

Review

Berit Rødstøl: *The Aftermath*

The 'village beast' and the sins of the fathers

Book: When the sins of a father are unleashed on his daughter, a whole rural neighbourhood is destroyed in Berit Rødstøl's new novel.

Berit Rødstøl (1975) debuted ten years ago with the stylistically assured and stylised novel 'Celestial Travellers', whose plot was set the early years of space travel, when the Russians – in the most advanced experiment to date – were also the first to send a mammal into orbit around the earth: Laika the stray dog's only sin was to be captured for precisely this purpose. He burned to death – as the physicists of the day, back in 1957, knew he would from the start.

What they didn't know was whether the pioneering dog would survive the launch itself, thereby paving the way for later human space travel. It was left to others to deal with the morality of the experiment – as, for example, Berit Rødstøl did in fictional form with 'Celestial Travellers'.

The protagonist of her second novel, 'The Aftermath', whose plot spans a period from the early 1990s to 2018, is also an entirely innocent party in the emotional massacre that results from a fatal accident at the beginning of the novel's timeline: When Stine was just a little girl, her father drove a bus for a bunch of young footballers – and her friend did not come out of it alive.

In the time that followed the family became the victims of hatred, vengeance, violence, ostracisation and accusations that literally made life impossible for the driver's little family. When the novel opens in May 2017, Stine has just moved back to her parents' run-down farm after many years away. Her mother and father are dead. Her father couldn't cope with the feelings of guilt and hatred that beset him; her mother wasted away. The farm lies fallow and in a state of disrepair.

But when, as an adult, Stine returns to restore the practical and emotional ruins, she finds that pretty much the entire village are staunch haters. Even twenty to thirty years after the fatal accident they have been unable to draw a line under the event. Through Stine's memories of what once happened and the years that passed before she dared return home, Berit Rødstøl depicts a community baying astride the 'village beast' (a Norwegian concept that personifies the closed-minded attitudes of rural communities).

There is no end to the sins of the father, which grow like a cancer wherever people fail to obey the Lord's Prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Through this literary chamber drama and making use of a few subdued voices, Berit Rødstøl achieves the feat of creating a beautiful novel about all the bad and painful things with which 'The Aftermath' is otherwise so relentlessly filled.

Jan Askelund in the daily Stavanger Aftenblad