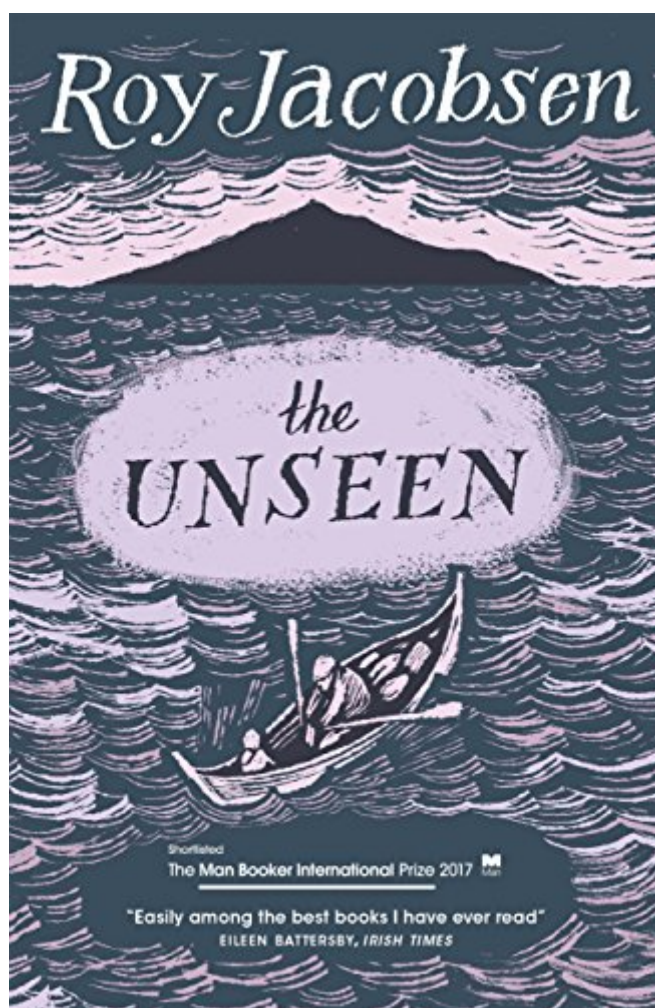


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The Unseen: SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE 2017



Synopsis

Shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize 2017 Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow. But occasionally someone tries . . . Ingrid BarrÃy is born on an island that bears her name - a holdfast for a single family, their livestock, their crops, their hopes and dreams. Her father dreams of building a quay that will connect them to the mainland, but closer ties to the wider world come at a price. Her mother has her own dreams - more children, a smaller island, a different life - and there is one question Ingrid must never ask her. Island life is hard, a living scratched from the dirt or trawled from the sea, so when Ingrid comes of age, she is sent to the mainland to work for one of the wealthy families on the coast. But Norway too is waking up to a wider world, a modern world that is capricious and can be cruel. Tragedy strikes, and Ingrid must fight to protect the home she thought she had left behind. Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw

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Customer Reviews

A great read.

"Islanders are never afraid, if they were they wouldn't be able to live here..." Roy Jacobsen, in *The Unseen*

The Unseen shows a way of life that would be foreign to most - early twentieth century Norway, an isolated island off the North-western coast, a rowboat the only tenuous link to the mainland, and a solitary family at the mercy of the unpredictable and often violent Arctic weather. Winter is a daily battle for survival, but these islanders know no other way of life. Not only are they up against the volatile weather, but their own hopes and dreams and fears, and a changing nation.

The fictional *Barrfjell* Island off the Norwegian coast is the main character of this novel. We get to know her intimately, all her hollows and crags, coves, headlands, white sandy beaches and her scarce trees. She is exposed to the elements, at the mercy of the unpredictable Arctic winds, the violent winter storms, frosts, snow, the merciless summer sun and threat of drought despite being surrounded by water. Her residents are few; sheep and cattle, at times a horse or a cat or a pig, and the sole family, the *Barrfjells* from who the island takes her name.

Hans *Barrfjell* is the head of the family. A fisherman at heart, he reluctantly accepts the necessity of farming but leaves the island for months each winter to fish the dangerous, but rich, Arctic seas. He leaves behind his father Martin and the three women to maintain the island in his absence. Martin is widowed and ageing, and is adjusting to his new role now he has passed the island to his son. Hans' wife Maria is strong and stoic, a hard worker but one who longingly gazes in the direction of her own family's island and dreams of a different life. Barbro is Hans' adult sister and he protects her fiercely. She carries a significant load of the physical work on the island despite her intellectual disability. Ingrid is three years old when we meet her, the only child of Hans and Maria. Hans watches her intently, searching for any sign that she has inherited the same condition as Barbro, which has been passed down his family line.

This is the story of Ingrid's coming-of-age. We see her grow from a three-year-old girl, curious and wise beyond her years, to a young woman who is strong in mind and body, and finding her place in the world. This is Ingrid's story, but it is much more than that. It is the story of the island, the stable and unchanging rock as she sees the seasons cycle by, summer to winter to summer to yet another winter. It is the story of a single family living on what should be inhospitable land, in isolation and at the mercy of the weather. They too watch as the seasons pass, as it is the seasons which rule their way of life. It is a harsh way of life, but the only one they know. It is the story of how this family, although having only a tenuous connection to the mainland, must adapt their way of life to the changing social and economical climate of the country as a whole. And it is the story of how far a man, with big plans and even bigger dreams, will go to leave his island, his legacy, in a better position than when he inherited it.

This is a quiet and slow, but powerful, story. There is no real plot to speak of, instead the reader is simply an observer

to this foreign way of life told through distinct episodes in time rather than one continuous narrative. The Barrfjell family do what they must to survive the volatile landscape and vicious storms, but also face the same changes, challenges and burdens as all families do, with births and deaths, hopes and dreams and fears and regret. And they do so without embellishing the drama. I particularly enjoyed the portrayal of the female gender as strong, independent and capable, rather than the usual gender norms we would see in an early twentieth century setting. The writing was wonderfully descriptive, with the violent storms and barren landscape particularly vivid, yet remained succinct for the most part. The isolation of the island and the unpredictable climate made for an eerie atmosphere. There was little dialogue, but what dialogue there was I found difficult to understand. "My word, hvor bitty it is. A can scarce see th' houses" is an example of one of the more understandable lines. The translation to English from this particular Norwegian dialect could have been tidied up. This would have been a bigger problem had there been more dialogue, but I am not certain I didn't miss some important developments. I did find the first half of the book very slow and difficult to engage with. Not a lot happened and the narrative was focused on Barrfjell Island and the four seasons. We did meet Hans and Maria, Ingrid and Barbro early on, although saw them only intermittently and briefly. I felt as though I didn't get to know them until much later in the book. Once the narrative became more character focused, I was able to understand them better and something definitely clicked. I became much more connected and invested in the story. The last 100 pages or so were sublime. I did enjoy this book, but for me it was a book of two halves. The first half was a bit too slow, I didn't see enough of the characters, it was too easy for me to put down and not intriguing enough for me to rush to pick it back up. The back half on the other hand was beautiful, exquisite and captivating. It had warmth and heart and soul, and I could not stop reading. This book needs a second read for me!

Roy Jacobsen's novel *The Unseen*, translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw, set early in the 20th century, is as bleak, spare and without frills, and as far from the shifting, rootless lives of modern cities as its chilly, austere setting suggests. This is a book which moves slowly, inexorably, and at times cataclysmically : nothing happens except by natural, seasonal rhythms. The most expressive and dominant character is the landscape itself, particularly a tiny island homestead, Barrfjell, settled and named by and for the family who fished and subsistence farmed it for a handful of generations. Patriarch Martin Barrfjell is reaching the end of his rule, lacking the physical strength to wrest fish from the icy waters, or repair a house constantly pounded by gales, torrential rain and driving ice and snow. His son Hans, married to

Marie is the real head of the family Their toddler daughter Ingrid, barely 3, and Hans, unmarried sister, Barbro are the only other residents on the island. Covering a timespan of barely a couple of decades, the high dramas of human existence birth and death, flowering and fading, are dealt with as they must be. These are lives of struggle, visceral and competent, intensely practical. It took me some time to settle into fascination and absorption with the recounting of the minutiae of day to day existence the fashioning of a jetty, for the better housing of the small fishing boats, the repeated destruction of the building by storms, the repeated rebuilding, the challenges of catching fish, drying, salting. Trading between the small islands and how the weather might make that impossible. This is not a book which takes the reader into deeply expressive interior journeys of character. There is a taciturnity about almost all the characters, they do not discuss their feelings. They are do-ers, not describers. When they do speak, their language is archaic, a dialect, and they are given at times words to say which show some relationship to Northumbrian dialect. These are Norsemen and women, for sure:

“My word, hvur bitty it is. A can scarce see th’ houses.”

Hans Barr says: “Oh, A can see ’em aright.”

“Tha’s better eyesight than mysel’, then,” the priest says, staring over at the community her has worked in for the last thirty years, but has never seen before from such a novel vantage point.

“Well, tha’s never been hier afore.”

“It’s a good two hours rowin’.”

“Has tha no sails?”

Hans Barr says. So, right away, the reader begins to think about an isolation beyond isolation. The Barrs must travel this long route to be able to trade their produce. Children need educating, and Ingrid, when she reaches school age, will need to make this journey to the larger island, and stay there, two weeks on, two weeks off, for the length of her schooldays. These are hardy people, daily battling with survival. This is a strange book, in the end, alluring, seductive, alien. The Barrs, all of them, have great dignity and authenticity. It’s strange, in some ways, to read a book where all the characters are in some ways so ordinary, so undysfunctional, so sturdy. For those disinclined to read representations of dialect, the fact that these islanders are taciturn will no doubt be a relief. For me, the dialogue worked, the short, pithy rhythms of speech have a music, and I was taken by the way the characters met their real life challenges with fortitude and grit. In a strange, bleak way the book has a kind of life affirming quality mainly because there is little sense of the kind of malevolence, deviousness and

treachery in these lives, instead a community unsentimental, borne out of the necessity of struggle, daily, with environment. People must trust, and must be able to trust each other. Treachery comes from wind and water, but that too is respected, viscerally loved and sensibly feared. These Lofotens are clearly a wealth away from the tourist destinations they have become a scant 100 years later. I received this as a digital copy for review, from the publishers, via NetGalley. And I recommend it. The Unseen is one of the short-listed titles for the Man Booker International Prize.

Throughout this tale of life out in the Islands off the coast of Norway I was captivated. All the characters have their place in the sublimely written narrative that makes you feel the cold, wet, heat and hardship of the (I imagined to be turn of the 19th-20th century) life of a family, whose world is their island. Beautifully and concisely written, you will be swept up in this most graphic description of the BarrÃfÆ'Ã Âys of BarrÃfÆ'Ã Ây. My only hesitation for not giving 5 stars is the language of the speaking. Always a tricky one this, how to translate the dialect into an English that is intelligible. Bits of it I got. Mercifully, there are no long speeches - perhaps a genuine reality of those people at the time - but there were short conversations of one line that I just could not understand. Did not spoil the book, though.

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