



Knots: Stories

Gunnhild Øyehaug , Kari Dickson (Translation)

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A mesmerizing collection of playfully surreal stories from one of Norway's most celebrated writers

First published in Norway in 2004, *Knots* is Gunnhild Øyehaug's radical collection of short stories that range from the surreal to the oddly mundane, and prod the discomforts of mental, sexual, and familial bonds.

In both precise short-shorts and ruminative longer tales, Øyehaug meanders through the tangled, jinxed, and unavoidable conflicts of love and desire. From young Rimbaud's thwarted passions to the scandalous disappearance of an entire family, these stories do the chilling work of tracing the outlines of what could have been in both the quietly morbid and the delightfully comical. A young man is born with an uncuttable umbilical cord and spends his life physically tethered to his mother; a tipsy uncle makes an uncomfortable toast with unforeseeable repercussions; and a dissatisfied deer yearns to be seen. As one character reflects, "You never know how things might turn out, you never know how anything will turn out, tomorrow the walls might fall down, the room disappear."

Cleverly balancing the sensuous, the surreal, and the comical, Øyehaug achieves a playful familiarity with the absurd that never overreaches the needs of her stories. Full of characters who can't help tying knots in themselves and each other, these tales make the world just a little more strange, and introduce a major international voice of searing vision, grace, and humor.

Knots: Stories Details

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Author : Gunnhild Øyehaug , Kari Dickson (Translation)

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From Reader Review Knots: Stories for online ebook

Owlseyes says

A Norwegian Master of the Short Story
Gunnhild Øyehaug dramatizes the critical consciousness.
By James Wood

in: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/201...>

Alissa Hattman says

Formally playful, sensual, and surreal, this collection is wildly varied, but Øyehaug's singular voice strings it together. Her writing is fearless, funny, and inventive. A pleasure to read!

Cherise Wolas says

These stories, the shortest a page, the longest 22 pages, are a very quick read. In many, there is a deliberate echoing, thoughts and images viewed identically, in identical prose, by different people, and/or a repetition of sentences as one gets deeper into a story. These are effective and purposeful techniques, but are used too frequently in such a slim collection with such truncated stories. Similarly, twice a gun is pulled in the name of lost love. All of the characters are laced with, or lashed by, anxiety. This collection has been described in various ways--as radical, absurdist, and focused on the banal of life. I don't know what radical means in this context, and the absurdist elements didn't work for me. The story I found the strongest, in terms of emotion and character, is the last one, Two by Two, but it ends in the animal dream-world of a young son, and lost its power for me. In fairness to the author, it's hard to know how these stories would read in their original Norwegian, or if it's the translation that gives it an overall flattened effect. As a whole, I didn't find the collection particularly strong, but I was intrigued reading stories set in a very different landscape.

Bryce Van Vleet says

I hope to someday get to read this in the original Norwegian. I've looked for it online but can't find it. Regardless, I really enjoyed this collection. I liked it for its narratives but I especially loved what it gave me in terms of my culture. Fjords, cold, IKEA, and other Nordic charm, fill these pages and I was so glad to read.

Nice and Mild - 3.5/5 - "If you like piña coladas and getting caught in the rain" A charming story but a bit shallow in my opinion

Taking Off, Landing - 2/5 - This was a complete 180. I'm going to have to think about this one.

Small Knot - 4/5 - The end sucked but I really loved the rest of this strange and endearing story.

Gold Pattern - 5/5 - A really interesting portrait of ecstasy in an era of one night stands.

Overtures - 5/5 - Such an interesting story about our families' expectations and claiming our own identity.

A Renowned Engineer - 4/5 - Sad but lovely.

The Girl Holding my Hand - 5/5 - One of my new favorite stories. I loved everything about this.

From the Lighthouse - 4/5 - Really interesting but just too short to be 5 star worthy.

Grandma is Sleeping - 5/5 - it's difficult to make me love a character in three pages but Øyehaug does it.

An Entire Family Disappears - 5/5 - This was a really interesting format and I loved the subtle reminder of our impermanence.

It's Raining in Love - 2/5 - I didn't connect to this one at all.

Compulsion - 4/5 - I've actually heard of a show like this before. I really enjoyed reading this.

Oh, Life - 3/5 - Oh, Lord. This was... interesting. Not bad though.

Echo - 2.5/5 - Really good characters but a too-weird plot.

The Deer at the Edge of the Forest - 2.5/5 - only half a page long so not much to judge but I thought this was an interesting concept.

It's Snowing - 4/5 - Øyehaug has a knack for capturing some extraordinary moments.

Fortune Smiles on Mona Lisa - 5/5 - Fantastic! A very fun and touching story.

Deal - 5/5 - Another thing Øyehaug is great at is inserting us right in the middle of someone's everyday life. It's wonderful to journey with them.

Trapeze - 6/5 - Fantastic characters, shocking twist, and a really engaging plot. Stunning.

Blanchot Slips Under a Bridge - 4/5 - I didn't get this one but I really enjoyed it? Curious.

Air - 5/5 - There's a saying in Norway about it never being too cold, only having insufficient clothes. I only mention it because I really liked this story for giving me a piece of my culture.

Transcend - 5/5 - She does something interesting with this play format again but takes it to an abstract level which is wonderful and compelling.

Meanwhile on Another Planet - 3.5/5 - Interesting but I always hate being explained to.

Vitalie Meets an Officer - 4/5 - Really interesting and engrossing

The Object Assumes an Exalted Place in the Discourse - 3/5 - This was more essay than story and I think I was a bit too dull to fully appreciate it.

Two by Two - 6/5 - I loved this. It was the perfect story to end on. I loved the characters, the plot, and the prose. So so good.

Maurits de Bruijn says

Lydia David on acid.

Joanna says

Wow, elsket denne!

Clark Hays says

Enchanting, at times infuriating and always intriguing

Knots, by Gunnhild Øyehaug, is an enchanting and, at times, infuriating book of extremely short stories — most are two pages or fewer. And though each story is maddeningly brief, each contains a glittering universe of sharp edges and long shadows, intricate and fully formed like some Gothic Faberge egg.

Øyehaug, according to the book jacket, is an award-winning Norwegian poet, essayist and fiction writer. It shows. Her work brings a poet's skill at distilling events and emotions into their purest form, imbued with existential meaning, and yet each story — ethereal at first blush — is also deeply grounded in both contemporary society and Norwegian myths and magic.

“Small Knot,” a story about the boy who was born with an indestructible umbilical cord that kept him tethered to his mother for life will stick with me. It's a disturbing modern fairy tale that captures the powerful, lasting and sometimes limiting connections we retain to our forbears, often to our lasting detriment.

Another, “Nice and Mild,” the powerful opening story, is about a man trying to overcome his proclivity to procrastinate. Trying to quiet his mental demons and rise above his own worst tendencies so he can visit Ikea and complete his to-do list, the story provides both a critique of modern life and insights into the shifting terrain of romantic relationships, all in handful of pages. That takes skill.

A scant few of the stories were less appealing to my tastes, such as “An Entire Family Disappears,” which was written as a kind of script in an experimental style.

Since I don't read Norwegian, I'm always hesitant to say much about her writing style since so much is dependent upon the translator. But Øyehaug certainly seems to have a powerful, concise and repetitive style — no doubt from her background in poetry — that suits these stories well.

This is from a scene in “Two by Two,” one of the longer stories. The main character is waiting for her husband, who she fears may be cheating again, and this after her having recently working up the energy to forgive him: “In other words, he should have been here at ten past twelve, when she finished clearing the snow and stood waiting, red-cheeked, by the window with a magnanimous, nearly loved-up look on her face.”

Knots is a truly unforgettable read and I look forward to trying more of her work.

Patricia Highsmith's Snail says

Loved this! G.O.'s stories are both unsentimental and incredibly kind. My favourite was probably the story of the girl sitting upstairs avoiding playing piano for her family, dying to go to the bathroom but in fear of being heard - until a wasp comes into the room and she has to get up....Nothing much happens but all the tension and anxiety is really racked up...it's so specific and real that I almost recalled having the experience myself (minus the piano). Other stories are much more surreal - for example, a man is attached to his mother via the umbilical cord and then she dies....It has an unexpectedly wonderful ending. It reminded me a little of Dan Rhodes for some reason (whose short stories were my gateway drug to the genre). I also loved the one with a girl running away, out of boredom, only to find herself being picked up by a local friend, an older man (I think many of the stories are set in the same small town) - they decide to swap alibis so she'll look cool and he'll be able to hide he's having an affair.

There are many stories in the latter half about unrequited love, confused people having sex, affairs, etc. There are also clever two-pagers, more like jokes or thought experiments. I feel like maybe the selection could have played up the stronger stories but I love how the writer's mind works and there are often fun little links or recurring characters.

Alan says

I've noticed that my reading this past year has included a relatively large amount of short fiction (1 or 2 a month at least) and within that there has been a high incidence of short short fiction aka flash fiction. That genre is defined as fiction of less than 1,000 words which is about 3 to 4 pages in standard print format. Short fiction has been around ever since Aesop's Fables but it does seem to be more prevalent these days if my experience is any indication.

I haven't been looking for short short fiction in particular but I just seem to run across it by chance, whether it is the work of Dorthe Nors in *Karate Chop: Stories*, Kirsty Logan in *The Psychology of Animals Swallowed Alive: Love Stories* or this present collection by Norwegian writer Gunnhild Øyehaug.

The Øyehaug came about as I collect fictional references to a favourite composer of mine, named Arvo Pärt, and maintain a list of them at [Fictional Characters Who Love Arvo Pärt](#).

I mention this connection as it is likely the reason that I found the story "Blanchot Slips under a Bridge" which fixates around the Arvo Pärt album "Alina" to be memorable due to the extra association that I had to it. The only other story here that had the same effect was "Vitalie meets an Officer" which was about the meeting of the mother and father of Arthur Rimbaud, a poet whose life and career have intrigued me ever since I read an historical fiction of his life (*The Day on Fire*) at an impressionable age. The downside to short short fiction otherwise seems to be that it is not very memorable unless you have some particular association to it. What I am left with is the feeling of oddness about most of these stories without any specific memories of most of them.

The exceptions to this were the longer first story "Nice and Mild" (about a quirky trip to IKEA) and the much longer extended final story "Two by Two" (about a cheating husband and the wife that waits at home for him) where you spend enough time with the characters to grow some association to them.

Benino says

Øyehaug's short story collection *Knots* draws upon the mundane aspects of a Norwegian reality to show surreal psychological suffering in interpersonal relationships. Both longing for a different self and their disgust with others leads her characters to want something else, something other than their lot, even if it's little as to be a different breed of deer, one more easily noticed, more easily hunted. Or to cling on to hope in an Ikea display stand, to have a friend's hands run through your hair.

Whilst these dissonances sometimes pleasurably perturb, they can also flop into dissatisfying cliché, a snow angel made by a deceitful husband, a child ruining a grandfather's visit, or fear of the sting of a wasp. Øyehaug makes the pitfalls of familial and worldly symbolism obvious in her stories as characters themselves choose to disregard reading these signs as part of a symbolism inherent to their existence. But can Øyehaug be read beyond this self-knowing irony? That is, the irony of using symbolism to the degree of a blunt surrealism, in a knowing way of depicting psychological suffering that knows it inflicts pain on itself as much as it suffers from external conditions beyond its control?

These stories demonstrate a sense of the absurd was at times delicate enough to be almost poignant, and occasionally almost delectable, but always with an unpleasant sensation, just as eating a Toblerone peak to discover a maggot. But over all it's difficult to feel like you've taken much away from this collection, other, that is, than a vague sense of disquiet and internal screaming.

Mel says

This was ok. Some of the stories were a one-page laugh and others were way strange but still entertaining.

Ilse says

(***1/2)

Sometimes when you read, it's like certain sentences strike home and knock you flat. It's as if they say everything you have tried to say, or tried to do, or everything you are. As a rule, what you are is one simmering, endless longing.

Knots is a collection of 26 stories, mainly ultra-short pieces ranging from one-two page flash fiction over three-four pages and two somewhat more fleshed out short stories taking ten to twenty pages for the opening and the closing of the collection. Delightfully imaginative and variegated in tone and style, from conventional to experimental, some stories are connected by characters, situations or repetitiveness of turns of phrases and patterns, most stand alone. Themes are death, desire, loneliness, family ties, love, betrayal, adultery, longing, identity, sexuality.

We meet a deer in an existential mood. We get fable and crime fiction. Some stories are funny, others chafing, mysterious or erotic. Some are abrupt like life. The opening story in a humorous and recognisable way illustrates the craziness of our current life style, how a visit to Ikea while suffering from depression

escalates. A few of the evocative titles like 'Fortune Smiles on Mona Lisa' or 'Blanchot Slips under A Bridge' reveal the playfulness and a certain light-heartedness characterising some of the stories. But there is also unfulfillment, a yearning to be seen by others, discomfort and disillusionment. While a few stories ostensibly touch on the banality of everyday life, Gunnhild Øyehaug doesn't eschew blending the ordinary with elements of the supernatural, rendering her stories a peculiar, surreal atmosphere. Her protagonists seem to float into the thin air of every day absurdity. They seem not earthed, while at the same time tied up – knotted - to their awkward situation – like in the story on the uncuttable umbilical cord uniting a mother and her adult son over the grave.

The Deer at the Edge of the Forest

The deer stood at the edge of the forest and was miserable. He felt like there was no point in anything, like he might as well give up. I walk around here, day in and day out, the deer thought, and there's no one who sees me. Am I invisible, or what? He didn't think so. I walk around here and could change people's lives if only they could see me, but no one sees me. Here I am, a hart, and no one cares. The whole point is that I am supposed to be difficult to see, I know that, I am supposed to roam around the forest and not be seen. But it is the very premise of my life that is now making me miserable. I want to be seen. So here I am at the edge of the forest. I am open to being seen, to being shot. If someone doesn't see me soon, I am going to do something drastic, I mean it. Right now it feels like I'm trapped in deerness. Oh, I would love to change everything, be someone else, something completely different. Oh, imagine if I could be a roe deer, an elk...

Within Gunnhild Øyehaug's slightly alienating world and through some of her somewhat ostentatious *spielerei* with names and literary references (Ted Hughes's Birthday Letters, Rimbaud, Cortazàr, Blanchot, Barthes – a fine analysis of these can be found here), I sense a cleverness below the surface of some of the stories which largely escapes me but which I can imagine will speak to readers who are more familiar with these authors (such for instance was the case with 'Vitalie Meets an Officer' drawing on the meeting of the parents of Rimbaud which reminded me of the little I gathered so far on Rimbaud's life).

Overall these stories were intriguing but didn't engage me much as a reader. Most stories felt a little insubstantial to my taste to make a long-lasting impression if read in one track, nonetheless the collection works in giving a flavour of the uncommon to the common, if dipping in with little doses (in that respect Øyehaug indeed reminds me of **Lydia Davis**, to whom she has been compared). Noticing that **Knots** gets pretty enthusiastic reviews, I guess it is just me this time- unable to suspend my disbelief in UFO's - and not this motley Nordic Wunderkammer of breezy, well-composed and quirky stories which other readers might enjoy a lot.

(paintings by Kristin Vestgard)

Leif says

Oyehaug's stories possess the kind of eccentricity that sidles up with an anxious grimace and then reaches forward to caress you with a yearning grin. They're playful when they're not desperate; carefully restrained when they're not teetering on the knees of sexual exhibition. They're fun. They weave together themes and characters without clear patterns. They range from the short one-pagers to longer, more considered webs of human feeling and desire compacted into great big knots.

They're good! Sometimes they bury themselves in the sand. Sometimes it's worth a little digging to find out that dirt is what was under your feet.

Michelle says

Clunky translation

Lauren says

Øyehaug is often described as a "master of short fiction" in her native Norway, and her works are slowly making their way into English translation.

Many - most? - of the stories are told in present tense, relying on the first-person narrator to describe the events in real time. This combined with the anxiety of her characters can be quite a ride. Opening with "Nice and Mild", we meet a man describing his trip to IKEA to buy blinds for his son's bedroom. Who knew this event could be so riddled with nerves! The stories are short - some only a few paragraphs of flash fiction, others 20+ pages. All read quickly and fast-paced.

Playing with surrealism, a bit of a erotica (surrealrotica?), some staged dramas/choruses, magical realism elements - this was a unique collection that greatly entertained and may be one of my favorite story collections of the year.

Øyehaug has a full-length novel (Wait, Blink) that I'm really interested to try after "dipping my toes" in here!
