

Anthony G. Covatta
2565 Handasyde Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45208
513.652.3750
acovatta@drewlaw.com

Memories May Be Beautiful And Yet

At this stage in our reading lives, when we come upon a good writer we haven't read before, we are thrilled. When it is a writer who has written more than one good book, we are even more thrilled. For myself, when it is a writer who's written a connected series of good books, I am in ecstasy. I like series of books, trilogies, tetralogies and more. I was thrilled to find Yukio Mishima's *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy thirty years ago. More recently, I spent a couple of years plowing through Trollope's *Barchester Chronicles* and then his equally good but less well known Palliser series, and I'm still getting off on Balzac's *Comedie Humaine* whenever I can find a good translation of one of the lesser known works.

Thus, I got a charge when I read about the Norwegian Proust. That is Karl Ove Knausgaard. He isn't actually a new Proust. To my taste he is better. If you haven't heard, Knausgaard, whom I'll familiarly refer to as Karl Ove in this paper, has written a six-volume series of novels, entitled ominously, *My Struggle*, based on his own life that have taken the Norwegian literary world, and, as the volumes are translated into other languages, the literary Western world by storm. To date, two of the works have been translated into English and released. They are *A Death in the Family*, known in the U.S. as *My Struggle: Book I*, and *A Man in Love*. These two books are the subject of my paper tonight, as well as some remarks on what makes a memoir or reminiscence more than just a flat recounting of events.

*

The first Karl Ove book that I read was the first in the series of six, *My Struggle: Book I*. *My Struggle* takes Karl Ove through his childhood into young adulthood and ends with the death of his father in rather painful circumstances and the events emanating from that, cleaning up the mess his father had left (physically and psychologically) and extricating his grandmother, who lived with the father, from the same plight.

Karl Ove came from what first appears to be a prosaic Norwegian family, two parents, two boys and a girl. He recounts the events of his adolescence in exacting but not excruciating detail. You live with him as he encounters girls for the first time, as he plays in a rock band, and, more importantly, discovers the joys of drinking. Karl Ove is as inept at dealing with girls as any American teenage boy. Adolescent love life in Norway is no different from that in the USA. He at least can look back on these painful forays into dating with clinical detachment and objectivity from his perch in the present.

A long section of the book tells us in minute detail about the events of one New Year's Eve when Karl Ove has secreted a sack of beer in a snow bank beside the road as he and his boon companions go to a series of parties. Karl Ove hopes to encounter one girl whom he has agreed with some bravado to meet, but, of course that affair peters out almost before it starts. The night ends inconsequentially but the telling of it brings back both painful and pleasant memories for anyone who started to enjoy drinking before he was 18 or 21, as the case may be, and had to smuggle his beer into parties and dances without incurring the ire of parents, neighbors and the parents of one's friends. The book is full of detailed situations such as this.

At first you don't notice the gathering storm, but the remoteness of Karl Ove's father becomes more and more apparent. Karl Ove's father is a distant but revered figure. He is a secondary school teacher, a bright man. His external dignity cloaks an inner life in acute disarray. It is painful to watch Karl Ove trying to stay within the orbit of the father's vision, with increasing lack of success. About halfway through the book, Karl Ove, now a teenager, recounts how one memorable afternoon he sees his father driving in their town with an unnamed passenger in his car. We aren't even told that it is a woman, but as the reader suspects, the father is having an affair. Some pages after this sighting, Karl Ove tells us about the breakup of the once prosaic marriage and dissolution of the average family with an average family life.

After that, the story returns to more or less normal, and Karl Ove grows up, with his mother living one place and his father elsewhere. It is shocking then to hear in the latter part in the book about the death of the father. While we haven't seen him, the father has descended into hopeless, cataclysmic alcoholism in which he is joined by his own mother, with whom he has lived in his last years.

The latter part of the book is given over again in extended detail to descriptions of Karl Ove and his brother cleaning up the mess, financial, physical and emotional, that their father left behind. Physical cleaning efforts and encounters with the funeral director are recounted at some length, but the detail strikes home. Anyone who has had to deal with the death of a loved one and the unexpected practical decisions and arrangements it demands will recognize both the physical and the emotional circumstances.

There is something metaphorical about the purifying efforts that Karl Ove and his brother engage in while cleaning up their dad and their grandmother's last residence. It becomes in some respects a rite of purification. Karl Ove rids himself at least in part of his conflicted feelings about his father. As he views his father's corpse for the last time, in lovely prose he understands at last that there is nothing in death to fear; it and we are only a small part, one species and one process in a world of many forms, things and events as the world shifts and surges.

As the book concludes, we see that Karl Ove has had an interesting but disturbing upbringing. There is nothing ultimately fatal about his relationship with his father or even his relationship with his mother, a somewhat steely, hard-hearted woman, but one for whom Karl Ove has a good deal of affection. What we have seen is a picture very much like that of each of our lives in which Karl Ove has balanced countervailing memories, the happy-go-lucky and somewhat foolish actions of his youth against the sad, nearly tragic failure of his father, flawed and self-destructive.

The title used in England, *A Death in the Family*, is significant. The death is of more than the father. It is not the death of the family, but is a death of the normal love and affection in the phases of the maturation process that all of us would like to see in all families, and especially in our own. The work is masterfully done, and it is a fitting lead into the next volume in the series, *A Man in Love*.

*

In this volume, while death is still on Karl Ove's mind, we see him in the midst of life. While Dante came to himself in a dark wood, having lost the straight path and finds

Virgil as a guide, for the thoroughly modern Karl Ove, there is primarily the self as a guide, with reference to literature and the arts, and a few fast friends.

That is, until he finds Linda, his life companion. Linda is also a writer. Their romance, marriage and initiation into family life are again told in considerable detail. *The Struggle* here is Karl Ove's coming to terms with life. He leaves his first wife, moves to Sweden alone, meets Linda, falls in love, marries her, and has three children. Of course, it is not that simple. In the process he struggles to actualize himself as a good man--a loving, faithful husband, an affectionate and nurturing father, balanced against his self centered, introverted need to write and actualize his vision.

In this process he must resist his innate tendency to isolation. He fights to bring himself out into life, to meet the world in the persons of Linda, the kids, friends, publishers, readers, all the living with whom he comes into contact. There is a charming scene in which Linda invades his rented office at night as he is trying to write. As she silently goes to sleep on the bed only a few feet from his desk, her mere presence drives Karl Ove to distraction and he has to flee the apartment. As this demonstrates, he is far from perfect, but he is admirable in his desire to grow into an adult role, learn, to know and to meet his responsibilities, always, well almost always, trying to choose the one best not just for himself but for those he loves.

Karl Ove loves life and loves to recount it. We walk the streets of Stockholm, we listen to him debate art, literature and philosophy with his friends in rocking bars and restaurants as they consume roast chicken, Swedish meatballs, bowls of potatoes. We watch Karl Ove prepare an elaborate New Year's Eve dinner for family and friends –

lobster is the main course. But the story never gets lost in the detail. We always sense Karl Ove's examining intellect observing and evaluating his actions.

Another engaging facet of the book is the clinical examination it makes of the neurotic tendencies of both Linda and Karl Ove. This book is no "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." It is not written with an acid pen. It does show us in unsparing detail (and without moralizing) how dependent Linda can be and how insecure about his work, his schedule and his work product Karl Ove often is as we just discussed. While neither escapes the writer's judgmental eye, we see Linda and Karl Ove emerge as very engaging companions for each other and for us, warts and all.

Paradoxically, this volume also ends with a view of Karl Ove's father, this time in the calm, assured words of his mother. She tells Karl Ove that she loved her ex-husband despite everything. That seems to be the valedictory message of the entire book. We want contentment. We need to love those whom we should love, despite everything.

*

So, I have given you two excellent books to consider reading and you have the further expectation of four more already well received in Norway and the rest of the continent, arriving one by one in the years to come. Like four comets. I want to leave you with a third point. There is something here in these books for the writer as well as the reader. Some Literarians frown at mere memoirs or descriptions of people, places or things here on our own Monday evenings. They are too easy to write, some think. After all, "Memories ... [are] beautiful ... and yet" they can be too easy and not tell us too much. Karl Ove gives us some hints about how we can make all those memories

and descriptions things of beauty, without boring our listeners to death.

Here at the Club in memoirs and reminiscences we hear the good, the bad, and the ugly. The ugly memoir focuses on a topic, say Omaha, Nebraska, and thinks anything goes. After talking about grandpa's living in Omaha before he moved to Glendale, the text jumps to the town's population, to a riff on its richest citizen, Warren Buffett, then tails off into how boring the five-day drive through Nebraska on I-80 can be. The bad is more organized, sometimes painfully so. It tells a consecutive story, or paints a coherent portrait, point by dreary point, an improvement certainly but fails to go beneath the surface of the subject.

The good is like Karl Ove's work. It has a coherent point of view, an idea or a series of ideas, that gives us insight into the subject, and into the mind, heart and soul of the writer, and thus into ourselves.

This is the essence of good writing. It is also the essence of what is good about the Literary Club. There are far too few venues where one can speak one's mind freely, explore a favorite topic or memory, talk about something one loves, and share such experiences with kindred and accepting spirits. That is what I find so welcoming and good in this very room. The sharing of thoughts, of experiences of emotions. Any topic will do, even for the neophyte writer. You only need to figure out what it is you like or cannot forget about the person, place or thing and why you like it or can't forget it and set it down in simple, clear prose. Have a point of view. Get something of the essence of the subject onto the page. This is not without difficulty but it is a rewarding experience. Some of your essence will be there on the page also, and your readers will find that reverberating in their own hearts and minds.

Memories May Be Beautiful And Yet. . . . Literary Club papers can be, too, even
if as with Karl Ove, it takes struggle to achieve it.

Presented to The Literary Club of Cincinnati
February 24, 2014

217874