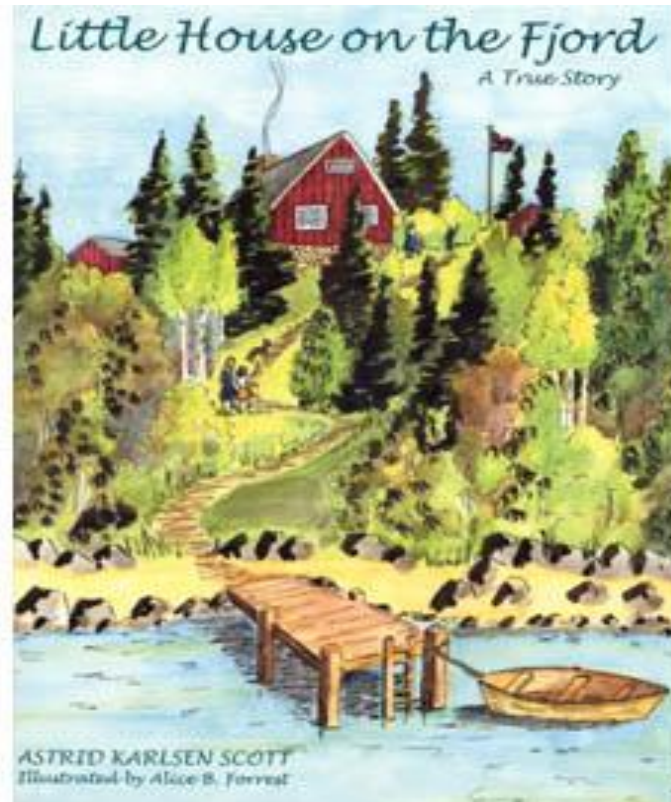


Book Review

by *James J. S. Johnson* (V.P., Norwegian Society of Texas, AD2010)

Astrid Karlsen Scott, Little House on the Fjord (Nordic Adventures, Inc., 2004), 92 pages, also available with audio CDs, read by the author.



The author, Astrid Karlsen Scott, has made a name for herself (for many years now) within the greater Norwegian heritage community. (Some readers will recognize her for her Norwegian cuisine and Norwegian holiday books and tapes; others will recognize her adventure-loaded World War II spy histories, *Silent Patriot* and *Defiant Courage*, both of which are very hard to put down.)

This charming, readable, and hard-to-put-down book, however, is an all-ages-friendly autobiography – of a lovable 10-year-old child’s family life, with gently drawn illustrations (and a family photo), to aid the reader’s imagination.

Specifically, this delightful book is a collection of childhood memories, auto-biographically chronicling some of the special chapters in the author’s family life while she lived on Kollen, a small island in Oslofjord (Norway), during 1946–1947. Living on Kollen was a life-blossoming, joy-filled time of family fun and adventure, in welcome contrast to fearful, hard times of World War II (which included dodging Nazi oppression and losing Jewish friends to death).

The author's childhood adventures included arriving on the small island, as her family's new post-WWII home, exploring the island, adventures with animals (both family pets and native wild animals), having row-boat adventures at sea (during sudden storms especially!), colorful experiences with relatives who came to visit, trials due to sickness and harsh weather, watching her parents face and overcome troubles together, celebrating Christmas according to Norwegian traditions, and more.

If the title "*Little House on the Fjord*" sounds like the Norwegian equivalent to Laura Ingalls Wilders' "Little House on the Prairie", it should! – because this heart-warming book echoes the loving family-life genre of Laura Ingalls Wilders' American classic, except Mrs. Scott's precious family memories occur on a small Norwegian island, as Norway recovered from World War II. During 1946-1947 the forested island of Kollen provided an insular home to the Karlsen family, where family love and faith repeatedly confronted challenges of very severe weather, dangerous accidents, dangerous animals, clashing personalities, sicknesses, and other events of daily family living. (In all of this, little Tulla's exuberant and winsome personality shines forth.)

The main characters in this childhood chronicle are two sisters, Tulla (the enthusiastic author, then aged 10) and sister Eva (the oldest child, aged 12). Other main characters are Mamma, Pappa, little brother Steinar (aged 5), and baby sister Solveig. (Baby sister Gro was not born till later.) Guest appearances include a visit from Bestemor (i.e., Mormor) Olsen, chickens, goats, sheep, a German mine (left over from WWII), a dog, a Juletide *nissen* who appeared to be about the same size as Pappa (appearing soon after Pappa left on an errand), Uncle Bjarne, nearby islander "neighbors" (Herr and Fru Jensen), and a few others.

As an American man (who still remembers being a 10-year-old boy), who grew up in rural farmlands with several brothers and sisters, this book's rural setting and entertaining sequence of autobiographical highlights provides several empathetic and endearing perspectives. Also, as an American, it is a literary privilege to read Astrid ("Tulla") Karlsen's girlhood memories, which paint verbal pictures of her island adventures, enabling me to imagine those places and happenings from the perspective of a child growing up there.

For example, in every land, around the world, children learn to respect the forces of nature; those forces are sometimes quite threatening. In Tulla's memory, the natural world's fearful side repeatedly appeared in storms at sea, especially in cold weather. For example, Tulla describes a time when she rowed to the mainland, to buy groceries for Mamma, but on the return-trip to home her rowing was interrupted by a vicious storm:

Is the boat breaking up? Please, God. Oh, help me, please. Don't lose me at sea. Not now when it is Christmas. I want to go home. I'm scared! The storm swallowed her cries. She pulled on the oars. Oh, no, there's that creaking noise again. The boat is breaking up. I'll drown! With the next stroke, one oar snapped. She pulled the broken half into the boat, bit her lip, and determined to keep fighting. The waves, like falling walls, lashed over her. Pulled by the current, the boat thrashed and plunged into the depth of the waves. She lost all control. There's

no hope for me. My life will end in the depth of this briny sea. She hid her face in her hands and sobbed while she pled, "Please God, God help me! . . . Oh please. Mamma needs her groceries!" she wailed.

(Quoting from page 55.) Imagine the plight of that 10-year old girl at sea in such a storm!

As an American "baby boomer" myself, I did not live through the terrors of World War II, - so I need an author's help to imagine the emotion-charged experiences of patriotic Norwegians recovering their country's political freedoms, after the ever-nightmarish Nazi German occupation finally ended at World War II's end. In Tulla's girlhood memory, she recalled World War II's ending whenever she passed by the sheriff's office:

Whenever Tulla passed the sheriff's office, she remembered the last day of the war. She and Mamma were returning from Oslo on the ferry. When they docked at Nesodden, some serious-looking men dressed in dark overcoats and hats huddled together. They stared directly at her and Mamma, or so it seemed. The men rushed toward them as they came down the gangway. Tulla's heart nearly stopped. All of a sudden a man from behind her pushed her. He struggled to get ahead of her and off the gangway. Tulla grabbed the railing so as not to fall into the fjord. "Mamma, help!" [Tulla cried.] "I'm right here. Hang on tight." She steadied Tulla's arm. The man pressed past them. In his effort to escape, he leaped onto the dock, but dark-clothed men caught him. He tore his jacket open; a large Norwegian flag draped his chest. "*Alt for Norge!*" All for Norway, he yelled. He was the sheriff of Fjeldstrand, but he had betrayed Norway during the war. The black-clothed men led [the captured quisling] away. Tulla shuddered when she saw his office again.

(Quoting from page 3.)

What a blend of family life, childhood imagination, personality blending, humor, sadness, rural tranquility, and happy times growing up on a forested island in Oslo-fjord. To read this book is to share Tulla's 10-year-old enthusiasm, happiness, adventures, fears, dreams, and loves - as she occasionally brushes with death.

Do I recommend the book? - ja, ja (yes, yes)! In fact, I've bought other copies, and have given them as gifts to others. (How often can you find a childhood biography of family, fun, and faith - lived out on a fjord, not a prairie?) With a bit of persistence, I was able to telephone Mrs. Scott (who is called her childhood nickname "Tulla" in the book). Unsurprisingly, she talked a lot like the cheerful "Tulla" whom I had imagined (from reading her book), - and I think she is still the same happy island girl, from her beloved Kollen, who there loved to live and lived to love.

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