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Interview with Christian Jungersen

Good Will

“People with whom we work closely can turn into dead meat for us.” Next week Christian Jungersen’s second novel will be published – a story of murder and office harassment among women who work at The Danish Center for Genocide Information.

by Klaus Wivel

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Christian Jungersen is a meticulous sort of man. Today he is a full-time author, having devoted the last fifteen years to his writing. This tall, slender man wearing wool socks, jeans and a hooded sweatshirt writes six days a week, morning, noon, and night. He is so diligent that during the past three years he hasn’t allowed himself to read any books except those that he could use for his novel. He lives alone in a two-room apartment in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen – it’s rather like a monk’s cell with Seinfeld videos on the bookshelf and a panoramic view over the low rooftops on Tagensvej. And he has no distractions such as children or a job. He is now in his early forties.

You would think that a man like him would be sending out a flood of books. But no. Not until next week will he be able to add book number two to his list of published works. Christian Jungersen takes his time to write good novels.

The Exception is the title of this book, which is more than 600 pages long. It’s a psychological thriller with a rare focus: the work environment of a public institution, whose employees are progressive, idealistic young women who have studied at Denmark’s liberal Roskilde University and who cultivate journalists at the leftist newspaper *Information*, and fall in love with them. Not exactly the most typical

setting for this type of book, but the result is a fast-paced philosophical drama with all the trimmings, including threats and murder and a plot so tightly woven that it's not until the very last page that the penny drops (and an entire world-view shatters).

"I've always been fascinated to hear people talk about the conflicts they have at their jobs and the people they work closely with who seem to transform into horrible monsters – people who, under other circumstances, are perfectly nice," says Christian Jungersen.

"I've had my own experiences of working with certain people who would be very likable if I met them at a party. But when I worked with them, something happened that changed them. What causes this? How can it be that the same person who makes great contributions on behalf of other people, under different circumstances can behave so terribly?"

"The interesting thing is that it's not always one group that's good and one group that's evil. So what is it that provokes the good in us, and what provokes the evil? That's something I've been fascinated with for over ten years."

Evil in all its forms is the subject of Jungersen's book. And what could be a more fitting setting for such an examination than a fictitious Danish Center for Genocide Information? A place where evil is not just the professional focus of the four female protagonists – it's also something that slowly gnaws away at their relationships in the workplace. It all starts when the two younger employees, Iben and Malene, each receive an email in English that contains a threat against her life. Did it come from one of the Yugoslav perpetrators of genocide that they've written about in their articles? Or did it come from Anne-Lise, in the next office, who clearly despises them, and whom Iben and Malene very quickly begin to suspect has a secret drinking problem?

"I've deliberately chosen to describe people who have a thorough intellectual understanding of evil, but who have no practical experience with it. As the story progresses, they're confronted with their own evil and that of others in a way that they never could have imagined in the beginning.

"Of course I don't mean to make light of the enormity of genocide – freezing people out is not at all the same thing as killing people. But many of the

psychological mechanisms of harassment in a workplace are similar. People with whom we work closely can turn into bait for us. A type of callousness can arise; we can even summon it up ourselves, if it's to our advantage."

During the past five years since the publication of his first novel, *Thickets*, Jungersen has spent his time learning about the latest research on social psychology and genocide.

"With *Thickets* I had to immerse myself in the early 20th century, reading old newspapers and becoming familiar with the time period. With *The Exception* I started going to lots of conferences on genocide. I've become a member of The International Association of Genocide Scholars, and last year I participated in a week-long genocide conference in Ireland. I did this, of course, so that the novel's facts about genocide would be accurate, but also to plant in my subconscious the same concerns as those that might be found in the subconscious of the characters in my book."

And some very sinister aspects of the women emerge. Toward the end of the novel *Iben*, who is the most prominent of the four female protagonists, says: "We ramble on, with our big words and idealism, but it's all just rationalizing after the fact for our own egoism." Could this be some sort of motto for the book?

"If a book that's over five hundred pages long has a motto, then it's a bad book. But it expresses *Iben's* very depressed view of the world, and, in part, my own. Like me, the characters are faced with a world of evil, and they're trying to get their bearings in that world, trying to find some light in a place that turns out to be very dark. I can relate to that struggle."

Are these people affected by the fact that their work has to do with genocide?

"Absolutely. But they try to rise above the evil because, as they say: 'If we can't rise above it, then who can?' There's a woman in the office who thinks she's being harassed, but the others don't agree, and so they use experiences from their world, the council for conflict resolution and the UN, and apply them to their own situation. They struggle to be good people. At the same time, what they're working with is also depressing, and it weighs them down."

You might get the impression that the people who work there are doing it for career reasons...

“No, they’re idealists. I decided to focus the novel on four women who work for an idealistic organization because that presents a more exciting story. Their fall is much greater. They set greater demands, they have high goals, and at the same time there is something driving them to try to annihilate one of their own colleagues. They want her dead. That contradiction is what I’m trying to map out. From my meetings with genocide scholars, it’s my clear observation that they are not career people; on the contrary, they’re people who have been shaken by what they’ve seen in the world and they’ve made an existential decision about how they want to use their lives.”

The book presents a sinister picture of idealism. Are you a cynic?

“If the main characters in the novel didn’t have their idealism, they would have nothing. But it’s hard to live up to idealism. In the book I draw on new psychological research on what today is called *Dissociative Identity Disorder*. It turns out that the scientific perception is no longer that people are either ‘normal’ with a fully integrated personality, or they have a radically split personality that can, for instance, suddenly speak with a child’s voice or understand foreign languages – everything we’ve seen in Hollywood films. Instead there is a continuum between these two extremes.

“The less extreme splits are interesting. They’re what make it possible for us, for example, to have several different world views at once.

“In the novel Iben and Malene think that of course they can treat Anne-Lise badly, because she’s so thick-skinned that she won’t even notice. At the same time, they hold another view that directly contradicts this: they can treat her badly because she does notice and it makes her unhappy, but she deserves it because she’s such a bitch. And then their third contradictory view is that they won’t tell their friends about what they’re doing at the office. In other words, they know deep down that it’s wrong.

“We can jump back and forth between various identities. That’s where self-deception comes in. Iben and Malene choose not to listen to the voice that tells them occasionally that they’re heading in the wrong direction.”

Christian Jungersen also describes Gunnar, the hot-blooded journalist specializing in Africa, who wears a black leather jacket and writes a regular column for the newspaper *Information*. In the past he belonged to the inner circle of the Maoist Communist Workers Party, and he tells Malene how, back then, for about fifteen minutes each month he would realize what a terrible regime he was helping to support.

“On a daily basis Gunnar was able to live with his communist involvement, feel passionately about it, but each month there would be fifteen minutes when he would ask himself what the hell he was doing. As Gunnar says: ‘Evil is when you ignore those fifteen minutes.’

“Evil isn’t just the people we see in movies running around with big guns and trying to shoot everybody. Evil can also occur in people who do the right thing, who are members of Greenpeace and Amnesty International, who take their empty bottles down to the recycling containers, but who now and then realize that, in the long run, the idealism they’ve chosen to pursue is selfish.”

And why does Gunnar ignore those fifteen minutes?

“We all do. We all know that the money we spend having a good time in town could save the lives of several people in the Third World. And that thought does occur to us occasionally, but we shove it back into the shadow world where it leads its own life. If there are people in the Third World whose children die for lack of something from our world, it’s easy to understand why they would hate us and think to themselves: how can anyone be so callous? They would call that evil.”

Is that what it is?

“Yes, it is. A callousness that is voluntarily chosen – I would call that evil.”

Jungersen’s clever idea is to allow the story to unfold among academic idealists, who also happen to be women.

“I think that type of environment is not very well represented in literature. The dynamics of a workplace are even less represented. There are plenty of novels about

love, about divorce, about how a harsh childhood can affect an individual in adulthood, and about the passage from one generation to another. But why are there so few books about life in the workplace, which can be just as filled with emotions, drama, and crucial experiences?

“When you’re old and look back on your life and try to sum it up, a key factor is whether you had colleagues who made you feel that you were smart, respected, and well-liked. Or who made you feel the opposite. Colleagues can totally change your own perception of yourself. And nobody writes about this.”

And what about the women? What gave you the courage to identify with four women at one time?

“That was actually terrifying. I never would have dared, except that in my last book I found that I actually succeeded in describing the world of an 82-year-old so well that I’ve received many admiring letters from retirees.”

You’ve written two books, yet you’re over forty. Why such meticulousness?

“Reluctantly, dragging my feet, I’ve been forced into writing books that were much harder to write than I thought I was capable of.”

And that’s what you want to do?

“Now I’m hooked. You put a lot of emotions into a novel. I think it was Norman Mailer who said that finishing a novel was like taking your child out into the backyard and shooting him. That’s not how it is for me. But you can compare finishing a novel to a child who moves away from home.”