

*The Quiet Girl* by Peter Høeg, translated from the Danish by Nadia Christensen (Harvill Secker) R195

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The opening sentence of *The Quiet Girl* usefully equips the reader for the rest of the novel: “She Almighty had tuned each person in a musical key, and Kasper could hear it.” The feminist slant on the Almighty is entirely in keeping with a novel in which the feminine principle is tirelessly exalted; and the notion of people being tuned to a musical key recurs every time a new character is introduced – which is often. Lastly, Kasper’s super-sensitive hearing is central to the plot, which revolves around (and around and around and around) the notion of sound as a key not only to the universe but to more mundane matters such as earthquakes and property deals. Just as, in Høeg’s best-selling *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*, the protagonist’s extraordinary sensitivity to snow enabled her to solve a mystery involving a missing child, here Kasper’s auditory sensitivity is the key to his involvement in the central intrigue, which entails the abduction of a group of children.

Kasper Krone is a forty-two-year old professional clown who, apart from his extraordinary auditory powers and his devotion to the music of Bach, is a gambler and a tax evader; much of the novel’s plot is driven by the fact that the Danish authorities are threatening to extradite Kasper to Spain, where he also owes huge arrears in taxes and where, as one official reminds Kasper, the prisons have not been renovated since the Inquisition.

It is almost impossible to write a synopsis of the plot, partly because it is almost impossible to discover exactly what the plot is. Høeg’s technique, which may best be described as magic surrealism, involves such a dizzying array of characters, who have the unnerving habit of turning up in the most unexpected places, and so many sparsely sign-posted time shifts, that the reader scrambles along as best he can, like a tired walker on a mountain hike. To add to the rigours of the exercise, the book is plotted topographically upon present-day Copenhagen as obsessively as *Ulysses* was plotted on the Dublin of Joyce’s youth, and the characters are considerably more mobile than Joyce’s pedestrians. There are two maps in the front of the book, presumably as an aid to orientation, but it is to be doubted whether plotting the exact location of the characters would make the plot any clearer – and it would certainly add to the not inconsiderable effort of negotiating 400 dense, allusion-packed pages.

At the centre of the intrigue is a group of children with special powers, of which the Quiet Girl of the title is one. The children are set apart by their quietness, that is, by the fact that they don’t exude a musical key. Apparently this fact is an indicator of other superhuman powers: either, for instance, the ability to cause earthquakes or, less sensationally, to foretell them.

This being a fallen world, a group of industrialists are seeking to harness the special power of the children in a commercially rewarding way. But in Høeg’s version of a fallen world a kind of innocence does survive, for instance in the sphere of circus performers (the book is as informative about circus practice as about the music of Bach). There is also a very strange sisterhood of nuns, including the Blue Woman and the African, the latter a pan-African martial arts champion. Add to this an ex-racing driver who lost both his legs in an accident, Kasper’s lost love, a geodesist called Stina, his dying but undefeated father, and any number of government and police functionaries, and you have

the makings of an extremely busy novel. The children, too, turn out to have designs of their own ...

This is Høeg's first novel in ten years. Though this does not necessarily mean that it took him ten years to write, it might well have done, such is the wealth of erudition and the intricacy of the plot. The book is also beautifully written (and expertly translated) with a quirky humour that saves it from portentousness and pretension (though in Høeg's native Denmark there is a body of opinion that accuses him of both). The staccato style takes some getting used to, and impedes, presumably intentionally, the reader's progress like a stone in one's shoe: "Kasper walked to the bed. Took hold of the large bald head and drew it close to him. He listened into the tragedy that thickly surrounds most people. The sound of all that could have been, but never will be."

I must report that this is the novel I have most frequently fallen asleep over since JM Coetzee's *Foe*; and I am advisedly supplying that comparison so that admirers of the kind of fiction exemplified by *Foe* (roughly, post-modernism at its most self-conscious) may disregard my wholly subjective response; my somnolence should not be seen a reflection on the quality of the writing.

Lest there be any doubt, *The Quiet Girl* is an immensely erudite, densely researched novel, with, by virtue of its central character, a kind of raffish charm. Readers who relish the kind of post-modern mystery not overly concerned with verisimilitude or other fuddy-duddy trappings of realism will have fun with Høeg's word-spinning puzzle, and I can see this becoming a kind of cult novel amongst, say, admirers of Thomas Pynchon. Others had better apply elsewhere.