

Denmark's women on the edge

Compelling fiction by Dorte Nors and Helle Helle explores solitude, regret and lives not led, writes Matthew Janney

Two recently translated Danish novels probe the distances between loneliness and connection, through two solitary female protagonists. In Helle Helle's *Hafni Says*, a woman on the verge of divorce sets out on a road trip, or as she describes it a "smørrebrød tour", across Denmark; in Dorte Nors' *Range*, an astrophysicist retreats into the countryside to seek solitude and study the cosmos.

The former is compact, witty and episodic – written in short chapters that mix exquisite attention to detail with impressionistic interludes. The latter is accumulative and expansive, with passages that meld the prosaic and the poetic in a single paragraph. But both revolve around women living on the margins, pushed "to the side of their own lives" (to borrow Larkin's phrase), driven off course only to find that wrong turn was perhaps a course correction.

The two works share this central element, but the reading experiences are distinct. You read *Hafni Says* like the *smørrebrød* (open sandwiches) it describes: in small delectable portions, nodding along to its observational precision, chewing over its subtle, layered flavours, wistfully yearning for more when it's all over so suddenly.

The book opens with a jolt, mid-sentence announcing "that she's getting

divorced", and races along describing both Hafni's inner and outer experiences, from the specifics of different Danish supermarkets to a recurring internal "darkness" that visits her. This is a world of fleeting connection: check-in desk intimacy, "a glass of rosé in the toothbrush glass", awkward encounters with other hotel guests at breakfast.

You read *Range* in a state of semi-bewilderment and intrigue, akin to navigating a maze; holding clues lightly, spotting patterns, sensing – sometimes with frustration – that there is more than we are being shown. For Gunn Haven, the protagonist of the novel, who is taking a sabbatical from teaching at "the Institute", everything is understood in cosmic terms: "threshold", "coordinates", "orbit".

Much of the novel's strangeness – and oblique insight – comes from Gunn's position as an outsider; she is a misfit, more at home in the predictability of scientific data than in the messy terrestrial matters of human connection.

If both novels are concerned with the forces that shape our reality, *Range* is more searching, interested in

grasping "the riddle" as Gunn says. As she frequently refers to being inside "the system" there is an echo of the "zone" in Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, the place where all our questions are finally answered, all our desires met. For Gunn, that zone is the mysterious choreography of the earliest galaxies.

Meanwhile, Helle is more willing to sit back and let her protagonist ride the wave, dither, digress, delay. "Time ticked on, but she never wore a watch," she writes. Hafni is in no mood to be reined in by the arbitrary forces of time or convention. "Doggy suit, pasta, feet

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on table" was the agenda for one evening – an example of Helle's self-confident, minimalist prose that says so much in so little.

Range, translated by Caroline Waight, is Nors's sixth book to appear in English (*Mirror, Shoulder, Signal*, translated by Misha Hoekstra, was shortlisted for the 2017 International Booker Prize). Waight, who also translated Nors's memoir *A Line in the World*, captures the full range of the author's style; the lightness, the touches of implication, the flashes of artful lyricism. *Hafni Says* is only Helle Helle's third book to receive an English translation, despite her being one of Denmark's most decorated novelists; all three have been translated by Martin Aitken, Karl Ove Knausgaard's frequent collaborator.

These join an impressively long list of recent Danish literature in translation by women – Solvej Balle's septology *On the Calculation of Volume*, Olga Ravn's International Booker-nominated *The Wax Child*, and the resurgence of the late Tove Ditlevsen – to name a few. What are these authors helping us to see?

One answer might be their candid, cliché-free treatment of big, human themes – solitude, ageing, work, motherhood, loss. Outsiders looking in, Helle and Nors's characters respond to these subjects with observations that range from tender to caustic, often carried by sharp one-liners and choice details.

The authors playfully drop hints for us, too. Take their use of literary references: in *Range*, Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, described as a "love story tinged with the heartache of missed opportunities", accompanies Gunn, while in *Hafni Says*, Hafni becomes engrossed in Dostoyevsky's *The Double*. Both works deal with past lives, alternate lives, dreamt, possible lives. They're there, humming in the background subtly but deliberately, asking character and reader alike whether the life we're living is the one we're meant to live.

Oscar Wilde had a good answer to this tantalising human question. "One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead," he wrote. And it's one both Gunn and Hafni seem to embody, if not consciously. In their solitude, in their withdrawal, in their disregard of convention, both women are relinquishing the performance of "pantomiming life" – Gunn's language again – and approaching something more real. In not leading their lives, perhaps they are finally living.

Range

by Dorte Nors

translated by Caroline Waight

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Hafni Says

by Helle Helle

translated by Martin Aitken

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