The Invincible Voice

In the era of personal non-fiction, this naked self seems almost revolutionary.

Lars Petter Sveen

The Art of Stuttering – Without Anyone Noticing

“It must have started when I was only a few years old, but the strongest memory is from the fourth grade," Lars Petter Sveen writes in his autobiographical book "The Art of Stuttering - Without Anyone Noticing".

He's on stage in a school Christmas play, he can't remember which one, but I'm guessing it included mice, given that his only line was "I think it likes cheese". But when his turn comes, he remains completely silent. Afterwards he drives home with his parents. No one mentions what happened with a word. “If I had stuttered, everyone would have remembered. That's what I thought".

In "The Art of Stuttering", Sveen writes with renewed literary power about life as an invisible stutter, and how throughout his life he has tried to keep his real voice hidden from everyone, including - he believes - his own children. The strategies are staggeringly numerous.

Throughout the book, Sveen details his long struggle to create sentences free of difficult letters. While his brother chooses to be an open stutterer, he himself practices, writes scripts before phone calls, and adds sounds that make the sentences possible to pronounce ("Eeehhnwhopper cheese eeehmenu"!). When he forgets his glasses and cannot read the script he has written for a lecture, the body itself finds a last resort: He passes out on stage.

For those who are familiar with Sveen’s body of work, this self-centered book appears as a 180-degree turn. His central project has been to cultivate empathy in the lives of others, to turn away from Norway with action-packed narratives, and to provide a distinctive resistance to autobiographical Norwegian contemporary literature. In his latest novels, he writes – admittedly with mixed success – about refugees and war. This is a new Sveen. When I first see the nimble title, I think of the serpentine road up to *Trollstigen*, sitting behind the wheel of a cramped rental motorhome that you have never driven before, loaded with extended family and heavy luggage. I hope for Sveen's sake that the brakes hold. And they do.

That Sveen's private disclosure captivates is almost inevitable - what fascinates an audience more than the public confession? But the fact that this has become one of Sveen's best books has to do with completely different things. It is, for example, strange to see how the style, which has occasionally annoyed me, works in its first encounter with the memoir genre: The almost juvenile appears as honesty, the repetitions become productive, the dramatic line changes create calm. Everything is turned upside down, and it works perfectly.

The way Sveen enters the genre is also surprising. In this country, the tendency has gone in two directions - either popular science or hyper-intellectual books, like Jan Grue's "If I Fall”. Neither happens here. Although this is a crowded book, where interviews with Sveen's stuttering family are central, the main character carries the narrative alone, without the support of facts, researchers or Wittgenstein quotes. Of course, there are some flaws here too, especially the most CV-like parts, but in the age of personal non-fiction, this naked self seems almost revolutionary. The closest we get to outside expertise are the visits to a speech therapist, but Sveen doesn’t fall into the trap of presenting stuttering's a to z here either. Only on the last page do we get the professional definition of what stuttering is.

Instead, Sveen is interested in questions the internet cannot answer: Why exactly does he (and Bruce Willis, and Joe Biden!) choose to hide their stuttering, while the IT guy at work and the artist Sebastian Zalo are so-called “open stutterers”? Why does he join the Stutterers Anonymous group only to brag to them about his voice control? A particularly interesting dynamic he describes is how openness becomes "a form of silence" in the childhood home, where stuttering flourished for several generations and was apparently normalized, and at the same time completely shut down. It makes the invisible stutters extra invisible, including to each other. "It feels like you should master hiding your stutter before you can admit that you stutter," Sveen writes. The process of presenting a voice "full of cracks" is no easy task, but Sveen succeeds, both privately and literary.

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