



Tove Jansson (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki, in Finland’s Swedish-speaking minority. Her father was a sculptor and her mother a graphic designer and illustrator; as an adult she lived with her life companion, the artist and professor Tuulikki Pietilä, in Helsinki and in a cottage on the remote outer edge of the Finnish archipelago.

Jansson began as a visual artist, drawing humorous illustrations and political cartoons for an anti-Fascist Finnish-Swedish magazine from 1929 (at age fifteen) until 1953. It was there that she introduced her most famous creation: Moomintroll, a hippopotamus-like character with a dreamy disposition, a loving and tolerant family, and a world of mountains and river valleys that he explores with unfailing curiosity and kindness. Her children’s books about the Moomin family are beloved throughout the world and have inspired films, television series, an opera, and theme parks in Finland and Japan.

THE TRUE DECEIVER

by Tove Jansson

Introduction by Ali Smith

Translated from the Swedish by Thomas Teal

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“I loved this book. It’s cool in both senses of the word, understated yet exciting, and with a tension that keeps you reading. I felt transported to that remote region of Sweden and when I finished it I read it all over again” —Ruth Rendell

“Her description is unhurried, accurate and vivid, an artist’s vision...The sentences are beautiful in structure, movement and cadence. They have inevitable rightness.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Guardian*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Tove Jansson’s *The True Deceiver* is an unnerving examination of the nature of obligation, the many shades of honesty, and the complexities of human intimacy, friendship, and conflict.

It is the dead of Scandinavian winter, in the kind of sleepy village where everyone has an acute knowledge (accompanied by a keen sense of judgment) about everyone else’s affairs. By and large, the villagers like and respect Anna Aemelin, a reclusive elderly children’s-book illustrator who lives alone in her parents’ old home at the top of the hill. Katri Kling, an outcast in the town because of her strange looks and blunt personality, is not so lucky: the townsfolk gossip about her, and their children cry “Witch!” when they see Katri in the street.

The novel takes shape when Katri begins to do little favors for Anna—at first, she is just bringing Anna’s mail and groceries, but before long, Katri and her simpleminded brother Mats have moved into Anna’s big, empty house. From there, the two women’s lives become intertwined in increasingly unpredictable ways, building a relationship from which neither will emerge unscathed.

With minimalist prose, Tove Jansson’s precisely observed novel probes the dark, hidden aspects of the psyche. The result is an unforgettable novel that will haunt the reader long after the final page has been turned.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Though most of *The True Deceiver* is written in the third person, occasionally the author relates a first-person account of Katri’s thoughts. What effect did this change in voice have on your experience of reading the novel? Why do you think Jansson uses it where she does?
2. What role do the villagers play in the novel? Did their opinions of Anna, Katri, and Mats affect your impressions of those characters?
3. Although “Katri’s advice was widely discussed in the village and struck people as correct and very astute” [p. 29], she is not liked by her neighbors. Do you think Katri is aware that she makes people uncomfortable, and she either doesn’t care or is unable to change her ways? Or does she not realize the effect she has on people?
4. The first chapter of the novel ends with Katri thinking, “That’s where she lives. Mats and I will live there too. But I have to wait. I need to think carefully before I give this Anna Aemelin an important place in my life” [p. 11]. To what extent are the events in the novel part of Katri’s grand plan? Is there anything she wasn’t able to predict or account for? Why or why not?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Summer Book

Tove Jansson (Translated from the Swedish by Thomas Teal, Introduction by Kathryn Davis)

Corrigan

Caroline Blackwood (Afterword by Andrew Solomon)

Mouchette

Georges Bernanos (Translated from the French by J. C. Whitehouse, Introduction by Fanny Howe)

Wish Her Safe at Home

Stephen Benatar (Introduction by John Carey)

The Strangers in the House

Georges Simenon (Translated from the French by Geoffrey Sainsbury, Introduction by P. D. James)

Cassandra at the Wedding

Dorothy Baker (Afterword by Deborah Eisenberg)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

Stephen King, *Misery*

Tove Jansson, Moomins books, including *Moominland Midwinter*

Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*

Ruth Rendell, *The Bridesmaid*

Amy Hempel, *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*

OTHER IDEAS FOR YOUR READING GROUP

The Servant, starring Dirk Bogarde and directed by Joseph Losey (film, United Kingdom, 1963)

5. Tove Jansson was best known in her lifetime as the creator of a series of gentle, fanciful, and very popular cartoon characters—much like Anna’s flowery bunnies. In her introduction to the novel, Ali Smith cites Tove Jansson’s observation that “every serious book is a kind of self-portrait” [p. xiv]. Do you think Jansson modeled Anna on herself? Does this consideration matter?
6. Does Katri have a conscience? How is she able to reconcile the idea that while others are cheating, she is just moving “a piece on the board game of money” [p. 61]? Why do you think the novel allows her to go unpunished for breaking into Anna’s home?
7. The author writes, “Anna began to be aware, in a new and disquieting way, of what she did with her time and what she didn’t do. She began observing her own behaviour more and more with every day that passed” [p. 79]. How does living with Katri and Mats change Anna? How does Katri change?
8. Edvard Liljeberg helps and defends Katri and Mats at several points in the novel; he even tells his brother, “That witch...is ten times smarter than you are. And you’re not that much nicer, either” [p. 146]. What does he see in the Klings that the rest of the villagers do not?
9. What is the significance of Mats’s boat? Could it be a symbol of something else?
10. Why does Katri’s dog go mad? Is it Anna’s fault, for causing it to no longer obey Katri? Why does Anna tell Katri, “He isn’t coming back. He wants to get away from you” [p. 170]? Is this unnecessarily cruel?
11. Just before the spring, Anna made her first visit to the woods. Afterwards she “was gripped by a terrible anxiety” [p. 147]. What gives rise to this anxiety? Is Anna experiencing artist’s block? Where does it come from?
12. Was anyone actually cheating Anna? At which point is Katri lying—when she first tells Anna about the people she’s dealt with in business, or at the end of the novel when she says none of her earlier statements were true? If no one was cheating Anna, why does Katri come clean? If Anna was being cheated, why does Katri pretend she wasn’t?
13. At the novel’s end, why doesn’t Anna want to add rabbits to the forest floor anymore?

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