

INTERVIEW WITH THE NORWEGIAN WRITER NILS-ØIVIND HAAGENSEN

RALUCA-DANIELA DUINEA¹



Nils-Øivind Haagenesen
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Nils-Øivind Haagenesen (b. 1971) is a Norwegian journalist, poet, writer and the head of Flamme Publishing House. He was born in Ålesund and at present he lives in Oslo, Norway. He made his literary debut in 1998

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with the volume of poems *Hender og hukommelse (Hands and Memories)*. In 2001 he published his first novel, *Det radioaktive (The Radioactive)*. In 2004 he was awarded *Sultprisen (Hunger Prize)* for his literary work, and in 2013 he was nominated for *Nordisk råds litteraturpris (Nordic Council Literature Prize)* with the volume of poems *God morgen og god natt (Good Morning and Good Night, 2012)*. He was also awarded the *Stiftelsen Kjell Holms kulturpris (Stiftelsen Kjell Holm Culture Prize, 2017)*. In 2019 he published the novel *Dette norske livet (This Norwegian Life)*, and in 2013 he published the novel *Liten (Little)*. *Sangria i parken (Sangria in the Park, 2021)* is his most recent novel published by Oktober Publishing House. He also published a series of volumes of poems *Det uregjerlige (Hard to Control, 2020)*, *Stor (Big, 2018)* and *Spredning (Spreading, 2014)*.

Raluca-Daniela Duinea: You made your literary debut as a poet, but you are also a novelist. How and when did you start writing?

Nils-Øivind Haagenen: I guess I started at the time I began university. In Bergen. At around nineteen, twenty. Literature didn't seem like a feasible way of life, really, I was studying politics to become a teacher, when a friend of mine asked me why I didn't study literature, "it's all you ever talk about". And in a sense, he gave me permission. Because when you grow up poor, working class, becoming an author seems irresponsible. You got an education to make sure you got a job to make sure you got a place to live and pay the bills etc. That's the way of thinking I grew up with. And had to break with it in order to make literature a way of life. It wasn't easy.

R.D.D.: I have written a PhD thesis about Jan Erik Vold's literary work, published in 2018, in book format as *The Poetry of Jan Erik Vold and the Norwegian Lyric Modernism in the 1960s*. In *Varmestafetten: 15 essays om Jan Erik Vold (The Heat Relay: 15 Essays About Jan Erik Vold)* you wrote an interesting essay entitled "Jan Erik Vold i kloster. Munkens levereregler vs. poetens skrivereregler" ("Jan Erik Vold at the Monastery. The Monk's Living Rules vs. the Poet's Writing Rules"). How did you become interested in Jan Erik Vold's literary work? What is the article about?

N.Ø.H.: In that essay I write about the chastity in Jan Erik Vold's poetry. Simply put, JEV has always struck me as a very chaste poet, and I thought comparing

the monk and the poet's way of life, in his poems in particular, could be interesting. And it was. I rather like that essay.

R.D.D.: I have recently translated into Romanian your novel *Er hun din? (Is She Yours?, 2016)*. Why this title? If you had to choose another title, what would it be?

N.Ø.H.: Choose another title? Hm. Surprising. First let me say that the title is a simple phrase, one you use when you want to locate a kid's parent, is she yours? Suggesting that whatever the kid is up to, is the parents' responsibility. The first working title I used was *The little girl discovers a funny adult*. Like a book for children might've used. It was a good working title. The simplicity, but also mystery in it kept me going for a long time.

R.D.D.: How did you come up with the idea of creating such a beautiful and interesting novel and who is Elvira the person to whom you dedicated this novel?

N.Ø.H.: Elvira is the daughter of a friend of mine, and the girl in the book is very much based on my first meeting with her, which was at her mother's, my friend's, birthday party. We became fast friends, and like the kid in the book she simply bombarded me with questions. About every little thing. And that's how the book came about, really. I got home from the party, it was a sleepover, and just started writing down our many conversations. It chooses you, as Miranda July puts it.

R.D.D.: The complexity of the novel *Is She Yours?* is centred around two major themes, abortion and the image of the unborn child. Are's attitude towards Janne's unexpected decision regarding her pregnancy is repulsion, disagreement, regret and disapproval. Why this controversial and delicate subject? Is the image of the unborn child, as it is described by Are, an invitation to think twice before taking a reckless decision?

N.Ø.H.: That might be a little bit of a leading question. I wouldn't call the decision to end the pregnancy reckless. Are's disgust is more centred on the parents who see the baby as a hindrance in their daughter's life. Are disagrees but feels overlooked and marginalised by his parents-in-law. Abortion is a major theme in the book, yes; in the sense: what happens when the baby father disagrees and wants to keep the child? Are feels powerless and robbed of future happiness, and that feeling becomes all encompassing.

R.D.D.: What about the names of the main characters, Eira, a six-year-old girl, and Are who is forty-three? It seems to be a specific assonance between their names. Did you choose their names on purpose?

N.Ø.H.: Yes. Names are always difficult. There are so few that fit the vision of the character. And I liked that his name is jumbled into hers, so there's that connection between them as well. Also, that his name, in Norwegian, rhymes with funny/weird. And that hers is like an abbreviation of Elvira. The real-life version.

R.D.D.: Are is heartbroken and he is longing for his unborn child. When he opens the manuscript entitled *Cordelia*, its content reflects his inner thoughts and philosophical reflections mostly based on how the unborn child would have looked like, the precious time they would have spent together, the type of education he would have given to his child, making reference to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* and Harold Bloom's *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. What is the role of this frame story? Is literature a way to escape life's problems?

N.Ø.H.: Not to escape, I think, but reshape. Understanding literature is also understanding the story of your own life. And the story of your life can be, and is, told in many different ways by the many people around you. Stories that can and will influence your own. Are wants rid of this, if possible. Meaning: he doesn't want to be weighed down by prejudice and presupposition. His parents-in-law are not opposed to their daughter becoming a mother, they just think it's too soon and she should finish her education first, get a job, visit Paris, live a year abroad, those kinds of things. Things affixed to "the good life". However, Are opposes any such pre-programmed idea of the good life. If all he wants is to make his girl happy, and her life a joy, how can having their child be wrong? Or bad timing? He struggles to understand this and finds help with his struggles, perhaps surprisingly, in literary theory.

R.D.D.: *Is She Yours?* is an interesting novel about love, family and children, career, existential problems, literature and philosophy. What role do children play in an adult's life?

N.Ø.H.: Oh, that's a big question. I'm always tempted to answer big questions with "I don't know", because I really don't. But I guess, in regards to the novel, this novel, I'd say the role of the child is to let the adult know that he's more

than one thing. That he is endless potential. Same as her, same as the child. He thinks he's stale, she knows he's fresh. And funny. And remarkable.

R.D.D.: It is worth mentioning that the dialogues in this novel are built up on a series of *invisible* replies which seems to be part of the plot, sometimes becoming even a part of it. To put it differently, there is no boundary between the direct speech and the narration itself, since the replies are not marked. In addition, the beginning of the main paragraphs is always written in capital letters. I consider that these special features make your writing style unique. Is that true?

N.Ø.H.: Unique? I certainly like that description. The dialogues I wanted to make as life-like or alive as possible, and sometimes in a conversation a person might answer him- or herself, or continue with a different kind of retort altogether before the other person has had his or her say. Which happens quite a bit with Are and Eira.

R.D.D.: Why did you choose to call Are either "the adult man" ("den voksne mannen") or simply "the man" ("mannen")? Are there any differences between these syntagms?

N.Ø.H.: It has a little bit to do with the child's viewpoint. The same way we look at children as children, they look at grown-ups as adults. He's just another adult, like she's just another kid. And then they become the opposite of just another version of their age, and then they become friends. Not just friendly and goody with each other, but real friends. That was part of the point or the plot, that friendship like that is possible. Between two people in wildly different parts of life.

R.D.D.: Another interesting thing regarding this novel is the special way in which you switch from the everyday colloquial language to a poetic one in the same paragraph, in order to create concrete images. Is this another special feature regarding your writing style?

N.Ø.H.: Yes, I'm sure it is. Although, for me it just happens. This is just how I see the world in writing.

R.D.D.: In this novel you have also made reference to well-known writers, literary critics, philosophers, singers, such as William Shakespeare, Harold Bloom, John Keats, Jacques Derrida, Søren Kierkegaard, Harry Nilsson, Wenche Myhre, Jahn Teigen and others. This intertextuality makes the novel even more

interesting and more vivid. Why did you choose to make reference to these scholars, writers and singers?

N.Ø.H.: Mostly for the reason you've implied in the question: to try to make it more life-like, more real and present as possible. And singers and authors and scholars and critics, along with so many others, play natural and regular parts in our lives. We quote them as we connect with others. We sing their songs when we celebrate each other. And so on.

R.D.D.: You have mentioned William Shakespeare many times with his *Twelve Nights, King Lear, Much Ado about Nothing*). What is the reason for making so many references to Shakespeare?

N.Ø.H.: Because it's Shakespeare. And the fact that his work represents all the hardship and all the silliness of life.

R.D.D.: Is there a connection between the video game Pac-Man and everyday life? Do you think that people around us tend to direct our life towards a *game over*, according to Even, a character from this novel?

N.Ø.H.: It was something that struck me at the time of writing: why do the ghosts flee Pac-Man when they are vulnerable? They'll just respawn, right? It shouldn't matter to them. In fact, the sooner he eats them, the sooner they'll respawn and be able to pick up the chase again. The only reason to flee would be to make his life difficult at the expense of their own. Which is how many people act in real life. Is the theory. And the world-view of Even. Who's a little bit like the villain of the piece.

R.D.D.: What does *aledyn* mean in the novel? The word is used first by Are when he is talking to Eira, when she eats oatmeal with milk.

N.Ø.H.: It's what I used to call Havregryn when I was a child. So, it's made up. And Havregryn is oatmeal. I used to eat it for breakfast.

R.D.D.: Another aspect of this novel is the fact that it is built upon different narrative writing plans. There are presented at least two different worlds. One seen through the innocent child's eyes, a world based on fruitful and funny discussions between Eira and Are and the other one seen through an adult's life perspective with its never-ending problems and challenges. What can you tell us about the structure of the novel?

N.Ø.H.: Yeah, that sounds about right. One of my goals was to comment on adult depression in this novel. And how people who suffer from this might be viewed, unfairly, as uninterested and disconnected. They might in fact be quite the opposite. And Eira doesn't allow prejudice surrounding this to influence her impression of Are, as she can't, as she's not aware. And that's not just a question of innocence, but joy and trust and acceptance and ... receptivity, I guess.

R.D.D.: Have your novels been translated into other languages. Do you have other novels or poems translated into Romanian or the novel *Is She Yours?* is the first one?

N.Ø.H.: It's the first one. And that's very exciting. I can only hope the people who read it, enjoy it.

R.D.D.: Did you publish other novels which are similar to *Is She Yours?* What about the novel *Liten (Little)*?

N.Ø.H.: Well ... that's a bit hard to say. They are similar insofar as they're written by me, but might have a different feel to them. *Is She Yours?* is more dialogue-driven than *Liten (Little)*, for instance. *Liten* does involve a little girl as well. My kid-sister who died when I was just a little boy. Before I got a chance to know – and remember her. So, the novel is simply my way of remembering something I can't. *This Norwegian Life* might have a bit more of the feel from *Is She Yours?* I'd say. Whereas *Sangria in the park* has more to do with unwanted sexual attention and what is and what isn't sexual abuse.

R.D.D.: You are a poet and a novelist. Jan Erik Vold in one of the interviews which I conducted, stated that "Prose is line, poetry is point" ("Prosa er linje, poesi er punkt"). What do poetry and prose mean to you? Which one reflects better your feelings and thoughts?

N.Ø.H.: Another big question. Vold's answer is fine. Although I might not want my poetry too pointy. I think they both mean a lot of the same things to me. Two different but similar ways to contain, but not restrain, life. Present singularity in ways that transcend it. To ease, for just a moment, the weight of just about everything.

R.D.D.: You are also the head of Flamme Publishing House. What kind of literature and what writers do you promote? What is the new wave in Norwegian literature?

N.Ø.H.: Yes, I am. And we promote all kinds, I'd say. Or rather: I hope. It's not always easy to look at yourself from outside, so to speak. New wave? Not sure. The way I see it there's lots of waves. Or constant choppy waters, more like.

R.D.D.: I would like to thank you for your patience and invite you to write a few lines for the Romanian readers who will read your novel *Is She Yours?* translated into Romanian. Thank you!

N.Ø.H.: Dear readers, firstly I'd like to say, to any who might pick up and read *Is She Yours?*, thank you. I once lived these few summer days, and they were some of the best days of my life. And writing the book was possibly my best writing experience. I felt briefly connected to something, or possibly everything, and I hope for you to experience the same. That would be simply amazing. Thanks again.

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