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Sun City Details

Date : Published January 1st 1976 by Pantheon Books (first published January 1st 1974)

ISBN : 9780394499079

Author : Tove Jansson

Format : Hardcover 214 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, Finnish Literature, Novels

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Jack says

Jag tycker den är rörig och svår att komma in i, men den är ibland också riktigt Tove Jansson-rolig. Känner mig nästan lite besviken dock, ska inte TJ vara bättre? Men kan också varit jag som läst ofokuserat, för visst blixstrar den till ibland.

"Musen offrade sig, anmärkte mrs. Rushkin uppe på verandan. Det är kristligt att sitta där bak... Var det en rolig observation? Nåja, sade Elizabeth Morris. Kanske mera elak."

Ademption says

Tove Jansson is one of my favourite writers, because she is wild, dreamy, flinty, and if her novels are to be believed, sensibly unafraid of all people, and completely unconcerned about their thoughts and judgements. She seems to be a mad, sweet loner, a people-watching misanthrope, who loved and tried to understand the individuals who bothered to approach her.

Jansson was a Feno-Swede, meaning she was part of a Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. White on white in a translucent wonderland, right?

Regardless of whether subtle distinctions inform her work, she's most well-known for her children's novels and comics about a family of hippopotamus-like creatures called Moomins, which is an international cartoon brand on par with Barapapa.

Later in life, Jansson wrote a series of novels, ostensibly for adults. I like these more, since her singular voice, full of gentle harshness, is more direct. It is the same voice, but without a gloss for children. In her adult novels, she calmly observes more absurdity, more madness, and more people behaving in very irrational but typical modes, unmediated by the sweetness of cartoon figures.

Sun City centers around a retirement home in St. Petersburg, Florida. Of all places, a Feno-swede decided to write about my university town! I knew it was a book about the elderly, but the setting really surprised me. At the liberal arts school I attended, there were retirement homes and senior condominiums nearby, some with overlapping economic interests, board members, and nebulous but vaguely shady though clearly contractual links to the college. Certain famous though obscure people retired to these places. I remember Peter Handke's name adorned plaques and symposia materials around the college. Though I never did see him in person, it was clear that he was a resident nearby, and to stave off boredom, he occasionally came over to participate in academic matters as some sort of unofficial writer emeritus. In another such exchange, a friend and I had dinner with a retired Broadway actress. She'd married old money and settled nearby and liked to regale college students with stories of transatlantic New York City, using "cookie" as a term of endearment for everyone.

Sun City reminded me of these strange but genuine undercurrents that run between the main population of retirees and everyone else in Florida coastal towns. How the Florida coast is God's waiting room. How all sorts of people from everywhere shed their once-glamorous skins or sell off their businesses, and since they can't afford California living or are just too weird for that other sunny state, they rock in rocking chairs,

passing the rest of their time in Florida. The book is a collection of some such retirees, living together, and gently tormenting one another with their opposing quirks. There's even a once-famous character, much like the old Broadway star, milling among the philistines of his generation, polite, patient, and completely forgotten. Did Jansson at one time occupy this role as a strange, wild-eyed Nordic retiree who did something vaguely fantastic but obscure, known to no one in a land of sunny forgetfulness? Or maybe she was a tourist, visiting friends. Either way, she accurately captures this milieu.

Jimmy says

I've always wondered why more books weren't written about the elderly, yet so many books are written about the young. Maybe we can all look back on youth, but we don't know much about being old. Maybe we only want to write about being old when we're old, and when we get to be old, we're too tired to write about it. Or maybe being old is too depressing and boring while being young is romantic and idealized. Or maybe these books are being written, but are just not very marketable or "sexy" so you never hear about them.

In any case, if you're interested in insightful, entertaining fiction about the elderly, you really can't do much better than this book (which was written by Jansson when she herself was relatively old, I think). It is sad and funny and intensely moving. If you've read *The Summer Book*, the only other Jansson book for adults that I've read, and one that's much more popularly read than this one, then you can expect some of the same elements--the episodic nature of the novel (though there is more of an overall arc here, and the final chapter definitely feels like the end of a novel), the simple yet powerful language, the personalities that are very much alive. In fact, this book is just as good as *The Summer Book*, if not slightly better, and it's sad that it's so overlooked.

Jansson writes about a retirement community in St. Petersburg Florida: the cast of characters are all unique and they all get on each other's nerves in different ways, though they do seem to enjoy it in a strange comforting way. The sadness in this book is very rarely explicit, but skillfully woven inside of the humor and the stories and the mood--there is a general sense of futility, of aimlessness, of the silliness of busy youth contrasted with the emptiness of age.

This book is now sadly out of print. If it weren't for my trusty public library, I would not have read it. I hope some publisher like NYRB Classics (hint, hint) will bring it back into print.

Some quotes:

It was possible that the strictly frontal placement of the rocking chairs, parallel to each other and facing straight ahead, was the only practical arrangement. It is probably difficult, thought Mrs. Morris, to place rocking chairs in groups, that is, rocking toward each other. It would take a great deal of space, and in the long run it might be tiresome. Of course the original, the natural idea was a single rocking chair in motion in an otherwise static room. p. 9

She forgot to mention fear of her room--the room you leave open behind you can be full of pitiful carelessness. You have to hide away the signs and appurtenances of old age, small anesthetic oversights, all the supporting constructions of helplessness, so unnoticed and so obvious. p.10

Dear Madonna, Linda whispered, let me make love to Joe on the banks of the jungle river. And then by your grace we will wade out into the water and swim slowly away together, farther and

farther away. She reached up and switched on the Madonna's lamp, not for the light but to pay respect. Then she folded her hands on her lovely stomach and fell asleep. p 22

Because Mr. Thompson was a woman hater, he thought about women a lot. p. 26

I begin to believe that a person really can die from such a thing as grief. Our predicament, Miss Frey, is that that means of making an exit is no longer open to us. Grief, Miss Frey, is very pure and strong, and it requires a great love. It is not the same as being unhappy. p. 74

Tim Tellerton knew that nothing could be squandered as easily as beauty. It was seldom esteemed at its full value while it stood in bloom, and later on it was preserved at the expense of far too much trouble and despair. p. 138

What was a conversation, and what could it mean? Mutual consideration of important things. Communication of experience and memory. Construction of possibilities for the future. To clarify and recognize together, and to observe the changes in a glance, a tone of voice, a silence--the silence of hesitation or understanding. To shape without altering. To laugh, or to sit quietly in common shyness that was never expressed. p. 160

Since Miss Frey, like most people, took slightly longer steps with her right leg than with her left, she moved in a large circle that eventually brought her back toward Silver Springs. p. 209

Jeffrey says

Such an interesting novel - set not in Jansson's usual haunts but in St. Peterberg, Florida! Focusing on the lives of the residents at a old age home, Jansson, as always, brings her wonderful ability to chronicle the intricacies of human relationships in this poignant yet funny novel. Her second novel for adults, it isn't The Summer Book - my favourite of her adult works - but it is delightfully quirky and a real must for Jansson fans!

Masia Maksymowicz says

This was not my favorite book of Tove Jansson, however I still enjoyed reading it.

It was full of sunshine and I could feel ocean breeze while reading -something that only Tove could do with her book.

The end of the book surprised me - it was just the way the book started - like nothing really happened, we don't go to any conclusions, just stay in this Sun City, living along and waiting for another trip, ball or death of a neighbor...

Jassu says

Aurinkokaupungissa on paljon hienoa, mitä en osaa järkeviksi sanoiksi pukea, mutta sen ihmiskuvaus on tarkkaa, lempää ja oivaltavaa.

Bjorn says

I'd like to help him but everything's become so difficult to explain, the things I say are neither accepted or dismissed, they're just something an old person said.

When Tove Jansson visited the US in the early 70s she saw a Florida retirement community and was astonished by it; an entire holiday resort where old people come to conserve whatever life they have left in a place where sunshine was guaranteed and the outside world wouldn't intrude. The Saint Petersburg she sets *Sun City* in isn't the real Saint Petersburg, FL, anymore than Moominvalley is the real countryside outside Helsinki; it feels more like a dream, like life suspended while waiting for the inevitable. The old women and men in the retirement home, carefully weighing their words to try and forge some sort of connection to the others (or avoid it, in some cases) without breaking the illusion that everything is perfect, are contrasted by Bounty Joe, one of the few young people around, who missed out on the hippie era and now only hopes for confirmation that Jesus is returning so he won't have to grow up.

Jansson's prose is beautiful as always, and the way she sketches characters more by what they *don't* say or remember than what they do, as if they've spent their lives walking on eggshells and can't bear to break them now. (Two characters are strongly hinted to be gay, as Jansson was and had to keep an open secret for years.) At the same time, while I don't really mind that the plot feels sort of non-existent, there's something about the setting that just feels ... off. I don't know if it's just that Jansson's experience with America is only barely more substantial than Kafka's was, or if it's deliberate to emphasize how artificial this sort of community comes across to an outsider.

Sleep is a blessing you can meet in many different ways.

Frank says

I feel a little guilty giving one star...it wasn't terrible, but it just wasn't good enough to warrant my reading time when I have stacks of books that also interest me. It's a short novel, but 1/4 of the way in and I felt relieved putting it down.

I was excited when I picked this up at the library discard table as I absolutely loved her Summer Book. The writing was solid in this one, and perhaps I should have given it a little more time, but I kept thinking I should re-read Muriel Spark's Memento Mori instead.

Niina says

I was super interested in reading Tove Jansson's literature other than the Moomin books I so hungrily waded

through last year, and I honestly cannot say whether I was surprised or not, and if so, was the surprise a happy one or not. Still, I think this book was not her best work, even though it was interesting, good and heartwarming, a nice story of a incoherent disbanding group of old people that have ended up in one location, where they're encouraged to try and keep on living even though their bodies are failing, their bladders are spilling and the people to sleep soundly in the night are not many even though they have their stuff, their rooms and a humid climate. These elderly people live in a slow pace in a slow place and nobody besides themselves is asking or expecting anything from them. Likewise, I read this slow, and felt like it was summer. As a nice counterpart for this band of people Jansson had thrown in the story a couple of young ones, one especially reluctant to stay in place, one expecting, wanting and burning. I must admit I feel like I missed the big picture here, if there was one, and persisted on just reading clear and easily-approachable text about people and life instead.

Jennie Hübinette Jansson says

Den första text av Tove Jansson som jag inte alls tyckte om! Fastnade inte och iddes inte ens läsa färdigt. Skummade sista delen. Jag tyckte att berättelsen var ointressant och känner inte alls igen Tove Janssons sätt att skriva.

VeganMedusa says

Like Cannery Row, but with old white people.

Ylva says

A book about growing old. I had no clue about the plot when picking out this book at the library. However, the author Tove Jansson is one of my favourite authors. It surprised me that the story took place in the USA, as the books by Jansson I have read has taken place in Finland or Europe. I found this book rather dull, due to its lack of excitement. Even though the story is short, it felt long-winded. Still I admire Jansson for her simple style in writing, and the genuineness in her characters.
