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Twentieth-Century Danish Writers

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Introduction

The two decades following the turn of the century have been described by Danish critic Bo Hakon Jørgensen as a "skyggezone" (a gray area) in Danish literature. Some literary historians have argued that the true division between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Danish literature is marked most decisively by World War I. The confusion regarding periodization arises from the fact that the currents of and the counterreactions to *Det moderne Gennembrud* (the Modern Breakthrough) of 1871, the literary movement promulgated by the critic and scholar Georg Brandes that introduced naturalism and realism to Denmark, were still strong at the turn of the century. Furthermore, the older generation of nineteenth-century writers, both the realists of the 1880s such as Henrik Pontoppidan and Herman Bang and the symbolist poets of the 1890s such as Sophus Claussen and Johannes Jørgensen, continued to publish important works well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the year 1900 is a useful demarcation, for it marks the arrival in Europe of a distinctively modern worldview—incorporating artistic, intellectual, cultural, and scientific influences—that came to shape Danish literature for an entire century. While a single trend, movement, or zeitgeist does not define the first two decades of the century, many competing and concurrent trends came into play: naturalism and realism, symbolism and Romanticism, social orientation and psychological introspection. The new weltanschauung, or comprehensive worldview, that began to emerge in Denmark at the turn of the century is a reflection of a society in transition. The forces of industrialization and urbanization began to transform Danish society from a rural agrarian culture to a modern industrialized welfare state, a process that took half the century to complete. The new perspective was also inseparably tied to developments in the sciences: Max Planck published the quantum theory in 1900; Albert Einstein, the theory of relativity in 1905; and Niels Bohr, the theory of the atom in 1913. These new scientific conceptions of the relationship between time and space, matter and energy, macrocosms and microcosms shattered the ordered nineteenth-century conception of the physical world and shifted the perspective on man's relationship to his surroundings. Just as Einstein's theory of relativity questioned the concept of a harmoni-

ous physical universe, so did Sigmund Freud's theories raise doubts about the conception of man as a rational being. Freud's pioneering work, *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), introduced the notion of the subconscious and the idea that human action was often guided by irrational impulses. Another reaction to the destruction of the concept of an ordered physical universe was the development of Expressionism in the pictorial arts. An artistic movement whose members sought to portray emotion rather than depict objective reality, Expressionism replaced aesthetic harmony with exaggeration, distortion, and dissonance, reflecting a shattered worldview. Although not all of these radical developments in the arts, science, and culture were immediately reflected in the literature of the day, the seeds were sown that would shape the direction of Danish literature in the following decades.

The various trends and impulses of the pre-World War I decades—in hindsight they are considered aspects of early modernism—are illustrated most brilliantly in the work of Johannes V. Jensen. His work is a reaction against the socially oriented naturalism of the Modern Breakthrough, an embracing of a new scientific conception of humankind (specifically biological determinism) as well as a harbinger of a new aesthetic awareness. In Jensen's magnificent historical novel, *Kongens Fald* (1901; translated as *The Fall of the King*, 1933), the reader finds a merging of naturalism with symbolism, of Romanticism with nihilism, and of psychological introspection with a national and regional consciousness. His cultivation of a "concrete" reality, technology, the machine, speed, and the moment—and, not least, his idealization of America—is illustrative of the cultural optimism that was characteristic of the early years following the turn of the century. With his *Digte* (Poems, 1906) and the many collections of short prose texts he called *myter* (myths), he laid the foundations of modernism in Danish poetry and prose and became one of the most innovative spirits in Danish literature and cultural life.

If there is one predominant tendency that is characteristic of Danish literature between 1900 and 1920, it is the democratization of the literary institution. Whereas throughout the nineteenth century most successful writers were sons of the educated bourgeoisie,

the clergy, or the upper class, in the early 1900s working-class and women writers joined the ranks of the literary establishment. Writers from the rural provinces and from the working classes of Denmark are best represented in this volume by Jeppe Aakjær, Marie Bregendahl, Thit Jensen, and Martin Andersen Nexø. In particular, the rise of a vigorous regional literature, or *hjemstavnslitteratur*, was nurtured in Denmark by the emancipation of Danish smallholders and the *folkehøjskoler* (folk high-schools), voluntary residential schools for adults with a curriculum influenced by National Romanticism and folk culture, founded in 1844 at Rødding by N. F. S. Grundtvig, the theologian, poet, and popular educator.

Aakjær's *Vredens Børn* (Children of Wrath, 1904), depicting the harsh working conditions of servants and farm laborers, represents this new combination of social criticism and regionalism. Nexø, Denmark's first influential socialist writer, portrays the plight of the working class in novels that remain the most important in this genre. Although Nexø does not typify regional literature, he was, like Aakjær, a product of the Grundtvigian *folkehøjskole* milieu. Nexø's *Pelle Erobreren* (4 volumes, 1906–1910; translated as *Pelle the Conqueror*, 4 volumes, 1913–1916), one of the most widely translated works in Danish literature, attempts to counter the bourgeois individualism of the nineteenth-century bildungsroman and expresses Nexø's solidarity with the proletariat.

A new generation of woman writers also made a striking entrance into the literary scene at the turn of the century. Bregendahl, Agnes Henningsen, Thit Jensen, and Karin Michaëlis, all advocates of woman's liberation from conventional roles, wrote about women's lives, psychology, and identity from an early feminist perspective. Michaëlis's novel *Den farlige Alder* (1910; translated as *The Dangerous Age*, 1911), describing the mental agony of a divorced, menopausal woman, acquired international fame and was translated into twenty languages. Bregendahl represents a bridge between regional literature and a new female perspective in *En Dødsnat* (1912; translated as *A Night of Death*, 1931), which depicts the death of a farm woman in childbirth as seen through the eyes of her many children. Bregendahl, Henningsen, Jensen, and Michaëlis all achieved long and prolific literary careers that extended well into the mid-twentieth century.

The outbreak of World War I was as great a shock to the Danes as it was to the rest of the western world. Denmark recognized that the era of peace at her southern border, which had begun at the end of the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, had now come to an end. The outbreak of World War I shattered the optimism and idealism of the early years of the century. The technological and scientific advances that had promised a

brighter future for humankind now aided armed conflict and mass destruction. Regardless of Denmark's neutral status, the war caused a shattering of ideals and a realignment of thinking, which found expression in Danish literature of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, the chaos of the postbellum era encouraged cultural and political debates and artistic experimentation. The seeds of change that had been sown before the war came to fruition during the decades that followed it.

Danish literature between the two world wars was shaped by several different literary currents, distinguishing the "disillusioned" decade of the 1920s from the politicized 1930s. It is no accident that the first part of Tom Kristensen's classic novel *Hærværk* (1930; translated as *Havoc*, 1968), which offers a portrait of the 1920s as a period of ambiguity, is titled "Mellem Meninger" (Among Opinions). The 1920s is often regarded as a decade without a clear literary program or movement, a decade characterized by skepticism, uncertainty, and nihilism and by the feeling that the old ideals and ideologies (both political and aesthetic) no longer apply to modern life. Particular to this decade is the introduction of modern aesthetics, especially inspired by Expressionism in the pictorial arts, for which the Danish periodical *Klingen* (1917–1921) served as an important vehicle. The 1920s became a period for lyrical experimentation and innovation in Danish poetry. Kristensen, with his lyrical expressionism, was a central figure of the decade; his debut collection, *Fribyterdrømme* (Dreams of a Freebooter, 1920), offers examples of Expressionistic technique, including inspiration from Cubism and Dadaism. His early novels depict the chaos of urban life in a manner that is characteristic of the European modernist novel. His famous novel *Hærværk*, in which the protagonist must experience chaos and devastation in order to achieve a standpoint, is a monument to the "lost generation" of the 1920s. Jacob Paludan, another key figure in the 1920s, offers a more conservative reaction to the decade. His novels may be read as a protest against the superficiality and materialism of modern civilization and mass culture, the results of industrialization and capitalism. His major work, *Jørgen Stein* (2 volumes, 1932, 1933; translated, 1966), depicts the disillusioned generation as "årgangen som snublede i starten" (the generation that stumbled at the start). A third representation of the decade occurs in Knud Sønderby's debut *Midt i en Jazztid* (In the Middle of a Jazz Age, 1931), which depicts the leisure-class youth of the 1920s, liberated from the morals and ideals of the prewar generation; the novel came to be considered a Danish parallel to F. Scott Fitzgerald's depiction of the Jazz Age.

By the late 1920s the politicization of Danish literature that came to characterize the era of the Great

Depression had begun. Marxist philosophy as well as the theories of Freud (whose major works were translated into Danish in 1920) became predominant intellectual influences in the cultural debates and literature of this decade. By the end of the decade the intellectual Left began to articulate a new literary program in journals such as the socialist *Clarté*. Marxism won over a younger generation of writers who advocated a politically engaged literature. An early manifestation of a new socialist, Marxist-inspired literature was Hans Kirk's *Fiskerne* (The Fishermen, 1928), which delineates the development of a community of fishermen. A collective novel, where the focus is not on a single hero but rather on a group of people, *Fiskerne* represents a radical break with the conventional bildungsroman that centers on the development of an individual protagonist. The compositional form of *Fiskerne*—regarded by early critics as a literary articulation of socialist ideology—became extremely popular in the 1930s and inspired a series of collective novels; H. C. Branner, Martin A. Hansen, William Heinesen, and Hans Scherfig all published collective novels. However, not all of these collective novels were directly inspired by Marxism, and many tended to describe the breakdown of the solidarity of a community rather than a socialist utopia.

The idea that the arts—not least, literature—should work to transform or reform society was certainly not new to Danish literature, but it was radicalized by the Depression and by the threat of Fascism. In 1933 Adolf Hitler was elected chancellor in Germany, the same year Denmark's Social Democratic prime minister Thorvald Stauning won the support of the Venstre (Liberal) Party and passed important social reforms which improved the lot of workers and the unemployed. *Social-realisme* (social realism) became the dominant literary trend of the decade; and the novel, the preferred genre. Among the most significant movements in Denmark of the late 1920s and 1930s is *Kulturradikalisme* (Cultural Radicalism). Based on the architectural concept of functionalism, Cultural Radicalism espouses the belief that rationality and functionality should shape social development; its goal is a democratic state in which every individual—man, woman, and child—is given the freedom to develop naturally to his or her fullest potential. The movement's journal, *Kristisk Revy* (1926–28), edited by the architect and cultural critic Poul Henningsen, and later *Kulturkampen*, the organ of a core group of anti-Nazi intellectuals such as Piet Hein, had considerable influence on writers of the period.

Many of the literary concerns of the 1930s may be understood within the broad context of Cultural Radicalism, the movement of the intellectual Left. A new understanding of the importance of childhood experiences and education—inspired directly by the the-

ories of Freud—were part of the cultural debates and literary concerns of the decade. The child and childhood became important concerns for writers of the period. Branner's collective novel *Legetøj* (Toys, 1936), for example, makes use of Freudian theory to demonstrate how childhood experiences may inhibit the healthy development of the individual, leading to power-seeking, even Nazism, in adulthood. Childhood as an important motif is also evident in Tove Ditlevsen's *Barndommens Gade* (Street of Childhood, 1943), as the title suggests. The criticism of prevailing pedagogic views and of education is directly reflected in Scherfig's *Det forsmte Foraar* (1940; translated as *Stolen Spring*, 1986), a scathing satire on the authoritarian Danish school system of the World War I era. In the 1930s children's education was considered one of the battlefields of the antifascist cultural struggle. Sexuality and women's liberation were also important topics of debate during the interwar period and related to the agenda of Cultural Radicalism. Danish women were granted the right to vote in 1915, and an equal rights law went into effect in 1921 at a time when many women were entering the work force. Under the Social Democratic government, child-rearing was regarded for the first time as society's concern. An active public lecturer, Thit Jensen was one of the driving forces in a movement that called for birth control and sex education to better the lot of women.

Drama, with its potential to engage the public directly in moral and political questions, became a favored genre of the decade. In the 1930s the Danish theater experienced a dramatic revival, particularly through the works of Kaj Munk and Kjeld Abell, whose works reflected the political currents of the decade. Munk's *Ordet* (1932; translated as *The Word*, 1953), a contemporary religious drama in the naturalistic tradition, has become a classic in Danish theater and a motion picture classic in Carl Dreyer's adaptation. Although Munk's dramas of the early 1930s idealized strong dictatorial leaders—initially he admired Hitler and Benito Mussolini—in the latter part of the decade, he rejected anti-Semitism and, after the German occupation of Denmark began in April of 1940, he became one of the most outspoken and fearless Danish opponents of Nazism. Abell was a greater innovator in the Danish theater; his dramas broke with the naturalistic tradition and experimented with new dramatic technique. In *Anna Sophie Hedvig* (1939, translated 1944), a play in which he alludes to the Spanish Civil War, he takes up the question of the ethical responsibility of the individual faced with fascist tyranny.

As in any national literature, there are masterpieces in Danish literature that fall outside the dominant literary or cultural currents of a given period. Such is the case of the writings of the Faroese author Jør-

gen-Frantz Jacobsen, whose only novel, *Barbara* (1939; translated as *Barbara*, 1939), set on the Faroe Islands in the late eighteenth century, tells the story of a destructively passionate woman. The Faroese Islands, situated roughly equidistant to Norway, Scotland, and Iceland have been under Danish rule since the Viking Age. Although the Faroese people gained limited self-government in 1948, they still have extensive historic and literary ties with Denmark. The two most widely read Faroese authors, William Heinesen and Jacobsen, chose to publish in Danish rather than their native Faroese; Jacobsen's *Barbara* became a best-seller in Denmark and one of the most widely translated works of the decade.

The work of Karen Blixen, whose *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934) and *Out of Africa* (1937) won international recognition, is another of the anomalies of Danish literature during the Depression. Blixen, who published in England and America under the pen name Isak Dinesen, defended the old-fashioned art of storytelling and clashed with the contemporary preference for socially engaged literature. Rather than relying on the works of Marx and Freud, she drew on those of Friederich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, as well as the *Arabian Nights*, presenting herself as a modern-day Scheherazade. Only after World War II, when her exotic tales were understood as modern existentialist parables, did she come to be recognized as one of the most influential Danish artists of the twentieth century.

The occupation of Denmark by Nazi Germany in 1940 is the most significant turning point in the history and culture of modern Denmark. National Socialism—the ideology of *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil)—never gained a significant foothold in Danish soil; therefore, the arrival of occupying German forces on 9 April 1940 served to galvanize intellectuals and writers, whether they were Marxists, anti-Fascist radicals, Christians, or nonreligious humanists. For the first years of the war, the Danish government engaged in a *samarbejdspolitik* (policy of collaboration) with Hitler, who intended to display Denmark as a “model protectorate” under the Third Reich. However, many Danes were resistant to this political compromise. As an underground resistance to the occupying forces grew, the iron fist of the Nazi regime tightened. By August 1943 acts of sabotage and resistance against the Nazi Wehrmacht had increased to such an extent that the Danish puppet government resigned. The resistance movement became more effectively organized, even boasting the rescue of some seven-thousand Danish Jews, who were smuggled into neutral Sweden in October 1943, and the resistance remained active throughout the remainder of the occupation. Danish literature was put under German censorship during the war, a circumstance which led to the flourishing of an illegal press as well as a tendency to

hide anti-Fascist allegories in works that passed through German censorship. Martin A. Hansen's *Jonatans Rejse* (Jonatan's Journey) and Branner's *Drømmen om en Kvinde* (The Dream of a Woman), novels published in 1941 under censorship, contain such anti-German sentiments and dramatize the tension between good and evil, life and death. *Der brænder en Ild* (A Fire Is Burning), published illegally in 1944, an anthology of essays and poems by such distinguished writers as Abell, Branner, Hansen, Ditlevsen, and Piet Hein, became a landmark for intellectual and spiritual resistance during the occupation.

World War II is a watershed in Danish literature. The occupation—besides galvanizing national feeling through a collective experience of hardship—forced the abstract questions of ethics and spirituality into the tangible realm of everyday life. Immediately following the liberation, publications dealing with firsthand experiences of the war were popular, such as letters, diaries, or documentary accounts of resistance fighters or concentration camp prisoners. In the 1950s, experiences of the occupation were articulated artistically in novels such as Branner's *Ingen kender natten* (1955; translated as *No One Knows the Night*, 1958) and Tage Skou-Hansen's *De nøgne træer* (1957; translated as *The Naked Trees*, 1959). In postwar Danish writing, the war continued to serve as a frequent literary motif well into the 1960s. In 1962 Scherfig published *Frydenholm*, a bitter and satirical indictment of the treatment of Danish Communists during the occupation. Scherfig, along with Kirk and Nexø, had spent part of the war imprisoned in Hørserød, an internment camp in Denmark.

Although Denmark survived the occupation with its culture, historical cities, and population largely intact—without the physical devastation and bombardment experienced by other European nations—World War II created a deep sense of pessimism and, among writers, a generation of skeptics. The liberation on 5 May 1945 brought relief but also the onset of the Cold War in a world now divided between Eastern and Western blocs and threatened by nuclear weapons. In postwar Danish literature the outer drama of the war and the occupation was now transformed into an inner conflict within the individual. The war had demonstrated the inadequacies of political ideologies to solve problems inherent to human nature. It had meant a loss of meaning and values. It seems natural that after the war writers were drawn to existentialism, which offered a way for the individual to create meaning in existence through his own actions and choices.

Heretica (Heresy, 1948–1953), a journal closely identified with the literary modernism represented by writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Rainer Maria Rilke, and T. S. Eliot, became the forum for a new liter-

ary movement that rejected the ideological dogmatism of the 1930s. The "heretics" were both poets and prose writers such as Thorkild Bjørnvig, Martin A. Hansen, Frank Jäger, Ole Sarvig, Skou-Hansen, Ole Wivel, and, of course, Blixen, who was regarded as a kind of artistic mentor. These writers saw themselves in a revolt against established intellectual beliefs: the scientific worldview of naturalism in general, and the materialism of Marxism, in particular. They sought to divorce the human dilemma from the "external" circumstances of society and politics in order to articulate a deeper religious or metaphysical understanding of life. The dominant genre of the *Heretica* movement was poetry, with Bjørnvig, one of the first editors of the journal, holding a central position as a visionary poet in the symbolist tradition. His significance is comparable to Sophus Claussen's role in the 1890s. Bjørnvig's poetry is neither strictly metaphysical nor religious but deals with the fundamental conditions of human existence—love, transformation, and death—as articulated in his well-known collection, *Anubis* (1955), the title alluding to an Egyptian god of death. The philosophy of the heretical protest is best described as a humanist existentialism, drawing its inspiration from Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre. The major prose work of the *Heretica* group, and one of the most debated books of the postwar period, is Hansen's *Løgneren* (1950; translated as *The Liar*, 1954). It is the quintessential existentialist novel depicting a pivotal moment in a man's life in which he recognizes his life as a deception and ultimately chooses the ethical resolution.

While the *Heretica* generation maintained the dominant influence during the immediate postwar period, the Cultural Radicals founded *Dialog* (1950–1961), a journal intended to counter *Heretica*. It profiled the views of the intellectual left wing and among its most important contributors were Kirk and Scherfig, both of whom remained steadfast in their socialist convictions following the war.

After the war, spelling reforms—initiated by the Socialist minister of education, Hartvig Frisch—were enacted in 1948. Nouns, which formerly had been written with initial capitals, as in German, were now lower cased. The spelling of the Danish special vowel *aa* was changed to *å*. Some older or conservative authors, such as Blixen, objected to these changes and continued to use the pre-1948 orthography in their works. In 1984 the Danish government allowed local governments, in cities such as Aarhus and Aalborg, to return to their original spellings of place names. Because of these changes, many apparent inconsistencies continue to appear in works of Danish literature.

By 1960 the process of industrialization and urbanization that had begun in Denmark at the turn of

the century was completed. The country was now a modern industrialized welfare state. In Danish literature, the criticism and rejection of modern urban life and an increasingly alienating existence serve as a frequent theme after the late 1950s. The war had left Europe in a deep cultural crisis. During the 1950s this crisis came to be regarded as permanent and led to a feeling of absolute alienation. The literary trends that emerged in the 1960s reflect a blending of this modernist sensibility with the existentialist perspective of the older *Heretica* generation.

The literary trends and the cultural climate of the 1960s may be framed within the context of *Ny-radikalisme* (New Radicalism), a political movement of the 1960s with ties to the Cultural Radicalism of the 1930s. New Radicalism grew out of the heightened social and political awareness that typified the 1960s in the West. In Denmark, the movement protested against the self-satisfied norms of the welfare society, bourgeois materialism, and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, among other matters. Similar to the Cultural Radicals of the 1930s, the New Radicals of the 1960s embraced the sexual revolution and educational reform. These radical sympathies and modernist poetics merged to form the dominant literary trend of the 1960s that some Danish literary historians have called *Ny-radikale modernisme* (New Radical Modernism). During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the periodical *Vindrosen*, edited by two of the period's central figures, Klaus Rifbjerg and Villy Sørensen, became the dominant literary and cultural organ of this second generation of postwar modernism. Torben Brostrøm, who later shared the editorship of *Vindrosen* with Niels Barfoed, was a leading critic of the period, chronicling its artistic vision.

Poetry is central to the modernist tradition in Danish postwar literature. In the hands of such poets as Bjørnvig, Per Højholt, Klaus Rifbjerg and Benny Andersen, poetry in the 1960s became less metaphysical and more involved in the external world. Rifbjerg's collection *Konfrontation* (Confrontation, 1960), central to postwar Danish modernist poetry, lends its title to a generation of "*Konfrontation* poets." The poetic text is regarded as the manifestation of the confrontation of the mind of the poet with the details of the concrete world. Unlike the reflective *Heretica* poet, the *Konfrontation* poet registers impressions of modern life, confronting material and concrete things as a way of coming to terms with the modern world. Andersen, who debuted in 1960 with his ironic depictions of the alienated modern individual and his humorous observations on the details of ordinary life, also belongs to this generation of modernist poets.

A contrary poetic trend emerged in the mid 1960s, representing another aspect of the modernistic tradition. *Systemdigting* (Systemic poetry) or metapoetry, concentrating on the poetic language itself, functions under the assumption that language cannot adequately depict the external world but is ultimately self-reflexive. Language and linguistic associations are the central focus of the metapoetic text, which eliminates the individuality of the poet. No other Danish poet has pursued Systemic poetry with more consistency and greater innovation than Højholt. His *Min hånd 66* (My Hand 66), a radically experimental work published in 1966, explores linguistic associations with a playfulness and humor that have become Højholt's artistic signature. Another of the foremost Systemic poets of the postwar decades is Inger Christensen, whose highly successful work *Det* (It, 1969) combines metapoetry with social criticism and a utopian vision. Henrik Nordbrandt, difficult to categorize within a single poetic movement, has drawn inspiration from *Systemdigting* as well as other traditions in Danish modernist poetry.

The isolated condition of the modern individual is also one of the predominant concerns of Danish prose narratives of the 1950s and 1960s. As in poetry, the postwar sensibility called for new forms of expression in prose. As early as 1953 Sørensen's first published work, *Sære historier* (translated as *Tiger in the Kitchen and Other Strange Stories*, 1957), introduced a new genre of fantastic stories that influenced an entire generation of "sære fortællere" (strange storytellers), a term coined by Thomas Bredsdorff in his 1968 work of that title, which presented this new generation of writers. The fantastic narrative breaks with realism in order to follow its own strange logic in a symbolic world often reminiscent of the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and ancient myth. However, the fantastic stories of the postwar period are distinctively modernist in the manner of Franz Kafka—one of Sørensen's sources of inspiration—in that they are based on a worldview that is fundamentally shattered. This distinction is vividly illustrated in Sørensen's tale "En glashistorie" (A Tale of Glass, 1964), a darkly pessimistic inversion of Andersen's Romantic tale "Sneedronningen" (The Snow Queen, 1845). The fantastic tales of this period demonstrate a heightened psychological sense, the plot often driven by the repressed desires or irrational urges of the subconscious. Peter Seeberg is another master of this genre. In *Eftersøgningen og andre noveller* (The Search and Other Stories, 1962), a work that shows the influence of Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, Seeberg depicts humans as faced with an absence of meaning in seemingly absurd quests for existential guideposts.

Another literary trend in Denmark during the late 1950s and 1960s is a return to a naturalistic or psycho-

logical realism; it is particularly well demonstrated in two very successful novels, both published in 1958, dealing with the themes of puberty and sexual awakening. Rísbjerg's *Den kroniske uskyld* (The Chronic Innocence) and Leif Panduro's *Rend mig i traditionerne* (translated as *Kick Me in the Traditions*, 1961) both deal with coming-of-age in a confusing and at times hypocritical adult world. In their focus on the significance of sexual development, these novels demonstrate the continued influence of Freudian concepts in modern Danish prose.

The youth and student rebellions of 1968 mark a turning point in Danish society and a further radicalization of literary trends. The worldwide political and social upheavals of the late 1960s—including international protests against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Free Speech movements in the United States, and the Cultural Revolution in China—strengthened the Left in Scandinavia and inspired a debate about engaged literature. Danish critics refer to the period from 1968 to the mid 1970s as "Virkeligheden der voksede" (The Reality that Grew), referring to the increasing politicization of literature. The individual is no longer regarded as an isolated entity but as a member of a social unit. Literary realism, with strong ties to the social realism of the 1930s, reemerged. Politicized works produced during this decade reassessed the writer's role in society and included much authentic factual information about contemporary economic, political, and social conditions. *Arbejderlitteratur* (worker's literature), workplace reports, memoirs, interview- and debate-books, and documentary accounts from the developing world became popular in Scandinavia at this time. In retrospect, most of the politicized documentaries of the period have mainly historical interest as part of a particular episode in Danish literature. Historical documentary fiction, on the other hand, which became a popular new genre during this period in Denmark, continues to hold readers. Thorkild Hansen's best-selling documentary works take up historical questions regarding Denmark's ventures in exploration and colonialism. In particular, his trilogy of books on the Danish slave trade, written between 1967 and 1970, reflects the growing awareness during the decade of the role of western imperialism in the developing world. Ebbe Kløvedal Reich, a central figure in the 1970s, links the student rebellion of 1968 with several grassroots movements and antiauthoritarian, left-wing platforms. His fanciful historical narratives depicting Denmark's history and mythology are contributions to the heated public debate about national culture and identity that surrounded Denmark's decision to join the European Common Market in 1972. In the decades which have followed, Reich has continued to cultivate Danish

national identity in historical works in which the Roman Empire represents by analogy the expanding European Union.

Ny-realisme (New Realism) became a predominant trend in prose works during the 1970s, offering more precise depictions of social reality than in the psychologically oriented realism of the preceding decade. While not explicitly political, these new realistic works are set in accurately depicted social milieu and tend to depict the private conflicts of the middle class. The work of Christian Kampmann, for example, demonstrates this development from psychological individualism, for example in his short stories *Blandt venner* (Among Friends, 1962), to socially critical novels of the 1970s that depict the private crises of the Danish bourgeoisie. The early works of Henrik Stangerup also demonstrate the tendencies of New Realism. *Manden der ville være skyldig* (1973; translated as *The Man Who Wanted To Be Guilty*, 1982), for example, deals with a man who is not allowed to be guilty because the guardians of the Welfare State deprive him of responsibility for his own life.

Not least of the significant developments of the late 1960s and 1970s was the flourishing of women's literature. As a result of the efforts of the Women's Movement and of the heightened social consciousness of the decade, women gained significant ground in Denmark in the 1970s. The right to free abortions was achieved in 1973, and new laws regarding equal pay went into effect in 1976. In the course of the 1970s the number of female members of parliament increased from 10 to 25 percent. In the literary establishment, women writers—at least in a numerical sense—finally gained the equality which had been denied them for so long. There are many women writers of great talent in Denmark today; in the twenty-first century, it will hopefully become meaningless to distinguish categorically between men and women writers. While it is impossible in this volume to cover all of the women who have contributed to Danish literature in the last decades of the twentieth century, some of the most representative and influential figures have been included.

Elsa Gress, one of the few female members of the most elite Danish authors' society, Det Danske Akademi (The Danish Academy), held a central position in Danish letters and criticism for four decades. Prolific in many genres, she joined the fierce polemic regarding the role of women with her essay *Det uopdagede køn* (The Undiscovered Sex) in 1964; although she formally rejected the Women's Movement, her controversial opinions often placed her at the center of the debate. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Suzanne Brøgger has continued to contribute her original perspective to the discussion of women's roles, identity, and sexuality since the 1970s. In her first book, *Fri os fra kærligheden*

(1973; translated as *Deliver Us from Love*, 1976), she attacks modern morality, monogamous love, and the nuclear family, and in *Crème Fraîche* (Sour Cream, 1978) she describes her erotic adventures. Brøgger seems to have taken to heart Blixen's 1953 oration in which she advised postwar women to lay down their weapons and repossess their femininity. Dorrit Willumsen, who debuted in the mid 1960s, became one of the most significant Danish prose writers of the late twentieth century. Firmly rooted in modernist tradition, Willumsen's early novels often depict women alienated as sex objects in a depersonalized male-oriented consumer society. Kirsten Thorup also holds a central position in modern Danish literature; in particular, her generational novels such as *Himmel og helvede* (Heaven and Hell, 1982) have established her reputation as an astute chronicler of Danish life and society during the postwar decades.

By the 1980s Denmark was well on its way to transforming itself from a modern industrial state to a technological information society. Whereas the 1960s and 1970s may be remembered for political activism and idealism, the 1980s and 1990s may—with historical hindsight—be identified with individualism, political apathy, and nostalgia. Because of economic recessions in the 1970s and growing unemployment, the tax burden of the welfare state began to fall heavily on those who worked, since students, the unemployed, children, and the elderly, who comprised over half the population, paid no taxes. For the first time since the Social Democratic Party took power during the Depression era, a Conservative majority won power in the Danish parliament in 1982. Poul Schlüter's election as prime minister marked a turn to the Right in Danish politics, a movement toward privatization and a tightening of the public sector. Almost simultaneously with the dissipation of the Cold War—marked most dramatically by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany—Denmark reluctantly joined the European Union in 1993. Within the context of these dramatic social and political realignments, it is interesting to note the resurgence of many traditional literary genres and modes during the last two decades of the century, although it is too early to predict which literary trends will eventually come to characterize these decades.

In the 1980s a new generation of lyrical poets emerged who experimented with postmodern aesthetics and impulses from painting, punk and New Wave music, and sculpture. The passionate tone, subjectivity, and sensuality of this poetry bears likeness to the older Danish poetic traditions, particularly to the Symbolists and the *Heretica* poets. Pia Tafdrup, whose 1985 anthology, *Transformationer: Poesi 1980–85* (Transformations: Poetry 1980–1985), introduced the new generation, emerged in the 1990s as a leading figure in Scandina-

vian poetry. Her work is also representative of *Kropsmodernisme* (Modernism of the Body), a new tendency in postmodern poetry that employs the sensations of the physical body as a basis for exploring the conditions of existence.

Biographical and historical fiction experienced a revival during this period. The biographical novel, a fictive narrative based on an historical personage, became particularly popular among women writers who revisited the destinies of notable artists, writers, or nobility of past centuries. Willumsen has made important contributions to this genre with two successful novels: *Marie: En roman om Madame Tussauds liv* (1983; translated as *Marie: A Novel About the Life of Madame Tussaud*, 1986), about the woman who founded the wax museum in London, and *Bang: En roman om Herman Bang* (Bang: A Novel about Herman Bang, 1996), an award-winning novel about the life of the Danish writer Herman Bang. Henrik Stangerup's trilogy of novels, *Vejen til Lagoa Santa* (1981; translated as *The Road to Lagoa Santa*, 1984), *Det er svært at dø i Dieppe* (1985; translated as *The Seducer: It Is Hard To Die in Dieppe*, 1990) and *Brøder Jacob* (1991; translated as *Brother Jacob*, 1993), depicting three remarkable Danish historical figures according to Kierkegaard's notion of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious existence, is among the most distinguished work in this genre. The biographical genre, with its focus on authentic persons of the historical past, might be viewed as a revolt against the alienating tendencies of modernist prose, which addresses the potential of language itself but fails to offer the reader heroes and heroines.

A Romantic yearning for good stories with engaging plots and remarkable protagonists is also evident in the emergence of the predominant literary movement of the late twentieth century, magic realism. Although magic realism is a critical term that was first applied to Latin American literature, the term is well suited to describe a Danish homegrown variety of fantastic narratives. Related to the *sære historier* (strange stories) of the 1960s, these magical narratives suspend the strictures of realism in order to merge elements of myth, fairy tale, ghost story, or murder mystery into the plot. Hanne Marie Svendsen made her mark as a magic realist with her award-winning novel *Gulduglen* (1985; translated as *The Gold Ball*, 1989). The tendencies of magic realism are also evident in Ib Michael's cycle of novels *Vanillepigen* (The Vanilla Girl, 1991), *Den tolvte rytter* (The Twelfth Knight, 1993) and *Brev til månen* (Letter to the Moon, 1995), which won critical acclaim in Denmark. In postmodern Danish literature, a highly creative merging of genres is evident in the fantastical narratives of the late century. Peter Høeg's *Frøken Smillas fornemmelse for sne* (1992; translated as *Smilla's Sense of*

Snow, 1993), which became an international best-seller, masterfully blends the genres of science fiction, the crime thriller, and the fantastic narrative. Characteristic of the work of Høeg and Michael is the metafictional aspect of the narrative, a self-conscious commentary on and clever interplay between various genres. One of William Heinesen's literary masterpieces should be mentioned: *Laterna Magica: Nye Erindringsnoveller* (Magic Lantern: New Fictive Recollections, 1985; translated as *Laterna Magica*, 1987), a collection of fantastic stories and timeless tales set on the Faroe Islands, represents a native Scandinavian form of magic realism and places a period at the end of a long and fruitful literary career that spanned nearly the entire twentieth century. The combination of linguistic artistry and intellectual sophistication, of ancient myth and folk ballad, of sincere pathos and wry wit, and of social commentary and a universalist perspective make *Laterna Magica* one of the crowning achievements of modern Danish literature.

In broad strokes, these are some of the principal lines of Danish literature of the twentieth century. An effort has been made to include the most representative and influential figures of the century in this volume. Some consideration has also been given to authors whose writing is available in English translation. In Denmark, the literature of the twentieth century is detailed in no fewer than five volumes in the third edition of *Danske digtere i det 20. århundrede* (Danish Writers of the 20th Century, 1982), edited by Torben Brostrøm and Mette Winge.

—Marianne Stecher-Hansen

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Karin Michaëlis

(20 March 1872 – 11 January 1950)

Phyllis Lassner
Northwestern University

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Karin Michaëlis

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I rette Øjeblik, script by Michaëlis and Herdis Bergström; Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Teater, 1921.

Karin Michaëlis was a celebrated novelist, short-story writer, author of a widely translated 1930s series of children's books with the eponymous heroine, Bibi, and a journalist and lecturer, who wrote and spoke especially on feminist and antifascist subjects. Yet, as did the writing of many gifted women writers, her work disappeared from view until rediscovered in the 1980s and 1990s by feminist scholars. Michaëlis's most famous novel, *Den farlige Alder: Breve og Dagbogsoptegnelser* (1910; translated as *The Dangerous Age: Letters and Fragments from a Woman's Diary*, 1911), dramatizes women's concerns for equality on social and cultural grounds and sold more than one million copies. It was made into two movie versions, one in German and one in Danish. Republished in English in 1991, *The Dangerous Age* once again attracted the acclaim and controversy that marked its original publication. A hallmark of European modernism in its experimental form, the novel

also dramatizes ongoing feminist debates about the social construction of women's natures and roles. As does Michaëlis's other fiction, it features women characters who express sexual desire and frustrated ambition in an elliptical language that represents the style of Danish symbolists at that time, but also the difficulty discussing subjects that were socially taboo. As were many Danish women writers of her time, Michaëlis was deeply affected by the women's movement.

Karin Michaëlis was only thirty-three when she wrote *Den farlige Alder*, a novel of a woman's midlife crisis, but the various crises of her own youth inspired her creation of a fictional woman who decides that it cannot be too late to discover herself. Karin Michaëlis was born Katharina Marie Bech Brøndum in 1872 in the Danish provincial town of Randers. Her memoir, *Little Troll* (1946; in Danish *Vidunderlige Verden*, 1948–1950), establishes her birthplace as a metaphorical stage—"crooked lanes and twisted streets"—for the alternating privations and triumphs that would define her life. Michaëlis's father, Jacob Anthoniesen Brøndum, a telegraphist, suffered from tuberculosis, which curtailed his career as a civil servant and impoverished the family; her mother, Nielsine Bech Brøndum, made and sold wreaths to pay the bills. Michaëlis later paid tribute to her mother in several works in which the oppression of domestic responsibility is seen from the perspective of a child. Her Bibi character, like so many of Michaëlis's fictional children, dramatizes the child's struggle against domestic oppression by living a vagabond life.

Michaëlis's childhood was marked by an affliction of "crossed eyes" which, though surgically corrected, left her with a squint and the fear that she was ugly. This fear was most likely a motivating factor in her adolescent pursuit of promises of romance. Looking back with pain and ironic humor, Michaëlis portrays herself as a sexually provocative adolescent. At fifteen, she became secretly engaged to two men, one of whom was scarred like herself and had a limp that she found romantic, while she considered the other man as her sex object. Within the context of conservative and pragmatic Danish society, this behavior so shocked Michaëlis's parents, they were convinced that the respectability of their family name was threatened.

Michaëlis translated her assessment of these experiences into the Bibi figure who, like Gunhild in Michaëlis's fictional memoirs, *Træet paa Godt og Ondt* (The Tree of Good and Evil, 5 volumes, 1924–1930), rebels against conventional "good girl" roles. Truants from school and home, both girls tramp the Danish

railways and roads in search of self-definition. Michaëlis herself left home in "voluntary exile," to tutor the daughter of a Danish consul, a position that encouraged her romantic imagination and independent spirit. When she returned home a year later, she rejected her parents' assumption that she would either do government work or get married. Yielding to her ambitions, they allowed her to move to Copenhagen to train as a piano teacher.

Both the city and her teacher, Victor Bendix—pianist, composer, and conductor—transformed her creative ambition. Assessing her musical talent as mediocre, he encouraged her to stay in Copenhagen and write. On 29 October 1895 Michaëlis married Sophus Michaëlis, a poet associated with the Danish symbolists of the 1890s, who also supported her literary ambitions. She then published two collections of short stories, *Højt Spil* (High Stakes, 1898) and *Fattige i Aanden* (Weak in Spirit, 1901), which, though praised by such critics as Georg Brandes, were also criticized for her choice of sordid subjects.

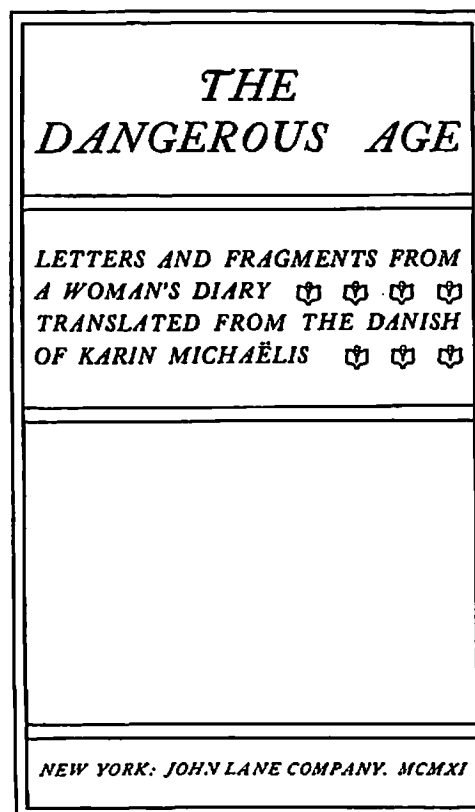
Michaëlis then began to write in other genres, including reviews and a novel of medieval life, *Birke-dommeren* (1901; translated as *The Governor*, 1913), which was vilified by critics. Her fourth work, the novel *Barnet* (1902; translated as *The Child Andrea*, 1904), was published by the respected Danish firm of Gyldendal and marked her literary breakthrough. Publication of *Barnet* also led to a long and productive relationship with editor Peter Nansen, whose promotion of the novel guaranteed its international success. Translated into sixteen languages, *Barnet* concerns a young girl dying from the effects of an accident. Although this scenario might easily have led to a sentimentalized story, Michaëlis instead shows the girl welcoming death to escape from the oppression of adult life as reflected in her parents' loveless relationship. It struck such a sympathetic chord that Michaëlis was accused by some readers of having stolen the diaries of their dead daughters. By and large, Michaëlis's child characters show the exploitative effects of grim, unhappy adults on the psychological development of the young. Some of her children's fiction was written for a more adult audience, while others targeted younger readers. Her particular contribution to the genre was the development of a language and syntax to show in both dialogue and monologue the child as both distinct and inextricably connected to the world of adults. Using the slang of Danish youth at the time, Michaëlis also introduced a kind of street talk that made her writing distinctly modern. This technique showed the complex interaction between a child's psychology and the social pressures that shaped it and brought it into a

conflicted relationship with the world of adults. She deals directly with her own childhood in volumes one and two of *Træet paa Godt og Ondt*, her fictionalized memoirs, *Pigen med Glasskaarene* (The Girl With the Glass Shards, 1924), and *Lille Løgnerske* (Little Liar, 1925).

Michaëlis's emphasis on relational and social factors also attributes women's potential to biology. This biological factor is explored as a compelling and unresolved tension in her fiction about women's nature, especially in debates about marriage and motherhood, as can be seen in such novels as *Lillemor* (Dear Mother, 1902), which was translated into twenty-two languages; whereas *Munken gaar i Enge* (The Monk is Loose upon the Meadows, 1905) reveals her satirical bent. Michaëlis's concerns about women's character were most fully expressed in her most powerful novel, *Den farlige Alder*.

When *Den farlige Alder* was first published in Denmark in 1910 and quickly translated into twelve languages, it shocked readers for reasons that remain powerful today. Its concern with the "true natures" of women made Michaëlis a celebrity, called upon to defend her views in lectures and interviews in Europe and the United States. Reviewers, such as George Middleton writing in *The Bookman* in October 1911, were taken with Michaëlis's "moving picture of a woman's emotions over strange hidden places," and the novel had more than fourteen printings in Denmark. Its appearance coincided with controversies about women's character and destiny. The feminist movement's call for equal rights and choices clashed with the claims of Sigmund Freud and other psychologists that women's destiny was biologically determined. Theories that considered marriage and motherhood the defining moments of women's lives also drove the formulation of fictional female characters. Although "New Women" novels of the period protest woman's sexual oppression, they limit her sexuality to the story of her youth. *Den farlige Alder* is remarkable in exposing such narratives of female development as oppressive.

Den farlige Alder remains striking today because of the bravura voice of the central character, forty-three-year-old Elsie Lindtner. From the first page of her letters and diaries to the last, she challenges herself and her readers unrelentingly, without intervention by any other narrator, about the politics of women's aging. As she veers from one extreme mood to another, from anger at her women friends' destructive strategies to desperate loneliness and remorse and then to empathy with the plights of other women, Elsie creates a new kind of woman's narrative. The unfolding drama of her midlife crisis



Title page for the first U.S. edition of Michaëlis's *Den farlige Alder*:
Breve og Dagbogsoptegnelser (1910), translated
 by Beatrice Marshall

becomes a woman's own story of the imprisoning scenarios of her development.

Most disturbing to contemporary readers of *Den farlige Alder* was its depiction of menopause, a topic suppressed even when studies of human sexuality were becoming conventional in modernist narratives, and in Scandinavian literature in particular. Although Michaëlis never mentions the word menopause in the novel, she dramatizes symptoms attributed at the time to the biological bases of middle-aged women's psychological changes, which was received with discomfort by readers. Even when favorable, reviews registered embarrassment at the confessional style of the novel and some reviewers even diagnosed and recommended treatment for the women's malaise.

Den farlige Alder dispenses with the conventional narrator who foresees and analyzes characters' devel-

opment. Through Elsie's responses to her own and other women's experiences, Michaëlis offers a new social-psychological model of women's midlife. Rather than identifying their problems as the onset of decline, she presents women's "hysteria" as a symptom of women's character in flux and struggling to reposition the sexual desire that had been killed by the marriage of convenience. Like those of the other women in the novel, Elsie's character is shaped by the need for social and economic security that drives them to comply with men's expectations and prevent them from knowing their emotional needs. At the core of this unknown self is a woman's sexuality, which only "bursts free" at the boundary between middle age and old age, only to find no acceptable avenues of expression.

During this period of professional success, Karin and her husband, Sophus, worked and traveled together, but the marriage was to end in bitter disappointment and divorce in 1911. Despite personal happiness and professional success as a playwright, Sophus became infatuated with a young woman. Karin responded by encouraging the affair at first, but then realized that her lingering doubts about her own attractiveness and independent spirit made reconciliation impossible.

Her belief that confidence began in a child's need for independence led her to friendship with Eugenia Schwarzwald, who founded an anti-authoritarian school in Vienna, so admired by Michaëlis that she immortalized it in her nonfiction book *Gledens Skole* (The School of Happiness, 1914). This book formulates Michaëlis's belief in sexual equality, arguing that women like Schwarzwald should play prominent roles in science and industry. If a young woman shows more domestic talent, however, she should be encouraged to marry and develop "her naturally given femininity." Some of Michaëlis's personal decisions proved destructive, as in 1912, when she impulsively married Charles Strangeland, an American economist who later blamed his successful wife for his failure to find work in Denmark. Michaëlis's play, *En Mo'rs Øjne: Skuespil i fire Akter* (A Mother's Eyes: A Play in Four Acts, 1915), about a blind woman, allegorizes their mutual self-deception. When the blind woman visits her children in America without telling them of her successful eye surgery, she sees them waiting on the pier dressed in rags. To keep her from worrying about them, they attempt to deceive her and pretend to be prosperous. After she sells her property to help them, she dies without ever letting them know she could see. Michaëlis faced her own illusions when she divorced Strangeland in 1917.

In 1912 Michaëlis published a sequel to *Den farlige Alder*, titled *Elsie Lindtner* (translated, 1912). This work might seem to subvert the feminist analysis of women's social roles and constraints of its predecessor. Instead of discovering outlets of expression for her continuing frustrated desires on her trip of adventure around the world, Elsie adopts a homeless waif in New York and returns to Denmark to devote herself to mothering him. The combination of maternal responsibility and child's needs, however, express concerns that Michaëlis had heretofore separated in her fictional and autobiographical writing. If *Elsie Lindtner* subsumes a woman's sexuality into maternal selflessness, it also establishes a woman's community where Elsie and her friends live in harmony and mutual understanding. If their maternal priorities are viewed as constraining, Michaëlis emphasizes that the women achieve a political and social culture defined by and for themselves.

During World War I Michaëlis visited refugee camps in Austria with her friend Schwarzwald. Following the war, she spoke out against anti-Semitism and personally challenged the policies of the president of Czechoslovakia, Tomas Masaryk, concerning the lack of German instruction in schools in the largely German-populated Sudetenland. In the interwar years Michaëlis lectured on "Love, Marriage, and Divorce," using her experiences and those of her friends. She argued that marital economic equality was fostered by a common expense fund that respected each partner's spending habits. Having seen women degraded by economic dependence and miserly divorce settlements, she campaigned for insurance policies that would assure women's education and economic self-sufficiency. She did not, however, join the women's movement.

Michaëlis demonstrated political courage throughout the interwar years. Branded by Adolf Hitler as "a dangerous woman," she continued to lecture in Nazi-occupied territory, her dais surrounded by Gestapo agents. Michaëlis opened her home at Thure to those fleeing Nazi imprisonment and death; some were fellow artists, such as Bertolt Brecht and his wife, Helene Weigel; others were strangers except for their shared political sympathies. Michaëlis reported that many had been tortured and then released only as object lessons to other writers. She often heard them screaming in their sleep.

Once it became clear that Denmark would be invaded in early 1940, Michaëlis went to the United States for the remainder of the war. Though she enjoyed the cultural vibrancy of New York City and being with her sister Alma and brother-in-law, she was cut off from her European audience and publish-

ing income. She had no American audience, and American publishers were not interested in publishing translations of her works.

After World War II Michaëlis returned to Denmark. In her last years she lived in Thure in poverty; although her books had sold in the millions, she had given away much of her earnings. Karin Michaëlis died in Copenhagen on 11 January 1950.

Michaëlis's writings are varied in genre. In addition to her novels, she wrote short stories, essays, and reviews. She produced about seventy titles in book form alone. Although she did not consider herself a feminist, she delivered scathing critiques of contemporary attitudes toward women in many of her interviews and magazine articles. She followed Freud's theories of the psychosexual determination of character, yet found it necessary to trace women's characters through alternative possibilities.

The literary culture in which Karin Michaëlis lived and worked was Scandinavian. For Danish writers, major European trends such as Romanticism enhanced the epic and folkloric forms that expressed their cultural history. Later, Danish critic Georg Brandes's naturalism and the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's social criticism combined with portrayals of women's sexual roles and working-class perspectives by the Norwegian novelist Amalie Skram and the Danish writer Marie Bregendahl. By the time Michaëlis wrote *Den farlige Alder*, literary experimentation had been formalized by modernism. *Den farlige Alder* combines the symbolic and socially critical aspects of Scandinavian traditions and transforms them by introducing a new narrative approach,

authenticating a woman's voice as the medium of social critique.

Karin Michaëlis should be considered a significant voice in the literary history of Denmark as well as in the modern feminist canon. She deserves recognition for her experiments with language and fictional form and for her cogent questioning of women's social roles in the European cultural context and in the modern history of the novel.

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Karin Michaëlis's manuscripts are held by Det Kongelige Bibliotek (The Royal Library), Copenhagen.