**Anne Bitsch – book review**

**“Disturbing book about child neglect”**

6 on the dice in the daily *Bergens Tidende*

**“A nuanced and insightful, personal tale of the author’s upbringing with an alcoholic mother*. “If you leave now, you are no longer my daughter.”***

“Who noticed? Why didn’t anyone do something?” In this book, these two questions are posed by the author Anne Bitsch, and once you have turned the final page, you find yourself wondering the same thing. Why did nobody step in and help Anne Bitsch, and how many children suffer the same fate?

This unusually well composed book is driven by the need to investigate what went wrong. It takes place in fall of 2016, when the author travels back to Denmark where she grew up. She tracks down the people who ought to have noticed and confronts them with the question: Why did you not do anything? These conversations are presented in the book, along with Bitsch’s reflections on them. The lack of accountability is extensive and depressing, but a few individuals do step forward, courageously willing to take responsibility.

Anne Bitsch grew up with an alcoholic mother who comes across in all respects as unfit to care for a child. The mother died in 2007, 57 years old, 40 kilos, and the book starts with an intensely vivid depiction of the funeral. The reader soon understands that Kamma, the mother, caused a lot of pain in her own life, as well as in the lives of others.

The rich narrative shifts between lively, literary descriptions and analytical, reflective segments. This allows the reader to follow the author’s coming-of-age from the perspective of a child, whilst simultaneously placing the experiences within a larger frame of reference.

Examining letters, photographs and other surviving documents, she writes about a mother who was politically engaged and active on the far left. Her mother was a student in the 1970s, and got pregnant with Bitsch’s father, a married man, in 1978.

Her mother appears to have developed a problematic relationship with alcohol early on, and Bitsch enquires as to why nobody noticed.

What makes the book far more than just a hair-raising catalogue of neglect is how the author carefully avoids simplified explanations. Bitsch, herself a researcher, systematically examines each factor which might have played a role.

One of these factors was, of course, her mother’s time as a student, especially during the anti-establishment politics of the 1970s, when unrestrained use of alcohol was considered natural. Bitsch also brings up her mother’s personality, as she was prone to alarming and frequent mood swings. However, her mother was not diagnosed with manic depression until 2001, but clearly used alcohol as self-medication in the past.

Another factor the author considers is how her mother made a class journey when she became an academic. Middle and upper class alcoholics were anomalies at the time, in comparison to stereotypical portrayals of debauched drunkards on park benches. Her mother’s class membership concealed her alcoholism.

In *If you leave now, you are no longer my daughter*, Anne Bitsch explains how she eventually reached out for help, and many of her conversations with people who should have done something are heart-wrenching to read.

«It was another time,» one tells her. «They couldn’t have known», says another. The most upsetting conversation is with Bitsch’s old high school teacher. In the course of the conversation, it becomes clear that Bitsch’s mother had called up and threatened the school with reprisals if they intervened. Further investigations were subsequently abandoned. And so, the alcoholic, violent and controlling mother got her way through a series of telephone threats. This is just one of many incidents that bear witness to how the author fell victim to comprehensive institutional neglect.

The book also tells of how Anne Bitsch became a victim of incest, and how her neighbors reacted when she told them what happened. Bitsch was ridiculed and the assaults were trivialized. Not a jolly read.

*If you leave now, you are no longer my daughter* is a well-written book and an important reminder to all of us to step in when children are obviously suffering. «If we stop to think, most of us know deep down that we should do everything within our powers to help when a child asks us to, even when it scares us.» Treat these words as a call to arms.

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