

HENNING MANKELL DEPTHS 2004 (DJUP)

(DJUP means 'depth', but can also be translated as 'intimate', 'bathos' 'profoundness'.)

October 1914: the destroyer *Svea* emerged from the Stockholm archipelago bearing south-south-east. On board was Lars Tobiasson-Svartman, a naval engineer charged with making depth soundings for the Swedish navy. He is obsessed with measurement and precision, instincts reflected in his comfortable but cold relationship with his wife. Close to where soundings are taken, Lars rows out to a barren reef, presumed uninhabited, and discovers a young woman there. Despite her almost feral appearance, Sara stirs something in him. The mission is a success and the *Svea* returns to Gothenburg. Lars, however, remains haunted by this chance encounter, and feels compelled to return...

This tale focuses on a tortured naval officer, Lars Tobiasson-Svartman, who has the important duty of taking soundings for secret naval channels in the approach to Stockholm at the outbreak of WWI. Like a skilled stonemason, Mankell builds his portrait of Svartman with infinite patience, adding details and highlights layer by layer:

Svartman as a naval officer attached to but not a part of a crew;
 Svartman as husband to a wife willingly left behind as he pursues his secret mission;
 and Svartman as the obsessed seeker of Sara, the lone inhabitant of Halskär, a desolate and isolated island.

. Mankell fully sounds the depths of Svartman's obsessions in a way so artful as to appear artless, creating a masterful portrait not only of Svartman but of the women in his life.

This is a memorable and shocking psychological study whose declared intention is to find a depth that can't be plumbed, through a liminal world of shifting seas and conflicting tides into a world of madness.

But it's not so much the character Lars on which one focuses, or the two women in his life, but the liminal seascape/dreamscape of the world he inhabits. What was dream and what was waking cognition?

For Lars, as he spirals into greater depths, greater confusions,

"It seemed to him that he was living in many different worlds at the same time. Each one of them was equally true."

Eventually, in these wild Baltic waters, all waking, human cognition dissolves, all the artificial constructs we create in order to identify loved ones, to name them, to fix them in place - loved ones who, after all, are in the constant process of changing into someone else - sink into the unknown

.As Lars's wife says, on the verge of clinical madness:

"I have realized that I am married to a man who doesn't exist, a shadow with a circulatory system and a brain that is nothing more than an invention, a figment of the imagination."

There was initially something about the language and narrative construction of this book that much like an underwater stream would slowly but surely sweep you further away from land

. It was the short sentences, the sometimes very short chapters, the feeling that only the very most necessary information was shared with the reader - what then, about all the information that wasn't shared?

Lars is a man of great control. He finds comfort in the fact that he has full control of his objective surroundings. He knows the depth of every part of the nearby ocean. That is his job: to measure ocean depths, and he does his job with great pride. Yet, as the reader will find out, while trying desperately to hold on to every ounce of control even of the more subjective sides of life, mainly his own and others' emotions, he sinks. Deeper and deeper. Into an abyss that seemingly has no bottom. Obsessed with measurements and numbers, his obsessive search for depths in the ocean which are bottomless is mirrored by his fast and deepening slide into chasms in his own nature

He is offered plenty of opportunities to save himself. To correct his wrongs. But that would be to admit defeat. And by refusing to admit defeat, defeat eventually begins to stalk him, like a wolf after its prey, hiding in the shadows, waiting to strike. How long can he really hide from it? How long can he escape?

Slow to start, divided into often surprisingly short chapters, sometimes only of a few lines, Mankell weaves the reader in, beginning to layer on ever more deeply and shockingly displayed psychological flaws in his central character.

Obsessive, unstoppable sexual desire proves the flaw in Svartman,

Mankell is a master in creating an oppressive atmosphere using allusions to the weather conditions. Some reviewers have disliked the multiplicity of chapters, some barely a paragraph long; however, I felt that this added to the tension of the story and underscored the dislocation of engineer's professional and personal life.

Throughout this book there's a feeling of unease as to what will happen exacerbated by the uncertainty for Sweden caused by the on-going First World War impinging on the nearby waters. A thought-provoking and disturbing story of a disordered mind.

A fascinating psychological study of a mind in a descending spiral of despair

It seems that the author is skilled in conveying a fractured personality that is adept at manipulating others through a web of deceit.

I would even venture to say that it even goes further, examining a spiritual turmoil that suggests evil more than psychological disturbance.