

A Winter Book



SELECTED STORIES

Sort Of
BOOKS

A Winter Book

Selected Stories

Tove Jansson

*Translated from the Swedish by
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Introduced by
Ali Smith

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Afterwords

Philip Pullman

Tove Jansson was a rare and extraordinary writer: a being seemingly composed equally of woman, nature spirit, sea creature and Moomin, whose consciousness was both exquisitely local (the famous island where she lived every summer) and generously universal (her understanding of all the processes of life and the passage of time).

These stories show a side of her that may be new to some British readers, who perhaps think of her, if at all, as a writer of charming stories for children. They are as tough as good rope, these stories, as smooth and odd and beautiful as sea-worn driftwood, as full of light and air and wind as the Nordic summer. We are lucky to have them collected at last.

Esther Freud

These stories are infused with such a strong sense of Tove Jansson's character that by the last page you feel on almost intimate terms with her: Determined, indignant, fearless, as a child, we see how she develops – have the luxury of glimpsing her as an old lady too, still determined, still indignant, so that it is with a shock that we catch her – for both her and us – in a rare moment of fear. But what never changes about Tove Jansson is her passion for nature, her love of the bleak rocks and shrieking gulls of the Pellinge peninsular and, above all, the sea. As a young girl she disobeys her father and rows out into a rough sea by moonlight 'all splinters and flakes from precious stones like sailing through a sea set with diamonds', and many years later we recognise the same stubborn core of the woman who declares war on a squirrel, the only other inhabitant of her island home.

Frank Cottrell Boyce

As a child I knew all there was to know about the world Tove Jansson created – the Moominvalley and the Lonely Mountains – but nothing whatsoever about her: I never saw a picture of her, had no idea if she was alive, dead, male or female. So meeting the real Tove in these stories has been an exciting and unnerving experience – a bit like meeting my own guardian angel.

Luckily Tove seems to have been all that a guardian angel should be – wise, stern and flighty. Like an angel, she thinks that humans are funny and vulnerable – tiny creatures busily accumulating grandeur and clutter on the surface of a dangerous

and unpredictable planet. In an era when the weather seems to be going haywire, this is an exhilaratingly prescient vision.

But she also has a strong sense that, if we're kind to each other, and if we take the time to learn to how to do things properly – if we make sure there's enough firewood, and that the roof doesn't leak – then somehow it will all be alright and possibly fun.

My favourite story here is 'The Iceberg'. A little girl sees an iceberg and dreams of riding away on it. The iceberg comes within her reach but, instead of jumping on board, she only wedges her torch in a little grotto at its base and watches it float away, illuminated now with a new inner light, like a great floating emerald. She does not go out and conquer the wilderness. She does not return home with trophies of antlers or wild flowers. She gives away something of herself and somehow gains. And obviously, being Tove, she makes sure the torch has fresh batteries.

I'm very glad I set such store by Tove Jansson as a child. She's been a good guardian angel to me.

