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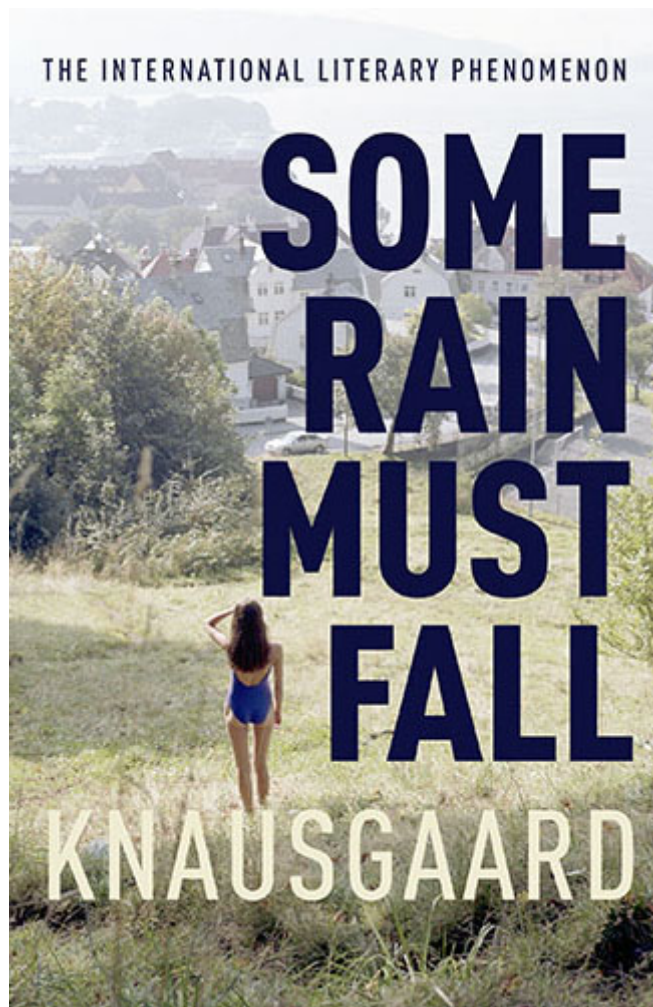
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Poor Karl Ove! Knausgaard's selfie-as-novel

FICTION



Some Rain Must Fall: My Struggle Book 5

by Karl Ove Knausgaard

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Here's a telling snapshot of Karl Ove Knausgaard from early on in *Some Rain Must Fall*, the fifth instalment of his epic selfie-as-novel, *My Struggle*. It's the late 1980s. Our young hero is 19 years old, readying himself to attend his first day at the Writing Academy, situated in the university town of Bergen.

I ... dressed, carefully and methodically. A black shirt, and the black waistcoat with the grey back. The black Levi's, the studded belt, the black shoes. Not a drop of gel spared to make my hair stand up as it should. I had also saved a plastic bag ... from Virgin, and in it I put my notebook and pen, as well as *Hunger*, to give it a bit more weight. (54)

Kitted out in his late-80s new wave regalia, armed with a carrier bag emblazoned with the logo of the record company that made sure the Sex Pistol's *God Save the Queen* saw the light of day, as well as the Hamsun novel that pretty much defines proto-existentialism, the budding writer strides out of his bedsit to conquer the world.

But, O, poor Karl Ove. Underneath it all (and not so very far underneath) he is, by his own estimation, a mess of dysfunction. He's socially inept, incapable of sustaining conversations, yet craves release from writerly solitude. He's hopeless with ladies, shy and mute in their presence, even though he longs for intimacy and sex. He may have been admitted to Norway's most prestigious writing academy – the youngest to have been accepted, he keeps reminding us – but he's convinced he can't write, that he's at best derivative, at worst completely talentless. He loves music, drums in his older brother's band, but can never rise above mediocrity. Even his body lets him down: he's pee shy and what's worse, suffers from premature ejaculation.

The only sure-fire thing that brightens his world is alcohol and he consumes beer, vodka and wine in staggering quantities. But these drinking binges lead to reckless behaviour, blackouts, and an infidelity that results in a bogus rape claim which destroys his first marriage. Yet not even drinking can purge him of his biggest demon, his father, innocuously referred to as Dad, the strait-laced teacher who married too young and is one part Plathian patriarchal super-ego, one part Darth Vader, a monster who stalks his life and dreams, enervating him, destabilising him at every turn. What's more, our young hero is all too aware of his inadequacies and excesses. His inner life veers between bursts of lofty exhilaration and longueurs of post-lapsarian guilt. Not since Saint Augustine chided himself for the sin of crying for milk as a baby has anyone been so riddled with guilt and shame, and so determined to purge himself of it.

This is how we find Karl Ove Knausgaard in *Some Rain Must Fall*. This instalment of *My Struggle* covers the fourteen years Knausgaard spent in the city of Bergen from the age of 19, thus taking him from the cusp of adulthood to early middle age. But, given its author's claims that the work is nearly entirely autobiographical, can we call this work a novel? Should we call it non-fiction as fiction, or non-novel as autofiction, or... but does any of this even matter? Karl Ove is back, all six-foot four of him, with all his thoughts, fears and bodily functions narrated in vivid detail, and whose manner of dramatization, I would argue, bears more resemblance to the novelistic form than that of memoir. With *Some Rain Must Fall*, the penultimate book of this six-volume work to appear in English (the final instalment is slated for next year), he has thrown down his latest 600 page-plus challenge. But can this Nordic *Untermensch*, with his Tolstoyan and Proustian ambitions, in length if not quite in scope, keep us interested?

The short answer is yes, and compellingly so, if not for obvious reasons. Such afflictions – evil patriarchs, chronic self-doubt, failed relationships, borderline alcoholism, artistic struggle – are in some ways easy material, the standard stuff of drama that happily lends itself to the identification effect, a central feature of realist literary discourse. But while Knausgaard may have put more neuroses into one character than those possessed by the combined cast of all of Woody Allen's movies put together, these aren't the only reason this volume of *My Struggle* still manages to enthrall.

To start with, in dramatic terms, it's not all doom and gloom. Karl Ove is making progress with some of his key issues. The previous volume, *Dancing in the Dark*, concluded with his efforts to address his premature ejaculation problem. In a wonderfully bawdy encounter, Knausgaard hooks up with a willing young woman at a music festival. Hellbent on finding a cure, he applies himself diligently to the task, lasting longer every time, never to see her again. *Some Rain Must Fall* picks up the narrative soon after this triumph, with our hero moving from cold, remote northern Norway, where he has spent a year teaching at a village school and writing, to take up his course at Bergen, a large university town in milder southern climes, but where it hardly ever stops raining.

Once again, in his macrostructural framing of the novel, we see Knausgaard's deftness in setting limits to his material, in selecting key periods that shape identity. An ambitious young writer still in his teens arrives in a new town to take up a prestigious course. The only person he knows is his older brother, Yngve, who is already there doing media studies. Soon to arrive in Bergen to also take up her studies is the beautiful Ingvild, a girl he met for a mere half an hour over the summer, and with whom he's smitten. These modest-sized narrative engines power up the story that's to follow, and while they at first might look too slight, they prove to be enough, appropriately calibrated to a novelistic form that celebrates incident, reflection, and the exploration of the lived moment.

Yet, for all the small-scale incidents of Knausgaard's universe, it would be a mistake to take him for a meta-modernist, working in the tradition of Joyce, Woolfe and Proust, who pioneered finding the significant in the unexplored moments of the everyday. While Knausgaard often privileges such moments, dramatically he's an Aristotelian at heart. In its own curious way, action always takes precedence over character; even when Knausgaard is simply smoking a cigarette, it's still a contemplative pause in whatever affliction he's currently suffering, and one that serves the affective masters of the Aristotelian universe: pity and fear. For Aristotle, pity is the feeling of compassion that is invoked by undeserved misfortune, fear the feeling of horror invoked by terrible acts. In many ways, Knausgaard's universe alternates between these two modalities, which take differing degrees of prominence depending on the book. For example, *A Death in the Family*, which documents the

terrible grip his father had on his life, and his father's gruesome death, is firmly situated in the fearful. *Some Rain Must Fall* lacks this dramatic heft, satisfying itself with the concerns of an ambitious 20-something desperate to make his mark, and the fraught process of acquiring the skills to do so.

In full compliance with neo-Aristotelean narrative arcs, this period of Knausgaard's life is a potent mix of rises and falls, successes and failures, with the mandatory bias towards the latter. He completes his creative writing course, but in the process of finding a balance between making a living and becoming a writer, loses direction; writing projects are begun in earnest, only to fizzle out. A subsequent unfinished course in literary studies gives way to a succession of part-time jobs and unsuccessful relationships with women, including, in the book's final act, a failed first marriage. In spite of it all he continues to write, encountering the usual rejections from publishers and suffering the usual self-doubt – feelings fuelled by the fact that many of his peers are successfully publishing their first books – until, finally, he too makes his much-craved-for debut as a novelist.

Throughout these trials and tribulations, it's Knausgaard's relationship with older brother Yngve that provides him with a constant, even though it's Yngve who's at the centre of one of the novel's central conflicts. Yngve, as a good older brother should, takes his little brother under his wing, introducing him to his friends, involving him in his music, giving him emotional counsel. But Yngve's idea of sharing clearly isn't confined to common interests and pastoral care. All too soon in Knausgaard's courtship with Ingvild – a seemingly endless series of meet-cutes that give way to long gaps between visits – we come to realise that the awkwardness she exhibits when she sees him is no longer due to shyness: it's because she's transferred her affections to the older brother. Knausgaard, having set himself up in the previous books as emotionally volatile, doesn't disappoint, and the depths of this betrayal are powerfully depicted: a burning, near-primal resentment at having been spurned for his older sibling.

This betrayal hits him as part of a larger familial betrayal, and is all the more devastating for it. Isn't it bad enough to be at the whim of unpleasable, remote father who, as we witnessed in the third volume, *Boyhood Island*, doles out his affections in miserly portions to a son who craves reassurance? And now Yngve, the brother he all but idolises, further cripples his self-esteem by snatching away his first real romance before it can even begin. The Knausgaard men are behaving not just badly, but abominably. Yet, surprisingly quickly, it's all over with Yngve and Ingvild, and soon Knausgaard re-establishes the brotherly bond. It's a telling account of forgiveness,

and narrative lines such as this show how effective Knausgaard's stylistic decision to detail lived experience can be: we feel his tortured emotions with fullness that a more truncated approach would prevent.

Poor Karl Ove: fate isn't being kind to him, and he seems poorly equipped to handle its challenges. There's an unfashionable word for his particular type of melancholy, the particular nature of his tragic flaw: angst. And Knausgaard's angst seems curiously well suited to our times, times that are fixated on the empowerment of the self, and which also revel in documenting the struggles to achieve it. I'd call Knausgaard's particular angst a kind of vitalist angst, at odds with the Sartrean tradition it springs out of. Such a tradition, instigated with Sartre's early novel *Nausea*, traps its subject in a futility of existence from which there is virtually no escape. God is dead, true love barely a possibility, consciousness itself is a bare cell with no exit: man [sic] is born to suffer. The only seeming path out of the prison house of subjectivity is the absolute freedom of the human subject to act, to create itself (preferably politically), but even such noble aspirations to self-actualisation run up against the limits of a corrupt world. This tradition doesn't quite capture the timbre of Knausgaard's angst. There is another existential literary tradition that comes somewhat closer, perhaps best represented by Henry Miller, who picks up the baton of futility and runs with it all the way across the Atlantic from the US to Paris, where he dulls the pain of total freedom with sex, alcohol, and unfettered artistic expression. And like Miller, Knausgaard is capable of moments of great affirmations of existence. Here's a passage where Knausgaard, contemplating his family and future possibilities, gives himself over to a flight of affirmation:

Darkness. Silence. The beat of my pulse. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. [...] My heart was young and strong, it would beat away through my twenties, it would beat away through my thirties [...] If I got to grandfather's age, and he was eighty, I had used only a quarter of my life so far: almost everything was before me, bathed in the hopeful light of uncertainty and opportunity, and my heart, this loyal muscle, would take me through it whole and unscathed, ever stronger ever wiser, ever richer in life lived. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum. (191)

It's these kind of declarations, heralding his innate vitality, that prevent the spirit of *Some Rain Must Fall* from sinking into total gloom. Knausgaard's main concerns are love (closely related to, but not entirely identified with, sex) and art (predominantly writing, but also music). Women may ultimately bring him nothing but suffering, but the sweet shyness that characterises the courting of Ingvild, and later his future wife, Tonje, is driven by the heart of a romantic who has faith in the empowerment of love.

He also delights in the physicality of landscape. The town of Bergen, soaked to the skin from constant rain, is still a source of constant beauty to him, situated as it is between the mountains and the sea, and while Knausgaard's descriptions are often hastily functional, they still convey its particular wonder.

Unlike Miller, however, young Karl Ove doesn't seem to be quite sure what to do with these surges of optimism, and appears to be caught somewhere between the extremes of Sartrean gloom and Milleresque bacchanalia. For nearly every assertion of drives meaningfully satisfied there's a contrapuntal force that overwhelms him, an underlying *mécontentement* that the very act of joy brings to the surface, capsizing his transcendence, and driving him to find release in alcohol and self-destructive behaviour. Nowhere is this truer than in his artistic endeavours, and his course at the Writing Academy, where his writing is critiqued, provokes a roller-coaster ride of artistic struggle. Comparing his work to that of another student at the academy, he conducts this self-criticism.

There was no such colour in what I wrote, no such hypnotic or evocative mood, in fact there was no mood at all, and that was the heart of the problem, I assumed, the reason I wrote so badly and immaturely. (159)

Yet, even if his early writing lacked mood, in *Some Rain Must Fall* he more than compensates: if we can characterise mood as fluctuations in states of feeling, there's mood to spare.

But Knausgaard also display considerable skill in his selection and shaping of dramatic situations. The novel's ground situation, a new career in a new town, is a standard narrative gambit, and one that Knausgaard deploys well. Its main delight is that the reader can accompany the narrator into unknown territory where they hope to make their fortune, experiencing, at a ringside seat and with no risk to themselves, the thrill of the new. The warren of student bedsits that proliferate throughout Bergen are filled with sharply drawn walk on/walk off characters, and they provide a case study at the level of lived experience of how a particular country, Norway, at a particular period, the 1980s and 90s, educates its professionals.

While the first half of *Some Rain Must Fall* follows a relatively clear plot line built around his studies at the writing academy, the second half becomes somewhat episodic, probably due to the fact that Knausgaard starts to move around in search of various writing opportunities: there are, for example, extended sojourns in Iceland and England. But

the novel as a genre isn't bound strictly to Aristotelian necessity in its sequencing of events, and even less so novels as autobiographical as Knausgaard's: our lives are messy entities, not shaped by the kind of logic where *a* causes *b* with syllogistic precision. As Milan Kundera reminds us in his anti-Aristotelian rant in *Immortality*, lives lived are full of random episodes, false paths, serendipity. And it's during one of these side steps that Knausgaard's style comes to life in a way I hadn't quite experienced in any of his other novels, and that furnishes some of what is, for me at any rate, some of the most striking writing in the series so far: his stints working at a hospital for the mentally disabled.

Knausgaard's motives for working as a carer aren't particularly noble: he's not good at managing his student grant, which comes in a lump sum at the beginning of the academic year, and what little disposable income he has is spent on records and alcohol. He needs work, he needs it immediately, and it's readily available in being a carer for the mentally and physically disabled. Suddenly we're taken from the relative melodrama of student life to an altogether more serious world: a hidden door opens on a Beckettian sub-universe populated by those who have been all but forgotten by the world, and are now dependent on the state. It's a kind of character test Knausgaard sets for himself, and one he passes reasonably well. The routines of setting out meals, taking the residents for outings, providing companionship for people who are complete strangers, and in many instances can't effectively communicate, is grippingly portrayed. He's not afraid to reveal the highs and lows of such a difficult task. He is by turns sympathetic, caring, apprehensive, bewildered. Spared the breast-beating and over-emoting that his other dilemmas inspire in him, we see a more balanced side. Also, the minimalist prose well is suited to the material: this stark and confronting scenario comes fully to life in the careful observations of some residents' near empty rooms, and the silent walks through deserted parks and gardens.

Much has already been written about Knausgaard's literary style: the plainness of his language, the massing of detail, the ostensible tendency to over-narration. Critics seems divided as to whether his writing is long-winded and sloppy, his talent failing his ambition, or whether it's fit for purpose, admirably serving the drama without overly drawing attention to itself. At any rate, there's more than enough praise to counter the negative view, with writers like Zadie Smith and Jeffrey Eugenides lining up to support his work enthusiastically. Whatever your view I would argue that, no matter what camp you fall into, it's hard to deny that with *My Struggle* Knausgaard has pulled off something extraordinary, that he has to some degree, if not reinvented realism, then refreshed it for a contemporary literary readership that is perhaps growing tired of tightly scripted novels that resemble movie scripts, or maximalist fictions that rely on outlandish hyperbole. In turning his back on the trappings of

standard conceptions of literariness – for example, the kind of high-blown lyricism and overweening self-romanticism that sank Harold Brodkey's much vaunted autobiographical novel, *The Runaway Soul* – Knausgaard has effectively employed a cruder mimesis, one that refuses to engage with the kind of *trompe l'oeil* effects that can in their own way achieve verisimilitude.

Instead, his style is based in part on what I would term a naïve epistemology, one that harkens back to the Cratylid tradition of the word, a belief that there's a natural correspondence between words and things, and that by naming things we can create worlds. Metaphor, simile and other poetic devices are virtually non-existent in the *My Struggle* novels. While comparisons to Proust abound in discussions of Knausgaard (a comparison he invites), his style couldn't be more different to Proust's filigree, hypotactical sentences whose sinuous lines, in the great tradition of modernist subjectivity, mimic the train of thought. Knausgaard, like Proust, may draw upon the great internal sweep of remembrance to generate his novel, but his conveyance of choice is made up largely of concrete images, dialogue and simple declarative sentences. Often, in paratactical mode, these sentences are strung together with commas, breaking every rule of 'good' grammar. It's tempting to think this style is a new kind of rendering of consciousness, but I would argue differently. Consciousness in Knausgaard is a kind of extreme ossification of realism, a near empirical entity, gleaned principally from observation of the external world and thoughts narrated as statements of fact, which is easy enough to claim in first person, where the narration of thoughts and emotional states correlate with the authenticity of the narrating subject. Consciousness as a mediating factor, a substance that distorts reality and that must be shown to do so, isn't evoked. Language is at the service of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get sensibility, and it's a sensibility that isn't afraid to dwell on lived experience at length, a Stendahlian mirror that reflects not in a series of tableaux, but that is as vast as the universe it captures, and is somehow co-extensive with it.

This is a somewhat technical way of saying that Knausgaard's realism is not the kind of realism we are accustomed to. In fact, while working in a realist paradigm, Knausgaard, in his desire to write rapidly and in volume (the near 700 pages of *Some Rain Must Fall* took, he claims, a mere eight weeks to write), has challenged the limits of contemporary realism. All the standard tropes of realism are there: concrete events plotted in chronological time (there is some anachrony, but within the acceptable limits of realism); a hero narrator whose consciousness is the spoke of the wheel; carefully selected conflicts that drive the story forward; internal struggles with self, external battles with people and institutions. But the edicts of contemporary realism that Knausgaard chooses to flout are those of tightness and brevity, and of relegating description and 'undramatic' events to the background in order to foreground the 'real meat' of the narrative: heightened events, turning points, moments of conflict. There is instead a merging of foreground and background in order to create more vivid textures of lived experience.

A case in point is the scene when Karl Ove moves into his first student flat. After unpacking and then going out, he returns to an empty home filled with an ambivalent solitude, one that is both exhilarating and disquieting. These quiet spaces between love and friendship, between social engagement and confrontation with self, are evocatively rendered. This said, there are times when it doesn't seem all that necessary to give us so much information about how dense the Bergen rain is, and every step (again) in the making of a cup of instant coffee. Yet, if an editor started hewing at these thickets of qualia, what would be left? The whole project – naïve in the extreme yet bizarrely effective – of replicating lived experience, would be lost. And, to be fair to Knausgaard, he has never asked us to do anything as eye-wateringly dull as stare at the Empire State Building for eight hours and five minutes, as Warhol did in one of his 1960s films. He's asking us to live his life with him, to experience its fallow periods as well as its climaxes.

Such techniques work better for some things than others, and there are sensory vacuums in the oddest of places. We've been hanging out with Yngve for nearly five books now, and I really have little idea of him. And the women in Karl Ove's life, so central to his longings, don't fare much better. These are the dangers of extreme solipsism: most of his characters exist only as manifestations of his desires, and tend to be lifeless in themselves. If you're looking for Forsterian roundness in the main players of *Some Rain Must Fall*, or any other novel in *My Struggle*, for that matter, you'll search in vain. Let's take the love interests: Ingvild, Gunvor, Tonje. We also know something of their tastes and inclinations: the first likes soccer, the second horses, the third jazz and movies. They all play important dramatic roles: Ingvild betrays him (at least as far as he's concerned). Gunvor, the fellow student he meets on the rebound and ends up living with, isn't quite right. His subsequent marriage to Tonje falls victim to his self-loathing and impulsiveness. But very few of Knausgaard's characters seem to take on a life of their own.

Yet, despite this, I'm unwilling to base any critique on an insistence on Forsterian characterisation. It's not so much that this second tier of principles in Knausgaard's cast don't surprise (a central Forsterian criterion for roundness); Ingvild and Yngve's betrayal could qualify as such, as could Tonje's tit-for-tat affair, as could his father's transformation from controlling patriarch to stupefied alcoholic. Their failure to come to life is perhaps symptomatic of the possibility that Knausgaard simply doesn't have the desire (or skill? or time?) to draw them, in his role as a witness narrator, in such a way that we are able to deduce their inner lives from finely drawn observation. Or perhaps he's defaulting to a psychological defence native to extreme subjectivity: if all I can truly know is myself, how can I assume to know another? Surely to presume to know another is the greatest arrogance?

But we should also consider more banal, technical reasons. His unwavering first-person point-of-view schema doesn't help matters; by this stage of *My Struggle* we're clocking in at over two thousand pages of me, myself and I, and it's simply not possible for him to give us access to anyone else's inner states in a manner as direct as his own. Whatever the cause, for the most part Knausgaard's characters glide through his consciousness, and ours, like the strangest of phantoms, corporeal yet disembodied, fully present yet hollowed out by his overwhelming needs and compulsions.

Poor Karl Ove: he really is a mess of dysfunction. But should he really invoke so much pity in the reader? Should we really feel so sorry for him? It's hard not to: he does seem to be a machine designed to produce pity on an industrial scale. He abounds with 'everyman' afflictions; those of the heart, of making a living, of realising his fair share of ambition, of finding out how to belong in a world that is as ever-changing as he is. For Aristotle, when it came to producing 'the tragic effect', it was best to create the type of hero who

neither is distinguished for excellence and virtue, nor comes to grief on account of baseness and vice, but on account of some error ... There must be no change from misfortune to good fortune, but only the opposite, from good fortune to misfortune: the cause must not be vice, but a great error; and the man must be either of the type specified or better, rather than worse. (33-4)

Throughout *Some Rain Must Fall*, it's clear that Knausgaard runs little risk of deviating from the Aristotelean requirement of a constant barrage of misfortune, most of it self-inflicted. But self-inflicted how? By error, or by vice? And what's the difference? Are acts such as excessive drinking and infidelity vices, errors of judgement, or pathologies? However we characterise his misfortunes, one thing is clear: Knausgaard asks that we not judge him too harshly, despite his claims to the contrary. At every opportunity he takes great care to set up reasons for his tragic falls: his evil father, his chronic self-doubt, the frustrations of artistic struggle, the inability to find true love. It's also as if his transgressions are beyond the limits of error, which implies the making of a decision whose outcome you must take some responsibility for. No, it would appear that Knausgaard really is – despite his constant breast-beating, despite his constant protestations of Augustinian guilt – beyond judgement, a creature whose contradictory drives, essentially noble (to find true artistic expression, to find true love) thwart the will to realise his full human and creative potential.

But perhaps Knausgaard's greatest skill, what makes us turn page after page, is the audacity, never explicitly expressed, with which he asks us to forgive him the very instant he transgresses. It doesn't matter if the sin is large or small. When he's

consumed by envy at the literary debut of his close friend, Espen, who, at the tender age of 21, publishes a novel before him, we are tacitly asked to respond by going: Perfectly understandable, who wouldn't be a little jealous? He's been trying *so* hard to get published. And even when, driven by a lust he claims he can neither control nor understand, he betrays Tonje, the reader, after getting over the initial shock, is invited to sigh: Who could blame him? He's so emotionally fragile! Knaussgard's demons are contrived to be so relatable, their actions so heavily qualified by extenuating circumstances, that you want to get them to a self-help group rather than do them the violence of exorcism.

There's also a cartoonish dimension to Knausgaard's bouts of angst: his sufferings, which are often reported as death blows, magically turn out to be mere flesh wounds. In *Some Rain Must Fall* he always quickly bounces back, ready to to write and love again (and by the time his life has moved on to middle age proper in *A Man in Love*, he has successfully re-oedipalised with a family all of his own). How are we to understand this narrative trajectory? As a matter of developing human resilience, the building up the scar tissue that helps shape our character for the better, and a testament to human optimism: knock me down, but I'll get straight back up again? Or is it born of the writer's need to keep conflicts coming thick and fast, while also maintaining the sympathy needed to keep the reader on side? There's no reason it can't be both. In fact, for *Some Rain Must Fall* to succeed, it has to be both, and it's up to the individual reader as to whether they're convinced or not. But for those who do love Knausgaard, and there are many who do, this canny dramatisation of everyday struggle may go some way to explaining his extensive readership outside his native Norway. In that country, *My Struggle's* success can be attributed in part to the tabloid-like coverage it has received due to hotly contested depictions of living family members. But the rest of the world has largely been spared the stories of legal action threatened by various relatives, the kiss-and-tell account by his ex-wife: we judge at more of a remove, and stripped of the media furore, we have to conclude that there must be more to it than a family squabble fought out in public.

And yet, after now having read – avidly, I'll admit – the first five volumes of *My Struggle*, I'm still left feeling troubled about the particular lure of Knausgaard's moral universe. Is its main attraction that he provides plenty of trauma, but few of its enduring consequences? Does he merely provide, ultimately, the illusion of angst, an audience-friendly suffering that has none of the nasty existential side-effects, like nihilism and total despair? What really is on offer here? Sins steeped in remorse that we're asked to absolve even before they've been committed? It would seem Karl Ove wants his suffering, and to enjoy it too. Saint Augustine, that connoisseur of truly virulent self-loathing, would have been horrified at this all too easy, all too rosy, crucifixion.

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