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The Unpredictability of Being Human

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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The first chapter ('You, Me and God Himself') is just six pages long, but by its end we know 14 year-old Malin has her problems. Her dad 'storms in' and 'storms out' of rooms, her mom's 'a bit on edge these days', her older brother Sigve is yelled and shouted at by her dad but doesn't give a toss. Malin herself gets caught shoplifting a Stratos chocolate bar (she hates Stratos) because a couple of the most popular girls in her class say she must if she wants to be in their group. In the process, she inadvertently incriminates Hanna, a more experienced shoplifter - but somehow they become friends. There's some scene-setting in these busy six pages too: Malin lives in a village in south-western Norway; there are hints that she is oddly obsessed with time and numbers; and at first it seems she's telling her story in that slick-witted way which YA readers will quickly recognise in fiction if not in daily life. As so often, the book's first sentence sets the tone; 'If I got to be God for one day, the first thing I'd do would be to microwave a bag of popcorn to perfection.'

Linni Ingemundsen tells us that growing up in SW Norway was 'her greatest writing influence' in working on this debut novel, begun during a Creative Writing MA Course at **Oxford Brookes University**. Other than the geographical setting, UK readers will find Malin's troubled home and her secondary school, with its spiteful jealousies and ruthless bids for popularity, familiar enough. They'll also recognise elements of the plot; events here culminate in one of those YA fiction parties, in this case the school prom. As we come to know Malin better, we realise that her fragile confidence is linked to her need to measure and record time precisely; and we also understand that her narration is far less self-aware than it seemed in that first chapter. Her sentences often have a simplicity which reflects the way she takes others absolutely literally, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. Her ability to read numbers contrasts with her inability to read people and situations. When it emerges 'as she sees it' that her mother, her father, her aunt and some of her classmates have all lied to her, she is devastated; the clues have been there for readers to get there before her. There is perhaps an echo here of [The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time](#) [4] though, as in Haddon's novel, there is no explicit mention of any specific disorder.

As readers recognise that they are in the hands of a likeable but vulnerable narrator, their concern for Malin and their interest in her story will surely become deeper. Malin's literal grasp of situations leads her into some excruciating 'but often comic - predicaments. For selfish reasons, her friend Hanna lines her up for a first date with a boy she doesn't

know. By way of preparation, Malin decides she'd better google 'How to Kiss a Boy'. Having read the instructions, as it were, she's confused when things don't play out according to the script. She's not helped much at school, either. Her teachers are an odd bunch themselves; not one of them spots that Malin's mind moves in unconventional ways. It is not until she moves schools that a Maths teacher tells her she's really smart and should be in an advanced class; and in that new school, she at last makes a friend of a kindred spirit. It's taken some harsh experiences and overwhelming family revelations – and even a death – for her to arrive at the optimistic final chapter. Now, at last, things are looking up – for her family as well as for Malin.

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