

*Jonathan G. Reinhardt*

## Sigrid Undset: Following the Thread of Belief

There is a broad consensus on the work of Norwegian writer and Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset (1882-1949). “Mainstream” critics deride her for starting out with promise, then losing all literary luster when she converted to Catholicism in 1924, and abandoning the feminist cause. Catholic critics praise her later work as most mature, and rejoice in converting her biography into a passion of return. Norwegians love Undset because . . . she is Norwegian. Currently, however, James Crossely observed in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, “though her Nobel Prize came to her in 1928, there’s a certain mustiness about her reputation, as though she’d lived in the era she most famously recorded.”

The third woman to receive the prestigious award for literary merit—and also the third and last Norwegian—she received the Nobel Prize “principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages.” At the banquet of honor, Professor Gösta Forssell remarked, “In her extensive work, an Iliad of the North, Sigrid Undset has resurrected in a new and visionary light the ideals which once guided our forefathers who built that community from which our Germanic culture derived. To an age in which it may be easier to acknowledge that the right to the greatest happiness is the duty of renunciation—to this age Sigrid Undset has shown the ideals of our forefathers: duty and faithfulness.”

Undset, daughter of an archaeologist, showed interest in the Norse myths from a young age, and her first attempt at novel writing was set in medieval Norway. She offered her maiden manuscript to the prestigious Gyldendal publishing house in Copenhagen, where it was rejected. According to Undset, a reader told her she had no talent for historical fiction, but might try writing something modern.

She did, producing the diary *Fru Marta Oulie* (not available in translation), published awash in scandal in 1907. Beginning with what Undset biographer Susan T. Vigilante calls one of the most memorable first lines in European literature—“I have been unfaithful to my husband”—it portrays a petty bourgeois wife’s reeling life. The destructive power of passions, especially from the point of view of women, would become one of Undset’s major subject matters. Not considered a very strong work, *Fru Marta Oulie* nevertheless established her reputation as a writer and feminist.

Undset’s other important early and contemporarily set work is the somewhat autobiographical novella *Jenny* (1911, transl. of 1920 revision: Steerforth Press, 2002). In it, Undset tells of the Norwegian painter Jenny who decides to fall in love with the rather insipid Helge Gram while in Rome, returns to Norway with him, begins an affair with his father, then eddies from corruption to perceived corruption, suffers the loss of her newborn child, and finally commits suicide.

The author's own life parallels the protagonist's at least insofar as that Undset herself visited Rome on a travel scholarship from the Norwegian government for a few months in 1910. There, she met the talented, feckless but married painter Arne Svarstad, who promptly divorced and wed an already pregnant Undset two years later. The budding voice of the fjords in the main remained mute on her private life, but scholars assume that much in Undset's writing that dwells on struggles with rampant passion, poisonous suspicion, and strife and worries among husbands and wives stems from this her unhappy and eventually rent wedlock.

Conservative reviewers were appalled by her frankness, and *Jenny* also marked an abrupt end for Undset's ironically iconic status among Norwegian suffragettes (they were emphatically put out about her protagonist's weak, unliberated end). The controversies, however, established Undset as a shiningly direct, honest author whose sentimental gifts were confined to picturesque land- and cityscapes. A short story *Images in a Mirror*, and a play *In the Gray Light of Dawn* (both included in *Sigrid Undset on Saints and Sinners*, Deal W. Hudson, ed., Ignatius 1993) are among Undset's minor accomplishments of this earlier stage.

Spiting everyone, Undset soon returned to a medieval setting for her novella *Gunnar's Daughter* (Penguin, 1998), published in 1909. The plot of this tale of passion and violence told into the dawn of pagan Scandinavia's Christian conversion initially seems to be that of a romance novel: maid meets noble warrior. Claiming she wanted to reflect the old sagas and ballads without romanticizing their violent episodes—instead making them seem realistic—Undset weaves a narrative writhing in rape, revenge, unrest, domestic abuse, murders committed over honor, and victimized children.

Soon after, the Nobel laureate marked her whole-hearted return to historical fiction with the publication of the first volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a trilogy set in medieval Norway. *The Wreath* (Penguin, 1997) was quickly followed by *The Wife* (Penguin, 1999), and when the final part, *The Cross* (Penguin, 2000), appeared in 1924, Undset had offered to the world her magnum opus. *Kristin Lavransdatter* recounts the life of the young noblewoman Kristin,

who succumbs to passion and deceit as a very young woman, then must live out the consequences of a difficult marriage to an unstable and often unfaithful husband who is not her strong-willed equal, and struggles to atone for herself and with herself. She achieves endurance, if not redemption, by realizing, as J. C. Whitehouse concluded in *Vertical Man* (Saint Austin Press, 1999), "a refusal to turn away from the harshness of life, and a perception that it is not all harshness." *Kristin* is an illustration of Undset's remark that early in her life the Norse *Njál's Saga* (Penguin, 2002) gave her, in Vigilante's words, "a premonition of how women could easily allow their own destinies to become hopelessly entangled with those of gifted but neurotic men." The novel is considered especially strong, too, for the human certainties Undset limns. [Deal Hudson](#), in his **MARS HILL AUDIO** [interview](#), comments, "The intertwining of . . . lives and the kind of effect that the failure or success of one life has on another is so powerfully depicted that you're reminded that you don't act your life in isolation from others."

*Kristin Lavransdatter* has never been out of print in English since it became available in translation in the 1920s. However, current Undset translator [Tiina Nunnally](#) points out in her [dialogue](#) with Ken Myers, the older translation was in need of revision. Bruce Bawer of the *New York Times* concurs: "In English-speaking countries, the book failed to survive its best-sellerdom, owing mainly, one suspects, to the execrable translation, which is crammed with hoary medievalisms ("come a-wooing", "methinks") that have no basis in the original." Nunnally's new translation (Penguin, 1997-2000) won the PEN Book-of-the-Month Club translation prize in 2001. The older translations (Vintage, 1987-1995) are also still available.

Nunnally, a Finnish-American Scandinavian languages specialist, has also translated *Jenny* and letters by Sigrid Undset for *The Unknown Sigrid Undset: Jenny and Other Works* (Steerforth Press, 2001), and the best-seller *Smilla's Sense of Snow* by Danish novelist Peter Høeg (Delta, 1995). *The Unknown Sigrid Undset* additionally includes two hitherto unavailable short stories translated by Naomi Wolford, "Simonsen" and "Thjodolf," concerned with the life of common people in early twentieth century Oslo.

Immediately following up on the success of her *Kristin* trilogy, Undset produced *The Master of Hestviken*, for which she seized upon the material of her very first, rejected manuscript. The first of four parts, *The Axe* (Vintage 1994) became available in 1924, and, by 1927, the epic piece was concluded with *The Snake Pit* (Vintage, 1994), *In the Wilderness* (Vintage, 1995), and *The Son Avenger* (Vintage, 1995). The series is considered second only to *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Paul Evans, in *Sigrid Undset: On Saints and Sinners* (Ignatius, 1993), compares *Hestviken* with Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* in its wide-scope life-and-death struggle, claiming that "so individual in its manifestations is the sin [Undset] depicts that its complex 'personality' is what lingers in our minds."

Historical novels remained Undset's forte, and she would later conclude her fiction writing with the less spectacular historical novels *Sigurd and His Brave Companions* (1931, Knopf 1943) and *Madame Dorothea* (1939, Knopf 1940).

Like many writers of historical fiction, Undset was sometimes criticized for escapism. "There is no flight from the world in her novels," J. C. Whitehouse, Reader in Comparative Literature at the University of Bradford, England, defends, "but a reflection on it in terms of a tough and profound faith." In his *Scandinavian Studies* 71.1 article "The Unfashionable Kristin Lavransdatter," Otto Reinert observed that Undset's novels "are product and not process literature: the reader does not participate in the novel's progressive discoveries or experiences them as being conscious of the difficulties of their own coming to being." Undset exhibits antimodern biases as clearly as Golding, Orwell, and Tolkien later would, and, in Reinert's words, "her vaunted 'historical realism' [is] a means of seducing the reader into accepting [them]." Her work is memorable because her characters' struggles remain "immediate and believable in terms comprehensible to every modern reader."

Undset also lacks all shyness in asserting the sense—shared with T. S. Eliot, for example—that a mother church could help heal the modern distemper, and her alleged conviction that womanhood is most complete in wifery and motherhood, which, Paul Bjarby notes the obvious in his article "Recent Trends in Sigrid Undset Criticism"

for *Scandinavian Studies* 58.3, alienates recent feminist critics.

Ideological preferences aside, Undset's novels have fallen out of favor partly because their modernism reflects the nineteenth century narrative style of Austen and Dostoevsky more closely than her feminist contemporary Virginia Woolf, or the word-play of James Joyce. "If modern writing matches modern philosophy in its preoccupation with *doubt*, Undset and Dostoevsky struggle with *belief*," Paul Evans remarks in *Sigrid Undset: On Saints and Sinners*. "They understand that human failing is less a matter of disease or history or accident than of revolt against Pascal's 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars'."

Beginning in 1925, the deeply religious Undset turned to hagiography. The first result was a work on the life of the Norwegian St. Halvard, to be followed by one on the holy king Olav in 1930, a collection titled *Saga of Saints* (Books for Libraries, 1977) in 1934, and, posthumously, a biography of Catherine of Siena (Sheed and Ward, 1954). *Saga of Saints*, Evelyn Birge Vitz of New York University explains, "was devoted largely to a retelling, an reexamination, of the epic and romantic legends—the great 'sagas'—of the great Norwegian saints, the fathers and mothers of Norwegian Christianity" with whom Undset was so fascinated that they caused her conversion to Catholicism in 1924: "I had ventured too near the abode of truth in my researches about 'God's friends', as the saints are called in the Old Norse texts. . . . So I had to submit."

Undset did not wholly abandon fiction after her medievalist pieces, but critics have reprehended her for increasingly abandoning the novel for allegory. Her post-*Kristin* novels are determined by the experience of her religious conversion and are chiefly apologetic. J. C. Whitehouse explicates, "It is clear that by *The Wild Orchid* (1929, Knopf 1931) and *The Burning Bush* (1930, Knopf 1932) there is a change in the nature of the moral reflections which various characters engage in. There, what might be called the natural decencies are seen through the eyes of a man for whom they are no longer completely satisfactory and are indeed occasionally strange." *The Burning Bush* especially is concerned with "that hidden part of each individual which is be-

yond the judgment of others, the self which is more than the sum of the idiosyncrasies, qualities or defects of each individual, and which is only fully meaningful in its relationship with God and other selves." *Ida Elisabet* (Knopf 1933), which deals with spiritual transformation, and *The Faithful Wife* (1936, Knopf 1937) fall into the same category.

Especially in her later years, Undset turned to writing essays and articles, often concerning herself with the Catholic faith, such as in *Katholsk Propaganda* (1927, not available in English). Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of San Francisco, notes in his article "Sigrid Undset: Holiness and Culture" that the autobiographical *Stages on the Road* (1933, Books for Libraries 1969) contains two representative examples of the Nobel Prize winner's social concerns. Undset keenly observes a reversal to pre-Christian oppressive social structures as evident among the Vikings through modernism with its emphasis on the essential Viking value of freedom:

Industrial capitalism and free competition have resulted in the majority of members of society having lost all security for their economic future . . . [Such] slave conditions are accompanied by a renewal of the morality of slavery. This is precisely the point about 'comrade-marriage' ['living together'] . . . , the commonest form of sexual intercourse among slaves. . . . Free love is for slaves, and marriage is for the free-born. . . . Of a slave-born concubine a man can demand fidelity so long as he cares to keep her for himself; of a wife her whole community can demand fidelity . . . because she shares her responsibility and the honor of the family with her forefathers and with her husband . . . and with her children. . . . The Christian Church could not recognize any due morality here either—could not acknowledge class distinctions and racial disparities to be other than trifling variations in a human material which was fundamentally one. . . . The Church insisted that Christian slave-owners at least refrain from hindering their slaves participation in the Church's means of

grace, among them the sacrament of marriage. . . . Little by little the church's view gained prevalence all over Europe . . . [that] it is criminal for other people, or social conditions, to withhold [the right of living in matrimony and founding a family].

Undset also voices her concern with the absence of a Catholic response to the fascist movements—a stance that would force the vocal Norwegian nationalist to flee to the U. S. when German armies under Nazi leadership invaded her country in 1940; a time she reflected in *Return to the Future* (Knopf, 1942)—as an example for her opinion on the role of the Church:

The church militant on earth may be reduced to a handful of adherents, not many more than would fill an arena or a local jail. The Christians of Europe may be reduced to a little band with no power to influence social development for a long period. . . . Until Catholic missionaries, from China or South America or Africa, return to preach the faith of our fathers to the lost barbarian tribes who are living amongst the ruins of ancient Europe.

According to Whitehouse, Undset makes the point in her other autobiographical work *The Longest Years* (1934, Knopf 1935) that "human beings are to be seen as an antidote to the overdose of the superficial generalities concerning *l'homme moyen sensuel* which the current liberal view would provide."

*Men, Women and Places* (1938, Books for Libraries 1969) contains more essay-shaped reflections, and Undset also penned a contemplative memoir for children, *Happy Times in Norway* (1947, Greenwood 1979).

Undset's unbroken popularity in Norway and an increasing interest for her works in English translation prove that seventy-five years after she received her Nobel Prize, the strengths of her writing still hold. Gidske Anderson wrote for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "None of Undset's books leaves the reader unconcerned. She is a great story-teller, with a profound and realistic knowledge of the labyrinths of the human

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mind—at all times and in all places.” The *New York Times*’ Bawer remarks that the Scandinavian author and her characters are “rather like Norway itself, its soul—half Viking, half Christian—torn between bold adventure and stark self-denial.” Undset’s work mirrors the beauty and poetic clarity of Old Norse, the metaphorical consciousness of the Catholic liturgy, and is dominated by the fiercely, reservedly charitable conviction she sums up in the last sentences of her retelling of the Arthurian legends *Fortællinger om Kong Arthur og Ridderne av det Runde Bord* of 1915, “For *mores* and manners are always changing as time passes, and people’s beliefs change and the way they think about many things. But people’s hearts do not change; they remain the same through all the days, forever.”

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