

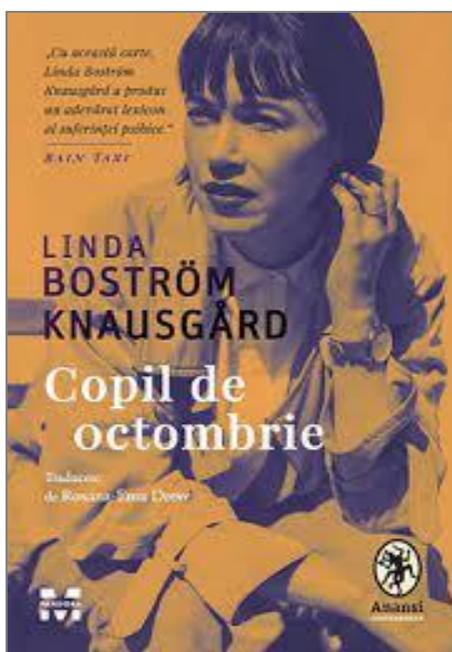
BOOKS

Linda Boström Knausgård, *Copil de octombrie* (Oktoberbarn/ October Child), translated from Swedish by Roxana-Ema Dreve, București: Pandora, coll. "Anansi Contemporan", 2023, 168 p.

After the micro-novel *Bine ai venit în America* (*Velkommen till Amerika/Welcome to America*), this year saw the publication of a new translation of a text by Linda Boström Knausgård, *Copil de octombrie* (*Oktoberbarn/October Child*). Both titles were translated from Swedish into Romanian by Roxana-Ema Dreve, at Pandora Press.

Copil de octombrie deals with themes such as isolation, loneliness, mental health, but perhaps the most important aspect Knausgård's novel touches is the relationship with the people around her, with her own family and with those closest to her.

As noted in other reviews, the main thrust of the book concerns the traumatic experience lived by the protagonist,



Linda, in a psychiatric asylum. Linda is subjected to electroshock therapy, a brutal treatment that is still being applied in Sweden today. The whole asylum is portrayed as “a factory”, where people suffering from mental illness are brought to be “cured” and reintegrated into society. It is important to consider the term “factory” used throughout the novel to describe the institution, as it shows the dehumanising nature of what happens there.

In fact, the doctors, the nurses and almost the entire medical staff are acting precisely at the opposite pole of empathy, a necessary quality in the doctor-patient relationship.



It is a nightmarish picture that unfolds through Linda's memories, in which patients are subjected to a treatment they do not choose, out of a belief in "the good imposed by force". Linda's recollection of her time in the asylum actually makes room for the denunciation of a clinical industry, where the results of studying patients' minds are used for selfish and mercantile purposes: "For those working with the unexplored parts of the human mind, it was a rewarding feeling to finally reach a result and thus be invited to the most select events" (p. 10). Moreover, it is not only the doctors' lack of empathy for patients or the brutal nature of dealing with the problems of those confined to psychiatric wards that are highlighted in Linda Boström Knausgård's novel, but also the harmful view of healing. People can only gain their freedom through dehumanisation, through forgetfulness, through indifference to their own lives: "No one cared that there were so many events that I would never remember. Memory loss was a small price to pay for the effects of therapy. And how much do memories weigh? How do we measure them? How do we know how precious they are? Memories were frowned upon in the factory" (p. 10). Operating the human mind according to a computer-like model is the only accepted solution and the only way to overcome mental illness. In this sense, what is being configured in the novel is a miniature world – a copy of the real world – which operates based on power relations (between the superior – or the so-called "normal" people – and the inferior – those who cannot overcome their own fears). Non-reason is expelled and seen as a destabilising factor in society: hence, the confinement of

all people who do not conform to society's norms to an exclusion zone – the psychiatric asylum.

Linda Boström Knausgård formulates in *Copil de octombrie* a very pertinent response to psychiatric therapy practices in the Nordic area. The novel can thus also be read in a political key, as it exposes the limits and pitfalls of a certain way of looking at the world. People are denied any form of healing that is not in accordance with the principles of institutional organisation and that does not follow a strict protocol. The author enters a subtle dialogue with the Scandinavian society, making this kind of human interaction possible. The book is not only a lexicon of mental suffering, but also a harsh indictment of the world in which Linda lives, as it speaks of the cruelty with which mental illness is addressed and the repulsion with which those who cannot function "normally" are regarded.

An important aspect to note, related to the conventions of autofiction (even docufiction), is Linda's relationships with those around her, and in particular with family members. Linda Boström Knausgård is thus part of an already established tradition in Scandinavian literature of dealing with themes describing interpersonal relationships within family, friendship, or love. Following electroshock therapy, Linda attempts to recover her memories through the exercise of writing, encouraged by Maria, one of the only caregivers not completely taken over by the inhuman system of the clinic. In this way, the novel is constructed by overlapping the present time (the time spent in the clinic) and forays into Linda's past (from childhood to adulthood, from interactions with her mother to the birth of her last child).

The shaping of these family relationships is important not only to recreate a certain climate and to show the dysfunctionality of human behaviour, but also to mark moments of transformation. Interactions with male instances are particularly used to formulate certain attitudes and stances. The image of the father is at odds with the image of the mother's boyfriend, to whom the protagonist is attached and in whom she imagines a safe space (the mother's boyfriend being the only one who did not treat her as a child, but encouraged her autonomous thinking). Another transformative moment is the breakup with her first boyfriend from high school, when Linda recognises some sort of inner strength and feels she is gaining independence. Finally, there is a subtle portrait of her husband, whom she addresses in a confessional tone, attempting an imagined dialogue – to convey all the otherwise unspoken things. This interaction in the key of reminiscence marks a vulnerability assumed and directly displayed. It seems that the cruelty of society, which feeds on ignorance and the maintenance of distance, is mirrored in a fleeting image that Linda makes of her husband: "You woke up from your nap, got out, saw what I did, lay back on the bed and fell asleep. That sleep. A second after you put your head on the pillow, you fell asleep. That total

break from self. I think all presidents, all high-ranking heads of state can sleep. I think it is a precondition. I think mankind can be divided into those who can sleep and those who can't" (pp. 163-164)

Finally, for Linda, writing remains the only healing and escape from the sordidness of a life she cannot fit into. Writing is one of the constants in her life. There is an image of Linda as a student for whom the only happy moment in school is the moment when she can write essays – compulsory homework. Over the years, writing inside the psychiatric ward remains the only connection with the loved ones.

The action of remembering the names of her children ends her time in the clinic. However, there is no actual healing of the protagonist. "Calm down. You are on the right side of reality" is just an ironic retort to the society she lives in. Linda does not rejoin the world, the great healing does not take place, but the route is reversed: the novel denounces a sick society in which everyone pretends to be functional.

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