

READING GUIDE: ALBERTA AND JACOB

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PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Alberta and Jacob (Norwegian title: *Alberte og Jakob*)

Author: Cora Sandel

Translator: Elizabeth Rokkan

Publisher: Peter Owen (2004)

ISBN: 0720611849

Price: ca. \$23.00

INTRODUCTION

One of the classics of twentieth-century Norwegian literature, this novel depicts a year in the lives of teenaged siblings Alberta and Jacob Selmer in a small, arctic town in the 1890s. Originally published in 1926, the novel explores the social and class limitations imposed on young people. Both Alberta and her younger brother Jacob long to get away. This is the first in a trilogy of novels that follows Alberta through adolescence into adulthood.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Contemporary Norwegian high school students often complain that "nothing happens" in this novel, and it is true that the author consciously rejects overt action in favor of depicting Alberta's subjective, existential reflections over her life. Cora Sandel appears to have been actively subverting the traditional female novel of development and moving in the direction of modernism in this novel. Her later works become even more experimental.

The novel is cyclical and intimately connected to the arctic landscape, following the life of Alberta, her family, and the local townspeople through the course of one pivotal year. In it we see both the months of winter darkness and the nervous energy caused by the brief summer of unrelenting sunlight. In the course of this year both Alberta and Jacob will attempt to break out of their bourgeois family existence, and Alberta experiences a sexual awakening and a growing awareness of the world beyond the confines of her small town.

Sandel is known for her subtle use of irony and her exquisite language and style. The novel was an immediate success upon its publication. Many readers mistakenly assumed that the novel was autobiographical, and there was a great deal of speculation about both who the characters in the novels "really" were, and who the person behind the pseudonym was. This speculation caused a great deal of consternation and distress for Sandel. The novel is in reality no more and no less autobiographical than any other work of fiction, but its deeply personal tone and meticulous attention to the details of everyday life make it unusually convincing.

FOR DISCUSSION

How is the arctic setting and climate of the story important?

Why does Alberta divide the world up into warm and cold, equating the former with good and that latter with bad?

Why is the Selmer household often portrayed using war and military metaphors?

How do certain visual metaphors, such as hands and mirrors, function in the novel?

What role does money (or lack thereof) play in the novel?

Although the novel focuses more on Alberta than on Jacob, the title refers specifically to both characters. Why do you think this is?

How do the various roads and streets that Alberta walks along contribute to or express her psychological state of mind?

What freedoms does Alberta's status (both as a young woman and as a member of the ruling class) deny her? How does she feel about it?

Alberta often experiences certain places as "eerie" and there is a certain Gothic undercurrent in the novel. How does this "eeriness" or sense of the uncanny function in the novel?

What role does sexuality (and in particular female sexuality) play in the novel?

Alberta is portrayed by the narrator as nervous and uncomfortable around other people, yet she attracts friends like the Lossius sisters and Beda Buck who are very outgoing. Do you think the narrator treats Alberta "unfairly"?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora Sandel is the pseudonym used by Sara Fabricius (1880-1974). Born in Christiania (today Oslo) into the ruling civil servant class, she moved with her family to the town of Tromsø in the far north of Norway at the age of about twelve. As a young woman Fabricius studied painting with Norwegian impressionist Harriet Backer, and departed for Paris in 1905 with the goal of becoming a professional artist. She lived mostly in Paris until 1921, getting by as a member of the expatriate artists' colony on the Left Bank. In 1913 she married the Swedish sculptor Anders Jönsson, and in 1917 they had a son. The family moved to Sweden in 1921, and although Fabricius continued to paint for at least a few more years, she turned more and more to writing, publishing her first short stories in 1922 under the name of Cora Sandel. In 1927 the family was torn apart by a bitter divorce and custody battle. From that point on she supported herself and her son on her meager earnings from her published works. The Alberta-trilogy (published in 1926, 1931, and 1939) garnered her both critical and popular acclaim. She published a total of five novels and five short story collections during her career. Her most acclaimed work, *Krane's Café*, has been adapted to both stage and screen, and in Helge Krog's stage

adaptation has become a standard of the Norwegian theater repertoire. Although most of her work is set in Norway, as an adult Sandel only lived there for a brief period from 1936-1939. She chose instead to live and die in Sweden. Like Henrik Ibsen, she found it very difficult to live in the community that she wrote about with such fascination.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR/TRANSLATION

The late Elizabeth Rokkan translated all of Cora Sandel's novels into English during the 1960s. These translations are controversial, and Sandel herself refused royalties from them in protest over Rokkan's at times substantial stylistic changes.

OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH BY THIS AUTHOR

Most of the translations of Cora Sandel's work have gone out of print, but are still readily available through used booksellers. The original English publisher of the translations, Peter Owen, has plans to re-issue the entire Alberta trilogy (volumes one and two are now in print).

Alberta and Freedom. Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. London: Peter Owen, 2007. ISBN: 0720612632

Alberta Alone. Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984. ISBN: 0821407619 [out of print, but Peter Owen should be releasing a new edition soon]

Krane's Café. Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985. ISBN: 0821407961 [out of print]

The Leech. Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. London: The Women's Press, 1994. ISBN: 0704340054 [out of print]

The Silken Thread: Stories and Sketches. Trans. Elizabeth Rokkan. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1987. 0821408658 [out of print]

Cora Sandel: Selected Short Stories. Trans. Barbara Wilson. Seattle: The Seal Press, 1985. ISBN: 093118830X [out of print]

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

If you enjoyed this book, we suggest the following other Nordic writers available in English:

Camilla Collett. *The District Governor's Daughters.* Trans. Kirsten A. Seaver. Norwich, UK: Norvik, 1992. ISBN: 1970041178

Victoria Benedictsson. *Money.* Trans. Sarah Death. Norwich, UK: Norvik, 2000. ISBN: 1870041402

Kerstin Ekman. *Blackwater.* Trans. Joan Tate. London: Picador, 1997. ISBN: 0312152477

Monika Fagerholm. *Wonderful Women by the Sea*. Trans. Joan Tate. New York: New Press. ISBN: 1565844882

LINKS TO REVIEWS IN ENGLISH

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