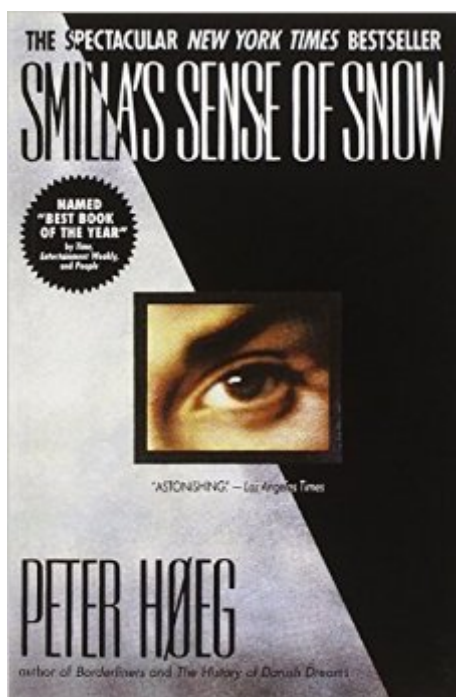


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Smilla's Sense Of Snow



Synopsis

She thinks more highly of snow and ice than she does of love. She lives in a world of numbers, science and memories--a dark, exotic stranger in a strange land. And now Smilla Jaspersen is convinced she has uncovered a shattering crime...It happened in the Copenhagen snow. A six-year-old boy, a Greenlander like Smilla, fell to his death from the top of his apartment building. While the boy's body is still warm, the police pronounce his death an accident. But Smilla knows her young neighbor didn't fall from the roof on his own. Soon she is following a path of clues as clear to her as footsteps in the snow. For her dead neighbor, and for herself, she must embark on a harrowing journey of lies, revelation and violence that will take her back to the world of ice and snow from which she comes, where an explosive secret waits beneath the ice....

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Customer Reviews

I read a review of Smilla in the New York Times Book Review the year it was published and was completely intrigued by it. I found it on a clearance rack for around 2 dollars a few years later, and have been reading it ever since. It is one of the few books that I take wherever I travel. Smilla is not always a nice person; most of the time her past envelopes her present and makes her almost unlikeable. The other characters in the novel, the mechanic, her father, the coroner and the blind linguist are so well written that you begin to feel that you know them. I can't agree with the 2/3's assessment, because I find it gripping to the end, even though I have read it many times. The atmosphere of Copenhagen in winter, the language of snow and ice, and the mystery surrounding a

young boy's death may not move ahead like an American mystery, but the slow unraveling of the plot is perfect for a novel set in a country where life is lived at a different pace than ours.

I probably wouldn't have read this book if it had not been gifted to me at Christmas by my best friend - she had seen the film, and knowing how much I like to read, felt that it would be 'right up my alley'...and once again, she was right in her judgment concerning my tastes. One of the quotes on the back cover (from *The New Yorker*) puts this novel '...in the league of Melville or Conrad' - while I'm not sure I would go quite that far, Høeg is a fine writer, and his talents for keeping the reader in suspense as he spins this tale are pretty impressive. The central character, Smilla, is of mixed Greenlandic and Danish parentage - and the conflicts between those two cultures, one colonial, one native, are alive within her constantly. The dialectic that exists between these two forces - which has so often transformed and rent the fabric of human society - tears at her life. She is a strong-willed, intelligent woman who is not really sure what she wants or expects from life - she trusts her instincts, but not necessarily her heart. When she comes upon the body of her six-year-old neighbor Isaiah crumpled in the snow outside their apartment building, dead from a fall from the roof, she is immediately suspicious - and when the police almost instantly rule the death an accident, Smilla's initial doubts increase. They continue to do so almost exponentially as she begins to look into the case - and her investigation leads her into one dangerous situation after another. The author balances the emotional with the sociological and the scientific elements nicely in this story - there are plenty of references to Smilla's inability to trust, and to love (and the reasons that lurk behind), background on the treatment of the Inuit people by the Danes (both in Greenland and in Denmark), and plenty of science as well. The author has done his homework. In the note about the author, it's mentioned that before turning to writing, he worked as a professional dancer, an actor, a sailor, a fencer and a mountaineer - and it's pretty evident that he pursued these activities with attention and zeal. You can see elements from several of them within this work. The writing is intelligent, and flows very nicely - and Høeg is masterful in giving away just what he wants to give away as the story progresses. Fans of the literary thriller should give this novel a good, long look.

Peter Hoeg proves that serious literature can be both entertaining and artful. On the surface, "Smilla's Sense of Snow" is genre fiction. But dig a little deeper, and there is a character study of great sensitivity, a setting with symbolic value and profound themes about loss. Unlike other densely-plotted thrillers, this book rewards re-reading

I read all the reviews before writing my own because I was curious about the general consensus. People complained about the unsatisfactory ending, what they perceived as the author's intellectual showboating, as well as the narcissistic, cold-hearted selfishness of the main character. I understand the criticism leveled at the ending; I was looking for more resolution in terms of the main character's relationship to her rootless life, but ultimately I accepted that as part of the book, for better or for worse. On the other two counts I couldn't disagree more. What might be taken for pretentiousness is perhaps the author's expertise in many wide-ranging interests. And as for the main character--well, that was what drew me to this book and made it one of my all-time favorites. What I found interesting in the negative reviews was the almost angry vehemence with which readers built their case.

I first read this literary thriller when it was published in 1993. Smilla Jaspersen--half Greenlander, half Dane, an unconventional loner and brilliant scientist who struggles with her conflicted upbringing--is devastated when a young boy she has befriended mysteriously falls to his death from the roof of their apartment building. Unsatisfied that it was an accident, she follows a trail from Copenhagen to the bleak Arctic reaches to solve his murder. Since that time I've probably read it a half a dozen times--and not for the incantatory power of the prose. Don't get me wrong--the writing is terrific and the story is compelling, complex, and extraordinarily well-plotted--but what gripped me most about this book was the main character. And she still grips me. Smilla is undoubtedly the first contemporary fictional female character who isn't a wife, mother, saint, or a whore. Imagine a grown-up cross between Nancy Drew and Pippi Longstocking--if they'd been kicked out of every school they ever attended, hitchhiked around the world, maybe did some low-level smuggling, and somewhere along the way managed to pick up a couple of graduate degrees. Smilla is clever, bold, smart, independent, funny, adventurous, slightly reckless, and feels no qualms about telling the men who get in her way to shove off. She's a boat-rocker, whistle-blower, a rule-breaker who thumbs her nose at authority and refuses to submit, like a well-behaved girl, to the ancillary role society would like her to play (e.g., wife, mother, saint, whore). Which, of course, drive the men whose power she challenges into a fury that makes them want to annihilate her. The irony is that she was created by a man. But Smilla's rebellion does not come without intense self-scrutiny and the painful knowledge that she's a lone wolf; at one despairing point in the book she even calls herself a loser. She admits her freakishness, the fact that she cannot find deep connections with others. She usually refrains from getting involved with men because she's terrified of becoming too dependent, of losing herself. She's terrified of being vulnerable, of being loved, of being left. And yet despite all of her fears she plods forward. She laments her inability to make a permanent place for herself in the world, and yet that doesn't deter

her from what she feels is her duty--to solve the death of a little boy who may be the one person to whom she had what came close to a true connection. But the greater, unspoken challenge is how to live in the world as a black sheep, particularly if you are a woman. Perhaps the intense dislike some feel towards Smilla stems from her daring to challenge the established structure of society which, despite all the advancements women have made, still places men on top and women underneath. Men dislike her because they can't abide a woman who doesn't know her second place; women dislike her because it forces them to address the power they give away by seeking validation from men. Plus, the world does not show any love for those who tell the truth or root out corruption--they are, more often than not, eliminated in one way or other. And yet, without those who exposed secrets or took the unpopular stand, who took the heat and bucked convention, we'd still be toiling in some medieval gloom. I also loved how Hoeg, in comparing Denmark to Greenland, underscores how the "progress" and "development" of the modern world have all but destroyed the integrity of ancient cultures, the beauty of the wilderness, and the deeply-ingrained rituals that lend meaning to life as well as binding people together. He weaves examples into the main plot as a kind of elegy to the world as it was before man's maniacal drive to improve it. Some improvements come to mind that did indeed improve the quality of life for mankind--fire, penicillin, and efficient farming methods--but there are so many more that can only make you weep. Now, if only America would produce a heroine as bold, rebellious, and independent as Smilla Jaspersen--and her little sister, Lisbeth Salander.

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