

The Christmas Lights by Karen Swan

4 Stars

Signy, wizened by pastoral life, and Bo, a gorgeous young blonde with an Instagram following of close to ten million people, meet on a shelf farm on Geraingerfjorden in Norway. Their lives are vastly different, but their stories are brought into parallel against the backdrop of a breath-taking, but perilous Norwegian winter.

It is 1936, and Signy is desperately searching for any form of life in the aftermath of a natural disaster that has hit their shelf farm. A couple of months before this, Signy, her sister and three other neighbourhood girls set off to the *seter* as it is time for the *buføring* when the animals from the farm are brought to the outfield pastures. Signy is wild with anticipation as she has spent most of her childhood listening to the older girls relate their summers as *seterbudeias*, or milkmaids. Although the girls are expected to labour ceaselessly throughout the day, tending to the herds while tossing and baling hay, lighter tasks such as churning butter and making cloudberry jam create a sense of community within the little group. The workload makes the days seem short which culminate in the freedom of spending nights under the stars and evenings of stories around the fire. There are no adults to impose boundaries or curfews, and the only contact with villagers is when their batches of *setermat* products (milk butter and brown cheese) are collected. But their freedom has a price, and as Signy senses the ominous presence of a predator watching them and drawing closer, she tries to prepare for the inevitable attack. However, she discovers that life has a way of playing strange tricks on people and predators often appear in disguise.

82 years later, Bo arrives at a shelf farm in Geraingerfjorden along with her partner and fellow Wanderluster. What started as a personal lifestyle for both her and Zac has become an overwhelming force as their digital influence has reached over nine million followers. Their mission is to find secluded getaways and locations for adrenaline junkies while promoting lifestyle brands, never being in a single hemisphere for more than a couple of weeks. They need to reach their target of ten million followers by Christmas. After travelling on four planes in 30 hours, Bo's energy is depleted when they arrive in Alesund. She longs for the intimacy of a private life with no feeds, no stories. She reaches the mountain-top at the Geraingerfjorden, and her troubles become infinitesimal in the face of the sheer force of the Seven Sisters Waterfall. This, however, is short-lived when she opens her feed and finds a message from HIM – the troll, who seems uncomfortably close.

In her novel, Swan has depicted the harsh, but undoubted beauty of a Norwegian winter. What is more, is her ability to draw you into the customs and details of farm life at the edge of a mountain. Although I have never visited any of the Scandinavian countries, I am so intrigued by her depiction of the landscape and traditions that Christmas in Norway seems highly attractive. This is a thoroughly enjoyable holiday read that holds you close right to the end.

Ange

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review.

