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The hand holding the glass

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THE HALF BROTHER. By Lars Saabye Christensen. Translated by Kenneth Steven.

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Or do you think Meryl Streep will play the duck?

There is a modern taste for brevity and condensation", wrote Saul Bellow, suggesting that "to write short is felt by a growing public to be a very good thing - perhaps the best." Lars Saabye Christensen does not agree; he has written a brick of a novel that keeps to 764 pages only by embedding dialogue in paragraphs that often run for several unbroken pages. It follows the childhood and early writing career of Barnum Nilsen and its central interest is in how the life informs the work. The experience of reading The Half Brother involves being immersed in the minute domestic and familial details of an imaginative child, seeing and feeling how the early life shapes the writer.

Beginning in the aftermath of the Second World War in Oslo, it is family and personal history, rather than Norwegian history. Christensen, who was born in

1953, is a prolific and well-respected writer of novels, stories and poetry; this magnificent book, which won the Scandinavian equivalent of the Booker in

2002, should win him international recognition.

The structure is simple. Barnum, our narrator, gives us glimpses of himself first as a child and then as a middle-aged alcoholic scriptwriter, before telling stories of his parents; the longest section is devoted to his autobiography. The prologue introduces the half brother, Fred, criticizing Barnum who buys a bag of sweets and thanks the man for his change: "Why on earth do you say many thanks? When you're getting back money that's ours?".

Fred's aggression and Barnum's eagerness to please are typical of their relationship and the scene ends dramatically with Fred offering to kill Barnum's father. In the second scene, an older Barnum, now a scriptwriter, wakes with a hangover and attends a film festival with his friend and professional partner, Peder, growing increasingly drunk and embittered as facile film industry types put forward their ideas. He has a strange encounter with Cliff Richard and wrecks any chance he and Peder have of selling one of their scripts. (Some American film people "are keen to do The Wild Duck"; "D'you think Meryl Streep'll play the duck?" Barnum asks.) At this low point, Barnum gets a letter from his mother: "You won't believe it. Fred has come back". The rest of the novel explains how Barnum has become this cynical drunk.

A section called "The Women" introduces Barnum and Fred's mother, Vera, and the Oslo apartment block where much of the novel takes place. It opens with Vera's rape, which is also Fred's conception, by a German soldier retreating at the end of the war. Vera is living with her mother, Boletta, and grandmother, "the Old One", three single mothers who provide a taste of scandal for the residents of their block. The Old One remembers her days as a star of the silent films.

Boletta works in the telegraph office, suffers from headaches and drinks to ease the pain.

Vera is young and "full to the brim with a great and curious joy" before she is raped. Afterwards she begins a period of silence that lasts until Fred's birth in the back of a taxi. It is the first of several similar silences; silence, like laughter and alcohol, knits the novel together as it passes down the generations.

"A Suitcase of Applause", the most outlandish and excitable section of the book, is devoted to Barnum's father, the midget and misfit Arnold Nilsen, nicknamed "the Wheel" after he rolls off a cliff, ending up "with the Norwegian Sea itself on his small shoulders" -an episode which has the strangeness and familiarity of a family myth, because Barnum cannot know the details as he relates them. Arnold runs away from his tiny island of Rost and joins a circus where he meets Mundus, the ringmaster, who tells him that "Imagination is the greatest thing there is!". He learns about the original Barnum, who "made the world his circus", and is told that "It's not what you see that counts first and foremost. It's what you think you see", and this becomes his motto and that of his similarly mendacious son. Arriving in Oslo in a flash car, he meets Vera; first he makes her laugh and then he gets her pregnant.

These chapters are the slowest of The Half Brother; the father's childhood in particular is a hinterland too far. With Barnum's introduction the novel feels better centred. Barnum gives a clue to the novel's technique when he complains about film directors who are frightened of silence, of space. Christensen provides "reams of detail", sounds, smells, images and conversations, presented almost without authorial comment in short, clear sentences. Many of these details the smell of Malaga wine for example -recur and fill the book with echoes. The style is cinematic -scenes are more often described than commented on -and though Barnum does not limit himself to a child's vocabulary, the narrating voice often has a childlike simplicity. Christensen rarely uses novelistic short-cuts such as potted biog- raphies and character sketches; actions are left to speak for themselves. This is Boletta, learning of her mother's death:

Boletta didn't start crying. She just dropped the coffee cups onto the floor.

They broke, one after the other. Then she tore off her apron and threw it onto the counter. After that we took a taxi up to Ulleval hospital.

The central contrast between tiny Barnum, let down by his stunted body, and morose, mysterious Fred, thwarted by his dyslexia, is obvious but effective.

Barnum loves and admires Fred even as he fears him and is embarrassed by him, while Fred's affection for Barnum emerges almost against his will as a mixture of protective feeling and aggression. The second half of the book is partly a portrait of the artist as a young man. Barnum meets Peder and Vivian, fellow adolescent outsiders. Together they discover the cinema and Barnum, inspired, starts writing scripts; we are given the complete screenplay of "The Fattening", an adaptation of his own dark experience of being a skinny child sent to a farm to be fattened up. He wins a prize from Norwegian Film and his script is acclaimed as "a didactic and imaginative attack on a perverse society", but, in the first of Barnum's disappointments, it is never filmed.

The triangular relationship between "Tiny" Barnum, "Fatty" Peder and Vivian, who was born in the car accident that destroyed her mother's face, could have become sentimental. Cliches that linger in the margins -the physically pathetic child who escapes into fantasy, the friendship that develops between unusual children, the love triangle that ends in disaster -are transformed by the individuality of the children and the oddity of their situation. Barnum kisses Peder in an attempt to get thrown out of a dancing class. Peder is thrown out for punching Barnum, while a self-possessed Vivian follows them. "No one wanted to dance with me", she says. "I couldn't be bothered staying." The boys are united by their physical defects - Barnum is short and Peder fat -and by their fascination with Vivian.

Minor characters worm their way into the narrative without any obvious authorial manoeuvring: the caretaker Bang, whose history as a triple-jumper gradually reveals itself as a potent influence on Barnum; Esther, who runs the kiosk where Barnum buys candy and, much later, sells pornography.

Patterns emerge organically that tie the text together. Perhaps the most significant is the pattern of absences. Barnum recalls "Fred, who'd been gone for 10 years, our great-grandfather, Wilhelm, who'd disappeared in the ice, Boletta's unknown husband, Dad's shadowy journey. . . ". The men who disappear are labelled "the night men" and to them Barnum could have added Rakel, his mother's Jewish friend whose disappearance during the war casts a shadow over everything that follows. Barnum thinks he will fill these absences with his writing and produce "my major work -this story that would centre around absence". This major work, to be called "The Night Men", is never finished.

There is a great deal of pain and death in The Half Brother but there is greater pleasure in the writing. It is exact both in the occasional image -film types fumbling for their mobiles "like rather tired gunfighters" -and in the depiction of changing relationships. Barnum's voice matures, becomes less innocent, more reflective. The sentences lengthen and he spends less time in the present and more in his past and in his writing. The narrative repeatedly shifts from past to present tense and back again, introducing a note of doubt: how much is Barnum remembering and how much is he imagining? In the early chapters, he narrates with an impossible omniscience but as the novel ends the reader understands that filling in the gaps in his past is an important part of the project.

Perhaps the greatest achievement in the writing is to maintain sympathy for Barnum as he becomes increasingly misanthropic. He abuses Peder's support and absents himself from Vivian for days.

The only time he feels happy is when he has a drink in his hand or is writing:

And it's at that moment, when the hand holding the pencil nears the page, when the finger falls towards a letter on the buckled, worn keyboard, that I'm in my element.

Giving us an early glimpse of the adult Barnum risks losing narrative drive -we know more or less how he will end up - but the childhood scenes gain great poignancy for the same reason. The gamble pays off. The simple structure works beautifully: when we come back to the opening sections after spending many hours seeing the world through Barnum's eyes, many of the questions they raise have been answered. Towards the close of the novel Barnum wonders: "Time. How can time be shown passing in a new way? If it were possible you could, for instance, put someone in front of a camera for fifty years and film the changes in their face. Possible title -Echo".

The Half Brother combines the meticulousness of a short story and the ambition of an epic and in doing so shows time passing in a new way. By favouring event over explication and imagination over analysis it allows readers to draw any appropriate conclusions. Kenneth Steven has helped by translating the novel superbly into precise, fluent English and deserves great recognition for an intimidating task flawlessly achieved.
