

Snellman, Anja. 2013. *Pet Shop Girls*. Translated by Scott Kaukonen & Helena Halmari. Independence, MN: Ice Cold Crime LLC, 262 pp. \$13.95. Originally published as *Lemmikkikaupan tytöt* [Helsinki: Otava, 2007.] ISBN: 978-0-9824449-6-2. Paperback.

In May of 2013, America stood back in horrific wonder as a strange story began to emerge from Cleveland, Ohio. Three young women escaped from an old house, having been kidnapped and held as prisoners for over ten years. Allegations of torture, sexual abuse, and degradation began to fill the files of the prosecuting attorney. Eventually, a conviction was obtained and the kidnapper, one Ariel Castro, was sentenced to life in prison plus one thousand years.

We'd heard this story before, the main variation being only the names. Jaycee Lee Dugard comes to mind, as does Elizabeth Smart. Whether snatched from the street or a bedroom or perhaps innocently accepting a ride from a stranger, or, as in Anja Snellman's novel, *Pet Shop Girls*, engaging in some risky behavior, the scenario is always the same: an alert is issued, a search begins, a parent makes a tearful plea. Not often enough does a living victim emerge, but it does happen, sometimes, as in the Cleveland case, after many years.

The young woman as murder victim we can understand. The psychopath has done his work. It is always grisly, it is always very sad, and we wonder what drives someone to do such a thing.

The young woman as prisoner, however—sometimes for many years—is a much different story. We wonder how such captivity can be maintained for so long. Was escape truly not possible? Can threats and fear and abuse truly paralyze us for years and years?

Or, this is the discussion we don't like to engage, might the victim have become complicit in her own captivity? Did she simply play the card that read, *This is survival. Don't even think of anything else?*

Consider Jasmin Victoria Martin, Snellman's main character. She is a teenager. She is lively and vibrant and occasionally goofy and wants nothing more than to be with her friends and to have enough money to finance all the necessities in a teen's life. As teens will do, she takes just a brief walk on the wild side. That walk changes her life forever.

Consider the Baptist (as Jasmin calls him), one Bruno Max Huber. He is a noted scholar, a world traveler, an art historian, a lecturer on religion and sexual ethics, an inspiring teacher, a connoisseur of fine wine, and a noted benefactor for various causes devoted to fighting human trafficking.

Consider the two of them together, which you ultimately have to do since Bruno Max Huber—whose scientific and artistic works have been translated into

several languages, and who has received numerous honorary degrees—kidnaps Jasmin. Or so we think.

Thus do we get into the *Pet Shop Girls*, a gripping exploration of predation, power, and prostitution. It all starts out innocently enough when Jasmin and her best friend Linda get jobs in a pet shop. Innocence, of course, is easily discarded, especially when the girls find out that in the rear of the pet shop is the *Wet Pet Shop*, accessible by invitation only. Within is a world of young girls and old men bound together by pleasure and fantasy. Brothel, bordello, gentleman's club, the name is nowhere near as important as the venue—a place where the most basic, and often the most base, desires can be fulfilled, can be bought.

It is not off topic to say that Snellman gives us a fascinating compendium of the manners, mores, and mindset of the contemporary teenage girl. We learn where they stand online and offline, their devices, what they wear, what they read, their music, what they think about when thinking can't be avoided, and, of course, their musings on all things sexual. This is not off topic because when the girls are offered jobs in the *Wet Pet Shop*, they are just teenage girls—not drug addicts, not street hookers, not call girls. In the *Wet Pet Shop*, they strip, they tease, they dance around poles and they dance on laps, they are photographed and videotaped for the Internet, they have sex, and they make money.

A lark, perhaps, it is not, but Jasmin and Linda don't take it all too seriously because they're at an age where they don't take anything too seriously.

Before long, Jasmin finds herself in the throes of Bruno Max Huber—the Baptist—a man of evangelical bent, obsessed with her, who wants to cleanse Jasmin of her sins by way of possessing her and having her do things even the sex manuals have yet to cover. He kidnaps her.

There is mystery in the telling of Jasmin's story. We're never clear on just how she was kidnapped, and there's always a sneaky suspicion that she's a runaway, since a news report did mention a young girl of her age being seen with an older man on the night it probably happened—no signs of force or struggle. Nor do we know exactly where this all takes place, suggesting that the story is not about a particular crime, but much more about victimization and about the limits of depravity. In Snellman's extensive epilogue, we receive a virtual history of prostitution with the reader left to wonder if that's truly what Jasmin was all about. Her point is that men *need* the prostitute and they always have. Woman as possessed, then, as bought, as sold, as owned, as toy, has been with us since the dawn of history. Nothing new there, but it's never clear just who holds the power in the relationship.

This is a stunning, if complex, page-turner, a very *human* story where we see more than just the predatory depravity of the brilliant Bruno Max Huber; where we learn the back story of the young men who function as security guards in the *Wet Pet Shop*, folks usually seen in this kind of story as just nameless, faceless thugs. Most

poignantly, we hear a great deal from Jasmin's mother, Sara, a divorcee and gynecologist. What's really going on behind those teary faces—usually mothers—we see so briefly on the news clips as they plead for the life of a daughter? It's wrenching, if not heartbreaking, to see Sara periodically enter her daughter's room fully confident Jasmin will be there, in good mood or foul, getting ready for school.

Above all, we encounter Jasmin's own ambiguity with respect to her curious fate. She wanders through legends, fairy tales, and stories from her childhood in a desperate attempt to keep from going mad. She plots escapes, submits to the demands of Huber, even cares for him when he is ill, and then plots more escapes.

Michelle Knight, one of the Cleveland women mentioned above, says that her captor worked very hard to persuade her that her family just didn't care and that they had long ago given up any hope of finding her. For Jasmin—kidnap victim or runaway—something of the opposite is true. She is no longer sure that there is anything in that "old" life worth caring about.

Never once, we learn, in those moments when a lock might have failed, a rope might have come undone, or the vigilance of Huber might have lapsed, did Jasmin even attempt to call her mother.

However, to paraphrase another victim, Elizabeth Smart, *don't ever question what I did or didn't do, or why, unless you've been there.*

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