



The Unseen

Roy Jacobsen , Don Bartlett (Translator) , Don Shaw (Translator)

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Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow. But occasionally someone tries . . .

Ingrid Barrøy is born on an island that bears her name - a holdfast for a single family, their livestock, their crops, their hopes and dreams.

Her father dreams of building a quay that will connect them to the mainland, but closer ties to the wider world come at a price. Her mother has her own dreams - more children, a smaller island, a different life - and there is one question Ingrid must never ask her.

Island life is hard, a living scratched from the dirt or trawled from the sea, so when Ingrid comes of age, she is sent to the mainland to work for one of the wealthy families on the coast.

But Norway too is waking up to a wider world, a modern world that is capricious and can be cruel. Tragedy strikes, and Ingrid must fight to protect the home she thought she had left behind.

The Unseen Details

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From Reader Review The Unseen for online ebook

Paul Fulcher says

Winter begins with a storm. They call it the First Winter Storm. There have been earlier storms, in August and September, for example, bringing sudden and merciless changes to their lives.

The First Winter Storm, on the other hand, is quite a different matter.

It is violent every single time and makes its entrance with a vengeance, they have never experienced anything like it, even though it happened last year. This is the origin of the phrase "in living memory", they have simply forgotten how it was, since they have no choice but to ride the storm, the hell on earth, as best they can, and erase it from their memories as soon as possible.

[..]

The sight of her father is the worst. Had Ingrid not known better she would have thought he was afraid, and he never is. Islanders are never afraid, if they were they wouldn't be able to live here, they would have to pack their goods and chattels and move and be like everyone else in the forest and valleys, it would be a catastrophe, islanders have a dark disposition, they are beset not with fear but solemnity.

The Unseen by Roy Jacobsen is set in the first half of the 20th Century (although there is little to date the novel), on the fictional Barrøy island off the coast of Norway in the Helgelandskysten area.

It is a little under one kilometre from north to south, and half a kilometre from east to west, it has lots of crags and small grassy hollows and sells, deep coves cut into its coast and there are long rugged headlands and three white beaches. And even though on a normal day they can stand in the yard and keep an eye on the sheep, they are not so easy to spot when they are lying down in the long grass, the same goes for people, even an island has its secrets.

The fisherman-cum-farmer Hans Barrøy [is] the island's rightful owner and head of its sole family, comprising his strong-willed wife Maria, born on a neighbouring island, Hans's widowed father Martin, no longer head of the family which he represents, his much younger sister Barbro, a hard worker but rather backwards, and his young daughter Ingrid, three when the novel opens but already troubling her father with wisdom beyond her years, and who he anxiously watches for signs of the one-child-in-a-generation affliction from which he aunt suffers:

"Tha laughs at ev'rythin' nu," he says, reflecting that she knows the difference between play and earnest, she seldom cries, doesn't disobey or show defiance, is never ill, and she learns what she needs to, this disquiet he will have to drive from his mind.

Life on the island is elemental and hard. Hans has to leave his family for several months each year to join a fishing boat, in which he proudly has a full share of the proceeds, as well as (unbeknownst) to his family drawing on bank loans, in order to finance the costs of maintaining the island and, in particular, his own ambitious plans to extend their house and build a proper pier. Much of the building material still comes from flotsam, jetsam and driftwood: *Whatever is washed up on an island belongs to the finder and the islanders find a lot.* In those days there was no oil-wealth funded Nordic model providing support to the islanders:

As the terrain is so open and exposed someone might well up with the bright idea of clothing the coast in evergreen, spruce or pines for example, and establish idealistic nurseries around Norway and start to ship

out large quantities of tiny spruce trees, donating them free of charge to the inhabitants of smaller and bigger islands alike, while telling them that if you plant these trees on your land and let them grow, succeeding generations will have fuel and timber too. The wind will stop blowing the soil into the sea, and both man and beast will enjoy shelter and peace where hitherto they had the wind in their hair day and night; but then the islands would no longer look like floating temples on the horizon, they would resemble neglected wastelands of sedge grass and northern dock. No, no one would think of doing this, of destroying a horizon. The horizon is probably the most important resource they have out here, the quivering optic nerve in a dream although they barely notice it, let alone attempt to articulate its significance. No, nobody would even consider doing this until the country attains such wealth that it is in the process of going to wrack and ruin.

Hans expects to live out his life on the island but Barbro wants to find a role in service on the mainland. *Nobody can leave an island. An island is a cosmos in a nutshell, where the stars slumber in the grass beneath the snow. But occasionally someone tries.* (in the original: Ingen kan forlade en ø, en ø er et kosmos i en nøddeskal med stjernerne sovende i græsset under sneen.")

Concerned at her being mistreated and abused - her first putative employer *manages to refer to her as "the imbecile" three times as she shows them the room Hans's sister is to share with the other maid* - Hans keeps insisting Barbro returns to the island until she takes matters, and the oars of the family boat, into her own hands, but even then she eventually finds her way back.

Hans Barrøy had three dreams: he dreamed about a boat with a motor, about a bigger island and a different life. He mentioned the first two dreams readily and often, and to all and sundry, the last he never talked about, not even to himself.

Maria had three dreams too: more children, a smaller island and - a different life. Unlike her husband she often thought about the last of these, and her yearning grew and grew as the first two paled and withered.

But it is Ingrid, still biologically a child, who, as the seasons turn and the cycle of life progresses, has to take on the island and their dreams.

The novel has been translated by the deservedly renowned Don Bartlett, translator of the excellent Karl Ove Knausgård, Per Petterson and Lars Saabye Christensen as well as the best-selling Jo Nesbø and Jostein Gaarder. Although this, as well as Jacobsen's previous novels and novels by Erlend Loe, has been co-translated by Don Shaw.

The translation generally lives up to Bartlett's very high standards, although the attempt to render the dialect of the locals into English fell a little flat for me, with lines such as

"My word, hvor bitty it is. A can scarce see th' houses"

and

"By Jove, A can see th' rectory too"

Norwegian literature is perhaps my favourite in Europe - with authors such as Dag Solstad and Jan Kjærstad, as well of course as Hamsun, to add to the aforementioned Karl Ove Knausgård, Per Petterson and Lars Saabye Christensen - and this novel adds another name to that impressive list.

I would hope to see this on the MBI shortlist.

It is always the person who has been away who gains the greatest pleasure from knowing time stands still.

Neil says

"Hans Barrøy had three dreams: he dreamed about a boat with a motor, about a bigger island and a different life. He mentioned the first two dreams readily and often, to all and sundry, the last he never talked about, not even to himself. Maria had three dreams too: more children, a smaller island and – a different life. Unlike her husband she often thought about the last of these, and this yearning grew and grew as the first two paled and withered."

This is the story of a family on an island. Hans and Maria plus the generations either side of them. It is the story of an isolated group of people making a life out of what can be an inhospitable environment. At various times, some of them leave the island, but *"once you settle on an island, you never leave, an island holds on to what it has with all its might and main."*

In the UK (and elsewhere, I believe), we have something called "Slow TV" and this book feels quite a lot like watching a Slow TV programme (this is a good thing, by the way: I have enjoyed watching the Slow TV programs broadcast in the UK). Events unfold: it doesn't feel like the plot is driving it along as much as events are happening as and when they are ready to happen and we are there to see them unfold. There's a quiet lack of drama about it, even in the most dramatic bits. This isn't a criticism because it is a very enjoyable book to read. The only thing I didn't like about it is the attempt to convert the dialect of the islanders into English - it didn't work for me.

I think I would like to see this on the Man Booker International shortlist, although I have a few others to read that could displace it.

Marie says

Jeg har oppdaget Roy Jacobsen! Han gjør i "De usynlige" det jeg liker aller best: skildrer med få og velvalgte ord, sier en side i en setning, kaster ikke bort ord på tanker, man forstår alt gjennom karakterenes handlinger og ord. Vakkert!

Familien på Barrøy strever året gjennom, lever av jorda og havet, valgene de tar hver dag er avgjørende for liv, men bare deres.

Jurga Jurgita says

Ne paslaptis, kad labai m?gstu ir žaviuosi skandinav? rašytojais bei literat?ra. Tod?l tik pasirodušius ir paklausius ger? atsiliepim? apie vien? garsiausi? ir ?domiausi? šiuolaikini? norveg? rašytoj? Roy Jacobsen ir jo knyg? "Neregimieji", nutariau patenkinti literat?rin? smalsum? ir aš. Iškart pasakau, kad jei tik?sit?s keli? siužetini? linij?, veiksmo, gyvenimišk? peripetij?- to tikrai ?ia nerasite. Tai skandinaviškas k?rinys, kuris dvelkia šaltumu, v?sa, netipiškais veik?jais, stipriais j? temperamentais ir ne k? švelnesniais j? bruožais. Tokie to krašto žmon?s- šalti kaip ledas, r?st?s kaip j?ra per audr? ir susigyven? su savimi. Jau vien pati knygos pradžia ir jos sakiniai dvelkia tikru šiaurietišku gyvenimu saloje, kuri vadinama Barioja, o jos gyventojai- Bariojais. Ši sala tarsi atskira valstyb?, kur viskas priklauso tik vienai šeimai. Jiems priklauso

viskas: met? laikai, paukš?iai ir horizontas. Jie - visaver?iai jos šeimininkai: mažai kalbantys, paprasti, neregimieji, gyvenantys tik pagal savas taisykles. Šie žmon?s tokie paprasti ir mokantys džiaugtis paprastais dalykais, kad jiems mielas gagos p?k? švelnumas, kvap? gniaužia užšalusios j?ros keteros. Viskas, kas turi vert?s, ? sal? patenka iš išor?s, išskyrus žem?, bet ji n?ra j? buvimo priežastis, t? salos gyventojai skausmingai suvokia. Viskas, kas išskalaujama ? krant? saloje, priklauso radusiems, o salos gyventojai randa gausiai. Niekas negali visam palikti salos, sala yra kosmosas riešuto kevalė, kur žvaigžd?s snaudžia žol?je po sniegu. Nors gyventojai yra priklausomi nuo savo salos, ta?iau jie svajoja apie ryš? su išoriniu pasauliu. Tik kokia viso to kaina? Dar tikrai daug ir graži? atsiliepiu? gal??iau parašyti apie š? nuostab? k?rin?, kur? skaitant lyg matai sustojusio laiko portret?, kuris taip nugludintas kaip iš j?ros ? krant? išmestas akmen?lis, kuris l?tas, bet tuo pa?iu kupinas tikros išminties, kur paprasti dalykai ?gauna ne?kainojam? vert?. Tikr? tikriausias šedevras, kur? norisi tur?ti savo nam? bibliotekoje.

Chrissie says

This is a tale about life on a tiny island, one kilometer north to south and half a kilometer east to west, one of the islands of the Lofoten archipelago in northwestern Norway, above the Arctic Circle. This island is fictitious, but there do exist many that are similar. One family lives on the island-- the Barrøy family. There is Hans, his wife Maria, Hans' father Martin, his sister Barbro and his young daughter Ingrid. She is three at the start of the novel. Years pass and who remains living on the island changes. Timewise, the setting is the first half of the 20th century. The island remains and the wind and the sleet and the rain. The snow, the dark nights of winter and the perpetual light of summer.

Life on this island is a never-ending struggle against harsh conditions, poverty and the elements of nature. The Barrøy family eek out their living through fishing, sheep, cows and the collection of eiderdown. It is the description of this life that is the central focus of the book.

While the struggle for existence is well depicted, the physical attributes of the land less so. Furthermore, the beauty of the land and its pull and attraction are (view spoiler)?

I had trouble with this book at the start. Halfway through I was still having trouble. I felt nothing for the characters. I found the writing disjointed and unclear. I would find myself asking: who is being spoken of and how many years have passed and what is the significance of **that**?

There is a priest who visits the island. He tells us "Life is hell!" He sums up all that we have observed. I find it strange that this man is frightened of **all** travel on water, even when there is not even the slightest breeze. He lives on an archipelago! Stranger still is that nothing is made of this in the story line, and why must it be repeated over and over again? **Many** details are repeated in the telling of the story. **Many** characters' peculiarities remain unexplained. Barbro, for example, I would have liked to know more of her past. This book is supposed to be the first of a series. Is that the hitch? Are we to buy the following books to get the full story? Or have I missed something? In any case, due to insufficient information, I never felt empathy for the characters.

Conveying the feel of a prose style is difficult. I felt the author was striving to make the prose deep, meaningful and lyrical, but in the act of trying so hard he failed. This is more prominent in the first half of the novel.

In the second half, the plot picks up and the writing becomes leaner, clearer and straight forward in tone,

which better fits a tale about the rugged existence on the island.

By the book's end the continuity of life from generation to generation comes forth. In this continuity there is a message of hope, but why must the revelation be saved for the very end?

The book has been translated by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw. It is not fair for me to judge the translation without comparing both texts, but often I found the wording extremely peculiar. What is this supposed to mean?

(The land) "was becoming an existential abscess."

Poor writing or poor translation? I do not know. Please remember how I spoke above of the author's attempt to write deep meaningful lines.

I listened to the audiobook narrated by Rachael Beresford. In the beginning I detested it. After a while I got used to it, but I never, ever thought it was OK. She drones rather than speaks. I had to start the book over because she put me to sleep. The tone is level and steady and without any ups and downs. Sometimes, she went up in the middle of a sentence, which made no sense at all. After a while I got used to the level, droning tone, and most often I could understand the words, but the dialogs were hopeless. I have been told by a reader of the paper book that she too found the dialogs difficult. Thankfully, there are not many dialogs and those that exist are short. But is this good? No! I will avoid this narrator in the future. I try very hard to separate my view of the author's written words from the narrator's expression of these words. Separating the two is in cases like this a challenge; listening was not enjoyable. I have given the narration performance one star.

Jane says

It took me quite a while before I finally got into this book. At first it dragged and dragged and I thought that it didn't have enough action in it to satisfy my reading needs. I kept putting it down after a few pages (there were really short chapters), but then came a night where the sleep didn't come and I decided to read a little.

And then, all of a sudden, I got into it. Somehow this book got a lot more intriguing and engaging for me right then and there while I was tired, but not sleepy. While I was the only one awake in the house and while I could somehow understand these unseen forces that one feels towards their home. I don't know whether Jacobsen meant it in the same way as I chose to interpret it, but it spoke to me like that.

I don't think I could ever really relate to this book's characters as I live nowhere close to a sea, nor can I understand the difficulties of the beginning of the 20th century but I think I can understand that silent, unseen force that drives you back home. That silent, unseen force that makes a home and without what one could never feel good staying at a place.

This book didn't speak to me like that during daytime hours. I needed the night and darkness and quiet.

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Dolors says

Beginning of the twentieth century. Three generations of a family try to survive in an isolated and arid island called Barroy, in front of the Norwegian coast.

Barroy is like a universe for its inhabitants, life can't be understood outside the confinement of this speck of rock dust amidst the ocean, but at the same time, life is continuously threatened by the hostile climate, the endless periods of darkness, severe snow blizzards and the unruly sea that provides sustenance but also kills mercilessly when one least expects it.

Barroy is like a microcosm with such a fragile balance that extinction is lurking around the corner incessantly, and miracles are performed daily when the sun goes down with no other death than the vanishing light.

Straddling the naturalist genre and the family saga, "*The Unseen*" is a realistic account but also a lyrical chant of devastating beauty where time is the only element that fragments the rhythmical hues of the prose, achieving Shakespearean tonalities when all kind of inclement weather is described.

Beyond the coast line, seasons roll on implacably without any trace of the bucolic ideal, and the Barroy family endures the years with stoicism and laconic humor that combine a unique blend of resignation and wisdom. Individual identities get diffused in the collective entity of the island, of which they are masters and slaves at once.

Jacobsen paints a timeless portrait of a bygone era, of a working class that vanished in the last century, the kind of people that founded the actual pillars of Norway. His style is as delicate as it is brutal, bared and clean, drenched with contemplative passages of landscape architecture that address existential ponderings such as the inexorable ties between land and identity, destiny and freedom, tradition and evolution. And the eternity of silence. The weight of thoughts never expressed out loud. The burden of being disappointed by one's dreams.

In one of the last chapters, Ingrid, the main protagonist of this tale of woe and glory, muses on the sounds of the island. Rushing winds, seagulls calling while soaring the damp skies, the roaring of the waves and murmurs of the cliffs, make silence a rarity in her world. But once in a while, on a very special occasion, all the elements seem to hold their breath at once, and the land listens in a void of expectation, hearing its own pulse. And everything turns into horizon, and one can touch eternity and know that she is where she is supposed to be. Determinant, but nameless. Safe, but unseen.

Vanessa says

This one just wasn't for me unfortunately.

I was reeled in by a promising sounding blurb, with its isolated and weather-torn Norwegian island setting. The idea of following a young girl and her life growing up in this unusual environment, with its self-imposed isolation sounded like exactly the kind of thing I would have loved. Unfortunately, I just found the lack of plot to make the read incredibly dull and dreary.

I also didn't particularly enjoy this particular translation either - I found that while the main prose sections were done well enough, sounding quite seamless in the English language, it fell down when it came to the dialogue - Jacobsen writes in an unusual Norwegian dialogue, which translated clumsily and took me out of

the flow of the writing far too often for my liking.

Overall, not a particularly interesting or satisfying read for me, and I'm surprised this ended up on the longlist.

Adina says

2/6 from Booker International Prize Shortlist. 4.5*

My heart fills with love while I sit on my chair thinking how to review *The Unseen*. Its “quiet beauty” (a perfect description of this book read in Jill's review) enveloped me and concurred my soul without me even noticing.

It is almost impossible for me to explain why I loved this small novel so much, since at a first glance it contains some elements that I run away from: long descriptive passages and recount of life at sea. I will try, though, with some images, my humble words and with the help of the author's, to introduce you to life on a small island in Norway.

The Unseen captures the day to day life of the Barrøy family on a small, one family island on the Norwegian coast, probably at the beginning of the 20th century. The novel starts with only 5 people living on the island: Hans, Maria – his wife, the daughter Ingrid, Martin - Hans' father and Barbo- Hans' sisters.

The island, *“is a little under one kilometre from north to south, and half a kilometre from east to west, it has lots of crags and small grassy hollows and sells, deep coves cut into its coast and there are long rugged headlands and three white beaches. And even though on a normal day they can stand in the yard and keep an eye on the sheep, they are not so easy to spot when they are lying down in the long grass, the same goes for people, even an island has its secrets.”*

Life is hard on the island and there is a permanent struggle to survive and to construct a more comfortable existence. Hans has to go to Lofoten each winter with a fishing boat from where he receives half of the catch proceeds. This represents a major part of the family's income completed by the sale of fish caught around the island, of seagull eggs (I had no idea they were edible) and milk from their livestock.

Winters are especially hard in such a remote place. The family is forced to battle the harsh forces of nature and most of the time they are at their mercy. *“Winter begins with a storm. They call it the First Winter Storm. There have been earlier storms, in August and September, for example, bringing sudden and merciless changes to their lives.*

The First Winter Storm, on the other hand, is quite a different matter. It is violent every single time and makes its entrance with a vengeance, they have never experienced anything like it, even though it happened

last year. This is the origin of the phrase "in living memory", they have simply forgotten how it was, since they have no choice but to ride the storm, the hell on earth, as best they can, and erase it from their memories as soon as possible. "

The family seems to be bound to live on the island. *"once you settle on an island, you never leave, an island holds on to what it has with all its might and main."* Barbro and Ingrid tried, in turn, to leave to work as maids on the mainland but the island always called them back, sooner or later, by choice or by tragedy.

The Unseen has a slow moving plot but I did not feel it as a slow read. This would be my choice to win the MBI prize but, in the same time, I can see why it would not be a favorite. The book might be too quiet; there isn't too much of a dramatic atmosphere even when tragedy strikes.

There is only one thing that made my reading experience less pleasurable. The English dialect invented for the translation of the dialogue between the islanders is a bit strange and forced. However, I understand that the author is very difficult to translate and a hard decision had to be made on how to deal with the Norwegian dialect. Excepting the dialogue, the translator made a wonderful job, his previous experience with Min Kamp and Jo Nesbo's novels definitely helped.

Many thanks to Roy Jacobsen, Quercus Books, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

Peter Boyle says

"Islanders are never afraid, if they were they wouldn't be able to live here..."

This captivating tale is set on the tiny island of Barrøy off the coast of Norway, around the beginning of the 20th century. It is inhabited by one family: Hans, his wife Maria, father Martin, sister Barbro and his young daughter Ingrid. The story tracks the adventures of this clan through the years, as they struggle to make a living from their small provisions by way of fishing and farming. There are unexpected births and deaths along the way, and we follow Ingrid's journey from little girl to eventual Queen of the island.

What struck me about the plight of the Barrøys is how the island shapes their whole existence. It is their livelihood but it's also a kind of prison. Life unfurls at a different pace to that of the mainland. The family exist at the mercy of the weather - glorious summers are always welcome but they also have to contend with the howling gales and tempestuous seas of winter:

"She doesn't like these storms, the creaking of the house and the trumpet blasts from the chimney, the whole universe in turmoil, the wind that tears the breath out of her lungs when she goes to the barn with her mother, that drives the moisture from her eyes and sweeps her into walls and bowed trees, and forces the entire family to camp down in the kitchen and sitting room, and even there they don't get a wink of sleep."

Even though Barrøy marches to the beat of its own drum, there is also pressure on the family to adapt if they want a better life for themselves. Hans is an ambitious man but he is also a bit of a dreamer. He has big plans to build a boatshed and a quay, and to add an extension to the house. Some of these ideas come to fruition, others fail. External change also threatens to upset the delicate balance of the island, with important decisions to be made about joining a milk route and the construction of a lighthouse beacon. The outside world is developing at a rapid pace and Barrøy cannot afford to be left too far behind.

The Unseen reminded me a little of A Whole Life, another wise European novel about man's relationship to a landscape. Like the main character of that book, the Barrøys face up to all kinds of emotional and financial hardship with fortitude. There are no major pyrotechnics in the plot: just one family doing the best they can. The prose is clear and sparse - very matter-of-fact, just like the Barrøys themselves. But it is also sprinkled with moments of sheer beauty, like a frozen sea that serves as the perfect ice rink or the moment Ingrid catches her reflection in a mirror for the first time. It is a compelling and convincing portrait of a lost age, a profound and moving story.

Gumble's Yard says

“The Unseen” is set on one of *the thousand .. islands* in the archipelago off the coast of Norway, in the first half of the twentieth century before Norway’s discovery of oil means it *attains such wealth that it is in the process of going to rack and ruin*.

Instead these fishing Islands (seen by Jacobsen as the heart of the Norwegian economy for centuries – and on one of which his mother grew up) remained at mired in extreme poverty and a hand to mouth, subsistence-type existence, eeking out a living from a combination of farming (limited arable and pastoral farming including eider down), local fishing, the foraging of flotsam and jetsam and periods by the men on the Island working for months on fishing fleets. Each island *inhabited by one or two families who each cultivate a thin layer of earth, fish the depths of the sea and bear children that grow up and cultivate the same plots of land and fish the same depths*.

The book is set on the fictional island of Barrøy *one kilometre from north to south, and half a kilometre from east to west* – inhabited by a single family who take their name from the Island. The family head and Island’s owner is Hans who lives with his strong-willed wife Maria, born on a neighbouring island and (unusually for the area) only daughter Ingrid. The two other inhabitants are Hans’s father Martin (who struggles with the old-age induced loss of his status as head of the Island) and Hans’s simple minded sister Barbro. Hans fishes for several months at the start of each year joining a fishing boat in which he has a formal share of the catch and which he uses to find gradual improvements to the Island – but which leaves the others without him for months.

Then the gravity takes hold of them. Not the gravity of the storm, but the year’s and the island’s slow lessons in loneliness. Suddenly there are fewer of them, they walk around and have lost the head of the Island Lofoten is a place you don’t necessarily return from unscathed, you are dicing with death And so the days pass ... Until strangely enough, this gravity is illuminated with new hope ... they have sent a man on a wing and a prayer into the seething darkness, now they are hoping to get him back alive, perhaps even with his pockets full of money, this after all is what gives the island hope, their head of family has his own fishing gear and a full catch share

For Barbro the only option is service with the slightly better off members of the mainland , something she is very keen on albeit Hans struggles with the way she is treated and keeps removing her from service. Ingrid after some limited schooling also has the same option, although all family members are expected to master different elements of the multiple skills that are needed for the family simply to survive.

The book moves forward gradually from one season to the next and one year to the next, interacting with a small number of relatives and mainland inhabitants (the Pastor, the owner of the trading post, the postmaster) but to an even greater extent with the Island, the sea and most of all the seasons and the weather.

Winter begins with a storm. They call it the First Winter Storm. It is violent every single time and makes its entrance with a vengeance, they have never experienced anything like it, even though it happened last year. This is the origin of the phrase "in living memory", they have simply forgotten how it was, since they have no choice but to ride the storm, the hell on earth, as best they can, and erase it from their memories as soon as possible

In another memorable passage Hans and Martin work on a quay and small landing building, only for a storm (on more than one occasion) to destroy months of their work – something they react to not with anger but stoicism and a simple resolution to try again until they succeed.

The only jarring note in what seems an excellent translation but a prolific translator Don Bartlett (Karl Ove Knausgård, Per Petterson, Lars Saabye Christensen, Jo Nesbø, Jostein Gaarder) is the local dialect “*Hva’s th blabben about*” “*A see hva A ca’ see*” “*An’ hva ca’ tha see?*” which has been rendered into an invented dialect in English, which was awkward to the extent I found myself (very unusually for a novel) wanting to skip the limited dialogue passages.

Overall though an excellent book- deeply evocative of a time and place.

Sinem A. says

anlat?m tutuk akm?yor. çok yerde hadi art?k diyorsunuz caan?m f?rsatlar? es geçiyor yazar, duyguyu veremiyor bitirmek için çok zorland?m itiraf edeyim. "güzel bir hikaye nas?l mahvedilir"e güzel örnek. ibret için okunabilir dayanabilirsiniz.

Dannii Elle says

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. Thank you to the author, Roy Jacobsen, and the publisher, MacLehose Press, for this opportunity.

This is an insight into the isolated lives of the inhabitants of a Norwegian island. Their daily lives are destructed and recounted for the reader and the latter portions, that see the family's youngest daughter, Ingrid's, transfer to the main land, sharply contrast with this rural way of living.

I initially found the family's daily struggle for survival fascinatingly insightful into a way of life I know

nothing about. There were also times, however, that it seemed almost tortuously slow and pointless, as an overtly detailed depiction of events was enumerated. There is little drama and no action, but there was an atmospheric quality that permeated the entire text and brought authenticity to the lives it detailed. Certainly insightful as an in-depth character study, but overall this was lacking pace and alacrity for me.

Joseph says

What is the meaning of this novel's enigmatic title? For me, "The Unseen" are the book's protagonists, the Barrøys, who own and live on one of the tiny, remote islands off the coast of Norway - aptly named Barrøy. When the novel starts, the Barrøys are old widower Martin, his son Hans (who has recently assumed the mantle of "head of the family"), Hans's wife Maria, their toddler daughter Ingrid and Hans's sister Barbro, who is "not quite there". "The Unseen" follows the fate of the Barrøys over roughly three decades. This might make it sound like a "family saga" or even an updated "Nordic saga", except that, instead of epic battles against gods and monsters, we witness the Barrøys' daily challenges as they toil to eke out a living from the island's soil and the surrounding sea.

From hints throughout the book, we get the feel that the novel is set roughly a hundred years ago, but the story it relates has a feeling of timelessness, an eternity marked by the recurring seasons. The sun rises and sets. The years roll by. Storms rage, wreak havoc and recede. Children are born. So are lambs. Old men die. So do cows. There are brushes with death - the sea sustains life but it can also take it away. The surrounding world tries to stake its claim over the island, as when there is an insistence that Barrøy be put on the milk route, or when the price of Barrøy's produce is determined by the Mainland's fickle rules of supply and demand. But Barrøy lives on in splendid isolation as a new generation of Barrøys proudly continues the family traditions.

The novel's language, as rendered in the joint translation by Don Bartlett and Don Shaw, is poetic yet lean and blunt. There are plenty of pages of nature writing, but nowhere does it become florid or overly sentimental. Use of dialogue is spare, which is a good thing as the thick dialect of the islanders is conveyed in a dense form of English (I wonder if it is an invented form of speech or based on an actual dialect).

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that The Unseen became a bestseller in Jacobsen's native Norway. It's a striking novel, but no page-turner. Its beauty is as austere as light refracted through a glacier. And just as memorable.

An ebook version of the novel was provided by the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review

Jill says

The Unseen seems to be a rather simple story but is really quite remarkable in its quiet beauty. The descriptions of the island and the isolation & related dependence on the weather and the sea were vivid and moving.

"But silence on an island is nothing. No-one talks about it, no-one remembers it or gives it a name, however deep an impression it makes. It is the tiny glimpse of death they have while they are still alive."

I enjoyed the book, but I really wish that Don Bartlett would only work on the My Struggle books until they are all released in English!
