

## LENE KAABERBOL

### A CROW'S TALE

In the Danish version of *The Serpent Gift*, the third book in the Shamer Quartet, there is a small story about a crow. It is told by the Shamer's son Davin in a quiet kitchen, to keep up his family's spirit and hold at bay the insidious magical and all-too-physical dangers lurking in the dense fog outside; in narrative terms it is there to form a domestic counterpoint to the outside sounds and actions that culminate in the killing of Beast, the family dog.

There is no such story in the English version. Or rather, the crow story has mysteriously transformed itself into an account of a pig instead. Why is this? What did my poor crow do to deserve complete eradication in the English-speaking world? Well, my English editor felt that a story about a crow who wanted to be white was racially sensitive. When she first brought up this objection, I was taken aback. It had honestly never occurred to me that anyone might read Davin's simple folktale in that light. But I knew that if my English editor had not raised this point, my American editor surely would have. And rather than distract the reader with completely irrelevant connotations of human skin colour and racial conflict, I swapped my crow for a pig – a pig called Percival, to be exact, a small but discriminate porker with a strong dislike of dirt. ““Just because one happens to be born a pig is no reason to behave like one!” he said, to the despair of his mother, who was a very proper and dirty sow.’

This little example demonstrates that fantasy, which purports to be set in distant climes and faraway mythical times, is in no way free of the culture from which it arises. I don't think a single one of my several hundred thousand Danish readers have ever considered the crow's tale in a racial light. I am also quite certain that some of my English and American *and* Australian readers would. Danes have a peculiar blindness, a lack of sensitivity to these issues that probably stems from the fact that we have not had to embrace multiculturalism for very long. Historically speaking, until about the late 70s,

we were a ridiculously homogeneous population, stereotypically blonde and blue-eyed, and naively used to considering this quite normal. The recent crisis sparked off by twelve drawings of the Prophet Mohammed proves that we are still, quite a few of us, dangerously insensitive to issues of race and religion. And if you do offend, innocence (in my crow's case) is not sufficient defence – not if you wish your story to cross borders and travel the world.

Another stumbling block in some countries has been the very title of the first book: *The Shamer's Daughter*. A Shamer is someone who can read shameful deeds in the eyes of anyone who meets her gaze; but hers is not just a passive power, she is also able to force the offender into feeling the shame that his actions deserve. The invention of this concept places ethics and ethical judgement at the very heart of the story: it is not just a theme; it is an integral part of the plot. So when a translator suggests that we call the Shamer something else – usually a soothsayer or a mind reader – my author's heart cries out. And theoretically, it should be possible to coin the word. Most languages include the faculty for turning a verb into a noun describing the person who does whatever the verb suggests: run/runner, read/reader, shame/shamer – simple as that.

No, not that simple. In some languages, that position is already taken. In Icelandic, 'shamer' means, rather innocently, just someone who scolds all the time. In other languages, French for one, a person-of-shame is a prostitute. Many people who misread the unfamiliar word think the book is about incest, and indeed one friend of mine was discreetly directed to the erotica section in a New York bookstore because the shop assistant thought he was asking for *Shame's Daughter*. One cannot, apparently, translate the 'The Shamer's Daughter' without brushing dangerously close to whatever a culture considers shameful, and I have often had to defend my title against marketing people who thought the Shamer part 'too negative' and the daughter part 'not appealing enough to boys'.

My Russian translator once asked me, 'Your characters have bodily functions. Do you think this is a particularly Scandinavian trait?' Stifling a giggle and the urge to point

out that Scandinavians probably have the same number of bodily functions as everyone else, I tried to consider her question seriously. It is true that one cannot readily imagine Tolkien's Aragorn stepping behind a tree to relieve himself, and although the girl's lavatories play an important part in several Harry Potter books, they are generally used for magical experiments and communications with ghosts, rather than for the purpose the architect intended. It is also true that no Scandinavian countries so far have raised an eyebrow at the 'bodily functions', nor felt the need to discuss what they should be called. My English editor, on the other hand, once remarked, 'We do seem to spend an inordinate amount of time talking about urine.'

For me, bodily functions – feeling hot, feeling cold, a clench of the stomach, a catch of the breath, and, yes, the urge to pee – are necessary to make my characters real. They are not irrelevant. Even in Fairyland, somebody has to dig the latrines. And so far, despite our discussions of micturation, my need to include them has caused only very minor changes in vocabulary – nothing like the wholesale eradication of my crow. I recently discussed with a colleague of mine the fact that swear words (many of which have to do with 'bodily functions') seem to have lost some of their power to shock. What really offends today is language that is sexist or racist or 'not PC' in other ways. And so, we hear Philip Pullman levelling accusations against CS Lewis for being racist, sexist, and religiously indoctrinating (most of which is quite likely true), while Tolkien is denounced as anti-democratic.

Authors, even dead ones, have to let go of their innocent nostalgia for Faëry and be ready to defend the political credentials of their imaginary worlds. Unfair, perhaps, for those who have now reached full membership status in the Dead Poet's Society. For those of us still living ... I don't know. Must we give up the urge to dress our villains in black, the need to kill off fierce beasts of endangered species, the battles for lost kings and kingdoms, and in the future fight only for democracies and every woman's right to be herself?

I don't (quite) think so. But I do believe that we must try not to be blind to the examples set by our stories. No book is an island, and even those of us who invent the unreal must live in the real world.

If this means that sometimes a crow must turn into a pig, then so be it.

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