



The Exception

Christian Jungersen , Anna Paterson (Translator)

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A bestseller throughout Europe, THE EXCEPTION is a gripping dissection of the nature of evil and of the paranoia and obsessions that drive ordinary people to commit unthinkable acts.

Four women work together for a small nonprofit in Copenhagen that disseminates information on genocide. When two of them receive death threats, they immediately believe that they are being stalked by Mirko Zivic, a Serbian torturer and war criminal, whom they have recently profiled in their articles.

As the tensions mount among the women, their suspicions turn away from Zivic and toward each other. The threats increase and soon the office becomes a battlefield in which each of the womenâ??s move is suspect. Their obsession turns into a witch hunt as they resort to bullying and victimization.

Yet these are people who daily analyze cases of appalling cruelty on a worldwide scale, and who are intimate with the psychology of evil. The cruelty which the women have described from a safe distance is now revealed in their own world. They discover that none of them is exactly the person she seems to be. And then they learn that Interpol has traced Mirko Zivic to Denmark.

THE EXCEPTION is a unique and intelligent thriller, heralding Christian Jungersen as a gifted storyteller and keen observer of the human psyche.

The Exception Details

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From Reader Review The Exception for online ebook

Elizabeth says

For me personally, this is a 5 star book, though it is not a book I would recommend to just anyone. Subject matter can at times be harsh.

I would lump this in a Secret History/The Likeness/Natsuo Kirino's Out category. The category of a "normal" or good person doing evil things and how that manifests within them. This was a very slow book to start and patience will win out. There are some very tense parts of the book and at times I felt there were some very Hitchcock like moments. The slow simmer builds and reaches a full boil that has left me now after finishing putting the sequence of events/reality of events together. The articles within on genocide are at times hard to read due to their harshness, but at other times very interesting in their psychology, and they definitely run parallel to the main story. I am expecting this to be optioned for a movie and will hope that it is a foreign film (at least first, ala the Stieg Larsson books). I expect I will re-read this, in whole or part, to see it through new eyes. This one will stay with me for a while.

Jessica says

This is a top-notch, meaty psychological thriller that takes you inside a small office dedicated to research into genocide. There, the five office workers simultaneously dig into the very nature of evil as they study the most inhumane acts ever perpetrated, while they quietly destroy each other's lives with office politics and interpersonal bullying. Buried not-so-deep beneath the surface of even the seemingly closest friendships and politest collegiality apparently lurks seething resentments that rival those of genocidal maniacs.

At the Copenhagen office of the genocide research center, Iben and Malene, best friends, each receives an anonymous email death threat that they initially assume was sent by a Serbian war criminal they have published about. When the director's secretary also gets one, but not the much despised secretary, Anne-Lise, Iben and Malene begin to suspect that Anne-Lise is out to seek revenge for their teasing and ostracism.

Told alternately from the perspectives of the four women in the office, the story is both weighty and taut, with the reader becoming drawn into the increasingly paranoid and claustrophobic intimacy among them. Anyone who has ever worked in an office will recognize the way tiny gestures take on intense meaning in those confines. Even at the story's climax, when things become a little more standard-thriller, the truth can still go in a number of directions.

David Gross says

It's got a lot going for it. You know early on that it is going to be making brutal office politics a microcosm reflecting elements of large-scale genocidal outrages. The office in question being a center for genocide studies allows for parallels to be drawn pretty explicitly.

This could get heavy-handed, but Christian Jungersen does a pretty good job keeping it interesting and poignant without drumming it in too harshly.

And the office politics bullying is done with a keen eye. I got the same sort of knots in my stomach that I get when I watch the intimate psychological savagery in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

But Jungersen spends far too much effort trying to make his book into a sexy Hollywood-thriller-to-be. Dramatic murders, mysterious international hoodlums, near-death chase scenes, handwaving computer espionage, and a whodunit with lots of twists and turns. If I want that sort of thing, I'll watch a James Bond film.

Barbara Rhine says

The *Exception*, by Christian Jungerson, on the other hand, is oddly compelling for the opposite reason. Set in the nonprofit Danish Center for Information on Genocide (DCIG), the book is about the surprisingly cut-throat competition among the women scholars who work there. There are threats from a mysterious and deadly source, and the women spend a lot of time suspecting one another. Two women bully a third, pretty much just because they don't like her. One woman, apparently happily-married, has been involved with one of the perpetrators.

Essays by two of the women inform the reader about various genocides, and whoo-ee, have there been a lot of them! We are treated to details from Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia and others, though not, for once, anything from WWII. It turns out that more have died from genocide in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, than from combat between soldiers.

But the men in this book? The gender that directly perpetrates the genocides? Two understanding husbands, one understanding lover, one sensitive boss, and one old-hand at genocide research who could end up with either or both of the single women—all ciphers compared to the women characters.

Yet this author's attempt to connect the actions of ordinary people, as we compete and cut each other down, with the motives of those who run amuck, is excellent. The book requires its readers at least to try to understand better the evil side of humanity. And if we are thoughtful, we sense that it is quite near our own ordinary selves.

Jim Coughenour says

Normally, if a book hasn't engaged me in the first 50 pages, I'll set it aside. Life's too short for bad books. I don't know why, exactly, I made an exception for *The Exception*. The first 400 of its 500 pages embeds you in the inner life of four pathetic, slightly deranged women who all work in the same office – all of whom are obsessed with the tedious minutiae of their work life. Toward the end the story shifts into an awful parody of a late-night TV police serial, complete with hideous cartoon villains and improbable escapes.

The *only* thing I can say in its favor is its absurdly bleak set-up. The women work in a center dedicated to research on genocide. One even edits a journal called *Genocide News* (no kidding) and we're treated to pages of ponderous extracts. It's only fitting that after torturing the reader with their empty lives for 500 pages, none of them ends up with much of a life at all. I can only guess that the author has a very droll sense of humor indeed.

Recommended only if you have lots of aquavit on hand.

Jim Elkins says

Mixing fiction and nonfiction

This is an interesting, memorable book. It's about women who work in a genocide research center. They write reports on evil, genocide, and other subjects, and then we read what they've written, embedded in the novel. What matters in this book is the extremely unusual mixture of fiction and nonfiction. The facts in those reports are all real; I learned, for example, about theories of evil in the Third Reich beginning with Arendt and continuing to the present.

But then between the reports, the fictional researchers continue to do evil to one another. It's a very effective device.

I met Jungersen in Copenhagen; he said he wrote intuitively, and he had little to add. I don't believe artists who claim they are intuitive: it's an easy out when it comes to public relations. I hope he changes his attitude to his own work.

(The book ends weakly, with a chapter ripped from (or written for) a Hollywood screenplay.)

Sandi says

I found this book to be quite riveting and thought provoking. Set in Denmark, it explores the relationship between four women who work at the Danish Center for Information on Genocide. When two of the women receive death threats the office is thrown into turmoil. The subject matter was quite dark but by shifting the narrative among the various character's points of view the suspense was sustained throughout the entire 500 pages.

julie says

i wish i could give this book only a half a star, but that doesn't seem to be possible...it's unspeakably bad. and the only reason i would give it half a star is that it provoked me and i do believe that books should provoke us in some way.

there are two messages to this book:

1. all women are psychotic.
2. bullying in the workplace will get you everything you want.

this seems like it was written by a man who had a string of bad girlfriends who he wanted revenge upon, so he wrote them up as the four nastiest types he could conceive, all with a completely psychotic inner life (which he subjects us to in turn) going on under a surface that is otherwise quite normal. the most self-

righteous, self-absorbed, most evil one of the lot is the one who gets everything her way in the end. there is no redemption and no good comes of reading this book.

run from it like the wind.

and on top of it, the english translation of it is absolute rubbish. but the book is no better in the original danish (i switched between the two the whole way and compared them in many places). life is too short for bad books...

Susan says

First I could not put it down....now a day later I finished all 500 pages and can't stop thinking about it. A great read....not a comfortable read, but well worth it. Not an easy subject...but a very satisfying read. How many times do we think we are so "right" when our actions indicate otherwise?

karen says

im frequently torn, when rating books, between rating based on merit, or rating based on my enjoyment. this is probably a three-star book, merit-wise. and yet i got totally sucked into it and really enjoyed it, despite its flaws. its a very well-paced thriller that requires a certain suspension of disbelief but is not terribly flawed. and my desire to finish reading it has made my thanskgiving feast delayed by three hours, so...

Mardel Fehrenbach says

An excellent, fascinating, probably somewhat controversial, and certainly unnerving novel. Some of the clunkiness of the prose may be due to the translation. It is a gripping story of good and evil, of interpersonal politics, and how even being " a good person" and "doing the right thing" does not necessarily protect you from the evil within. Little evils often add up to something bigger, and the convoluted story line and petty office politics have enough realism to ring true. The real horror of this story is not the situation itself, but how each of the characters reacts until the entire situation is out of control and an even greater horror is perpetrated.

Even though the situation may seem far fetched, Jungersen captures how peoples own beliefs and psyches shape their responses and how even the "best" people are human and fallible and capable of cruelty -- something we best not forget. We have all seen situations that seem to blow up out of proportion to their beginnings. Jungersen builds on that theme and shows how easily principles can fall in a crisis situation.

It has been over a year since I read this book and I still find the memory unsettling. Perhaps it is time to look at it again.

Kate says

Note to author: Most women do not act like those really awful 13-year-olds you encountered in middle school. Get over it.

I was assigned this book by my adviser for an independent study. All I had to do was read it - not write anything, and I was happy about that. However, now that I'm not required to do any more academic writing, and no one is really "listening," I feel compelled to put in my two cents. I know - ironic.

In short, I am NOT a fan of this book. The basic premise is interesting: looking at how the small, daily acts of evil people commit against each other relate to the huge atrocities of genocide. If the author had focused on that idea more directly, it might have been a fairly good book. Instead, he created four female characters who had nothing better to do than act extremely paranoid, catty, self-righteous, and/or victimized in order to illustrate his point. Based on his characterization, I have to assume he has some fairly misogynistic attitudes. Sure, he gives each woman reasons for doing what she's doing to the others, but that doesn't make any of them good people. The only significant (but still peripheral) male characters are fairly reasonable people, who do nothing other than stand in contrast to these four awful women. Well, there is one evil guy, but he's the Bad Guy, so what do you expect? All-in-all, not a good jumping-off point for me.

I think, somewhat like in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the author is trying to use the plot to provide the emotional experience of an intellectual argument. This argument is that quotidian evil acts sometimes incidentally converge to create the horrors of genocide. In parallel, the plot is the result of a few bad choices fitting together in just the wrong way, causing all hell to break loose. I get the argument about genocide, but it made the plot completely unlikely.

I guess, all told, it's an interesting intellectual exercise, but it all comes down to a fundamental difference in perspective between my adviser and me. He is interested in what motivates people to be evil, so as to prevent it. I am interested in what motivates people to be good, so as to promote it. Figure out what camp you're in, then take my review with a grain of salt.

Bandit says

What a book. The sort of book you walk away from disoriented. It isn't just physically heavy at 512 pages (though weightless on Kindle), it's also heavy in every other sense of the word. Such a deceptively simple story about inner strife of a small office spun into such a powerhouse of psychological suspense. Four women working in a center for information on genocide turn their lives into a Sartre style nightmare, subtly, slowly turning their office and personal lives into a psychological battlefield spiraling toward an inevitable tragedy. That's a basic summary and it oversimplifies the plot. The real genius of this book is in the juxtaposition of the evil on grand scale and one of a small contained environment. The macro and micro of evil in principle. Can a person overcome their pathologies as presupposed (predetermined) by various psychological standards and become an exception to the rules? Is evil born or created and how close is an average person to crossing that line under the right circumstances? Subject that has long fascinated me, one I studied, social psychology and all its implications, whether explaining something genuinely horrifying like genocide or a much smaller event such as interpersonal relationships. Jungersen took all the concepts, terms

and research of social psychology and applied them so astutely, so cleverly to the book's protagonists and their actions...it's practically a textbook on the topic, although one with a suspense thriller motive thrown in. The book is told from four different perspectives of its heroines and at no point are you exactly sure of what's going on, because, of course, we can only know so much of another person and as the truth is slowly revealed, it stands a good chance of blowing your mind. This is why we read, isn't it? To be engaged, moved, surprised, entertained, educated, stunned even, to try to understand others. Well, this book offers all of it, although it isn't easy to get through, isn't always fun, far from light and might cause severe distrust of others or at least reconfigure your estimation of humankind. Fascinating book, a bestseller in Europe, well deserved of any praise. Absolutely worth the time and effort. Highly recommended.

Jessica says

Being as it's very educational for a novel, this book depressed the fuck out of me, and my view of humanity still has not fully recovered from reading it. The best parts were the sections on actual genocide, and the actual story and characters took awhile to engage me, but they eventually did. It's interesting to learn about the calm, stoic Danish people and their way of life, which evidently involves Scandinavian furniture, a terrible job market, being stalked by Serbian war criminals, and quietly torturing their havarti-munching coworkers.

Christina says

Christian Jungersen's book has been much talked about here in Denmark. It seems like everybody has read it and most people have loved it as well. I finally got around to reading it, and while I was well entertained while reading it, it wasn't as good as I expected it to be.

Undtagelsen (The Exception) is about four women working together at the Danish Centre for Genocide Information. The two youngest women, Iben and Malene, are old friends and they are in charge of the office, leaving the two older women, Camilla and Anne Lise, to fend for themselves. This results in Anne Lise being bullied and when Iben and Malene - and later on Camilla - receives emails with death threats, things escalate in the small office.

I really loved the concept of this book and how Jungersen compares the small level bullying in work places with larger scale bullying which genocide in a way can be at least compared to - we don't like you because you're different. I liked the real facts about genocides and was really intrigued by the discussions of what evil is and how people can commit the most horrific acts while being pressured by a group or influenced by a powerful leader and afterwards can carry on ordinary mundane lives without ever thinking about these things again. How a loving school teacher can kill his pupils and their parents because they are from another ethnic group and then after the war is over, he goes back to teaching the surviving kids.

Jungersen has some interesting perspectives on how we change our views to correspond with the situations we find ourselves in. How every time a person saluted Hitler, for instance, that person became more and more accepting of his thoughts and ideas because you're not only showing others how you are like them; you are also showing yourself. This point is so very important because we do that all the time - if I have a job where everybody else have very strong and negative feelings about immigration, then I'll tone down my own positive feelings and over time, my feelings will become less and less positive. So it's a warning to everyone to consider who you surround yourself with because over time, the wrong crowd can influence you and distort your values.

I also really liked how he tells the story from the point of view of the four women (although Camilla doesn't

get much of a say until very late in the book). It shows how different people see the same situation and how paranoia slowly (quickly!) builds and people suddenly suspect anything another person do.

But some things in this book didn't work for me. At times, the paranoia of these women just didn't feel real - it felt exaggerated. Girlfriends trust each other more than the two girlfriends at the center of this book do. It did at time feel like a man's attempt to describe women's world. Now I've heard lots of men talk about how women are to each other and I'm sad to say, not all of it is wrong. I've worked in an office with just a male boss and the women could be cruel to each other - I've seen one co-worker stand behind another and make stabbing movements with no one interfering (not feeling proud of that one). But these women just didn't ring completely true to me.

Also, I had some problems with the plot at times. The spyware Rasmus (Malene's boyfriend) makes to find out who mailed the death threats and which get involved in a very important plot point at a late point in the book, did seem a bit far fetched to me - or not the spyware itself, but what it did and caused to happen.

In some ways, it's also very easy to have your characters talk a lot about split personalities because then you can have them do everything at a later point without them being aware of it... It's kind of a *Deux ex Machina* plot device - although I do realise that it's a far more valid device. Maybe it's just because it didn't work completely in this book that I get reminded of this.

Finally - I like the title. The title makes me think and question my interpretation of this book because it has kind of a *Usual Suspects* ending - who is Kaiser Soze? Who is the exception? I like this somewhat open ending - although I suspect it's because I think too much that I think it has an open ending ...!

In the end, this is an interesting book with a concept and an idea that could have been executed better but it's still definitely worth a read.

Jason Pettus says

(The much longer full review can be found at the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com].)

"Ignoring the small flash of doubt in yourself -- that is what evil is. Nobody thinks of himself as evil, but that deception is part of evil's nature. And you can't lie to yourself all the time. Once in awhile, there's that moment when you question if you are doing the right thing. And that's your only chance to choose what is good, to do the right thing. And the moment lasts maybe fifteen minutes every other month, maybe less."

The little lesson about life quoted above is something a lot of us (especially Americans) are starting to realize more and more; that the root of what we traditionally call "evil" lies not in the cartoonish villainy we've assigned over the decades to such groups as the Nazis and the Klan, but rather in the small everyday lapses in ethics all of us commit regularly, which when multiplied by millions is what leads to things like Hitler, Franco, Stalin, Bush, etc. "Evil" is when we see something happening that we know is ethically wrong, but turn a blind eye towards because it's easier to do so; evil is when we overreact, when we rush to judgment, when we affect a self-righteous tone, when we abuse whatever tiny little amount of power any of us might have in our particular lives. It is something we're all guilty of, that none of us ever think we're guilty of ourselves, but when multiplied by an entire society is what leads us into the grand messes of both the world and of history.

And perhaps the guiltiest parties of all, or so argues Danish novelist Christian Jungersen in his brilliant new book *The Exception*, are those who believe they could never be guilty in the first place -- radical liberals, for example, humanitarians, those from pacifist countries -- because it is these people precisely who are blundering through such small evil acts without ever acknowledging them, without recognizing them for

what they are. it's a fascinating and controversial thing for someone in Jungersen's position to posit, which is what has made Jungersen a fascinating and controversial author in his native Denmark; for Denmark, you see, has a long and proud tradition of pacifism and humanitarianism, including being one of the only countries on the planet during the Nazi era to officially and publicly harbor Jews. As a result, or at least according to Jungersen, there is now a certain amount of "liberal haughtiness" inherent in the Danish national character...

Cindi says

I really struggled through this book. I wanted to like it, to get into the subject matter and what the author was trying to say, but there were a lot of problems with it. First, it was translated from Danish and that just didn't work. It was very choppy, without flow. I hope it was better in its original language. Second, there was a lot of repetition. A lot. Really. Third, and probably the worst defect is that the characters were, well, hideous. Women who are competent professionals, with incredibly responsible jobs, in a serious non-profit center focused on genocide research - who act like seventh-graders to each other and in their personal life. Written by a male, it really smacked of sexism in the way the characters were drawn. Fourth, there was a lot in the book that just didn't need to be there. And, finally, fifth - the plot just didn't come together for me and didn't make up for the other flaws. I give myself a A for perseverance for finishing it; a D for my time management skills while reading it.

Jess says

Anytime I try to describe this, it comes off sounding boring or depressing. While it's not a light book, and I wouldn't describe it as a page-turner, either, it was gripping and I could easily read it for an hour or two at a time, only putting it down and turning off the light when my eyes started to hurt. It was, bizarrely, a perfect accompaniment to the library management class I'm taking - but please don't interpret that as meaning it's boring. The management class is dull, but not this book. Really interesting things with multiple viewpoints, interweaving fact with fiction, and the way groups of people behave and distort reality.

Meave says

Sometimes, characters in fully formed television worlds watch their own television, which is a device to comment on the events in the television show, and on the television show itself; you know, meta-TV. This book uses articles about genocide as the TV show inside the TV show, to comment on and help explain the actions in the novel, which is set in the fictional Danish Center for Information on Genocide.

The narrative is almost exclusively third-person limited, but it alternates between the employees of the DCIG, so you never feel like you have "all the facts," and the way Jungersen drops the reader in media res, you never feel like you know enough about "what happened before." As though there are "facts," it's ridiculous. It laughs at the idea of fact. Reading just the story as closely and analytically as you can, drawing sure conclusions is impossible. When you read one woman's section, her experiences make sense, even while you remember what the other women were thinking and feeling about the same events, and you don't know who is in the right.

Because I feel like The Exception wants you to choose. The genocide articles are worked smoothly into the narrative, and of course they're shocking and horrifying, but they also force you to consider the narrative in light of their various theses. What did this genocide demonstrate about human behavior? And then back you go into the story, and everyone is either acting weird or perceiving everyone else as acting weird; this concept could have been really instructive and precious, but it's quite sophisticated and intelligently done, I think.

I can't say much more without mentioning any plot points, and that'd be a terrible shame, not to get to read this cold. It's just so good, so strange and creepy, unlike anything I've read in a while. I can't recommend it highly enough. I want to wait a few months and read it again.

Rebecca says

Christian Jungersen's *The Exception* is a gripping psychological thriller that dissects the perversions of human nature with a scalpel. Stitched into the narrative are studies on the nature of evil and accounts of real historical genocide, documenting patterns of savagery and entitlement that Jungersen then deftly reproduces in his characters. A recipient of the Danish Radio and Golden Laurels Prizes, nominee of literary awards throughout Europe, and *New York Times* Editor's Pick, *The Exception* is a thought-provoking, tightly wound whodunit that lingers with the reader long after the book's conclusion. Pity, then, that it's also a clunky, sexist hackjob that, while getting the psychology of evil chillingly right, gets the psychiatry of its characters dangerously wrong.

The Exception centers on four women, coworkers at the nonprofit Danish Center for Information on Genocide, who begin to receive anonymous death threats. Their camaraderie soon devolves into a frenzy of accusations and scapegoating. Everyone is a suspect. Iben and Malene are best friends and romantic rivals. Anne-Lise is the office misfit who feels bullied by Iben and Malene. Camille shies away from the combustible office politics but has a torrid secret past that may implicate her in the threats.

Jungersen is at his best when jabbing at the hypocrisies of Western liberalism. He depicts the nonprofit world as one part hipster bacchanalia, two parts moral smugness—a keen and skewering observation that is conveyed with just the right amount of understatement. Early in the book, Iben finds herself speaking to a man who has abandoned his dream job, and its attendant financial insecurity, for a position in advertising. “Human rights and art,” he says, “great stuff but there’s no money in it.” Iben is incensed. She “jump[s] in and defends traditional values, such as ‘Money isn’t everything’ and ‘You can’t buy happiness,’” forcing him to justify not his profession but the very concept of remunerative employment. “In no time she realizes that this discussion is just a rerun of their old debates, as if they are all battle-worn politicians in the last days of an election campaign, able to predict their opponents’ arguments.”

Iben isn’t the only one intoxicated by moral superiority. The novel is determined to dismantle all delusions of moral grandeur. The four main characters each lay claim to innocence, even as they rationalize committing acts of increasing cruelty against each other—from petty lunchroom slights to outright assault. Meanwhile, their boss is engaged in a more systematic kind of duplicity, aligning himself with the country’s anti-immigration party in order to deny power to a rival board member, ultimately allowing the organization to become an instrument of the reactionary politics he claims to personally revile. There are also meaningful parallels between these characters and the Western world at large. When Iben “tries to concentrate on what a group of Dutch experts has written about Muslims in the southern Russian states,” her arrogance overlaps neatly with Western political arrogance—a Venn diagram of sanctimonies. The irony is delicious.

Interspersed throughout the novel are Iben's fictional academic articles on the psychology of evil and the genocides in Bosnia and World War II Germany. Here we find Jungersen's thesis: We—all of us—undermine our neighbors and our colleagues to acquire trivial advantages for ourselves, employing increasingly elaborate rationalizations to assure us of our rectitude. These acts are evil writ small, genocide in miniature. They are murder of the conscience, and with enough license, they become actual murder.

There is power in this argument, which explains *The Exception*'s enthusiastic reception. It raises important questions about the relationship between privilege and moral authority, and about the motives underlying liberal self-satisfaction. But this is also where the story begins to fall apart. A whodunit simply can't end with every character equally culpable for the crime. So Jungersen undercuts his thesis with a twist ending that leaves one character as a literal martyr and another as a literal psychopath—embodiments of good and evil if ever there were. *The Exception* aspires to a moral calculus, but it achieves only arithmetic.

Even worse, Jungersen arrives at this unsavory conclusion by grossly misrepresenting the nature of mental illness. In order to designate a villain, he conflates a wide range of psychiatric disorders, implicating his evildoer first with an anxiety disorder, then with a split personality, and finally with antisocial behavior—as though common psychiatric illnesses can just flower effortlessly into psychopathy. It is a lazy trick to tidy up an unwieldy story, one that promotes a dangerous and outdated equivalency between mental illness and evil.

Worse still, Jungersen's women all become obnoxious female stereotypes. Iben and Malene's romantic rivalry is a *Betty-and-Veronica* frenemy cliché that borders on offensive. Camilla throws herself headlong into bad relationships, propelled by both her reckless libido and her reckless desire to please. And Anne-Lise is simply a hysteric who, at one point, must be restrained by her husband: “Anne-Lise runs around as a rush of thoughts overwhelms her. Why should I have believed they could bear to live with me? I’m bursting with evil thoughts...I must hit my face as hard as I can. I deserve to be punished because I’m a horrible wife. I’m a bad, bad mother.” Jungersen might have avoided this reductiveness if his writing wasn’t quite so childlike and expository. He (and his translator, Anna Paterson) use language as a tool of mere utility rather than art, and they treat *The Exception* as a novel of Big Ideas rather than one of nuanced storytelling.

I am saddened by the failure of Jungersen’s experiment (if the recipient of international accolades can be called a failure). His political philosophy is provocative but marred by inattention to story mechanics. Or alternatively, his story is an exhilarating psychological drama overburdened by politics. Either way, neither the ideas nor the story emerge intact. Iben, at one point, denounces “the lack of political awareness in American literature.” But when literature is done right, we shouldn’t see its political motives, much less be distracted by them. Subtlety is its own Big Idea.
