

A DANISH SCHEHERAZADE

The Jade Cat follows the Danish-Jewish Løvin family on their journey through life, from Denmark to exotic places like India and Afghanistan, through the world wars and back to Denmark. We visit them in mental hospitals and almshouses for the poor, we watch them in absolute splendor and utter decay. Their story is a harrowing one. With *The Jade Cat*, Danish author Suzanne Brøgger has brilliantly created a sweeping epic about her family, peppering it with dangerous ingredients like shame, guilt and incest. The result is a 20th century rollercoaster. WRITTEN BY / PHOTOGRAPHED BY

Henry Miller called her his Danish Scheherazade, and one is tempted to use mythology to describe her. Wise, elegant and very beautiful she is, Suzanne Brøgger, one of Denmark's most prominent authors. To most Scandinavians she will forever be known as the sex goddess who penned anti-love books during the heyday of women's lib in the 1970's, but she herself says she never submitted to any feminist group, and her entrance into the Danish Academy in 1997 shows that she is an author of a lasting metal. Today, with September's publishing of *The Jade Cat* in America (The Overlook Press), making a pilgrimage to Brøgger in Copenhagen seems a timely thing to do.

"I had a baby late in life when most of my family had already passed on, and I wanted my child to know my background," she says when asked why she wrote it. "That was one reason. Another reason was we were at the tail end of the 20th century, and I thought I'd paint that century through the story of my family, and besides, I had inherited all these letters...."

By writing about her dysfunctional family, she says she gave shape to something very complicated.

"But," she is quick to mark, "it is art. It is not therapy. When it was all written, when all was said and done, my family's history was still there. It doesn't go away."

"I wasn't married and I didn't have children, I lived alone with a black cat and I wrote books. You know, a little bit like a witch!"



There are people who move among us with an inner kind of aristocracy that transgresses gender, social status and nationality. Brøgger is one of them. I find myself thinking it's a pity she is not queen of some country. But then perhaps we wouldn't have her books. And it is, after all, the wise writings of Brøgger that have earned her the status as a beloved writer.

Born in Copenhagen in 1944 to a family both grand and defective, she received an unorthodox upbringing in Sri Lanka and Bangkok, where her stepfather worked. Later she was sent to boarding school in Jutland, and it was there, she explains, that she discovered writing.

"I became a writer because I was torn away from my musical environment. In Denmark I played the piano in a band, then my family moved to Sri Lanka. No more music! I went to American schools and was later sent to a boarding school. And it was in my correspondence from the boarding school that I discovered I had a flair for making my life visible through writing. So I thought, 'well, here's something I can do.'"

She pours tea from a delicate teapot, and the scent fills the kitchen where we sit. It is a day for tea, in spite of the fact that it's May; it's a rather gray and windy day in Copenhagen. But Brøgger's kitchen is warm and cozy, her walls are covered with art, a framed Modigliani here and a Buddha figure there. The latter a memento, no doubt, from her days in the Far East.

"I began as a war correspondent," she continues. "I sold silk in a store in Thailand and told everybody I wanted to be a writer. Then soldiers who came in said, 'Why not go to Vietnam, there's a story for you,' and so I went to Vietnam to cover the war from a woman's perspective."

After Vietnam she went on reporting from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and the Middle East.

"When I was 24 I felt I had experienced enough, I felt I had traveled enough, I needed peace, I needed peace to be able to write. By nature I am a generous person, it's hard for me to say 'no,' to turn people down. I had to go away."

And so she moved out to the Danish countryside – to Løve on Zealand – and it is from her house there that she has written all her books. It's almost impossible to guess that all these books, many of which have the alluring backdrops of Paris, New York and Bangkok, were written in rural Denmark.

Brøgger's debut came with the provocative *Deliver Us From Love* in 1974, an attack on the traditional family and monogamy (which Brøgger at the time likened to "legalized cannibalism"), and was soon followed by books like *Crème Fraîche*, *Tone* and *JA*, books that inspired a great deal of people, perhaps women mostly, to live life differently, to take more chances, to not be so afraid.

"The entire western world was preoccupied with women's lib," Brøgger says looking back at her earlier books. "You couldn't escape it. And in those days, being a woman was not what it is today. Traveling alone in the world as a woman, for example, was quite uncomfortable. I think a lot of good came out of the women's lib. Young women today are independent and strong, they don't need to ask a man for anything; relationships between men and women are different too, and men show more interest in their children today. But a nuclear family... of course it can mean a sense of safety and security, but it can also be something difficult, it can be a difficult place that is hard to escape. And there are many dysfunctional families – we hear about them all the time. Just think about the recent Fritzl case in Austria...."

Perhaps the young Brøgger moved to the countryside to escape her past, too? Out there, her neighbors became a family for her, taking her under their wings.

"I had no money when I moved there," she says. "And my neighbors felt sorry for me. They let me shop on credit in their little country store, they brought me soup.... But I believe it was the fact I was so very different that they took care of me. I wasn't a threat to them, you see. I wasn't married and I didn't have children, I lived alone with a black cat and I wrote books. You know, a little bit like a witch!"

Although Brøgger has been translated into many languages, the American market has yet to discover her.

"Well," she smiles when I ask her why she thinks that is, "I am not exactly mainstream you know."

It's probably the spiritual side of Brøgger that most people fall in love with: her spirituality, her wit, her lush Danish language. She recalls her letters from boarding school as being uplifting, and her books are too, uplifting, positive and rooted in an existential fervor. Brøgger can tackle the heaviest of questions and make it not only fascinating but also graspable, livable. In "Den pebrede susen" from 1986 she writes: "There's enough material in every person for her to become herself. And even if not all acorns turn into oaks or we all become heroes, we do all have the ability to become human beings, 'werden was man ist'. We're all coded with unique messages, but we all have to do the same journey through the labyrinth, even though some fear the movement, resist it and complain that others have 'better possibilities than me'. They will be comforted with the fact that death is the most well organized democracy there is, it will hit us all. The worst thing with life is that you cannot learn much from it, there's no dress rehearsal, for

SUZANNE BRØGGER

Born: Copenhagen, November 18, 1944.

Lives: Løve, a village outside of Slagelse, Denmark.

Family: Husband and daughter Luzia.

Listens to: Jazz, Bach, Mozart.

Reads: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Marcel Proust, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Søren Kierkegaard, Karen Blixen.

Favorite place for coffee in Copenhagen: The café at Glyptoteket.

Fun fact: When Brøgger sold silk in Thailand, long before she had established herself as a writer, she interviewed one of her customers, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio – the future Nobel Prize winner.

as long as we're alive, every moment is a premiere."

And the idea of becoming herself has been one of Brøgger's most beloved exercises.

"I experimented with my life," she says. "I did what I wanted to do with it."

Yet everyday has to be tackled afresh.

"We're an adaptable race," she says. "We have learned to live in Siberia as well as Sahara, but I think the information age, TV, cyberspace, all this multitasking is difficult for many to live with. I look at what is happening and I say, like Patti Smith, 'It's not my century.'"

Her century or not, today Suzanne Brøgger is happily married and has a daughter who is in her early twenties. And she continues her writing.

"Right now I am working on essays, but it doesn't come easy. Writing in the age of Internet is not easy, it's hard to focus. Nevertheless, I get up early in the morning, I read, I do my yoga and I write – I write at least three pages every day."

When she doesn't write, she cooks, sews and knits – almost like your typical housewife.

I ask if she minds getting older, but she says she doesn't.

"No, I can't say I do. But you see, I did what I wanted to in life, I am not bitter."

She summarizes her philosophy of life very eloquently in "Sølv," her book about living in the country:

"Is it necessary to take a bath everyday? Is it necessary to make up your face for the narcissi? Is it necessary to eat real food everyday? Is it necessary to decorate your house with flowers? And yourself with silk scarves and nail polish on the toes, even though nobody sees you? My answer to it all is, yes. Just do it. It's just like with art, don't ask what it is good for. You won't get a good answer anyway." ■■