

# 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

# Contents

<i>Introduction by Ali Smith</i> .....	11
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## PART I Snow

The Stone .....	21
Parties .....	27
The Dark .....	34
Snow .....	42
German Measles .....	52
Flying .....	57
Annie .....	63

## PART II Flotsam and Jetsam

The Iceberg .....	73
Albert .....	78
Flotsam and Jetsam .....	85
High Water .....	92
Jeremiah .....	99
The Spinster Who Had An Idea .....	107
The Boat and Me .....	118

## PART III Travelling Light

The Squirrel .....	127
Letters from Klara .....	153
Messages .....	164
Correspondence .....	171
Travelling Light .....	178
Taking Leave .....	197

<i>Afterwords by Philip Pullman, Esther Freud and Frank Cottrell Boyce</i> .....	206
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# Introduction

by Ali Smith

“How old must you be to write a story?” a young Japanese fan wrote and asked her heroine, the Finnish writer and illustrator Tove Jansson. Jansson, at this point, was in her seventies and world-famous as the creator and illustrator of the Moomins, the extended family of big-nosed philosophising creatures (and their various neighbours, including a tiny anarchist no bigger than a thumbnail) who, simply by mildness and geniality, survive the terrible upheavals of their often topsy-turvy life in a beautiful Scandinavian setting of mountains, forests, seas and valleys.

Jansson was then – and is now – much less well known for her fiction for adults, which she began to write in her early fifties and which she concentrated on for over three decades, pretty much the rest of her life (she died in 2001 at the age of 86). Typically, she kept that Japanese girl's beautiful, spare letters and, as if to demonstrate that art can sometimes be what life

itself sends you, but delivered back to you through clearer eyes, she transformed them into 'Correspondence', a miraculously lightly held short story about youth and age, connection and isolation, published here in English for the first time.

In fact, this collection is the first selection of Jansson's short fiction for adults to be published in an English translation for nearly forty years. The recent UK reprint of her classic 1972 novel *The Summer Book*, thirty years after its original publication, has done a lot to remind readers that the brilliance, the thoughtful originality and the blithe hilarious anarchy people associate with her tales of Moominvalley are really only half the story of Jansson's quiet creative genius. Her ten books of fiction for adults – her novels, short story collections and memoir writing – form an equally shining achievement.

*A Winter Book* has been selected to provide as full a view as possible of Jansson's short story work, with an array of pieces hard to find in English, and collected here for the first time in the book's final section. The book also comprises some of the choicest stories from her very first collection, *Sculptor's Daughter* (*Bildhuggarens dotter*, 1968), which she published when she was 54. *Sculptor's Daughter*, one of her most dynamic works, was her first book written specifically for adults rather than children and, interestingly, its subject is childhood itself. Its gloriously funny, disarming and charming set of semi-autobiographical stories of a small girl wintering in Helsinki and summering on a small Finnish island haven't been available in English since 1969.

Beautifully crafted and deceptively simple-seeming, these stories are like pieces of scattered light. In their suppleness, their childlike wilfulness, they're much less melancholy than the average Moomin tale. Light-footed, skilful and mischievous, they belie both the age of their writer, a woman in her middle years,

and the fact that they were written in the stark afterglow of her mother's old age and ten years after her father's death.

Jansson grew up a bohemian artistic child, a daughter of artists and bohemians; her mother was the famous Finnish/Swedish illustrator and artist Signe Hammarsten; her father, Viktor Jansson, was an equally well-known sculptor; and if the very notion of the creative family resides at the centre of Moomin-lore, then these short stories – partly autobiographical, though always wholly crafted into story in their own right – give renewed meaning to words like 'creative' and 'family'. After her mother's death in 1970 she would write her last book for children, *Moominvalley in November*; she followed this with *The Summer Book*, her acknowledged adult masterpiece: the simple, spare story of a very old woman and a very young girl and the adventures, losses and gains there inevitably are when great age and youth live together on a very small Scandinavian island for the whole of an endlessly lit summer.

But Jansson's short stories are as yet unacknowledged small masterworks. Each is distilled to an essence. "You should never keep a single inessential object in your boat," as the adventuring girl tells herself and us at the beginning of 'The Boat and Me'. These are stories that could safely weather storms; they're written with the kind of economy that makes a story rich, and with the kind of precision that turns any mere clockwork of narrative into something that goes beyond time itself.

*Parts I and II* are stories originally from *Sculptor's Daughter*, rearranged here seasonally into winter stories (*Snow*), then summer stories (*Flotsam and Jetsam*). The winter stories are largely town-based and the summer ones island-and-sea stories, a landscape that readers of *The Summer Book* will immediately recognise. Jansson herself spent every summer

living and working on a tiny island off the coast of Finland with her lifelong partner, the graphic artist Tuulikki Pietilä; as winter drew in, they would return to their shared flats in Helsinki, and one of the finest pieces here is the collection's final one, the beautiful and honest 'Taking Leave', which records the end of their island life, an end enforced by their own old age. Its perfect final image of release allows this collection to end on what you might call a real high.

So *A Winter Book* modulates between winter and summer, youth and old age. 'The Boat and Me' – a story which seems as if it should have been part of, but has somehow cast itself out on its headstrong own journey away from, the safer moorings of *Sculptor's Daughter* – was also published when Jansson was in her eighties. It is included here as a go-between story before the final part– *Travelling Light* – whose theme is maturity and whose stories, all written when she was between her sixties and eighties, have been selected from various collections and sources to give a taste of Jansson's artful, often funny and always spellbinding take on the hardships and release of later life. Three of her stories on the subject of writing letters have also been brought together for the first time, and some of her more obviously autobiographical writing here reveals some of the hilarious nonsense and ephemera which fame brought her in old age, as well as exposing something a little closer to existential.

What? Scandinavia and existentialism? Don't expect the heavy old, dark old cliché. Though they never miss a challenge, though they're very much about the dark, about risk, violence, jealousy, fears of abandonment, and though they never short-change a reader when it comes to the truth about anything unsettling, these stories are the opposite of heavy. Whether they're about crabbed age or youth, they make an art of lightness, of letting go.

Take one of the later stories, 'The Squirrel', where an old woman living on an island becomes fixated by the visit of a far-too-unreliable wild creature. The story's refrain is the word 'grey' and its subject is the process of growing old. But its protagonist, in her well-meaningness and her determination, shares a lot with the child protagonist of the stories in *Sculptor's Daughter*. Though it reads as more realistically shocked, numbed out of the confidence, the trusting innocence, of the child-stories, it shares with them the same fascination with the fight between existential release and optimistic disgruntlement, or force of will, as can be found in a story like 'The Iceberg'. Here the child, excited by seeing a perfectly formed tiny iceberg, decides to jump into it and sail away in its grotto-like mouth. But the iceberg is just too far out of reach. "It was lying there bumping against the rocks at the end of the point where it was deep, and there was deep black water and just the wrong distance between us. If it had been shorter I should have jumped over; if it had been a little longer I could have thought: What a pity, no one can manage to get over that." Instead, she throws her lit torch into it. Then she watches it float away, all lit up, triumphant. It's beautiful. The child wonders how long the batteries will last. Then she despises herself for not risking the jump.

This glorious creation of a child-self, with all her cowardice, her jealousies, her funniness, her witty wilfulness, her precocious understanding of the mechanics of art and her unprejudiced filtering of the adult wisdoms fed to her, is the perfect literary voice. It is innocent, and is all about inference and the getting of knowledge. It is as if the stories themselves are saying, just like the child does: "I know. I know a lot that I don't talk about." They explore human urges at base. They examine the creative urge and the destructive urge. They get very close to real violence and anger. They are always

revealingly aware – via the child’s blithe innocence, her very unawareness – of class and gender prejudices.

These slight-seeming stories are really discrete philosophical gifts. ‘Flying’ is directly about lightness, the flight of the imagination, yes, and about the imaginative act of shaking off individual guilt – but in the end this story, in whose finale the whole of Helsinki (including “cats and dogs and guinea-pigs and monkeys” as well as the President) takes to the sky, banishes northern work ethic and shows how creative power has to be hand-in-hand with generosity if it’s going to get anything off the ground. ‘The Stone’, a diminutive reworking of the myth of Sisyphus, is enthralled by what looks weighty. Its child-self battles to roll all the way home, and then up some impossible stairs a stone as big as herself and much, much heavier, which she has decided is a massive lump of precious metal. This story, about the real worth of things, shows how richness is found in the least likely places as well as how everything ordinary becomes silvered-over by adventure – even adventure that ends in what looks like abject failure. The noise the stone makes as it falls down through the building means “Every door opened and everybody ran up and down the stairs”. It’s a story that goes out of its way to make shut doors open.

The fact that the stories are so brief somehow suggests an eternity, a complete world. It is an extraordinary feat. With a child’s pure adurance, Jansson, the laureate of small things, is confident of the value in the seemingly worthless. The *Sculptor’s Daughter* stories are held between present and past tense in a way that creates a new kind of time, at once vital, happening right now, and yet safely past, preserved in memory. They make, with a double-edged consciousness that’s often very funny, a space that’s neither simply adult nor childlike but is somehow believably both. An innocence in these stories puts

## INTRODUCTION

the innocence back into adulthood, yet preserves the potential and knowing space that childhood is.

*A Winter Book* is full of stories that make art of life and celebrate the life of art. In the process, and like everything Tove Jansson wrote, they celebrate the endless, unstoppable, good-natured force of the imagination. They take, for instance, the attempts to communicate, the blunt requests, the repeated language-stammers of a total stranger; that Japanese girl fan, and, in a typical Jansson combination of inference and clear-sightedness, reveal them as a beautiful story in their own right, a fine tight-roped balance of hope and hopelessness. The stories face age, youth, and each of the dark and light seasons with the same determination to make something light of it all. In their slightness they may seem almost dismissible, but they light up the dark for miles like that torch drifting away on the unmoored iceberg: "Perhaps that torch would go on shining at the bottom of the sea after the iceberg had melted and turned into water." These small acts of seeming accident and covert deliberation make something momentous happen.