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Assume crash position
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« Hva kan du eie, når selve livet er et lån! »
— Arnulf Øverland

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Your guide to Mathallen
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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

“Marta Oulie” paints a passive picture

Tiina Nunnally’s translation of Sigrid Undset’s classic novel of betrayal is a beautiful but distant read

CAREN GUSOFF
Seattle, Wash.

From what I can tell, much has already been made of the line that opens Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset’s first novel, “Marta Oulie” (University of Minnesota Press, 2014): “I have been unfaithful to my husband.” In 1907, Marta’s frank words were shocking, even to readers receptive to other contemporary depictions of female sexuality, such as those by Undset’s fellow Norwegians, Henrik Ibsen and Hulda Gulborg.

Much has, also, already been made by literary critics on the politics of confessional diary format, hugely popular for half a century by the time Undset chose it to frame “Marta Oulie;” epistolary fiction (and non-fiction) was embraced in work authored or created for consumption by women. By telling a story via letters or diaries, authors were better able to portray intimate experiences while maintaining, counter-intuitively, distance from same. Long before readers judged (and, possibly, secretly identified with) Bridget Jones’s neurotic calorie counting and mangled relationships, women were finding secret camaraderie in the tribulations of others while maintaining socially-acceptable plausible deniability.

We meet Marta towards the end of her marriage to Otto. Otto is dying, slowly but surely, of tuberculosis at a nearby sanitarium, leaving Marta to raise four children: one of whom is probably not Otto’s, but instead the product of a brief affair with Marta’s cousin, Henrik.

Marta’s diary runs for the two years, deep in Otto’s illness to just after his death. But, it also covers the time between the happy beginnings of their relationship and Marta’s later restlessness and boredom with her role as wife and mother. When Henrik, close to both Marta and Otto, returns from

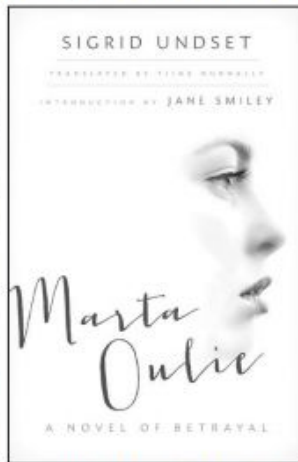


Photo: University of Minnesota Press

England and becomes Otto’s business partner, Marta, almost unthinkingly, begins a physical relationship with Henrik. As Otto and Henrik’s business flourishes, the usually vigorous Otto begins his physical decline from TB, a disease for which, we learn, he has a genetic predisposition.

But Marta’s diary is more than a mere documentation of the last months of a relationship. It is a detailed record of Marta’s guilt, self-flagellation, and remorse over not only her betrayal, but her very nature. She’s honest, as befits the diary format, but unpleasant. Even making allowance for the span of time between Marta’s concerns and the present, she is difficult to like. Even as she tries to struggle with her own independence, she considers herself a victim of it.

Marta lays down both the action of the

time and her memories as if she has been entirely unable to affect the trajectory of her life. She is, instead, doomed to simply record her life and its subsequent miseries. Granted, much of Undset’s point is that the choices afforded to women were limited; Marta herself is utterly stunted in every way, even ways not expected or dictated by society.

If “Marta Oulie” came close to portraying the struggle some independent, intelligent women may have had accepting the sacrifices and disappointments packaged with the traditional life of wife and mother, the depiction is smothered by Marta herself.

Marta portrays her courtship and marriage to Otto as if she were an observer to the relationship. Even as she protests that she was in love with him, there’s no evidence of it. Her reaction to her first pregnancy comes closest to depicting a believable complex reaction: “I thought it was so marvelous that when it happened to me, I could hardly believe it... Yet I also dreaded it terribly” (29). But everything else just happens to Marta, and even her affair with Henrik seems accidental. Even as she claims, “I wanted to be adored by his eyes and hands and lips” (71), and that “...if only I could have left him in peace, the whole affair would never have happened” (72), it’s lip service: we never see her decision, only her remorse and resentment at its aftermath. The ending scene is most telling—Marta recounts an incident that happened at her first teaching job in which a child had her arm mangled in a wagon accident. As Marta and the other

teachers struggled to dress the wound, the child kept ripping off the bandages, wanting to see what had happened to her. Like the child, the diary simply paints Marta a picture of her own accidents.

There are many beautiful sentences, breathtaking in their poetry and imagery, and expressive of turn-of-the-century life in Kristiania (now Oslo). However, there are also many confusing ones, and a number of places where the time, places, and actions are muddled up. Whether that’s deliberate to remain true to the diary format, or a weakness of otherwise excellent translation is not clear. This is the first English translation of “Marta Oulie” (known as “Fru Marta Oulie” in its original Norwegian).

Overall, “Marta Oulie” is a quick read, and of interest to anyone wanting to see the early development of one of Norway’s most famous and prolific authors.



Caren Gusoff is a SF writer living in Seattle, WA. The author of *Homecoming*, (2000), and *The Wave and Other Stories* (2003), first published by *Serpent’s Tail/High Risk Books*, Gusoff received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 2008, was the Carl Brandon Society’s Octavia E. Butler Scholar at Clarion West. Her new novel, *The Birthday Problem*, will be published by Pink Narcissus Press in 2014. Find her online at spitkitten.com.



Text: Mara Oulie, review for Norwegian American

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