

## Review of Atle Berge's novel ROUGHNECK

# “A powerful novel about life after the Kielland disaster”

Shouldn't we know by now the whole truth behind why the Alexander Kielland oil rig capsized? Why 123 human beings lost their lives?

Seven years [in the book] after the rig went down, some people still don't have any answers and still feel the ripples of the disaster – as Atle Berge's novel shows.

*Puslingar* (English title: *Roughneck*) by Atle Berge (born 1986, debut 2010) is a novel you need to get your hands on. Not only because he weaves his work into a world in which we live and breathe every day of our lives, but also because of the book's successful mixture of Berge's own, self-concocted stories of interactions between fictional characters, and a wealth of sources and facts, public reports, news reports and interviews from witnesses at the time.

*Puslingar* starts in Easter 1980. A woman named Astrid sits at home with her eight-year-old daughter Marita in Western Norway, wondering how Jonny, her husband and Marita's father, is faring out in the North Sea. A message arrives saying that an oil platform named the Alexander Kielland, an overnight base for offshore oil workers, has capsized. Was Jonny staying there that night? Was he on board? Has he been rescued?

### A Moving Portrayal

The first section, “The Part About the Accident”, is a moving portrayal of those left behind by the incident. It depicts how these “bereaved” aren't just the survivors, but also main characters in this all-immersive oil narrative, a narrative where each and every one of us has a role. The section begins when a co-worker comes to their door and can't bring himself to leave until he tells Astrid how his best friend died that day. The reader, however, doesn't get to know exactly what happened until far later in the book.

The owners of the oil rig and the state itself, as well as the government and other executive powers can't investigate the rig fast enough, and begin putting together a Final Report about what occurred. Meanwhile, Astrid is being pressured by many of her peers into accepting a one-time pay-off for her husband's life.

The main bulk of the book is made up of “The Part About the Lives Left Behind” and “The Part About the New Investigative Commission”, which runs from 1987 to 1991. After all, the tragedy wasn't just the 123 people who died the day Alexander Kielland went under, but many of the survivors who scarcely led real lives afterwards, too. Marita's unshakable courage and substance carry her through school years and help her, despite great adversity, to get into the Norwegian Institute of Technology and her degree in oil engineering. She even manages to awaken fresh new interest in the accident that killed her father, placing a question mark on what *really* happened, and even in the real world has refused to let up to this day.

### A Young Girl Tough as Nails

With Marita, Atle Berge has crafted a portrait of a young girl as tough as nails, someone “brave, open and thoughtful”. A girl who writes in stark contrast to the key values of the local community around her, where people rarely talk openly about what happened, with an overwhelming retaliation in the form of sarcastic commentary. Her words couldn’t be more applicable to a society that neither officially nor collectively has any desire to know the reasons behind the event.

This is what it seems the book is all about. In Marita’s own life, as well as in the larger community and Norway’s oil state. As the book states, this is something we simply learn to live with: “the nation must forget in order to tolerate itself”. This might sound like what this novel is teaching us, its “moral”, or “message”, if it weren’t for the fact that Marita, the up-and-coming oil engineer in *Puslingar*, is still keeping her father’s memory alive and refusing to let up her fight to find out what happened when Alexander Kielland capsized.

It is also worth explaining how this rich novel is filled with multifaceted characters in a believable world, each with their own conflicts and dilemmas, their shyness and insecurities, their crippling weaknesses, their false courage and their social consciences. Throughout the book, Atle Berge depicts realistic, everyday interactions and conflicts between human beings that turn *Roughnecks* into a thinly veiled discussion about themes like love and gender roles, as well as attitudes towards information, language, speech and power. All the while Marita just keeps growing older and wiser.”

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