

## READING GUIDE: OUT STEALING HORSES

### PUBLICATION INFORMATION

Out Stealing Horses (Norwegian title: *Ut og stjæle hester*)

Author: Per Petterson

Translator: Anne Born

Publisher: Graywolf Press (2007)

ISBN: 1555974708

Price: ca \$22.00

### INTRODUCTION

This masterfully written novel interweaves layers of time as it gradually reveals the truths and deceptions behind protagonist Trond Sander's memories of the last time he saw his father in the summer of 1948. Alternately set in a quiet village in contemporary Norway and a remote community close to the Swedish border only a short time after the Second World War, the novel offers an achingly beautiful portrait of the sacrifices and betrayals made by two families.

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

Two narrative planes dominate *Out Stealing Horses*: in the present a man of sixty-seven, Trond Sander, leaves his urban life to move into a dilapidated cabin in a small village in 1999. The novel depicts the rhythms, work, and events of rural life with loving detail. The isolation gives Trond time to reflect over his past, and his thoughts constantly return to the summer of 1948, when he and his father stayed together in the cabin where, as Trond eventually discovers, his father spent much of his time during the war.

The author weaves in a third layer of narrative time as the fifteen year old Trond learns from a neighbor about the events of 1942-44, when Trond's father used the cabin as his base. The traumas and dilemmas of life in occupied Norway thus form the heart of this novel. Yet another narrative plane, three years earlier than the narrative present of 1999 also haunts Trond's memories. There is thus a double set of time periods that parallel and resonate with each other: 1999 : 1996 and 1948 : 1942-44.

The lives of Trond and his father are intimately and fatefully intertwined with the neighboring Haug family throughout the earlier narrative planes of the novel, and indeed one of the Haugs appears unexpectedly in the narrative present as well. The location of the border community where Trond's father's cabins was located is a crucial factor in the story, since during the Second World War the resistance movement in occupied Norway actively "trafficked" in documents and refugees across the border to neutral Sweden.

### FOR DISCUSSION

Why do you think Trond's father is so secretive about his activities during the war?

What do you think about the role that dogs play in the novel?

The characters appear to lead largely silent lives, such that when they actually speak their words seem at times unnatural and awkward, while at other times they are unusually verbose and articulate. What do you think about the way communication is presented in the novel?

Trond repeatedly refers to himself as a lucky man, but the tone of the novel is melancholic. Do you think he is deceiving himself, or is he truly lucky?

What is the significance of the Norwegian-Swedish border in the novel? Does it function on a metaphorical as well as a literal level?

The author makes some specific literary references. Trond reads and refers to the novels of Charles Dickens (specifically *A Tale of Two Cities*), while his father had copies of Knut Hamsun's novels *Hunger* and *Pan* in his cabin. Do you think there is any significance to mentioning these specific works?

The first-person narrator sometimes makes comments that undermine the reality of the story (for example when he refers to his departure from the border community at the end of the summer in 1948 as though it were a movie). Can you think of further examples of this, and how do you respond to these as a reader?

Why does Trond become so angry when he goes to Sweden with his mother?

Do you think the father's actions are ultimately forgivable?

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Per Petterson was born in Oslo in 1952 and now lives on a farm in the rural hamlet of Hemnes in southeastern Norway close to the Swedish border. He was educated as a librarian and has also worked as a bookseller, translator, and literary critic. He debuted with a short story collection, *Aske i munnen, sand i skoa* (1987: Ashes in the mouth, sand in the shoes) and published his first novel *Ekkoland* (1989: Echoland) two years later. His three most recent novels, *To Siberia* (1996), *In the Wake* (2000), and *Out Stealing Horses* (2003) have all been translated to English. The latter was an enormous success, winning two major Norwegian literary prizes (Bokhandlerprisen and Kritikerprisen), as well as the prestigious UK Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

#### ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR/TRANSLATION

Anne Born is a poet, reviewer, and translator who resides in South Devon, England. She has translated many works from the Danish and Norwegian, including the letters of Isak Dinesen.

#### OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH BY THIS AUTHOR

*In the Wake*. Trans. Anne Born. London: Picador, 2002. ISBN: 0312427042

*To Siberia*. Trans. Anne Born. London: Harvill, 1999. ISBN: 1860464602

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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

Sigurd Hoel. *Meeting at the Milestone*. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Los Angeles: Green Integer Press, 2001. ISBN: 1892295318

Martin A. Hansen. *The Liar*. Trans. John Jeppson Eggishaw. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995. ISBN: 1557132437

Knut Hamsun. *Pan: From Lieutenant Thomas Glahn's Papers*. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. London: Penguin Classics, 1998. ISBN: 0141180676

## LINKS TO REVIEWS IN ENGLISH

Bookgroup Info: <http://www.bookgroup.info/041205/review.php?id=160>

Ready Steady Book: A Literary Site:

<http://www.readysteadybook.com/BookReview.aspx?isbn=1843432293>

*This NORTANA study guide was prepared by Ellen Rees, Associate Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Oregon.*