

© [Alt for Damerne](#), Denmark, October 7, 2004

*Interview with Christian Jungersen*

## **He sees through women**

**Christian Jungersen has chosen not just one, but four female protagonists for his new psychological thriller, which is also a harrowing story about harassment in the workplace. We talked with him about his studies on what it's like to be female – and about the evil that even the best of us are capable of committing.**

by Birgitte Bartholdy.

Translated by Tiina Nunally

Four women work in an office in Copenhagen. A secretary, a librarian, and two academics. From the outside, it looks like an utterly typical office scenario, with jokes, small talk, and brown-bag lunches in the kitchen. But if we look closer, it's a nightmare of pretense, fear, and harassment – at least seen from one woman's point of view.

How could things go this far? How can two of the women, Iben and Malene, who are perceived by others as sweet, charming, and intelligent, end up using little remarks, intrigue, and lack of eye contact to snipe at the librarian Anne-Lise? Why does the secretary, Camilla, merely look on? And what's behind the threatening emails that have suddenly appeared? Were they written by the persecuted Anne-Lise as a means of revenge against the others?

The scene shifts.

The answers are to be found in the mind of a man in a small apartment in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen. His name is Christian Jungersen. For more than three years he has lived and breathed the story of his huge novel *The Exception*, which deals with these four women and how the threatening emails turn the office upside down to such a degree that the result is murder and hostage-taking.

The four women work at The Danish Center for Genocide Information. Each day

they send out reports, write articles, and draw attention to books that have to do with the insane scenarios of terror that occur around the world – in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and all sorts of other places. Yet they have a hard time recognizing the scenario of terror in their own office.

“I’ve long thought it enormously interesting that people you think of as congenial, charming, and nice can sometimes completely change character and turn into virtual demons if a certain situation presents itself,” says Christian Jungersen.

As part of the research for his novel he has read enough books to fill many bookshelves on the topics of genocide and war crimes; again and again he has come to the conclusion that evil is not just committed by blatant psychopaths whom we see in films leering horribly as they murder people right and left.

“In reality, evil is most often committed by people like you and me, who think we’re doing the right thing and that what we’re doing is perfectly reasonable. With this story about four women, I want to show the self-deception that makes it possible for all of us to be evil and yet convince ourselves that we’re not.

“In one way we’re like computers. Some of us run on the same program our whole life and never get forced into situations that start up other programs. But at some point or other, most of us have the experience of behaving more cruelly than we had ever imagined possible. We end up in some unfamiliar program because we’re in a war, or we’re about to get divorced, or we’ve been subjected to some type of injustice at our workplace.”

### **Unhappy at the advertising agency**

Some of the scenes in the novel are taken directly from personal experience, Jungersen confirms, from the period when he worked as a copywriter after finishing his first novel, *Thickets*. But it was never as bad as what Anne-Lise experiences in the book.

“But that was a period of my life when I was the unhappiest and the most creatively blocked,” he says.

“It was a hot big-time advertising agency in downtown Copenhagen, but you could just as well have made me parachute out over New Guinea to a tribe where they walked around with huge penis extensions. It was that different. The eye contact, the

body language, the things other people thought were fun and exciting, everything. The men talked about sports, cars, and money; the women didn't really expect the men to talk about anything else. If I tried, they would think: 'What's he up to? He's weird.'

"One of the managers told the others that he cringed every time I came into the room, and so it's interesting to look at what happened between them and me. There was one woman I thought would have been a good friend if things hadn't gone in that direction. Even though it was abominable, it was also deeply fascinating. I learned a lot.

"It's possible to harass someone just through eye contact. No matter what Anne-Lise says in the book, the others look away and answer her in monosyllables. All week long, month after month – and at the same time they're laughing and having fun with each other. That's more destructive than you could ever imagine."

*It takes a long time before the others realize how much they hurt Anne-Lise...*

"But they really do know all along. At the same time, they're unaware of it. They both think: 'We can do what we want because she's so thick-skinned that she won't even notice.' And: 'We can do this because it's just.' At the same time, they also think: 'What we're doing is very wrong; we'd better not tell anyone about it.'

"The same mechanism existed in the concentration camps of the Holocaust. The officers were told that they were making a great contribution to humanity by exterminating the Jews; people would thank them for the next thousand years – but they had to remember to eliminate all traces. We're capable of living with many contradictory realities inside ourselves.

### **Men don't hear the undercurrents**

*Why did you choose to write about four women?*

"If I had written about male career attorneys, journalists, or spies, people would say: Oh, they're all a bunch of scoundrels, we know that. But such sweet, idealistic young women who work for an organization with a humanitarian purpose and who are members of Greenpeace and Amnesty International – we expect goodness from them. And then if it turns out that they also have an evil side, it *must* be something

that holds true for all of us.

“I think women have a greater tendency than men to want everyone to be nice to each other at work. That’s why they were more interesting to write about. They have farther to fall.”

*How did you manage to get yourself into the female psyche?*

“I don’t really think that men and women are that much different inside. But the way we communicate is very different. Maybe because women have always had to adapt to the fact that they can’t get their way by using physical force, they learn to be more sensitive to non-verbal signals from others and to rely on the same sensitivity in others. Like so many men, when I was younger I was terrible at deciphering anyone’s hidden meanings. But my girlfriend has taught me a lot about what’s really going on between people below the surface.

“I’ve also benefited greatly from my writing group. We’re all published authors and meet for dinner once a month and talk about each other’s new chapters. The group includes two men – me and Rasmus Heiberg – and three women: Christina Englund, Sulaima Hind, and Charlotte Weitze, who all along gave me their reactions to my descriptions of women.

“In one of the first chapters, for example, there’s a scene in which Malene, a beautiful woman with lots of drive, is invited to a get-together at a friend’s place. She makes several attempts to tone down what she wears. But when she arrives, the hostess still looks her up and down and says: ‘This isn’t a party, you know.’ The women in my writing group reacted strongly to this, so I knew that I had gotten it right.

“When women talk to each other, there are lots of undercurrents that men can’t hear. Taken to the extreme, you might say that if a man buys an ugly pair of pants, his male friends will say to him: ‘you look like an idiot in those pants,’ but he won’t care and he’ll keep on wearing them. If a woman buys an ugly pair of pants, her girlfriends will say to her: ‘Oh, how pretty,’ but the woman will hear from their tone of voice that they don’t really mean it, and she’ll stop wearing those pants.

“Books about writing screenplays always emphasize that the dialogue should be like one long argument that lasts the whole film. The characters should always have

different opinions, otherwise there's no tension. But that's not how reality is! Especially not among Danish women. Women spend a lot of time saying how they agree with each other: 'it's the same way for me,' and 'isn't it like that for you?' and 'I feel the same way.' Sometimes they're telling the truth, but of course it's more exciting to write about when they aren't. It's important to me to present these undercurrents as accurately as possible, because facial expressions and changes in a colleague's tone of voice mean a lot in terms of the tension in my book. These subtle signs are all the characters have to go by in order to pinpoint the murderer."

### **At the age of seventeen he went to a consciousness-raising group**

Back when Christian Jungersen was growing up in Humlebæk, a suburb of Copenhagen, no one would have guessed that he would one day become a writer. On the other hand, from a young age he displayed a great thirst for knowledge.

"As a teenager I spent an enormous amount of time in the library, in the sections for psychology and philosophy. And that was where, in a magazine called *Sexual Politics*, I found an invitation to a meeting of the Men's Movement – a parallel organization to the Women's Movement but for men. And so I went. I was only seventeen. That was in 1979, so I'm probably one of the youngest people who have experienced being part of a consciousness-raising group in the '70s. Once a week for almost five years I would meet with men who were between twenty-five and thirty-five to talk about couple relationships, feelings, and sex. It taught me a tremendous amount, especially about the problems that men have with women."

After finishing high school Jungersen hitchhiked through Europe and then earned a university degree in communication.

One day he was sitting in a circle of singers at a summer festival for playing funk music, and he heard someone say: "I'm here because I've discovered that I have a few years left before I have to throw myself into all that stuff with family and a career." The singer paused for a moment and then went on: "Maybe in ten or fifteen years."

Jungersen laughed, but afterwards he thought to himself that this also applied to him.

"It was quite an eye-opener. I actually had greater freedom than I had imagined.

And so I didn't take a regular day job and at the same time started writing screenplays. I wrote two screenplays a year."

None of them were bought, and when he was about to start on screenplay number seven, he just couldn't do it.

"And then I thought to myself, I need to publish a novel first, and make a name for myself. I thought it would take me six months to write, and after I'd been writing for six months, I thought: 'Well, it'll take me two years.' And after I'd written for two years, I thought: 'I guess it'll take four.' And fortunately that's how long it took."

The result was *Thickets*, which was published in 1999 to excellent reviews; the book was on the bestseller list in Denmark for three months.

*How did it feel to have something published after writing for seven years?*

"Now people will think I'm a total freak."

*And you are, too!*

"Well yes, but can't you tone it down a bit? I'd been going around to one publisher after another for two years, so it was fantastic. Also because I could now say to people: 'You know what, I can't come to that dinner because I'm in the middle of writing something.' I wanted my occupation as a writer to be taken as seriously as other jobs and that made lots of things easier."

*You're forty-two, have a rather spartan lifestyle, and you still live alone...*

"My girlfriend is a journalist and works at home, like I do. We like having our own apartments and visiting each other on weekends or sometimes during the week. I try to spend as little time as possible on the practical day-to-day things so that I can devote the majority of my time to imagining, pondering, and writing. And I'm happy with my life; I don't know anyone who's as happy as I am. If I won five million kroner in the lottery and could do whatever I wanted, I'd still start writing another book. I feel that I have an abundantly full life.

"I guess that's a writer thing. Most people would probably think my daily life sounds rather lonely and meager, but whenever I talk about it with other Danish authors, they all say: 'It sounds perfect.'"