracles and revelations, Martin explains, used to be common in St Columba's time, and they still occurred while his body was buried on the island. Columba's finger, the precious bones of the title and all that is left of the saint, can still perform minor "miracles of the heart" - such as that of bad men becoming good. Grimur tries to atone for all the people he has killed, but real faith eludes him. Martin argues that God's love is endless - as boundless as the sea. Grimur is not so sure: he cannot shake off his Viking gods, and he knows that they have other ideas. Has Martin ever seen an eagle take a lamb, seen it open its belly while the lamb is still alive and eat it from the inside? The world is hostile, indifferent at best. And the sea, for that matter, has a clear boundary. While this may be a purely theological matter, Grimur knows that, sooner or later, the red sail will appear on the horizon again, and that the outcome of this encounter will settle the argument.

*Columba's Bones* is written with a vividness that reduces the distance between AD825 and our time to what feels like a thin curtain - a curtain not unlike the one David Greig's characters are tugging at, hoping to get a glimpse of the mysteries. ■

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