

One in a Thousand

'Two People Meet' by Knud Sønderby

Knud Sønderby was born in 1909 in Esbjerg, a young city with an important industrial port on the west coast of Denmark. His father, a wholesaler, died when he was still a child, and he moved with his mother to a rather posh northern suburb to Copenhagen. He studied law but had already begun to write before he graduated from university. Soon after, he quit his job at a law firm and devoted himself to journalism, and his first novel, *Midt i en jazztid*, or, *From the Jazz Age*, was published when he was 22 years old, in 1931.

The critics mostly hated it, especially those belonging to the generation which had seen the culture and values of old come to nothing in World War One. Young readers loved it, though, and Sønderby was already a bestselling author when his second novel appeared only a year later. By then, he had been compared by some to F. Scott Fitzgerald and to Ernest Hemingway but he later maintained that he didn't know Hemingway's work when he wrote his two famous novels about the restless, disillusioned, cynical youth of the bustling metropolis that Copenhagen had only just become.

I shall talk to you about the second novel, *To mennesker mødes*, or, *Two People Meet*. Sønderby went on to write three more novels, one of them dwelling on his impressions from Greenland, another one drawing on his experiences with the resistance movement during the German occupation. After the war, when he returned from Sweden where he had fled like so many other resisters, he would write a handful of plays and otherwise turn to writing essays, five volumes of which appeared between 1941 and his death in 1966.

His mature non fiction prose, seemingly modest with their mundane topics, their melancholy, sauntering blend of memories and fleeting but keen observations and reflections, are considered by

many to be highlights of Danish post-war literature in terms of style and subtlety. Like others, he became a more classical writer with age, reverting the tendency of Modernism to disfigure and dismantle the shapes and proportions of literary writing.

And a Modernist he was, when in his twenties he found the kind of unpretentious and streetwise, yet imaginative and lucidly poetical voice to express the feeling of his generation. A feeling of being lost in the big city, sceptical about nearly everything including their own sprouting lust for life, doubtful of their own identities, and fearful of love's faltering capability of closing the gaps of loneliness and class. Before anything else, *Two People Meet* is about being young and bored and impatient for life to finally begin, about going out at night to dance and drink, about looking for sex and waiting for love, and you recognize it all to an astonishing degree, wondering only why the boys are wearing hats and ties, not caps and leather jackets. The cynicism is there together with insecurity and mischief, the hangovers are certainly there together with disgust and playfulness, attraction and despair.

The main character is studying to become a doctor and hangs out with a small group of idle upper-class friends, another boy and two girls. One of them is a semi-failed wannabe artist with whom he thinks that he might perhaps, or perhaps not, have a relationship. The four of them are bored most of the time and slightly desperate over life's apparent lack of meaning, but cozily so, in their own snug, leisurely way. And then one evening on a dance floor he sees a pretty face in the crowd and when they meet again soon after he decides that she is more than just pretty and that he wants to know her. As it happens, the girl comes from the opposite part of town in every respect, and falling in love with her becomes an awkward journey into the paltry, needy gloom of working class life before the welfare state was built.

The simple, even simplistic love story thus becomes a portrait also of a city and an age where alienation, as Marx would have it, made itself felt as an existential fact. There is little psychology, though, and we hardly get to know anything about the characters' past except glimpses and flashes in a fragmented narrative shot

through with changing points of view, a diversity of voices and tones of voices, a cinematic sensibility towards details with no obvious connection, and a penchant for experimental digressions. Ever so often the narrator will enter stage and argue with the reader or suggest other options or take us into wild leaps of the imagination, zooming in and out, hovering over the city or plunging into fantasies about the inner lives of anonymous side characters.

Rather than lose himself, though, in cheeky Modernist poses, the author manages to weave his disconnected and fragmentary vision into a seemingly weightless, dream-like contemplation of a floating world. And that is perhaps the secret of Søndersby's charm, and the subtlety of his wisdom. The loneliness and contingency of human lives only make his rendering of them all the more tender. So much in the novel is to do with the coldness between people, their emotional impotence and lack of courage to reach out and connect, and yet their portrait comes through with the radiant mildness and sympathy of a loving eye.

He describes the entanglement, the rush of emotions as well as the misunderstandings and the embarrassment and he does so with a peculiar blend of candour and discretion. The girl has a story of her own, a shameful one in her own perception. She lives with her parents and – as we learn before the hero does – a baby which she has got by the man she did not want, and whom she was almost forced to marry after being cheated on by the man she wanted. That is the ordinary mess which suddenly confronts our hero when he finally gets to know her, and he is torn between arrogance and jealousy, alienation and the feeling that he may have met 'one in a thousand'.

This is a recurring notion throughout the book, and a surprisingly Romantic one at that in a novel so manifestly modern in its portrayal of the disenchantment and mediocrity of urban life. But there you are. It remains the tacit moral observation of this discreet author that the importance of who we meet and the significance of that encounter is something we create ourselves. Yes, it is all so coincidental, he seems to tell us, whom we meet and become attracted to, and yet we are betrayors when we fail to honour and

cherish the moment. We degrade ourselves when we cannot rise to the occasion; when instead we turn away, shunning the banality of circumstances and social station, forgetting that it is in the power of our feelings to turn the banal into something unique and precious.

Our hero decides that he can cope with her having a child and a past, but one day he makes the fatal mistake to introduce her to his upper class friends. At the end of the day it proves to be not so much the unwanted child or the unwanted past that keeps disturbing their closeness like an unsurmountable divide. When she comes to tea with his blasé friends, what spoils their love is basically that she is unable to take part in their living room conversation. She just doesn't fit. He says it later, when they both feel that the story is almost over: "We can choose one another and then we will have to give up everything else, or we can give up on each other and have all of the rest."

Knud Sønderby is graceful enough not to make the choice for them, or for the reader. He leaves them like that, one Sunday on the beach, and he leaves it to the waves and the lyme grass on the dunes to interpret their condition in one of his typical digressing bouts of personification so reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen who also had a penchant for letting inane objects think and speak. They shared, the two of them, what I see as a common trait in so many Danish writers, preferring the intimacy and the ephemeral details of everyday life to the generally accepted grandness of important themes. Making something emotionally acute out of almost nothing.

Jens Christian Grøndahl