

God's Friends

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Sigrid Undset, *Olav Audunssøn I: Vows*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 376 pp., \$18 paper.

Sigrid Undset, *Olav Audunssøn II: Providence*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 280 pp., \$18 paper.

SIGRID UNSET, WHO WAS AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE IN Literature in 1928, is without question one of Norway's most famous and influential novelists. That she became her country's first female Nobel laureate "principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life during the Middle Ages" seems a natural consequence of her upbringing.¹ Her father, an archaeologist working at the Museum of Antiquities in Oslo, introduced her at a young age to the material and literary worlds of the Middle Ages.² Her mother, who homeschooled her until she was eight, taught her Scandinavian folktales and Danish history, and at the age of ten, during a visit to her father's family in Trøndelag, Undset read the Old Norse-Icelandic epic *Njáls saga*, which she later referred to as "A Book that was a Turning Point in my Life."³

Undset is perhaps best-known for her *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22) trilogy, which factored greatly into her receipt of the Nobel Prize, and which centers on the young woman for whom the work is named and follows her life in fourteenth-century Norway. The *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy (1925-27), too, is set in Norway's Middle Ages, and Kristin Lavransdatter's parents make a brief appearance in one of the volumes. The books were originally translated to English between 1928

1 Horst Frenz, ed., *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam: Elsevier), p. 250.

2 Claudia Berguson, "Sigrid Undset," in *Twentieth-Century Norwegian Writers*, ed. Tanya Thresher (Detroit: Thomson Gale), p. 298.

3 Tordis Ørjasæter, *Menneskenes hjertes. Sigrid Undset—en livshistorie*, second edition (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2011), p. 25-28, 38.

and 1930 by Alfred G. Chater; the first and second volumes, which were originally published in Norwegian in 1925 under the title *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* (Olav Audunssøn at Hestviken), are given the titles *The Axe* and *The Snake Pit*. The third and fourth volumes, translated from the Norwegian *Olav Audunssøn og hans barn* (Olav Audunssøn and his Children, 1927), were titled *In the Wilderness*, and *The Son Avenger*. These remained the sole English translations of the Olav Audunssøn saga until Tiina Nunnally's new translation of the first volume appeared in 2020 with the University of Minnesota Press, followed in 2021 by the second volume; the third volume appeared in 2022, and the fourth, that will complete the tetralogy is presumably in progress or forthcoming. Nunnally, who is both a novelist herself as well as an award-winning translator of works from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, also translated the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy (1997, 1999, and 2000), as well as Undset's more contemporary novel *Jenny* (1998).

The present two works—published as the first and second volumes of the larger tetralogy—are translations of the two parts that comprise Undset's 1925 *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* (Olav Audunssøn at Hestviken). Rather than using Chater's *The Axe* and *The Snake Pit* as titles for these first two volumes, Nunnally opted for *Vows* and *Providence*, which reflect the dominant themes on which each volume centres, and which connect to the larger influences on Undset's writing at the time.

The first volume, *Vows*, is set in eastern Norway (in the Oslo fjord region) during the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century, at the time of the country's turbulent civil war era. As a child, Olav Audunssøn is given as a foster child to his father's old friend, Steinfinn Toressøn, and betrothed to Steinfinn's daughter, Ingunn. The book follows the children's upbringings at Frettastein as foster brother and sister and the evolution of their

relationship to that of a betrothed couple, and the many trials and tribulations they endured as a result of a variety of fateful events and decisions, including betrayal, infidelity, and murder. The second volume, *Providence*, follows the couple as they settle and begin a family at Olav's ancestral home at Hestviken with a hope of starting anew. However, the tragedy of Olav's life and of his and Ingunn's love story continues to unfold with the events of the first volume looming large over both husband and wife, as well as their children.

A significant influence on many of Undset's works was her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1924.⁴ She credited the stories of holy men and women, which she read at the age of eighteen when she borrowed C.R. Unger's *Heilagra manna sögur* (1877) from her local library, as one of the reasons she turned to Catholicism: "...I had ventured too near the abode of truth in my researches about 'God's friends,' as the Saints are called in the Old Norse texts of Catholic times. So I had to submit."⁵ Consequently, hagiography became a significant focus of her literary production, and from 1920 on she wrote numerous works on saints—both Norwegian and foreign, from the Middle Ages and later periods. The influence of Undset's Catholic faith is also apparent throughout the first two volumes of the *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy translated thus far, particularly in Olav's inner battle between his own will and his Christian piety, which Nunnally captures elegantly in her translation. Vivid pictures are painted of the medieval Catholic church in Norway, of the lives of monks and clergy, and of the broader importance of Christian repentance and forgiveness of sins.

Tiina Nunnally breathes new life into the first two volumes of the *Olav Audunssøn* tetralogy, reflecting beautifully Undset's Norwegian prose and her eloquent storytelling style. This reviewer very much looks forward to reading the next two volumes, which will bring the tale of Olav Audunssøn (and his children) to a conclusion. A

4 Anna Clara Törnqvist, "Legendens etik och erotik: Ett möte mellan Sigrid Undset, Selma Lagerlöf och Santa Caterina av Siena." *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 34:4 (2005), p. 47.

5 Stanley Kunitz, ed., "Sigrid Undset." In *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: Wilson), p. 1433.