

## THE TRUE DECEIVER

TOVE JANSSON (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki into Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. Her father was a sculptor and her mother a graphic designer and illustrator. Winters were spent in the family's art-filled studio and summers in a fisherman's cottage on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, a setting that would later figure in Jansson's writing for adults and children. Jansson loved books as a child and set out from an early age to be an artist; her first illustration was published when she was fifteen years old; four years later a picture book appeared under a pseudonym. After attending art schools in both Stockholm and Paris, she returned to Helsinki, where in the 1940s and '50s she won acclaim for her paintings and murals. From 1929 until 1953 Jansson drew humorous illustrations and political cartoons for the left-leaning anti-Fascist Finnish-Swedish magazine *Garm*, and it was there that what was to become Jansson's most famous creation, Moomintroll, a hippopotamus-like character with a dreamy disposition, made his first appearance. Jansson went on to write about the adventures of Moomintroll, the Moomin family, and their curious friends in a long-running comic strip and in a series of books for children that have been translated throughout the world, inspiring films, several television series, an opera, and theme parks in Finland and Japan. Jansson also wrote novels and short stories for adults, of which *The Sculptor's Daughter*, *The Summer Book*, *Sun City*, *Fair Play*, and *The True Deceiver* have been translated into English. In 1994 she was awarded

the Prize of the Swedish Academy. Jansson and her companion, the artist Tuulikki Pietilä, continued to live part-time in a cottage on the remote outer edge of the Finnish archipelago until 1991.

THOMAS TEAL has translated Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book*, *Sun City*, and *Fair Play*.

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TOVE JANSSON

*Translated from the Swedish by*

**THOMAS TEAL**

*Introduction by*

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## INTRODUCTION

IN 1962 TOVE JANSSON published a story for children called 'The Spring Tune' featuring Snufkin, the peripatetic musician of the Moomin stories. "It's the right evening for a tune, Snufkin thought. A new tune, one part expectation, two parts sadness, and for the rest, just the great delight of walking alone and liking it." As he settles in to compose, he is disturbed by a small creature, a 'creep', which rustles out of the undergrowth, declares its admiration for the famous Snufkin, asks him a lot of questions and demands attention and comfort. Meanwhile the tune, which until then was forming itself out of the noises of forest and brook and the slow revelations of the season, disappears. Snufkin has to wait for it to come back.

Never underestimate Jansson, who never ever underestimates her reader. This story for eight-year-olds is a sharply pertinent discourse on the relationships between art, nature, fame and identity; a discussion of the place and role of the artist and of the mysterious sources of creativity. It could be said that everything she wrote is, in one way or another, about the creative interactions between art and reality or art and nature – and this latter

happens to be the title of a story from a 1978 collection of short stories for adults, *The Doll's House* (the book she published directly before *The True Deceiver*).

The central character in 'Art and Nature' – an old caretaker responsible “for the whole of this big art exhibition and also for the forest” – finds himself refereeing a passionate argument between a husband and wife in a darkening sculpture park, about what a picture they've just bought actually represents. He sees that their picture is still wrapped up in its paper and string. He suggests that, to solve the disagreement, the couple simply leave it inside its wrapping from now on. “It's the element of mystery that's important, very important in some way.” Simple as that. Then he ejects them from the park and goes off to his bed.

Tove Jansson was born an artistic child of bohemian Finnish artists. Her mother, Signe Hammarsten, was one of Finland's most well-known artists, designers and book illustrators; her father, Viktor Jansson, was a celebrated sculptor. Jansson herself became well known in her thirties for her Moomin tales and illustrations, which eventually made her world-famous. Because she was and is so recognized for her children's literature, her adult fiction, which she began writing in her early fifties (she died in 2001, aged 86), has tended to be much overlooked, but over her last three decades – a sizeable chunk of an artist's life – the eleven books she wrote were all for adults.

The UK re-publication of *The Summer Book* (1971), in 2003, followed by a selection of her short stories, *A*

*Winter Book*, in 2006, and the first publication in English of her final novel, *Fair Play*, in 2007, has been revelatory for her English-speaking readership. That there can still be as-yet-untranslated fiction by Jansson is simultaneously an unbelievable aberration and a sheer delight, like a finding of buried treasure every time we're lucky enough to be able to read, for the first time in English, another of her books – especially when the translator is as well suited to her minimal, deeply resonant style as Thomas Teal (who was also the original English translator of *The Summer Book* in the 1970s).

*The True Deceiver* is another fortuitous first, then, and it is an unassuming, unexpected, powerful piece of work. If the Moomins are Jansson's most celebrated legacy – a community of big-nosed, inventive, good-natured beings who survive, again and again, the storms and existentialisms of a dark Scandinavian winter through simply being mild, kind, inclusive and philosophical – then what will happen when a real community is put in their place? What will the outcome be when Jansson tackles, naturalistically, the life of a tiny hamlet in a dark winter landscape with all its usual viciousness and vicissitudes? And in a book so close to real local life that the original Swedish publication carried a disclaimer stating it was in no way based on any real place and its characters were in no way based on anybody really alive?

A novel about truth, deception, self-deception and the honest uses of fiction, *The True Deceiver* is almost deadpan in its clarity and seeming simplicity. No surprise, then, that this novel is at heart one of her most

mysterious, most subtle works. It was her third novel specifically for adults and was first published in 1982. Her biographer, Boel Westin, records that it was a novel with which she had great difficulty. “Its unsparing view of life,” Westin comments, “is in fact one of the characteristics of her adult books.” Jansson herself commented on the hard graft of it, how “stubbornly, labouriously” she worked on it. There’s no doubting the oppressiveness of the conditions under which her characters have to live and work. “The winds had risen. It pressed snow against the windows with a powerful whispering that had followed the people of the village for a long, long time. Between squalls there was silence.”

The novel begins with the disarming simplicity which characterizes the whole book. “It was an ordinary dark winter morning, and snow was still falling.” There is a darkness, almost banal, there at the heart of the very first sentence. “No window in the village showed a light” in a book about the dark, about a dark place, where snow is a kind of claustrophobia, where “paths filled with snow as quickly as they were shovelled out,” where “people woke up late because there was no longer any morning.” No longer any morning – the ordinariness is utterly surreal. By paragraph two the judgementalism of small community life has set in; perhaps this mindset is linked to the unrelenting climate? “It’s still snowing and there she goes again,” the unnamed narrator comments about Katri, one of the novel’s protagonists. Katri and her brother are clearly not liked in the village. He’s too

“simple” and her eyes are the wrong colour. Worse, the brother and sister aren’t properly “local”.

The novel’s voice is flat, exact, a kind of reportage which shifts, quite seamlessly and suddenly, into Katri’s own voice, making it not at all clear who the first narrator is and unsettling all notions of objectivity. By the end of this first chapter we’re left with this unsettledness, and with the knowledge that this book, concerned with locality, money, winter, wildness, social unacceptability and power, will also be about whether there’s such a thing as objectivity. Objectivity and truth happen to be Katri’s obsessions. Her refusal to enter into social nicety, her honesty, her silences and her bluntness, have made the villagers uncomfortable and deeply hostile towards her, but made her peculiarly trusted, given her a great deal of power in the community.

It will also be a book very much about the way you look – and the double-take of what a phrase like “the way you look” means: the way you perceive things as well as the way you are perceived by others. It will be about what friendship is, what trade is, what kindness is, and what true currency is. “They say that money smells, it’s not true. It’s people that smell.” It will be about the natural wildness that recognizes something as basic as human “smell” itself as a kind of currency. “Dogs must have seen through us, they must possess a crushing insight that thousands of years of obedience holds in check... How long can what was once a wild animal deny its wildness?” Katri, furred with snow like her dog,

counts herself in with the underclass of dogs – will this also be a book about class and hierarchy? At the end of the chapter Katri is standing looking at the local big house, which surreally resembles a giant rabbit's face, and is owned by the artist, Anna Aemelin, who lives there “all by herself, alone with her money”. Her motives are clear to her and unhidden from us. She and Mats, her brother, are going to move into that house.

All this, in five short pages. The book begins on the projected standoff, dog versus rabbit – “the real story of Anna and Katri,” in other words, the standoff of ‘real’ versus ‘story’. At its heart is a battle that promises to be savage. “I wish the whole village could be covered and erased and finally be clean.” Katri wants an obliterating purity; she is a personification of wintriness. Her opponent, Anna Aemelin, has no foothold on winter and is a being particularly associated with spring. “It was winter, and she never worked until the first bare earth began to show.” Her art is dependent on the spring, and it almost feels, sometimes, as though the spring might be dependent upon her art. She's also a person practically disconnected from the village, an ageing child living in a veritable museum to her parents, and a famous artist, who draws forest floor pictures known the world over for their authenticity, then takes these “implacably naturalistic” pictures and adds lots of very unnaturalistic flowery rabbits, for which she is equally world-renowned, especially among small children.

Who is the true deceiver here? And how does deception relate to truth? The novel, with its village full of

mundane cheats and charlatans, is a philosophical face-off between two mindsets, between Katri's cynicism and Anna's aesthetic sensibility. Is there such a thing as kindness? Or is there only "the whole sloppy, disgusting machinery that people engage in with impunity all the time everywhere to help them get what they want; maybe an advantage, or not even that, mostly just because it's the way it's done, being as agreeable as possible and getting off the hook." What are flowery rabbits (or, it might be added, Moomins) actually for?

Or is it Anna who's right, that the paying of attention to people's needs, though "a pretty rare thing", is a natural and uncynical part of being human? She knows what is expected of her, and she acts on it, just like she knows her own lie and finds it tiresome. But "things are not always that simple". Katri, on the other hand, knows exactly what "simple" means. She has seen and destroyed the snow figures the village children have made in spiteful likeness of her and her too "simple" brother. She knows even more sharply that representation of reality is a loaded concept, for everybody, never mind just for any artist.

"Mats has no secrets. That's why he's so mysterious." Jansson's own texts, works which seem so simple as to be near-throwaway, are always honed to perfection, given a lightness that proves deceptive, an ease of surface which, like a covering of ice over a lake, allows you a rare access to something a lot more risky and profound. "Rarely do books give as clear an impression as yours that they simply matured to the point of inevitability," Jansson's

editor at Bonniers, her Swedish publisher, wrote to her when she was struggling with difficult work; in many ways *The True Deceiver* is a book about artistic maturation as well as human coming of age. Like all her fiction, it is a modulation between frozen states and more fluid springlike states. A discussion of the workings of fiction is subtly built in as part of its foundation, with Katri as its fairy-tale villain, or Big Bad Wolf, and with the parallel presence of the simplistic children's stories which Mats and Anna both love, stories of naive world exploration. But this is no fairy tale. Katri's real and secret quest is an unselfish one in a mundane selfish world – to give Mats a secure home and at the same time have the boat that he's designed be made, be brought to exist in the real world. This real boat, a real seagoing possibility, is all the more hopeful and reconciliatory as a symbol here.

Is this an autobiographical portrait? Jansson herself said, quite frankly, at the time of *The True Deceiver's* first publication in Swedish, that “every serious book is a kind of self-portrait”. This overexcited reviewers, who decided to see the book, a subtle and calibrated work, in terms as simplifying and reductive as autobiographical terms almost always are. But the hopelessly innocent Anna Aemelin, totally at a loss with the commercial spinoffs from her flowery rabbits and desperately in need of someone to discipline her administrative habits, is laughably far from the sharp-eyed and wise Jansson who could write so acridly and merrily (as she did in her short story, ‘Messages’) about the flurry of insane requests that came in from companies and individuals concerning

her “product” (asking, for example, for her attention to “Moomin motifs on toilet paper in pastel shades” or “panholders with Moomin figures which I design myself and make in the kitchen without any paid help”).

Jansson knew the terrible responsibility and surreality of her position, a position which could result in a request like the one from a company who wanted to use her tiny anarchist figure, Little My, on “a discreet new mini sanitary towel” (she said a discreet no) directly alongside one from a reader asking for a drawing of Snufkin “that I can have tattooed on my arm as a symbol of freedom”. She knows that the responsibilities of the artist are huge, the position of the artist surreally powerful. She also suggests that, like Katri, who chooses and edits her words as carefully as any writer, everybody is a kind of artist, with similar responsibilities and comparable powers.

Westin notes in her biography how Jansson often writes herself into her fiction, “sometimes unconcealed, freely, openly, sometimes hidden behind various names and disguises . . . traces of Tove Jansson run hither and thither in all her texts and pictures, and the patterns they form are constantly new.” The key phrase here is constantly new. In *The True Deceiver* both deceivers learn to reinvent themselves.

This novel about art and comfort, about art’s place in the dark, is very much about the fact that words mean. It functions like an x-ray through all platitude. It is a deeply poetic work and its images, like the dog which finally runs mad, or the pile of rubbish left on the surface of the frozen lake, all the piled-up ephemera of Anna

Aemelin's life which will sink when the ice melts and the spring comes, are pervasive. On the surface, this is very much a book about how to survive, as well as to deal with what surfaces, in lives, over time. Surely one of its most haunting moments, a moment in which Jansson deals directly with art's impetus, is when Anna, looking through reams and reams of her parents' old correspondence, trying to find a portrait of herself, the artist, as a young girl, discovers that she was hardly there, that "she didn't exist". This is when she realizes, paradoxically, that she became "a painter of the ground" only after both her parents were dead and buried in it.

*The True Deceiver* is the opposite of charming – and deliberately so. But this novel's presentation of itself as a tough and unresolving work is what might be called a kind of deception in itself. "The struggle between the wild animal... and the rabbit has no real conclusion," Boel Westin writes. "There are no real answers to what is right and what is wrong."

That's one possible reading of the novel. But look at its deep-layered understanding of human surrealities and sadnesses, and at Jansson's usual vision of the epic qualities inherent in all small things. Though meticulous in its rejection of sentimentality, it demonstrates, alongside all the local cruelties, a wealth of small, real kindnesses. More: by the end, its two fixed protagonists, Anna and Katri – the two opposite poles of its "real story" – have actually learned to shift position.

This change doesn't come without fracture – ice

will break in the melt. All the same, at the end of this nimble, mysterious novel, both women have changed their old tunes for new. It is one of Jansson's most deceptively quiet, most astonishing compositions.

—ALI SMITH