



My Struggle: Book Two: A Man in Love

Karl Ove Knausgård, Don Bartlett (Translation)

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Having left his first wife, Karl Ove Knausgaard moves to Stockholm, Sweden, where he leads a solitary existence. He strikes up a deep friendship with another exiled Norwegian, a Nietzschean intellectual and boxing fanatic named Geir. He also tracks down Linda, whom he met at a writers' workshop a few years earlier and who fascinated him deeply.

Book Two is at heart a love story—the story of Karl Ove falling in love with his wife. But the novel also tells other stories: of becoming a father, of the turbulence of family life, of outrageously unsuccessful attempts at a family vacation, of the emotional strain of birthday parties for children, and of the daily frustrations, rhythms, and distractions of Stockholm keeping him from (and filling) his novel.

"Intense and vital. . . . Where many contemporary writers would reflexively turn to irony, Knausgaard is intense and utterly honest, unafraid to voice universal anxieties. . . . The need for totality . . . brings superb, lingering, celestial passages. . . . He wants us to inhabit the ordinariness of life, which is sometimes vivid, sometimes banal, and sometimes momentous, but all of it perforce ordinary because it happens in the course of a life, and happens, in different forms, to everyone. . . . The concluding sentences of the book are placid, plain, achieved. They have what Walter Benjamin called 'the epic side of truth, wisdom.'"—James Wood, *The New Yorker*

"Ruthless beauty."—*Aftenposten*

"This first installment of an epic quest should restore jaded readers to life."—*The Independent*

"Between Proust and the woods. Like granite; precise and forceful. More real than reality."—*la Repubblica* (Italy)

My Struggle: Book Two: A Man in Love Details

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Olaf Gütte says

Marcel Reich-Ranicki hat einmal gesagt: "Es gibt nichts Langweiligeres als Geschichten über kleine Kinder"! Glücklicherweise geht es im zweiten Band von Karl Ove Knausgards autobiografischer Romanreihe nicht ausschließlich um kleine Kinder, man kann auch interessante Dialoge des Autors mit seinem Freund Geir verfolgen. Trotzdem kann ich nach diesem Roman den Hype um Knausgard nicht ganz nachvollziehen.

Geoff says

Book Two of *My Struggle* makes good on the promise of an 'epic of the everyday'; toward the end of the book Karl Ove describes his idea of literature as a kind of participation in the gaze of another, how only diaries and essays continue to move him as works of literature because that is where one might come closest to inhabiting another's gaze on the world, another's purview onto being. Thus the book he begins to write, thus the book we hold in our hands. For even here among the ascetic, exhaustive disclosure of raw daily living we find metafiction at work. "The new sincerity" though? I can't make the claim. People simply do not remember things in this way. Autobiographical fiction, yes... but sincere? I am in no position to qualify this. This is unmoored remembrance, digressive autobiographical meanderings, extended mauldering, with an emphasis on the creational aspect of dream-recall, because again no one remembers like this. The language is as spare as ever -it is my impression, correct or not, that not a single metaphor was employed throughout the entirety of these 600 pages. The sparseness, or attempt at a minimalist precision in the prose, at length can give the impression of a kind of austerity, severity, but the lie to this is given in unexpected moments of dark laughter and lengthy passages where the eye is cleared to apprehend the substructure of sublime beauty a landscape or a scene manifests. Karl Ove is especially susceptible to tempering his angst with a rejuvenation of the senses in a kind of nostalgic or aesthetic drawing-into the color of the sky, the twinkle of the stars, the inky night, the smell of a forest or salt water, the sound of waves, the sparkle of snow, the rhythms of a busy city, the mise-en-scene of a noisy gathering of people. The latter is where I can see a sort of similarity to Proust, though I still think it is a lazy critic who attempts to elucidate things about this project in terms of Proust, something else is at hand here. But there is a similar concentration on personality revealed during extended dialogue and minuscule observation from the narrator. Possible influences are revealed in this volume, Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* and Hamsun being, to me, the clearest analogs. But mostly this is a book about a rootless man attempting to write while managing a marriage and children - the primary concern of this book is what it is like to be a father in his mid-thirties and the attempt to come to terms with what his life is. The impressive thing is that Karl Ove manages to draw us so completely into his almost unremarkable daily concerns and makes them feel so vital to us, outside, gazing in on the gaze searching out. Again, the idea that every life is an odyssey, an epic, no one excluded. The adventure of becoming whatever it is you end up becoming. That there is a shadow always over our small happinesses and successes, and that there is a background of quiet hope behind our failures, that grasping our authenticity and our becoming is indeed a struggle. Perhaps this resonates the most with those of us who feel we don't exactly belong in the lives we one day find ourselves living, but isn't this everyone at some point? Karl Ove here in Book Two is cataloging a kind of universal alienation of the individual, and he does it with startling success. These books he has written are close to our lives, we should be glad they are out there for us to inhabit.

Marcello S says

Come si fa a scrivere (solo) due righe su un libro così?!

Lo dico subito: la parte migliore del libro è l'amore tra Karl e Linda, con le loro tecniche di avvicinamento non proprio infallibili.

Almeno all'inizio, i nostri sono bellissimi nel loro perdersi e ritrovarsi, tra mille silenzi e comportamenti imperfetti.

Le cose però cambiano e periodi di felicità si alternano ad altri di buio e liti furibonde.

E Linda ne esce come una rompicazzo insopportabile + possessiva + furiosa + maniaca + depressa + suicide-wannabe.

(Karl, nei prossimi volumi non dimenticarti di raccontarci quanto è stata felice di vedersi descritta così).

Anche la Svezia ne esce malconcia. Knausgård ce la racconta come un luogo chiuso ad ogni influenza esterna, dove i norvegesi vengono visti come dei selvaggi trasandati.

Dove non è ammesso nessun comportamento al di fuori di quello "appropriato". E dove "a nessuno interessa la Norvegia, la Norvegia in Svezia non esiste".

Non è una cronologia di eventi e situazioni. Si va avanti e indietro nel tempo.

Da applausi il modo in cui Knausgård incastra in ogni storia principale una caterva di sotto-narrazioni con salti carpiati all'indietro che alla fine, in qualche modo, riportano tutto a casa.

Da applausi anche la mia pazienza nel seguirlo, a dirla tutta.

La seconda parte è stata un po' più problematica. Troppo piena di dialoghi quasi impenetrabili, che ti lasciano il fiato corto. Di considerazioni poco godibili e un po' pesanti ai non esperti in materia (vedi: filosofia, costruzioni sociali, quadri, determinismo, saggi o romanzi di autori scandinavi).

Ci sono sigarette da fumare e chiacchiere al pub su purezza e moralità.

Pannolini da cambiare, piatti da lavare e preoccupazioni quotidiane del tutto normali.

Il finale è un ritorno a casa, tra paesini dispersi nei fiordi norvegesi. In luoghi in cui "non c'è davvero niente. E un tempo era tutto."

Da lì parte l'idea di Knausgård di parlare della sua vita, "cinque pagine al giorno, sempre, a ogni costo".

Parole chiave: vita privata | angoscia esistenziale | onestà intellettuale | non mediazione.

Epico e autentico. Solo un po' troppo lungo. [76/100]

"Della mia infanzia ricordo soltanto una manciata di episodi che ho sempre considerato determinanti e fondamentali, ma che adesso capisco essere immersi in un mare di altri avvenimenti, cosa che annulla completamente il loro significato, perché come faccio a sapere che proprio gli eventi che sono rimasti radicati dentro di me sono stati quelli decisivi e non tutti gli altri di cui non so nulla?"

Stephen P says

A man with no roots. The narrator wherever he has been has not belonged. This includes his interior as well as the exterior world. No wonder, as a writer, his only interest is to locate and express the truth. The truth is difficult he sees. External reality is endowed with meaning but only through his eyes. Otherwise it remains as objects of mass and outline.

However, his vision cauterized by the split between his shamed self (hints of his being abused) fostered by an unending castigation of his self, voiding out whatever significant successes he achieves with indifference. He is the man of indifference. From an early age realizing his is different than others with his sensitivity and interior life, can do nothing about it except erect the architecture of indifference. He claims to himself that all he wants is to be alone, read and write. Yet he marries a woman, second marriage, who for good reasons needs to be with others letting loose a flow of friends through their flat, a social calendar of insincere rounds of small talk visits with friends, and eventually three small children. Their life is built brick by brick with the prickle of chaos spurring further chaos. Thriving off of it they trade turns feeling victimized.

Wanting to be alone he caters everything to stifle the blood flow of an instinctive throbbing. This mimics his desire to feed his impulses as a search to behold his freedom versus building his life around doing whatever he has to do to be accepted by others. The necessity to be with others equals the cry to be alone. Built in and inbred it is what he knows how to do fight, both these battles, and sees time slipping away. As he reaches 35 before his eyes indifference eats up what time can be left, as has happened to his best friend in Stockholm, to do something of value, something surfacing from within him. Interestingly, this dynamic is played out between Stockholm and his native Norway. Stockholm being a place where everyone strives to appear the same following an arbitrary code eschewing any signs of individuality where Norway's winds breathe the breath of individuality into each soul.

The style of the writing is continued from My Struggle #1 but the ink thicker as confidence in the writing, conscious or unconscious, is further enhanced. As an adult his openness and honesty without comment about himself is unparalleled in literature. It is both autobiography and fiction, and neither. A reporting of every day life inner and outer, nothing can be too banal versus a narrative, with sparse sentences devoid of metaphoric, poetic, swathes, though the writing within this style is mostly a joy to read. But it is not read. Imbibed without the effort of reading, thinking while words enter unnoticed. The catch is that at sometime the book needs to be closed to eat or sleep. Then the profundity, acuity, of the writing surfaces.

All memory is fictional and therefore all biography is fictional. Fiction is fiction. Karl-Ove, willing to give up fame, fortune sought a mixture which chemists may not dissolve into their component parts, an attempt at bare truth. The reader experiences a solidity of the narrator's character that has not been captured in writing of either style. This particular blend removed all and any sign of the author. Strange, since it is all about and told in first person by Karl-Ove. However, it is Karl-Ove the narrator not Karl-Ove the author. It is no slender line. There is nothing sly going on here, no sign of an attempt at being cute of trying to pull off a new narrative strategy. This is his struggle with no consideration that it is any greater than or significantly different than ours.

The difference, along with the style, is the invitation and experience to actually live within another human being. An intelligent, articulate, flawed man possibly allowing the reader to see and understand more than he does of himself. It is a rare experience. Sometimes disarmingly so but continuously rewarding. A person so

willing and capable of revealing himself through the reporting of the minutia, more exalted parts of his life, his weaknesses, also extends the invitation for the reader to examine their own lives. An added gift of no extra charge. It is not so much that one comes out of reading this novel as changed but that one is offered the opportunity to change.

There are breaks of minutia, description, repetition, which serve to highlight what fills in around it. In an interview on Bookworm he confirms the intentionality of this. However, for me the jazz quartet at infrequent times stayed too long with the banal of the piece no longer underscoring the swift, high flying solos to follow but injecting an unwanted disruption. Therefore the painful loss of 1 star which yearns to return.

My Struggle 2 was not a suspense thriller I could not put down. Yet, I read for longer periods of time than any book previous. Always, I looked forward to returning to Karl-Ove, a person who I knew much better than most I've known in the, "Real" world. Reading this book is a quiet storm. Its ramification, meanings, its full experience is yet to come.

Manny says

[from *Min kamp 1*]

It was now more than two weeks since I had published my review of *Min kamp 1*, and during that time I had not posted anything new. Every day, I stared at the screen, tried to begin, abandoned my unsuccessful attempt after half an hour. Maybe I would never again manage to produce a meaningful piece of writing. I checked my mail for the third time that afternoon. Someone I didn't know said they thought it was amazing that I could read the books in the original Norwegian. There's nothing much to it, I wrote back. I lived in Sweden for ten years, and Norwegian is closely related. After I had replied, I was filled with self-loathing. How could I waste my time on such trivia? Once more, I vowed I would stop doing it, but I knew I was too weak-willed. I went downstairs to have a cigarette.

But you don't smoke, said my girlfriend Not when I returned.

I do when I'm reviewing Knausgård, I said in an irritated voice. I went into the kitchen and began to unstack the dishwasher. I put each item back in its correct place: the glasses directly over the sink, the cups next to them, the flat plates in the cupboard above the counter, the bowls beneath it, the cutlery in the plastic holder opposite, the wooden spoons in the box that had once held a bottle of Old Pulteney.

You don't really want to be doing this, do you? asked Not, as she came over to put her arms around me. What would you rather be doing instead? Reading *Min kamp 2*, I snapped. I just need time to finish it. Not began to weep quietly, and I immediately regretted my harsh words. She is a very fragile person, who has never recovered from being raped by her step-father at the age of 12. Or possibly it was something else that had happened to her. I have a poor memory for this kind of thing. As usual, I found myself apologizing.

Come on, said Not, as she dried her eyes. Let's go for a walk. You can bring your book. I put on my sandals, took a pair of sunglasses from the bowl near the door, dropped the Knausgård in a blue cloth shopping bag and opened the door. We took the elevator down, passing the fourth, third, second and first floors on our way to the bottom. Although I had already done so earlier, I checked the mailbox, but there was nothing new. I opened the street door. We went out on to rue du Mont-Blanc, then turned left down rue de Chantepoulet. So what do you think your review will be like? asked Not. I don't know, I said. I think the review form is

exhausted. The last worthwhile thing posted on Goodreads was Geoff Wilt's review of *Finnegans Wake*. There are only two more reviews on the site that are worth reading. Everything else is simply mediocre. Including my work. I look at it, and all I can think is: it's just more stuff about books. It's without value. Dishonest.

We had now reached the lake. With the setting sun behind us, the scene resembled one of Rothko's paintings. At the bottom, the darker blue of the water merged into the grey-blue of the Salève, then into the lighter shades of the sky. A smear of white on one side marked the Jet d'Eau; the darker spots in the foreground resolved themselves into a family of ducks, slowly paddling upstream against the current of the Rhône.

You don't need to write about the book, said Not, as she took my hand. Just write about your life. Whatever you like. You're an excellent writer. You could write about going to the bathroom and people would read it.

You know, I said, you might be on to something there.

[to *Min kamp 3*]

Ken says

How the hell does Karl Ove (I feel as though we are best friends now) pull this off? No way should he be managing this. I loved the first magnum, despite the downward spiral of a dying alcoholic father, and now I'm giving highest marks to the follow-up opus as well. Four more books are promised to come. I don't doubt it. The man can go on and on and on to the point where detractors might equate his diary-like approach to a diarrhea-like one (only with words, thank you).

I like Book Two despite the fact that the first 80 pp. read like a Mr. Mom rant, despite the fact that the book just ends randomly (or, as the big shots like to write, *in media res*), and despite the fact that most of the 573 pp. consist of mundane daily existence. It's like a literary reality show, an intellectual soap opera, a blow-by-blow follow-the-author Big Brother live cam from Scandinavia.

So, what gives? I have to think about this. A lot of little things are at work, and a few big ones. Voice, of course. He's hitting the right note, even if I don't quite know what note that is (sharp, flat, whatever). The setting (mostly Sweden here, as opposed to Norway in Book One) gives him ample canvas to paint on, too. Speaking of, he knows a lot about painters. And writers.

And I like to listen to him blather on with opinions about both, just as I love to read Hemingway when he goes on and on about books and writers and painters. And speaking of *Hemingway*, Knausgard likes to write about drinking just like the big-bearded lug. A little-bearded lug, Karl Ove's picture makes me wonder how he's still standing. By the looks of him, he could keel over any second. Liquor and cigarettes can give you that collapsible, desiccated look. Watch out for stiff Scandinavian breezes, is my advice.

But seriously, a review of some sort at least. It's not a novel. An autobiography, maybe -- or "memoir," which allows for novelistic liberties. Much easier to invent stuff when the stuff is breaking out all around you. And quite a conceit. Not only Proust, but Rousseau would be proud. And so many others who have written *Karl Odes to Themselves*. You get a lot of young husband-wife bickering here and much ado about bringing up babies. First, though, a *Moby Dick*-like birthing scene for Baby One. Wife Linda screams for 30 pp..

But more interesting to me (my kids are grown up) was the banter with his best friend Geir. This guy is yin to Karl Ove's yang. Where Karl Ove is withdrawn, a Romantic, and one to avoid conflict, Geir is outgoing, a Realist, and happy to engage (even taking a "vacation" in Iraq!). More interesting still, Geir is a boxer and intellectual. Neat combination, that. And, meeting over beer, aquavit, grappa, or whatever, these two talk about everything under the sun -- mostly the Scandinavian sun, but that's cool, too. You learn a lot about Scandinavian literature (and I love Hamsun, anyway).

So yeah, that. It's kind of like the upside of college, the days you stayed up late and argued passionately about intellectual stuff. Karl Ove still enjoys that with his pals (few as they are), and we get ringside seats. I jotted down names of painters, musicians, poets, novelists, etc., out of sheer curiosity. Unfortunately, many of them are not translated into English.

In the end, then, the Diary of an Everyday Life only works if you care, if your temperament matches Knausgard's, and if you like minutiae and a writer not only willing but dying to digress. He picks up colors and textures and sensory details nicely, too. In that sense and in those scenes, he shows similarities with Tolstoy.

Speaking of Tolstoy and similarities, we might as well throw solipsism in the mix. Knausgard's ruminations on death -- the death of ME, specifically -- admits to us all that he is the center of his universe and not afraid to say so. He almost seems to be saying, "Do you dare to deny that you are the center of YOURS? Who cares what will become of the world. For all intents and purposes, It ends when you do!"

And like Knausgard's book does. Randomly.

Ellie says

I can't stop reading-I bought the next volume as soon as I got ten pages near the end. Long passages of excruciating detail of mundane events (such as making a cup of tea, taking little children out to school, marital arguments over chores) suddenly lit by poetry. Uneasy feelings in social situations, readings in (to me) exotic locales, the light of memory that fades with time-and the lights that don't. Ruminations on art, modernism, poetry, literature, and the meaning (if there is one) of life. I'm loving this book-this whole saga.

The location is interesting too.

It's interesting to watch interviews with the author. He sounds like his wife's descriptions of him in the book but not at all like his feelings about himself.

I could fall in love. In fact, I may already have.

Jessica says

I really, really, really loved the first one of these, but I did not love this one. It was at times a... *slog* to get through. There were some great moments and I'm glad I finished it, because it ended strong, but the majority fell into the risky trap of this project, and read to me like excerpts from a self-absorbed parenting blog detailing what life is like as a successful writer with a family in Sweden (spoiler alert: in the absence of any

other worries -- medical bills, say, or the need to do unpleasant work for a living, Scandinavians have the leisure to spend days purchasing books and contemplating how miserable they are). Sweden does sound annoying in that too-good-to-be-tolerable way, sort of like Portland but with socialized medicine and an entire class of people gainfully employed in producing culture. Plus too dark and cold. Anyway. My current life is somewhat similar to the one described by Knausgård, minus the success and people dropping by regularly to tell me how brilliant and talented and good-looking I am. I too am stuck home with a baby, and while in one way this made the book more interesting than it would've been otherwise, in another it made me wonder why I should bother reading about his, when I have plenty of Struggles of my own (yes, I get that that's the point, but it didn't stop me from wondering it).

I kept trying to decide why I loved the first one but didn't really have the patience for this. Part of it is that bourgie creative-class life in present-day (or very recent) Stockholm just isn't nearly as interesting to me as life growing up in Norway in the seventies; there wasn't magic in this one, as there was in the first, except in a few rare moments and then at the end. The first book transcended the mundane casually, habitually, pretty much constantly, while the second was the opposite: we got stuck with much less fascinating characters, in an infinitely less compelling landscape, for hundreds and hundreds of pages. Clearly this was the point, but again, knowing that didn't make it any more interesting to read.

My other problem -- and I hate admitting this, because I secretly think people are stupid when they demand likable characters, so this is me saying that I'm stupid -- was that I couldn't stand Knausgård or his partner or his friend or really anyone else in the book. Much as I'd love to be too high-minded to let this trouble me, in the absence of captivating plot, atmosphere, language, theme, etc., I am not and it did. His partner seemed miserable, he seemed like a dick, and I just kept being like, "Will you unhappy whining people please *stop* having more children?" which, yes, again, I do get that that's the point but it didn't make this any more of a pleasure to read. I know this makes me sound like a moron, but there were all these times when he would say something gross about, say, a disabled person, or American Indians, or the time he smashed a poor furry bat with a brick (I love bats), and I'd just be like, "Why am I doing this dick the courtesy of inhabiting his head?" This dramatized a tension that's always made me uncomfortable: that as a reader, you're having an intimate experience with a person who is more than likely not someone you'd ever spend actual time with, being as a lot of writers are socially anxious weirdos, arrogant assholes, or just not people I'd ever want to know, or who'd ever want to know me. I learned pretty early on it was usually better to avoid meeting my favorite living writers, and even to avoid reading interviews with writers or other artists whose work had affected me, because their real-life personas were always disappointing in a way that disturbed my relationship with their work. Knausgård is aware of and interested in this, and he forces the issue by being the subject of his book, and by being obsessively self-reflexive about the question of what others (including us, his readers) think of him.

Writing this review is making me realize that many of the things that made this book interesting were the things that made it not much fun to read. However, I am a casual ditcher of books I don't enjoy but I stuck this one out, and on some level I did feel my struggle was worth it. The ending, when he returns to Norway and then starts writing the first book, is at points almost unspeakably beautiful. And, being me, I cried at the end. There are some things he's doing here that are great, and in themselves worthwhile. I haven't decided yet if I'll keep going to number three... probably I will, though after a long pause. This took me forever to get through but I wouldn't let myself start new novels until I finished it, so I've got a major backlog of books that aren't about Karl Ove Knausgård's struggle, and I'm looking forward to reading some of those.

Justin Evans says

I'm torn between taking part in the backlash against the Knausgaard hype--because, let's be honest, there are plenty of authors more deserving of front page attention from every newspaper, magazine and website with 'New York' in the title--and trying to get in early on the revisionism to the backlash, by pointing out that although Knausgaard is not Proust or Woolf, nor is he trying to be, and it's not his fault that every newspaper, magazine and website with 'New York' in the title decided to put him on their cover at the same moment. Frankly, the idea that any serious author could possibly drum up that level of support before s/he is dead is rather heartening.

Which will it be, I wonder, backlash or revisionism-to-the-backlash? Probably more backlash, I admit, but while lashing back I will try to remember that, read on its own terms rather than in the context of Knausgaard-is-the-new-black rhetoric, this book is an ideal airplane novel. In fact, Knausgaard's real achievement is probably that he's written a book that compels you to turn the pages, while also not being a complete idiot. If contemporary literature is any guide, that puts him in a class of one.

On the other hand, I'm more than a little concerned that the book is so readable just because it makes the life I (and probably most of his other readers) lead seem epic and worthy of attention. That makes me feel a warm glow. I recognize the things that Karl Ove goes through in the book. I relate to him.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, in short, turns me into a high school senior, reading only books in which the main character looks, feels, talks and acts like the reader him or herself. I look forward to finishing the series and writing an essay or review: "Karl Ove Knausgaard is More Dangerous to Literature than Harry Potter."

More seriously: Knausgaard is a literary existentialist who knows that i) he's a literary existentialist and ii) knows that being a literary existentialist is more than a little silly. He very self-consciously flips back and forth between his Holderlin mood (oh world! how beauteous thou art!) and his Bernhard mood (fuck off). He is ultra-individualistic, and recognizes that this causes him problems and pain, but can't quite break out of it. This level of reflection raises this volume far above the first, and gives me reason to keep reading. No mean feat.

It helps that his friend Geir is a total champion, and that Knausgaard is willing to let another voice provide some context on his (the author's) life. I hope for more Geir to come.

Helle says

Though his style and agenda have nothing in common with Virginia Woolf, Karl Ove Knausgård, too, has an outrageous and uncanny ability to mix the banal and the lofty, the quotidian and the existential without ever upsetting the balance. He deals, in short, with life, and in this process he cuts off all layers of pretension and untruth and reveals the rawness, the failures, the temporary successes and the anxieties of modern life.

In this second installment of Knausgård's massive opus, he zooms in on children and relationships, on falling in love, on his opposing needs for family life and for solitude, on trying, ultimately, to be a good man. As in the first book, he makes no bones about his shortcomings – this time as a father and as a partner, but nor is anyone else spared the brutal honesty of his pen – from his wife's depressions to his mother-in-law's drinking problem – he deals in all of it. Although it is an autobiographical novel, subsequent interviews have

revealed little invention in these revelations; this is his life, these are the people in it. (Characteristically, he even chronicles the birth of his first child, right down to his wife's pains, primal screams and contractions, the too mild anesthetics, the intern who had to join the midwife. I felt a jolt of *déjà-vu*, and not for the first time my heart went out to his wife).

As in my recent reading experience of Hilary Mantel's 2nd installment of the Cromwell series, something clicked into place when I began this second volume. I was familiar with the confessional tone, I knew the main participants and could easily conjure up the scenery again (although we move from Norway to Sweden) and thus could better sit back and enjoy the journey he took me on. And once again, part of the attraction of *Min Kamp (My Struggle)* is in its recognizability: it is both voyeuristic and liberating (occasionally also annoying) to read of how Knausgård feels emasculated when he walks his child's pram through Stockholm; how he feels ambivalent about modern life and longs for the renaissance (e.g. he imagines what it would be like to live in a world which Shakespeare is about to enter); how poetry seems an unconquerable land to him and how that makes him feel unworthy, yet how he tries to come to terms with it – how he constantly tries to come to terms with all these thoughts and actions (and often fails) that he considers shortcomings but which most of us are guilty of in different ways all the time. Few people bring them out into the open like Knausgård does, and presumably that is why some of the reviews in Danish newspapers have claimed that: he doesn't write about himself; he writes about me, about all of us.

It isn't all about children and relationships, though. The main storyline (which is never chronological) is interspersed with strange anecdotes about friends, parents, snakes, crazy Russian neighbours, nature. The minute descriptions of the materials of the world – the things in it – sometimes reminded me of *American Psycho* in its endless listing of items which seemingly serve no purpose other than to act as a kind of backdrop for the likewise endless reflections. We get some interesting Norwegian perspectives on Sweden from the exile's point of view (e.g. on conformity), many of which I've heard from my Danish friend living in Stockholm. Along the route he muses on his own writing, on literature, on other writers. He is reading *The Brothers Karamazov* while writing this book and complains that while he can't help reading Dostoevsky, he also feels the novel has a hysterical quality to it. The existential questioning he brings into his reading, he also demonstrates in some of the dialogue between, especially, himself and his best friend, Geir. They have some conversations in the latter half of the book that not only resonated profoundly with things I realized I had thought myself but which also, in my view, moved the book into a league of its own.

He dips in and out of second hand bookshops, buying obscure and well-known books alike. He heads for a café, has a coffee and a cigarette and reads for so long that he arrives home too late for supper. He is both an unapologetic reader and writer. He says at one point: *Listen af ting, jeg gerne ville læse, var lang som et ondt år*, meaning roughly *The list of books I wanted to read was as a long as a year of evil*, the latter part being a Danish, and presumably Norwegian, saying, which underlines exactly how he feels chained to his books, whether as a reader or a writer. His writing is not necessarily a labour of love. It is what he feels he *must* do.

There is a Nordic melancholia that pervades the book. At times it – he – was too much, and I had to put aside his ruthless introspection for something lighter that would let me breathe. At other times, this book precisely enables free breathing: he leaves no stone unturned, is continually unplugged, leaving me, for a while at least, feeling as if I, too, had shed layers of untruth by proxy.

(James Wood, too, is a fan of Knausgård. Here is his interview with him in:
<http://www.theparisreview.org/intervi...>)

M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/9034512...>

As I was nearing the end of *Volume II* I actually felt a bit silly and embarrassed as I looked forward to reading my customary turtle-paced six pages each morning. I used the book as part of my daily meditation as I knew there was no way I could read it like I do novels in which I am interested in and cannot help myself in finishing more than too fast. And as hard as it was for me to trudge through the almost endless Knausgård rhetoric involving changing dirty diapers and idle conversation with people of no interest to him or to me it struck me constantly how there are very few writers I respect and admire that I would give the same reverence to as I seem to give this guy Knausgård. I am simply indifferent these days to child-rearing, and this is one of the major points of focus in his life as a writer. But in all his endless chatter regarding his self-inflicted mundane life, and my growing disinterest in basically everything he does but write, he seems to not care one bit what I might think of him and what he says. Knausgård himself claims he would never understand why anyone would read him either. And somehow I feel sorry for him even as he wheels his double-wide baby carriage full of cash to deposit into his local bank.

Karl Ove Knausgård has been compared to Marcel Proust, and unfairly so it seems. It is likely because Knausgård's completed series spans six large books. I never felt I had enough time left in my life to properly give Proust a fair reading at the expense of so many other novels I felt I still had to read. Though I have tried a bit in the past to read Proust I gave up the struggle rather quickly. I did recognize his greatness just from the little bit I read. And I happened to own quite a lovely set of his books I sold for a rather large sum a few years ago, not to mention my visiting his grave in Père Lachaise.

Quite often the agenda-based literary types complain about Knausgård's maleness, race, and sexual orientation being one and the same with all the other media-driven marketing stars of time past. I basically do not have any need either for elitist white man's drivel, or parenthood, daycare, or love relationships, mothers and fathers and the sins inflicted on their children, drinking, beating off, or whatever it is these complainers are talking about. I read for the words, the language, and even though Knausgård is reported to not like the English translation of his books is even more reason for me to read them. He is also a contrarian and I believe the world needs more of them in it. As for the powers-that-be and their marketing genius focussed on the white heterosexual I say, "have at it." Hardly anybody reads anymore anyway. At least not anything literary. I never have liked people with agendas, or organizations that think they know better, or works of art that complain about things as they are. I prefer, through the language, to get my socks knocked off every chance I get. Knausgård does NOT do that for me, but there is something about him that has several really smart people trying to figure out what that is, and certainly not because he is popular today with a few wannabes. Something occurs in his text that changes things, that alters something in our bodies, and there is a redemptive quality after finishing these rather long books. And don't ask me why because I don't know what it is.

I rarely, if ever, buy a book due to its marketing. The few times I have I was extremely disappointed and swore I would never do it again. I read a lot and learn of other writers I might be interested through this process of discovery. I am involved quite intimately with like-minded readers who offer me so many book recommendations that there is no way I can possibly get to them all. I am so far removed from the marketing aspect that I feel I am on the fringe. Add that in the summer I spend four months in Michigan in a cabin with no TV and I am basically advertisement-free. And when I am home in Kentucky I watch internet TV services such as Netflix and amazon prime and again have no marketing thrown at me at all. It is only during the Super Bowl, The Kentucky Derby, and the nightly news that I am bombarded by ads for Viagra, Depends,

and other unsavory delectables. And I do not watch Oprah or read her shitty magazine. So marketing does not work for me, or on me. And the readers who depend on these advertisers and blurbs to tell them what to read deserve what they get.

There is nothing in Vol II of *My Struggle* that feels important enough for me to comment on. It is enough for me that I finished another book in this series. I have not learned much from Knausgård either. I don't like the music he listens to or even many of the books he reads. And it is perhaps because of our age difference that he matters so little to me as a contemporary. But what I do like is his style, his indifference to what any of us might think of him, and his determination to see this project through. He is going to continue telling us his life story and we might all as well get used to it. He is a relatively big star in regards to the few people who might be reading him. He is a dark and dangerous man, and has looks that compare with an actor named Bridges. Knausgård is as stunned as some of we are at his current success. I find myself simply happy for him and despise all the jealous griping. And Knausgård is not a creep, which is saying more for him than other media darlings who seem to get far more marketing attention than he.

Darwin8u says

A Man in Love

"The fact that paintings and, to some extent, photographs were so important for me had something to do with this. They contained no words, no concepts, and when I looked at them what I experienced, what made them so important, was also non conceptual. There was something stupid in this, an area that was completely devoid of intelligence, which I had difficulty acknowledging or accepting, yet which perhaps was the most important single element of what I wanted to do."

-- Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle* Book 2

Sometimes writing a review of a book is just about marking the space, staking the ground, scratching the wall with hard chalk. I swim back and forth about how I feel about Knausgaard. Hell, I swim back and forth about whether I want to spell his last name Knausgaard or Knausgård. Right now I don't feel strongly either way. Completely ambivalent. Sometimes, I think Karl Ove's art is his huge capacity for being pretentious and narcissistic, but (just to be fair) I also think the same thing about most artists. There is something about the personality of an artist that IS by their nature selfish, demanding, exhibitionist: crying for notice, for acclaim, for some distant other to meet their gaze, catch their pitch, experience their trip. I think of the story of Picasso's daughter showing him her beautiful new shoes, and he takes them and paints them and makes her cry.

And I mean all this ego art as a good thing. I guess what, for me, sets Karl Ove apart from other fiction artists/authors is he exposes (or at least wants us to THINK he exposes) a lot more about his life in his art. His self is stylized, but not hidden. He isn't hiding his ego behind another character. He makes his ego a character. He isn't trying to hide his flaws (and boy sometimes there seems to be buckets of flaws) or those of his family (see Linda) or friends. He uses those weaknesses like a painter uses shadow or a carpenter uses sandpaper.

His prose seems to jump between three styles:

1: Hyper-detailed narrative about his life. This isn't a straight narrative. He will jump back and forth in time. He starts with three kids, backs up to before he meets Linda, progresses through courting, marriage, babies, and during this journey forward will occasionally run back in time as he recalls events or situations that add to his current narrative. Anyway, this style is the bulk of the book and allows for very descriptive accounts of fights with his wife, struggles with family members, trips, walks, meals, etc. It is like he took his journal/diary and just tossed it in and expanded it.

2. Excursions into philosophy. In the middle of an event in his life, Karl Ove will suddenly digress and spend 3-10 pages discoursing on literature, painting, angels, life, death, children.

3. Excursions into nature/city. Not only does he take walks, but any movement might lead Karl Ove into a journey into a sunset, swarm of birds, buildings, beach, clouds. He is painting with words, trying to capture in words what a Turner or one of his photographer friends might capture with a lens.

4. Discussions with friends (mainly his close friend Gier). These parts accomplish the same things as 2, but as a dialogue with counterpoints instead of a straight inner monologue.

So, here I sit 1/3 (or two books) into 'My Struggle' and not yet tired of it. My feelings for these books ebb (Franzen at his worst) and flow (Proust at his best) depending on the prose and my own mood. At times, when I'm feeling great and the book seems to be *on fleek*, it all ends up being a groove I was meant to slide down (++), but there are times when the prose seem to be working fine, but I'm just not feeling it (+-) or when the prose kinda stinks, but I seem not to mind very much (-+). Thankfully, there have been very few instances where me and the novel seem to be mired at the same time (--). I might have lost faith (at times) in Knausgård as a person, but not in what he has written (yet), and not yet in his role as an artist.

"Over recent years I had increasingly lost faith in literature. I read and thought this was something someone has made up. Perhaps it was because we were totally inundated with fiction and stories...The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person? Not directed above us, nor beneath us, but at the same height as our own gaze. Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can, art is something you are alone with. You meet its gaze alone."/

-- Karl Ove Knausgård, *My Struggle Book 2*

Matt says

[continued from [here](#)]

At 8%, and once again I'm eating an apple. Coincidence!? An apple a day keeps the doctor away; they say. Karl Ove and his family are eating apples too. On a family trip to an amusement-park. The muse is long gone; the park peeled off and ugly, but the kids don't notice. The first food mentioned in a novel has to mean something, right? A symbol ... maybe? Apples are secretly driving our fate. The tree of knowledge, the forbidden fruit, the apple falling on Newton's head, and the apple tree Martin Luther wants to plant on pre-doomsday? All of these appleish representations are in dispute. Sometimes an apple is just an apple.

•••

At 22% Karl Ove arrives in Stockholm; trying to buy a scarf. Not an easy task for a Norwegian alien in

Sweden it seems; a fest for false friends if I add German and English too: Halsduk, Halstuch, Halstørkle, Scarf, Schal, Shawl, Sjal. [Mental note: arrive in Sweden in summer or bring a scarf]

••●••

At **30%** and Karl Ove managed to nest his memories five levels deep now; if I'm not mistaken. A story within a story within a story within a story within a story. I hope he finds his way back. I hope *I* do.

••●••

At **45%**. It's 5:30am and I'm in the office. It's quiet. The only other person in the building is far away. The tea is ready. At this time of day there's almost no noise coming from the street below. I can open the windows. The first thing I read this morning is a Wikipedia entry about *Malbolge*. As you probably know this is the name (different spelling) of the eighth circle of hell in Dante's Inferno. It's also the name of a programming language. That's what I'm interested in; that's my job – sort of. The programming language from hell! Invented in 1998, it's so complicated that it took two years for the first programm to appear. This is what a "Hello World!" program looks like in *Malbolge*:

```
(=<`#9]~6ZY32Vx/4Rs+0No-&Jk)"Fh}  
|Bcy?`=*z]Kw%oG4UUS0/@-ejc(:'8dc
```

A strange noise interrupts my thoughts. I look out the window and see a giant street sweeper crawling up the street. Its color is a light yellow and on its side there are huge letters forming the word **SCHRUBBER**. There's a car double-parking in front of the building across the street. The **SCHRUBBER** has to go around it. The maneuver is painfully slow and tight and I wonder what the driver is thinking now. Does he like his job? I close the window and return to my desk. My interest in *Malbolge* has vanished and I go back to Knausgård. Linda is pregnant.

••●••

At **50%**. Knausgård is a master of digression and one of slowness. Suits me just fine on this beautiful day. It's neither too hot, nor cold, no rain and no humidity to speak of. The sky isn't all a boring blue but you have some clouds to look at. I listen to the kids from the kindergarten next door as they play outside in the sun. Four little stories from kindergarten are in Knausgård's book so far. From my own relatives who live in Norway I know that Norwegians are good with kids. But this is Sweden and Karl Ove doesn't seem so fond of the kindergarten. His duties there interfere with his *life*, he thinks. Maybe he still has to find his real identity? The other sound coming from outside is the rustling of the trees. This is weird, because the rustling always reminds me of the movie *Blowup* by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. A great movie this is. But even greater is Antonioni's *The Passenger*. Jack Nicholson plays David Locke, a TV journalist making a documentary in post-colonial Africa, then decides to impersonate a man who died in his hotel. It turned out the dead man was an arm dealer, and Locke travels through Europe to the appointments the dead man made. The camera-work in this movie is astounding. The penultimate scene is a long single tracking shot. The camera moves from a hotel room through the bars that are placed in front of the window to a beaten down village square then turns 180 degrees and moves back into the room. That's seven minutes in which basically nothing happens and you have ample time to ponder what happened before in the movie. In a way this movie reminds me of Knausgård's book. Nothing happens and it's very slow, but in a dense kind of way that sucks you right in.

••●••

At **66%**. While Karl Ove takes us through a part of Stockholm, my thoughts wander off seven years back to a trip we made through a part of Norway called *In a Nutshell*. Hardangerjøkulen / Nærøyfjord / Flåm / Aurlandsfjord. I have go there again one time.

Knausgård took Linda from Moss to Balestrand via Oslo and Flåm once; funny I followed his footsteps before I even knew about him. Above me, on the first floor, my nephew (for lack of a better word) is playing piano. Something complicated, Rachmaninov perhaps, or Chopin; with many notes in any case. He lives in Norway (my nephew, not Rachmaninov, but is German) and he knows Knausgaard, but only through the media. The scandals that *Min Kamp* had triggered were omnipresent. Any PR is good PR, isn't it, Karl Ove? *potius amicum quam dictum perdere.*

••●••

At **78%**. The little family is visiting Linda's parents in the Swedish countryside. A song comes to mind:

*Tram wires cross Northern skies
Cut my blue heart in two
My knuckles bleed down tattered street
On a door that shouldn't be in front of me
...
Whisper me words in the shape of a bay
Shelter my love from the wind and the waves*
Emily Barker -- Nostalgia [Wallander Theme]

Discussing Norway's history with my nephew; constitution day on May 17th; people walking in uniforms; the subtle difference between patriotism and nationalism; Being mildly shocked when I heard about the first constitution of Norway (1814) that included (in the second paragraph) a general ban against Jews and Jesuits entering the country. Knausgård already mentioned the constitution day; will he also mention this? Still have a long way to go with *Min Kamp*.

••●••

At **85%**. I guess this was inevitable. Yesterday I walked through a light forest. There was a creek, which I followed, until I came to a small house. The stream flowed along one side of the house and was driving a water wheel. My guess that this could be here an old forge was confirmed when I heard a noise from the house that sounded like hammer blows on an anvil. Apparently there was a blacksmith at work. The door of the house stood open and I went inside. The smith was a tall man, and stood with his back to me in front of his forge. He poked with a rod in the hot coals and then a small fire began to blaze. He didn't seem to notice me. He picked up the rod, which was actually a long plated pliers, from the fire and led it to the anvil. The pliers was holding an elongated piece of steel, glowing orange, and on which he was now pounding with his hammer. Suddenly the blacksmith began to speak. "Forging is an *art* from which everyone thought it's no longer needed. Ha! You know what this nail is for?" He held up the glowing piece of steel, and I realized it was indeed a four-sided nail about fifteen centimeters long. Before I could answer he said: "Exterior facades. Nothing better than these nails. Common nails you get at the hardware store, hold three years tops before they rust. And they cleave the wood, moisture penetrates, mold is the consequence. Screws are slightly better, five to ten years, and then – rust and mold. But this nail will last six hundred years. That's what I call a warranty! You want one?" He probably thought, if I wanted to have a nail. When I still didn't answer the blacksmith raised his head, so I could see his face for the first time. It was Karl Ove Knausgård. He grinned. The nail, which he had held up, had turned into a rolled book and on the spine I could read the letters "in" and "Kam". He led the book on the anvil, it glowed a little, and he started again with his hammer. Then I woke up. Strange dream this was.

••●••

At **95%**. DAMN!

I meant to finish the book last night but I couldn't. I was happily reading along on my Kindle when the darn device suddenly acted up and rebooted. It seems I forgot to switch off WiFi-mode, and the Kindle started to download a new Firmware OTA and then installed it.

DAMN! DAMN!

I had to stare on some polite messages and progress bars instead of reading for at least 20 minutes. My precious reading time was gone just like that.

DAMN! DAMN! DAMN!

The only good thing I found out is that Knausgård indeed managed to get out of the nested story telling alright; back on the first level. Congrats, Karl Ove; but I think you have to work on your damned temper tantrums.

••••

At **100%**. FINISHED ... for now. So, what have I read? Is it the/a autobiography of Karl Ove Knausgård, his memoir, some sort of diarrheal diary, or the literary equivalent of a reality TV show? With only two out of six books read (28% if you count the pages) I think it's too early to tell. The word *Roman* (=novel) on the original Norwegian (and also German) book covers makes me think there must be more to the picture than meets the eye at first. The German publisher (or maybe Amazon Germany) recently added "autobiographical project" to the book's title, but that's probably only for marketing. Knausgård, the author, not the one in the book, seems to be a rather sly dog. The German word for that would be *Schlitzohr*. I'm pretty sure he has something more up his sleeves but he won't show until the show is over. There is some strange undertow in the way he tells his stories and he finds just the right balance of conversations with his partners, inner monologues, trivial actions, and philosophical banter, that I like to read him on and on and on. But I made up a reading plan, and I'm going to stick to it. Period. No more Knausgård until October (Volume 3). Last one (Volume 6) when it comes out sometime around September 2016. Too much Knausgård at once cannot possibly be healthy.

[to be continued here]

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Lee says

The original Norwegian editions of Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume *My Struggle* series, presented in thick ~500-page installments, have purportedly sold more than a half-million copies and won lots of prizes. If rumors of such critical and commercial success are true, even if only in Scandinavia, it's good news for humanity, since these volumes lack traditional plot, let alone anything approaching bondage, vampires or wizards. Maybe it helps that Knausgaard, a respected author of two novels before he'd even started *My Struggle*, has a bold, sensationalist, attention-grabbing title appropriated from Hitler's polemical autobiography, which forces readers to contrast his representation and impressions of his writing/family life with the Führer's concerns? Or maybe the series has stormed across Scandinavia because its scope and approach suggest Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, but instead of tracing the past in rapturous, velveteen, serpentine effusions – every passage suffused with chrysanthemum dust – *My Struggle* presents something comparatively without affectation, a steady, solid, quotidian, flinty (albeit likely to burst into tears, like squeezing water from a rock) representation of and insight into what it's like for one man to be alive.

In Fall 2012, both my mother and a grad school friend recommended the first volume to me, saying it sounded “up my alley.” It was way up there, in approach, accessibility, unpredictability, unexpected humor, and heft. For a few years I’ve been saying that fiction that feels like fiction is not my favorite sort of fiction. I’ll turn on a novel for an overwrought simile comparing a Gatorade cap to a crown of thorns. Maybe it’s just me, but I prefer fiction that feels unlike contemporary literary fiction. I’m not necessarily a fan of experimental or explicitly unconventional fiction, either. Turns out I just seem to prefer fiction that feels real. Twain said something like the difference between fiction and non-fiction is that fiction must be absolutely believable. Thomas Wolfe (the guy who wrote *Look Homeward, Angel*, not the guy in the white suit who wrote *Bonfire of the Vanities*) said that fiction is fact, selected, arranged, and charged with purpose. Both of these assertions apply to Knausgaard’s recent work, except I don’t think the author, at least as he presents himself in the *My Struggle* series, charges his selections and arrangements of fact with an explicit purpose other than trying to get as close as he can to the core of life. No conventional plot therefore, yet nevertheless engaging, consistently insightful, and almost recklessly sincere.

This series is a multivolume masterpiece of sincerity. It’s epic literary autobiography, worthy of the traditional and more recent meanings of the modifier epic. A Norwegian living in Sweden may have written it but it fulfills David Foster Wallace’s prophecy about post-ironic fiction in the United States: “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.” By now, at least as Knausgaard presents Sweden in this volume, the notion of “U.S. life” can be expanded to include Western Civilization’s so-called First World, including Scandinavia. Like DFW, Knausgaard covers significant territory across apparently infinite pages but he doesn’t do it in a look Ma no hands backflipping with a smile sorta way. All the formal elements of traditional fiction are in place, sans gimmickry. No attention-getting footnotes or images or power points or graphs or numbered lists or Danielewskisms. No masturbatory flights of language en route to the celestial sublime. No silly set pieces or big dance numbers at the end. No talking pieces of poo. Nothing included for a joke. No excessive modifiers or anything that feels like it’s not part of the author’s attempt to stay as close as possible to what he perceives as the core of things, the honest truth of life. He also realizes that such a project may seem megalomaniacal, and he addresses this more than once, never mythologizing himself, always his worst critic, always forcing himself to submit to humility.

What happens in this engrossing, readable, plot-less stretch of 543 beautifully formatted pages published by Archipelago? Mostly child care. Instead of the mythologized image of the author of the past, we find a 21st century house husband, considering himself feminized compared to how fathers once raised children, living in a homogenized culture thanks to international influence (as in Murakami, American fast food joints are name-checked, including Burger King and Subway): “Europe . . . was merging more and more into one large, homogeneous country. The same, the same, everything the same.” Karl Ove is a 30-something Norwegian who’s left his first wife and moved to Stockholm, where, despite this sense of sameness, he can’t read clues revealing minute social gradients as he can in Norway. The author’s good friend Geir, another Norwegian writer living in Sweden, rants about the differences between Norway and Sweden the way some in Philadelphia may occasionally rant about the differences between Philly and New York. (Sweden is essentially more orderly. In Norway people bump into each other on the street. Norwegian academics don’t dress so well.)

Book 1 ended with the author cleaning up the mess his recently deceased alcoholic father made, literally and figuratively. As with Book 2, it started in the recent past and presented a surprisingly fresh vision of the author with young children, at playgrounds, struggling with plastic contraptions meant to convey children across town. As in the first volume, these opening sections create a sympathetic image of a manly, cigarette-

smoking Scandinavian author overrun by three children, loving them deeply, trying to control them, aware that this image of a father who gets down on the floor and plays with a rattle with his kids is relatively recent and yet by now pervasive.

His own upbringing had been strict, his father distant and scary, and so Karl Ove struggles with his father's spirit inside him. He has a history with drink, too. In one riveting recollected scene in which he drinks himself into a world that's narrowed to a dark tunnel, after the woman who will become the mother of his children humanely rejects him, he smashes a glass and uses its largest, sharpest shard to shred his face.

In both books, this opening fatherhood gambit won me over, made me willing to follow him wherever he went. In the first volume, it's teen years playing in a terrible band and looking for a place to drink on New Year's Eve. In Book 2, it's his first days in Stockholm and the story of how he met his wife, Linda, the woman who helped him become who he is today: prize-winning successful novelist pushing around three young children in a stroller.

The central struggle in this volume is achieving a balance between family and art. He wants a family, three children like a little gang, but he also wants to be left alone to write. He has an "all or nothing" mentality, so this conflict drives the story. It's all pretty deceptively simple:

For me, society is everything, Geir said. Humanity. I'm not interested in anything beyond that. But I am, I said. Oh yes? Geir queried. What then? Trees, I answered. He laughed. Patterns in plants. Patterns in crystals. Patterns in stones. In rock formations. In galaxies. Are you talking about fractals? Yes, for example. But everything that binds the living and dead, all the dominant forms that exist. Clouds! Sand dunes! That interests me. Oh God, how boring, Geir said. No it isn't, I said. Yes, it is, he said.

David Foster Wallace's 1990 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" concludes with questions about what will come after postmodern irony: "Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal!'"

To which Knausgaard might reply: "For me it was trees and leaves, grass and clouds and a glowing sun, that was all, I understood everything in the light of this."

An elaborated elegance makes this series what it is. Its patterns and formations feel organic and humble yet troubled and in no way understated. The form in the first two volumes at least suggests something like quiet majesty. It's only as complicated as it needs to be, with simply dramatized scenes with plentiful short bursts of dialogue, summarized scenes, stretches of essayistic exposition, all in rotation in a way that I comfortably anticipated over time. Yet, despite what's essentially a not very experimental form, the project itself as a whole seems unconventional, almost unhinged. Three thousand pages of literary autobiography about a middle-aging Norwegian writer and his wife and kids and friends and family? You kidding me? His kids don't even suffer from Marcusian language pathologies? No empathic immersion in the presentation of other lives? No specific canonical biggie (despite the title and physical similarity to Proust's multivolume masterwork) providing explicit formal and thematic support?

Of the young writers I had read there was only Jerker Virdborg I liked; his novel Black Crab had something that raised it above the mist of morals and politics others were cloaked in. Not that it was a fantastic novel, but he was searching for something different. That was the sole obligation literature had, in all other respects it was free, but not in this, and when writers disregarded this they did not deserve to be met with

anything but contempt.

By the time of the second volume's action, Karl Ove has written one well-regarded novel but the money is running out. He hasn't written much of anything for four or five years. He's included in an article about writer's block and authors who've only written one novel. But he's searching for something different, a way out. After seeing Bergman's production of Ibsen's "Ghosts" with his future wife, he has a model for the sort of work he wants to do in the future. The play offers a bright horizon for the author, and a guide to the book in the reader's hands.

"A kind of boundlessness arose, something wild and reckless. Into it disappeared plot and space, what was left was emotion, and it was stark, you were looking straight into the essence of human existence, the very nucleus of life, and thus you found yourself in a place where it no longer mattered what was actually happening . . . That was where I had to go, to the essence, to the inner core of human existence."

This inner core of human existence manifests as conversations with friends, dinners at home, fights with a Russian alcoholic neighbor who blasts music in the middle of the night, irritation with his wife's inability to pitch in around the house and thereby force him to do all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning, all of which gracefully revolve in the present, interspersed with non-linearly proceeding backstory. This sort of structure after a while feels like associative telescopic stargazing into the past, the present naturally filled with expanses of history. Inclusion of non-linear backstory makes the whole story feel real and alive, its edges open and scalloped instead of straight, orderly, contrived, and fictional, since memories tend not to appear in order:

Everyday life, with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or made me happy. This had nothing to do with a lack of desire to wash floors or change diapers but rather with something more fundamental: the life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts.

A half-million Scandinavians might like Knausgaard in part because this longing for something more meaningful, his attempts to find meaning and beauty in the banalities of life, his struggles at home and with his artistic ambition, are the mark of a conventional protagonist whose obsessive desires are ceaselessly impeded by obstacles. It's a double-bind in Knausgaard's case: art impedes family and family impedes art. Like Homer Simpson's famous revelation about alcohol, art and family are the cause of and cure for all his problems.

In the second volume, there are two exaggeratedly extreme acts: the drunken face-cutting when younger and the manic immersion that produces his second novel, *A Time For Everything*, risking his family for the sake of his art. So often I sympathized with the author's situation. I read passages aloud to my wife involving discussions about day care so similar to discussions we'd just had. She began referring to the thick squarish hardback as my new best friend. As a father of a three-month-old daughter, a writer learning to balance family and art, this volume was even more up my alley than the first one about teenage drinking/bands and the death of his father. Yet, despite convergences, I would never go at my face with a shard of glass and I would never leave my family to live in an office for weeks to write a novel. Of course, it's possible that neither of these extreme actions ever happened. It's possible that these semi-sensationalist moments are straight-up fiction. But it feels wrong to type that, as though it betrays a trust established between writer and reader over more than 1000 pages at this point.

I don't want to make it seem like this series was written only for me, since most likely its revelations about

self, its honesty with itself and with the reader, bring the project close to more readers than one. But still, it's a rare expanse of recently published prose that opines about Thomas Bernhard in the context of the narrator's search for what he would do after his second novel: "No space was opened up for me in Bernhard, everything was closed off in small chambers of reflection, and even though he had written one of the most frightening and shocking novels I had read, *Extinction*, I didn't want to look down that road, I didn't want to go down that road. Hell no, I wanted to be as far from that which was closed and mandatory as it was possible to be. Come on! Into the open, my friend, as Hölderlin had written somewhere. But how, how?"

The clear answer to the preceding question is the book itself, a non-annoying narrative loop-de-loop. By the time the above quotation appears on page 409 we have a pretty good idea of how he'll write his way out. I don't in any way want to suggest that the book runs cutesy metafictional macros on the reader. It's more like the second volume begins to catch up to the point in recent history when he began the project. Whereupon I foresaw an ending in which Knausgaard makes it to the absolute present, completely caught up with himself, writing about writing the sentence he's writing . . .

Early on in the second novel he states that the work is its own reward. Sitting in a room alone working on what he's writing is all he really wants. There's something inexplicably East Asian about his project, his interest in naturally occurring patterns, as though writing is not about creating another form of narrative entertainment or gaining an audience of readers but a meditation that produces text as traces of where his mind traveled whenever it achieved the solitude he longed for. As such, the primary enlightenment Knausgaard offers involves humility and endurance, presented in uniquely formatted short bursts followed by hard returns, amounting to the volume's thematic climax on page 501:

"If I have learned one thing over these years, which seems to me immensely important, particularly in an era such as ours, overflowing with such mediocrity, it is the following:

Don't believe you are anybody.

Do not believe you are somebody.

Because you are not. You're just a smug, mediocre little shit.

Do not believe that you're anything special. Do not believe that you're worth anything, because you aren't.

You're just a little shit.

So keep your head down and work, you little shit. Then, at least, you'll get something out of it. Shut your mouth, keep your head down, work and know that you're not worth a shit.

This, more or less, was what I had learned.

This was the sum of all my experience.

This was the only worthwhile thought I'd ever had."

Again, part of the struggle for the author is to triage eventual criticism that he's a self-serving megalomaniacal freak. He's successful in this. He wins the reader over thanks to what seems like sincere introspection throughout. But also through well-phrased contempt for unnamed examples of the sort of self-serving mediocrities he's afraid he might be or become.

Knausgaard succeeds in presenting the particularities of his conflict with such steadiness and clarity that it appeals on a deep level to a large readership. There are very few sensationalist details or betrayals of confidence that trigger voyeuristic impulses in readers. There's very little sex, for example, and when it occurs it's procreative, on a couch after watching a crappy movie. Ultimately, the sense you get from reading this series, the mental and emotional state achieved when silently immersed in its pages, is of connection with another human being, a man from a distant yet familiar place, like yourself in some ways but not in all ways, a man concerned with achieving existential fulfillment, stability, peace. In the end, the project itself seems like proof that he's achieved a productive balance. There's a sense that he's able to write this My

Struggle series while maintaining his family. Wikipedia says he's still married to Linda and they live with their three children, and he's clearly lived up to manifesto-like spiels about fiction in *My Struggle*.

I suppose just because a purported half-million Scandinavians have read Knausgaard's series doesn't mean I should lump them together. But a great novel seems to bring its readers together, those who've shared an experience, each similar yet unique. There's no question that this volume continues a remarkable series that I expect will have long-lasting influence, at least on me as I gulp down the remaining 2000-plus pages as they appear in English over the next few years. If Knausgaard's project influences a generation of literary autobiographers, in theory, for now, it's fine with me. I'd love to see more fiction that feels unlike fiction because it consists of fact selected, arranged, and charged with the purpose of presenting itself as real. Not hyper-real reality or semblances seen through the scrim of tasteful artifice, but as real as it gets, raw, unadorned, and awesome.

(If interested, here are my reviews of Books One, Three, Four, and Five.)

Ben Winch says

Four Responses:

Dec 14th 2014

I'm on the second *My Struggle* book and believe it – and its predecessor – to be a failure, at least as it relates to me. Is that arrogant? Should it be: *I'm* a failure, at least as I relate to *My Struggle*? The plain fact: I've been skipping pages, have been since the start. Skipping phrases and sentences too, skimming to reach the parts that say whatever it is I like to hear Knausgaard say. Not only skipping forward either, but jumping around the way I do with rock biographies, with books whose *content* interests me more than their form. And no, in Knausgaard's case (unlike, say, with *Last Train to Memphis* or even that crappy book on Creation Records or too-studious biography of Fats Domino) I don't intend to go back. At first – for 20 pages – I tried reading conscientiously. With my first skip forward I told myself *I might* go back. But the childhood scenes, for the most part, defeated me. Nor was I interested at all in the apparently central/climactic scenes involving the clean-up of his father's house. What did/does interest me? Scenes of the present, of the recent past, of a man roughly my age facing the sorts of challenges I'm facing: the struggle to write/create versus family. In this sense, Knausgaard gives me something. But too often I'm reading for the gossip-thrill or for reassurance: "Yes, he hates parenting too sometimes, and he's a *real* father." (I'm a stepfather.) Don't get me wrong, I think he's good. He's certainly addictive. (I ordered Part 2 despite myself, and when it arrived it shoved everything – Soseki and Lispector – off my radar for a few days until it wore off.) But it's *impure*, cut with something, stepped on with cornstarch or talcum powder or plain dust – something light and mildly irritating that accumulates the more you ingest. Since I distrust addictive books to begin with, this added sense of impurity is damning. I'd suggest Knausgaard should edit more, but maybe the *speed* of writing and publication is necessary lest he get bogged down in scruples, and I guess I'd rather have the chance to dip into his work than for it not to exist at all. Still, to me, *My Struggle* is a failure: the failure (after the drama of the conception of his second novel, during which he left his family against his wife's wishes) to divorce himself from family life enough to be a fully-functional creative writer. Because this is *not*, in my opinion, fully functional creative writing. It's intriguing for that, it's impressive, but ultimately it's frustrating. Never does it really take flight, despite its marathon runner's fluidity. Or maybe for a page or two here or there Knausgaard beats his wings hard enough to clear ground, but exhaustion sets in. It's bound to, if you never stop for breath. Verdict: worth watching as a phenomenon but, for me, life is too short.

Dec 20th 2014

It *is* addictive, this thing – I don’t know why. And that’s part of its addictiveness: that I *want* to know why! What’s the secret of its hold on me? I just read (or skimmed, at least near the end) 10-20 pages describing a New Year’s Eve at Knausgaard’s and his second wife’s bourgeois apartment in central Stockholm, during which each of the six guests and the two hosts comes clean, in mock self-pitying tones, about “failures”, parents, childhood. Along the way a 3-4 page digression about the criminal dealings of one of them – but why?! At best it’s a bit of local colour, at worst it’s cheap sensationalism. Ugh, and this repeated harping on his own good looks – always from the mouths of others, of course, and reproduced without comment. What do we infer? That Knausgaard sees himself among the beautiful? That he’s critiquing them? True, he criticises himself (or his protagonist) mercilessly, but not with any real depth: he’s stupid, a coward, repressed, yet a failure for releasing (on rare occasions) his emotions. Maybe this is part of Knausgaard the author’s appeal: he’s deadpan in places you expect emotion and gushingly (not to say incoherently) emotive in places you don’t. One thing’s for sure: *My Struggle* is good for occupying the mind when you’re intermittently distracted by family and mundanity. In situations I’d never subject my favourite books to – with kids screeching and wife’s friends chatting in the next room – *My Struggle* is a superlative distraction. It makes me feel *good* about myself, my relationship, my family, because we *couldn’t* be such blithe fuck-ups as these two, with their “That’s it I’m leaving” drunken over-reactive arguments every week or two despite their evident resolve to have children. I’ll admit there’s a kind of fascination – paradoxically – in watching the lives of people so close to me in age and lifestyle (richer and more fashionable but just as lost as I’ve been when I lived in cities). But that, I suspect, is a transient appeal; it makes *My Struggle* of its time, and the type of book that – were it written 30 years ago – would probably bore me. It *does* bore me, even as it compels me. It’s not that I don’t *like* Karl Ove (writer or character); I wish him well. But I *do* sense some “Faustian bargain” (the phrase is Knausgaard’s) in *My Struggle*, both in the way it appropriates and disseminates gossip about its characters’ real-life counterparts and in the lack of reflectiveness I so far find in it. In writing this, in contorting his life into occasionally too pat/sentimental a form (ie: when “Karl Ove” faints after kissing “Linda” for the first time, which either is fictional or has not been effectively described) is Knausgaard the human/author avoiding what reckoning could save him from having to write it in the first place? Is he *keeping himself in stasis* to wallow in *My Struggle* – to lengthen it, to justify himself, to allow him more time sitting at his beloved desk? Three kids, a bipolar wife and the fourth-longest novel ever published? How do you do it? Neglect your kids, your wife, yourself? I’m betting, for all his fear and self-criticism re the first two options, it’s Knausgaard himself (the human) he’s sold out in order to create Knausgaard the character.

Jan 13th 2015

Over recent years I had increasingly lost faith in literature. I read and thought this is something someone has made up. Perhaps it was because we were totally inundated with fiction and stories. It had got out of hand. Wherever you turned you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs and TV series, they were all about made-up people in a made-up, though realistic, world. And news in the press, TV news and radio news had exactly the same format, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not. It was a crisis, I felt it in every fibre of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like lard, not least because the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant. In other words, it saw the same. This sameness, which was our world, was being mass-produced. The uniqueness, which they all talked about, was thereby invalidated, it didn’t exist, it was a lie. Living like this, with the certainty that everything could equally well have been different, drove you to despair. I couldn’t write like this, it wouldn’t work, every single

sentence was met with the thought, but you're just making it up. It has no value. Fiction writing has no value, documentary narrative has no value. The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person? Not directed above us, nor beneath us, but at the same height as our own gaze. Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can, art is something you are alone with. You meet its gaze alone.

It's interesting, in a way, to encounter this passage, roughly 1000 pages into a series of novels to which I've become moderately addicted, clearly the manifesto (or part of it) of the writer Knausgaard, and so utterly opposed to my own opinions on art and writing. "What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person?" I mean, sure, in the broadest sense (a sense so broad it almost has no meaning) I agree, but to me that's far from an argument for diaries as art; to me, it could in fact be the opposite: an argument for art *shorn of* realism, of fact, of things that "actually happened". To me, it's *this* gaze – the gaze that sees *beyond* the city street, the cafe table, the three kids making chaos – that makes or inspires or equates with art. To me, the problem is not the "made-up people" but, too often, the "realistic world". Granted, we agree on one thing: that "the distance... held to reality [is] constant". Knausgaard's solution is to focus *in* on reality, to break this spell of sameness; couldn't it just as well be to pull away? If we're talking about fiction, surely either technique is valid. But is *My Struggle* fiction? The question may seem trivial, irrelevant (as his publishers assure us it is) until you consider this passage, because (a) *My Struggle does* deal with narrative, at times in a very traditional way, and (b) at times Knausgaard – I'm damn near certain – is "just making it up". So "they were just stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not". But how is Knausgaard's story any different? Maybe only in this: that the "uniqueness, which they all talked about" *is* here, ironically because Knausgaard does *not* talk about it. He claims *not* to be unique. Nor is he; I find many similarities between him (as he's depicted in *My Struggle*) and myself, for a start. Nor is his *story* unique, but its telling is, and for precisely those reasons he hopes it will be, because (when he manages it) his eschewing of "story" for the sake of voice is compelling in its very mundanity. The true part, for the most part, *works*. But his and his publisher's skirting of the issue of truth – the assertion that it makes no difference whether it actually happened or not – undermines Knausgaard's (whether character's or author's) implicit claims to be part of the solution to the problem he defines above. What I'm saying: it's a victory, but compromised. You want truth? Tell it straight, be brave, don't doctor it and give it shape. Find the shape *in* it. Cut the crap. The thousandfold litany of daily middle class ablutions I can live without, *unless* they alter your gaze. If it's about capturing a gaze, fine, then show what that gaze *does* to reality. "I took out my mobile and flipped it open" – that's not "gaze", that's "documentary realism", and it's only here because its author was trying to outrun his conscience and couldn't slow down to edit. The result: half solution, half problem. Admirable given the circumstances of its conception maybe, but able to rise above those circumstances to another plane only rarely.

Jan 16th 2015

I skim-read *My Struggle 1 & 2* and I don't regret it. But to read like that all the time? I didn't skim 2666 or *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (to name two other surprise bestsellers in translation). I don't skim any writing which seems *alive*, because at a glance I never know which part of it is crucial. I don't read fiction to gather information; if I did, I could pick the eyes out of it, as in a music biography. Realising that *My Struggle* seems most often alive in its essayistic passages (ie: when Knausgaard conjures from air rather than transcribing from memory), I developed the habit of skipping descriptions of those events most commonly made the focus of biographies, dramas and realistic fiction ("dramatic" scenes of Knausgaard's wife giving birth or the aftermath of his father's death from alcoholism). Thus, in a work famed for its dullness or

repeated instances of nothingness, I enjoyed most those parts which focussed on nothing. Drama, to me (Knausgaard cutting his face, say) was dullest of all; far better those “scenes” constituting nothing but Knausgaard (or “Knausgaard”) staring at a wall, or sitting in a busy Stockholm cafe checking out the waitresses between passages from Dostoyevsky. And in retrospect I think I see why: because those Knausgaard-in-the-present moments also constitute acts of invention, since by the thrust of his writing he creates and gives shape to the future, even if it be only another dive into memory.

Three states:

- the “dive” into memory;
- the “coming up for air” to the present;
- the “swim” across the surface, which is essay and reflection.

For me, it was the coming up that sustained me.

You may have heard me complain of a lack of urgency in recent (late 20th and early 21st century) fiction. Too often writers seem to *luxuriate* in ways which, to me, don’t seem tenable in an age of probable imminent world-shaking disaster. Most often, my solution is to seek short works, often in translation, by writers for whom notions of commercial success are/were almost meaningless, owing to time, place, language or temperament. But Knausgaard, for all his 3000+ pages (or at least the 1000 I’ve skim-read) does not luxuriate. True, he (or his character) is decadent – alcoholic in a posh apartment, buying pre-packaged meals and disposable nappies from an expensive department store because he can’t be bothered walking to the supermarket and neither he nor his wife can plan their meals more than a day in advance. But he’s not this by choice so much as lack of strength or initiative to swim against the current, even as a desperate (though vague) sense of the wrongness of it all creeps over him, even as the aesthetic in him, who wants nothing more than to write, rebels. So we get a multi-volume tirade by a man seemingly chained (not by circumstance but by temperament) to a desk, ironic because said man seems to believe he’s being *kept from* his desk. I forget who it was who said there are two kinds of great writers: those who embrace life in all its facets and those who, though unable to embrace it all, refuse ever to lose sight of its darkness. Knausgaard, to his and our detriment, is of the latter kind, but he’s up there. Maybe in the age-to-come of blasted copyright, skewed/muddied authorship and textual sampling some new breed of artist will do the editing he forsakes (from lack of time – from urgency) so that I can dispense with the skimming. Until then, volumes 3,4,5 and 6 may remain a mystery to me, for all their greatness.

Glenn Russell says

Oh, Karl Ove, you capture the heart-break of the lovesick, hypersensitive teenager that speaks to our own lost teenage years. And thanks for Book 2, writing of your life during your 20s and 30s, married, raising children, dealing with the whole urban banana. A reader might think very self-centered of a writer to pen 6 thick volumes of his life, but you, Karl Ove, are able to tap into the culture's pulse and our collective modern human experience - reading your books is almost like reading our own autobiography.

Here is a section of *My Struggle*, Book 2 I found particularly insightful, where Karl Ove reflects on his dealings with the people in his life: he tells us when he is with other men and women, he feels empathetic and bound to them; but when he is by himself, his feelings for them dissolve. “Everyday life, with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, not something that was meaningful or that made me happy. . . . I always longed to be away from it. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, that was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts. What was the problem? Was it the shrill, sickly tone I heard everywhere that I couldn’t stand, the one that arose from all the pseudopeople and pseudoplaces, pseudoevents, and psudoconflicts our lives passed through, that which we saw but did not participate in, and the distance that modern life in this way had opened up to our own, actually inalienable here and now? If so, if it was more reality, more involvement I longed for, surely it should be that which I was surrounded by that I should be embracing?”

This is but a sliver of Karl Ove’s musing at the time on the dynamics of living an everyday city life as husband, father, friend, acquaintance; he continues for several pages, expanding on such topics as our standardized, homogenized shrinking world until he is obliged to participate in his daughter’s Rhythm Time class, a occasion he finds to be one of the most excruciatingly painful experiences of his life -- he feels a powerful, passionate, sexual attraction to the graceful, gorgeous Rhythm Time teacher but also feels completely humiliated sitting on the floor, shaking a rattle and singing children’s songs. It’s this linking the details of his own experience and conflicted feelings with a broader philosophizing on society and culture, art and literature, I find so compelling.

And a reflection from further on in the novel, “For who brooded over the meaninglessness of life anymore? Teenagers? They were the only ones who were preoccupied with existential issues, and as a result there was something puerile and immature about them, and hence it was doubly impossible for adults with their sense of propriety intact to deal with them. However, this is not so strange, for we never feel more strongly and passionately about life than in our teenage years, when we step into the world for the first time, as it were, and all our feelings are new feelings. So there they are, with their big ideas on small orbits, looking this way and that for an opportunity to launch them, as the pressure builds. And who is it they light upon sooner or later but Uncle Dostoyevsky? Dostoyevsky has become a teenager’s writer, the issue of nihilism a teenager issue.”

Ironically, the many pages of this book are filled to the brim with brooding on existential issues, forever questioning the meaning and meaninglessness of life, as if the author’s feelings are perpetually new feelings, as if every morning he steps into the world for the first time with all the awkwardness, discomfort, unease and even clumsiness of a teenager unhesitatingly opening his heart to the frequent hard edges and occasional tenderness of those around him.

The narrator reminds me of those characters from the novels of Dostoyevsky who, swept up in the intensity of the moment, in a gush of emotional frenzy, say ‘to hell with the future’ and stack all their chips on one spin of the roulette wheel or burn their life savings in a fire. For example, here is Karl Ove back in his room, totally drunk, after hearing a woman he loves tell him sorry, she’s not interested. “I went into the bathroom, grabbed the glass on the sink and hurled it at the wall with all the strength I could muster. I waited to hear if there was any reaction. Then I took the biggest shard I could find and started cutting my face. I did it methodically, making the cuts as deep as I could, and covered my whole face. The chin, cheeks, forehead, nose, underneath the chin. At regular intervals I wiped away the blood with a towel. Kept cutting. Wiped the blood away. But the time I was satisfied with my handiwork there was hardly room for one more cut, and I went to bed.”

Observing Karl Ove as he makes his North American book tour this spring, there isn't any evidence of a face cut to shreds. One beauty of a novel is the author has the latitude, even in an autobiographical novel like this one (many of his extended family refuse to have anything to do with him), to create imaginatively. And this play of creative imagination makes all the difference. Although the author draws explicitly from his own life—the first-person narrator is named Karl Ove Knausgaard, and he uses the real names of his wife, children, parents, and friends, I am reading these books as a novel, since I sense a good portion is embellished or simply made-up.

Made-up or real, in the end, this is a novel of emotional extremes. Linda, the love of his Karl Ove's life, breathes hot-blooded fire: melodramatic, mercurial, quick-tempered and occasionally violent and destructive. Yet these two lovers remain together and have three children. And with every additional child their household fire rages with more ferocity. How on earth do they do it? 600 pages of Book 2 tells the tale.

One last note on a key piece of Book 2: Karl Ove's ongoing conversation with his philosophical and literary friend, Geir, and his ongoing conversation with his philosophic inner self. For instance, Karl Ove alone, "Fictional writing has no value, documentary narrative has no value. The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person? Not directed above us, not beneath us, but at the same height as our own gaze. Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can, art is something you are alone with. You meet its gaze alone."

Perry says

"The Epic Side of Truth, Wisdom"

Feel like my soul has turned into steel / I've still got the scars that the sun didn't heal "Not Dark Yet," Bob Dylan, 1997

Prior to reading this, I was skeptical about reading a roman à clef based loosely on the author's life? Could he succeed in depicting a seemingly ordinary life as interesting enough to fill 4/5/6 volumes? Is he the Scandinavian equivalent of the *fat-head fiction writers churned out from MFA programs across the nation to dazzle the cognoscenti with a woeful memoir of M.y F.abulous A.gony*, or, worse, a supercilious philosophizing intellectual boor who'll shortly lose the reader in his quest to bless the world with intelligence and Mensa mysticism?

I skimmed several reviews prior to concluding my worries were misplaced and that Volume 2 (subtitled "A Man in Love") seemed the best place to start the 6-volume set. Note: each novel is self-contained so you can start with any volume and need not fear being sucked into reading any of the other 5 volumes; though, if you're like me, you'll want to read at least one more.

Knausgard's writing style is so honest, hypnotic, addictive, enduring, cozing. It's not arrogant, hyper-intellectual or ranting. One reviewer even complemented it as "unliterary." Reading this was like having over to an anodyne dinner a bright, congenial, ordinary fellow (who's also a world-wise Norwegian artist) sit down and converse with you "on the level" for hours, discussing ordinary things that happen in the course of life to us all, in varied forms, such as falling in (and out of) love, in-laws, parents, pets, neighbors, child-rearing, reading books, being forced to attend a party where you only know a few people and otherwise by those you despise, living quarters, career moves, traveling, restaurants, music, sports, work, old loves, old friends, returning to the place you grew up. There seems no subject he'll deign to discuss, yet he's never boring. You'll want to keep buying him more drinks to beg him to stay.

His explanation for writing this monumental work is found, I think, in this passage:

*The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were *diaries and essays, the types of literature that* did not deal with narrative, that . . . just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person? Not directed above us, nor beneath us, but at the same height as our own gaze. Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can, art is something you are alone with. You meet its gaze alone.*

Knausgaard reifies Socrates' famous quote that the "unexamined life is not worth living." With attention to fine detail and genuine inquisitiveness of both the significant and the mundane, he helps the reader, too, find the richness in life, revealing that, quoting Henry Miller, "*we have only to open up to discover what is already there.*" Reading this book (or any of the other volumes) is a particularly helpful exercise for the young writer in showing not telling.

Knausgaard incredibly winkles the extraordinary out of the ordinary as if it were pearls from oysters. And, he does so in such a way that's "more real than reality." [Italy's *La Republica*] Some examples that are typical in his tale of falling in love with and having children with his current wife:

What was it that Rilke wrote? That music raised him out of himself, and never returned him to where it had found him, but to a deeper place, somewhere in the unfinished."

I have no problem with uninteresting or unoriginal people--they may have other, more important attributes, such as warmth, consideration, friendliness, a sense of humor or talents such as being able to make a conversation flow to generate an atmosphere of ease around them, or the ability to make a family function--but *I feel almost physically ill in the presence of boring people who consider themselves especially interesting and who blow their own trumpets.*"

But what do you say to have any impact on a man who at one time admired the Spice Girls?

I concur with the assessment by the New Yorker's reviewer that Knausgaard has hit on "the epic side of truth, wisdom."

Kyriaki says

Αφο? δι?βασα το εξαιρετικ? ενδιαφ?ρον “?νας θ?νατος στην οικογ?νεια” ?ρθε ο καιρ?ς να συνεχ?σω με το δε?τερο μ?ρος του Αγ?να του Karl Ove (αρνο?μαι να γρ?ψω το επ?θετ? του!).

Στο δε?τερο βιβλ?ο λοιπ?ν μας μιλ?ει γι' αυτ? ακριβ?ς που λ?ει και ο τ?τλος, για τη ζω? του ως σ?ζυγος και ως πατ?ρας. Για το π?ς γν?ρισε τη Λ?ντα, τη δε?τερη σ?ζυγ? του, για το π?ς απ?κτησαν το πρ?το τους παιδ?, για τις δυσκολ?ες της σχ?σης τους και τα προβλ?ματα της καθημεριν?τητας, τις αποτυχ?ες, τις γκρ?νιες, τους καβγ?δες. Για την αγ?πη του για την γυνα?κα του και τα παιδι? του, την αν?γκη του για το γρ?ψιμο και τη συν?παρξη ?λων αυτ?v.

Γραμμ?νο στο ?διο στιλ με το πρ?το, κ?πως ημερολογιακ?, κ?πως συνειρμικ?, χωρ?ς το εξομολογητικ? ?φος που περ?μενα να δω μας παραθ?τει με ειλικρ?νεια τις σκ?ψεις και τις απ?ψεις του, τα πιστε?ω και τα θ?λω του.

Εδ? πιο πολ? απ? ?τι στο προηγο?μενο, εκε? που δι?βαζα δεν μπορο?σα να μην αναρωτηθ? τι θα σκ?φτονταν για το τ?δε σημε?ο οι εμπλεκ?μενοι του βιβλ?ου. Το λες και λ?γο γεννα?ο να παρουσι?σεις τις σκ?ψεις σου με τ?τοιο τρ?πο χωρ?ς την προστασ?α κ?ποιου φανταστικο? χαρακτ?ρα.

Ενδιαφ?ρον ?πως και το πρ?το αλλ? ομολογ? πως το απ?λαυσα λιγ?τερο και κ?ποιες φορ?ς με κο?ραζε. ?σως να ?φταιγε το θ?μα ? σως και η ?κταση, δεν μπ?ρεσα να καταλ?βω τι δεν μου ?κατσε τ?σο καλ?.... μπορε? και η μετ?φραση ? η επιμ?λεια της, με την οπο?α νομ?ζω ?τι κ?τι δεν π?γαινε καλ?.....

Απ? ?λο το βιβλ?ο θα ξεχωρ?σω τις τελευτα?ες περ?που 200 σελ?δες μου μου ?ρεσαν πιο πολ? και σ?γονυρα κ?ποια στιγμ? (ελπ?ζω σ?ντομα) θα επαν?λθω και με το 3ο μ?ρος....

B.R.A.CE. 2018: ?να βιβλ?ο με τα απομνημονε?ματα ? την βιογραφ?α κ?ποιου

Aggeliki says

Ο Knausgard μας ξανασυστ?νεται β?ζοντ?ς μας ξαν? θεατ?ς σε μια ?λλη φ?ση της ζω?ς του. Τελει?νοντας και το δε?τερο βιβλ?ο, ?χω την α?σθηση ?τι σε κ?θε τ?μο μας παρουσι?ζει και μια ιδι?τητ? του ως ?νθρωπος. Στο πρ?το ?ταν ο γιος, ο εγγον?ς, ο αδερφ?ς, ο ?φηβος, ο φοιτητ?ς και ο νεαρ?ς ?ντρας. Στον ερωτευμ?νο ?ντρα ε?ναι ακριβ?ς αυτ?.. Ο σ?ντροφος, ο εραστ?ς, ο σ?ζυγος, ο πατ?ρας, ο ?ριμος πια ?ντρας. Με τις μικρ?ς και τις μεγ?λες στιγμ?ς του. Με τα προβλ?ματα της καθημεριν?τητας και τις χαρ?ς που αυτ? προσφ?ρει. Με τα αδι?ξοδα, προσωπικ? και επαγγελματικ?, τις κρυμμ?νες επιθυμ?ες, τις ωμ?ς αλ?θειες που πολ? απλ? ξεστομ?ζει. Η αφ?γηση της ζω?ς του δεν ωραιοποιε?ται, δεν παρουσι?ζεται ως ονειρικ? ? ιδανικ? αλλ? ο?τε και ως σκοτειν? δραματουργ?α. Ε?ναι ?νας απλ?ς ?νθρωπος, με κοιν?τοπα προβλ?ματα, ανησυχ?ες και προβληματισμ?ς. Παλε?ει να βρει λ?σεις, κ?νει σωστ?, κ?νει λ?θη και π?νω απ? ?λα ζει τη ζω? που του αναλογ??. Karl Ove, να ξ?ρεις δεν ε?σαι μ?νος σου.

Melanie says

My first impression of Karl Ove Knausgaard came from a black and white photograph published with a review of his book "A Time For Everything" in The New York Review of Books.

He is seen smoking against the rugged Norwegian landscape, hair disheveled, wearing an old, battered tee-shirt, lost in thought. Completely and unabashedly himself, yet ill at ease. Entirely present, feet deeply rooted in the present moment, yet his mind is clearly in flight, flickering at the surface of his gaze.

The striking portrait somehow encompasses all of the qualities of his writing: intense, raw, physical, elusive, inquisitive and elemental.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>

What Knausgaard achieves in "My Struggle", his mad yet mesmerizing 6-volume autobiographical enterprise, is simply the most "real" depiction of the movements of the mind that I have ever read. A life told in its most boring minutiae and its most elemental highs and lows, as it moves from the most mundane to the most transcendent.

Knausgaard plays alongside Proust or Virginia Woolf in his desire to encapsulate all of his experience as a human being, a teenager, a son, a friend, a lover, a father but most of all: a writer. But he does it with even more urgency, more radicality, more anger and more modernity. An Everyman of the 21st century with a 17th century temperament.

The second volume of this autobiography, which tackles the fire and vagaries of love as well as the deep ambivalences that lie at the heart of domestic life and parenthood, is utterly engrossing.

My only sadness comes from the fact that I now have to wait another year before we get the third installment in English.

Read him, and listen to him below speak about Book 1, which deals with his youth and the death of his father, and he might very well change the way you look at the world around you and your own reaction to events.

<http://youtu.be/1ODhM41VOYg>
