



## Before I Burn

*Gaute Heivoll , Don Bartlett (Translation)*

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**An international literary sensation about an arsonist on the loose in rural Norway and the young man haunted by the story**

In 1970s Norway, an arsonist targets a small town for one long, terrifying month. One by one, buildings go up in flames. Suspicion spreads among the neighbors as they wonder if one of their own is responsible. But as the heat and panic rise, new life finds a way to emerge. Amid the chaos, only a day before the last house is set afire, the community comes together for the christening of a young boy named Gaute Heivoll. As he grows up, stories about the time of fear and fire become deeply engrained in his young mind until, as an adult, he begins to retell the story. At the novel's apex the lives of Heivoll's friends and neighbors mix with his own life, and the identity of the arsonist and his motivations are slowly revealed. Based on the true account of Norway's most dramatic arson case, *Before I Burn* is a powerful, gripping breakout novel from an exceptionally talented author.

## Before I Burn Details

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# From Reader Review Before I Burn for online ebook

## Vita Rakkenes says

Veldig bra bok faktisk!

Jeg synes den kanskje var vanskelig å komme inn i starten fordi det er veldig detaljerte beskrivelser i boken, men gjør at den føles virkelighetsnær.

Alt i alt en veldig god bok om å finne seg selv og håndtere brannene inni seg selv...

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## lanius\_minor says

Jiné než Královo srdce, které jsem ?etla bezprost?edn? p?edtím. Ak?n?jší, více rovin vypráv?ní. Román se mi trefil do nálady i do vkusu. Sledování požár? a jejich str?jce, který je ?tená?i odhalen pom?rn? brzy, aniž by to ubíralo na poutavosti d?je. Autorovi vzpomínky na poslední chvíle s otcem. Zrod spisovatele. Postavy matek a otc?. Skoro cynický konec. Všechno se mi to moc líbilo a dob?e se mi to ?etlo.

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## Julie M says

I wanted to like this, but the author's declarative sentence style and passive voice got on my nerves right away. Knowing the Nordic "type" I thought his characters were quite believable. But the outing of the arsonist/pyromaniac (and his subsequent punishment and return to the small Norwegian town after prison) seemed unnecessarily drawn out - I knew right away whodunit. Most readers would! It ruined the story's arc, and was anti climactic. Heivoll's story, based on a true crime in 1970's Kristiansand, wasn't well served by his decision to weave in his own memoir either. IMHO, of course. Can't recommend this one.

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## Sean Owen says

Heivoll sets out to document a series of Arsons in a small Norwegian town in the late 70s. The initial concept here is interesting, but the execution leaves much to be desired. Heivoll happens to be from the town afflicted by the arsons and was born around the time of the arsons. While this connection may be what led Heivoll to explore the incidents, but he makes far too much of it. The chapters alternate between documenting the arsons and biographical sketches of the authors life; his birth, his decision to become a writer, his father's illness and death. The chapters focused on the arsons are well written and compelling. The characters and motivations are complex and compelling. Unfortunately the momentum and interest generated by these chapters is sapped when the author breaks away for yet another tiresome series of pages about himself. There was a great deal of promise here, but unfortunately any value has been lost in the author's solipsism.

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## Ben says

**3 stars!**

*"Who do we see, When we see ourselves?"*

The urge to pick this novel came at the hands of an error: I thought it was a thriller, and an award winning one at that, a collection of novels so rare and precious.

Summer 1978. In a rural village in Norway a pyromaniac sets fire to barns and houses, causes massive destruction while filling the lives of the locals with sheer horror. The peaceful town appears center stage in all-national news. The town folks lose sleep, and many men stand guard at their front door. Days go by and there is no clue regarding the identity and the motives of the person in charge of this horror show – but there's a mother at the village, which slowly comes to the understanding that the pyromaniac is probably her son.

*"And the greatest of them all is love."*

In the height of the news coverage and the terror, a child is born. Years afterwards, after making his way to the city and becoming an author he decides to come to his home village – he tracks the fires while crossing his story with the pyromaniac's: they're both good children, top of their class, deeply loved any yet, something, for the both of them, goes terribly astray.

I was mistaken in my understanding of this novel. This is not a typical 'Who did it?' novel simply because any thinking reader will figure out the arson's identity by the first 50 or so pages of the novel. This is not even a 'Why done it?' novel, because as motives seem luring at first they lose their appeal quite quickly.

**This is story about the subtle line between sanity and madness; about the relationship of parents and their children; about the struggle of forming an identity for yourself; about coming to terms with your inner world; about memory; about loss.**

What we have here is a highly driven character driven about parental love, and the unique and intricate bond between parents and their children.

My complain about Scandinavian novels as a rule of thumb is that they seem cold and arcane to me, long descriptions and opaque dialogues, characters created with the vulgar stroke of a brush, as freezing and

unbecoming as the desolate landscape of the terrain.

This novel had this 'sickness' as well. Long, brooding descriptions to mask the truth: this novel contains almost no plot points and has weak narrative. Houses were set on fire. There. You have just read the novel.

The best parts, and to my dismay they were quite rare, were the parts where characters evoked real, raw emotions and the novel tested the relationship of the narrator with his dying dad and the arsonist's with his over-the-top caring mother.

*"I want to become an author," I said.*

*"You can't ruin your life just because your dad is dying."*

**How far will we go for our children? How long can we suppress the truth of their real characters? What could they do to make us not love them anymore?**

While the novel raised those questions, I was deeply enthralled. In other parts? Yeah, I guess it snows in Norway.

**Until next time!**

**[Instagram]**

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### **Lynne says**

This dark novel about an arsonist in a small rural Norwegian town is beautifully written in spare, evocative prose. For me, this made the terrific fear, despair, and horror all the more compelling. The main character's obsession with the arsons the year he was born, becomes ours. I'm still thinking about the haunting last line, "*my dear, Let me put this into words before I burn.*" I think it is about the legacy of trauma...you always feel it can happen again at any moment.

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### **Aino says**

Koukuttava kirja, joka yhdistää kiehtovasti faktaa ja fiktiota, tiivistä jännitystarinaa ja psykologista pohdintaa, synkkyyttä ja kauneutta. Sopii myös/erityisesti niille, joita perinteiset jännärit eivät yleensä kiinnosta.

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## **Linda says**

Author's first novel, won a prize, and was nominated for others, in its native country, praised by critics and other authors - enough to reel me in. Sounds like a good book, right?

Not this one. I was greatly disappointed in it. There is lyrical prose and an interesting case, but the juxtaposition of the narrator's life and the events of the town in which he was born and raised doesn't work for me. I kept waiting for the whole thing to jell. (My husband laughs at me for finishing books that I don't like - it's hard to explain to him that 1) it may get better or 2) it might actually come together at the end.)

The narrator (Gaute Heivoll) is born just at the time of massive arson in his hometown and nearby areas. It's not long before the reader knows who the arsonist is and why he is doing it. What the reader, at least I, didn't know is quite how the narrator's telling of that story and his own fit together. He has decided to write about the arsons and gets interviews with people still alive who were involved. He also finds his grandmother's journals and finds references to the arsons. He broods on his father's death, his decision to become a writer and not a lawyer, and other personal matters.

He fails to follow the arsonist very closely after his release, which left a huge gap for me. The man was obviously schizophrenic and when released, returns to his hometown and tries to lead a "normal" life. However, schizophrenics do not just spontaneously get well and there isn't any indication that he is being treated in any way to maintain his stability. The final recounting of the arsonist's life just didn't seem at all real and seemed tacked on.

One very interesting item: In Norway, when a crime has been committed by an obviously (declared) insane person, that person is not required to put in a plea of "guilty" or "not guilty." They are only required to agree that they committed the crime.

You may find this book more meaningful than I did. Maybe you can see the connection between the arsonist's story and the narrator's that I was missing. If you decide to read the book, I hope so.

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## **Ida Jackson says**

Mens jeg leste Heivoll, tenkte jeg hele tiden: Hva er det som gjør at dette er en *roman* og ikke *litterær sakprosa*, egentlig? *Før jeg brenner ned* handler om en serie med faktisk påsatte branner på Sørlandet på 1970-tallet, og Heivoll har gjort omfattende research. Han er så varsom med materialet sitt at han spekulerer lite rundt en del hendelser det ellers hadde vært ekstremt interessant å få utforsket i en litterær kontekst.

Istedentfor er han så forsiktig med hjembygda og alle aktørene i historien at boka noen ganger blir direkte langdryg fordi han skal ha med en masse småsteder og navn som er ravende likegyldig for meg som ikke-innfødt leser. Jeg tror jeg hadde vært mer tålmodig med alle de biografiske detaljene om jeg faktisk hadde plukket opp en sakprosabok. Når noen velger romanformen, ønsker jeg meg mer utforskning, særlig på den delen som er utilgjengelig for de fleste kildenære biografer: Den psykologiske. Istedentfor ligger Heivolls litterære uttrykk i å slenge på en del Åsne Seierstad-svulstige metaforer isteden.

Og likevel: Dette er en bragd av en bok. Vekslingen mellom research, nåtid, selvbiografi og oppdiktede scener er dyktig gjort, og Heivoll har definitivt en historie å fortelle. Det er bare at jeg ikke likte den så godt som jeg hadde håpet på, og jeg tror den hadde kledd en kildeliste, en Ivo de Figueiredo-lignende touch.

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## M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/7572078...>

Really, the music today in this Starbucks makes me want to destroy something. I am sort of stuck here as my Subaru is being worked on over at the Big O, a couple blocks away. Big job. New shocks, tire rotation, wheel alignment, oil change. You know, almost regular maintenance for an automobile with nearly 150,000 miles on it. Anyway, I ordered a *mocha grande*, gave them a name to call out when it was ready, and finally, fifteen minutes later, I go up to check on what could possibly be taking so long and there on the counter it sat. At least I thought it was mine. The person behind the counter said it was a *mocha* for somebody with my first name. I mentioned that it would have been nice if someone had informed me. The person remarked that a yell was made, but perhaps I didn't hear it. I have been back sitting here at my little square barstool table after another fifteen minutes have gone by and have yet to hear a yell out of anybody, least of all a barista, and there have been plenty of customers since me, so I think the rather grumpy employee was lying to me. Just like Gaute Heivoll may have been lying to me as well. But it doesn't matter to me if Gaute was telling me a tale because this book was supposed to be a work of fiction anyway. I am not at all positive that these related burns actually happened and do not really care. Gaute made them real enough for me.

The book is actually heart-wrenching with his personal memoir content regarding his dying dad and his own struggle over what to do with his life. The narrator has the same name as Gaute Heivoll so I suppose we can imagine this is a true story with some made-up shit in it. There is plenty of pain to go around the bowl and get it going with a very good spin. We get to know all the neighbors and their personal crosses they bear. And somehow we are getting to at least the surface personality of the criminal who is never revealed until late in the book, but you know all along who it is and I think this is also on purpose. I am of the opinion that Gaute Hovill knows exactly what he is doing, as in his being a supremely gifted writer with a masterly plan.

Something tells me this novel is a parallel bit about being an only child and how the pressures to make something of oneself might ignite a burn that can become unmanageable. It may be that a mental illness or dis-ease develops and exacerbates an already difficult situation. The reader is kept from knowing what exactly happened to the most tragic character of all the many collected in this book. It is never made clear what happened to this once kind and considerate person that fueled his eventual becoming into a dangerous pyromaniac. Parents can sometimes cause more harm than good, and the damage is usually done in the spirit of love and adoration. I know firsthand what it is like to love someone too much and to care even a bit too exorbitantly for their happiness. It is quite hard to let go. *To live and let live*. But one must, or else perhaps have to live with possibly unseemly consequences.

In the end I realized this was a book of memory, about a certain time spent in the history of a small town called Finsland. A story about a boy who lost even himself, who hung onto a memory of his own perfection, a boy who even his parents no longer knew, and the journey some of us must make between a past time remembered and a life lost in its clouding over. It is obvious to me that Gaute Hovill is a born poet as there are enough beautiful sentences to prove his gift for stringing along words. But it is one of the saddest books I have ever read, and it is simply because of this: There is little in its completion that might redeem the lives that seem to still be lost grappling out in its frontier. But isn't that the truth.

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### **Ian says**

Gaute Heivoll's enormously satisfying novel/memoir, *Before I Burn*, recounts a period from the spring of 1978, when the people of Finsland--a remote, sparsely populated region in southern Norway--were terrorized by a series of deliberately set fires that destroyed homes and ruined lives. Heivoll's cast of characters is made up of the people who were resident there at the time, a list that includes his own parents and, eventually, himself since he is born in the midst of the crisis. The book is billed as a crime novel, and though crimes are committed in its pages and police arrive to investigate, the prose has an undeniable literary polish and the story's unconventional structure constantly chafes against the restraints of the genre. The action follows three distinct threads. In Finsland in 1978 fires are being set and no one can figure out who is responsible. At the centre of this is Dag, a smart, talented and deeply troubled young man and son of the local fire chief. In 1998 the twenty-year-old Gaute Heivoll, watching his father slowly succumb to cancer and profoundly dissatisfied with the routine path his life seems to be following, deliberately sabotages his law exams. And in the contemporary thread, Gaute, now a writer in his thirties, has returned home to Finsland with the intention of conducting first-hand research into the circumstances surrounding the fires while some of the people who experienced the fear and panic of those weeks in 1978 are still alive. Psychologically penetrating and chillingly evocative of what it must be like to feel threatened and helpless in your own home and suffer emotional turmoil at the hands of a force that is unpredictable and lacks both a face and a shape, *Before I Burn* grips the reader from the first scene and doesn't let go until the unsettling epilogue.

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### **Sigrid says**

Ok, so, the word I'm stuck with after reading this book is "interesting". I love the writing. The way the book is written, how the author describes everything - from the nature to the thoughts of the characters - it's beautiful and he is talented. And sometimes while reading I just really wanted to go write something myself. I also like the story in a way, but sometimes I just felt like it was dragging on for too long. Every now and then I had trouble focusing and I just wanted the story to end. There is a lot to focus on, a lot of stories melted together, which is sometimes fine and even good, but several times I found myself not wanting to know every single detail of random stories that happened to pop in to the authors head. Because that's what it felt like sometimes.

Still, all in all, I think I liked this book. Despite it being very different from my preferred genre and probably not something I would have decided to read just like that. Well written book, interesting story, it just kind of annoyed me and I don't really have a good reason why.

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### **Doug Wells says**

This is my second Norwegian author (other is the amazing Per Petterson) - these guys are serious plumbers of darkness. Excellent writing and a compelling story, and breathtakingly dark.

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## **Bonnie Brody says**

Gaute Heivoll has written both a compelling novel and a historical and fact-driven book that examines a series of fires that occurred during two months in 1978 Norway. It is told from the perspective of the author who was born during the year that the arson occurred, as well as from the perspective of the arsonist who was in his twenties when the author was born.

Heivoll has returned to his hometown of Finsland, Norway to research this book and try to become a writer. He interviews those who knew the arsonist and he also gleans information from newspaper clippings and his grandmother's diaries.

The arsonist, Dag, is the son of the fire chief. He was a most wanted child, an only child and very much loved - good at everything he put effort into. During his early adulthood he goes into the military and returns home after some sort of rejection that is never made clear. He lolls around the house and follows his father on fire calls that, because Dag is setting the fires, become more frequent and horrific. At one point, there are eight fires set over a period of three days.

Between May 6, 1978 through early June, 1978, ten fires are set, mostly to abandoned buildings and out buildings in Finsland. Towards the end of the pyromaniac's rampage, however, buildings are burned with people or pets in them. They come just a hair's breadth from losing their lives.

The book goes into the lives of the people who live in Finsland, mostly farmers, who have known each other their whole lives. It is inconceivable to them that one of their own is starting these fires. How could this possibly be? They only know that the arsonist comes at night and they have been driven to ignore sleep and are forced to stand guard all night to protect their homes and belongings from the crazy person who is burning down the village home by home.

Gaute Heivoll remembers clearly a time in school when one of his teachers told him he'd be a writer. He had gone to Oslo to study law but when it came time to take his exams, he turned in empty papers. He is afraid to be a writer yet drawn to a writing life and compelled to write at the same time. He is drawn in completely by the subject matter of this book.

Mr. Heivoll is a child being Christened at the time that the fires start and he imagines what his life as an infant is like when those around him are so frightened and paranoid about the fires. The town is a quiet one and no one would ever suspect Dag, the perfect boy, of doing anything wrong. When his parents figure out it is Dag, the bottom falls out of their world.

The book is poetically written and highly charged. It brings to life Mr. Heivoll's own development as an author while examining the life of an arsonist who can not stop himself from his heinous actions. This book will appeal to those who like true crime and memoirs, along with literary fiction. I recommend it to anyone who treasures good writing and poetic use of language.

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## **Jim Angstadt says**

Before I Burn

Gaute Heivoll

This is a story about arson in a small town in Norway in the 1970s. The story moved slowly. The characters were not particularly interesting, and the 'action', or lack of it, was not satisfying. Bailed.

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