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Literary Criticism

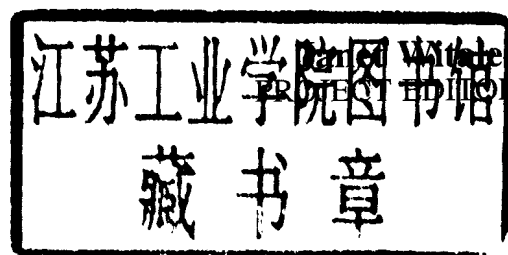
CLC

156

Volume 156

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Peter Høeg

1957-

Danish novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Høeg's career through 1998. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 95.

INTRODUCTION

Høeg is a critically acclaimed and award-winning Danish novelist. *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992; *Smilla's Sense of Snow*), Høeg's most internationally recognized work, has been sold in more than thirty countries. Critics have likened Høeg's works to those of such authors as Jules Verne, Jorge Luis Borges, and Italo Calvino.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Høeg was born May 17, 1957, in Copenhagen, Denmark. His father, a lawyer, and his mother, a Latin teacher, raised Høeg and his siblings in an intellectual, middle-class environment. Høeg graduated from Frederiksberg Gymnasium in 1976 and then attended the University of Copenhagen. In 1984 he earned a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature. Høeg then embarked on a series of career choices that moved him away from the intellectual world and academia. He spent time as a mountaineer, a professional dancer for the Royal Danish Ballet, and as a crew member on pleasure boats. It was during a boating trip that Høeg developed an idea which would become *Fores-tilling om det tyvende århundrede* (1988). In 1995 this work was translated into English as *The History of Danish Dreams*. Høeg's penchant for travel and adventure is often highlighted during his rare public performances, where he has been known to entertain audiences with tales of mountain climbing and visits to Kenya. Høeg met his wife, Akinyi, who is a member of the Kenyan Luo tribe, while visiting in Kenya. In 1996 Høeg established the Lolwe Foundation to provide aid to women and children from the Third World. The word "lolwe" is from the language of the Luo tribe (called Dhu-luo) and is used to describe the infinite space where lake meets the sky to the west. Høeg donated all the proceeds from his novel *Kvinden og aben* (1996; *The Woman and the Ape*) to the Lolwe foundation.

MAJOR WORKS

The History of Danish Dreams, narrated by the central character named Mads, begins near the year 1520 and progresses through four centuries and four generations.



Mads is a member of the last generation and the novel focuses on Mads's recounting of dreams he receives from his ancestors. The novel is written in the style of magical realism and includes themes that are also examined in many of Høeg's later works. These themes include the representation of time, both physical and symbolic, social class, the battle between the individual and society, and the mistreatment of children. The book is divided into three sections, with each section covering the lives of one generation. The narrative examines the history of four families who intermarry as the sections progress, until all four families are joined as one. The four families represent four different social classes of Danish society; the main character from each class is a thief, an aristocrat, a priest, and a newspaper publisher, respectively. Covering such widely varying characters and economic backgrounds enabled Høeg to provide social commentary and criticism of Danish culture. Høeg published a collection of short stories, *Fortællinger om natten*, in 1990. This work was translated into English in 1998 as *Tales of the Night*. The stories are set during the year 1929 and focus on a particular day, March 19. Each deals with a different

character who is undergoing a traumatic change in life. *Smilla's Sense of Snow* marked a departure for Høeg in that it is a mystery, but the book retained many common themes that mark much of Høeg's work—magical realism, a focus on child welfare, and a critical look at Danish society. The narrator, Smilla, exhibits traits unusual for a character in a detective genre book: she is most at ease alone or when discussing mathematics, and she is an expert on glacial morphology. It is this skill which leads her to believe that her neighbor and closest friend, an Inuit boy named Isaiah, has been murdered. Isaiah's death has been attributed to an accidental fall from a rooftop, but Smilla suspects foul play. As the novel progresses, Høeg discusses ethnic tensions present within Danish society (Smilla is half Danish, half Inuit, and never feels comfortable within the Danish culture), as well as the exploitation of Greenland and its native population by Danes. *De måske egnede* was published in 1993 and translated into English as *Borderliners* in 1994. The novel is told through the eyes of Peter, an orphan who recounts his childhood experiences at a boarding school engaged in an experiment in Social Darwinism. Failure to conform to the headmaster's standards equates to a failure to conform in Danish society and to being banished to the lower rung of the class system. Peter is joined at the Academy by Katarina and August, each from a different social background, and the three characters ally themselves in an effort to destroy the rigid hierarchy that the Academy enforces. The narrator of *The Woman and the Ape*, Madeline, who has been compared to Smilla in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, as both characters are solitary scientists, embarks on a love affair with a highly intelligent talking ape named Erasmus. She frees Erasmus from his bonds as the subject of scientific experimentation, and in turn Erasmus frees Madeline from her unhappy marriage and addiction to alcohol.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The History of Danish Dreams received a largely positive European critical response. Many Danish critics labeled the book a "significant novel debut of the 1980s," but reviews of the English translation were mixed: reviewers either felt that Høeg's social commentary was too clever or faulted the author for using characters who were too one-dimensional. *Tales of the Night* received praise for its clever descriptions of the passage of time and its effective character development. Nader Mousavizadeh asserted: "Høeg illuminates the political and the cultural through the prism of small, intimate lives of no apparent consequence, simultaneously elevating and denigrating, mocking the grand and dignifying the petty." *Smilla's Sense of Snow* generally received positive reviews from both European and American critics. Many reviewers characterized the book as an "anti-colonial thriller" and praised Høeg's reinventing the mystery genre with his unique prose, rendering of Smilla, and introduction of magical realism. Negative comments focused on the conclusion, which left many questions unanswered and which critics felt drifted into the realm of science fiction and away from

the murder mystery genre. *Borderliners* received generally unfavorable response from American critics. Some reviewers were disappointed with Høeg's return to the passage of time as a theme, feeling it detracted from the plot line. European reaction to the book was also mixed, with initial reviews being generally positive but later comments turning negative. Erik Skyum-Nielsen referred to the novel's treatment of human rationality as "pompous" and called the novel overrated. The negative European reviews of *Borderliners* also initiated debate about Høeg's political aims. *The Woman and the Ape* was faulted by critics as a simple recycling of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* stories. Danish critics argued that the novel was too preachy and that the examination of the animal rights issue within the book overrode the plotline. Constant comparison to *Smilla's Sense of Snow* diminished further positive American reviews for *The Woman and the Ape*, which was also labeled a mystery. The negative criticism for *The Woman and the Ape* helped to create a backlash against Høeg with some critics concluding that the author had reached his creative peak with *Smilla's Sense of Snow*.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Forestilling om det tyvende århundrede [*The History of Danish Dreams*] (novel) 1988

Fortællinger om natten [*Tales of the Night*] (short stories) 1990

**Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* [*Smilla's Sense of Snow*] (novel) 1992

De måske egnede [*Borderliners*] (novel) 1993

Kvinden og aben [*The Woman and the Ape*] (novel) 1996

*This work was published under the title *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* in the United Kingdom.

CRITICISM

Jane Smiley (review date 24 October 1993)

SOURCE: Smiley, Jane. "In Distant Lands of Ice and Sun." *Washington Post Book World* 23, no. 43 (24 October 1993): 1, 11.

[In the following positive review, Smiley applauds Høeg's redevelopment of the mystery genre in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*.]

It's not hard to tell that Peter Høeg, the Danish author of *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, has been, among other things, a mountaineer, an actor and a sailor. The novel, his first to be translated into English, is bursting with hows—how

arctic ice is formed; how to get to Greenland from Denmark by ship; how the Inuit world view, i.e., that of the Eskimos of North America and Greenland, differs from the European; how to swim in freezing water and survive; how to win the confidence of lifelong employees of a powerful and vindictive corporation; how the shipping industry works. In fact, one thing that *Smilla's Sense of Snow* reminds me is that "How?" is fiction's essential question, one that the earliest picaresque novels asked most directly: How does the traveler get where he or she is going? Yet every novel explores over and over the relationship between a character and what happens to him or her: How the character acts and reacts, who he or she is, far outweighs, in importance and interest, any climax.

Smilla's Sense of Snow happens to be a thriller, a genre that seeks to explore the mysteries of social good and evil, but also many broader political issues, especially the meanings of borders and boundaries between countries or cultures. In this case, the countries are Denmark and Greenland, until a few years ago Denmark's colony, and the cultures are European and Inuit, one, of course, well known, the other almost entirely mysterious. Like all thrillers, Høeg's novel has a MacGuffin, the valued object that all the characters seek and that is intended to finally lay bare all their characters. Yet for all the mystery and suspense, a thriller never stands or falls on the identity of the MacGuffin, but rather on the fascinating qualities of the characters and on the insights the author brings to the clash of cultures he is exploring. On both of these counts, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is first rate.

Smilla herself is a 37-year-old half Danish, half Inuit woman living in Copenhagen. Raised in Thule, in the far north of Greenland until the death of her mother, then brought to Denmark and sent to various boarding schools by her wealthy doctor father, Smilla is bitter and isolated. She befriends a 6-year-old Inuit boy living with his alcoholic mother in a nearby apartment. When he dies in an apparent accident, falling off a roof, Smilla is not convinced by what she sees that the death is an accident. A vast conspiracy is uncovered.

Of course it is. Vast conspiracies are the bread and butter of thrillers. For an American audience whose only knowledge of Denmark may come through the monologues of Garrison Keillor, it is rather refreshing that the evil parties have names unpronounceable and even unspellable in English, that the horror they plan to unleash upon the world has nothing to do with atomic weapons, and that no scenes take place in either Beverly Hills or the Oval Office. But even better is that Høeg understands just how Denmark and the Danish character are representative of a larger European attitude toward the non-European world, and the remote and mysterious Inuit are representative of the destruction and transformation all non-European peoples have suffered at the hands of the most well-intentioned colonizers.

Smilla is not easy to get to know. She is crusty, judgmental, pedantic, self-conscious. For a sense of humor, which would be far too light for a person of her seriousness, she

substitutes a mordantly ironic wit. She rejects, on principle, all human connection, and she turns out to be right in doing so. Her voice is so thick with information that the reader may well resist her at first. But Smilla's conviction about herself seems to be that eventually acquaintance with her repays the effort, and that came to be my conviction, too. I don't mean to say that she softens. Rather, her voice becomes familiar and intriguing, and, of course, the conspiracy and the MacGuffin, too, carry her story along.

Other characters are not so well realized, and there are plenty of them. Some of the more interesting ones die early or are introduced too late, when the plot is forging ahead full throttle and leisurely psychological exploration is impossible. The chief goon, a role that always has potential, is, in Høeg's novel, nearly faceless. Smilla finds an unexpected ally in a cook who specializes in sourdough bread, though, a nice touch, and in passing neatly characterizes the special narcissism of her father's very young second wife. The evil designs of the architect of the vast conspiracy have an unusual motive, too, more well thought-out than the depiction of the villain himself.

What Høeg is really interested in is the nature of investigation itself—whether it can be done and what its moral implications are. Smilla loves snow and ice, and is an expert on the subject, not only by virtue of her origins among a people who have many different descriptive words for different types of snow and ice, but also by virtue of later scholarly application. But part of her alienation has to do with her deep doubts about how her papers and other work have been put to use by those who would simply exploit the Arctic for its resources of oil and minerals, leaving destruction and ugliness in their wake. And Høeg's writing takes on deeper conviction and a more vivid style as soon as Smilla nears the Arctic. Though the plot shoots forward, the reader tries hard to slow down and savor this strange and dangerous world.

Finally, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is a serious and absorbing novel of character and geography masquerading as a thriller. I recommend it.

Brad Leithauser (review date 1 November 1993)

SOURCE: Leithauser, Brad. "Thrills and Chills." *New Republic* 209, no. 4111 (1 November 1993): 39–41.

[In the following review, Leithauser offers a generally positive assessment of *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, despite the protagonist's "professorial" narration style.]

So many other puzzles beset the reader of *Smilla's Sense of Snow* that, adrift in its mazes, you almost forget to ask, What type of novel is this? It is a mystery? A techno-thriller? Some mutant species of science fiction? The publishers bill it as a simple thriller, albeit with an exotic setting; they compare it to *Gorky Park*. If a thriller is what it is, it's the best one I've read in years. And yet, in the at-

tention that it lavishes on peripheral characters who advance the plot only incrementally, in the focus that it places on philosophical questions and in the ultimate indifference that it shows the loose ends of its narrative, the book pays little heed to the conventions of the thriller. Whatever else it may be, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is the record of a search—one of the oddest and most beguiling journeys I've come across in contemporary fiction.

Like the story she tells, the heroine is a heterogeneous blend. Her name is Smilla Qaavigaaq Jaspersen. Her father is a Danish anesthesiologist of international reputation. Years before, while doing medical research in Greenland, he met and married Smilla's mother, a bearskin-clad Eskimo who hunted seals and auks and narwhals. When his wife eventually drowned, he brought his daughter to Copenhagen, where she, now a woman in her late 30s, continues to live. When we first lay eyes on Smilla, she's a creature of some finery. It is December. Dark, wintry Copenhagen is beginning to wrap itself up in ice, and Smilla is portrayed as an "elegant lady" in a cashmere sweater and a fur hat. She is someone else when, near the close of the book, we glimpse her with her clothes off as she steps into a shower:

There's no skin on my kneecaps. Between my hips there is a wide yellowish-blue patch that has coagulated under the skin where Jakkelsen's marline spike struck me. The palms of both hands have suppurating lesions that refuse to close. At the base of my skull I have a bruise like a gull's egg . . .

This is a partial list of wounds. Still to come is the breaking of her nose. The mysterious struggle she is engaged in, against an amorphous circle of thugs and aristocrats, is savage. She might as well be battling one of the bears that she used to come upon in the far north:

Not one of those living carcasses that amuse you at the zoo, but a *polar bear*, the one from the Greenlandic coat of arms, colossal, three-quarters of a ton of muscle, bone and teeth. With an extreme, lethal ability to explode. A wild animal that has existed for only 20,000 years, and in that time has known only two types of mammals: its own species and its prey.

Actually, she might be better off with the polar bear. At least she would know who her enemy was and why it wanted her dead.

What she does know is that something is amiss when a little boy who lives in her apartment building tumbles off a snowy roof to his death. The Danish police judge it an accident. They conclude that the boy slipped while at play. But Smilla has a "sense of snow," and when she ventures up to the rooftop and minutely examines the boy's tracks, they suggest to her that he was in fear and in flight. What could the boy have been so scared of? It's a question that will lead her first into the business archives of a Danish mining company, and eventually onto a ship journeying to an island off the west coast of Greenland, where the dead boy's father himself died in a puzzling accident.

What we have here is perhaps the staple cliché of the thriller genre: the piecemeal discovery that an isolated act of violence fits into an ever-widening conspiracy. And as such—as a cliché against which any experienced reader becomes cynically steeled—its handling presents a monumental task to a writer bent on presenting it with artistic freshness. This is a task that Peter Høeg handles with great deftness. Everything in his story seems to build simultaneously. The conspiracy widens, the violence escalates, the scenery shifts from the dark level streets of Copenhagen to the shimmering ice caverns of a Greenlandic glacier. Steadily the novel grows scarier, bloodier, colder.

At the outset of her tale I was aware that Smilla—as a European, an Eskimo and a woman—stood at three removes from a reader such as myself. All the more striking, then, was the speed with which the sense of distance from her vanished—the speed of arriving on intimate terms with her. And she accomplishes this without being at all forthcoming. She is a taciturn soul. We read nearly 100 pages before we discover that her passion for snow and ice derives not merely from experience but from scholarship. She is a glaciologist, with articles to her credit like "Statistics on Glacial Graphology" and "Mathematical Models for Brine Drainage from Seawater Ice." We believe in this heroine partly because her reticence in no way feels coy. It seems, rather, like the wariness of somebody who, having grown up surrounded by dangers, instinctively seeks to keep predators at bay.

There is wariness, too, in Smilla's didactic, vaguely professorial mode of narration. Her method is expository and deductive. Time and again she opens a new section or paragraph with a general pronouncement whose pertinence is unclear: "Chivalry is an archetype," "The misconception that violence always favors the physically strong has spread to a large segment of the population," "Falling in love has been greatly overrated," "People perish during transitional phases." She then steers the remark, in wheeling, roundabout fashion, to the situation at hand. The plot advances in fits and starts, having been filtered through a driving, complicated mind. I have no idea, obviously, whether a half-Inuit/half-Danish female glaciologist might plausibly think as Smilla thinks; but in the fictional atmosphere she creates and inhabits, her sensibility has a realistically wide-ranging coherence.

We trust her in part because we sense behind her an author who has combined extensive first-hand knowledge with enormous amounts of research. Høeg knows a good deal about shipping practices, anesthesiology, cooking, maritime regulations, glaciers, forensic pathology, mathematics, Danish corporate law and so on. His heroine conveys authority, so that one doesn't question her (one is simply glad to have learned a fact) when she, in her appealingly pedantic way, informs the reader that Greenlanders have "the largest skulls in the world," or that "the most dangerous kind of avalanches are powder snow avalanches," or that the complex number system is the "first number

system in which it's possible to explain satisfactorily the crystal formation of ice," or that "Rigor mortis spreads from the jaw muscles downward." So convincing is this aura of erudition that it remains unshaken by an occasional slip—as where Høeg offers erroneous statistics about the murder rate in Dallas.

Indeed, one continues to believe in Høeg, and in Smilla, even as the story drifts further and further into the fantastic. Something peculiar happens to *Smilla's Sense of Snow* as it sails toward its denouement. Small incongruous hints that seem to belong to another genre—to science fiction rather than to the thriller—start to proliferate. We begin to hear about radiation, about asteroids, about parasitic worms that behave like nothing under the sun. Meanwhile, the novel pushes northward, eventually transporting us into an almost Coleridgean fantasy-world ("a miracle of rare device, / A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice"), where a meteorite has constructed a kind of crystal palace around itself, whose ice may be giving birth to a horror. A novel that had seemed centered on murder and on corporate corruption now takes on the trappings of movies like *The Blob* (whose extraterrestrial predator, one recalls, was shipped to the arctic), *The Thing* (whose monster preyed on the inhabitants of an arctic station) and *Them* (which evoked a world threatened by genetic mutation).

Smilla's Sense of Snow underwent a small but unfortunate alteration on its journey into hardcover. I'm told that the book's Danish title might be literally translated as "Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow." The novel happened first to reach me not in bound galleys but in typescript, where it was called simply "A Sense of Snow"—a more bracing, austere inviting title than the compromise eventually arrived at. The book looked destined to join that singular fraternity of foreign novels whose title in English translation seems an improvement on the original—books like Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters* (Japanese title: *Dry Snow*) or Halldor Laxness's *The Fish Can Sing* (Icelandic title: *The Annals of Brekkukot*).

In every other way, the novel has been beautifully translated by Tiina Nunnally, who is one of the founding forces behind the Fjord Press, a small publisher in Seattle that has perhaps done more than any other press to bring modern Scandinavian literature to America (including Knut Hamsun's stories, the first two volumes of Martin Andersen Nexø's *Pelle the Conqueror* and Jens Peter Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*). With *Smilla's Sense of Snow* Nunnally has outdone herself. The book must have been ferociously difficult to translate, not only for its length and wealth of technical detail but for its diverse subtlety. The translation ranges impeccably from the bleakly lyrical ("Outside, above the harbor, a light appears, as if it had been sleeping in the canals, under the bridges, and is now hesitantly rising up onto the ice, which grows brighter") to the tersely witty ("His handwriting looks as if he has taken a course in bragging about himself calligraphically"). And there are passages of surpassing beauty:

One October day the temperature drops fifty degrees in four hours, and the sea is as motionless as a mirror. It's waiting to reflect a wonder of creation. The clouds and the sea glide together in a curtain of heavy gray silk. The water grows viscous and tinged with pink, like a liqueur of wild berries. A blue fog of frost detaches itself from the surface of the water and drifts across the mirror. Then the water solidifies. Up out of the dark sea the cold now pulls a rose garden, a white blanket of ice blossoms formed from salt and frozen drops of water.

This is, evidently, the first time Høeg—who is in his late 30s and has published a couple of other novels—has written anything like a thriller. As such, it's a remarkably skillful and ingenious display—with a couple of minor, unexpectedly amateurish touches. In an already complicated story, he surely might have been expected, for instance, to vary his characters' names somewhat; as it is, the reader must keep straight Løyen, Lander, Loubert, Lubing, Lagermann and Licht. . . .

For the reader who negotiates safely through this swamp of liquid consonants, a larger problem arrives at the novel's close, where we're clearly meant to reach the apex of the book's depictions of evil. But I've met its arch-villain dozens and dozens of times: he's the brilliant, reckless mad-scientist found in half the low-budget sci-fi movies ever made. In a book containing a number of minor characters who are nothing short of dazzling (so that the reader actually feels a sharp, tugging reluctance when they pass out of its pages), one hardly expects the at-last-revealed leader of the Bad Guys to be a forgettable figure—but that's what he is.

Quite unforgettable, conversely, are Høeg's depictions of icy landscapes. I've long had a taste for literature about the far north—both novels and accounts of various polar settlements and expeditions. But I don't know that I've ever met ice that has the same grinding, unstoppable weight as that which piles up in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. Here is frazil ice and grease ice and pancake ice and field ice and meltwater ice, as well as varieties identified in Greenlandic (*ivuniq*, *maniilaq*, *apuhiniq*) because English lacks specialized terms for them. Here, too, are icebergs 325 feet tall. My encyclopedia tells me that something like a sixth of the globe is covered by ice and snow. In literature, as in life, it's a mostly unpopulated zone. One thinks of Frankenstein's monster, last seen drifting on the ice floes; of the narrator of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, reflecting back on arctic Zembla as he narrates a tale of buried violence in New England; of the frozen girl in the crystal mausoleum of Tarjei Vesaas's *The Ice Palace*. Readers who have the good fortune to pick up Høeg's novel will no doubt henceforth add Smilla Qaavigaaq Jaspersen to this list. She's last glimpsed at nightfall, venturing over ice nearly "as thin as a membrane, a fetal membrane," stretched over a sea "dark and salty like blood."

Peter Høeg and Karina Porcelli (interview date spring 1994)

SOURCE: Høeg, Peter and Karina Porcelli. "Overnight Success: Peter's Sense of Fiction." *Scandinavian Review* 82, no. 1 (spring 1994): 19–22.

[In the following interview, Høeg discusses his career and the popular success of Smilla's Sense of Snow.]

Peter Høeg is not a man of appearances. The 36-year-old Danish author arrives at an appointment via bicycle—not a mountain bike, not a racing bike—but an old, black bike with a plastic bag wrapped around the seat. The number of gears is inconsequential. This is what is important: to spin through the streets of Copenhagen.

For the most popular Danish novelist since Isak Dinesen, discriminating between the essential and the extraneous is important. Especially these days. In his native Denmark, his thriller, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, is a runaway best-seller, and he is a frequent, though reticent front-page celebrity. Internationally, his critically acclaimed novel is being launched in 17 countries, and is spawning obsessive doodads like "I Love Smilla" buttons in London book shops. In the U.S. *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, is set for a fourth printing, and is inching its way up best-seller lists—a remarkable achievement for an unknown Scandinavian author who rides an old black bike and revels in anonymity. A big-budget movie, to be directed by fellow Dane Bille August, is also in the works. And, most recently, *Time* magazine named him the author of the year.

A MYSTERY-THRILLER

Set in wintry Copenhagen and the frigid waters of Greenland, *Smilla's Sense of Snow* follows the sleuthing of its half-Eskimo, half-Danish heroine. An Arctic scientist with a penchant for fancy clothes, poetic reflection and acerbic social commentary, she spends much of her time tagging polar bears and writing articles like *Statistics on Glacial Graphology*. An expert on snow, she unravels the death of a six-year-old friend by beginning with his melting footprints. It's an unusual thriller, written by a reluctant member of the global glitterati.

As he enters a Copenhagen apartment, Høeg takes off his shoes, which even in Scandinavia is a custom reserved for more familiar occasions. He conspicuously lacks affectation, instead easing into the blond stance of the Danish guy next door: Delicately scraggly, a loose T-shirt stretched over slim, taut shoulders, he reaches down to pet an overweight cat.

"I never expected this book to be translated, or to be read beyond Scandinavia, and I am still paralyzed," he says, settling himself cross-legged on a sofa. "At the Frankfurt Book Fair last year, I told the American and English publishers not to print so many books. I thought *Smilla* would be read by 4,000 Danes, and that would be it."

Certainly the novel's Arctic setting is vaguely familiar to most Danes. And Smilla's resentment and anger regarding the treatment of Greenlandic Eskimos stings Danes more deeply than any other readers. Nonetheless, even if non-Danes don't understand the arid humor and the minutiae of the commentary, the novel remains a compulsive page turner thanks to a female narrator so bullheaded and idiosyncratic, you half-hope Høeg is marinating on a sequel.

Høeg enlisted the help of Greenlanders for some of his research. He says:

Writing as an Eskimo is dangerous because I am intruding verbally into a culture that has been humiliated by the Danish. I cannot, as a European, have sufficient knowledge of the Eskimo culture, not even enough to write a book, but then I had to at least try. Smilla's dilemma is being between two cultures, and not being able to find a proper place.

Writing as an Eskimo was one hurdle, but Høeg made his task even more difficult by writing as a woman:

In all literature that appeals, there has to be a little game, and that tends to be suppressed, because authors like to give the impression of being very intellectual and reflective. But every book is a game, a play, and dressing up like a woman, which men love to do at carnival, and which I have done through *Smilla*, is a game.

Høeg wrote this, his third book, in longhand over the course of two years in a one-room flat shared with his Kenyan wife and their young daughter. By Danish standards, he says, they were poor. "On one hand, I think it is important for me to be able to survive," he says, rebounding temporarily into materialism.

On the other hand, I am not interested in anything more. My family and I live what I think most people would agree is a modest lifestyle. And that is not going to change. It has been like that for six years, and it will not be affected by the success of *Smilla*. Money can be interesting, but it cannot reach deep into the mind or into those psychological things that are important.

THE IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE

Høeg protects what is important in his life—his family, tranquillity and time—by eliminating the extraneous, including telephones and televisions, neither of which he owns.

I don't want it [he says of the phone]. You can be with a child for hours, and then suddenly come a few minutes of deep contact. They do small things, and you understand each other in a way that transcends language. If somebody can just grab the telephone and reach you at that moment . . .

His philosophy is echoed in his writing method.

Literature grows out of small ideas and then a lot of routine, and regularity. Every day I work some hours, and in those hours, perhaps there is a minute of good