

Marit Eikemo, Anders Heger, Kim Hiorthøy, Egil Halmøy,
Erlend Loe, Finn Skårderud, *Smileffjes: Fem samtaler med Erlend*,
Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2019, 166 pp.

*Hvis det ikke var for at jeg har det så bra i livet mitt, ville jeg ikke hatt
noe imot å bli en fugl. Hvis det er flere liv, vil jeg bli ulike fugler.*

*If I didn't have it so well in my life, I would have nothing against being
a bird. If there are several lives, I would like to be various birds (p. 148).*

In 2019, the publishing house Cappelen Damm from Oslo put out two books in celebration of Erlend Loe's fiftieth birthday, namely a collection of interviews entitled *Smileffjes: Fem samtaler med Erlend* (Emoticons: Five Discussions with Erlend, transl. P.D.G.) and the novel *Helvete* (Hell, transl. P.D.G.) illustrated by his friend Kim Hiorthøy.

Smileffjes: Fem samtaler med Erlend contains five chapters, each by a different interviewer. As expected, this is not a typical collection of interviews, mainly because there is not one central theme that centers on a certain discussion. Rather, we encounter a postmodern playfulness that is so typical when it comes to an author such as Loe. Instead of focusing only on his books or on the concepts behind them, Loe takes the discussion further by talking about various themes such as suicide prevention, conspiracy theories, the advent of technology, and climate change.

The first chapter, *Takk for sist, vi snakes snart!*¹, by Marit Eikemo is a mix of memoir and interview centered around the idea of changing oneself over time. At least this is the beginning question and one that persists throughout the book, and one to which Erlend gives a nuanced answer. Eikemo previously expressed the opinion that Loe's *Gone with the Woman* (1993) was better than *Naiiv.Super* (1996), but her view has shifted since becoming a writer. Loe has published many children's books, scripts, theatre adaptations, and translations that encompass a richness of ideas rarely seen in Norwegian contemporary literature. The authors most similar to him are Ragnar Hovland² and Frode Grytten³.

Eikemo's previous interview with Loe was when she was a journalist for the student magazine *Studvest* from Bergen. Back then she had an exclusive chance to talk directly to one of the emblematic members of the so-called irony generation.

¹ An approximate translation is "Thanks for the last time (we saw each other), we'll talk soon!". Here "Takk for sist!" (Norwegian, untranslatable) refers to the fact that the interviewer and the author have previously met, and now they are meeting again. See pp. 5–15.

² Norwegian writer, born in 1952.

³ Norwegian writer and journalist, born in 1960.

The editorial board was split: those who had never heard of Erlend Loe and those who saw no sense in publishing an in-depth interview with an author who was already appearing in all the newspapers. An open question remains: What does Loe have to do with student culture? The new discussion entailed two people with some catching up to do. Loe admits that he has been living by his ideas since his twenties and even if he does not know where his ideas will take him, he is not worried. His joy comes from playing with the way people talk and behave, and his main driving forces are enthusiasm and excitement.

An important part of being a writer is also trying to stay relevant in the public eye. Loe concedes that he is not interested in writing epic tales, but this does not mean that his books are superficial; many are about values, especially family values, and many of the characters in his novels are in turmoil, which is often found at the boundary of madness. Loe also often writes about unconventional things, such as animal sex in the novel *Dyrene i Afrika* (The Animals from Africa, transl. P.D.G.; 2018) or in the TV series *Kampen for tilværelsen* (Struggle for Life, transl. P.D.G.; 2014–2015). The underlying relationship is that between seriousness and nonsense – a particular way to see the world, without preconceived notions.

The next part of the interview focuses on a meeting between Loe and Ragnar Hovland, one of the former's most important literary models. While Hovland mentions *Naiv.Super* as his favorite novel, *Sveve over vatna* (Glide over water) and *Ei vinterreise* (A winter journey) holds a special place for Loe. The latter novel shifts between humor and seriousness and discards the idea that humorous books cannot create a type of literature that is both important and witty. Hovland admits that writing literature is not only about serious topics, such as eating disorders or rape, as some debutants think. And returning to the elusive question of changing oneself, Loe says that he himself has not changed much even though having children is a fundamentally altering experience.

In the second chapter of the book, *Vi har noe nå – en samtale et stykke ut i forfatterskapet* (We have something now – a discussion a bit outside the body of work, transl. P.D.G.; pp. 16–46), Anders Heger starts by observing that to talk about Loe recalls reading him. You step in a room where language is not used to frame something firm but to test something out. Asked if his work, seen from above, has changed or is the same, Loe answers that maybe developed is not the right word. The first three novels, *Gone with the Woman*, *Naiv.Super*, and *L* belong together because they all are about identity and being young, the relationship between what youth was 50 years earlier and what it has become, and the opposition of being a grown-up that was typical of the 1990s. These three novels all address being a new, immature grown-up who avoids taking part in adult dilemmas and problems and having a kind of fear of taking things too seriously. This idea is taken further in the novel *L*, which is almost a philosophical discussion of the aforementioned problems. This all began when Loe saw the original *Kon-Tiki* film, which got him thinking about how the earlier generation had done so much for the country

in a short amount of time. How will their powers be used was the thought Loe explored in *L*.

Loe's fourth book, *Fakta om Finland* (Everything about Finland, transl. P.D.G.; 2001), signaled a new departure in his body of work and disrupted his previously childish writing style. It was different in that it had no divisions or paragraphs and no space in-between paragraphs. It exhibits a new kind of seriousness. This could have resulted from a new change in time from the so-called anti-irony generation up until today's climate activists. Loe's perspective is that this can be tracked more through film than through literature. If, when *Naiv.Super* was published, people were talking about 9/11, now the on-going discussion is about the terrorist massacre in Utøya that happened in 2011 or about the climate. And the Fridays for Future strikes are organized more by adults than by youngsters, with Loe mentioning that the 20-somethings of today are becoming adults sooner than those of the 1990s.

The "this is not my problem" attitude is not only a genuinely naïve or escapist attitude: someone is ironic and distanced in relation to seriousness not only as a survival strategy but also as a way of understanding the world. The novel *L* has a declared position. The first part is a discussion of the position taken by the generation Loe represents, while the second part is something that pertains to documentary literature, which is sometimes even documented with photographs. Later, in *Doppler*, this takes a turn toward societal satire that is politically or socially conscious.

The first novels seem to be set in timeless or placeless universes. This changes in time as Loe's writing becomes more and more political. Being immersed in the music, literature, and comic books of his time led to Loe to develop an outsider, anti-consumerist position, and the best examples of this are found in *Doppler* and *Naive.Super*. His method of writing is, again, very intuitive and all the notes he takes and possible words that he wants to include take form only after a long time. Loe likes to play with contexts, and, while some things are clear and wait to get written down, some take improvisation in order to unite these so-called stations between the text. Heger puts it this way:

Det ene er at dette er ting du liksom gleder deg til å skrive fordi du har moro av det. Det andre er den følelsen man kan få som leser, at dette ser lett og gøyalt og ganske overflatisk ut, men bakenfor er det en innsikt som forfatteren kanskje ikke engang vet selv at han formidler. Ting som at *Doppler* er et uttrykk for den kollektive ensomheten alle mennesker kjenner på, eller at *Naiv.Super* er en nødvendig demaskering av den naivistiske generasjonen (p. 26).

On the one side, there are things that in one way or another you are glad to be writing about because you have fun out of it. On the other side, there is this feeling one has as a reader, that it appears easy and amusing and very superficial, but behind this there is an insight that maybe the writer himself does not know that he mediates. That *Doppler* is an expression of the collective loneliness all people experience, while *Naiv.Super* is a much-needed unmasking of the naivist generation (p. 26).

Loe admits to not knowing beforehand what he was trying to say, and that he thinks about how he will respond to the published books being private property. Then Loe talks about the requirement that is imposed on authors to talk rationally and philosophically about their writings. In a way, there is an ambivalence about it all the time; you do not know what you are doing, but you also notice it nonetheless. It sounds dumb, but that is the way it is. Asked if this is the writer's role and if Ibsen and Tolstoy would have answered the same honestly, Loe says it is difficult to speculate. They have created unrealistic expectations about what a writer is and what is expected of wisdom. Also, they are elegant. Loe definitely does not feel included in this respect. Maybe it is about rationalizing our experiences... the irrational position is found nearly all the time in us. There are big differences concerning the writer's role, if one writes about the big stuff or the small stuff.

Of course, his entire body of work could be considered a *Buddenbrooks*, the great novel by Thomas Mann. But Loe thinks it has nothing to do with the length but rather with the *large*⁴ glance that condenses everything down into characters and situations. Loe concedes he is very far from there. Writing eleven or twelve books is not the same thing. Of course, we must mention that Loe's body of work contains more than 25 titles.

Another of Loe's uncertainties is him considering that his own dilettantism springs from imposter syndrome that some of his characters also share. And, surely, it also springs from the aforementioned outsider position, since his oeuvre is commonly more well-received abroad, in countries such as Russia, Serbia, and Hungary, especially in the last ten to 15 years. *Naiv.Super* has been translated into almost 40 languages and *Doppler* into 30.

Loe is perceived as having introduced the new style of so-called naivism or neo-naivism⁵. While this is true, Loe explains that form is often made available by content. And here Loe uses the expression Trojan horse to hint at the fact that you must pretend to write easy, accessible, funny material, but there is really a lot behind this that is used consciously all the way from *Naiv.Super* to *Kampen for Tilværelsen* (Struggle for Life), which is something to attract the audience and get the message across that the readers will get their money's worth. Although there is a brutality in the word funny that makes it almost useless. There is also the tragic in the funny, or the funny that becomes tragic, which Loe likes.

There is a clear politicization in Loe's children's books, especially beginning with *Kurt blir grusom* (*Kurt Gets Truckloads*, transl. D. Bartlett; 1995), which is a critique of consumer society, and continues with *Kurt koker hodet*⁶ (*Kurt Bites his Head Off*, transl. P.D.G.; 2003, theatre adaptation) about asylum seekers and the comic turn

⁴ In italics (in original).

⁵ As Per Thomas Andersen has called it.

⁶ Originally written as a theatre play. Developed alongside Anne Marit Sæther and Gilles Berger from Cirka Theatre in Trondheim and staged at Trøndelag Theatre in spring 2003. Not yet translated into English.

this can take. A playful game with what you can tell children also appears in *Den store røde hunden* (The Big Red Dog, transl. P.D.G.; 1996), where it is mentioned that a strong, dangerous friend solves a lot of your problems, which is something you should absolutely not write in a children's book, or *Rumpemelk fra Afrika* (Rumpmilk from Africa, transl. P.D.G.; 2021), with its unappetizing title. The same is noted in *Kurtby* (The City of Kurt, transl. P.D.G.; 2008), which transgresses the genres of both children's and adult literature.

For Loe, language is a borrowed wisdom and a fantastic instrument that he has access to, and language is owning finer clothes than those you actually have. Linguistic certainty gives voice to what is in the head where language is thought, and it is impossible to separate form and content.

In the third chapter⁷, *Gutterreisen* (Boy Travels, transl. P.D.G.; pp. 47–109), Kim Hiorthøy and Egil Halmøy have a long talk with Loe about the overall ideas of his works. The chapter starts with a major cliff hanger; Loe receives a message from an Irish fan who read *Naiv.Super* and no longer wishes to live. As Loe points out, for a youngster to take his own life when things change so fast at that age – that is just tragic. As the discussion progresses, they are reminded of Egil Halmøy's photo in *L*⁸ or Loe's decision to enter the National Film School of Denmark for which he had written *Gone with the Woman* while also studying at Kunstakademiet, which he later left for the National Film School. After his studies, Loe wrote *Naive.Super*.

Then the discussion centres along the lines of what is acceptable humor in the right context. It also has to do with taking into consideration the person that makes the joke, especially with instances of ironic racism. This is miles away from conspiracy theories, such as anti-vaxxer resistance, Holocaust denial, or the theory of the flat Earth, the last of which is very difficult for Halmøy to accept. There is a difference between making this kind of joke with your friends and telling them in public. In the same way the left has made fun of Christianity throughout history, you should have the right to make fun of Islam without it being racist. But, as Loe points out, the reason we have finished doing so is because this can have fatal consequences⁹. The left has historically been critical toward religion and antiracist but, when various religions came in Norway, you could not be antiracist and critical toward their religions simultaneously, and the antiracist way of thinking has won over the religiously critical one. If Loe had not felt threatened by Islamic extremism¹⁰ then he also would have made fun of it, but a certain censorship has been imposed recently that makes it difficult to do so.

Another topic involves the use of emoticons in sentences. In this instance, not using them makes the sentences more complex and leaves more room for interpretation. Loe admits writing the word emoticons instead of sending them. What

⁷ The third chapter is based on the transcript of nine recordings, each clearly divided.

⁸ Some pictures with the protagonists are published inside the novel.

⁹ Here Erlend Loe is also probably thinking about the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting from 2015.

¹⁰ In the book *Kurtby* (2008), Loe depicts Christian fanaticism.

if Houellebecq used emoticons? It is absurd, Loe says. Emoticons are unequivocal, Hiorthøy explains.

Asked again if he has changed over time, Loe answers in the affirmative saying that he has changed very much so, but it is not his *forté* to plan everything throughout – it is more about what idea he decides is funny such as his latest novel *Dyrene i Afrika* (2018). For him it is important not to pause and overthink it. Then everything seems simple and banal. Even though he does this more and more, Loe shies away from doing it as it diminishes his creativity.

When posing the most common question he gets – What does naïve mean or what constitutes a naïve writer – Loe becomes a bit irritated saying that the word is a stamp put on his writing that he never seems able to shake off. Halmøy explains that it is important to separate naivism from naivety, and that naivism is, in a way, conscious naivety that renders it not naivety, and that Loe's irony is something that does not go with naivety. Hiorthøy adds that it has to do with seeing the world in a simple way or in a childlike way, which Loe responds to with the affirmation that he regrets including the word *naiv* in the title. One knows that the world is more complicated, which gives this so-called simplicity its quality. However, Halmøy notes that the word naïve could have actually been used but to a lesser degree and that the word naivism would have been used exactly about this book, giving the example of Arild Nyquist¹¹ (1937–2004) and the way the word naïve describes his poems. Loe's attempt to distance himself from this label by being increasingly raw in his later books, although without people realizing this, is also worth mentioning.

Loe's perspective about interviews is that they show an instantaneous glance of the author, even though he admits dreading the experience of being interviewed as he often goes into auto-mode by repeating himself, but nobody can say this because they never heard him before. Many people think they know him by judging his books, but this is inaccurate. Loe mentions that in interviews he rarely discusses himself open-heartedly, with the exception of the present interview. Of course, he is also the same person when he writes, but that is only one side of him. Playing a humorous game in writing is something that is more representative of Loe than is an interview.

In the fourth chapter, *Senmoderne melankoli* (Late Modern Melancholia, transl. P.D.G.; pp. 110–134), is an interview by Finn Skårderud about Loe's use of humor. In his introduction, Skårderud starts by saying that Loe thrives more in fictional worlds than in real ones and that in Loe's contemporary literature (*samtidsdiagnostisk litteratur*) he finds the pattern of shrinking motion that refers to the tendency to reduce, minimize, limit, and simplify (*redusere, minimere, begrense og forenkke*)¹². From Skårderud's perspective, *Naiv.Super* is Loe's breakthrough novel and is convinced that this type of literature can stimulate us to wiser considerations

¹¹ Norwegian writer and musician.

¹² In Norwegian.

about withdrawal. Positive withdrawal can be a pause or a holiday, while negative withdrawal can be called psychiatric illness. He insists that Loe writes a precise and enlightening literature about the melancholia of the late modern human.

In the interview, Loe mentions this as the spirit of the age, something he found through luck, but Skårderud does not believe this. The American culture pessimist Christopher Lasch, who wrote *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), also published *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (1985)¹³. Withdrawal is indeed an aspect of Loe's body of work, and the motive of retreat can be seen as the art of survival. There are countless skilled melancholic writers who in form and content capture the spirit of the age or the zeitgeist. Melancholic literature is not sad in itself, but there is an excess of it bringing forth descriptions, experiences, and an understanding of difficult conditions. Thomas Bernhard links melancholia to mania and Samuel Beckett to the absurd. Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* turns irony into violence and plays cheerfully along these lines.

Looking back at the 1990s, Loe says his writing style had more to do with his own feeling than with an analytic project to describe the times. In the mid-1990s a lack of consistency and deeper thinking appeared. When political ideals collapsed, there was a lot of consumerism and hedonism. It could have been a luxury problem, but calling it that would have shut out other possibilities for naming it. Something of the oppressive responsibility of having to decide about your own life and the future lies behind the attitude of *Naiv.Super*. Loe also experienced the youngsters' culture as sophisticated in a hermetic way. And he now sees *Naiv.Super* as a reflex, a desire to show a specific kind of seriousness, and that there was something genuine and elementary that one could trust. The book deals with something we all go through: Who am I? What have I done with myself that is valuable to take further? It is nothing special for Norway – it is universal, Loe postulates. He also sees the humor in the tragic, which was something difficult to balance when writing *Naiv.Super*. It would have been worse to discuss adult life with little thought and humorlessly. Without humor, Loe would have been more depressed. A melancholic child, he grew up with humor, which made it easier for him to see humor as a free place, although he is sometimes now seen as a harmless author and scarcely an important one. Seriousness is king, and humor is perceived as a cowardly backup solution. For Loe, this is not a problem. Some books are promoted because of their humor, but if we interpret the seriousness in them as quality then we are not good enough readers; we just hide behind it. Because his writing style is seen as simple, Loe experiences imposter syndrome – if it is easy to make, it is not so good.

Another characteristic of his oeuvre is his description of the end of time, especially in the novel *Slutten på verden slik vi kjenner den* (The end of the world as we know it, transl. P.D.G.; 2015). This end worries Loe, but he realizes that he

¹³ Skårderud mentions 1985, while other sources say it was published in 1984.

takes a certain ironic perspective of the whole misery. Another subject is lifestyle or fashion blogs (*rosablogging*)¹⁴ that have become a hopeless phenomenon; while earlier you would get approval through merit, now it is all about making yourself seen on the internet.

Broadly speaking, Loe has a longing for fiction. Through film he can understand how people think and feel in order to be a wiser man and to fill a void in himself, especially in difficult times, such as his recent divorce. In short, fiction is a form of feeling and learning how to be human. This translates in his literature, because fiction renders it possible for him to say tougher and wiser things. In a way, fiction is better than life; in fiction somebody has thought up something that begins and ends, but in life everything seems to be a mess, and it lacks a complete dramaturgy.

The fifth and last chapter, *Erlend intervjuer Erlend om Erlend* (Erlend interviews Erlend about Erlend, transl. P.D.G.; pp. 135–160), focuses on Loe's ingenious post-modern play; well, at least this is the premise of this interview. In it, Loe explains how his choice of studying film came about. Unsure if he could earn a decent living as a writer, he thought that being a screenwriter could be his main job while literary writing could be a side job and something just for fun. At the time of the interview, he was juggling a staggering 12 or 13 projects, which speaks volumes about his intellectual curiosity. He also shares his love of bicycle riding and an exciting new film project writing the script for Alexander Payne's adaptation of Karl Ove Knausgård's two articles published in New York Times entitled "My Saga" (Knausgård 2015a; Knausgård 2015b) about his journey from Newfoundland to several parts of Midwestern United States. When asked the same elusive question about change, Loe says he has not changed; he is him at all ages at the same time.

All things considered, the collection of interviews *Smilefjes: Fem samtaler med Erlend* borrows from the same playful style of Loe's novels, but its coverage of Loe's body of work is insufficient and focuses rather on Loe's experience as a writer, screenwriter, son, father, husband, friend, and, ultimately, human.

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¹⁴ A phenomenon related to blogs written by relatively young women about what concerns them in their daily life, especially things that are considered by some to be trivial.

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