

*Stella Descending* by Linn Ullmann, translated from the Norwegian by Barbara Haveland (Picador, R142)

14 March 2004

On a summer's evening in Oslo, two lovers are balancing on the edge of the rooftop of an apartment block, apparently engrossed in some game of their own devising. They embrace – or is it a tussle? – and the woman falls to her death. “The descent,” we are told, “from the moment she loses her footing until she hits the ground, will take two seconds.” But those two seconds seem to last forever, as the novel freezes the fall to examine the questions surrounding it: What really happened? Was she pushed? What led up to this fall?

Around this simple enough conundrum Linn Ullmann has fashioned a strangely elusive web of associations and intrigues. The woman, we discover, was Stella; the man was Martin, her partner of ten year's standing, father of her daughter Bee. She had a daughter, Amanda, by another man before meeting Martin. Her best and possibly only friend was Axel, a misanthropic septuagenarian whom she met while nursing him in the hospital where she works, and who was probably in love with Stella. The detective investigating this incident is the hugely overweight Corinne Danielsen, who was a ventriloquist and puppet maker before joining the police force. Her special gift, she believes, is that she gets “an ever so slight twinge” in her stomach in the presence of a killer. Interviewing Martin, she experiences the tell-tale twinge; and yet there is not enough evidence to arrest or convict him. To the disgust of Axel, Martin walks free.

*Stella Descending* is a reviewer's nightmare. It seems to escape all those handy labels that facilitate the business of categorising and evaluating, and to hover just out of reach in some fictional realm of its own. It does flirt with the genre of the detective novel, but if we expect some resolution, we are disappointed: if Stella was pushed, we will never know. In its meticulous tracing of family lines, the novel has something of the family saga; but there is little of the sense of dynastic continuity that characterises such sagas. There is a decidedly surreal aspect to Stella's presence in the novel, apparently speaking from beyond the grave but also during the long descent, the fall that spans the whole length of the novel.

In short, the novel is long on invention and short on explanations. This is a weakness only for such readers as feel cheated if they are never told “what really happened”. What reconciles one to the indeterminacy of the narrative here is the sheer wealth of the detail, the faithful recreation of a rather unexciting city in all its middle-class comfort, above all the sense of interiors as mysteriously determining the fates of their inhabitants.

A running device is the video tape Martin insisted on making on the eve of Stella's fall, professedly to catalogue their possessions for insurance purposes, but in fact more as a strange rite of courtship and provocation; flirting with Stella through the lens and his running commentary, he also violates her: “and if she just spreads her legs a little wider I can take you inside, up inside her, because she's naked under the negligee and there is no lovelier country on earth.”

Martin's commentary is erotic and yet taunting: he seems to be describing a country from which he feels excluded. We discover in fact, that the birth of Bee alienated them, in that Martin felt superseded in his wife's affection's by the strangely intense little child.

Having overcome, incompletely and with great difficulty his physical aversion to his own child, Martin now faces Stella's announcement that she is once again pregnant.

Linn Ullmann is the daughter of the actress Liv Ullmann and the famed director Ingmar Bergman; and it is tempting to discover in her dreamlike tale of loveless possession and possessive love something of her father's bleak Scandinavian Puritanism, with its obsessive dwelling on those closed enigmatic faces haunted by ghosts of their own making. But in its very poker-faced solemnity *Stella Descending* has an ironical humour that Bergman would not have allowed himself or his characters. Stella's descent into life, as it were, as described by Martin, is almost as traumatic as her leaving it: "You fall down through Edith's birth canal, fall into the world, fall into the splendid old hands; you fall wide-eyed, long and slender, like a diver from a cliff – but with an unearthly scream that bursts the young nurse's eardrum, with the result that today, thirty-five years later, she is still deaf in the left ear."

By a coincidence that is so understated that it may easily go unremarked, the young nurse, by now an old woman deaf in both ears, is one of the three witnesses to Stella's final fall. (Another one is an ex-teacher of Stella's who does not realise the identity of the young woman she sees falling.)

What, apart from a wry kind of humour, is the point of such coincidences? It seems to me that they are there as markers of the kind of random pattern that establishes itself without creating meaning: the avocado green sofa, for instance, that keeps recurring in the narrative, without accumulating any particular significance beyond itself. In Ullmann's little world, people interact without touching, or touch without making contact. Stella, the ever-falling star, is the one character who has entered the lives of others and seems fated to remain there after her death. "I tell Bee that Mamma falls and falls and never hits the ground," says Amanda to her little sister; and the novel ends, paradoxically on a note of hope, with the falling Stella addressing her unborn child: "And someday, very soon, I will give you a name."

Elusive but intriguing, intense but cool, convoluted but controlled, *Stella Descending* does, after all, partake of something of the quality of the art of Ullmann's famous mother and father.