

READING GUIDE: ANTIPHONY

Publication information

Antiphony (Norwegian title: Vekselsang)

Author: Laila Stien

Translator: John Weinstock

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INTRODUCTION

This beautifully layered and subtle novel explores the difficulties a young woman encounters when she sets out to write a book about the indigenous Sámi people (aka. “Lapps”) of northern Norway, and the friendships she develops with three Sámi women as she tries to come to terms with her own position as an outside observer in their community. Set primarily in a small village on the northern tundra, this psychologically complex book also provides a thoughtful introduction to the Sámi people, at the same time as it raises important questions about how indigenous people are represented and understood generally.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

An antiphony is a choral piece in which the singing alternates between different groups, and the title works well as a metaphor for the way in which four different women find their voices in this short, almost lyrical text. The narrator is a young social scientist from Norway’s metropolitan south who finds her understanding of her own position disintegrating as she interviews and befriends three women of different generations from an extended native family. Instead of asserting the authority to represent the Sámi to the outside world, the narrator begins to question her own sense of self. She finds that she cannot write the book she set out to create, and in its place presents us with this narrative of how her ethnographic project ended up transforming into an exploration of her relationship with the three ‘native informants’, and the ways in which all four women have affected each others’ lives.

The novel is divided into three sections, each focusing on one of the three Sámi women and introduced with a brief narrative retrospective of the protagonist’s journey to the far north. Through the stories of each of these women, the reader is led along an account of the dramatic changes Sámi reindeer-herding society went through over the course of the twentieth century. The elderly great aunt, lying on her hospital deathbed, tells stories of her life as a traditional herder in the days before the snowmobile, when the Sámi traveled by reindeer-sledge and no roads penetrated the tundra interior. Her niece, the hard-working, middle-aged mother, tells of the devastation caused by the government-sponsored readjustment program in which Sámi families were paid to give up their herds. The niece’s daughter, an angry young university student, confronts the narrator directly,

forcing her to acknowledge the ways in which she herself is part of the system of oppression created by the Norwegian colonization of the Sámi. As she recognizes this and surrenders her authority, the narrator comes to understand the student better, and the two become friends. The novel ends on an upbeat note; despite the difficulties the Sámi have endured, they have the strength and the will to adapt and to persevere; and maybe the narrator does too.

Its hopeful ending notwithstanding, the novel is an extended meditation on the theme of loss. Each of the four women, including the narrator, has suffered tremendously. The optimism at the end comes when the protagonist realizes that they all may have the strength to continue on, moving past, but not forgetting, their pain.

John Weinstock's translation, carried out in consultation with the author, has captured the profound subtlety of the original. Many of the novel's strongest points are made through indirect inference, and readers will find themselves forced to read between the lines, paying as much attention to what is not said as to that which is. This leads to a unique and rewarding experience, in which our encounter with the novel can become an exploration of ourselves and our positions, as much as of the characters and their setting.

FOR DISCUSSION

Why do you think the protagonist cannot finish writing her book?

What does the student mean when she accuses the protagonist of being yet another who is out to profit from Sámi culture?

How is the narrator's experience in trying to write an ethnography (a scholarly presentation of another culture) of the Sámi different from her earlier experience in Africa? What reasons might there be for these differences?

What do you think happens on the night that the student visits the protagonist in her hotel room? What is left unsaid in the text?

When *Antiphony* was first published in Norway in 1997, a number of critics commented that the character of the protagonist was only very thinly and vaguely sketched, and that it was difficult to really know anything about her. Do you agree? And if so, is this a weakness, or a strength? How does this treatment of the narrator relate to the difficulties she experiences in writing her ethnography?

Critics of ethnography often point out that the ethnographer occupies a position of power over those she represents. In what ways might this be true? How does this novel address the power relationships of ethnography?

What role do male characters play in this novel, and why do you think they are represented as they are?

While this novel questions the validity of ethnography, it also presents a good deal of information about the Sámi. How does it negotiate this balancing act? Do you think it is successful?

What did you learn about the Sámi? What does this novel leave you wanting to learn?

Her Christian faith is very important to the old woman in the hospital, yet it is also the source of much of her unease. Christian missionaries condemned the traditional Sámi musical form of yoiking, and the conservative Læstadian movement to which many Sámi, including this character, belong continues to view yoik as sinful. In what ways do you think this might place a burden on Sámi believers? And, on the other hand, in what ways might the Sámi draw strength from Christianity?

How do you read the final scene in the book, in which the narrator is puzzled by seeing her own reflection superimposed on the face of the student? Why do you think this confuses her?

How might some of the questions this novel raises be helpful in other (non-Sámi) contexts?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laila Stien was born in 1946 in the northern Norwegian town of Hemnes, and grew up in Rana. She is recognized as one of the leading contemporary Norwegian short story writers, and is also an accomplished translator, having translated a number of Sámi texts into Norwegian. She has won a number of prizes for her writing, which is typified by understatement, inference, and subtlety.

As a university student Stien studied ethnography, Sámi, and cultural anthropology. An ethnic Norwegian herself, she has long lived in the northern county of Finnmark with her Sámi husband and children. Not surprisingly, Stien's stories tend to be set in northern Norway, and her writing style is colored by northern dialect. Many of her stories contain Sámi elements, characters, or settings. *Antiphony* is her only novel.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

John Weinstock is a professor of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas in Austin, where he has taught since 1966. His teaching repertoire includes courses on Sámi culture, music, linguistics, and Norwegian and Old Norse languages and literatures. He has published a number of scholarly works on such topics as the hero in Scandinavian literature, Carl Linnaeus, and the history of skiing, and many more books, articles, and translations.

Professor Weinstock also maintains an informative web site on Sámi culture, which may be useful for readers of *Antiphony*. < <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/> >

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

If you enjoyed this book, or would like to learn more about the Sámi, we would suggest the following texts available in English translation:

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. *The Sun, My Father*. Trans. Lars Nordström, Harald Gaski, Ralph Salisbury. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1998.

---. *Trekways of the Wind*. Trans. Ralph Salisbury, Harald Gaski, Lars Nordström. Tuscon, AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1994.

Rauni Magga Lukkari. *The Time of the Lustful Mother—Árbeeadni—Morslodd*. Trans. English Kaija Anttonen. Karasjok, Norway: Davvi Girji, 1999.

Harald Gaski, ed. *In the Shadow of the Midnight Sun: Contemporary Sami Prose and Poetry*. Karasjok, Norway: Davvi Girji, 1997.

---, ed. *Sami Culture in a New Era: The Norwegian Sami Experience*. Karasjok, Norway: Davvi Girji, 1998.

Veli-Pekka Lehtol. *Sámi People: Traditions in Transition*. Trans. Linna Weber Muller-Wille. Fairbanks: Univ. of Alaska Press, 2005.

Hugh Beach. *A Year In Lapland: Guest of the Reindeer Herders*. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2001.

Lars Levi Læstadius. *Fragments of Lappish Mythology*. Juha Pentikäinen, ed., trans. Börje Vähämäki, Beaverton, Ontario: Aspasia Books, 2002.

LINKS TO REVIEWS IN ENGLISH

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/newera/journal2.htm>

This NORTANA Study Guide was produced by Troy Storfjell, assistant professor of Norwegian and Scandinavian Studies at Pacific Lutheran University.