

BIOGRAPHY

Tove Jansson (1914–2001) was born in Helsinki, in Finland's Swedish-speaking minority. Her father was a sculptor and her mother a graphic designer and illustrator; as an adult she lived with her life companion, the artist and professor Tuulikki Pietilä, in Helsinki and in a cottage on the remote outer edge of the Finnish archipelago.

Jansson began as a visual artist, drawing humorous illustrations and political cartoons for an anti-Fascist Finnish-Swedish magazine from 1929 (at age fifteen) until 1953. It was there that she introduced her most famous creation: Moomintroll, a hippopotamus-like character with a dreamy disposition, a loving and tolerant family, and a world of mountains and river valleys that he explores with unfailing curiosity and kindness. Her children's books about the Moomin family are beloved throughout the world and have inspired films, television series, an opera, and theme parks in Finland and Japan. Jansson's novel, *The True Deceiver*, also translated by Thomas Teal, will be published by NYRB Classics in December 2009.

THE SUMMER BOOK

by Tove Jansson

Translated from the Swedish by Thomas Teal

Introduction by Kathryn Davis

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"Tove Jansson was a genius. This is a marvelous, beautiful, wise novel, which is also very funny."— Philip Pullman

"Poetic understatement, dry humor and a deep love for nature are obvious throughout her oeuvre.... The book is as lovely, as evocative as a film by Hayao Miyazaki."—*Time Out New York*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* magically evokes the world of childhood in all its wonder and fragility. Sophia, her father, and her grandmother have come to their small island, as they do every summer, and while Papa works, Sophia and Grandmother explore the beaches and by-paths, work in the garden, go swimming, build a model of Venice in the marshes, get a new pet cat, see occasional visitors, and look after each other. This summer is the same as all the rest, and yet different: the old woman is often tired, dizzy, and afraid of losing her walking stick, false teeth, or balance; the young girl is plucky and curious, and trying, in her unspoken, child's way, to come to terms with the fact that her mother has just died.

Jansson, who wrote and illustrated the beloved Moomintroll children's books, once said that "Every children's book should have a path in it where the writer stops and the child goes on. A threat or a delight that can never be explained. A face never completely revealed." In her writing for adults, Jansson's artistry in pointing the way to the inexplicable is even more subtle and astonishing. Every moment of the book—every incident of the summer on the island—is described with crystal clarity and a crisp, sharp beauty. But underneath it all are depths of mortality and grief: Grandmother's memories and regrets; Sophia's tantrums and screams of terror, soon forgotten in a new game invented by her resourceful grandmother or in a new part of the island to explore.

The Summer Book is wonderfully easy to read and difficult to describe, because it always works on both levels. Even to mention its wisdom and depth seems to detract from its humor and light touch, and vice versa, yet the book is equally perfect in both ways: as a psychological portrayal of grandmother and granddaughter at a turning point in the cycle of life, and as a delicate distillation of summer adventures.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. We hear that Sophia's mother is dead only in passing, in chapter 2 (page 9). Did you find yourself thinking about that throughout the book? How does it underlie specific details of Sophia's behavior, or the overall feel of the story? Why do you think Jansson (or the characters) doesn't talk about it more? Jansson also waited until after chapter 1 to reveal this important information: why would she choose to do it that way? How would chapter 1 have been different if we had known about Sophia's mother?
2. The book is filled with beautiful descriptions of things on the island. "It was pretty and mysterious" (pages 5–6) is one of the first descriptions, and also a good description of the book as a whole. Do you think of *The Summer Book* as a kind of island, or a summer vacation? Do you react to it similarly to how Sophia reacts to things?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

A High Wind in Jamaica

Richard Hughes
(introduction by Francine Prose)

Alfred and Guinevere

James Schuyler
(introduction by John Ashbery)

Mistress Masham's Repose

T.H. White
(illustrations by Fritz Eichenberg)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Leonora Carrington,
The Hearing Trumpet

Grimm's Fairy Tales

Tove Jansson, Moomins books,
including *Comet in Moominland*,
Finn Family Moomintroll, etc.

Marilynne Robinson,
Housekeeping

3. Which are your favorites of the games that Sophia and Grandmother play together? Did you play any games or do activities like that when you were a child? Was there anyone in your life like Grandmother?
4. *The Summer Book* is about an important summer in Sophia's life, of course, but it is also a story about an important summer in Grandmother's life. How does the book seem different when you look at it from that angle? What is the arc of the story from Grandmother's point of view?
5. Is Papa a good father? Sophia says, "I like it when he's working...I always know he's there" (page 138). He is almost always working, and never says anything; we hear about him mostly from Grandmother, who describes a lot of his rules. Is he a good son to Grandmother?
6. Jansson is wonderfully wise about the different ways in which Grandmother and Sophia see the world: Grandmother tends to track and observe things, while Sophia tends to forget—for example, the blade of grass with seabird down (pages 22–23). Sophia also projects her feelings outward; for example, she asks Grandmother, "You won't be sad now, will you?" to keep from feeling sad herself (page 50). Do you think these habits are specific to Sophia and Grandmother, or true of adults and children in general?
7. Sophia experiences unrequited love for Moppy the cat: "It's funny about love...The more you love someone, the less he likes you back" (page 54). She trades Moppy for Fluff, who is much more affectionate, but in the end she wants Moppy back. Do you think Sophia is being childish, or is Jansson using the story to express something true about adults as well?
8. "Her children sprang up...so nothing changed" is part of the description of a rosebush (page 62). Is that true of the family in the book? Do you think Sophia will be like Grandmother when she is older? Why or why not?
9. Does the story of Eriksson, the "friend who never came too close" (page 70), make you see the family relationships differently? What about Verner, or the new neighbor whose house they break into? Grandmother is concerned about Sophia's manners, but later thinks: "No. *I'm* certainly not nice. The best you could say of me is that I'm interested" (page 151). Do you think this is really true? Is Grandmother "nice"?
10. During a fight, Sophia writes to her Grandmother: "I hate you. With warm personal wishes, Sophia. All the words were correctly spelled" (page 129). Why does Sophia respond that way, and why does Jansson mention Sophia's spelling? What is Grandmother angry or depressed about in this scene, and how much of that do you think Sophia understands?
11. What do you think of Sophia's book *A Study of Angleworms That Have Come Apart*? What is it really about, and how does having Sophia write it let Jansson express a different side of Sophia's character? How does it compare to Berenice's drawing (pages 33–34)?
12. What do you think of the drawings in *The Summer Book*? Do they make it feel more like a children's book, or is this a kind of adult book that drawings belong in? In general, do you think of this book as a book for adults or for children? What's the difference?