

Written by  
**Torill Rambjør**  
Philologist and Art historian

## Sigrid Undset - a famous Norwegian author

Sigrid Undset was born in Kalundborg, Denmark, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1882 and died in Lillehammer on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1949. Sigrid was the oldest of the renowned archologist Ingvald Undset's three children. The mother was Anna Maria Charlotte Gyth, of Danish origin. In 1884 the Undset family relocated from Kalundborg to the Norwegian capital, Kristiania (today named Oslo), where the young Undset spent her infancy and formative years. When she was eleven, her father died. Consequently, the economic situation of the family worsened, and Undset, at the age of sixteen, to help, started to work in a private business office. In the following ten years, working, she contributed to the financial support of her family.

### An author comes to life

Despite all this, the young Undset holds onto her dream of being an author and dedicate her free time to writing. In 1903 her first narrative work, the novel, *Fru Marta Oulie* (Mrs Marta Oulie), is published<sup>i</sup>. Already the following year her second work, *Den lykkelige alder* (The age of happiness), is released, and both novels received good reviews from the literary critics<sup>ii</sup>.

As a child, Sigrid often listened to her parent's stories about their travels in Europe. Among those, were the stories about their stay in Rome. Thus, travelling to Rome, the Eternal City, became Sigrid's own childhood dream.

In 1909 the opportunity materializes when Sigrid Undset is awarded a scholarship by "Den norske forfatterforening" (The Norwegian Authors' Union). With the departure for Rome Sigrid's life changed radically. The family commitments were finally over. She could focus on her vocation to become a writer. After a long journey, Sigrid Undset, at the age of twenty-seven, arrives in Rome, on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1909.

### Life among artists in Rome

At first, she stays at "Casa Block", in Via Gregoriana 42, an accommodation often used by Norwegian artists, when being in Rome. However, after a short period of time, the young writer

moves to Via Frattina 138, in the vicinity of the Spanish Steps. Here, a tiny accommodation, on the top floor of the building, becomes her permanent, roman residence.

Soon, Sigrid Undset is admitted into the Scandinavian artistic circle in Rome. An environment that becomes important to her. Amongst the Scandinavian artists, she can now lead a happy life, without worries, freed from family responsibilities. Finally, she can dedicate herself to writing. Living in a metropolis so different from Kristiania makes Sigrid profoundly happy. Sigrid Undset, as other artists who have come to Rome before her, spends a lot of time exploring and discovering the cultural, historical, artistic, and architectural aspects of the Eternal City.

During her first months in Rome, her introductions and new acquaintances are innumerable. One of them, however, will become of fundamental importance to Sigrid. That is the meeting with the famous Norwegian painter, Anders Castus Svarstad (1869-1843), who Undset admires. Although both are modern and cosmopolitan people, they are also very different. However, the similarities between them seem to overcome the diversities, and on June 30<sup>th</sup>,1912 Sigrid Undset marries Anders Castus Svarstad, in Antwerp.

## Jenny – the success novel

In this very happy period of her life, Sigrid Undset writes the contemporary novel *Jenny*. The novel is published in November 1911. The reviews are several and predominantly positive, some even excellent. *Jenny* becomes a great success, and Sigrid Undset is established as a praised writer<sup>iii</sup>.

The novel tells the life story of the protagonist Jenny Winger, a young Norwegian painter who lives her middle-class life in Kristiania, and amongst Scandinavian artists in Rome. Undset describes the protagonist's emotions and thoughts, her ambivalence in relation to the traditional female role, her point of view on motherhood, her dream of finding true love, her artistic vocation, and her struggle to become a painter. Furthermore, to some extent, she touches upon contemporary political aspects, such as the social and civil conditions of women. Reading *Jenny*, interestingly, one finds several similarities between Jenny Winger's life and that of Sigrid Undset herself. Going forward, let us focus on Sigrid Undset's own life, after the publication of *Jenny*. How does it proceed? What happens?

## Artistic life – family life

Three years have passed since Sigrid first met Svarstad, and they are married. After the wedding, the first year they spend happily, first in London and then in Rome. Whilst in Rome, on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1913, Sigrid gives birth to her eldest son, Anders Castus. However, the boy is not in good health, and Sigrid decides to return to Kristiania. The return marks a turning point in Undset's life. She is at the beginning of her life as mother, wife, and mistress of the house.

Back in Kristiania, after a short stay at her mother's house, Undset moves with her family to Ski, a small town close to Kristiania. With this, Undset's life as housewife and, especially, as mother begins. Her ambition is to create a good family life. Although family commitments have increased, Undset continues to write. Furthermore, she contributes actively to the Norwegian Authors' Union, as well as she, by expressing her views in daily newspapers, participates in the contemporary debate on socio-cultural issues. Then, in 1914, Undset resumes writing fiction, and the novel *Våren* (Spring) is published<sup>iv</sup>. Two years later, the Undset-Svarstad family moves to Sinsen, a suburb of Kristiania. The following year, on October 29<sup>th</sup>, her daughter, Maren Charlotte ("Molle") is born.

At that time Undset still believes in continuing life with her great love, her husband, the well-known painter Svarstad. He, on the other hand, continues to travel, following his artistic vocation. Hence, his absence from the family environment increases. Gradually, this domestic situation makes Sigrid recognize the conflict between being a mother and a loving wife, to an increasingly absent husband. Drawn between the longing for her rarely present husband and her maternal responsibility, Undset feels conflicted. Thus, despite all her efforts, the distance between her and Svarstad increases.

After years of ambivalence, Sigrid finally concludes that mothering her children must take priority over maintaining her marital relationship. Her own children must come first! Consequently, in 1919, Sigrid Undset, bearing her third child, leaves Kristiania. Together with her two children, she moves to Lillehammer, a Norwegian town and municipality in "Innlandet" county, where Undset settles at the outskirts of the city, at an estate, which she names "Bjerkebæk"<sup>v</sup>.

## Life at Bjerkebæk

As said, the experience from the previous six years has led Sigrid Undset to the conclusion that it is impossible, simultaneously, to be a loving wife, a mother and stepmother of six children

and pursue a literary career. To adapt to this newfound awareness, Undset gradually creates a new life for herself and her children, a universe comprised of a literary life, being a writer, and a daily life dedicated to her family. Apart from the Second World War period, Sigrid Undset continues to reside at Bjerkebak until her death.

Moreover, after her transfer to Lillehammer, Undset is the sole provider in her family and custodian of Bjerkebak. Writing being her only source of income, to cope, she must reinforce her literary activity. Hence, the first book of the trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter, Kransen (The Wreath)*, soon takes shape<sup>vi</sup>. The novel, published in 1920, becomes an immediate success, praised both by critics and readers. The reviews and sales were exceptional. In the two successive years the second and third book of the trilogy, *Husfrue (The wife)* and *Korset (The Cross)*, are published, and the reviews and sales remain exceptional. By this, Sigrid Undset position as a writer of merit is an acclaimed fact, and her economic concerns are ended. However, in this period of literary success, Undset's mental restlessness seems to grow. Was there a longing for something different, something more?

## Undset - the Catholic

After a period of soul-searching, Sigrid Undset finds consolation in the Catholic religion, and, on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1924, she converts to Catholicism. Simultaneously, her marriage is annulled by the Church. Three years later, also the legal divorce becomes valid. This radical change of believe, from atheist to fervent Catholic, represents a fundamental, personal turning point for Undset, a change that also comes to influence her later literary work. The contrasts caused by her conversion do not, however, slow down Undset's literary activity. In the following years two significant novels, *Olav Audunsson til Hestviken (The Master of Hestviken)* and *(Olav Audunsson og hans børn) (The Master of Hestviken)*, are published, in 1925 and 1927, respectively<sup>vii, viii</sup>. The reviews and praise received by the Undset were immense, even abroad.

## The Nobel Prize laureate

In 1928 Sigrid Undset receives an extraordinary literary recognition. She is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. According to the official website of the Nobel Institute: "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928 was awarded to Sigrid Undset "principally for her powerful descriptions of Northern life During the Middle Ages"<sup>ix</sup>. Sigrid Undset was the third woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The first was Selma Lagerlöf from Sweden, in 1909, and the second was the Sardinian Grazia Deledda, who received the award in 1926.

At the age of forty-six, Sigrid Undset has become an internationally renowned author, a celebrity. The celebrations and recognitions are many. However, to Sigrid Undset personally, this recognition has a more profound meaning. To her, the award represents a tangible proof of having reached one of her personal goals in life.

In retrospect, it seems possible to trace a common denominator of the important choices Undset made in her life: Her will, determination and ability to form her own life, often in an unusual way, but always in accordance with her personal convictions. The examples are several: her travel alone through Europe, her stay in Rome, her choice to follow her heart, believe in love, and marry a divorcee many years older than herself, her later choice to renounce their personal, emotional relationship and give priority to her literary vocation and children, to divorce and to convert to Catholicism.

## The Second World War – Refuge in the United States

Sigrid Undset was not only saluted as an author of grate fame, but also recognized for her contribution to society, which, in a historical perspective, is to be considered of national significance. An example thereof is her participation within the literary community, in the “Norwegian Authors’ Union”, of which she was elected president in 1935. A position she manages with great skill and authority.

At that time, the political instability in Europe was increasing. In Germany, the support and power of the “National Socialist German Workers' Party” (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, with the initials NSDAP) continued to increase, and with the “Night of Broken Glass/November pogrom”, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938, the NSDAP’s anti-Semitic position was clearly evidenced.

By then, parallel to writing, Sigrid Undset, already for many years, has thundered against Nazism. Denouncing the Nazis publicly, however, led to repercussions, and, in 1933, the Nazis put Undset on their “blacklist”. Later, her books became banned in Germany, and the German newspapers were forbidden to print her name. In addition to worry about antisemitism, Undset is concerned about the livelihood of the Finns. To support the latter economically, Undset auctions off her Nobel Prize medallion.

However, with the German invasion of Norway, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1940, Sigrid Undset is in jeopardy. She must flee the country. But before leaving Norway, she speaks, via radio, to the Norwegian people, to encourage them. Her escape route starts at Bjerkebak, goes through Nordland County, via Stockholm, through Russia to San Francisco. From the Pacific coast,

Undset travels east, to New York where she settles. The following five years, Sigrid Undset, the author, and Nobel Prize laureate, is touring the United States, using her fame to campaign for her motherland, Norway, and to make known the fierce resistance against the Nazi invasion, within the Norwegian people.

## Post-war

After the war, Sigrid Undset returns to Norway. She arrives in Oslo on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July 1945 and returns to "Bjerkebæk" on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August. With that, finally, a period of normalization in her life begins.

Initially, after her homecoming, Sigrid Undset gets minimal recognition for her contribution during her exile years. In 1947, however, Sigrid Undset is awarded the Royal Norwegian Order of Saint Olav, Grand Cross (Storkorset av St. Olav) for her contributions. For this official, highest Norwegian recognition, she is profoundly grateful. Particularly, it is the official explanation she finds flattering: "For fremragende litterært virke og for tjenester for 'fedrelandet' (For her exceptional literary work and for her services to her motherland)<sup>x</sup>. From then on, Undset's health worsens, and her literary output decreases. In fact, at that time, she writes her last book *Caterina av Siena* (*Catherine of Siena*), which is posthumously published in 1951<sup>xi</sup>. Two years after receiving the Grand Cross she passes away, at the age of sixty-seven. The famous author, Sigrid Undset dies on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1949, at Lillehammer.

However, the essential cornerstone of Sigrid Undset's life, is her essential, intrinsic strength that gives her the ability and strength to make the necessary choices, often unusual, but right for her, to form her artistic and private life in an autonomous way.

## Sigrid Undset's oeuvre

Her oeuvre is extensive. It consists of novels, short stories, essays, hagiographies, narratives, memoirs, books of cultural history, children's stories, poetry, collections of letters and newspaper articles. In the period from 1907 to the early years of World War II, the author wrote almost one book a year. In all, her literary works exceeds forty, of which some are published posthumously. More than thirty are prose works, mostly novels. Among these, the best known is the trilogy, *Kristine Lavransdatter*, completed in 1922. The trilogy together with two novels *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken* and *Olav Audunssøn og hans børn*, published in 1925 and 1927, constitute the basis for awarding her the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1928. Furthermore, a number Undset's works are translated into many languages, Italian included. In my research

sixteen different titles in Italian were found, amongst which were Undset's first success novel, *Jenny*, and *Kristin, Lavransdatter*, her masterpiece absolute. A detailed biography of Undset's work is published by 'Universitetsforlaget'.<sup>xii</sup>

Still, the fascination with Sigrid Undset, the extraordinary and controversial writer, is very much alive. Her masterpieces continue to attract passionate readers and Undset has become a literary icon in Norway and the world.

---

<sup>i</sup> Undset, S. 2007. *Fru Marta Oulie ; Den lykkelige alder ; Fortellingen om Viga-Ljot og Vigdis*, Oslo, Bokklubben.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Undset, S. 1973. *Jenny*, Oslo, Aschehoug.

<sup>iv</sup> Undset, S. 1994. *Våren*, Oslo, Aschehoug.

<sup>v</sup> Mueseum, S. L. 2021. *Bjerkebæk* [Online]. Stiftelsen Lillehammer museum. Available: <https://eng.bjerkebek.no/> [Accessed 10.01.2021 2021].

<sup>vi</sup> Undset, S. 1986. *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Oslo, Aschehoug.

<sup>vii</sup> Undset, S. 1981a. *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken : 1*, Oslo, Den norske bokklubben.

<sup>viii</sup> Undset, S. 1981b. *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken : 2*, Oslo, Den norske bokklubben.

<sup>ix</sup> Nobelprize.Org. 2020. *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928*. [Online]. Nobel Media AB 2020. Available: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1928/undset/bibliography> [Accessed 10. November 2020].

<sup>x</sup> Slapgard, S. 2008. *Dikterdronningen : Sigrid Undset*, Oslo, Gyldendal.

<sup>xi</sup> Undset, S. 1987. *Caterina av Siena*, Oslo, Aschehoug.

<sup>xii</sup> Packness, I. 1963. Sigrid Undset bibliografi. In: 1963, N. a. F. (ed.) *T. Norsk Bibliografisk Bibliotek*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.

---

## Bibliography

- Museum, S. L. 2021. *Bjerkebak* [Online]. Stiftelsen Lillehammer museum. Available: <https://eng.bjerkebak.no/> [Accessed 10.01.2021 2021].
- Nobelprize.Org. 2020. *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928*. [Online]. Nobel Media AB 2020. Available: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1928/undset/bibliography> [Accessed 10. November 2020].
- Packness, I. 1963. Sigrid Undset bibliografi. In: 1963, N. a. F. (ed.) *T. Norsk Bibliografisk Bibliotek*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Slapgard, S. 2008. *Dikterdronningen : Sigrid Undset*, Oslo, Gyldendal.
- Undset, S. 1973. *Jenny*, Oslo, Aschehoug.
- Undset, S. 1981a. *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken : 1*, Oslo, Den norske bokklubben.
- Undset, S. 1981b. *Olav Audunssøn i Hestviken : 2*, Oslo, Den norske bokklubben.
- Undset, S. 1986. *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Oslo, Aschehoug.
- Undset, S. 1987. *Caterina av Siena*, Oslo, Aschehoug.
- Undset, S. 1994. *Våren*, Oslo, Aschehoug.
- Undset, S. 2007. *Fru Marta Oulie ; Den lykkelige alder ; Fortellingen om Viga-Ljot og Vigdis*, Oslo, Bokklubben.