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Summary and Book Reviews

Out Stealing Horses: Summary and book reviews of *Out Stealing Horses* by Per Petterson, plus links to an excerpt from *Out Stealing Horses* and a biography of Per Petterson.



Out Stealing Horses
 A Novel
 by Per Petterson
 Hardcover: Apr 2007,
 288 pages.
 Paperback: Apr 2008,
 256 pages.

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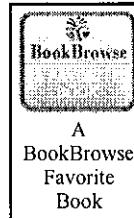
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Book Summary

Trond's friend Jon often appeared at his doorstep with an adventure in mind for the two of them. But this morning was different. What began as a joy ride on "borrowed" horses ends with Jon falling into a strange trance of grief. Trond soon learns what befell Jon earlier that day—an incident that marks the beginning of a series of vital losses for both boys.



Set in the easternmost region of Norway, *Out Stealing Horses* begins with an ending. Sixty-seven-year-old Trond has settled into a rustic cabin in an isolated area to live the rest of his life with a quiet deliberation. A meeting with his only neighbor, however, forces him to reflect on that fateful summer.

Book Reviews

BookBrowse
 Many authors ladle out plot in great splashy dollops, Per Peterson measures his with quiet coffee spoons. What at first looks to be a classic coming-of-age story set in Norway, slowly reveals itself to be something more. What that something is is not entirely spelled out, which makes *Out Stealing Horses* a literary treat for readers who prefer not to be spoon-fed every detail, and instead enjoy filling in some of the gaps for themselves.
Full Review (members only, 999 words).

Booklist
 The novel's incidents and lush but precise descriptions...are on a par with those of Cather, Steinbeck, Berry, and Hemingway, and its

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A poignant memoir of one family's struggle to come together after being shattered by tragedy.

Editor's Choice

Apr 26 | Apr 24 | Apr 22

The Dream of Perpetual Motion
 Dexter Palmer



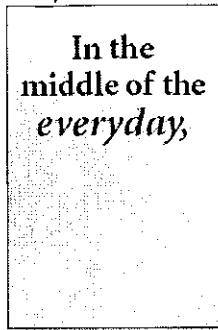
Beautifully written, stunningly imagined, and wickedly funny, *The Dream of Perpetual Motion* is a heartfelt meditation on the place of love in a world dominated by technology.

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Sam Lipsyte
Michael Kimball chats with Sam Lipsyte about *The Ask* (2010) which probes many these including work, war, sex, class, child rearing, romantic comedies, Benjamin Franklin, cooking shows on death row, and the eroticization of chicken wire.

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Sharon Draper
Sharon Draper, two-time Coretta Scott King Award-winning author, talks about

emotional force and flavor are equivalent to what those authors can deliver, too.

Kirkus Reviews

Haunting, minimalist prose and expert pacing give this quiet story from Norway native Petterson (*In the Wake*, 2006, etc.) an undeniably authoritative presence.

Publishers Weekly

Petterson coaxes out of Trond's reticent, deliberate narration a story as vast as the Norwegian tundra.

Entertainment Weekly

Per Petterson fluently jumbles his chronology, sustaining mysteries within several subplots and vivifying evergreen ideas about determinism and the bonds of family. But the real trick is in the way everything finally, neatly converges into an emotional jolt.

New York Sun

Mr. Patterson has something like her talent for scene setting and chronological collage, and all of the writers above have mastered a kind of tempered, minor-key retrospection. *Out Stealing Horses* is one of my favorite two or three new novels to appear this year.

The Guardian (UK) - Ian Thomson

This book is a minor masterpiece of death and delusion in a Nordic land.

Sunday Telegraph (UK)


The plotting is so subtle that one barely notices questions being raised and then, cleverly, answered. By the end, when all the pieces fall into place, we can see how elegantly Petterson has constructed matters, letting us live in a mystery we don't know needs solving until the solution is presented.







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
This short yet spacious and powerful book...a gripping account of such originality as to expand the reader's own experience of life.

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June 24, 2007

In a Lonely Place

Reviewed by THOMAS McGUANE

We imagine we've seen this: Trond Sander, an Oslo professional who has recently lost his wife and sister, hopes to cure his loneliness by a plunge into solitude; nothing dramatic, he wants to pension out and make a few changes. Scandinavians differentiate between loneliness and solitude as a matter of course. But Trond, insinuating at times, but colloquial and close to one's ear, tells a candid story so

concretely that the reader has to live it out. "I have been lucky," he says of his life, while acknowledging that he has always longed to be alone. Has the death of his wife liberated him? He says only, "I lost interest in talking to people." He will indeed learn to talk, alone, in the middle of a train of thought when "the difference between talking and not talking is slowly wiped out." Reflecting upon his move to the country, he says, "I had put myself in an impossible situation." He sleeps poorly because in the quiet, the past presses in upon him and it is disturbing. The millennium is nigh but he expects it to mean nothing. While the fireworks are elsewhere, he will get drunk and listen to Billie Holiday on his record player. We accept that cultivated people turn up in such places, though Americans tend to view them as Edward Dahlberg described the conventional view of Thoreau, "as a kind of cranky male sibyl, a crabbed and catarrhal water sprite of our woodland culture." Trond is no Thoreau — he's more like us than other Scandinavian protagonists including Knut Hamsun's Lt. Glahn or Halldor Laxness's Bjartur — but his efforts require peace and quiet.

A vital man in his 60s, Trond tells himself he has turned a corner; he moves to a rural cabin, worries about his old Nissan in a village where only Volvos are routinely fixed; worries about having the wrong brand of chain saw and knows no one who will plow his driveway if he is snowed in. He would have liked four-wheel drive but didn't want to be perceived as "new rich." Planning to chop firewood, he also has an electric heater. Despite the straitened circumstances of many of the local people, no one walks, so wedded are they to their machines. This, in contrast to the pastoral subsistence Trond remembers from the boyhood he is bent on reimagining as he searches for the mysteries that have ruled his life. The place has a sort of grandeur: the nearby river flows through the town then loops north into Sweden and beyond, how far beyond we can only guess; but the suggestion is of a spacious and not fully known North, even into the Taiga, whose extent, said Chekhov, is known only to birds of passage. It's a pleasant place withal — a farm here, a cottage there, a bit farther along a store where a child could buy sweets. "The feeling of pleasure slips into the feeling that time has passed, that it is very long ago, and the sudden feeling of being old." He has a dog, Lyra, with whom he has a somewhat formal relationship. He listens to the BBC all day long, which helps cement his feeling that he no longer understands the news or at any rate that it is too late for him to make plans based on something he might hear on the radio. Television would be a problem as he despises being entertained, though when he wonders how he learned to sharpen a chain saw he concludes he must have seen it in "a feature film with a

OUT STEALING HORSES

By Per Petterson. Translated by Anne Born.

258 pp. Graywolf Press. \$22.

forestry setting." He seems to appreciate this detached state.

The rural lands of northern Europe have had a long if spare human presence to which modern people feel akin; of course the same could be said of America, though details of our self-regard suggest we are uncertain if our Indian predecessors were actually human. When the characters of Hamsun or Laxness take to the wild it is not to a place they think they have conquered, gouged and depopulated; it is part of a fondly held origin story offering redemption and eternal peace. Be that as it may, to Trond and his neighbors the natural world is an intimate presence, and it is benign. But city dwellers heading for the country hope to find a picturesque past and are not pleased when rural people are catching up too quickly, have new methods of farming, spend too much time in their cars or perform dances they have seen on television.

Like many an older man at loose ends, Trond flings himself into various do-it-yourself homeowner schemes whose quotidian nature barely masks the eeriness of his life and memories. One recollection is of the "unison crash of boots, like the crack of a whip" as Wehrmacht troops marched into Oslo, the roar of Messerschmitts as they came in formation "from the open sea and from Germany" up the fjords and low over the rooftops of the city. His mother's brothers, twins, come to be known as the one who was shot by the Gestapo and the one who was not shot by the Gestapo. Another twin, a child, is shot by accident in very different circumstances as the first of a series of eventualities that tighten around the whole of Trond's adult life. This doppelgänger effect and other kinds of mirroring are part of the ingenuity of the narrative, which passes back and forth in time with such structural assurance and isometric tightness that the continuity is undisturbed. Even the title, "Out Stealing Horses," serves as both the announcement of an adolescent prank and a password for the dangerous activity of the resistance. A fairly short novel with a timescape of half a century that seems to have left out nothing important is a bit of a miracle. I can't see how exegetes, excited by unpacking fraught outcomes, can pry this one apart. As Dostoyevsky remarked, "Twice two makes four seems to me simply a piece of insolence."

There is a kind of secular jauntiness to Trond's inquiry into his present state of affairs, late in life with much unwound bafflement. About death, just around the corner, he says that he doesn't "give a damn," and we believe him but with reservations: his compulsive examination of his past reads as a final account. "That part of my life when I could turn the dreams to some use is behind me now. I am not going to change anything anymore." Most of all he would like to know why his father, whom he adored and who seems to have adored him, disappeared from his life — the disruptions of war of course — and made Trond almost an orphan while causing his abandoned mother to drift toward something heavy he doesn't want to understand. That his father was a courier for the resistance, transporting documents, then human beings, out of occupied Norway makes the abandonment even more ambiguous. It's another distant ripple of Nazism with the inextirpable suggestion that Germans are Nazis forever. Or perhaps, as in Conrad, so is everyone else.

On the other hand, in a Gidean "gratuitous act," offered first as an idyll, Trond's boyhood companion Jon holds the perfect cup of a goldcrest's nest only to crush it to dust and break the eggs on the ground. With his unruly hair, scarcely subdued air of violence and love of hunting for the pleasures of the kill, Jon universalizes a problem unresolved by his enviable if enigmatic freedom. Jon's fathomless black eyes and chalkwhite, expressionless face are raised almost to myth as he performs this desecration; he has a position in the story as a source of ill comparable to Germans in their long overcoats, guarding the village bridge with their motorcycles and machine guns. It's a challenging pairing: sympathetic glimpses of German soldiers as youths far from home oddly quick to murder and young Jon's small but memorably violent act incline us

toward a view of a more universal evil, absolution withheld.

Among the agreeable surprises of Per Petterson's novel is the misleading suggestion that the modesty of his narrator's voice foretells a tale of minor events, an account of the sort of photorealism that prevents anything from ever happening. In fact, the book contains some bold, convincingly stated coincidences well outside the range of our highbrow realists. When Trond discovers that his next-door neighbor is Lars, the surviving twin of the accidental shooting over half a century ago, he observes that this is the sort of event you could never put in a novel. We're delighted to accept his explanation. Something big has happened! And Jon, who vanished from the story nearly as long ago for a life at sea, returns to take the farm away from Lars by the cruel law of primogeniture. It would seem that the Dionysian lad who destroyed the nest and eggs of the goldcrest has completed his work. Lars leaves home never to see his mother or brother again; it's been many years, he doesn't know if they are dead or alive: he doesn't ask. Trond, in the meanwhile, sorting through his life and continuously reminding us until our suspicions are aroused that he has been lucky, thinks somewhat ominously, "It would be nice finally to have some rest." But he declines to ask the palpably damaged Lars the question that would complete his search. It is an extraordinarily humane decision.

The characters living and dead are equally palpable, another small wonder of "Out Stealing Horses." The unsentimentalized remoteness of Trond's place produces a vital tranquility that allows Trond to remember and comprehend what swept his father away. Whether seagoing Jon or Trond's lovestruck father, the feral male is quietly taken apart as the suffering that results from his jaunty negligence is laid bare. So much of this book's melancholy derives from the long shadow of men with guns, equal at least to the erotic force that interrupts civilized arrangements.

I won't give away the events that allow Trond to make peace with his memories of the father he loved and who abandoned him. But the visit of one of his grown daughters, Ellen, has much to do with it. A levelheaded young woman who questions him gently about his self-imposed exile, she understands his choices but does not comprehend why he never told the family he was leaving. She has gone to great lengths to find him, calling town councils for 80 miles around and arriving in a white Mitsubishi Space Wagon. Trond doesn't know if his eyes are moist from crying or from the glare of white paint on the Mitsubishi. He has some work to do.

Ellen asks if he would have preferred it if she'd not come. He thinks about her question and says in his characteristically rational detachment that he doesn't know. Then, filled with sudden and unexpected terror that she won't return, he asks her not to leave. Ellen replies that she has no intention of leaving but that she would like to make a suggestion.

"What's that, then?" Trond asks.

"Get yourself a telephone."

After this, the house is different, the yard is different. Even with Lyra, his dog, the place feels empty. Trond thinks, "When someone says the past is a foreign country, that they do things differently there, then I have probably felt that way for most of my life because I have been obliged to, but I am not anymore."

This short yet spacious and powerful book — in such contrast to the well-larded garrulity of the bulbous American novel of today — reminds us of the careful and apropos writing of J. M. Coetzee, W. G. Sebald and

Uwe Timm. Petterson's kinship with Knut Hamsun, which he has himself acknowledged, is palpable in Hamsun's "Pan," "Victoria" and even the lighthearted "Dreamers." But nothing should suggest that his superb novel is so embedded in its sources as to be less than a gripping account of such originality as to expand the reader's own experience of life.

Thomas McGuane's most recent book is "Gallatin Canyon," a collection of stories.

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Photo: Torunn Nilsen

Biography
Per Petterson (born 1952) worked for several years as an unskilled labourer, trained as a librarian, and worked as a bookseller, writer, and translator before publishing his first work, *Aske i munnen, sand i skoa (Ash In His Mouth, Sand In His Shoe)*, a volume of short stories, in 1987. This book was proclaimed one of the decade's most sensational debuts. Since then he has written a book of essays and five novels that have established his reputation as one of Norway's most significant fiction writers. These are *Ekkoland* (1989), *Det er greit for meg* (1992), *To Siberia* (1996), *In the Wake* (2000) and *Out Stealing Horses* (2003). For *To Siberia*, Petterson was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literary Award and nominated for The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. For *In the Wake* he received the prestigious Norwegian literary prize, Brageprisen, and the novel was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. *Out Stealing Horses* was awarded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in the UK, as well as both the Norwegian Booksellers' Prize and the Norwegian Critics' Award for best novel. In 2006, the novel was also named one of the 25 best Norwegian books the last 25 years by the Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet. *Out Stealing Horses* has sold more than 140,000 copies in its different editions in Norway, and was on the Norwegian bestseller list for more than 70 weeks.

This biography was last updated on 07/09/2007.

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City of Dragons
Kelli Stanley

San Francisco's Chinatown, 1940: Miranda Corbie, a private investigator, stumbles upon the fatally shot body of Eddie Takahashi. The Chamber of Commerce wants it covered up. The cops acquiesce. But Miranda wants justice--whatever it costs.

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Interview: Per Petterson: The call of solitude

Norway's Per Petterson, best-selling author of "Out Stealing Horses," talks about the monastic pleasures of being alone and the loneliness imposed by personal tragedy.

By Sarah T. Williams, Star Tribune

Last update: September 26, 2007 - 10:27 AM

The protagonist of Per Petterson's "Out Stealing Horses" just wants to be alone. The recently widowed Trond, 67, has moved to a cabin in the far east of Norway and now takes comfort in his daily routines -- rinsing out his Thermos, stacking fire wood, whistling for his dog and sharpening his Jonsered chainsaw. The quietude is shattered when Trond's neighbor turns out to be someone he knew in childhood, and whose knock on the door pulls aside 50 years of history "with a lightness that seems almost indecent." Trond is forced to remember the summer of 1948, when both personal and global tragedy forever changed every friendship and every familial relationship. Petterson, who lives in Hemnes, Norway, won both the Independent Foreign

Fiction Prize and the Dublin IMPAC Award for his coming-of-age tale, which critics have called powerful, symphonic and quietly compelling. We caught up with him by e-mail (like his protagonist, he likes to guard his privacy), in the midst of working on a new novel, celebrating the birth of a grandchild and preparing for his U.S. book tour. **Q** Let's start with the fact that the English translation [by Anne Born] of this award-winning book was published by a nonprofit press here in St. Paul, Minnesota. Did you find Graywolf or did Graywolf find you? **A** In fact I do not know how it came about, except that it was Graywolf that found me. What they did not know was that I had found Graywolf about 20 years ago, when I worked in a bookshop called Tronsmo in Oslo, and was head of import there. I fell flat for their books and imported them to Norway, read them myself and sold them. The world sometimes moves in circles, and I am very happy to be where I am. At Graywolf. **Q** In the first few pages of "Out Stealing Horses," the narrator, Trond, enjoys a state of solitude that is near heavenly. Do you sometimes have that same wish to be alone? **A** Very much so, and I often am. Living here where I live, on a farm way out in the countryside, in the woods, in fact, I have plenty of time to be alone, and I like it. I always have. I like my own company. And I am not the only one who feels this way; a

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high percentage of the Norwegian population feel as I do. It is our brand of Buddhism. If you have read "Pan," by Knut Hamsun, you will get an idea of what I mean. **Q** In childhood, Trond reflects on the differences between Norway and Sweden -- wondering, for example, if river water tastes any different after it takes a little trip through Sweden. These are differences that are joked about here in Minnesota as ridiculously indistinguishable or seriously vast. Which do you think they are? **A** Neither, I think. It is only something that can pass through your mind in a flash of a moment, like when the languages are different, some national traits are different, why shouldn't water taste differently? In the time that traveling was something you usually could not afford, everything outlandish seemed to be filled with strangeness. So why not? **Q** World War II and a shattering household tragedy share the stage in this novel. Do you think the human spirit processes these events differently? **A** I think they certainly do. The deaths and murders of the war, any war, but this in particular, are so vast, so massive, that in one way is difficult to grasp, the devilishness of it, and at the same time you are not alone, you share this maniac life with so many. That is why some people here in Europe could say "it was better during the war." It is a meaningless thing to say, of course, but what

they mean is they miss the solidarity between people, that feeling of shoulder to shoulder, sharing the conditions of the world. In a household tragedy, you are very much aware of being alone. It is something that is possible to grasp, and that is why it hurts so much. Because you are alone. I know a little about this. **Q** You lost several members of your family (parents, a brother and a niece) when the Scandinavian Star ferry burned in 1990. Did that incomprehensible loss increase your urgency to write? **A** It is true I did, and it was a strange year, like going on some kind of speed, pushing grief always 'round the next corner, until it caught up with you. But no, it did not increase my urgency to write. I do not think of literature as something confessional or therapeutic. I make sentences in order to be precise about experiences and things. I am urged by many things and no things in particular. Most of what is connected with the things that happened in 1990, is personal in a private way and cannot be written about. **Q** What are book lovers in Norway arguing about? **A** I am not sure I know. There is always this quarrel about what is preferable, the straight naturalistic epic storytelling or the modernistic, disjointed, slightly hermetic one. To me it does not matter, as long as it's good. I like both kinds. Although the common reader seems to prefer the first,

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which is to be expected, and who would blame her? Sarah T. Williams is the Star Tribune Books editor. Sarah T. Williams • swilliams@startribune.com

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Welcome to my website. I assume if you've come here, you're familiar with some of my novels. I hope they have touched you in some way. And entertained. I do work hard to keep you turning those pages. If one of my books keeps you up late? Victory is mine!

I feel blessed and privileged to be writing for you. After all, what good does it do to have all these characters running around in my head, chattering to each other, giving me no peace whatsoever, if there's no one else to listen? That's where you come in. You listen to them, and through them, to me. And through the characters and the stories, you know the way my mind works (a scary thought), as well as my heart, my flaws, my fears, my hopes, and my faith.

In general, the journeys of my characters are based on my own struggles, stubbornness, missteps, and victories. I may not have experienced exactly the same situations that plague them (ah, the benefits of imagination!) but the emotions and angst they confront are universal and common to many of life's challenges. And though we don't like to admit it, we *do* gain the most growth through the hard times, yes? Easy, it's not. But rewarding? There is no measure. Being a survivor, whether it be of a death in the family, lost love, career detours, or merely getting through today so we can tackle tomorrow, is the heady and harrowing substance of life. And novels.

You'll find two types of novels on this site. The majority are contemporary inspirational fiction, i.e. novels set in the present day that strive to lift you up as you slog through the crises of the characters. They are novels that incorporate all aspects of life: family, faith, tragedy, and triumph with a lot of conflict stirring the soup . . . But be assured of this: in the end, you *will* feel good. And hopefully you will even feel better about yourself and your own life journey. You may cry along the way, but hey, such is life.

The other type of novel is the type I'm hereby deeming "fictionalized biography" (I can do that, you know, because I'm the *author*.) In this type of book I take the life of a real live person of history (well, actually, they're dead now) and present their life story through scenes, like in a novel. So instead of learning about their lives in a third-person biography form, I let *them* tell their story, first-person, in a you-are-there format. My first book in this genre was called *Mozart's Sister* (did you even know he had a sister?) She was just as talented as he was but because she was a woman she didn't have many opportunities to fully utilize her talents. How tragic is that? The second person I tackled was Jane Austen (*Just Jane*). . . a novelist novelizing the life of a novelist. *That* was a challenge. And a joy. Next was *Washington's Lady* about Martha Washington. If you don't feel like waving a flag after reading this book . . . And next is a book on the amazing love story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: *How Do I Love Thee?* I am very excited about the chance to give these ladies a voice. They deserve it.

Which leads to the common thread in all my novels: finding your purpose. No matter if the book is about *Mozart's Sister*, a plane crash, a Victorian boarding house, or time travel, one message prevails: we each have a unique God-given purpose. The trick is to find out what it is. I hope my books help you take a step closer to that amazing knowledge.

So enjoy the site. And let me hear from you. We're in this together.

God bless us every one.

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 by Emily Giffin

SUSPENSE/THRILLER AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT
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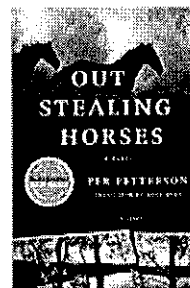
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- About This Book
- Discussion Questions
- Critical Praise
- Author Biography

Out Stealing Horses

by Per Petterson

List Price: \$14.00
 Pages: 256
 Format: Paperback
 ISBN: 9780312427085
 Publisher: Picador



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About This Book

Out Stealing Horses has been embraced across the world as a classic, a novel of universal relevance and power. Panoramic and gripping, it tells the story of Trond Sander, a sixty-seven-year-old man who has moved from the city to a remote, riverside cabin, only to have all the turbulence, grief, and overwhelming beauty of his youth come back to him one night while he's out on a walk. From the moment Trond sees a strange figure coming out of the dark behind his home, the reader is immersed in a decades-deep story of searching and loss, and in the precise, irresistible prose of a newly crowned master of fiction.

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Discussion Questions

1. "I needed to concentrate," Trond says at the start of the book (pg. 7), explaining his decision to move to the country. Do you think he is happy in

his isolation? Is he making a brave choice by withdrawing to the country, as he has always dreamt of doing; or do you think he's fleeing the responsibilities of his life?

2. Soon after Odd is killed, Trond says "I felt it somewhere inside me; a small remnant, a bright yellow speck that perhaps would never leave me." What is it he feels? How does that day stealing horses with Jon, and learning what has happened to Odd, change Trond? Do you see the effects of that loss in him as an older man?

3. Petterson has been widely praised for his descriptions of nature, and of small quiet moments in everyday life. How does his writing make these ordinary moments compelling? Which images of landscapes or domestic scenes remained most vivid in your memory after finishing the book?

4. After his dream at the start of Chapter 5, which leaves him weeping, Trond says, "But then it is not death I fear." Do you believe him? If so, what is he afraid of?

5. How do you think Trond's life would have changed if he had hit the man in Karlstad (pp. 231-233)? Why does he attach so much significance to that decision?

6. Look at the scene in which Trond's car goes off the road and he sees the lynx in the woods (pg. 65). At the end of the scene, Trond says "I can't recall when I last felt so alive as when I got the car onto the road again and drove on." Why does a near accident, and the sight of the lynx, thrill him?

7. Were you surprised by Ellen's reaction to her father when she finds him at the end of the book? Would you be angrier in her position, or more forgiving? Has Trond been unfair to her?

8. How has Trond become like his father, and how has he managed to take a different path? What parallels do you see between the lives they lead in the book? How is Trond's behavior as an adult influenced by the short time he spent with his father as a young man?

9. Look at the book's final section, after Trond has discovered that his father isn't coming back. How does his behavior change? Were you surprised by his reaction to the news?

10. How do you think Trond's life will change after the end of the novel? Will he see more of his daughter? Will he and Lars become friends, or will he return to the isolation he had sought out when he moved to the country?

11. Look at Ellen's monologue about the opening lines of **David Copperfield** (pg. 197). How do you understand the phenomenon she's describing, of not being "the leading characters of our own lives"? Has this happened to anyone you know? Do you think it has happened to Trond? Is it a good or a bad thing?

12. Why do you think Trond's father doesn't tell him the story of the Resistance? Why does he leave it to Franz? How do you think Trond's perception of his father would have changed if his father had told the story himself?

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Critical Praise

"A gripping account of such originality as to expand the reader's own experience of life."

—**Thomas McGuane, *The New York Times Book***

Review

"Read **Out Stealing Horses** by Per Petterson. From the first terse sentences of this mesmerizing Norwegian novel about youth, memory, and, yes, horse stealing; you know you're in the hands of a master storyteller."

—**Newsweek**

"That's the effect of Per Petterson's award-winning novel: It hits you in the heart at close range."

—**Alan Cheuse, NPR's All Things Considered**

"Petterson's spare and deliberate prose has astonishing force . . . Loss is conveyed with all the intensity of a boy's perception but acquires new resonance in the brooding consciousness of the older man."

—**The New Yorker**

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A life in writing: Per Petterson

Interview by James Campbell
The Guardian, Saturday 3 January 2009

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Per Petterson, Norwegian writer, in Lillestrom, Norway Photograph: Elin Hoyland/Elin Hoyland

Per Petterson remembers the last thing his mother said to him. It was in April 1990. She had just finished reading his first novel, *Echoland*, which had been published in Norway the previous year. "She said: 'Well, I hope the next one won't be thatchildish.' Which was a blow. And the next weekend she was dead."

Petterson's father, brother and nephew died with her, when a ferry caught fire on the overnight sailing from Oslo to Frederikshavn in northern Denmark (159 people lost their lives). "I've thought a lot about what she said. I've tried to figure out what she meant. She was a little harsh, because she herself had survived so many things. She probably meant that I hadn't been ambitious enough in that novel, that I should go further. OK, you want to be a writer - be a writer then! But she shouldn't really have said that."

Sitting in the electricity-free extension to his white wooden house 60 miles south-east of Oslo, Petterson smiles at his last remark, aware of the overlapping ironies of his mother's timing and her severity. With the release of the English translation of his fifth novel, *Out Stealing Horses*, he became an internationally bestselling author. The book "struck like a comet", in the words of a New York Times journalist, "sending readers and critics into fits of justifiable swooning". *Out Stealing Horses* won the Independent foreign fiction prize, the 2007 Impac award - one of the richest going - and a slew of others. His new novel, *I Curse the River of Time*, currently being translated, won the Norwegian Brage prize before Christmas. Its subject is the deep bond between the young narrator and his mother, who passes on to him her love of literature. It contains a scene that mirrors the conversation in which Mrs Petterson told her son to make a more mature reckoning with his talent.

Petterson does not divide his writing life into "before" and "after" the ferry disaster. "But there are some things I couldn't have written if my parents were still alive." One is the

novel *To Siberia*, first published in English in 1998 and now reissued, which imagines the life of his mother when she was a girl, migrating from Danish Jutland to Norway, discovering men's perfidy, anticipating the Nazi occupation. "I can't know what she was thinking when she was 13 years old. But when she talked about her brother" - in the book he is Jesper, an adolescent resistance fighter - "she had a glow. When she talked about my father, she didn't have that glow. This is something you notice, without noticing it, when you're a child. I realised it only when I was in my 30s. Wow! There's a novel there."

The farmstead where Petterson and his wife Pia live with their sheep and chickens is reached by driving through a whitened landscape, across the Glomma river which, he tells visitors, separates the urban sphere from the "back bush". Asked the name of the area, he replies: "I say I live in the woods, near the Swedish border." The couple moved from the city a dozen years ago, with Pia's children from an earlier union. (It is also Petterson's second marriage.) "When we first came, it was so cold the duvet stuck to the wall." Now there is heating piped into each room and a cat or dog under every chair.

Several of Petterson's novels feature the character Arvid Jansen. "He's not my alter ego, he's my stunt man. Things happen to him that could have happened to me, but didn't. He has my mentality." The novel *In the Wake*, which appeared six years after what Petterson refers to as "the wipe-out", depicts Arvid in the throes of trauma following a more or less identical catastrophe to that which affected the author. "What he goes through in 14 days I went through in two years." Arvid is first seen early in the morning, still drunk, kicking the glass door of an Oslo bookshop similar to the one Petterson used to work in. A passerby advises warily that no one has arrived yet. Arvid has not worked in the shop for years. "He loses his balance. When you are under great pressure, the ability to walk straight is affected, and you have to concentrate hard just to do your normal stuff. Arvid is like Charlie Chaplin in that book - he sits on a chair and the chair breaks."

At a certain point in his compressed crisis, Arvid meets a kindly neighbour who listens to his account while making cocoa (the way to his heart, it turns out). "Then I tell her about the boat and the fire," Arvid says, "and all those who died in the flames, and how they lay close together in the companionways, side by side like a single conjoined body ... And she nods, she remembers that fire, everyone remembers that fire, they all nod and grow quiet."

Paul Binding, the author of a study of Henrik Ibsen, admires Petterson "for his eschewal of the artificial or fashionable ways of fiction. He doesn't seem tempted to go down any route but the one his theme demands. I suspect that he has always harboured feelings of being unlike other people, and that the ferry accident must have enforced the sense of having a lonely race to run. It's not the kind of tragedy that one feels could enter one's life."

The bookshop, in reality, is Tronsmo, still doing brisk business in central Oslo, with almost as many books on display in English as in Norwegian. Petterson was chief buyer (he remains a director), in which role he gave expression to a taste for writing that dwells on the margins. He likes James Kelman, Alice Munro, Charles Bukowski. "When I went to *City Lights* in San Francisco, people in Norway asked me what it was like. I said: It's a little like Tronsmo, only Tronsmo is better for American literature."

Since the success of *Out Stealing Horses*, Petterson has been in demand at book festivals from Israel to Iceland, but he has found that the pressure of life outside his cosy work cabin, 50 metres down an icy slope from the house, is another of life's hazards. "It's been

fantastic," he says of his recognition. "At the same time, it's quite distressing, because everybody wants to talk about the work I've already done, and I am trying to think about the book I am going to do. And the way I write, if you get pulled out of it, it's very difficult to get back in."

Petterson mentions cancelling a recent tour the night before departure. "I said I was ill - which wasn't untrue. I was invaded." He has devised a method of coping with the stress of being on public display. "I am an actor playing Per Petterson." Ten people listening in the nearby village would make him more nervous than an audience of 600 in Manhattan, "because you would get a reprisal at the local shop next day. I get it whenever I've been on television. They talk about me, I know they do."

He works as a "sentence-by-sentence writer", groping in the dark towards an illumination that is withheld even from the author. "When I started *Out Stealing Horses*, I had no idea that the war would be in that book. Then some friction crept in - an unease between the two fathers. And I thought to myself: what can that be? Well, this is the 1940s. It has to be something about the war. Shit. I'll have to write about the war. Then I have to do research, and I hate research. Of course, now it seems that the war is essential to the story."

The novels are studies in the pleasures of slow reading. The external world is described in minute detail - with significance hanging on a look, a remark, a minor action. At the end of *Out Stealing Horses*, the narrator Trond recalls himself as a youth, about to hit a stranger in the street for no good reason, then retreating. "If I had punched [him], my life would have been a different life, and I a different man. And it would be foolish to maintain, as so many men do, that it would have come to the same thing. It would not. I have been lucky."

Petterson has been complimented on the intricate plotting of *Out Stealing Horses*. "Sorry. I didn't plan it at all. I just had the boy, the father and the summer. That sense you have of catching up as the layers of the story are peeled away - that's me catching up." There is also a streak of the monomaniacal narrator of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* in all his work. The same wayward euphoria that punctuates despair is present in *In the Wake*. "I think it's very funny," Petterson says of Arvid Jansen's difficulty in maintaining his balance after the wipe-out. "But it's also extremely sad. What was difficult about writing this little novel was keeping the pressure up - that's three years' worth of pressure for 200 pages." In terms of style, Binding regards Petterson as "closer to Americans than to British writers. His style is highly sophisticated, but without that slight touch of slickness that can mar Carver or Wolff or Ford."

He was raised in a "strictly working-class" household in Oslo, with his father's Swedish relatives on one side and Danes on the other. His father, whom he describes as "an athlete, looking like Tarzan", worked in a shoe factory. Boys in his novels decorate their bedrooms with posters of Lenin, and it is with pride that he points out that the publishing house Oktober, which has issued all his books, "is named for the October revolution" (though it is mainstream now).

His conversation returns regularly to his origins - "I thought everyone was working class when I was a boy" - but snatches of Tolstoy, Ibsen ("I don't really like Ibsen"), Hemingway, Heaney and others are plucked from the air and patched into conversation as naturally as references to the duties involved in running a farmstead. Christopher MacLehose, who as publisher at Harvill was responsible for the first translations of Petterson's work, says: "He is tremendously well read. When he was in Dublin for the Impac award, he littered his acceptance speech with references to Irish writers." In I

Curse the River of Time, Arvid and his mother share an admiration for Arthur Seaton, the hero of Alan Sillitoe's novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. "I've always liked that type: working class but at the same time fiercely individualistic. 'I'm out for myself.' Rebellious, drinking, fuck-you type. I like that."

Petterson was 18 when he realised that books could guide a person in a direction other than that suggested by the bedroom posters. "I decided if I couldn't be a writer, my life would be miserable. I had this imaginary room of references to all the books I had read, a kind of bubble, in which I lived." A teacher revealed "how literature worked. You don't just tell a story, you can use a technique, a style, to make things happen and to make the reader feel in a special way. That was a great discovery."

There were not many magazines available to the literary apprentice in Norway in the 1970s. "Most of the radical writers were published in the *Window* or *Profile*, but I didn't dare to send things. I was a coward. I didn't even dare to finish anything. If I saw that it was lousy, what should I do? So I just kept on not finishing things." The prevailing spirits were writers such as Dag Solstad and Jon Michelet, more politically radical than he, whom he admires greatly. But his distinctive voice became audible to his inner ear when he found his own subjects, which could scarcely be less radical: work, the family and the second world war. "Some critics said, hey, why are you writing historical novels? I say, they're not historical, they're contemporary, because people walking around who lived through this, even a little bit, they carry it inside. The contemporary isn't just what you can see now."

It is in *Out Stealing Horses*, Petterson's masterpiece of coherent fragmentation, that his principal subjects are most fruitfully embedded. The sleeping memories of the reclusive narrator, 67-year-old Trond, are jolted into life by accidental occurrences: an unplanned meeting with a childhood friend, the recollection of that friend's mother's touch, the realisation that his father's explanations of his own and the woman's actions are unreliable - for one thing, they are engaged in the Norwegian resistance; for another, they are having an affair. In Binding's view, "the war is even deeper in the Norwegian psyche than it is in Britain. There is a compulsion to express the psychic difficulties of the occupation."

Petterson has enjoyed particular success in Germany, as have other Norwegian writers. The reading public in Britain and America has been notoriously neglectful of translated fiction in recent years, but it is sometimes the case that one popular writer can start a movement on which that writer's compatriots hitch a ride. Gina Winje, who runs *Norla*, the government office for promoting Norwegian literature abroad, says that "the last few years have seen an increased interest in the English-speaking world". With his new imprint, MacLehose is enjoying the current popularity of Scandinavian crime writers. "Whether literary writers will follow Per in such numbers is open to question. But it is undoubtedly the case that Norwegian writing is at a high point."

MacLehose says that Petterson worked closely with Anne Born, the translator of *Out Stealing Horses*, to achieve a tone that was harmonious with his Norwegian voice. "He practically rewrote it." Petterson himself says: "Sometimes I think the English version is better than the Norwegian. I got the audiobook recently, with an American actor reading it, and I found myself thinking, 'That's good.' Then I thought: 'Oh. I wrote it.' It's the same book, but then again it's another book."

After several hours of talk, he leads the way through the spruce and fir woods, on to a high ridge overlooking a lake with a small island in the centre. He boasts of plentiful moose and deer around, and a pair of the latter obligingly scatter. Petterson begins to

outline the novel he is writing now, with a character situated in a landscape exactly like this one. "He wanders round in the dark, my man ... just down there ... but it's me, a kind of fictional me ..." He seldom visits his parents' grave. "I haven't been there for four years, because they're with me all the time. I'm a family-based person, even though we didn't exactly have a very happy family. I was never in any doubt that this was a centre of writing."

Petterson on Petterson

"It was something to do with a face. I had never seen it before, yet I did recognise it, but as it comes to me now, the thought of it is unpleasant. Someone gave me a gin ... The glass is full to the brim, and then I do not remember anything more except that face, and now I stand with my forehead against the glass of this bookshop door, and I kick the door. They have to let me in. I do not know how long I have been standing here. I have been out of this world and now I am back, and I don't feel well. Why doesn't someone come and let me in? I kick the door. People are passing on the pavement behind me, but I don't turn round, just squeeze my face to the glass and my nose is flattened and I stare at the rows of books ... It is morning, the sun feels hot on my neck, but I dare not turn round. That glass of gin was yesterday and miles and miles away from this street in central Oslo."

• From *In The Wake*, published by Vintage

In Norway, most readers believed that the things that happened in the book - sad things, unhappy things, even catastrophic things - were true. A very few incidents were connected to events in my own life, but the story itself was definitely fiction. The only thing in it that was literally true was this opening paragraph, I am sad to say. I just wrote it down, and I thought, this man is in a sorry state. Why is that, other than because of a party that went wrong? Then I said to myself, what is the worst thing that ever happened to you? That didn't take long to find out, and so I wrote this novel, which is a slim novel, and I sat three years at the computer.

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